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OPENING UP THE EX FILES: USING COORIENTATION THEORY TO EXAMINE
PARTNER PERCEPTIONS OF TALKING ABOUT RELATIONAL HISTORY

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by

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OPENING UP THE EX FILES: USING COORIENTATION THEORY TO EXAMINE
PARTNER PERCEPTIONS OF TALKING ABOUT RELATIONAL HISTORY

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The role talking about relational history plays in romantic relationships is unclear. Talk about relational history (TRH) involves disclosing information about past relationship experiences to a romantic partner or asking a romantic partner about his or her past relationship experiences. Prior research indicates that individuals in romantic relationships could conceivably have a range of perceptions about TRH, from perceiving TRH to be highly taboo (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985) to perceiving such relationship talk to be highly important (Actielli, 2002). The degree to which partners agree with and understand each others' perceptions about TRH could be associated with their relationship satisfaction. Studying TRH is important because relational history is relevant to current relationships; seeking out or avoiding discussions of relational history has relationship implications.

Coorientation theory (McLeod & Chaffee, 1973) was used to guide this investigation of perceptions pertaining to TRH, including the extent to which TRH was perceived as taboo, important, and discussed in romantic relationships. Findings from two pilot studies indicated that TRH is a multidimensional concept made up of three

factors: talk about characteristics of past partner(s), talk about sexual history, and talk about characteristics of past relationship(s). In the main study, partners from 135 couples (270 individuals) reported their own perceptions pertaining to TRH; they also reported what they believed their partners' perceptions were pertaining to TRH.

Findings from the main study indicated that relationship context played a role in TRH perceptions: people in shorter relationships perceived TRH to be less taboo and TRH took place more frequently than in longer relationships. In many respects, men's and women's perceptions of TRH were significantly different from one another. Though neither perceived TRH to be taboo on average, men did perceive TRH to be more taboo than women did. Implications of the findings are discussed, and future research directions are also suggested.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

The role that talking about relational history plays in romantic relationships is unclear. Talking about relational history (TRH) involves disclosing information about past relationship experiences to a romantic partner or asking a romantic partner about his or her past relationship experiences. Prior research indicates that people in romantic relationships could conceivably have a range of perceptions about TRH: they could perceive TRH as highly taboo, highly important, or both. The degree to which partners agree with and understand each others' perceptions about TRH could affect not only communication within their relationship but also their relationship satisfaction. The current investigation of TRH was guided by coorientation theory (McLeod & Chaffee, 1973).

Several goals guided the design of this study. The first goal was to examine the perceptions of people in romantic relationships about TRH. Measures of perceptions of TRH focused on the extent to which participants perceive TRH as taboo or important and on the extent to which they perceive that they have discussed TRH in their romantic relationships. A second goal was to determine the extent to which partners within a couple agree with each other's perceptions about TRH. A third goal was to determine the extent to which partners within a couple understand each other's perceptions about TRH. A final goal of this study was to determine whether an association exists between relational satisfaction and partners' agreement with and understanding of each other's perceptions about TRH.

Gaining a better appreciation of participants' perceptions about TRH required first a better understanding of the factors that compose TRH. Past research has treated relational history as a one-dimensional concept. It is possible, however, that relational history is a multidimensional concept composed of several sub-factors. Perceptions of the extent to which these subfactors are important may influence whether they are discussed by romantic partners. Two pilot studies were performed before the main study was undertaken. The results of these pilot studies indicated that participants perceive TRH as a multidimensional concept containing three sub-factors: *characteristics of past partner(s)*, *characteristics of past relationship(s)*, and *sexual history*.

Coorientation theory (McLeod & Chaffee, 1973) was used to guide this analysis. Coorientation theory examines interpersonal perception about a specific referent by comparing individual perceptions of that referent to determine the extent to which people agree with each other and understand each others' perceptions. In the current study, people in romantic relationships were asked to report their perceptions of TRH and to estimate their partners' perceptions of TRH.

Statement of the Problem

Talk about relational history (TRH) involves disclosing information about one's past relational experiences, including thoughts, memories, or emotions from past relationships, to a current romantic partner, or asking one's partner about his or her past relational experiences. TRH with a partner in an ongoing relationship is inherently relevant to the current relationship. Such talk is "synonymous with Wilmot's (1980) concept of explicit relationship meta-communication" (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985, p. 265).

It is unclear what role TRH plays in romantic relationships. Some researchers (e.g., Afifi & Guerrero, 2000) claim that past relationships are a taboo topic for romantic partners. TRH has been framed in research as taboo, or off limits, and there is evidence that avoiding discussions about relational history (Afifi & Guerrero, 2000) or evading relational issues could function as a relationship maintenance strategy (Canary & Stafford, 1992; Dainton & Stafford, 1993). Other scholars have suggested that discussing relational history is an important part of relationship development (e.g., Altman & Taylor, 1973; Littlejohn, 1999). Whether TRH is perceived as taboo, important, or both, previous research suggests that conversations that contain TRH could have a wide range of effects on relational outcomes such as satisfaction.

A couple's agreement about TRH should enhance the partners' ability to understand each other. This study tested the hypothesis that both understanding and agreement were positively correlated with relationship satisfaction. A discloser who shares past relationship experiences with a romantic partner needs that partner "to accept a version of the history of the relationship and its ending that does not seriously undermine the person's credibility as a possible future partner for other people" (Duck & Condra, 1990, p. 200). Correctly managing a conversation that contains TRH could thus have effects relevant to the outcome of the relationship. Adequate management of conversations containing TRH would benefit from an understanding of a partner's perceptions of TRH. Understanding a partner's perceptions of the extent to which TRH is taboo and the extent to which TRH is important could provide valuable insight into how to approach and discuss either one's own or one's partner's relational history.

Understanding a partner's perception of having discussed TRH may also be important for coordinating conversations containing TRH. Understanding a partner's perceptions of the extent to which TRH is taboo, is important, and has been discussed could facilitate coordinating subsequent conversations containing TRH.

Given that TRH is a relationship-relevant topic, it is possible that TRH may be related to relationship satisfaction. The ability to accurately understand a partner's perceptions of TRH would be aided by agreement on these perceptions. Because men and women sometimes disagree about the role of relationship-relevant communication in romantic relationships (Acitelli, 2002), the partners' biological sex may compromise their ability to understand each other's perceptions of TRH. The current study compared the extent to which men and women in the same couple perceived that TRH was taboo, was important, and had been discussed. The results of these comparisons were used to determine the partners' agreement and understanding.

As mentioned earlier, one indicator of the potential importance of TRH to current relationships is the need for careful attention to framing TRH. When talking to another about a close relationship, the speaker "always frames the description of the relationship in ways that suit the speaker's goals on a particular occasion to a particular audience" (VanderVoort & Duck, 2000, p.1). Such framing would probably occur because speakers want TRH to benefit them or their relationship in some way. TRH involves sharing experiences from past relationships; "in sharing stories about the [past] relationship (especially but not exclusively stories of break up), individuals attempt to create a psychological environment in which their behavior makes sense to self and others" (Duck

& Condra, 1990, p. 197). The motivation to engage in TRH in order to create such an environment is probably informed by people's perceptions of the extent to which TRH is taboo and the extent to which TRH is important.

One's relational history informs future relationship experiences. As people grow, learn, and change in romantic relationships, past experiences can lead to expectations about how a current partner in a romantic relationship will act (Markus, 1977). Individuals and their relationship partners negotiate these expectations about which personal thoughts and feelings about themselves they will communicate and when, where, and how they will communicate them (Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993). In addition, couples also negotiate which topics they *will not* discuss. Couples report that they avoid discussing certain topics in an attempt to protect their relationship (Afifi & Guerero, 2000). Such avoidance may result from fear that the discussion will either negatively affect the relationship or lead to dissolution of the relationship. In short, couples could actively seek out or avoid TRH.

Purpose of the Study

One of the purposes of this research project was to examine people's perceptions of TRH. Two pilot studies performed before the main study was undertaken determined that TRH is a multidimensional concept made up of three factors: *characteristics of past partner(s)*, *characteristics of past relationship(s)*, and *sexual history*. In the main study, participants were asked to report their perceptions of the extent to which each factor was important and had been discussed in their romantic relationships.

Another goal of this study was to determine the degree to which TRH was perceived as taboo, important, and discussed in romantic relationships, and the extent to which each partner agreed with and understood the other partner's perceptions of TRH. This study also examined the association of such coordination with relationship satisfaction. The perspectives of male and female partners were examined individually and compared with each other so that the degree to which partners agreed with and understood each other could be determined.

These goals were accomplished by applying coordination theory to the design and analysis of this study. Couples were recruited to participate; both partners within these couples answered questions about their own perceptions of TRH and were asked to guess their partners' perceptions of TRH. An analysis of these individual-level perceptions determined how participants regarded TRH in romantic relationships. A comparison of the partners' perceptions determined the extent to which couples agreed with each other and understood each other's perceptions. An examination of partners' agreement with and understanding of their partner's perceptions of TRH (i.e., the degree to which partners perceived TRH was taboo and important, and the extent to which partners perceived having discussed TRH) determined the correlation of these factors with relationship satisfaction.

Significance of the Study

Studies of TRH are important because relational history is relevant to current relationships; seeking out or avoiding discussions of relational history also has relationship implications. "There are no 'clean slates' in relationships: no relationship

‘starts fresh’. Instead, all relationships, as a social birthright, are heirs to the living history of social existence” (Baxter & Montgomery, 1997, p.345). This inheritance includes all of the partners’ past romantic relationships and the thoughts, feelings, expectations, and biases that accompany those past relationship experiences. Attimes , partners may feel it desirable or necessary to discuss aspects of their relational history. There may be ways of reducing the negative impact that discussing topics that may be perceived as taboo, such as relational history, has on partners and romantic relationships. Before any recommendations can be made that will help couples better manage such conversations, individuals’ and couples’ perceptions of TRH must be examined.

This study is also relevant to people and their relationships because it examined interpersonal perceptions of TRH. Studying interpersonal perceptions is important because such perceptions have consequences for everyday interactions and relationship satisfaction (Acitelli, Douvan, & Verrof, 1997). In an examination of interpersonal perceptions, Sillars (1985) pointed out thenecessity of situating one’s study in a particular context for a specific referent; both influence people’s perceptions and their interpretations of those perceptions. Moreover, Kenny and Acitelli (1994) call for future studies on a variety of perceptual referents so that researchers can sort out when the similarity of partners’ perceptions matters and when it does not matter to relationship quality. Given that TRH is relationship-relevant, it is viewed as a potentially important referent. This study examined interpersonal perceptions of TRH within the context of romantic relationships.

People's perceptions of TRH are probably guided by the kinds of experiences they had in those past relationships and by how these experiences are applied to current relationships. Past relationships could have either a positive or a negative influence on present relationships. A training school or competency perspective (Stets, 1993) asserts that past relationships have a positive influence on current relationships in that they teach partners valuable lessons about the kinds of behaviors and communication that work in successful relationships. According to this perspective, past relationships allow people to learn from their mistakes, and such learning improves the quality and stability of each successive relationship. There is empirical support for this perspective in that people who remarry after divorce adopt communication patterns that differ from those they used in their first marriage (Spanier & Furstenberg, 1982). Moreover, remarried people often believe that their new relationship is better than their old one (Spanier & Furstenberg, 1982) and that what they learned from their past relationship helped them to adjust more easily to the new marriage (Albrecht, 1979). Although both of these studies suggest that learning from past mistakes may result in better current relationships, this effect could be due in part to participants' desires to believe that their current relationship is better than their old one(s). While those who are dissatisfied in their current relationships may idealize past relationships, satisfied partners will not generally denigrate their current relationship or assert that they were happier and enjoyed a better relationship previously. Approximately half of the marriages in the United States are remarriages for one or both partners; for those who remarry, divorce may be more likely than for those who marry for the first time (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000). Therefore, evidence supporting the

training school or competency perspective could in fact verify only that a social desirability bias causes people to report that they value their current romantic relationship more than their past relationship(s).

The detrimental perspective (Stets, 1993) takes the opposite stance: It posits that past relationships negatively influence current relationships. This perspective suggests that people do not learn from the mistakes of the past but rather repeat bad habits and patterns that were learned and normalized in past relationships. Persons who either married or cohabited in the past generally experience subsequently less healthy relationships than those who did not previously cohabit or marry (Stets, 1993); this finding lends support to the detrimental perspective.

Whether or not people perceive TRH to be taboo, such talk is relevant to current relationships because experiences in past relationships affect perceptions and behaviors in current relationships. Past experiences create a baseline for abstract knowledge “which guide[s] interpretations of events in the present and expectations for the future. Thus they provide [a] continuity among interactions” (Planalp, 1987, p. 177-178). As Kelley (1979) argues, partners come to understand each other’s behaviors through their own experiences. For example, perhaps in the past Bob has never been able to successfully discuss sexual history with any relationship partners, leaving that topic largely unexplored. Bob comes to “know” that, although health officials advocate talking about sexual history, such talk does not actually happen in his romantic relationships. Bob meets Alice and pursues a romantic relationship with her. Alice, who has had discussions about sexual history in her past relationships, talks directly to Bob about her sexual

history. Her behavior will seem unusual to Bob because it is unique to his experience and perception. Even attempting to communicate about a topic may signal a rules structure about what information *the couple* should have access to, indicating both the *perception* the couple exhibits about that topic and the *behavior* the couple will perform with respect to the topic. Perhaps Bob and Alice disagree as to the extent to which TRH is taboo. If the incongruence between Alice's and Bob's perceptions about TRH is too broad, the manner in which Alice talks about a topic that Bob has previously viewed as taboo may cause him to react in one of two different ways: He could reassess his perceptions about TRH or he could reassess his perceptions about Alice. On one hand, if Bob shifts his perceptions about TRH to match Alice's, the partners become closer, and TRH could be a positive turning point in their relationship development. On the other hand, Bob could change his perceptions about Alice to match his perceptions of TRH (i.e., negative); this change could cause Bob to pull away from Alice and his relationship with her and could mark a negative turning point for their relationship.

The significance of the current study is manifested in both conceptual and pragmatic gains. Conceptually, communicating about TRH could be complicated for interactants, because they could perceive TRH as both highly taboo and highly important. TRH is a rich and fertile research area for interpersonal communication scholars because it is outside the parameters of the current relationship but at the same time is also relationship-relevant. Discussing relational history may be a necessity, because many people, such as those who are divorced and those who have children from past relationships, *need* to discuss certain aspects of their relational history with a current

partner. Coorientation theory provides a structure for examining couples' perceptions of TRH to determine the extent to which partners agree with each other and understand each other's perceptions of TRH. A better appreciation of the role that agreement with and understanding of perceptions of TRH play in romantic relationships requires first an exploration of perceptions. This study explored perceptions by using a coorientation model to guide the analysis. The following review of the literature explores relational history, taboo topics, and self-disclosure.

Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Coorientation theory will be used to guide this analysis of partners' perceptions about TRH. TRH involves disclosing information about one's own past relationship experiences or asking a partner about his or her past relationship experiences. In this study, the amount of agreement between couples was determined by a comparison of partners' perceptions of the extent to which TRH is perceived as taboo and important and of the extent to which TRH is perceived to have been discussed. The amount of understanding present was determined by a comparison of participants' perceptions of their partners' guesses about their own perceptions of TRH. The study tested the hypothesis that agreement with and understanding of each other's perceptions of TRH were correlated with relationship satisfaction.

In the following sections, relational history will be examined as a possible topic for communication between romantic partners. Explanations that might prompt people to perceive TRH as highly taboo will be explored, as will explanations that could prompt people to perceive TRH as highly important. The mechanisms of interpersonal perception will be explained, and the study will test the correlation of couple-level agreement and understanding of these perceptions with relationship satisfaction.

Talk about Relational History (TRH)

The influence of relational history can vary; similarly, the reasons for which people discuss relational history vary. Published reports suggest many possible reasons for, or functions of, TRH. These functions could include getting something off one's

chest for a sense of catharsis (Amato, 2000), avoiding past relational mistakes (Duberman, 1975), seeking information about the current partner (Rosenfeld, 2000), checking for compatibility (Bersheid, 1985; Duck & Condra, 1990; Sternberg, 1996), relating relational rules (Duck & Condra, 1990), and reassuring a partner who feels uncertain in a new relationship about the current role (if any) of the ex-partner (Metts, Cupach, & Bejilovec, 1989; Weiss, 1975).

People could practice TRH because they need to evaluate the current relationship and check for compatibility. Partners use many indicators to judge the health of a current romantic relationship, and past relationships help shape the lens through which the partners see and judge current relationships. Wayment and Campbell (2000) extended a model for self-evaluation to evaluations of romantic relationships and found that people used information from past relationships moderately frequently and believed that the information was moderately useful. Personal standards for what a relationship ought to be were cited more frequently and seen as more useful for evaluating a current relationship than was information from past relationships (Wayment & Campbell, 2000). When people did refer to their past relational experiences to judge the quality of current relationships, negative experiences were perceived as more useful than positive experiences. Perhaps people learn from the mistakes of the past; for whatever reason, people refer to those past negative experiences more frequently than to past positive ones. People not only focus on negative experiences in past relationships but also develop a bias toward past partners. People perceive past partners as less open, conscientious, and agreeable than current partners; they also perceive past partners as more neurotic,

dependent, and anxious than current partners (Geher et al., 2005). If TRH focuses on past negative experiences and qualities of past partners, it could also function to reassure current partners that they are preferred.

Past relationships create expectations about how partners should interact within romantic relationships; people could engage in TRH to communicate these expectations. Clark and Collins (1993) examined the role that memories of “old flames,” or past romantic partners, play in current relationships. They found that an old relationship provides a context for or shapes one’s evaluation of present or future experiences.

Newman (1982) reviewed the possible functions served by talking specifically about past partners. These functions may be found in either the *intent of* the speaker or the *impact on* the receiver. First, partners try to convey expectations and to negotiate relational rules by talking about their past partners. Implicitly communicating what is and is not appropriate, satisfying, or desirable by telling a story about an ex-partner’s behavior and its ramifications could prompt the current partner to avoid the mistakes of the past partner. Alternatively, such communication could cause the recipient to believe that the discloser is critical of romantic partners; thus, talking about past partners is not without its risks.

A second reason that people may talk about past partners involves the extent that such talk relates to the self. Newman suggests that people discuss their past partners to share aspects of themselves with their current partners. Relating past relationship history involves sharing information about the self with another. This reconstruction of the past for the present partner is inherently biased. Regardless of the bias or truth of the

information, the current partner relies on it to form some sort of impression of the present partner on the basis of information about those past partners. Third, people talk about their past partners to confirm their own self-image. People may wish to verify particular traits they have or want to have and could use past partners as evidence that they have these traits. Partners' discussions of aspects of themselves as they relate to past partners could influence the fourth function of TRH, which is that people talk about their past partners to create emotional or psychological closeness or distance. Depending on who is described more favorably, the current partner or the past partner, talking about a past partner could be one way of increasing or decreasing relational intimacy.

According to Newman (1982), recipients of disclosures about past partners could react in several different ways. For instance, once the past partner has been mentioned or described, that person may become perceived as a mythical figure by the current partner. If the discloser shared an important relationship with the ex-partner, such as a "first love," the past partner may take on larger-than-life proportions. Because the current partner may try to evaluate how he or she compares to important people from the discloser's past, the past partner may be seen as a competitor. Alternatively, information about the past partner may offer the recipient warning signals of things to come. For example, learning that a current partner once cheated on a past partner may cause the new partner to stop and reconsider the relationship, its worth, and the perceived likelihood that the current partner will cheat again. Of course, the amount and nature of TRH influence the impact of such information on current partners and relationships.

It should be noted that talking about a past relationship at length differs from simply mentioning it. Tarwater (1991) found that most people were in favor of mentioning past relationships but indicated a more cautious attitude toward discussing these past relationships in detail. When asked what advice others have given them when broaching the topic of past relationships, participants reported that gradually disclosing more about the past relationship, sharing information on the basis of the needs of current relationship, recognizing the risks involved in talking about a past relationship, and expecting reciprocal disclosure from the other should be considered during conversations that contain TRH (Tarwater, 1991). Tarwater describes people who have a “vision of relationships which combines recognition of the risks inherent in self-disclosure with an appreciation for the importance of disclosure in the development of a relationship” (p. 183). The perception that current partners were talking about the past for any reason other than to enhance and maintain the current relationship (i.e., for catharsis, self-clarification, self-validation, social control, or manipulation) indicated to the recipients that the discloser was not yet really over that past relationship and, as a consequence, was not ready for the new relationship (Tarwater, 1991).

In sum, people could practice TRH because past relationships affect people’s expectations about (Clark & Collins, 1992) and judgments of (Wayment & Campell, 2000) current relationships. Although some researchers argue that talking about past relationships is taboo (Afifi & Guerero, 2000; Baxter & Wilmot, 1985), others recognize the opportunity for positive relationship work, such as increasing intimacy (Newman, 1982), and for mitigating the risks associated with disclosure (Tarwater, 1991).

Given that TRH is relationship-relevant, it has the potential to be perceived as highly important. Relational thinking and talk, termed *relationship awareness*, is important because it can increase satisfaction, especially for women, for whom relational talk seems to be rewarding and beneficial to relational well-being (Acitelli, Rogers, & Knee, 1999).

Relationship awareness involves “attending to relationships; one can attend to relationships by thinking or by talking about them” (Acitelli, 2002, p. 92). Acitelli defined relationship awareness as “a person’s focusing attention on interaction patterns” (p. 96). Acitelli’s research on relational awareness focuses on the thoughts that partners have when comparing themselves to each other. For example, partners may compare their conflict management styles to those of the other. In the present study, the conceptualization of relationship awareness was expanded to include comparisons between current and past relationships. TRH is a reasonable manifestation of relationship awareness because, inevitably, discussing a past relationship with a current romantic partner requires that one has attended to and been aware of both past and present relationships.

Acitelli (1988) found that talking about a current relationship is generally perceived to have a greater positive impact on that relationship than not talking about it, this was especially the case when interaction was negative (e.g., during a conflict). Focusing attention on romantic or marital relationships is important to women’s satisfaction (Acitelli, 1992). Women perceive relationship talk as having intrinsic value and see such talk as an end in and of itself; men, on the other hand, are more likely to

perceive relationship talk as a means to an end, a way of solving some specific crisis in the relationship (Acitelli, 2002). There is evidence to support the claim that the sex of the partner matters and that men and women will perceive TRH differently. Therefore, the following hypothesis was posed:

H1: Men's and women's perceptions of TRH will be significantly different from one another.

This hypothesis will be examined in terms of all subsequent analysis, and men's and women's data will be analyzed separately. Next, this review examines TRH as it could be perceived first as a taboo topic for people in romantic relationships and then as an important topic for such people.

TRH Could be Perceived as Taboo Topic

A taboo topic is described by Baxter and Wilmot (1985) as "an interaction topic that is perceived as off limits to one or both of the interaction parties" (p. 254). Topics are deemed taboo because they often hurt others' feelings, are touchy, reference painful past experiences, and jeopardize others' opinions of the discloser. Within close relationships, discussing the relationship itself and discussing past relationships are considered by some (about 25%) to be taboo (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985). However, others may perceive that TRH is important because it allows them to get to know their romantic partner and share relevant details from past relationships. As a compromise between perceiving TRH as taboo and perceiving TRH as important, partners may be willing to talk about some aspects of their relational history but not about others.

Perceiving a topic as taboo could function usefully for partners in romantic relationships. Perceiving a topic as taboo serves as a means of information control, of counterbalancing an emphasis on openness and self-disclosure (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985; Caughlin & Golish, 2002). Taboo topics support the closed or private areas of one's experiences (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985). Talking about past relationships is perceived as relationship talk, which can be seen as destructive, futile, and risky (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985). Of those who considered TRH to be taboo, 50% believed that mentioning the ex-partner was a threat to the current relationship because it could signal a viable alternative to the current relationship; 27% reported a belief that the emphasis of conversation should be on the present relationship and that past relationships are irrelevant; and 14% perceived TRH to be taboo because avoiding such talk provided them an opportunity to manage their identity. In short, "prior relationships were avoided because of the metacommunicative comment about the present relationships' uniqueness and commitment levels" (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985, p. 267).

Not only did people report avoiding TRH, but people also seem to be able to accurately tell when their partners avoid a topic. Unfortunately, being able to accurately perceive a partner's avoidance is associated with dissatisfaction with the relationship (Caughlin & Golish, 2002). Upon closer examination, Caughlin and Afifi (2004) discovered that the reason for avoiding a topic moderates its impact on satisfaction. Avoidance motivated by a desire to protect the current relationship is positively associated with satisfaction, but avoidance caused by distance between the partners negatively affects satisfaction. If the communicator who avoids a topic is seen as an

incompetent communicator, the sin of avoidance is forgiven and relationship satisfaction does not suffer (Caughlin & Afifi, 2004). Dailey and Polomares (2004) take a message production theory standpoint in their examination of topic avoidance. Their research found that people can avoid a topic because of relationship-based maintenance reasons, individual-based self-protection reasons, or information-based reasons such as insufficient interest in the potential of the topic to carry a conversation. Although their findings showed that overall topic avoidance is related negatively to satisfaction with significant others, these researchers found that avoiding talk about relational history and sexual experiences is not related to satisfaction (Dailey & Polomares, 2004).

Because there are viable reasons for which partners may perceive TRH as taboo, and because past research has indicated that people often perceive TRH to be taboo, the following hypothesis was offered:

H2a: Men will perceive that TRH is taboo.

H2b: Women will perceive that TRH is taboo.

TRH Could be Perceived as an Important Topic

Even if romantic partners perceive TRH as taboo, for many reasons they may still find themselves discussing previous relationships and sharing experiences from their relational histories. The perception of the extent to which TRH is important could supercede the perception that TRH is highly taboo. The potential for the perception of TRH's importance lies in its relevance to current relationships.

TRH involves disclosing information from one's own past relationship experiences, or asking a partner to disclose information from his or her past relationship

experiences. Self-disclosure involves sharing private information about the self with another and includes “any information exchange that refers to the self, including personal states, dispositions, events in the past, and plans in the future” (Derlega & Grzelak, 1979, p.152). Self-disclosure tends to beget reciprocal disclosure from a partner (Jourard, 1971; Rosenfeld, 2000). The tendency to disclose does not appear to be a personality trait (Dindia, Fitzpatrick, & Kenny, 1997); rather, self-disclosure tends to reflect the degree of intimacy in a relationship. People generally share nonintimate information with acquaintances and share more intimate information in close relationships.

Although self-disclosure tends to be normative, automatic, and reciprocal, variations are tolerated in any given interaction (Dindia, 2000). If interacting people determine that focusing on one partner during a conversation is warranted, then such a focus would be considered acceptable. There are only small, if any, sex differences in self-disclosure (Dindia, 2000); that is, both men and women self-disclose on intimate topics at roughly the same rate. Disclosure depends more on the conversational partner and the context of the communication than on the sex of either of the interactants.

For the most part, people disclose primarily to those they love and trust (Jourard, 1971). The degree of intimacy in a relationship often guides partners’ decisions to reveal or not to reveal personal information. Prager (1989) found that more intimate relationships are characterized by more intimate disclosures between relational partners; as partners matched each other’s level of intimacy, self-disclosure increased in intensity.

By choosing to disclose to people with whom a close relationship has already been established, people can minimize the risks and maximize the benefits associated

with self-disclosure. The partner's reaction will be influenced by the perceived interaction norms developed in the relationship, as well as, obviously, by the partner's predilection for particular behavioral and communicative responses. As Rosenfeld (2000) points out, self-disclosure does not occur within a vacuum but is rather surrounded by important contextual features, such as the relationship in which the disclosure takes place.

Because the relational context of TRH is important, and because the context of a relationship changes with the length of the relationship, the length of couples' relationship is probably relevant to behaviors associated with TRH. The following hypotheses were posited:

H3a: Relationship length will be correlated with men's perceptions of TRH frequency.

H3b: Relationship length will be correlated with women's perceptions of TRH frequency.

H4a: Relationship length will be correlated with men's perceptions of TRH avoidance.

H4b: Relationship length will be correlated with women's perceptions of TRH avoidance.

The relational context of self-disclosure influences both the discloser and the recipient (Derlega & Grzelak, 1979). A person's perception that another has self-disclosed predicts affection more than does the person's perception of having disclosed to another (Sprecher, 1987). The recipient may feel obliged to listen and to self-disclose similar information. "Information exchange often creates mutual dependence among

people. The nature of that dependence in turn affects further development of the relationship” (Derlega & Grzelak, 1979, p.171). This finding may explain why “self-disclosure appears to be a significant predictor of relationship stability” (Cate & Lloyd, 1992, p. 76). People evaluate the exchange on the basis of its subjective value for the self and the relationship and on how well needs are met via the self-disclosure.

Not only will relational context influence perceptions of TRH behaviors such as frequency of TRH and avoidance, but these behaviors will, in turn, inform perceptions of TRH. Behavioral outcomes could help partners determine the value of TRH. If people have found a previous attempt at TRH unrewarding, they may report that they avoid TRH more, and the extent to which TRH is perceived as taboo may increase. Perceiving TRH as taboo may function to protect the quality of interaction in the relationship and may increase relationship satisfaction. Indeed, couples report avoiding dissatisfying topics or treating them as taboo in an effort to protect the relationship (Afifi & Guerro, 2000).

This ability to avoid dangerous topics and address helpful ones affects relationship development. TRH may reduce uncertainty about a partner’s preferences. It may also allow the recipient of another’s self-disclosure to coordinate actions necessary for reducing uncertainty and may increase both partners’ perceptions of compatibility (Bersheid, 1985). Before talking about past relationships, people may know little or nothing about their partner’s past relationships. The frequency with which TRH takes place will probably be related to the extent to which TRH is perceived as taboo. A similar association is expected for perceptions of TRH avoidance.

For these reasons, this study tested the idea that perceptions of behaviors associated with TRH will be correlated with perceptions about TRH:

H5a: Men's perceptions of TRH frequency will be negatively correlated with men's perceptions of the extent to which TRH is taboo.

H5b: Women's perceptions of TRH frequency will be negatively correlated with women's perceptions of the extent to which TRH is taboo.

H6a: Men's perceptions of TRH frequency will be positively correlated with men's perceptions of having discussed TRH.

H6b: Women's perceptions of TRH frequency will be positively correlated with women's perceptions of having discussed TRH.

H7a: Men's perceptions of TRH avoidance will be positively correlated with men's perceptions of the extent to which TRH is taboo.

H7b: Women's perceptions of TRH avoidance will be positively correlated with women's perceptions of the extent to which TRH is taboo.

H8a: Men's perceptions of TRH avoidance will be negatively correlated with men's perceptions of having discussed TRH.

H8b: Women's perceptions of TRH avoidance will be negatively correlated with women's perceptions of having discussed TRH.

TRH behaviors are anticipated to predict people's perceptions of the extent to which TRH is taboo and important. It should be noted that perceptions of TRH as taboo and important are not mutually exclusive. People who simultaneously perceive TRH as taboo and important could opt to communicate indirectly about their relational histories.

People differ in the types of information they are willing or motivated to share in their romantic relationships. Petronio (2000) writes that “people define personal information as private because it reflects issues that matter deeply to them” (p. 38). People feel a sense of ownership for information about the self, and this ownership influences the topics about which they are willing to disclose, as well as the level of normal intimacy within the relationship (Petronio, 2000). In essence, people perceive ownership rights to information about themselves. Petronio (2000) cites past relationships as an example of information that might be perceived as belonging to the self with no obligation to share it with the new partner. This perception of ownership rights to the details of past relationships may mark TRH as taboo in the minds of relational partners. If the information is perceived as privately owned and taboo by one but not both of the partners, TRH could have disastrous implications for the relationship’s well being.

Previous research findings suggest that the risks and privacy concerns associated with self-disclosure can be mitigated in a number of ways. For instance, self-disclosure may be studied as a process (Dindia, 1997) in which partners reveal information about their relational past little by little (Tarwater, 1991). Perhaps revealing small bits of general information over time addresses the fact that past relationships are a taboo topic of discussion for many partners.

Another way of mitigating the risks of self-disclosure is talking indirectly about the topic. Derlega, Winstead, and Folk-Baron (2000) examined the process of divulging potentially stigmatizing information, the fact that one has tested positive for HIV, to romantic partners. The indirect strategies used in such situations are desirable because

they allow a discloser to convey information but to duck responsibility if the information is not received well. This was the case with the sample studied by Derlega, Winstead, and Folk-Baron: Almost a third of the people they surveyed indicated that they disclosed their HIV status indirectly, by “talking in a general way about HIV” (p. 62). Those participants who disclosed indirectly were more likely than those who disclosed directly to be concerned with testing their partner’s reaction: They feared rejection more, and they also reported difficulty in communicating. Thus, indirectly disclosing was a way of shielding the HIV-positive partners from the negative effects of disclosure while allowing them to test their partner’s reaction to the topic. Indirect disclosure about a past relationship may serve similar functions, particularly in those cases in which the information from the past relationship is perceived as stigmatizing.

By sharing information about past relationships, partners may become more comfortable in sharing and exploring aspects of themselves, each other, and their relationship. Sharing revelations with a partner could help maintain and enhance a romantic relationship because talk “prolongs, defines, and encapsulates perspectives; talk is the engine of relationship stability and change” (Duck & Condra, 1990, p.187). Talking about past relationships, in short, has relationship implications because it could move a relationship forward or backward.

It is possible then, that participants perceive TRH as important. In this study, participants were expected to report a range of perceptions about the extent to which TRH was important and had been discussed.

Two pilot studies, completed before the main study was undertaken, explored the dimensions of TRH. Full descriptions of the procedures and results of these pilot studies can be found in the methods section. Briefly, two important findings came out of the pilot studies, and these findings informed the formulation of the research questions concerning perceptions of the extent to which TRH was important and had been discussed. First, the results of the pilot studies indicate that TRH is a multidimensional concept. Second, the results suggest that TRH consists of three dimensions: *characteristics of past partner(s)*, *characteristics of past relationship(s)*, and *sexual history*. Thus, the following research questions were posed:

RQ1a: To what extent do men perceive topics of TRH (past relationship characteristics, sexual history, or partner characteristics) as important to discuss?

RQ1b: To what extent do women perceive topics of TRH (past relationship characteristics, sexual history, or partner characteristics) as important to discuss?

RQ2a: To what extent do men perceive having discussed topics of TRH (past relationship characteristics, sexual history, or partner characteristics) in their relationship?

RQ2b: To what extent do women perceive having discussed topics of TRH (past relationship characteristics, sexual history, or partner characteristics) in their relationship?

As partners give and receive information about their partners, their perceptions of each other could develop and change. If partners' perceptions of TRH are at odds, this conflict could affect relational outcomes such as satisfaction.

Perception

An examination of individual-level and couple level perceptions of TRH determined the extent to which couples agree with each other and understand each others' perceptions of TRH.

Interpersonal perception focuses on the perceptions of the self and perceptions of the other. Interpersonal perception is a composite of (a) how people perceive others in general, (b) how a person perceives a target, or a specific person, (c) how others perceive that same target person, and (d) how a person perceives that target person specifically within their relationship (Kenny, 1988).

According to Kenny, (1988, 1994) an analysis of perception and interpersonal relationships must address 2 levels of analysis: the individual level and the dyadic level. The individual level addresses the psyche of the individual and his or her own specific thoughts and beliefs about an object or other. The dyadic level deals with the social level of interaction, including the obligations, expectations, and other social aspects of the social level of interaction. The current study addressed the individual level of perception by examining individuals' attitudes about TRH; it addressed the dyadic level by examining how partners' perceptions and behaviors are cooriented (i.e., how much partners agree with each other and understand each others' perceptions) toward each other and the influence of this coorientation on relationship satisfaction.

A study of interpersonal perceptions must take into account the fact that beliefs about a person are not direct perceptions per se but are rather inferences drawn from observed communication with or about that person (Kenny, 1994). According to Kenny

(1994), person perception differs from object perception in four ways: (a) people perceive each other simultaneously; (b) people are aware that others are able to perceive them; (c) person perception of the other is tied to self-perception; and (d) people change but perceptions do not always change in concert with these changes, that is, a fundamental attribution bias exists and does not waver, even in the face of competing evidence.

Generally, perceptions of others are associated with self-perceptions (Murray, Holmes, & Griffen, 1996a) in that people assume that others think, feel, and behave as they do (Kenny, 1994). To account for participants' projection of their own perceptions onto their guesses of the perceptions of their partners, the following two hypotheses were posited:

H9a: Men's own perceptions of TRH will be correlated with their guesses of their partners' perceptions of TRH.

H9b: Women's own perceptions of TRH will be correlated with their guesses of their partners' perceptions of TRH.

H10a: Couple agreement for perceptions of TRH will be positively correlated with men's understanding of women's perceptions of TRH.

H10b: Couple agreement for perceptions of TRH will be positively correlated with women's understanding of men's perceptions of TRH.

The way in which a person's perceptions are directed can influence relational outcomes. Having an idealized perception of the partner's attributes (i.e., a perception more positive than the partner's self-perception) predicted satisfaction with the relationship (Murray, Holmes, & Griffen, 1996a) and also predicted more stable relationships with less conflict and doubt (Murray, Holmes, & Griffen, 1996b). These

positive illusions of the other may not only benefit the partners' current relationship but may also benefit the other over time in that the partners come to see themselves in the idealized way (Murray, Holmes, & Griffen, 1996b). This finding is important, because it illustrates the way in which perception affects behavior. If a person perceives his or her partner as open and forthcoming, that person may behave accordingly. During a conversation that contains TRH, people could avoid TRH because they believe that their partner perceives it to be highly taboo, not because of their own perceptions of TRH.

When two people view an event, such as a conversation, their perceptions of that event will probably differ for a variety of reasons. One possible reason is that the two people have different information about the event. Another possible reason is that the two people view the event similarly but have different meaning systems that affect perception and cause them to attribute causation for the event distinctly (Kenny, 1994). Finally, the relevant perceptions may simply be idiosyncratic. Any or all of these reasons could explain why two partners could misunderstand each other about TRH. To a certain extent, misunderstanding is expected in any analysis of perception. One of the purposes of this study was to examine misunderstanding about the referent TRH and the influence of understanding one's partner on relationship satisfaction.

One reason that people talk about a taboo topic may be that they do not experience the topic as taboo. That is, "Behavior is a function of experience" and "both experience and behavior are always in relation to someone or something other than self" (Laing, Phillipson, & Lee, 1964, p. 9). Thus, Alice's behavior toward Bob (e.g., asking Bob about his relational history) is a function partly of Alice's experience of Bob (e.g., as

someone who would discuss his relational history). “Hidden discrepant value systems and discrepant expectations based on those value systems” (p. 18) lead to behaviors that are misinterpreted as relationship threatening instead of relationship enhancing.

As the partners become more and more involved in a developing relationship, one partner’s repeated observations of the other’s behavior and self-disclosure over time may bias that partner’s perceptions of the other (Sillars & Scott, 1983) in that people generally overestimate similarity and are emotionally invested in their interpretation of their partner’s behavior. Perceivers often view problematic behaviors as general and as having a nonspecific origin. As a consequence, the conflicts that result are perceived to be a result of the other’s personality, not of his or her behavior (Sillars & Scott, 1983).

Interpersonal perception is interesting, in part because people cannot control the perceptions that others form of them. Attempts at manipulating those perceptions can backfire and can instead create unintended perceptions. Importantly, part of the impression that Alice forms of Bob’s perspective has to do with Bob’s behavior: If Alice asked Bob about his relational history and Bob seemed to be relaxed and forthcoming during TRH, Alice could believe that Bob perceives TRH to be of average importance. This belief would differ from the impression that she would have formed if he were hesitant to discuss this topic with her. In the latter case, Bob’s avoidance might prompt Alice to ask, “What is Bob hiding?” or to think, “There must be something important in his relational history that he doesn’t want me to know about.” Bob’s attempt at minimizing the presence of TRH could cause Alice to believe that he perceives TRH as

highly important. Bob's reaction may unwittingly elicit information-seeking behavior from Alice about the very topic he wishes to avoid.

When two people are connected to each other, each has his or her own orientation to objects relevant to their relationship. Coorientation is the term used by McLeod and Chaffee for interpersonal perception (Sillars, 1985). To coordinate their perceptions, partners must share meaning and be able to anticipate the other's perspectives (Sillars, 1985).

Coorientation is an approach to examining how people who are connected relate to a common object by surveying each person's thoughts about that object and learning what each person believes the other thinks about that same object. A key assumption underlying this approach is that

a person's behavior is not based simply on his [or her] private construction of the world; it is also a function of his [or her] perception of the orientations held by others around him [or her] and of his [or her] orientation to them (McLeod & Chaffee, 1973, p. 470).

For example if Bob loves Alice, believes that Alice perceives TRH as highly taboo, and also himself perceives it as highly taboo, he may opt to avoid practicing TRH with Alice so that both of them will remain satisfied. Alice also loves Bob; however, she may think that discussing her relational history with Bob is not taboo but is rather very important. Alice believes that Bob is ambivalent about whether this topic is taboo. Because Alice believes that she should talk about it, she seeks to discuss her relational history with Bob. Bob's avoidance of the topic may reduce Alice's satisfaction with the relationship,

because she will be unable to discuss what she perceives as important. Even though both partners agree about how they feel about each other (they love each other), they disagree about the role TRH should play in their relationship (Is TRH taboo or not? Is TRH important or not?), and they inaccurately perceive their partner's attitude about discussing relational history (Does the other think TRH is taboo or not? Does the other think TRH is important or not?). Their inability to effectively coorient to the same object may diminish relational quality for both of them. By looking at these two people, their respective thoughts about an object, and their perceptions of the other's thoughts about an object, researchers can gain insight into the "rather different descriptions of the same situation [that] can result from these different viewpoints" (McLeod & Chaffee, 1973, p. 479).

Although coorientation theory has previously been used to analyze interpersonal communication situations, it has not been used to study the way in which two people coorient to TRH. As the example of Alice and Bob illustrates, a coorientation approach should provide an understanding of how a couple's relational quality is affected when partners inaccurately coorient to the same relationship-relevant object. Bob's attempt to protect his relationship with Alice by avoiding discussions of relational history may be the very thing that lowers relational quality for Alice. Bob's ineffective attempt to satisfy Alice may lower his own satisfaction if he perceives that she is acting inappropriately when she does not also avoid TRH. If one of the interacting parties perceives relational history as off limits and the other perceives it as important to discuss, satisfying both parties simultaneously may be difficult, if not impossible. Thus, the present study tested

the notion that if one partner does not understand the other, the lack of understanding will be negatively related to the relationship satisfaction of both partners.

The coorientation model put forth by McLeod and Chaffee (1972, 1973) provides one way of describing the interdependent social realities of two people in a connected relationship. One person's social reality may vary greatly from another's, depending on the beliefs, attitudes, and values brought to their interaction. Focusing on a single object and on how each person in a dyad orients to, or perceives, that object allows an outside observer to determine how the dyad coorients to that object.

By using similar attributes of object x (in this case, TRH) to compare two people's perceptions about object x (in this case, the extent to which TRH is taboo, important, and discussed), the researcher can observe three areas of coorientation and the degree to which they exist for a couple: congruency, agreement, and understanding.

Congruency is an index of the "similarity between a person's own cognitions and his [or her] perception of the other person's cognitions" (McLeod & Chaffee, 1973, p.485). Congruency is an intrapersonal variable determined by comparing people's own cognitions about an object with their perceptions of their partner's cognitions about that object; separate congruency scores could be calculated for Partner A and Partner B (see Figure 1). Congruency is the only intrapersonal variable in the coorientation model because it is the only variable to use one person's cognitions and that same person's perceptions of the other person's cognitions as a basis of comparison (O'Keefe, 1973). Because the purpose of the current study is to focus on what happens between partners at the level of the dyad, congruency was not examined.

Partner agreement and understanding were measured and examined for their association with relationship satisfaction. Sillars, Pike, Jones, and Murphy (1984) and Sillars (1985) emphasize that agreement and understanding should not be confounded and should be treated as methodologically distinct from each other. Agreement is a congruence of direct perspectives (both Alice and Bob agree about the extent to which TRH is taboo), whereas understanding is a congruence of meta-perspectives and direct perspectives (i.e., Alice accurately understands the extent to which Bob thinks TRH is taboo). Both agreement and understanding were explored in this project

Agreement. Agreement is the degree of “cognitive overlap” (McLeod & Chafee, 1973, p.485) between the orientations of Partner A and those of Partner B. An outsider to the system (i.e., a person outside the relationship) determines agreement (top of Figure 1) by comparing the cognitions of Partner A and Partner B about an object. In the current study, the focal object was TRH.

Agreement appears to be an important element of romantic relationships, and partners tend to overestimate the degree of similarity they actually share (Acitelli, Douvan, & Veroff, 1993). Couples appear to perceive that they understand each other to a higher degree ($r = .75$) than they actually do understand each other ($r = .40$) (Sillars, Pike, Jones, & Murphy, 1984). This overstatement of similarity may result when people base their implicit assumptions about how their partner will act on how they themselves would act and then behave in a manner that elicits this response from the partner. Familiarity and liking lead to higher levels of assumed similarity (Kenny, 1994).

Agreement can have important implications for relational outcomes. Research suggests that when couples are more similar, they are also more satisfied (Allen & Thompson, 1984). Assuming that people's behavior is a function, at least in part, of their perception, partners whose perceptions agree are also likely to behave in ways that are predictable and expected by the other. Indeed, Kelly and Burgoon (1991) found that partners whose reports of behavioral interactions were similar were happier than those whose reports were not similar. Without these similar perceptions, one partner's behaviors may not match the other partner's expectations. Discrepancies between expectations for relational behavior and actual behavior statistically significantly predict satisfaction (Kelley & Burgoon, 1991). In fact, discrepancies between the expectations for a behavior and the perceived behavior have been found to be a more powerful predictor of satisfaction than actual similarity of thought or attitude.

There is evidence that spousal agreement about relational expectations predicts satisfaction (Kelley & Burgoon, 1991). Agreement about perceptions of TRH should be positively associated with relationship satisfaction because, as stated earlier, TRH is an inherently relationship-relevant topic. Alice's and Bob's attitudes about whether TRH is taboo may influence their behavior: Alice willingly discusses her relational history, whereas Bob avoids talking about it. An analogy is found in turning a light switch on or off in a room: If one partner prefers darkness but the other prefers light, only one or the other can be satisfied with the situation at any given point in time. Dissatisfaction with the way they deal with TRH could be negatively associated with Alice's and Bob's satisfaction with the relationship. Alice and Bob may be able to resolve their situation in

a satisfying relationship if they diminish the importance of the topic or compromise by varying the frequency of TRH.

A couple's agreement about TRH perceptions is likely to be correlated with relationship satisfaction for both partners:

H11a: There will be a positive correlation between couple agreement for perceptions of the extent to which TRH is taboo and men's relationship satisfaction.

H11b: There will be a positive correlation between couple agreement for perceptions of the extent to which TRH is taboo and women's relationship satisfaction.

H12a: There will be a positive correlation between couple agreement for perception of the extent to which TRH is important and men's relationship satisfaction.

H12b: There will be a positive correlation between couple agreement for perception of the extent to which TRH is important and women's relationship satisfaction.

H13a: There will be a positive correlation between couple agreement of having discussed TRH and men's relationship satisfaction.

H13b: There will be a positive correlation between couple agreement of having discussed TRH and women's relationship satisfaction.

An examination of the extent to which couples agree with each other and how this agreement functions in a relationship allows us to see how one might be motivated to

agree with a romantic partner. If couples agree with each other and project their perceptions onto their partner, they may appear to have reached an understanding. Upon closer inspection, however, we may find that what they have achieved is not true understanding but rather a biased projection of their own perceptions onto their partners (Sillars, Pike, Jones, & Murphy, 1984). True understanding entails knowing the perceptions of one's partner, even amidst disagreement; this concept will be discussed next.

Understanding. Understanding is “the extent to which one person's estimate of the other person's cognitions matches what the other person really does think” (McLeod & Chaffee, 1973, p. 487). Understanding, or accuracy, is determined by comparing people's own perceptions with their partner's beliefs about their perceptions of an object. In the current study, separate understanding scores were calculated for both partners (Partner A and Partner B; Figure 1). “Understanding involves one person's ability to take the perspective of another person” (Sillars, 1985, p. 291) and affects that person's ability to accurately attribute behaviors. Having a valid understanding of a partner's perceptions should lead to better predictions about that partner (Swann, 1984). An accurate understanding of a partner's perceptions of the extent to which TRH is taboo and important would inform a conversation that includes TRH.

When thinking about relational issues, people use their own perspectives as a baseline for guessing others' perspectives (Sillars, et al., 1984). In the study by Sillars and colleagues, partners' understanding (conceptualized as a correlation of scores) was approximately .42, but when the analysis was controlled for response similarity, the

understanding scores for partners dropped to approximately .19, a finding indicating that partners can understand each other more accurately when they agree with each other. Unless response similarity is considered, a couple's degree of understanding appears to be much higher than it actually is (Sillars, et al., 1984).

Understanding can also have important implications for relational outcomes. Being unable to understand the partner contributes to lower relationship satisfaction; this inability to accurately read the partner may stem from internal dysfunctions or psychological problems such as an anxious/avoidant attachment style (Tucker & Anders, 1999). Such internal psychological problems could cause people to focus on irrelevant or poor indicators of their partner's perceptions. When one partner is unable to accurately read the other, misunderstandings develop, conflict occurs, resentment may build up, and relationship satisfaction suffers. Being misunderstood may in and of itself breed dissatisfaction; although some partners may be motivated to be misunderstood or to misunderstand each other (this motivation is addressed below).

A number of reasons could explain the source of misunderstanding. Perhaps the partner is poorly skilled at giving cues about his or her mood, attitude, or state. Alternatively, perhaps insecure people distort the perfectly good cues that their partner is sending (Tucker & Anders, 1999). Noller (1981) found that couples with low marital adjustment were as able to accurately decode messages from strangers as were couples with high marital adjustment. When decoding messages from their own spouses, couples with low marital adjustment did not understand their partners as well as did couples with high marital adjustment. Noller concluded that the inability to understand someone is

related to the context of the relationship and is not a trait-like deficit in skills associated with understanding communication in general.

Whatever the cause of the misunderstanding, when one partner does not accurately understand the other, relationship satisfaction declines, particularly for women (Gottman & Porterfield, 1981). The decline in relationship satisfaction could be due to a decline in overall communication; misunderstanding could be one manifestation of that decline. Sillars and his colleagues (1984) found that when partners understood each other better, they were less negative when they interacted with each other.

Familiarity increases partners' confidence in understanding each other but does not necessarily increase actual understanding (Sillars, 1985). Perhaps people fail to seek out the information necessary for actually understanding their partners because they feel as though they "already know" what the other is thinking and feeling (Sillars, 1985). Because familiarity breeds "entrenchment of existing impressions" (Sillars, 1985, p. 280) of the other, people feel more and more confident about what they know about the other and give the other less and less space to influence their perceptions.

Complicating matters is the realization that people may sometimes be motivated to be misunderstood (Laing, et al., 1964). Not all people share the same paradigm of open communication; thus, not all people may want to practice TRH. Perhaps Bob perceives TRH to be taboo because of an event in a past relationship that he specifically does not wish to discuss with Alice. Perhaps Bob is worried that Alice's learning of this event will threaten the positive perception she has of him. For whatever reason, Bob does not wish to practice TRH. He also does not want Alice to know that he does not want to practice

TRH because her realization that he wishes to avoid this topic may raise her suspicion and inspire her to seek out information about his relational history. Thus, Bob finds himself not wanting to discuss his relational history and not wanting Alice to know that he does not want to discuss it. For these reasons, Bob may try to mislead Alice or may intentionally allow her to misunderstand him.

On the other hand, the perceiver could be motivated to misunderstand a partner's behavior and perceptions. A rival whom a partner perceives as attractive could be threatening to the relationship; an inaccurate understanding of the partner's perceptions would preserve the perception of a stable relationship. As stated earlier, one of the reasons people cited for perceiving TRH as highly taboo was the potential threat to the current relationship represented by the past partner (Newman, 1982). In the presence of such an attractive rival, participants demonstrated less accuracy in guessing their partners' perceptions of the rival (Ickes, 1993). To the extent that it is threatening to see a relational partner as attracted to someone else, people may be motivated to misinterpret this information (Ickes & Simpson, 1997). The mere presence of TRH, regardless of the content of the discussion, could be threatening to partners because of its implicit reference to past partner(s) and its relevance to the current relationship.

Understanding is a measure of the degree to which people's estimates of their partner's perceptions correctly match the partner's actual perceptions. When partners in a couple can accurately determine what the other is thinking, each partner is more likely to correctly anticipate what the other wants. Accurately understanding each other may allow the partners to behave in ways that maintain and enhance their relationship; such

understanding should also be associated with relationship satisfaction for both partners (cf. Murray & Holmes, 1996, for a commentary about how accuracy may not always enhance relationship satisfaction).

H14a: There will be a positive correlation between men's understanding of women's perception of the extent to which TRH was taboo and men's and women's relationship satisfaction.

H14b: There will be a positive correlation between women's understanding of men's perception of the extent to which TRH was taboo and men's and women's relationship satisfaction.

H15a: There will be a positive correlation between men's understanding of women's perception of the extent to which TRH was important and men's and women's relationship satisfaction.

H15b: There will be a positive correlation between women's understanding of men's perception of the extent to which TRH was important and men's and women's relationship satisfaction.

H16a: There will be a positive correlation between men's understanding of women's perception of having discussed TRH and men's and women's relationship satisfaction.

H16b: There will be a positive correlation between women's understanding of men's perception of having discussed TRH and men's and women's relationship satisfaction.

Chapter 3

METHOD

The goals of the main study were to examine the extent to which couples agree with each other and understand each other's perceptions of TRH, and to determine the association of such agreement and understanding with relationship satisfaction. Previous research has characterized TRH as either normative (e.g., Altman & Taylor, 1973) or taboo (e.g., Baxter & Wilmot, 1985); these conflicting characterizations may be the result of an imprecise conception of what TRH entails. Earlier research has treated TRH as a one-dimensional concept. It is possible, however, that TRH is a multidimensional concept composed of several sub-factors. Some of these sub-factors may be perceived as important, whereas others may be perceived as unimportant. It is possible that, when previous researchers measured participants' perceptions of and discussion of relational history, participants' references to different sub-factors led to conflicting conclusions about the nature of relational history as a conversational topic for romantic partners. With these concerns in mind, this study constructed a measure of TRH and used two pilot studies to explore the possibility that TRH is a multidimensional concept.

In Pilot Study 1, participants were asked to create a comprehensive list of topics associated with relational history. In Pilot Study 2, another group of participants was asked to evaluate the extent to which each item on this list of topics should be discussed; this evaluation was used to determine whether a set of underlying factors existed. The three factors detected were characteristics of past partner(s), sexual history, and characteristics of past relationship(s). In the main study, couples were asked to report

their perceptions of the degree to which they perceived TRH as taboo and important and to report whether they had discussed these factors with their romantic partners. The perceptions of partners in the couple were compared so that the degree of agreement between partners could be determined. Participants were also asked to answer questions from their partner's point of view, guessing what their partner's perceptions would be. Participants' own responses were compared to their partner's guesses about their responses so that the degree of understanding of the partner's perceptions could be determined. Both agreement and understanding were related to relationship satisfaction. An alpha of .05 was used for all statistical tests.

Pilot Study 1

Participants

Participants were recruited by a snowball sampling strategy (Bailey, 1994), also referred to as "chain referral sampling" (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). This procedure involves identifying a target characteristic of participants; people who know others with the target characteristic are approached and are asked to recruit participants for the study. This pilot study did not select a target characteristic that guided choices for participants; respondents were identified only by their willingness to participate. For the pilot study, the advantage of snowball sampling lay in the diversity of the sample and the range of their responses. Many studies involving interpersonal communication rely on convenience samples, which can overrepresent populations associated with university communities and threaten the generalizability of the results (Sillars, 1991).

To obtain participants for this study, the researcher approached people unfamiliar with the research and asked them to participate; those participants then recommended additional people who might participate, and so on. In total, 28 people participated in the pilot study, which was conducted in two phases. The first phase involved 19 participants: 10 (52.6%) men and 9 (47.4%) women. The participants ranged in age from 19 to 50 years ($M = 24.89$, $SD = 8.67$). Of the 19 participants, 8 (42.1%) were White, 4 (20.1%) were Hispanic or Latino, 4 (20.1%) were Black or African American, 2 (10.1%) were Asian, and 1 (5.3%) was native Hawaiian. In terms of relational status, 13 (68.4%) of the participants were in a romantic relationship at the time of data collection. The second phase involved 9 participants: 4 (44.4%) men and 5 (55.6%) women. These participants ranged in age from 26 to 34 years ($M = 29.56$, $SD = 2.65$). Of these 9 participants, 7 (77.8%) were White, 1 (11.1%) was Hispanic or Latino, and 1 (11.1%) was Black or African American. With regard to relational status, 5 (66.6%) were in a romantic relationship at the time of data collection.

Procedure

In phase one of this pilot study, 19 participants were asked to generate lists of topics related to relational history that people *could* discuss with their romantic partners. Participants were asked to provide as comprehensive a list as possible and to include topics that couples might be hesitant to discuss. In the second phase, the list of topics generated from the first phase was given to 9 additional participants who were asked to read through the list and add additional topics as they saw fit.

Results

In phase one, the number of topics generated by each participant ranged from 1 to 23 ($M = 8.63$, $SD = 5.67$; Mode = 8.00; Median = 8.00). To eliminate redundant data, the researcher examined the entire sample of topics and wrote all items generated by participants on individual index cards. Writing responses on individual index cards allowed for easy and efficient comparisons of answers. After duplicate answers had been eliminated, 27 unique topics associated with relational history emerged. In the second phase, the number of topics that each participant suggested adding to the list of relational history topics ranged from 0 to 3 ($M = 1.11$; $SD = 1.17$). As in phase one, the researcher examined the list and deleted duplicate answers. As a result of this process, 3 new topics were added, for a final list of 30 topics (see Table 1).

Pilot Study 2

Participants

Pilot Study 2 involved 297 respondents. One hundred forty-one (47.5%) of the participants were male and 152 (51.2%) were female. The respondents ranged in age from 18 to 46 years ($M = 19.75$, $SD = 1.98$). Of the 297 respondents, 266 (89.6%) were White, 16 (5.4%) were Black or African American, 2 (1%) were Hispanic or Latino, 1 (0.3%) was a Pacific Islander, and 6 (2%) were of other or mixed ethnicity. Many of the respondents (166; 55.9%) reported that they were in a romantic relationship at the time of data collection; 126 (42.4%) reported that they were not in such a relationship. For those who were in romantic relationships, the length of those relationships ranged from 1 month to 6 years, 8 months ($M = 1.70$ years, $SD = 1.37$ years). The respondents reported

the status of those relationships as casually dating (17; 5.7%), exclusively dating (113; 38%), cohabiting (24; 8.1%), engaged (6; 2%), or married (7; 2.4%).

Procedure

The objective of the second pilot study was to identify possible factors underlying TRH. Respondents were recruited through a participant pool of students in lower-level communication classes at a large southern university and were offered extra credit as an incentive to participate. At the time of data collection, respondents were offered a comparable alternative assignment for extra credit if they did not wish to participate in the current research. No students chose the alternative assignment, which was to write an essay on an interpersonal issue. After completing a consent form, participants were given both written and verbal instructions about how to respond to the survey. They were shown the list of 30 relational history topics and were told that the list had been generated in a previous study. They were asked to indicate on a written questionnaire the extent to which each topic should be discussed in a romantic relationship by using a 7-point Likert type scale with scores ranging from 1 (should not be discussed) to 7 (should be discussed). The second page of the questionnaire requested demographic information about the respondents.

Results

When responses to all 30 items contained in the list of TRH topics were averaged for extent to which relational history topics should be discussed, scores ranged from 1.70 to 6.32 ($M = 4.69$, $SD = .72$). *T*-tests were conducted to ensure that participants' sex and their relational status did not influence their ratings. There were no statistically

significant differences between men and women in their scores for these items ($t [291] = -1.55, ns$). Additionally, there were no statistically significant differences in the scores for these items between respondents in or not in a romantic relationship at the time of data collection ($t[290] = 2.56, ns$).

To determine whether a set of underlying factors could explain the list of topics associated with TRH, the ratings of the extent to which these topics should be discussed were subjected to a principal axis factor analysis with varimax rotation. An examination of the scree plot and eigenvalues that emerged from the analysis indicated the optimal number of factors. A three-factor structure using 15 items and accounting for 53.1% of the variance provided the best solution. The first factor, *characteristics of past partner(s)* ($\alpha = .80$), referred to attributes of past partners and artifacts from past partners, and was comprised of keeping possessions from past partner(s)/relationship(s), physical characteristics of past partner(s), personality of ex(s), friends' and family's opinions of ex(s), good memories with past partner(s), comparisons between the current partners and ex(s), ex(s)' preferences (e.g., "My ex hated it when I ____"), and cultural background of ex(s). The second factor, *sexual history* ($\alpha = .69$), referred to elements related to sexual matters in past romantic relationships, exposure to or contraction of STDs, sexual experiences with ex(s), number of one-night stands, and instances of cheating on a past partner or being cheated on by a past partner. The third factor, *characteristics of past relationship(s)* ($\alpha = .74$), described the scope and features of past relationships: the length of past relationship(s), satisfaction with past relationship(s), and the manner in which past relationship(s) ended. The factor loadings for the relevant items are presented in Table 2.

Main Study

The objectives of the main study were (a) to explore the perceptions of participants about participating in TRH with a romantic partner, (b) to determine the extent to which partners in romantic relationships share similar perceptions or agree with each other about TRH, (c) to determine the extent to which partners understand each other's perceptions of TRH, and (d) to examine the association of such agreement and understanding with relationship satisfaction. The study was based on the hypothesis that participants perceived TRH as taboo. Research questions were posed regarding which factors of TRH (*characteristics of past relationship[s], sexual history, and characteristics of past partne[s]*) partners perceived as important to discuss and which factors participants perceived as having been discussed with their relational partners. Hypotheses were posed regarding the contextual features of the relationship (relationship length) and the association between TRH behavior and perceptions of TRH. It was hypothesized that the greater the agreement in perception of the degree to which TRH is taboo, the degree to which TRH is important, and the extent to which TRH has been discussed, the greater the participants' satisfaction with their relationships will be. Similarly, the study predicted that the greater the extent to which partners understand each other's perceptions of the degree to which TRH is taboo, important, and has been discussed, the more relationally satisfied partners will be. Thus, the extent to which partners in couples agree with or understand each other's beliefs and attitudes should be positively correlated with relationship satisfaction. In the main study, chain referral

sampling was used again to identify potential participants involved in romantic relationships

This study was Internet-based; participants logged on to a privately controlled Internet site and were directed through the questionnaire items by a series of screens. The Internet-based survey method allowed participants to complete the questionnaire at a time and place of their own choosing.

Internet-Based Data Collection

Although data collected via the Internet may be met by some with skepticism, a growing body of literature supports the merits of Internet-based research as compared to traditional forms of data collection. Of course, social scientists should be skeptical before adopting a new procedure. Such skepticism ensures that errors in data collection and analysis are reduced by prompting researchers to examine all aspects of the data collection procedures and the impact of those procedures on the validity of findings. However, collecting data via the Internet can be a reliable, valid, reasonably representative, cost-effective, and efficient way of conducting survey research (Gosling, Vazire, Srivastava & John, 2004; Meyerson & Tryon, 2003). If researchers safeguard against compromised internal and external validity, they can obtain valuable results that generalize to similar populations just as well as results obtained from traditional (i.e., college student) populations.

Internal validity of Internet-based research. Internet based research can yield findings that are just as valid as those yielded by other methods of research. Findings generated by Internet-based research often point to the same conclusions as do those

generated by paper-and-pencil measures (Birnbaum, 2004; Gosling et al., 2004), and Internet-based measures are psychometrically equivalent to paper-and-pencil measures (Meyerson & Tryon, 2003). It is possible to achieve valid results from Internet-based surveys, and safeguards such as password protection prevent uninvited participants from completing the survey. Protecting the integrity of Internet-based data is feasible (Gosling et al., 2004).

Using the Internet to conduct survey research is possible because of new advances in technology. Internet-based research and take-home questionnaires share many of the same characteristics. Like other surveys, Internet-based questionnaires must make use of simple-to-understand instructions and layout (Daley, McDermott, McCormack Brown, & Kittleson, 2003). Cronk and West (2002) conducted an experiment to determine whether the method of data collection influences data results. They varied the site of data collection (in class or take home) and the method used (paper-and-pencil or Internet-based survey). They found no statistically significant differences between responses to a take-home questionnaire and responses to an Internet-based questionnaire.

Internet-based research is subject to the same problems as take-home questionnaires in that the researcher cannot control the environment in which participants complete the questionnaire. Furthermore, an unintended respondent who does not meet eligibility criteria for participation could complete the questionnaire, or the confidentiality of the respondent could be compromised if someone else is present during data completion (Daley et al., 2003).

Internet-based research can offer some advantages over in-person data collection. One study found that if the anonymity of participants completing Internet-based questionnaires can be maintained, their responses exhibit less social anxiety and lower social desirability than do responses to questionnaires completed in person (Joinson, 1999). Mustanski (2001) also suggested that people who participate in Internet studies may display more disinhibited behavior, such as revealing personal secrets and personal information, than those completing questionnaires in the presence of a researcher. Such behavior could increase the validity of findings.

External validity of Internet-based research. Internet-based surveys offer both advantages and disadvantages in recruiting participants. Collecting data with an Internet-based questionnaire is an efficient way of gaining access to either a focused, specialized sample or a large, heterogeneous sample (Birnbaum, 2004). If either of these types of populations is not of interest to the researcher, the researcher should carefully consider whether Internet-based research is the best method to use. The current study desired a large, heterogeneous sample representing a variety of relationship experiences. Daley et al. (2003) caution that Internet-based research may result in a biased sample, in that respondents must have access to a computer with Internet access. Internet-based research may tend to over-represent men and Whites (Meyerson & Tryon, 2003). The drop-out rates associated with Internet-based research are higher than those associated with other types of research, and the rates of repeated participation are also higher (Birnbaum, 2004). In terms of response rate, Daley et al. (2003) reported mixed results about the superiority of Internet-based or mailed-in questionnaires.

In considering the representativeness of Internet-based samples, Mustanski (2001) offered this assessment: “Even if Internet users are not currently representative of the U.S. population, they may be more representative on some variables than the typical college student who is the subject of most research” (p.294). Gosling and colleagues (2004), psychologists at the University of Texas at Austin, agree, reporting that although Internet-based research over-represents highly educated, high-income populations, student research also over-represents these populations. For these researchers, Internet-based data collection procedures provided access to participants in all 50 states; the mean age of participants in their studies was 27.6 years (Gosling et al., 2004). A myth exists that people likely to participate in Internet-based research are maladjusted loners who lack the social skills of people expected to participate in traditional, paper-and-pencil research procedures. This myth that Internet-based participants are maladjusted was not supported by Gosling et al., who found that Internet-based participants did not socialize less and did not score differently on measures of introversion and neuroticism than did participants in paper-and-pencil surveys.

In conclusion, Internet-based research can be just as internally and externally valid as paper-and-pencil methods. In time, and with more evidence comparing Internet-based and paper-and-pencil measures, the skepticism of most scholars concerning Internet-based research will probably subside and will be replaced by guidelines that will help researchers examine the validity of Internet-based data.

Current research suggests that several points should be kept in mind when Internet-based research is designed. Participants should be carefully recruited so that only

those belonging to the population of interest will have access to the survey. Once these participants have been recruited, important details about the survey should be explained to potential respondents as they decide whether to participate. Participants need to know how long it will take them to complete the survey, what to do if they should experience technical difficulties when completing the survey, and why it is important that they complete the survey without the help or influence of others. Emphasizing the importance of following directions and calling 20% to 25% of the participants to verify their responses and the confidentiality of their answers are also helpful in confirming the integrity of the data.

Participants

In the main study, 135 couples (135 men and 135 women) completed the survey, for a total of 270 participants. Inclusion in the study was not limited to heterosexual couples, although only heterosexual couples participated. The male participants ranged in age from 18 to 72 years ($M = 33.87$; $SD = 14.63$); the female participants ranged in age from 18 to 61 years ($M = 32.20$; $SD = 13.59$). The length of current relationships ranged from 1 month to 41 years ($M = 10.75$ years; $SD = 11.62$ years). Couples reported their relational status as exclusively dating (55 couples; 40.7%), married (65 couples; 48.1%), engaged (5 couples; 3.7%), or cohabiting (6 couples; 4.4%). Participants were predominately White (260; 96.3%); 5 (1.9%) were Black or African American, 1 (0.4%) was Hispanic or Latino, 2 (0.7%) were Asian, 1 (0.4%) was Korean, and 1 (0.4%) was of mixed ethnicity. The participants had a wide range of educational levels: 2 (0.7%) had completed some portion of high school, 12 (4.4%) had earned a high school diploma, 112

(41.5%) had completed some college courses, 68 (25.2%) had earned a college degree, 13 (4.8%) had completed some postgraduate work, and 58 (21.5%) had earned a postgraduate degree.

Procedure

Participants were recruited by snowball sampling, also called chain referral sampling (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). More specifically, two methods were used for recruiting study participants. First, the researcher sent e-mail messages to people with whom she was acquainted who were unfamiliar with the study and were involved in a romantic relationship; the messages invited these people to participate. These participants then recommended potential participants who were in romantic relationships, and so on. Second, students taking lower-level communication courses were offered extra credit for recruiting a romantic couple to participate in the research study. To ensure that all students had an equal opportunity to participate in recruiting and to avoid giving students in romantic relationships an advantage over single students, romantically involved students could not recruit their own partners to participate for extra credit. Students were offered an alternative extra-credit assignment, which consisted of writing a short essay about an interpersonal issue, at the time recruiting directions were given; no students opted to complete the alternative assignment.

Students were given written and verbal instructions about how to recruit couples as participants. They were told to approach couples only if both partners were at least 18 years old and had access to the Internet at home or at a public computing site. They also were directed to turn in forms containing information about themselves and the names

and contact information of the couple that they had recruited. The students indicated how they were related to members of the couple (e.g., friends, parents, etc.). The forms included a checklist of questions verifying that (a) the contact information for the couple was accurate, (b) the couple agreed to participate in the study, (c) and the couple understood that they could not share their questionnaire answers with each other.

The investigator then contacted the couples via e-mail with written instructions detailing the study, including the amount of time it would take to complete the study, the confidentiality of responses, and the importance of completing the study free from distraction and independent of their partners. Couples were also provided with the URL for the study and a direct link to the study. Each couple was assigned a passcode, which consisted of a unique 3- to 5-letter word (e.g., acme), which both partners in the couple used to gain admittance into the survey. The passcodes allowed the researcher to link couple data to the correct partners while preventing unknown Internet users without passcodes from gaining access to the Internet site and the questionnaire.

After participants entered their passcodes, they were directed to a page that addressed the potential for contamination of online research. In everyday language, they were told that only those involved in conducting the research would examine their responses and that all responses would be kept confidential. Respondents were cautioned that research about interpersonal communication and relationships often sparks conversations between partners, and they were asked to refrain from discussing the research and their responses until after both partners had completed the questionnaire. They were told that discussing the questionnaire and their responses before both had

completed the questionnaire would result in contaminated data and would compromise the validity of the study's results. Participants were also asked not to help each other fill out the questionnaire and were told to complete the questionnaire without their partner in the room. Participants were then asked to click "I agree" to the following three statements: (a) "I will fill out my questionnaire in a private setting, where my partner cannot see or observe my responses"; (b) "I will not discuss my answers with my partner until both of us have completed our questionnaires"; and (c) "I will not ask my partner about his or her responses until both of us have completed our questionnaires." If participants did not respond to these three questions, or if they chose "I do not agree," an error message appeared. Participants could not advance to the questionnaire until they agreed to all three statements.

Participants were then directed to a screen containing the consent form and were asked to click a button indicating their informed consent to participate in the research. After completing the consent form, they began the questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of 5 screens; at the end of each screen was a "submit" button, below which was a progress bar noting the participant's progress through the questionnaire.

In addition to recruiting carefully and explaining important procedures before the participants began the survey, the investigator randomly selected 30 (22.2%) of the couples who had completed the study and spoke to one of the partners in that couple via telephone. To verify the integrity and confidentiality of their responses, the investigator asked (a) "Did you talk to your partner about your survey answers?" (b) "If you did talk to your partner about your survey answers, when did you discuss them?" and (c) "Did

you have any help in completing the survey?” In response to the first question, 14 (46.7%) of contacted participants reported that they did not discuss their answers with their partners. The remaining 16 (53.3%) participants were asked when they had discussed their responses with their partners. Only 2 of the participants remembered the exact date on which they had discussed the study; in both instances, those dates were after both partners in the couple had completed the questionnaire. The remaining 14 respondents could not remember the date on which they discussed their responses, but all were sure that the discussion had taken place after both partners had completed the questionnaire. In response to the third question, regarding whether participants had received any help in completing the questionnaire, all 30 (100%) of the phone respondents reported that they had completed the questionnaire on their own. The results of this validity check suggest that the data collected via this Internet-based questionnaire were not contaminated.

Measures

Demographic information. Participants were asked to provide demographic information about them, including their age, sex, education level, and ethnic group.

Frequency of TRH. Participants were asked to respond to questions regarding how frequently they discussed their relational history with their partners in romantic relationships. The frequency of TRH was measured because people who discuss relational history frequently are more likely than those who do not to have partners who know more about their relational history; as a consequence, they may understand their partner’s perceptions more accurately. The frequency of TRH was expected to be negatively associated with the degree to which participants perceived TRH to be taboo

and with participants' tendency to avoid TRH. As a measure of how frequently partners discussed relational history, they were asked to indicate their level of agreement with four statements: (a) "My current partner and I talk about past relationships frequently," (b) "My current partner and I often talk about our past relationships," (c) "My current partner and I habitually talk about our past relationships," and (d) "My current partner and I never talk about our past relationships." The last item was reverse-coded. Responses ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). When the fourth item was dropped, the scale demonstrated good reliability ($\alpha = .83$).

TRH avoidance. TRH avoidance was assessed by using a modified version of Caughlin and Golish's (2002) measure, which is based on Guerrero and Afifi's (1995) measure of topic avoidance. Guerrero and Afifi's measure included 8 items, each beginning with the phrase "I avoid . . .," followed by topics relevant to those in romantic relationships. All items were followed by a 7-point Likert-type scale with scores ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Caughlin and Golish modified the Guerrero and Afifi scale to include additional items relevant to parent-child dyads. For the present study, the items were modified to focus solely on perceptions of avoiding TRH. Participants were asked to report their own and their partner's avoidance behaviors. Eight questions were used: (a) "I avoid talking about relational history with my current partner," (b) "My current partner avoids talking about past relationships with me," (c) "I stay away from talking about past relationships with my partner," (d) "My current partner stays away from talking about past relationships with me," (e) "I evade conversations with my partner about past relationships," (f) "My current partner evades conversations

about past relationships with me,” (g) “I steer clear of conversations about past relationships with my current partner,” and (h) “My partner steers clear of conversations about past relationships with me.” Responses ranged from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). When the fifth item was dropped, the scale showed strong reliability ($\alpha = .93$).

Perception of TRH as taboo. As a measure of participants’ attitudes toward TRH participants were asked to respond to statements addressing the degree to which they perceived discussing relational history as taboo or off limits. The results of a pretest¹ confirmed that the TRH Taboo measure used for this research was one-dimensional, was a reliable (.80) index of respondents’ attitudes, and was not related to either the sex or the ethnicity of the respondents. In responding to these questions, participants indicated the degree to which they agreed with 6 statements about the degree to which TRH is taboo: (a) “Past relationships should be considered a taboo topic for romantic partners,” (b) “It is healthy for romantic partners to talk with each other about their past relationships,” (c) “Romantic partners should keep information about their relational history to themselves,” (d) “People should not talk about their past relationships with their current romantic partners,” (e) “Romantic partners should discuss their relational history with each other,” and (f) “It is important for romantic partners to talk with each other about their past relationships.” The second, fifth, and sixth items were reverse-coded. Responses ranged

¹ One hundred sixty-six students at a large southwestern university were offered extra credit to take part in this pre-test. Of the participants (45 men [27.1%] and 119 women [71.7%]), 116 (69.9%) were White, 18 (10.8%) were Asian, 16 (9.6%) were Hispanic or Latino, 11 (6.6%) were Black or African American, 1 (0.6%) was Middle Eastern, and 2 (1.8%) were from mixed (2) ethnic groups. The original scale contained 8 items; after the results of the pretest were examined; two items were deleted from the scale: “My current partner stays away from talking about past relationships with me” and “Romantic partners should tell each other everything about their past relationships.”

from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The scale showed strong reliability ($\alpha = .92$).

Other's perception of TRH as taboo. Participants were asked to complete the TRH measure a second time, this time from the perspective of their partner. Participants were asked to answer the questions as they believed their partner would answer them.

As a measure of participants' beliefs about their partner's attitudes relating to talking about relational history, participants were asked to respond to statements addressing the degree to which they believed their partners perceived discussing relational history as taboo. Participants indicated the degree to which they believed their partner would agree with 6 statements about the degree to which TRH was taboo: (a) "Past relationships should be considered a taboo topic for romantic partners," (b) "It is healthy for romantic partners to talk with each other about their past relationships," (c) "Romantic partners should keep information about their relational history to themselves," (d) "People should not talk about their past relationships with their current romantic partners," (e) "Romantic partners should discuss their relational history with each other," and (f) "It is important for romantic partners to talk about their past relationships with each other." The second, fifth, and sixth items were reverse-coded. Responses ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The scale showed strong reliability ($\alpha = .89$).

Perception of TRH importance. Participants responded to a series of questions regarding the three dimensions of relational history identified in the second pilot study: *characteristics of past partner(s), sexual history, and characteristics of past*

relationship(s). Respondents indicated how important they thought it was to discuss each of these issues with their romantic partner. Participants were asked to answer the questions in reference to their own and their partner's relational history; these two scores were averaged. Three items were used to measure participants' perceptions of the extent to which TRH was important: (a) "How important is it to discuss characteristics of your own/your partner's ex(s) with your partner?" (b) "How important is it to discuss your own/your partner's sexual history with your partner?" (c) "How important is it to discuss characteristics of your own/your partner's past relationship(s) with your partner?" Responses ranged from 1 (not important) to 7 (very important).

Other's perception of TRH importance. Participants were asked to complete the Perception of TRH Importance scale a second time, this time from the perspective of their partners. They were asked to answer the questions as they believed their partners would answer them.

Participants responded to a series of questions regarding the three dimensions of relational history: *characteristics of past partner(s)*, *sexual history*, and *characteristics of past relationship(s)*. Respondents were asked to answer the questions as they believed their partners would in reference to their own and their partner's relational history. As with the Perception of TRH Importance variables, the answers respondents gave in reference to their own and their partner's relational history were averaged. Three items measuring other's perceptions of TRH importance: (a) "How important is it to discuss characteristics of your own/your partner's ex(s) with your partner?" (b) "How important is it to discuss your own/your partner's sexual history with your partner?" (c) "How

important is it to discuss characteristics of your own/your partner's past relationship(s) with your partner?" Responses ranged from 1 (not important) to 7 (very important).

Perception of TRH discussion. Participants responded to a series of questions regarding the extent to which they perceived they discussed TRH with their partner. Participants responded to questions in reference to their own and their partner's relational history, and these responses were averaged. Three items measuring perception of TRH discussion were used: (a) "Have you discussed characteristics of your own/your partner's ex(s) with your partner?" (b) "Have you discussed your own/your partner's sexual history with your partner?" (c) "Have you discussed characteristics of your own/your partner's past relationship(s) with your partner?" Responses ranged from 1 (definitely have not discussed) to 7 (definitely have discussed).

Other's perception of TRH discussion. Participants were asked to complete the Perception of TRH Discussion scale a second time, from the perspective of their partners. They were asked to answer the questions as they believed their partners would answer them.

Participants responded to a series of questions regarding the extent to which they believed that their partners perceived they had discussed TRH. Participants responded to questions as they believed their partners would respond in reference to their own and their partner's relational history; these responses were averaged. Three items measured other's perception of TRH discussion: (a) "Have you discussed characteristics of your own/your partner's ex(s) with your partner?" (b) "Have you discussed your own/your partner's sexual history with your partner?" (c) "Have you discussed characteristics of

your own/your partner's past relationship(s) with your partner?" Responses ranged from 1 (definitely have not discussed) to 7 (definitely have discussed).

Agreement. Agreement (i.e., attitude similarity) was calculated by comparing partner scores for each of the 135 couples in the study. Agreement scores were calculated for the three perceptions of TRH: taboo, importance, and discussion. Agreement is a coorientation variable that was calculated by comparing the data from one partner to the data from the other, thereby determining the similarity of their perceptions. Coorientation variables may be calculated in one of three ways: (a) by subtracting one partner's score from the other's score, thereby determining the discrepancy between partners' scores (b) by correlating partner scores using a Pearson correlation, or (c) determine the amount of agreement between scores using a form of an intraclass correlation (ICC) between partners' scores suggested by Robinson (1957). Purnine and Carey (1999) found that correlation scores are more stable and valid than discrepancy scores in predicting relational outcomes. When agreement was calculated by using the discrepancy between partners' scores, agreement scores could be influenced by "elevation," which is a participant's bias toward using a particular part of the scale. The influence of elevation could inflate or deflate agreement, depending on the direction and degree of each partner's bias and on how the partners' biases compare with each other. The inflation or deflation of the agreement scores would alter the association between agreement and satisfaction. To avoid this influence, the current study did not use discrepancy scores to determine the amount of agreement between partners.

Robinson (1957) points out that correlation scores can also give a false impression of agreement. That is, agreement is a “special case of correlation, since two variables that agree must be correlated, but variables which are correlated do not necessarily agree” (Robinson, 1957, p.19). Rather, Robinson proposes a formula for calculating agreement that is a form of intraclass correlation that relies on the sum of squares of deviations from the mean, divided by the total variance possible between the two scores. Thus, Robinson’s (1957) Agreement was used to calculate couple agreement. Couple agreement could range from 0 (perfect disagreement) to 1 (perfect agreement).

Understanding. The process of asking participants to report their own perceptions regarding TRH and then to put themselves in their partner’s shoes and answer from the partner’s perspective (other) was necessary for calculating the three TRH coordination variables for understanding (i.e., correctly identifying the partner’s perceptions): taboo, importance, and discussion. Partners use their own perceptions as a basis for guessing their partners’ perceptions, and they project their own perceptions onto the perceptions of their partner (Sillars, et al., 1984). A partial correlation was thus used to calculate understanding, because it controlled for a participant’s own response when determining the amount of association between the guess of the partner’s response and the partner’s actual response. Six total understanding scores were calculated by using correlations between partners’ answers: the first three measured men’s understanding of women’s perceptions of the extent to which TRH was taboo, important, and discussed; the second three assessed women’s understanding of men’s perceptions of the extent to which TRH

was taboo, important, and discussed. Understanding could range from -1 (perfect misunderstanding) to 1 (perfect understanding).

Relationship satisfaction. A modified version of the Marital Opinion Questionnaire (MOQ) (Huston, McHale, & Crouter, 1986) was used to determine how satisfied participants were with their relationships. The items that compose the measure were modified so that they referred to the participants' current relational partner. The MOQ consists of 11 items, 10 of which use a 7-point semantic differential scale to describe relationships: (a) "Miserable-Enjoyable," (b) "Hopeful-Discouraging," (c) "Free-Tied Down," (d) "Empty-Full," (e) "Interesting-Boring," (f) "Rewarding-Disappointing," (g) "Doesn't give me much of a chance-Brings out the best in me," (h) "Lonely-Friendly," (i) "Hard-Easy," and (j) "Worthwhile-Useless." The second, third, fifth, sixth, and tenth items were reverse-coded. The eleventh item was a global assessment of satisfaction: "How satisfied or dissatisfied have you been with your relationship?" Answers ranged from 1 (completely dissatisfied) to 7 (completely satisfied). As suggested by Huston, et al., of the first 10 items, the third and ninth items were dropped, and the remaining 8 items were averaged. These eight items demonstrated good reliability ($\alpha = .93$) and the average of the items was statistically significantly correlated with the last item ($r = .56$). The averaged sum was added to the final score, this total was divided by two for the final average.

Statistical Analysis

T-tests (paired and independent sample) and Pearson correlations were used to test the hypotheses and research questions. An alpha level of .05 used for all analyses.

Chapter 4

RESULTS

The purposes of the main study were to determine the degree to which partners within a couple agree with each other's perceptions about talking about relational history (TRH) and the degree to which partners within a couple understand each other's perceptions about TRH. The analyses in the main study focused on the variables that contribute to participants' perceptions of TRH and on the association (if any) of couple agreement and understanding with relationship satisfaction. TRH involves disclosing information about one's past relational experiences to a current romantic partner or asking one's partner about his or her past relational experiences.

First, participants' perceptions of TRH were examined. Participants' perceptions were grouped by sex to discover what, if any, sex differences exist between men's and women's perceptions of TRH (Hypothesis 1). This examination of participants' perceptions of TRH determined the extent to which they perceived TRH as taboo (Hypothesis 2), the extent to which they perceived TRH as important (Research Question 1), and participants' perceptions of the extent to which they perceived having discussed TRH (Research Question 2). An examination of participants' general perceptions of TRH was necessary for verifying the factors of TRH found in Pilot Study 2.

Preliminary Analysis

As a validity check, it was necessary to evaluate participants' perceptions of the degree to which the 15 items composing the 3 factors discovered in Pilot Study 2 should be discussed. Performing this validity check was essential because if participants'

perceptions of what composed each factor differed from the researcher's expectations of what composed each factor based on the perceptions of the participants in Pilot Study 2, the results in the main study pertaining to the factors of TRH could be compromised. Participants were shown the 15 items from Pilot Study 2 composing the 3 dimensions of TRH (*characteristics of past partner[s]*, *sexual history*, and *characteristics of past relationship[s]*) and were asked to indicate how the extent to each topic should be discussed on a scale from 1 (should not be discussed) to 7 (should be discussed). Confirmatory factor analysis was performed to verify the three dimensions discovered in Pilot Study 2. Generally speaking, items should have a loading of at least .50 to be considered an adequate indicator of a concept. The model fit was poor (χ^2 [87, N = 270] = 364.77, $p = .000$). In an attempt to refine the factor structure, four items were removed from the analysis: in the *characteristics of past partner(s)* factor, the items "cultural background of ex," "possessions kept from past partners," and "good memories from past relationships" were removed; in the *sexual history* factor, the item "exposure to or contraction of STDs" was removed. The factor structure with standardized regression coefficients is shown in Figure 2. The model fit was still poor (χ^2 [41, N = 270] = 195.00, $p = .000$).

Items that loaded well for the *characteristics of past partner(s)* factor ($\alpha = .87$) were: "comparisons between current partner and ex partner" (CFA12, $\beta = .65$), "ex's preferences" (CFA11, $\beta = .70$), "friends' and family's opinion of ex" (CFA9, $\beta = .71$), "personality of ex" (CFA8, $\beta = .87$), and "physical characteristics of ex" (CFA5, $\beta = .81$).

For the *sexual history* factor, ($\alpha = .80$), three items loaded well: “sexual experiences and preferences” performed marginally (CFA6, $\beta = .50$). The item “number of one-night stands or casual sex partners” performed well (CFA13, $\beta = .85$), as did “past cheating experiences” (CFA14, $\beta = .94$).

Finally, for the *characteristics of past relationship(s)* factor ($\alpha = .84$), three items performed adequately: “how past relationships ended” (CFA7, $\beta = .76$), “satisfaction with past relationships” (CFA3, $\beta = .85$), and “length of past relationships” (CFA2, $\beta = .83$) loaded satisfactorily.

These results indicate that findings associated with the characteristics of past partner(s), sexual history, and characteristics of past relationship(s) variables should be regarded as compromised. The data from the main study failed to confirm the factor structure discovered in Pilot Study 2. When participants responded to questions regarding the importance of and discussion of specific TRH topics, they may not have been using referents for those factors that were anticipated.

Results

Hypothesis 1 posited that men's and women's perceptions of TRH would be significantly different from one another. This hypothesis received partial support. A series of independent-samples *t*-tests were used to test this hypothesis. A statistically significant sex difference in perceptions of the extent to which TRH was taboo was discovered. Men (MTABOO, $n = 132$, $M = 3.31$, $SD = 1.41$) perceived TRH as significantly more taboo than did women (FTABOO, $n = 135$, $M = 2.76$, $SD = 1.24$), $t[265] = 3.37$, $p = .001$). There were statistically significant sex differences for

perceptions of the degree to which discussing sexual history was perceived as important and perceptions of the extent to which discussing characteristics of past relationships was important. Women (FSEXIMPORT, $n = 135$, $M = 5.71$, $SD = 1.78$) reported significantly higher scores for the degree to which discussing sexual history was important than did men (MSEXIMPORT, $n = 134$, $M = 4.86$, $SD = 2.01$), $t [267] = -3.67$, $p = .001$). Women (FRELIMPORT, $n = 135$, $M = 4.64$, $SD = 1.75$) also reported significantly higher perceptions of the importance of discussing characteristics of past relationships than did men (MRELIMPORT, $n = 134$, $M = 4.04$, $SD = 1.74$), $t [267] = -2.801$, $p = .005$). There were sex differences in participants' perceptions of what they had discussed in their relationships. Women (FSEXDISCUSS, $n = 135$, $M = 5.74$, $SD = 1.71$) perceived that they had discussed sexual history in their relationship more than did men (MSEXDISCUSS, $n = 133$, $M = 5.12$, $SD = 1.94$), $t [266] = -2.78$, $p = .006$). Women (FRELDISCUSS, $n = 135$, $M = 5.41$, $SD = 1.45$) also perceived that they had discussed characteristics of past relationships more than did men (MRELDISCUSS, $n = 134$, $M = 4.84$, $SD = 1.70$), $t [267] = -2.95$, $p = .003$). Women and men did not differ significantly in their perceptions of the extent to which discussing characteristics of past partners was important (MEXIMPORT and FEXIMPORT, $t [267] = -1.44$, ns), nor did men and women differ in their perceptions of having discussed characteristics of past partners (MEXDISCUSS and FEXDISCUSS, $t [267] = -2.95$, ns).

Hypothesis 2a and b suggested that participants would perceive talking about relational history (TRH) as taboo; this hypothesis was not supported. Table 3 shows the mean and standard deviation of the perception of the extent to which TRH was taboo.

The mean, 3.03, is below the mid-point on that 7-point scale and indicates that the average response corresponds to the phrase “somewhat disagree” to statements that regard TRH as a taboo topic. A single-sample *t*-test showed that both men’s (MTABOO, $t [129] = -5.67, p = .001$) and women’s (FTABOO, $t [129] = -11.16, p = .001$) scores were significantly lower than the mid-point for the scale.

Research Question 1a and b asked about the extent to which participants perceived topics of TRH (*characteristics of past relationship[s], sexual history, or characteristics of past partner[s]*) as important to discuss. Participants appear to consider most of these topics important. An examination of the means (see Table 3) reveals that the perception of the degree to which discussing sexual history was important (SEXIMPORT; $M = 5.28, SD = 1.94$) was rated significantly higher than the importance of discussing characteristics of past relationship(s) (RELIMPORT; $t [268] = -8.67, p = .000$) or of discussing characteristics of past partner(s) (EXIMPORT; $t [268] = -16.84, p = .000$). The perception of the extent to which discussing characteristics of past relationships was important (RELIMPORT; $M = 4.34, SD = 1.77$) was also rated statistically significantly greater than discussing characteristics of past partners (EXIMPORT; $t [268] = -7.39, p = .000$). A single-sample *t*-test revealed that men’s scores regarding the extent to which discussing characteristics of past partners was perceived as important were significantly higher than the scale mid-point (MEXIMPORT, $t [130] = -4.37, p = .000$), as was their perception of the extent to which discussing sexual history was important (MSEXIMPORT, $t [130] = 5.14, p = .000$), though their perceptions of the extent to which discussing characteristics of past relationships was

perceived as important did not differ significantly from the midpoint (MRELIMPORT, $t [130] = 0.25, ns$). A single-sample t -test revealed that women's scores regarding the extent to which discussing topics of relational history were important were all significantly higher than the mid-point of the scale, indicating that women perceived discussing characteristics of past partners (FEXIMPORT, $t [130] = -2.39, p = .018$), sexual history (FSEXIMPORT, $t [130] = 10.73, p = .000$), and characteristics of past relationships (FRELIMPORT, $t [130] = 4.06, p = .000$) all to be important.

Research Question 2a and b asked about the extent to which participants perceived that topics of TRH (*characteristics of past relationship[s], sexual history, and characteristics of past partner[s]*) were discussed in their relationship. An examination of the means reveals that participants perceived having discussed these topics in their relationships. Participants perceived having discussed sexual history (SEXDISCUSS; $M = 5.43, SD = 1.85$) significantly more than they perceived having discussed characteristics of past relationships (RELDISCUSS; $t [268] = -3.09, p = .002$) or having discussed characteristics of past partners (EXDISCUSS; $t [268] = -6.51, p = .000$). Participants perceived having discussed characteristics of past relationships (RELDISCUSS; $M = 5.12, SD = 1.60$) significantly more than they perceived having discussed characteristics of past partners (EXDISCUSS; $t [268] = -3.63, p = .000$). A series of single-sample t -tests were used to compare respondents' scores to the midpoints of the scales to determine if scores indicated agreement to statements focusing on having discussed relationship history. Men perceived that they had discussed characteristics of past partners (MEXDISCUSS, $t [129] = 4.86, p = .000$), sexual history (MSEXDISCUSS,

$t [129] = 6.58, p = .000$), and characteristics of past relationships (MRELDISCUSS, $t [129] = 5.70, p = .000$) with their partners. Women also perceived that they had discussed characteristics of past partners (FEXDISCUSS, $t [129] = 5.51, p = .000$), sexual history (FSEXDISCUSS, $t [129] = 11.45, p = .000$), and characteristics of past relationships (FRELDISCUSS, $t [129] = 11.66, p = .000$) with their partners.

Hypothesis 3a and b posited that relationship length (RELLENGTH) would be correlated with men's and women's perceptions of TRH frequency (MFREQ and FFREQ). This hypothesis was supported: Relationship length was significantly and negatively correlated with both men's ($r = -.29, p = .001$) and women's ($r = -.37, p = .001$) perception of TRH frequency.

Hypothesis 4a and b posited that relationship length (RELLENGTH) would be correlated with men's and women's perceptions of TRH avoidance (MAVOID and FAVOID). This hypothesis was supported. Relationship length was positively and significantly correlated with men's ($r = .24, p = .001$) and women's ($r = .18, p = .05$) perceptions of TRH avoidance.

Hypothesis 5a and b predicted that men's and women's perceptions of TRH frequency (MFREQ and FFREQ) would be negatively correlated with their respective perceptions of the extent to which TRH was taboo (MTABOO and FTABOO). This hypothesis was supported. Men's perceptions of TRH frequency were negatively and significantly correlated with men's perceptions of the extent to which TRH was taboo ($r = -.35, p = .001$). Similarly, women's perceptions of TRH frequency were negatively and

significantly correlated with women's perceptions of the extent to which TRH was taboo ($r = -.28, p = .001$).

Hypothesis 6a and b posited that men's and women's perceptions of TRH frequency (MFREQ and FFREQ) would be positively correlated with their respective perceptions of having discussed TRH (MEXDISCUSS, MSEXDISCUSS, MRELDISCUSS and FEXDISCUSS, FSEXDISCUSS, FRELDISCUSS). This hypothesis was also supported. Men's perception of TRH frequency was positively and significantly correlated with perceptions of having discussed characteristics of past partners ($r = .34, p = .001$), sexual history ($r = .36, p = .001$), and characteristics of past relationships ($r = .39, p = .001$). Women's perceptions of TRH frequency were also significantly and positively correlated with their perceptions of having discussed characteristics of past partners ($r = .39, p = .001$), sexual history ($r = .35, p = .001$), and characteristics of past relationships ($r = .33, p = .001$).

Hypothesis 7a and b suggested that men's and women's perceptions of TRH avoidance (MAVOID and FAVOID) would be positively correlated with their respective perceptions of the extent to which TRH is taboo (MTABOO and FTABOO). This hypothesis was supported. Men's perceptions of TRH avoidance were positively and significantly correlated with their perceptions of the extent to which TRH was taboo ($r = .45, p = .001$). Women's perceptions of TRH avoidance were also positively and significantly correlated with their perceptions of the extent to which TRH was taboo ($r = .55, p = .001$).

Hypothesis 8a and b posited that men's and women's perceptions of TRH avoidance (MAVOID and FAVOID) would be negatively correlated with their respective perceptions of having discussed TRH with their current partners (MEXDISCUSS, MSEXDISCUSS, MRELDISCUSS and FEXDISCUSS, FSEXDISCUSS, and FRELDISCUSS). The findings also support this hypothesis. Men's perceptions of TRH avoidance were negatively correlated with their perception of having discussed characteristics of past partners ($r = -.27, p = .001$), sexual history ($r = -.27, p = .001$, and characteristics of past relationships ($r = -.22, p = .001$). Women's perceptions of TRH avoidance were also negatively correlated with their perceptions of having discussed characteristics of past partners ($r = -.45, p = .001$), sexual history ($r = -.37, p = .001$) and characteristics of past relationships ($r = -.39, p = .001$).

Hypothesis 9a and b predicted that men's and women's own perceptions of TRH would be significantly correlated with their guesses about their partners' perceptions of TRH. The findings support this hypothesis. First, the men's scores will be examined, then the women's scores. Men's perceptions of the extent to which TRH was taboo (MTABOO) were moderately correlated with men's guesses of their partners' perceptions of the extent to which TRH was taboo (MOTABOO; $r = .55, p = .001$). Men's ratings of the extent to which TRH was important were also correlated with their belief of the extent to which their partners perceived TRH to be important. Men's own perception of the extent to which discussing characteristics of past partners was important (MEXIMPORT) was correlated with their guess of their partners' perceptions of the extent to which discussing past partners was important (MOEXIMPORT; $r = .70, p$

= .001). Men's perception of the extent to which discussing sexual history to be important (MSEXIMPORT) was also significantly correlated with their reports of their partners perception of the extent to which discussing sexual history was important (MOSEXIMPORT; $r = .87, p = .001$). Men's reports of the extent to which discussing characteristics of past relationships was important (MRELIMPORT) was also highly correlated with their guess of their partners perception of the extent to which discussing characteristics of past relationships was important (MORELIMPORT; $r = .79, p = .001$). Men's scores also displayed projection in that their scores of their own perceptions of having discussed TRH were positively and significantly correlated with their guesses of their partner's scores. Men's perceptions of having discussed characteristics of past partners (MEXDISCUSS) was correlated with their beliefs of their partner's perception of having discussed characteristics of past partners (MOEXDISCUSS; $r = .80, p = .001$). Men's perceptions of having discussed sexual history (MSEXDISCUSS) were also positively and significantly correlated with their reported beliefs of their partner's perception of having discussed sexual history (MOSEXDISCUSS; $r = .90, p = .001$). Finally, men's perceptions of having discussed characteristics of past relationships (MRELDISCUSS) was correlated with their beliefs of their partner's perception of having discussed characteristics of past relationships (MORELDISCUSS; $r = .86, p = .001$).

Next, the women's scores will be examined for support for Hypothesis 9b, that women would project their own perceptions onto their partners. Women's beliefs of their partners' perceptions of TRH as taboo (FOTABOO) were positively and significantly

correlated with their own perceptions of TRH as taboo (FTABOO; $r = .54, p = .001$).

Women's reported belief about their partner's perceptions of the extent to which discussing characteristics of past partners was important (FOEXIMPORT) was correlated with their own perception of the extent to which discussing past partners was important (FEXIMPORT; $r = .64, p = .001$). Women believed that their partner's perception of the extent to which discussing sexual history was important (FOSEXIMPORT) was positively correlated with how important they perceived discussing sexual history to be (FSEXIMPORT; $r = .76, p = .001$). Women's reports of their partner's perception of the extent to which discussing characteristics of past relationships was important (FORELIMPORT) were correlated with their own perception of the extent to which discussing characteristics of past relationships was important (FRELIMPORT; $r = .66, p = .001$). Finally, the same pattern of significant, positive correlations, indicating projection, was found in the women's perceptions of having discussed TRH. Women's beliefs that their partners would perceive having discussed characteristics of past partners (FOEXDISCUSS) was positively correlated with their own perceptions of having discussed characteristics of past partners (FEXDISCUSS; $r = .83, p = .001$). Women's report of their partners perception of having discussed sexual history (FOSEXDISCUSS) was significantly and positively correlated with how they perceived having discussed sexual history (FSEXDISCUSS; $r = .80, p = .001$). Finally, women's beliefs that their partners would perceive having discussed characteristics of past relationships (FORELDISCUSS) was correlated with how they perceived having discussed characteristics of past relationships (FRELDISCUSS; $r = .74, p = .001$).

Hypothesis 10a and b posited that couple agreement for perceptions of TRH will be positively correlated with men's and women's understanding of their partners' perceptions of TRH. This hypothesis received no support from the findings. Men's understanding of their partner's perceptions of TRH was not related to the amount of agreement for the extent to which TRH was taboo ($r = -.01, ns$), the extent to which TRH was important ($r = .14, ns$), or having discussed TRH ($r = .09, ns$). A similar pattern was found for women: Women's understanding of their partner's perceptions of TRH was not related to the amount of agreement for the extent to which TRH was taboo ($r = -.03, ns$), the extent to which TRH was important ($r = .11, ns$), or having discussed TRH ($r = .13, ns$).

Hypothesis 11a and b posited that there would be a positive correlation between couple agreement for the extent to which TRH was taboo and men's and women's relationship satisfaction. The findings did not support this hypothesis. Couple agreement for the extent to which TRH was taboo was not significantly correlated with men's relationship satisfaction ($r = -.13, ns$), nor was it related to women's relationship satisfaction ($r = .05, ns$).

Hypothesis 12a and b posited that there would be a positive correlation between couple agreement for the extent to which TRH was important and men's and women's relationship satisfaction. This hypothesis was not supported. Couple agreement for the extent to which TRH was important was not significantly correlated with men's relationship satisfaction ($r = .06, ns$) or women's relationship satisfaction ($r = -.06, ns$).

Hypothesis 13a and b predicted that there would be a positive correlation between couple agreement for having discussed TRH and men's and women's relationship satisfaction. The findings did not support this hypothesis either. Couple agreement of having discussed TRH was not significantly correlated with men's relationship satisfaction ($r = .12, ns$) or women's relationship satisfaction ($r = -.01, ns$).

Hypothesis 14a and b posited that there would be a positive correlation between men's and women's understanding of their partner's perceptions of the extent to which TRH was taboo and men's and women's relationship satisfaction. The findings did not support this hypothesis. Men's understanding of their partner's perception of the extent to which TRH was taboo was not correlated with either men's relationship satisfaction ($r = .05, ns$) or women's relationship satisfaction ($r = -.01, ns$). Similarly, women's understanding of their partner's perception of the extent to which TRH was taboo was not significantly correlated with men's relationship satisfaction ($r = .03, ns$) or women's relationship satisfaction ($r = .02, ns$).

Hypothesis 15a and b suggested that there would be a positive correlation between men's and women's understanding of their partner's perceptions of the extent to which TRH was important and men's and women's relationship satisfaction. This hypothesis was not supported. Men's understanding of their partner's perception of the extent to which TRH was important was not significantly correlated with men's relationship satisfaction ($r = .10, ns$) or women's relationship satisfaction ($r = .17, ns$). Women's understanding of their partners' perception of the extent to which TRH was

important was not related to men's relationship satisfaction ($r = .01, ns$) or women's relationship satisfaction ($r = .03, ns$).

Finally, hypothesis 16a and b posited that there would be a positive correlation between men's and women's understanding of their partner's perception of having discussed TRH and men's and women's relationship satisfaction. The findings did not support this hypothesis. Men's understanding of their partner's perceptions of having discussed TRH was not correlated with men's relationship satisfaction ($r = .01, ns$) or women's relationship satisfaction ($r = -.14, ns$). Women's understanding of their partner's perception of having discussed TRH was not significantly correlated with men's relationship satisfaction ($r = -.06, ns$) or women's relationship satisfaction ($r = -.10, ns$).

Chapter 5

DISCUSSION

Summary of Findings

The current study examined the perceptions of people in romantic relationships about TRH. In two pilot studies, TRH was found to be a multidimensional concept composed of three factors: *characteristics of past partner(s)*, *characteristics of past relationship(s)*, and *sexual history*. In the main study, measures of perceptions of TRH focused on the extent to which participants perceived TRH to be taboo and important and on the extent to which people perceived having discussed TRH in their romantic relationships. A contextual feature of the relationship, relationship length, was correlated with participants' perceptions of behaviors related to TRH: Participants discussed TRH less frequently and avoided it more in longer relationships. Perceptions of these behaviors, TRH frequency and avoidance, were correlated with perceptions of the extent to which TRH was taboo. The degree to which partners in couples agreed with and understood each other was also examined. The couple's agreement for TRH perceptions were not significantly correlated with either men's or women's relationship satisfaction; nor was the couple's understanding for TRH perceptions significantly correlated with either men's or women's relationship satisfaction.

Hypothesis 1 posited that men's and women's perceptions of TRH would be significantly different. This hypothesis received partial support. As the following discussion of findings will show, men's and women's perceptions of TRH are significantly different from one another for most, but not all, perceptions of TRH.

Women's perceptions of the importance of discussing sexual history were higher than men's, and women were more certain that they had discussed this topic with their partners than men were. Again, this finding is consistent with results suggesting that women are more interested in relational matters and communicate more about those matters than men do (Acitelli, 1988). Women's perceptions of the importance of characteristics of past relationships were higher than men's, and women were more certain that they had discussed characteristics of past relationships with their current relational partner than men were. No sex differences were found in response to the items concerning the discussion of characteristics of past partners. Again, results indicate that men's perceptions of TRH as taboo are higher than women's.

Hypothesis 2 posited that, consistent with Baxter and Wilmot's (1985) findings, participants would perceive TRH as taboo. This hypothesis was rejected: When all participants' responses were viewed together as an aggregate, the average response showed that participants "somewhat disagree" with statements regarding TRH as taboo. On the whole, participants did not perceive TRH as taboo. However, the findings also indicated that men perceived TRH as more taboo than did women. The men's responses did not designate agreement with statements indicating that they perceive TRH as taboo, but their responses were significantly higher than the women's responses. This finding, that women's perceptions of TRH as taboo were lower than men's, may be explained by previous research suggesting that women focus on relationships more than men do (Acitelli, 2002). Assuming that discussing relational history with a current partner has implications for the current relationship, the finding that women's perceptions of TRH as

taboo are lower than men's is consistent with other results. For example, Acitelli (2002) found that, although men consider relational talk to be a means of solving a relational concern, women find relational talk rewarding in and of itself, regardless of whether it addresses a relational concern. In fact, in another study men were found to be less interested in, to think less about, and to communicate less about relationships than women (Acitelli, 1988). Perhaps the finding in the current study that women perceive TRH as less taboo than men did is an artifact of their engaging in more thought and communication about relationships in general.

The first and second research questions asked which topics of TRH participants perceived as important and which topics they perceived they had discussed in their romantic relationships. Participants perceived that sexual history was the most important topic for discussion of the three, followed by characteristics of past relationships. Characteristics of past partners was perceived as the least important topic for discussion. When participants reported which topics they perceived they had discussed with their romantic partners, the topic rankings followed the same pattern as the rankings of importance. It is possible that participants were displaying a social desirability bias in that they were motivated to report that they had discussed what they reported they perceived to be important. That is, participants might believe that they were being inconsistent if they reported that discussing a topic was very important but that they had not discussed it in their current romantic relationship. This point was explored by a post hoc analysis examining the correlations between perceived importance and perceived discussion of a topic. As expected, perceptions of a topic's importance were significantly and positively

correlated with perceptions that the topic had been discussed. Specifically, perceptions that discussing sexual history was important were positively correlated with perceptions that sexual history had been discussed in the current relationship ($r [268] = .67, p = .001$). Perceptions that discussing characteristics of past relationships was important were positively correlated with perceptions that characteristics of past relationships had been discussed ($r [269] = .66, p = .001$). Finally, perceptions that discussing characteristics of past partners was important were positively correlated with perceptions that characteristics of past partners had been discussed ($r [269] = .55, p = .001$). These correlations indicate positive associations between perceptions of a topic's importance and discussion of that topic; however, correlations do not support claims of causality. It is possible that participants were motivated to perceive a topic as more important if they had discussed it in their current romantic relationship.

Participants perceived that the most important topic for discussion was sexual history, and they were also most certain that they had discussed this topic with their partners. This finding may be explained, in part, by the messages health educators have been sending to groups likely to contract STDs. Health educators have advocated an STD prevention strategy termed “negotiated safety” as an alternative to abstinence and monogamy strategies for those at risk of contracting an STD (Kippax & Race, 2003). Negotiated safety allows a person who is HIV-negative to enter into a relationship with another person who is HIV-negative and have unprotected sex. This practice is “relatively safe...as long as safe sex agreements are negotiated to cover sexual behavior outside these regular relationships.... that all sexual behavior outside the regular

relationship is safe” (Kippax & Race, 2003, p.3). The practice of negotiated safety necessitates TRH focused on sexual history to the extent that people can determine that their partners are HIV-negative and to communicate that they are also HIV-negative. Findings from the current study suggest that participants agree with health educators about the importance of discussing their sexual histories, although the content and actual frequency of these conversations may vary from health educators’ recommendations.

Participants perceived that the second most important relational topic for discussion was characteristics of past relationships, and their perceptions of having discussed this topic were second highest. Discussing the characteristics of past relationships could represent an aspect of relational history that is more directly relevant than characteristics of past partners to the current relationship. That is, learning how satisfying a past relationship was, how long it lasted, or how it ended can provide important, if general, cues about what a current relationship might be like.

Characteristics of past partners were perceived as the least important relational topic for discussion, and participants were least likely to have discussed this topic. This finding may be explained by the previous finding that talking about a specific past partner may be seen as directly threatening to the current partner and relationship (Newman, 1982). Discussing characteristics of past partners may be dangerous, because such a discussion could signal a continued interest in the past partner (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985), and this continued interest could threaten the current partner’s status.

The length of participants’ relationship was hypothesized to be correlated both with the frequency of (Hypothesis 3) and the avoidance of (Hypothesis 4) TRH. For both

men and women, the length of the relationship was negatively correlated with the frequency with which TRH took place. The longer the relationship, the more likely participants were to perceive that they avoided TRH in the current relationship. It is possible that discussing relational history is more relevant at earlier stages of relationships than at later stages. When new romantic partners meet and begin to get to know one another, relational history could be one of the many topics they discuss. They may explore a breadth of topics, as Altman and Taylor (1973) suggest, including those associated with their past relationships. Discussing features of past relationships may show aspects of the self that are relevant to the budding current relationship.

Hypotheses 5 through 8 focused on the relationships between reports of TRH behavior and TRH perception. Hypothesis 5 posited that TRH frequency was negatively correlated with perceptions of the extent to which TRH is taboo; Hypothesis 6 posited that TRH frequency was positively correlated with perceptions of having discussed TRH. Findings support both of these hypotheses. It is possible that discussing relational history frequently desensitized respondents to the perception of that topic as taboo or off limits. On the other hand, it could be that the perception that TRH was not highly taboo allowed the participants to discuss the topic more often. Hypothesis 7 posited that TRH avoidance was positively correlated with perceptions of the extent to which TRH is taboo. The findings support this hypothesis. That is, the more participants reported avoiding the topic, the more they perceived TRH as taboo. Perceptions of behavior (i.e., avoiding TRH) were associated with attitudes about a conversational topic (i.e., the perception of the degree to which TRH was taboo). Hypothesis 8 posited that TRH avoidance would be

negatively correlated with perceptions of having discussed TRH. This was also found to be the case; the findings support this hypothesis.

Hypothesis 9 predicted that participants' own perceptions would be significantly correlated with their guesses about their partners' perceptions of TRH. The findings support this hypothesis. A common pattern emerged among all three topics: participants' guesses about other-perceptions were remarkably similar to their own self-perceptions. Participants believed that their partners would perceive the importance of discussing past partner(s) similarly to the way that they themselves did such that as the participants' own rating of the topic's importance increased, they believed that their partner's rating would increase as well. Participants also believed that their partners' perceptions of having discussed past partner(s) and sexual history would be similar to their own. Participants could be projecting their own perceptions onto their partners and thus assuming more similarity between these perceptions than was actually present. This finding confirms those of other studies of projection suggesting that people base guesses about the other's perceptions on their own perceptions (Kenny, 1994). For both men and women, there was a high and statistically significant positive correlation (ranging from .54 to .90) between the scores representing self-perceptions and the corresponding scores representing other-perceptions of the same topic. Findings consistently show that perceptions of similarity between couples are higher than actual similarities (e.g., Sillars et al., 1994). Partners use their own perceptions as a basis for guessing their partners' perceptions, and they project their own perceptions onto the perceptions of their partner.

The findings did not support any of the hypotheses associated with coorientation theory. Hypothesis 10 posited that the couple's agreement would be positively correlated with partners' understanding of each other. This hypothesis was not supported.

Hypothesis 11, which posited that the couple's agreement about the extent to which TRH is taboo would be correlated with men's and women's relationship satisfaction, was not supported. Hypothesis 12, which predicted that couple agreement as to the extent to which TRH was important would be correlated with couple understanding of the extent to which TRH was important, was not supported. Hypothesis 13 posited that couple agreement for the discussion of TRH would be correlated with couple understanding of perceptions of having discussed TRH. The findings did not support this hypothesis either.

Hypothesis 14, which posited that the couple's understanding of perceptions of the extent to which TRH is taboo would be correlated with relationship satisfaction, was not supported. Nor was hypothesis 15, that the couple's understanding of perceptions of the extent to which TRH was important would be correlated with couple satisfaction. Finally, hypothesis 16, which predicted that the one's understanding of the other's perception of having discussed TRH would be correlated with relationship satisfaction, did not find support in the findings.

There are several potential explanations for the absence of findings consistent with coorientation theory. First, it is possible that the relationships suggested between couple agreement and understanding with relationship satisfaction did not accurately describe the conceptual relationship as it exists in the target population. Perhaps coorientation theory is not the best theory to explain a relationship between partner's

perceptions of TRH and their relationship satisfaction. If this is the case, future research should focus on identifying concepts and relationships between concepts that accurately represent what happens in the population.

Second, it is possible that the relationship between concepts does exist in the target population, as the coorientation models hypothesized, but that the methodological constraints of the study prevented the detection of that relationship. Of primary concern are the items contributing to the factors representing the topics of TRH: *characteristics of past partner(s), sexual history, and characteristics of past relationship(s)*. All three of these factors contained items that did not measure the factors well on the sample in the main study. This issue will be discussed at more length below. It is possible, however, that, without a clear assessment of what the topics of TRH were, any potential pattern in participants' responses was diluted by the poorly fitted factors. Perhaps a larger sample of couples would increase the power of the analyses so that they could adequately capture the hypothesized relationships between variables. It is also possible that the demographic differences between the individuals who participated in the pilot study and those who participated in the main study affected participants evaluations of the topics associated with TRH.

Post-hoc analysis

In the following section, statistically significant relationships among variables that were not hypothesized and yet were still noteworthy are discussed. This is done in an attempt to build a theoretical foundation upon which future research may reference and verify findings from the current study.

Although this finding was not hypothesized, relationship length was significantly correlated with participants' perceptions of the extent to which TRH is taboo. The correlation between relationship length and the extent to which TRH was perceived as taboo was somewhat significant for men ($r [129] = .34, p = .000$) and for women ($r [130] = .30, p = .001$). Men's beliefs about their partner's perception of the extent to which TRH was taboo was also correlated with relationship length ($r [130] = .33, p = .000$), though the same was not true for women's beliefs about their partners' perceptions ($r [130] = .16, ns$). In short, the longer the relationship, the greater the participants' (especially men's) perception that TRH was taboo. Perhaps an implicit assumption of partners in romantic relationships is the notion that TRH is appropriate only at the early stages of relationship development, when it is most relevant. It is possible that TRH is relationship-threatening in that it could signal a continued interest in the past partner and the past relationship (Newman, 1982). If this is the case, people may tolerate TRH at the earlier stages of relationship development when that topic is most relevant; beyond that point, TRH may become increasingly taboo for romantic partners. Yet another explanation for these findings is that there was a cohort effect on this analysis: Younger participants may have perceived TRH as less taboo than did older participants. Younger participants may have received more exposure to self-help media on relationship repair, which advocate open and honest communication, because such media are prevalent in our current culture. Older participants, in contrast, may have perceived discussing relationship-relevant topics as more taboo than did younger participants. Relationship length was used as the preceding variable in the analysis as a control for this possible

cohort effect. Even so, it is interesting to note that both age and relationship length were moderately correlated with perceptions of the degree to which TRH is taboo; age was correlated with perceptions of the degree to which TRH is taboo ($r[267] = .33, p = .001$) as was relationship length ($r = .29, n = 267, p = .001$).

Relationship length was also negatively correlated with women's understanding of men's perception of the extent to which TRH was important ($r [130] = -.18, p = .04$), as well as men's relationship satisfaction ($r [130] = -.28, p = .01$). The context of the relationship, as long established or new and growing, appears to play a vital role not only in TRH, but in general relationship features as well, such as satisfaction with the relationship.

Another set of findings discovered during post-hoc analysis was of interest for building theory about TRH for future work. Perceived frequency of TRH was related to agreement for perceptions of TRH in several interesting ways. Perceived frequency of TRH worked differently for men and women as they each perceived TRH. For women, frequency of TRH was negatively correlated with couple agreement for the extent to which TRH was taboo ($r [130] = -.20, p = .02$), but the same was not true for men ($r [130] = .00, ns$). The more frequently women perceived TRH, the less they agreed with their partner about how taboo TRH was. The more frequently women perceived TRH, the less taboo they believed their partners would perceive TRH to be ($r [134] = -.44, p = .000$). A similar relationship between perceived frequency of TRH and beliefs about the extent to which their partners perceived TRH to be taboo was found for men, but not nearly as pronounced as it was for women ($r [134] = -.18, p = .04$). Perhaps women believed that

the decline in men's perceptions of TRH as taboo would be greater than was actually the case when TRH took place frequently. Women may have mistaken the frequency of communication about the topic as an indication that their partner agreed with their perceptions of the extent to which TRH was taboo.

Perceived frequency of TRH was also significantly correlated with couple agreement for the extent to which TRH was important differently for men and women. For men, the more frequently they perceived TRH, the more the couple agreed as to the extent to which TRH was important ($r [134] = .17, p = .05$), and the same was not true for women ($r [134] = -.08, ns$). Perceived frequency of TRH was not correlated significantly to couple agreement for having discussed TRH for men or for women.

Men's and women's perceptions of TRH were also related in peculiar ways to variables they were not hypothesized to correlate with. Men's perception of TRH avoidance was positively correlated with women's ability to accurately understand men's perception of the extent to which TRH was taboo ($r [135] = .20, p = .02$). This finding is consistent with Acitelli's (2002) finding that women attend to relational-relevant topics more closely than do men. Women's perception of TRH avoidance was negatively correlated with men's relationship satisfaction ($r [132] = -.24, p = .006$). This may signal one of two possible processes taking place within the relationships. Perhaps women, as they avoided TRH more and more, were behaving in a way that was unexpected by men, and this lowered men's relationship satisfaction. On the other hand, women, perhaps sensing their partner's dissatisfaction with the relationship, were not motivated to approach TRH with their partners and thus avoided it more. In either case, this is an

interesting association that was unique to women's perception of TRH behavior and men's relationship satisfaction.

As stated earlier, none of the hypothesized relationships consistent with coorientation theory yielded significant findings. A couple's orientation to TRH was not related to either men's or women's relationship satisfaction. However, individual orientations to TRH were important in that perceptions of TRH were significantly correlated with relationship satisfaction. The only variables that were significantly associated with relationship satisfaction were the measurement of the extent to which women perceived TRH to taboo, and the extent to which men believed their female partners perceived TRH to be taboo. The more women perceived TRH to be taboo, the lower their relationship satisfaction was ($r [132] = -.20, p = .02$). The more taboo men believed their partners perceived TRH to be, the lower their relationship satisfaction was ($r [132] = -.18, p = .04$). Both partners' assessments of the female partner's perceptions (either her own perceptions or men's belief about her perceptions) of the extent to which TRH was taboo were related to their respective levels of relationship satisfaction. Again, this may be due to women's area of specialty in the relationship, as the partners who were most likely to be relationally aware (Acitelli, 2002). This correlation between relationship satisfaction and perception of TRH as taboo was not mediated by couple agreement or one partner's understanding of the other partner's perceptions.

Contributions of Findings to Current Research

First and foremost, this study expanded current understanding of TRH. The findings indicate that relational history should not be treated as a unidimensional concept.

The present study found that relational history is comprised of multiple factors. Further research is needed to clarify and confirm the factors that compose TRH, but the likely existence of multiple factors in TRH should not be ignored. Without exploring these factors, the results of studies that focus on TRH will be difficult to interpret, because the participants' perceptions may not be understandable without a clarification of which aspect of relational history is of interest (e.g., *sexual history, characteristics of past relationship[s], or characteristics of past partner[s]*). It is also possible that other aspects of relational history may also affect partners' perceptions; future studies should determine what those other aspects are and what influence they have on perceptions of TRH.

Moreover, the argument that people perceive TRH as taboo has been clarified to some extent. Baxter and Wilmot (1985) defined a taboo topic as something that is perceived as off limits by one or both of the relational partners. This is a liberal definition, in that couples need not agree about what is considered taboo. The definition also does not take into account variance in the extent to which partners perceive topics as taboo. In the current study, participants reported a range of perceptions about the degree to which TRH was taboo. On average, participants did not perceive TRH as taboo, and women's perceptions of TRH as taboo were lower than men's.

This study supported Acitelli's (1988) assertion that women's relationship awareness is higher than men's. The current study extends Acitelli's arguments by demonstrating that perceptions of a relationship-relevant topic, relational history, are pertinent to partners and their relationship. The more women perceived TRH to be taboo,

the less satisfied they were in their current relationship. Interestingly, the more men believe their partners perceived TRH to be taboo, the lower their own relationship satisfaction was. The both partner's perception of the extent to which the woman sees TRH as taboo is negatively associated with relationship satisfaction.

For both men and women, perceptions of the appropriateness of discussing relationship history appears to be contextually bound to the beginning stages of the relationship. Couples report they discuss relationship history less frequently and regard it as more taboo as the relationship progresses. Sillars (1985) recommends that, when couple agreement and understanding are researched, specific referents be explored in specific contexts. The current study followed this recommendation. Talk about relationship history is associated with a unique set of perceptions that affect couple agreement and understanding. Not only that, but the context of the relationship (long or short) plays a part in the perceptions of romantic partners about the extent to which relationship history is off limits as a conversational topic.

Limitations

Several important limitations to the internal and external validity of the current study should be noted.

Generalizability. The discovery and labeling of three factors reflecting TRH (*sexual history, characteristics of past relationship[s], and characteristics of past partner[s]*) did not generalize from the sample used for Pilot Study 2 to the sample used in the main study. A relatively traditional college student sample, with a mean age of approximately 20 years, evaluated the measure developed for the main study. The mean

age of participants in the main study was approximately 33 years. It is possible that younger participants perceived the factors reflecting TRH differently than did older participants and those younger participants had a different perspective on relational history than did older participants. When the factors were explored in the second pilot study, the data collected from younger participants indicated that issues such as children from past relationships did not consistently load on any dimension of TRH. If items such as this one had been examined by using a sample with a greater variance in age, including participants who were divorced or widowed and had children from a past relationship, the factors reflecting TRH may have been different.

Participants in the main study did not have the opportunity to examine the entire list of 30 topics of TRH discovered in Pilot Study 1, they were only asked to evaluate the 15 items that comprised the 3 factors that were discovered. It is possible that if participants had examined and responded to all 30 items, a different factor structure could have been discovered. Future studies should address this concern by asking participants from different populations to examine and evaluate the items to determine if differences across samples result in unique factor structures of TRH.

The measurement tool used to define the dimensions of TRH was not confirmed with participants in the main study. Although this lack of generalizability was unfortunate, such findings serve as a reminder of the importance of paying careful attention to the attributes of a researcher's participant population. One of the findings of this study suggested that the perception of the extent to which discussing relational history was off limits varied with the length of the relationship and with age. Relational length and age of

the population of interest should be key variables in focusing on certain populations in future studies.

Additionally, participants were homogenous with regard to ethnic background. Acitelli (2002) explored differences with regard to relational awareness between White and Black samples of romantic couples. She noted that sociocultural factors probably affected the extent to which partners had relational awareness and the effect of relational awareness on the relationship and the partner. Therefore, the findings of the current study may not reliably generalize to populations that are not primarily White.

Internal validity. The inability of the measure of the dimensions of TRH to generalize from the second pilot study sample to the main study sample also may reflect the internal validity of the study. In the first pilot study, the researcher coded the responses given for possible topics of TRH. A second researcher was not used, and intercoder reliability could not be assessed without a second coder. The task was perceived to be straightforward: simply eliminating redundant responses given by participants. Although mistakes or errors of judgment in this task were not likely, they were possible. Future studies investigating the dimensions of relational history should take steps to explore the factors of relational history with different samples so that results may be verified. The absence of a reliable and stable measurement of these dimensions probably lowered the statistical power of the CFA in the main study to detect stable findings in analyses that used those dimensions to explain the relationship between couple agreement, understanding, and relationship satisfaction.

As mentioned previously, using the Internet to administer the survey could have created an opportunity for participants to falsify or contaminate the data. In an attempt to prevent falsified data, couples were given unique passcodes so that only study participants could access the study's Web page. Regardless, it is still possible that the e-mail message received by participants was not secure and that the password was intercepted and used by a third party. In an attempt to address data contamination, participants were asked to complete the survey by themselves, without the aid of their partner, and to refrain from discussing the survey with their partner until both partners had completed the survey. A random sample of participants was contacted by telephone and asked whether they had violated the terms of participation for the study. None of these participants reported breaking the confidentiality procedures requested of participants in the study. It is possible, however, that either the participants who were contacted actually did contaminate the data but lied about doing so when asked, or that participants who did contaminate the data were not among those randomly chosen and contacted.

Directions for Future Research

Several directions for future research are worthy of discussion. Some build on the strengths and findings of the current study and others attempt to address weaknesses in the design of the current study.

Participants' past relational experiences may influence their perception of the extent to which TRH is taboo, important, and their likelihood of engaging in TRH with their partners. These past relational experiences were not assessed in the current study;

future studies should explore this avenue of research. Past relational experiences have the potential to contextualize peoples' willingness to engage in TRH and their perception of TRH. Examples of important past relational experiences include the nature of the dissolution of a relationship and the presence of children from past relationships that may necessitate contact with the past partner. The amount and quality of past relationship experiences may be associated with a person's willingness to discuss them and should be addressed in future research about TRH.

Peoples' motivation or intentions for current relationships may likewise influence the type and amount of information about their relational history they are willing or feel obligated to share. A casually dating relationship not intended to last beyond a few weeks or months could be devoid of any TRH. A relationship that is intended to last for a long time may compel partners to share more intimate details of their relational history in an attempt to create and open communication environment in which partners understand each others' identity both in and out of the relationship, before and after their current relationship began. People's commitment to their relationship may reflect on their motivation to coorient to objects in the relationship. This identifies another avenue for future research.

The factors of TRH should be explored in more depth. A study could be designed in which 3 target populations are sampled: college students, divorced and widowed people seeking new relationships, and a randomly sampled group from a general population for comparison. Each of these groups of people could be asked to evaluate the 30 topics of TRH found in Pilot Study 1 and report the extent to which each topics

perceived to be taboo, seen as important, should be discussed, and has been discussed in their own relational experiences. The factor structures that result from each of these groups could be examined to discover if they are particular to each group. College students, because they are younger, typically have less of both life experience and relational experience than divorced or widowed people have. The longer histories of those who are divorced or widowed could influence the way in which they perceive or approach TRH and the topics therein. If necessary, and if different factor structures are identified, they could be used in subsequent research on those target populations.

A future study could identify the process that partners in relationships who do not agree with each others' perceptions of TRH use to resolve this disagreement without lowering their relationship satisfaction. Published studies suggest that partners could resolve their situation in a satisfying relationship by diminishing the importance of the topic (Dailey & Polomares, 2004), they could compromise by varying the frequency of discussions about TRH or by varying the depth and breadth of disclosure about TRH (Tarwater, 1991). These hypotheses should be explored in future research.

As mentioned earlier, partners in shorter relationships discussed relational history more often and found TRH less taboo than did those in longer relationships. Future studies on TRH should sample from populations with relatively short relationships; relationship length influenced perceptions of the importance of TRH. Sampling couples in shorter relationships may result in a participant pool that discusses TRH more frequently and perceives TRH as less taboo. College student populations certainly offer a readily available and convenient source of participants in shorter relationships for whom

TRH is probably important. Additionally, divorced or widowed people would probably find the topic of relational history important as they explore and establish new romantic relationships.

Participants were not asked to indicate how certain they were of their guesses about their partners' responses. In future studies, measuring this concept would be interesting. The certainty that participants felt in their guesses may have varied and was probably influenced by past experience with TRH in that relationship, as well as by the attention given to the partner's behaviors and attitudes about TRH. Knowing the extent to which participants felt certain about their guesses of their partners' answers could have illuminated the relationship between understanding and relationship satisfaction, which in the present study was not statistically significant. The degree to which participants were certain of their guesses about their partners' perceptions of TRH could have modified the relationship between self-perception and other-perception. Perhaps those participants with low certainty were more likely to project their own perceptions onto their partner.

During data collection, participants were also asked to respond to open-ended questions about why they considered each factor of TRH (*sexual history, characteristics of past relationship[s], characteristics of past partner[s]*) to be as important as they perceived it to be. Participants were also asked to indicate why they thought their partner would perceive discussing TRH to be as important as they reported. In a subsequent study, these qualitative data will be analyzed in an attempt to understand the reasons that participants perceive that discussing an aspect of their or their partner's relational history is as important as they perceived it to be. Perhaps a pattern will emerge from an

examination of these data; such a pattern may offer an explanation of why particular topics were or were not discussed in the relationship.

One of the strengths of the current study is the finding that TRH is multidimensional. Although the study did not provide strong evidence as to the number of dimensions or the topics that compose these dimensions, future research should continue to explore the dimensions of TRH and how they might unfold in conversation. For example, a conversation about sexual history, which participants in the current study perceived to be important to discuss, will probably unfold differently than a conversation about characteristics of past partners, which was perceived to be less important. O'Keefe (1973) argues that acknowledging the relevance of the perception object (i.e., TRH) is crucial to research on agreement and relationship satisfaction. The more an object is perceived to be important by partners seeking agreement, the more significant agreement becomes to relationship satisfaction. Examining conversations focusing on various dimensions of relationship history would offer an opportunity for describing the tone of such conversations as well as the way in which that tone varies with that topic's importance. Not only that, but this type of research could be used to observe the strategies partners employ to successfully discuss relational history and to communicate their perceptions of TRH and the extent to which TRH is perceived as important, taboo, or both to their partners. Partners could be interviewed and asked to reflect on and report cognitions during interaction. Agreement and understanding could be assessed by comparing partners' perceptions once again, and these concepts could also be examined in terms of relationship outcomes such as relationship satisfaction.

Future research could also address the practical meaning of labeling a topic as “taboo” for couples in romantic relationships. The connotative meaning of labeling a topic as “taboo” could differ for partners in a couple. In judging a third party, acquaintance pairs were able to reach a high degree of consensus when they used the same criteria (Story, 2003). In a future study, partners could be asked to define “taboo.” Taboo could indicate simply that the topic is off limits, but there could also be variance in the way in which topics that are off-limits are negotiated in the relationship. It is important to keep in mind that labeling a topic as “taboo” could also label it as potentially exciting and titillating. For instance, “taboo” could defensively mean “don’t you dare go near this topic” to one person but could coyly mean “if you ask, I’ll tell” to someone else. Participants perceived that sexual history was the most important topic of relational history to be discussed. This finding may be due to a partner’s secret desire to know what is most intimate about the other partner. As communication scholars, we should be aware of and explore the hidden meanings ascribed to the labels we use for concepts.

Tables and Figures

Table 1: Topics Associated with Talk about Relational History

Leisure activities/hobbies with the ex(s) (e.g., movies, music, food, etc.)
Number of sexual partners
Exposure to or contraction of STDs
Sexual experiences or preferences
Number of one-night stands or casual sex partners
Conflict management strategies
Power relationships (e.g., who made the decisions)
Number of past relationship(s)
Length of past relationship(s)
Stage of past relationship(s) (e.g., dating, cohabiting, engaged, married, divorced, etc.)
Satisfaction with past relationship(s)
Cheated on ex(s) or was cheated on by ex(s)
Abuse or violence in past relationship(s)
Events or behaviors experienced in past relationship(s) but not tolerated in current relationship
Pregnancies or children from past relationships
How past relationship(s) started
Reasons why past relationship(s) ended
How past relationship(s) ended (e.g., Was it a mutual split? Did one partner “dump” the other?)
Physical characteristics of ex(s)
Personality of ex(s)
Likes and dislikes of ex about you (e.g., My ex hated it when I _____)
Cultural background of ex(s)
Your friends’ or family’s opinion of ex(s)
Good memories from past relationship(s)
Bad memories from past relationship(s)
Revelations or realizations about ex(s)
Comparisons between current partner and ex(s)
Frequency or amount of time spent thinking about ex(s)
Frequency or amount of time spent with ex(s) now (i.e., still keep in touch with the ex?)
Possessions kept from past relationship(s) (e.g., photos, clothing, etc.)

Table 2: Factor Analysis of TRH Topics

	Factor		
Items	I	II	III
<i>Characteristics of Past Partner(s) ($\alpha = .80$)</i>			
Personality of ex(s)	.72		
Friends/families opinions of ex(s)	.67		
Physical characteristics of ex(s)	.63		
Comparison between current partner and ex(s)	.63		
Ex(s) preferences	.61		
Good memories from past relationship(s)	.58		
Possessions kept from past relationship(s)	.46		
Cultural background of ex(s)	.41		
<i>Sexual History ($\alpha = .69$)</i>			
Number of one night stands		.82	
Cheating in past relationship(s)		.73	
STDs exposed to or contracted		.46	
Sexual experiences		.39	
<i>Characteristics of Past Relationship(s) ($\alpha = .74$)</i>			
How past relationship(s) ended			.67
Satisfaction with past relationship(s)			.62
Length of past relationship(s)			.58

Note: The eigenvalues were 3.39, 2.18, and 1.09, respectively.

Table 3: Means, Medians, and Standard Deviations of Perception of TRH Variables for Men and Women (N = 135)

Variable	Mean	Median	Standard Deviation
Men's perception of the extent to which TRH is taboo (MTABOO)	3.30	3.08	1.40
Men's guess of partner's perception of the extent to which TRH is taboo (MOTABOO)	3.50	3.33	1.45
Men's perception of the extent to which discussing characteristics of past partners is important (MEXIMPORT)	3.38	3.50	1.61
Men's perception of the extent to which discussing sexual history is important (MSEXIMPORT)	4.90	5.50	2.00
Men's perception of the extent to which discussing characteristics of past relationships is important (MRELIMPORT)	4.03	4.00	1.75
Men's guess of partner's perception of the extent to which discussing characteristics of past partners is important (MOEXIMPORT)	3.72	4.00	1.76
Men's guess of partner's perception of the extent to which discussing sexual history is important (MOSEXIMPORT)	4.76	5.50	2.13
Men's guess of partner's perception of the extent to which discussing characteristics of past partners is important (MORELIMPORT)	4.03	4.00	1.85
Men's perception of having discussed characteristics of past partners (MEXDISCUSS)	4.70	5.00	1.63
Men's perception of having discussed sexual history (MSEXDISCUSS)	5.13	6.00	1.95
Men's perception of having discussed characteristics of past relationships (MRELDISCUSS)	4.86	5.00	1.72
Men's guess of partner's perception of having discussed characteristics of past partners (MOEXDISCUSS)	4.60	5.00	4.67
Men's guess of partner's perception of having discussed sexual history (MOEXDISCUSS)	5.15	6.00	1.91
Men's guess of partner's perception of having discussed characteristics of past relationships (MORELDISCUSS)	4.76	5.00	1.74
Women's perception of the extent to which TRH is taboo (FTABOO)	2.80	2.67	1.23
Women's guess of partner's perception of the extent to which TRH is taboo (FOTABOO)	3.52	3.50	1.47
Women's perception of the extent to which discussing characteristics of past partners is important (FEXIMPORT)	3.62	4.00	1.82
Women's perception of the extent to which discussing	5.69	6.50	1.80

sexual history is important (FSEXIMPORT)			
Women's perception of the extent to which discussing characteristics of past relationships is important (FRELIMPORT)	4.63	5.00	1.76
Women's guess of partner's perception of the extent to which discussing characteristics of past partners is important (FOEXIMPORT)	3.53	3.50	1.85
Women's guess of partner's perception of the extent to which discussing sexual history is important (FOSEXIMPORT)	5.11	6.00	2.02
Women's guess of partner's perception of the extent to which discussing characteristics of past partners is important (FORELIMPORT)	3.96	4.00	1.78
Women's perception of having discussed characteristics of past partners (FEXDISCUSS)	4.85	5.50	1.77
Women's perception of having discussed sexual history (FSEXDISCUSS)	5.73	6.50	1.73
Women's perception of having discussed characteristics of past relationships (FRELDISCUSS)	5.45	6.00	1.42
Women's guess of partner's perception of having discussed characteristics of past partners (FOEXDISCUSS)	4.86	5.00	1.69
Women's guess of partner's perception of having discussed sexual history (FOSEXDISCUSS)	5.46	6.00	1.79
Women's guess of partner's perception of having discussed characteristics of past relationships (FORELDISCUSS)	5.00	5.50	1.56

Table 4: Correlation Matrix, Means, and Standard Deviations of Perception of TRH Taboo Variables (N = 135)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. RELLENGTH														
2. MFREQ	-.29**													
3. MAVOID	.24**	-.30**												
4. MTABOO	.33**	-.35**	.45**											
5. MOTABOO	.34**	-.31**	.51**	.54**										
6. FFREQ	-.37**	.30**	-.12	-.22*	-.13									
7. FAVOID	.18*	-.17	.30**	.25**	.25**	-.33**								
8. FTABOO	.32**	-.22*	.35**	.29**	.32**	-.28**	.55**							
9. FOTABOO	.17	-.21*	.27**	.32**	.15	-.43**	.67**	.53**						
10. AGRTABOO	.00	.01	-.01	-.17	-.05	-.20*	.18*	.23**	.11					
11. MUNDFTAB	-.05	.01	.20*	.03	.06	.01	.04	.02	.03	-.03				
12. FUNDMTAB	-.05	-.02	-.01	-.01	.04	-.09	.01	.07	-.03	-.01	-.18*			
13. MSAT	-.28**	.12	-.14	-.12	-.17	-.08	-.24*	-.13	-.12	-.13	.03	.05		
14. FSAT	-.17	.07	-.14	-.07	-.11	.00	-.16	-.15	-.03	.05	.02	-.01	.45**	
Mean	10.86	2.64	3.73	3.30	3.50	2.87	3.33	2.79	3.52	.59	.04	.04	5.98	6.24
SD	10.42	1.30	1.60	1.40	1.45	1.38	1.60	1.23	1.47	.34	.38	.39	1.05	.84

** Correlation is statistically significant at the level of $p \leq 0.01$ (2-tailed).

* Correlation is significant at the level of $p \leq 0.05$ (2-tailed).

Note: RELLENGTH = Relationship Length; MFREQ = Male's Perceived Frequency of TRH; FFREQ = Female's Perceived Frequency of TRH; MAVOID = Male's Perceived Avoidance of TRH; FAVOID = Female's Perceived Avoidance of TRH; MTABOO = Male's Perception of the Extent to which TRH was Taboo; FTABOO = Female's Perception of the Extent to which TRH was Taboo; MOTABOO = Male's Perception of the Extent to which His Partner Perceives TRH to be Taboo; FOTABOO = Female's Perception of the Extent to which Her Partner Perceives TRH to be Taboo; AGRTABOO = Couple Perception Agreement as to the Extent to which TRH was Taboo; MUNDFTAB = Male's Understanding of Female's Perception of the Extent to Which TRH was Taboo; FUNDMTAB = Female's Understanding of Male's Perception of the Extent to Which TRH was Taboo; MSAT = Male Relationship Satisfaction; FSAT = Female Satisfaction

Table 5: Correlation Matrix, Means, and Standard Deviations of Perception of TRH Importance Variables (N = 135)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
1. MEXIMPRT																	
2. MSEXIMPRT	.48**																
3. MRELIMPRT	.66*	.69**															
4. MOEXIMPRT	.69*	.59*	.65*														
5. MOSEXIMPRT	.48*	.86**	.61*	.64*													
6. MORELMPT	.66*	.69**	.79*	.80	.74*												
7. FEXIMPRT	.25*	.11	.21	.26**	.13	.25*											
8. FSEXIMPRT	.09	.19	.12	.11	.20	.17	.41**										
9. FRELMPT	.24*	.11	.23*	.24**	.18*	.28*	.68**	.52**									
10. FOEXIMPRT	.26**	.13	.27**	.22*	.07	.21*	.63*	.32*	.50								
11. FOSEXIMPRT	.21*	.27*	.27**	.23**	.27*	.27**	.40**	.76**	.48**	.51**							
12. FORELMPT	.30**	.15	.31*	.28*	.15	.28*	.67*	.41**	.67**	.84**	.58**						
13. AGRIMPRT	.18*	.51**	.29**	.18*	.41**	.25**	-.25**	.18*	-.07	-.18*	.10	-.15					
14. MUNDFIMP	.12	.07	.03	.02	.17	.08	.04	.11	.01	-.10	.14	-.04	.14				
15. FUNDIMP	.03	.19*	.02	-.01	.20*	.06	-.03	.11	.06	-.24**	.02	-.11	.11	-.01			
16. MSAT	-.10	-.19*	-.18*	-.07	-.12	-.13	.03	-.05	-.07	-.10	-.16	-.20*	.06	.10	.01		
17. FSAT	-.10	-.14	-.21*	-.16	-.10	.18*	-.02	-.02	-.01	-.06	-.09	-.14	-.05	.17	.03	.46**	
Mean	3.39	4.90	4.04	3.72	4.76	4.03	3.62	5.69	4.63	3.53	5.11	3.96	.69	.07	.15	5.98	6.26
SD	1.61	2.00	1.75	1.76	2.13	1.85	1.82	1.80	1.76	1.85	2.02	1.78	.29	.43	.45	1.05	.81

** Correlation is significant at the level of $p \leq 0.01$ (2-tailed).

* Correlation is significant at the level of $p \leq 0.05$ (2-tailed).

Note: MEXIMPRT = Male's Perception of the Extent to which Talking about Characteristics of Past Partners was Important; MSEXIMPRT = Male's Perception of the Extent to which Talking about Sexual History was Important; MRELIMPRT = Male's Perception of the Extent to which Talking about Characteristics of Past Relationships was Important; FEXIMPRT = Female's Perception of the Extent to which Talking about Characteristics of Past Partners was Important; FSEXIMPRT = Female's Perception of the Extent to which Talking about Sexual History was Important; FRELMPT = Female's Perception of the Extent to which Talking about Characteristics of Past Relationships was Important; MOEXIMPRT = Male's Perception of His Partner's Perception of the Extent to which Talking about Characteristics of Past Partners was Important; MOSEXIMPRT = Male's Perception of His Partner's Perception of the Extent to which Talking about Sexual History was Important; MORELMPT = Male's Perception of His Partner's Perception of the Extent to which Talking about Characteristics of Past Relationships was Important; FOEXIMPRT = Female's Perception of Her Partner's Perception of the Extent to which Talking about Characteristics of Past Partners was Important; FOSEXIMPRT = Female's Perception of Her Partner's Perception of the Extent to which Talking about Sexual History was Important; FORELMPT = Female's Perception of Her Partner's Perception of the Extent to which Talking about Characteristics of Past Relationships was Important; AGRIMPRT = Couple Perception Agreement as to the Extent to which TRH was Important; MUNDFIMP = Male's Understanding of Female's Perception of the Extent to Which TRH was Important; FUNDIMP = Female's Understanding of Male's Perception of the Extent to Which TRH was Important; MSAT = Male Relationship Satisfaction; FSAT = Female Satisfaction

Table 6: Correlation Matrix, Means, and Standard Deviations of Perceptions of TRH Discussion Variables (N = 135)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. RELLENGTH											
2. MFREQ	-.30**										
3. MAVOID	.23**	-.30**									
4. MEXDSCS	-.26**	.34**	-.27**								
5. MSEXDSCS	-.30**	.36**	-.27**	.69**							
6. MRELDSCS	-.31**	.39**	-.22*	.81**	.76**						
7. MOEXDSCS	-.24**	.30**	-.22*	.80**	.67**	.73**					
8. MOEXDSCS	-.34**	.29**	-.26**	.62**	.90**	.70**	.65**				
9. MORELDSCS	-.33**	.44**	-.35**	.74**	.74**	.85**	.82**	.75**			
10. FFREQ	-.31**	.22*	-.13	.15	.22*	.24**	.17*	.15	.22*		
11. FAVOID	.17	-.15	.27**	-.19*	-.09	-.26**	-.13	-.02	-.22*	-.40**	
12. FEXDSCS	-.18*	.08	-.16	.24**	.24**	.25**	.29**	.22*	.31**	.39**	-.45**
13. FSEXDSCS	-.34**	.17	-.07	.16	.28**	.22*	.19*	.24**	.20*	.35**	-.37**
14. FRELDSCS	-.28**	.22*	-.18*	.25**	.34**	.28**	.27**	.26**	.31**	.33**	-.39**
15. FOEXDSCS	-.17	.09	-.18*	.23**	.24**	.27**	.24**	.19*	.28**	.42**	-.56**
16. FOEXDSCS	-.32**	.19*	-.13	.22*	.30**	.32**	.24**	.25**	.28**	.40**	-.41**
17. FORELDSCS	-.18*	.20*	-.20*	.31**	.30**	.37**	.32**	.24**	.35**	.42**	-.57**
18. AGRDSCS	-.09	.05	.01	.24**	.34**	.31**	.24**	.35**	.30**	.01	.09
19. MUNDFDIS	-.01	.01	-.04	-.06	.07	.08	-.11	.13	.05	-.14	-.01
20. FUNDMDIS	.02	-.04	.05	-.01	-.05	-.06	-.10	-.07	-.14	-.09	.13
21. MSAT	-.16	.03	-.15	.13	.07	.08	.05	.05	.14	.02	-.20*
22. FSAT	-.27*	-.31*	.22*	.17	.11	.19*	.13	.09	.24*	-.02	-.24**
Mean	10.67	2.65	3.71	4.70	5.13	4.86	4.60	5.15	4.76	2.94	3.33
SD	10.41	1.30	1.60	1.63	1.95	1.72	1.67	1.91	1.74	1.42	1.62

** Correlation is significant at the level of $p \leq 0.01$ (2-tailed).

* Correlation is significant at the level of $p \leq 0.05$ (2-tailed).

Table 6, cont.

	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22
1. RELLENGTH											
2. MFREQ											
3. MAVOID											
4. MEXDSCS											
5. MSEXDSCS											
6. MRELDSCS											
7. MOEXDSCS											
8. MOSEXDSCS											
9. MORELDSCS											
10. FFREQ											
11. FAVOID											
12. FEXDSCS											
13. FSEXDSCS	.59**										
14. FRELDSCS	.67**	.65**									
15. FOEXDSCS	.83**	.53**	.67**								
16. FOSEXDSCS	.57**	.80**	.66**	.65**							
17. FORELDSCS	.73**	.50**	.73**	.87**	.66**						
18. AGRDSCS	-.21*	.01	-.16	-.22*	-.05	-.21*					
19. MUNDFDIS	-.01	-.12	-.13	-.04	-.12	-.05	-.09				
20. FUNDMDIS	-.17	-.08	-.10	-.19*	-.09	-.17*	.13	.12			
21. MSAT	.13	.09	.18*	.16	.03	.09	.01	-.01	-.06		
22. FSAT	.09	.16	.21*	.07	.11	.02	-.14	-.14	-.10	.45**	
Mean	4.85	5.73	5.45	4.86	5.46	5.00	.65	.10	.12	5.97	6.26
SD	1.77	1.73	1.42	1.69	1.79	1.56	.31	.39	.69	1.05	.81

Note: RELLENGTH = Relationship Length; MEXDISCUSS = Male's Perception of the Extent to which Talking about Characteristics of Past Partners was Discussed; MSEXDISCUSS = Male's Perception of the Extent to which Talking about Sexual History was Discussed; MRELDISCUSS = Male's Perception of the Extent to which Talking about Characteristics of Past Relationships was Discussed; FEXDISCUSS = Female's Perception of the Extent to which Talking about Characteristics of Past Partners was Discussed; FSEXDISCUSS = Female's Perception of the Extent to which Talking about Sexual History was Discussed; FRELDISCUSS = Female's Perception of the Extent to which Talking about Characteristics of Past Relationships was Discussed; MOEXDISCUSS = Male's Perception of His Partner's Perception of the Extent to which Talking about Characteristics of Past Partners was Discussed; MOSEXDISCUSS = Male's Perception of His Partner's Perception of the Extent to which Talking about Sexual History was Discussed; MORELDISCUSS = Male's Perception of His Partner's Perception of the Extent to which Talking about Characteristics of Past Relationships was Discussed; FOEXDISCUSS = Female's Perception of Her Partner's Perception of the Extent to which Talking about Characteristics of Past Partners was Discussed; FOSEXDISCUSS = Female's Perception of Her Partner's Perception of the Extent to which Talking about Sexual History was Discussed; FORELDISCUSS = Female's Perception of Her Partner's Perception of the Extent to which Talking about Characteristics of Past Relationships was Discussed; AGRDISCUSS = Couple Perception Agreement as to the Extent to which TRH was Discussed; MUNDFDIS = Male's Understanding of Female's Perception of the Extent to Which TRH was Discussed; FUNDMDIS = Female's Understanding of Male's Perception of the Extent to Which TRH was Discussed; MSAT = Male Relationship Satisfaction; FSAT = Female Satisfaction

Figure 1: TRH Coorientation Model

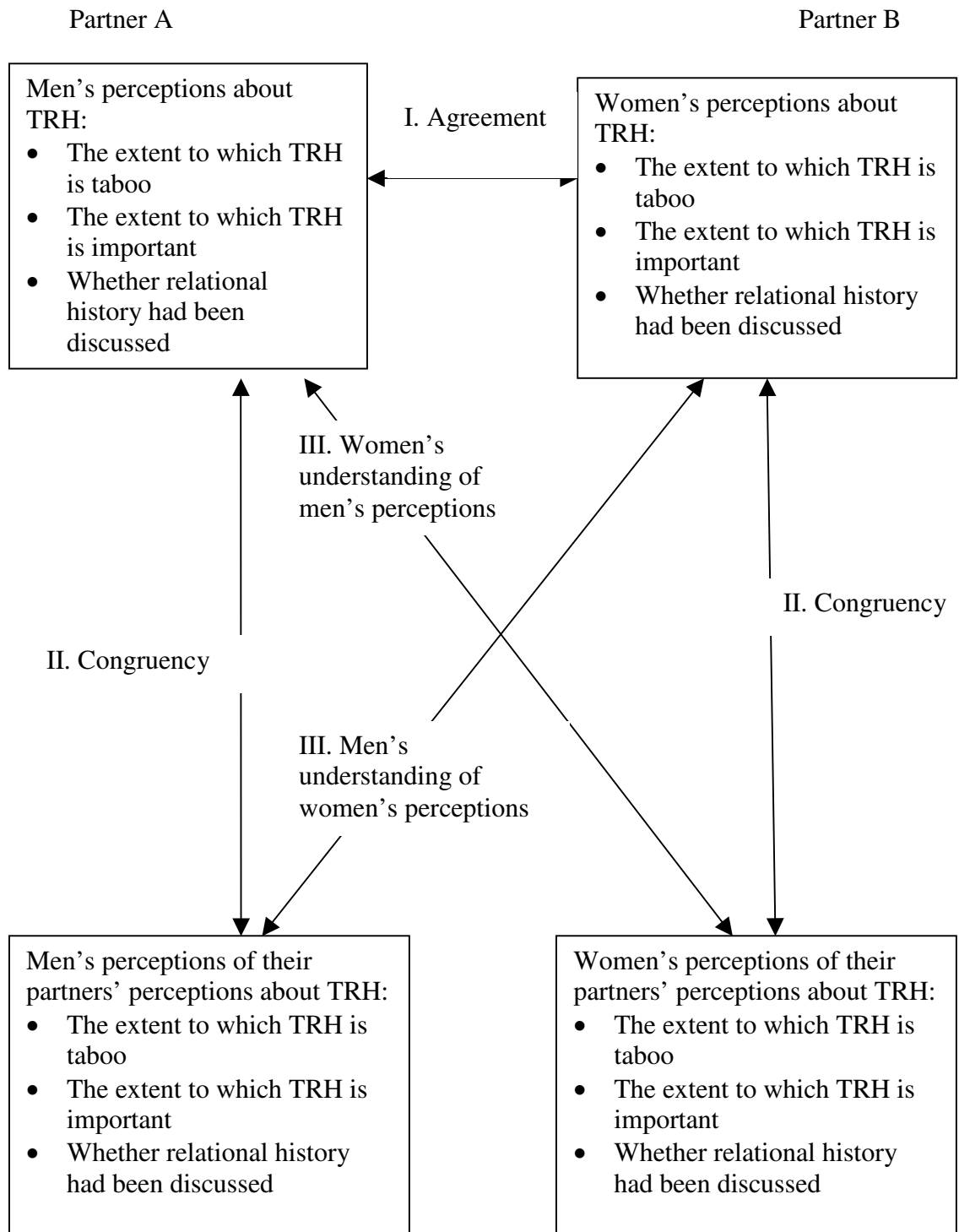
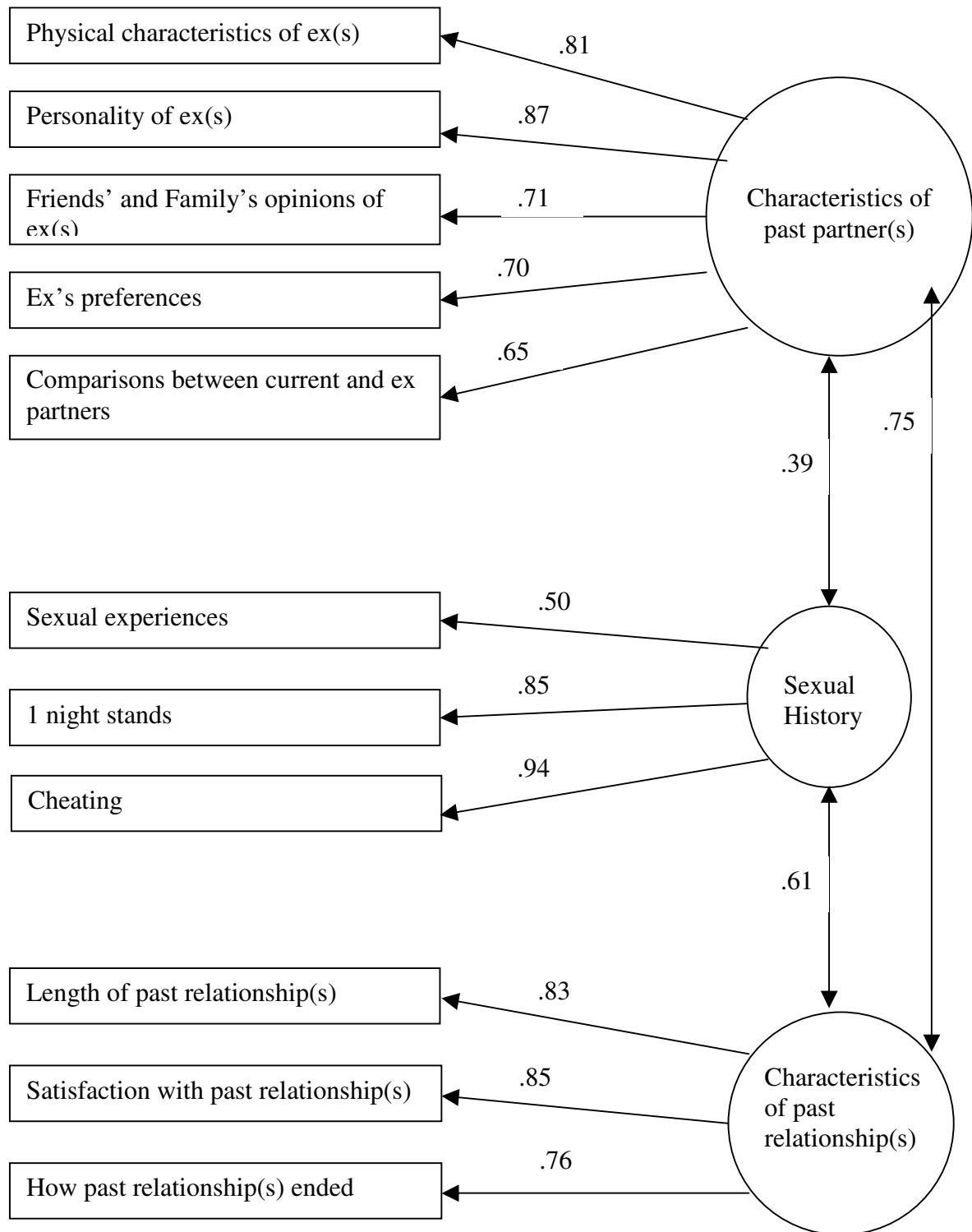


Figure 2: Factor Analysis of TRH Topics



Appendix A

Introduction to the Study and Consent Form

(Opening welcome page)

Welcome to the study!

Thank you so much for agreeing to participate.

Plan on spending about an hour of uninterrupted time working on the study from beginning to end. First, you'll be asked to read a consent form, and asked to agree to participate in the study. Then, you'll be told about some important qualifications to take part in the study. Finally, the survey itself.

To verify that you haven't reached this page in error, and to link your information to your partner's information, please provide your pass code: _____

<<next>>

(Participants clicked a button that led them to the next screen of the survey.)

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Study Title:

Opening the Ex Files: Using Coorientation Theory to Examine Partner Perceptions of Talking about Relational History

WHY ARE YOU BEING INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH?

You are being invited to take part in a research study about Talk about Relational History. If you take part in this study, you will be one of about 300 people to do so.

WHO IS DOING THE STUDY?

The person in charge of this study is Caroline Rankin of The Department of Communication. There may be other people on the research team assisting at different times during the study.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?

By doing this study, we hope to learn the extent to which romantic couples share similar beliefs and attitudes regarding discussions of relational history.

WHERE IS THE STUDY GOING TO TAKE PLACE AND HOW LONG WILL IT LAST?

The research will supported by UK Department of Communication and will take place online. You have been instructed use a computer with internet access that is in a private setting, one in which your partner is not present while you are completing the survey.

WHAT WILL YOU BE ASKED TO DO?

You will be asked to fill out a survey. In that survey, you will answer some questions about yourself. You will also answer questions about what you and your romantic partner discuss in terms of each of your relational histories.

ARE THERE REASONS WHY YOU SHOULD NOT TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?

If you are under the age of 18, or if you are not currently in a romantic relationship, you should not participate in this research study.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS?

To the best of our knowledge, the things you will be doing have no more risk of harm than you would experience in everyday life.

In addition to the risks listed above, you may experience a previously unknown risk or side effect.

WILL YOU BENEFIT FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

You will not get any personal benefit from taking part in this study.

DO YOU HAVE TO TAKE PART IN THE STUDY?

If you decide to take part in the study, it should be because you really want to volunteer. You will not lose any benefits or rights you would normally have if you choose not to volunteer. You can stop at any time during the study and still keep the benefits and rights you had before volunteering.

IF YOU DON'T WANT TO TAKE PART IN THE STUDY, ARE THERE OTHER CHOICES?

If you do not want to be in the study, there are no other choices except not to take part in the study.

WHAT WILL IT COST YOU TO PARTICIPATE?

There are no costs associated with taking part in this study.

WILL YOU RECEIVE ANY PAYMENT OR REWARDS FOR TAKING PART IN THE STUDY?

You will not receive any payment or rewards for taking part in the study.

WHO WILL SEE THE INFORMATION YOU GIVE?

Your information will be combined with information from other people taking part in the study. When we write up the study to share it with other researchers, we will write about this combined information. You will not be identified in these written materials.

However, there are some circumstances in which we may have to show your information to other people. For example, the law may require us to show your information to a court. Also, we may be required to show information which identifies you to people who need to be sure we have done the research correctly; these would be people from such organizations as the University of Kentucky.

We will make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team from knowing that you gave us information, or what that information is. For example, your name will be kept separate from the information you give, and these two things will be stored in different places under lock and key.

CAN YOUR TAKING PART IN THE STUDY END EARLY?

If you decide to take part in the study you still have the right to decide at any time that you no longer want to continue. You will not be treated differently if you decide to stop taking part in the study.

The individuals conducting the study may need to take you off of the study. They may do this if you are not able to follow the directions they give you, if they find that your being in the study is more risk than benefit to you.

WHAT HAPPENS IF YOU GET HURT OR SICK DURING THE STUDY?

If you believe you are hurt or if you get sick because of something that is done during the study, you should call Caroline Rankin at (859) 257-3369 immediately. It is important for you to understand that the University of Kentucky will not pay for the cost of any care or treatment that might be necessary because you get hurt or sick while taking part in this study. That cost will be your responsibility. Also, the University of Kentucky will not pay for any wages you may lose if you are harmed by this study.

Medical costs that result from research-related harm can not be included as regular medical costs. The University of Kentucky is not allowed to bill your insurance company, Medicare, or Medicaid for these costs. You should ask your insurer if you have any questions about your insurer's willingness to pay under these circumstances. Therefore, the costs related to your care and treatment because of something that is done during the study will be your responsibility.

WHAT IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS?

If you have questions about the study, you can contact the investigator, Caroline Rankin at (859) 257-3369. If you have any questions about your rights as a research volunteer, contact the staff in the Office of Research Integrity at the University of Kentucky at (859) 257-9428 or toll free at 1-866-400-9428.

WHAT ELSE DO YOU NEED TO KNOW?

You will be told if any new information is learned which may affect your condition or influence your willingness to continue taking part in this study.

Date: _____

(Participants typed in the date they completed the survey)

By clicking this button, you are agreeing to take part in this study: <<I agree>>

(Participants clicked on the button, and proceeded to the first screen of the main study)

Appendix B:
Survey Instrument

(Participants must have provided consent to participate in this research project to reach this screen.)

Before you begin participation in this research project, you must first be advised of a few things:

Research participants are often comforted in knowing that their data will be kept confidential. Only those people directly involved in the research will examine the data. When findings are reported, they will be reported in aggregate, meaning findings will be reported about the group of participants as whole. It is also important to note that participants' responses will not be revealed to their partners.

Interpersonal research investigating romantic couples often sparks conversations about the topic of research. When we allow participants to complete surveys online, there is a risk that participants will discuss the survey or specific parts of the survey with each other before both partners have completed the survey. Discussing responses to the survey while the information is still being collected results in *contaminated data*. In other words, the researcher cannot be sure if the answers participants are giving are a result of actual relationship situations, or if answers are a result of discussing and thinking about answers as a couple.

If you decide to share your responses with your partner, I ask that you please refrain from discussing your responses to the survey until both partners have completed the survey. Please do not fill out the survey with your partner in the room; please do not help each other fill out your surveys.

Before you participate in this research, you must click indicate if you agree to the following statements:

I will fill out my survey in a private setting, where my partner cannot see or observe my responses.

☐ I Agree

☐ I Disagree

I will not discuss my answers with partner until both of us have completed our surveys.

☐ I Agree

☐ I Disagree

I will not ask my partner about his or her responses until both of us have completed our surveys.

☐ I Agree

☐ I Disagree

(Participants must have chosen “I Agree” from a pull-down menu to all three questions to advance to the survey. If they didn’t, a new window opened, instructing them that they must click “I agree” to all three questions to proceed to the study.)

Directions: Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research project! Please take this time to answer the following questions. These questions are designed to help us get to know who you are and understand your relationship. All of your responses will be kept confidential; please answer honestly. Participation in this project is voluntary. If you would like to skip any of the questions, please feel comfortable in doing so.

You have been randomly chosen to be designated as **Partner A** for the purposes of this research project. Whenever you see a reference to Partner A, that is referring to you; references to Partner B refer to your current partner. The survey is broken down into three parts: in Section 1, you will answer questions about yourself and your current relationship, in Sections 2 and 3, you will be answering a series of questions about how you and your partner think and talk about relational history. In Section 2, you will answer these questions from your own perspective. In Section 3, you will answer the same questions again, but from your partner's perspective.

Section 1

Please answer the following questions about how you and your partner discuss relational history. Relational history applies to any information from your past relationships or past partners, and includes your thoughts, feelings, and opinions about those relationships and people.

Read each of the following statements and indicate how much you agree or disagree by choosing the number that matches your response.

1= strongly disagree, 2= disagree, 3= somewhat disagree, 4=neither disagree nor agree, 5=somewhat agree, 6= agree, 7=strongly agree

- | | | | | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. My current partner and I talk about past relationships frequently. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 2. I avoid talking about relational history with my current partner. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 3. My current partner avoids talking about past relationships with me. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 4. My current partner and I often talk about our past relationships. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 5. I stay away from talking about past relationships with my partner. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 6. My current partner stays away from talking about past relationships with me. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 7. My current partner stays away from talking about past relationships with me. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 8. My current partner and I habitually talk about our past relationships. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 9. My current partner evades conversations about past relationships with me. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 10. My current partner and I never talk about our past relationships | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 11. I steer clear of conversations about past relationships with my current partner. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 12. My partner steers clear of conversations about past relationships with me. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |

Please answer the following questions about your relationship. How would you describe your relationship? Please choose the number that corresponds to the answer that best fits:

Miserable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Enjoyable
Hopeful	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Discouraging
Free	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Tied Down
Empty	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Full
Interesting	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Boring
Rewarding	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Disappointing
Doesn't give me a chance	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Brings out the best in me
Lonely	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Friendly
Hard	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Easy
Worthwhile	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Useless

How satisfied or dissatisfied have you been with your relationship?

Completely satisfied 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Completely dissatisfied

Read each of the following statements and indicate how much you agree or disagree by choosing the number that matches your response.

1= strongly disagree, 2= disagree, 3= somewhat disagree, 4=neither disagree nor agree, 5=somewhat agree, 6= agree, 7=strongly agree

- | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. When I wish, my self-disclosures are always accurate reflections of who I really am. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 2. I cannot reveal myself when I want to because I do not know myself thoroughly enough. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 3. When I express my personal feelings, I am always aware of what I am doing and saying. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 4. I am often not confident that my expressions of my own feelings, emotions, and experiences are true reflections of myself. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 5. I always feel completely sincere when I reveal my own feelings and experiences. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 6. When I reveal my feelings about myself, I consciously intend to do so. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 7. My self-disclosures are completely accurate reflections of who I really am. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 8. I am not always honest in my self-disclosure. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 9. When I am self-disclosing, I am consciously aware of what I am revealing. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 10. My statements about my own feelings, emotions, and experiences are always accurate self-perceptions. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 11. I am always honest in my self-disclosures. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 12. I do not always feel completely sincere when I reveal my own feelings, emotions, behaviors, or experiences. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |

These questions are designed to help us get to know who you are. All of your responses will be kept confidential. Please answer honestly and choose the appropriate response or fill in the appropriate information.

Are you (choose one) Male Female

How old are you? _____ years old

How long have you been in your current romantic relationship? _____ years _____ months

How would you describe your relationship? (choose one)

Casually dating

Exclusively dating

Cohabiting

Engaged

Married

How would you describe your ethnicity? (choose as many as apply)

American Indian or Alaskan Native

Asian

Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander

Black or African American

Hispanic or Latino

White or Caucasian

Other not listed: _____

What is your level of education? (choose one)

Some high school

High school degree

Some college

College degree (B.A. or B.S.)

Some post-graduate work

Post-graduate degree (e.g., M.A., PhD, M.D.)

Section 2

In this section, you will be answering questions concerning your own thoughts and opinions about talking about relational history with your partner.

Please read each of the following statements and indicate how much you agree or disagree by choosing the number that matches your response.

1= strongly disagree, 2= disagree, 3= somewhat disagree, 4=neither disagree nor agree, 5=somewhat agree, 6= agree, 7=strongly agree

- | | | | | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Past relationships should be considered a taboo topic for romantic partners. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 2. It is healthy for romantic partners to talk with each other about their past relationships. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 3. Romantic partners should keep information about their relational history to themselves. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 4. People should not talk about their past relationships with their current romantic partners. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 5. Romantic partners should discuss their relational history with each other. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 6. It is important for romantic partners to talk about their past relationships with each other. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |

Below is a list of topics associated with **YOUR** relational history that you and your partner could possibly discuss with each other. After each topic, there is a series of questions, please answer these questions about each conversational topic.

PARTNER A'S RELATIONAL HISTORY

Characteristics of the Ex(s)

This may include such issues as Personality of ex(s), Friends'/Family's opinion of ex(s), Good memories from past relationship(s), Physical characteristics of ex(s), Comparisons between current partner and ex(s), Cultural background of ex(s), Possessions kept from past partner(s), and the Ex's preferences (e.g., My ex hated it when I...).

1. How important is it to discuss this topic with your partner?

Not important 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very Important

Why or why not?

1. Should you discuss this topic with your partner?

Should not discuss this topic 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Should discuss this topic

3. Have you discussed this topic with your partner?

Definitely have not discussed 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Definitely have discussed

Sexual History

This may include such issues as: Number of one-night stands, Cheating on past partner(s) or being cheated on by past partner(s), Exposure to or contraction of STDs, and Sexual experiences.

1. How important is it to discuss this topic with your partner?

Not important 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very Important

Why or why not?

2. Should you discuss this topic with your partner?

Should not discuss this topic 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Should discuss this topic

3. Have you discussed this topic with your partner?

Definitely have not discussed 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Definitely have discussed

Characteristics of Past Relationship(s)

This may include such issues as: Satisfaction with past relationship(s), Length of past relationship(s), and How past relationship(s) ended.

1. How important is it to discuss this topic with your partner?

Not important 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very Important

Why or why not?

2. Should you discuss this topic with your partner?

Should not discuss this topic 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Should discuss this topic

3. Have you discussed this topic with your partner?

Definitely have not discussed 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Definitely have discussed

Section 3

Below is a list of topics associated with **YOUR PARTNER'S** relational history that you and your partner could possibly discuss with each other. After each topic, there is a series of questions, please answer these questions about each conversational topic.

PARTNER B'S RELATIONAL HISTORY

Characteristics of the Ex(s)

This may include such issues as Personality of ex(s), Friends'/Family's opinion of ex(s), Good memories from past relationship(s), Physical characteristics of ex(s), Comparisons between current partner and ex(s), Cultural background of ex(s), Possessions kept from past partner(s), and the Ex's preferences (e.g., My ex hated it when I...).

1. How important is it for your partner to discuss this topic with you?

Not important 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very Important

Why or why not?

2. Should your partner discuss this topic with you?

Should not discuss this topic 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Should discuss this topic

3. Has your partner discussed this topic with you?

Definitely have not discussed 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Definitely have discussed

Sexual History

This may include such issues as: Number of one-night stands, Cheating on past partner(s) or being cheated on by past partner(s), Exposure to or contraction of STDs, and Sexual experiences.

1. How important is it for your partner to discuss this topic with you?

Not important 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very Important

Why or why not?

2. Should your partner discuss this topic with you?

Should not discuss this topic 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Should discuss this topic

3. Has your partner discussed this topic with you?

Definitely have not discussed 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Definitely have discussed

Characteristics of Past Relationship(s)

This may include such issues as: Satisfaction with past relationship(s), Length of past relationship(s), and How past relationship(s) ended.

1. How important is it for your partner to discuss this topic with you?

Not important 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very Important

Why or why not?

2. Should your partner discuss this topic with you?

Should not discuss this topic 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Should discuss this topic

3. Has your partner discussed this topic with you?

Definitely have not discussed 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Definitely have discussed

Section 4

This section contains questions similar to the ones you just answered. The difference is, in this next section you will be answering the questions as YOU PERCEIVE YOUR PARTNER would answer them. You may or may not have discussed B's thoughts and opinions about talking about relational history. Answer the questions as you think your partner would answer them.

Keeping in mind that you are **Partner A** and your current partner is **Partner B**, please answer the following questions as you think your partner would answer. Read each of the following statement and indicate how much YOU PERCEIVE YOUR CURRENT PARTNER agrees or disagrees with each statement by circling the number that matches your response.

Please read each of the following statements and indicate how much think your partner agrees or disagrees by choosing the appropriate number.

1= strongly disagree, 2= disagree, 3= somewhat disagree, 4=neither disagree nor agree, 5=somewhat agree, 6= agree, 7=strongly agree

- | | | | | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Past relationships should be considered a taboo topic for romantic partners. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 2. It is healthy for romantic partners to talk with each other about their past relationships. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 3. Romantic partners should keep information about their relational history to themselves. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 4. People should not talk about their past relationships with their current romantic partners. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 5. Romantic partners should discuss their relational history with each other. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 6. It is important for romantic partners to talk about their past relationships with each other. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |

Keeping in mind that you are **Partner A** and your current partner is **Partner B**, please answer the following questions. Below is a list of topics associated with **YOUR** relational history that you and your partner could possibly discuss with each other. After each topic, there is a series of questions, please answer these questions about each conversational topic as YOU THINK YOUR PARTNER would answer.

PARTNER A'S RELATIONAL HISTORY

Characteristics of the Ex(s)

This may include such issues as Personality of ex(s), Friends'/Family's opinion of ex(s), Good memories from past relationship(s), Physical characteristics of ex(s), Comparisons between current partner and ex(s), Cultural background of ex(s), Possessions kept from past partner(s), and the Ex's preferences (e.g., My ex hated it when I...).

1. How important DOES YOUR PARTNER THINK it is for you to discuss this topic with him/her?

Not important 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very Important

Why or why not?

1. DOES YOUR PARTNER THINK you should discuss this topic with him/her?

Should not discuss this topic 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Should discuss this topic

3. DOES YOUR PARTNER THINK you have discussed this topic with him/her?

Definitely have not discussed 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Definitely have discussed

Sexual History

This may include such issues as: Number of one-night stands, Cheating on past partner(s) or being cheated on by past partner(s), Exposure to or contraction of STDs, and Sexual experiences.

1. How important DOES YOUR PARTNER THINK it is for you to discuss this topic with him/her?

Not important 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very Important

Why or why not?

2. DOES YOUR PARTNER THINK you should discuss this topic with him/her?

Should not discuss this topic 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Should discuss this topic

3. DOES YOUR PARTNER THINK you have discussed this topic with him/her?

Definitely have not discussed 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Definitely have discussed

Characteristics of Past Relationship(s)

This may include such issues as: Satisfaction with past relationship(s), Length of past relationship(s), and How past relationship(s) ended.

1. How important DOES YOUR PARTNER THINK it is for you to discuss this topic with him/her?

Not important 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very Important

Why or why not?

2. DOES YOUR PARTNER THINK you should discuss this topic with him/her?

Should not discuss this topic 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Should discuss this topic

3. DOES YOUR PARTNER THINK you have discussed this topic with him/her?

Definitely have not discussed 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Definitely have discussed

Section 5

Keeping in mind that you are **Partner A** and your current partner is **Partner B**, please answer the following questions. Below is a list of topics associated with **YOUR PARTNER'S** relational history that you and your partner could possibly discuss with each other. After each topic, there is a series of questions, please answer these questions about each conversational topic as **YOU THINK YOUR PARTNER** would answer.

PARTNER B'S RELATIONAL HISTORY

Characteristics of the Ex(s)

This may include such issues as Personality of ex(s), Friends'/Family's opinion of ex(s), Good memories from past relationship(s), Physical characteristics of ex(s), Comparisons between current partner and ex(s), Cultural background of ex(s), Possessions kept from past partner(s), and the Ex's preferences (e.g., My ex hated it when I...).

1. How important DOES YOUR PARTNER THINK it is for him/her to discuss this topic with you?

Not important 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very Important

Why or why not?

2. DOES YOUR PARTNER THINK he/she should discuss this topic with you?

Should not discuss this topic 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Should discuss this topic

3. DOES YOUR PARTNER THINK he/she has discussed this topic with you?

Definitely have not discussed 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Definitely have discussed

Sexual History

This may include such issues as: Number of one-night stands, Cheating on past partner(s) or being cheated on by past partner(s), Exposure to or contraction of STDs, and Sexual experiences.

1. How important DOES YOUR PARTNER THINK it is for him/her to discuss this topic with you?

Not important 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very Important

Why or why not?

2. DOES YOUR PARTNER THINK he/she should discuss this topic with you?

Should not discuss this topic 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Should discuss this topic

3. DOES YOUR PARTNER THINK he/she has discussed this topic with you?

Definitely have not discussed 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Definitely have discussed

Characteristics of Past Relationship(s)

This may include such issues as: Satisfaction with past relationship(s), Length of past relationship(s), and How past relationship(s) ended.

1. How important DOES YOUR PARTNER THINK it is for him/her to discuss this topic with you?

Not important 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very Important

Why or why not?

2. DOES YOUR PARTNER THINK he/she should discuss this topic with you?

Should not discuss this topic 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Should discuss this topic

3. DOES YOUR PARTNER THINK he/she has discussed this topic with you?

Definitely have not discussed 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Definitely have discussed

Finally, please answer the following questions from your own perspective. Please read each item, and decide on a scale from 1-7 whether or not each item should be discussed in romantic relationships in general (not necessarily in your current relationship specifically). Choose the appropriate number to indicate your response.

1= should not be discussed 4= neutral on discussing this topic or not
7= this topic should be discussed

	Should be discussed			Should not be discussed			
1. Possessions kept from past partner(s) (e.g., photos, clothing, etc.)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2. Length of past relationship(s)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3. Satisfaction with past relationship(s)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4. Exposure to or contraction of Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5. Physical Characteristics of Ex(s)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
6. Sexual experiences or preferences	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
7. How past relationship(s) ended (e.g. mutual split? Was it an angry or friendly split?)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8. Personality of ex(s)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
9. Your friends' or families opinion of ex(s)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
10. Good memories from past relationship(s)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
11. Ex's Preferences or Likes/Dislikes concerning you (e.g., My ex hated it when I _____)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
12. Comparisons between current partner and ex(s)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
13. Number of one-night stands or casual sex partners	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
14. Cheated on ex(s) or was cheated on by ex(s)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
15. Cultural Background of ex(s) (e.g., Religion, or Ethnicity, etc.)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Thank you so much for your time and your input!

Please remember that it is important for you to avoid discussing your responses with your partner if your partner has not completed the survey yet.

You may be contacted by the researcher to verify your response

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