

THE ROLE OF SEXUAL COMMUNICATION IN COMMITTED RELATIONSHIPS

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

Marriage and Family Therapy

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2016

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## ABSTRACT

## The Role of Sexual Communication in Committed Relationships

by

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In this Master's thesis, I describe a study to understand the role that sexual communication plays within committed couple relationships. I collected data from 142 couples who completed an online survey consisting of a battery of quantitative assessments measuring relationship satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, communication processes, and sexual communication. Using dyadic data analysis within path analysis, I observed the significant paths of influence that different types of sexual communication has within couple relationships. Findings revealed that couples who discussed sex more were more likely to be relationally and sexually satisfied. I also observed the differences in sexual communication and general communication due to the differences in their associations with sexual and relationship satisfaction, respectively. With these analyses I expand the current literature to broaden and deepen our understanding of the role that sexual communication plays in committed relationships.

(113 pages)

## PUBLIC ABSTRACT

## The Role of Sexual Communication in Committed Relationships

Adam C. Jones

In this Master's thesis, I describe a study to understand the role that sexual communication plays within committed couple relationships. I used data from a sample of 142 couples who completed an online survey consisting of a battery of quantitative assessments measuring relationship satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, communication processes, and sexual communication.

Through path analysis, a statistical tool that tests relationships between variables, I observed the impact that sexual communication has within couple relationships. In my findings, I highlight the differences between the "what" and "how" behind couples' communications about sex. I examined these findings by gender and found important differences for men and women.

Findings revealed that couples who discussed sex more were more likely to be relationally and sexually satisfied. I also observed the differences in sexual communication and general communication due to the differences in their associations with sexual and relationship satisfaction, respectively. With these analyses I expand the current literature to broaden and deepen our understanding of the role that sexual communication plays in committed relationships.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to dedicate this Master's thesis to any sad soul who actually opens this up and reads it. If you, the reader, fall into this category, please notify me immediately. My email is [a.jonesy111@gmail.com](mailto:a.jonesy111@gmail.com). If someone reads this, it might make me feel somewhat better about spending countless amounts of hours writing it; also I will probably buy you ice cream or a dessert of your choice. If you are reading this, you should also know about some of the key players in helping me write it. These people may or may not mean anything to you, but they mean a great deal to me. So suffer through this because, remember, ice cream awaits you.

Let's start off with Dr. W. David Robinson. I met Dave on the same day I decided to become a Marriage and Family Therapist. From the very beginning, and down to today, he has seemed to see something in me that I haven't really seen myself. I hope everyone can have the experience of working with someone who sees your potential. It has made a world of difference for me. Throughout the past few years he has become my greatest confidant, mentor, best friend, and the butt of my jokes. He was always the first to give me opportunities that pushed me and challenged me to write better and become a better human. He also has a mean ceiling shot in racquetball. Dave is the one that encouraged me to carry on with this project, he has helped me conceptually throughout this entire process. He has waded through my endless drafts of poor writing and helped this thesis turn into something that is somewhat readable.

Dr. Ryan B. Seedall is the most loving and caring man on the planet. I challenge anyone that is reading this to find one thing to hate Ryan about. I'll even buy you another

ice cream, actually I'll buy you 1,000,000 ice creams because it's IMPOSSIBLE! Unlessvi you hate him for the fact that you'll never be as nice as he is...but that reason doesn't count. Ryan spent countless hours helping me to figure out how to draw lines and squares in ways that mean something. You've probably never met someone who can kick your butt at racquetball and simultaneously make you feel like a million bucks, but that's because you haven't met Ryan Seedall.

Kay Bradford is probably the smartest man on the planet, but he would never admit it. I'm so glad I was able to have his help on this project. His critical eye and superior intellect is unmatched by anyone I know. He really helped bring this article to the next level.

Dave, Ryan, and Kay make up my advisory committee for this Thesis, however there were many other important people helping me behind the scenes on this project that I wouldn't be able to leave out. I need to make sure I include a huge thanks to Megan Oka, she's the third faculty member in the USU MFT program, and while she wasn't on my thesis committee, she helped and inspired me in many other ways.

I would also like to thank my two families. First my immediate family who has been so loving and supporting throughout this process. I'm sure my mother had never expected her baby boy to grow up and become known the "26-year-old Virgin Sex Researcher," however she has showed me nothing but love and support throughout this process. Secondly, I'd like to thank my USU MFT cohort, the group that surpasses the role of friends and must be counted as a second family to me. Thank you all for putting up with me and my excessive hugs and kisses over the past few years, no one reading this will ever understand how much you all mean to me.

To you, the reader, these names may be nothing more than ink on paper, but trust vii  
me, if you had had the opportunity to interact with these people, your life would have  
never been the same; mine certainly won't be.

Adam C. Jones

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## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Developing an understanding of what leads to happy, successful relationships is a complicated and intricate task. Researchers have long sought to understand what leads to successful relationships (Bradbury, Fincham, & Beach, 2000). While the function and types of relationships may vary widely, being satisfied with both the communicative and sexual aspects of the relationship are two of the most important contributors to relational success and satisfaction (Yoo et al., 2014). Because these two components (communication and sexual satisfaction) have such a significant impact on developing strong relationships, it is crucial to understand what contributes to positive communication and sexual satisfaction.

Sexual satisfaction within relationships may be attributed to a number of factors, including physiology, experience, anxiety, attitudes, and beliefs (Bancroft, 2002). While couples may have great success resolving significant relational problems through communication, many couples may have greater difficulty resolving sexual issues due to difficulty in discussing sexual topics (Byers, 2005).

This difficulty in discussing sex may have a number of different contributing factors. Strong cultural influences may make sex a taboo topic (Holmberg & Blair, 2009), which may lead individuals to consider their sexuality to be shameful. Discussing one's individual sexual experiences requires some inherent vulnerability, which may increase anxiety and defensiveness from the individual or partner (MacNeil & Byers, 2009). Couples may also have difficulty discussing sex with each other because of different

gender-related communication patterns that commonly lead to misunderstandings between partners (Litzinger & Gordon, 2005).

By gaining insight into how couples communicate about sex and what impact that communication has on outcomes such as communication satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, and relationship satisfaction will thus be impactful in helping couples increase the connection within their relationship (Yoo, 2013). While much of the current literature on sexual communication is on young, college-age couples (e.g., Byers, 2005; MacNeil & Byers, 2009; Montesi et al., 2013), we lack a broader understanding of the role that sexual communication has on committed relationships. The purpose of the present study was to expand the understanding within literature on the influence of sexual communication on various relational outcomes within the context of long-term relationships.

The current body of literature lacks breadth and depth to fully explain the role of sexual communication in relationships. In this study, I expand on the current research and also provide a more in-depth analysis of sexual communication in relationships. Through an anonymous online survey, I explored both the content and process of sexual communication in relationships and analyzed the impact of that communication on relational outcomes. Using a theoretical approach based in family systems theory, I used the dyadic survey data to understand the reciprocal nature of sexual communication and the various paths of influence on both individual and partner satisfactions.

Participants in this study were gathered through a number of various outlets including email listservs, social media, and clinical settings. The participants completed a

battery of assessments that measured relationship satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, couples' communication satisfaction, and various aspects sexual communication. By nesting couples together within a path analysis, I addressed the following research questions:

1) Are there different effects in content and process of sexual communication on each individual's sexual and relational outcomes?

1a) How do these effects differ between genders?

2) What are the differences between sexual and general communication processes and their effect on relational outcomes?

Below, the findings from the study are discussed and used to draw conclusions about the role that sexual communication plays in committed relationships. Implications for clinicians and couples are discussed, as well as more opportunities for future research.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Sexual satisfaction and healthy couple communication have repeatedly been found as two of the most important predictors of relationship satisfaction (Yoo et al., 2014). Communication, sexual, and relationship satisfaction are each consistently shown in the literature to be interrelated (Litzinger & Gordon, 2005; Mark & Jozkowski, 2013), therefore it may be difficult to sift out the influences of each of these concepts within complex family and couple relationships.

Family systems theory (FST) provides a useful paradigm for understanding complex and interrelated concepts. FST assumes that individuals cannot be fully understood without examining the contexts in which they are placed (Broderick, 1993). Similarly, I use FST to examine the constructs of relationship and sexual satisfaction and communication, under the assumption that these ideas cannot be understood in isolation, but are developed through the reciprocal interactions with partners and spouses (Papero, 1990).

In order to better explain how and why these concepts are connected, I will give review the current state of the literature and illustrate the need for the present study. My review of literature will contain three different sections. In my first section, I will explain the literature behind relationship satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, communication satisfaction, and sexual communication are individually defined. In my second section, I will discuss the interdependent nature of each of these components by highlighting the research showing the reciprocity between relationship satisfaction and communication,

relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction, communication and sexual satisfaction, and finally the impact of sexual communication on all three of these relational outcomes (communication, sexual, and relationship satisfaction). In the third and final section, I will outline the gaps in the current literature, provide rationale for the present study, and review my research questions.

### **Section One: Individual Construct Definitions**

As relationship satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, communication, and sexual communication are each intricately interrelated, an explanation of each concept is necessary. Beyond the initial complexity of each of these concepts, a fully comprehensive review of these concepts requires specific information on how each component is related to the other (which will be addressed in section two). In this section, I discuss each concept separately in order to provide a broader understanding of how each concept is individually defined.

#### **Relationship Satisfaction**

Relationship satisfaction as a single concept is a complex and intricate phenomenon. Satisfaction in one's relationship covers a broad spectrum of connection, commitment, intimacy, compatibility, conflict management, and functionality. While a large number of different factors contribute to relationship satisfaction, the nature of these factors may be reduced to categories such as the following: cognition, affect, physiology, relational patterns, social support, and surrounding contexts (Bradbury et al., 2000; Weaver et al., 2002).



While connection (which I will use synonymously with “intimacy”) may be the most vital determinant of relationship satisfaction (Yoo, 2013), it may be a complicated concept to measure. Connection is best measured by examining the satisfaction with the emotional and physical closeness in the relationship (measured in this study using the Couple Satisfaction Index). While other factors may contribute to overall relationship satisfaction (Bradbury et al., 2000), I will review how sex and communication have been found to be the primary contributors to relationship satisfaction.

### **Sexual Satisfaction**

With sexual satisfaction as a contributing component to relationship satisfaction, and with sexual satisfaction being a complex concept in itself, it is important to understand the building blocks of sexual satisfaction within couples. Sexual satisfaction, as an individual concept, has a large number of contributing components that are supported in the literature. Sexual Satisfaction may be broadly defined as one’s satisfaction with the frequency, variety, quality, of various aspects of his or her sexual life, including functioning and connection.

These contributing factors are often connected with other biological, psychological, and social influences (DeLamater & Sill, 2005). A large body of literature has shown how biological influences (such as health issues, sexual dysfunction, body weight) may all negatively affect sexual and relationship satisfaction (Bancroft, 2002). Also, psychological components (such as anxiety, stress, and depression) can also adversely affect a couple’s relationship (Basson, 2001).

In an effort to increase relationship satisfaction, researchers have continuously shifted their focus toward understanding the social components contributing to sexual satisfaction. This shift in focus is largely because one of the most common presenting problems in divorcing couples is sexual dissatisfaction or incompatibility (Lavner & Bradbury, 2012). Researchers have focused on a number of different relational factors that may influence sexual satisfaction, such as length of the relationship, frequency of sex, number of children at home, attitudes, desire discrepancy, spouses' ages and education levels (Christopher & Sprecher, 2000; Ross, Clifford, & Eisenman, 1987). As I will discuss later, newer research in family systems theory has begun to focus on how social interaction within relationships also affects the sexual and relationship satisfaction within couples (Christopher & Sprecher, 2000).

### **Communication**

Another component to understand couple relationships is communication satisfaction. Couple communication consists of conflict management, listening and responding to each other's needs, and the processes of how couples communicate about problems in their relationship. A lack of communication within couples has been a common global complaint of couples seeking therapy (Banmen & Vogel, 1985). Communication processes play an important role in how couples manage conflict (Gottman, 1999). "Pursuer-Distancer," supportive, and avoidant patterns in communication commonly develop in couple relationships, which may each predict relationship outcomes (Christensen, 1988). Communication may be considered to encapsulate both relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction (i.e., sex may be

considered a form of communication), however, for this study, I conceptualize communication as the general, day-to-day processes of connecting as a couple and resolving conflict.

Understanding what components contribute to successful communication in couples and families may be essential to developing a better understanding of the relationship between communication and relationship satisfaction (Gottman, 1999). Measuring a couple's communication is an important component in broadly understanding a couple relationship and should be considered as a distinct variable when assessing couples as these patterns may or may not be indicative of relational functioning (Gottman, 1999).

### **Sexual Communication**

Understanding how couples communicate about sex is another indicator of sexual and relationship satisfaction. In recent years, researchers have begun to shift their focus from general couple communication to understanding couples' sexual communication and its impact on relational outcomes (e.g., Holmberg & Blair, 2009; Mark & Jozkowski, 2013). Sexual communication is defined as the communication and self-disclosure and communication processes around sexual topics and problems. The distinction between sexual communication and regular couple communication comes from the assumption that sexual communication entails a great deal of inherent vulnerability (Cupach & Comstock, 1990; Johnson, 2010). While couples may feel comfortable talking about a number of issues and topics in their relationship, they may have difficulty discussing the topic of sexuality.

Communication about sex may differ from general couples' communication because of various social or cultural reasons. The comfort level discussing sexuality within a couple may be due to social/cultural norms, individual experiences, or relational patterns (Haning et al., 2007). Sex may commonly be considered taboo due to social and cultural influences (Moyer-Gusé, Chung, & Jain, 2011). Individuals may view talking about sex as inappropriate or even embarrassing. Partners may have different opinions about discussing sexuality, due to differing expectations, desires, experiences, or beliefs, which in turn may affect the relationship (Khoury & Findlay, 2014). Some may have sexual trauma that may influence attitudes toward sex. In any case, communicating specifically about one's own sexual relationship entails a great level of vulnerability, which may make it difficult to make adjustments in the sexual relationship if needed. This vulnerability may make it difficult for couples to discuss sexual preferences, passions, and desires (Willoughby, Farero, & Busby, 2014). Beyond the need to make adjustments, sexual communication has a number of other influences on relationship and sexual satisfaction (MacNeil & Byers, 2009).

There is a burgeoning body of research showing that higher disclosure to one's partner about sexual preferences and desires is positively correlated with sexual satisfaction and relationship quality (e.g., Byers & Demmons, 1999; MacNeil & Byers, 2005; Montesi, Fauber, Gordon, & Heimberg, 2011). However, while the amount sexual self-disclosure may have a positive impact on the relationship, my study also analyzes the relational processes associated with couples' discussion of sexual conflicts. Also, much of the current research on how couples communicate about sex has dealt with samples

derived predominantly from dating couples from a university campus that had been dating for no more than two years (e.g., Byers & Demmons, 1999; Hess & Coffelt, 2012; MacNeil & Byers, 2005; Mark & Jozkowski, 2013). What we lack is a clearer understanding of how sexual communication influences long-term relationships.

Each of these constructs are difficult to measure independent of one another because they all effect, and are affected by, each other. Thus, understanding how each of these components is related is crucial to developing a clearer picture of the state of a relationship. This study focuses on two different types of sexual communication: content and process. Sexual communication content focuses on the breadth and depth of sexual topics discussed while sexual communication process have more to do with the relational patterns in discussing sexual topics.

## **Section Two: Relationships Between Primary Constructs**

While each of these concepts is individually complex, in this study I will seek to clearly explain the interdependence between relationship satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, communication satisfaction, and sexual communication. Each of these variables is a complex concept individually and is reciprocally related to the others. In the following section, I discuss the relationships between each of these concepts by reviewing literature that connects each of these concepts at a time. By illustrating the connection between two concepts at a time, I provide a broader and more in-depth picture of these interdependent relationships.

## **Communication and Relationship Satisfaction**

How couples communicate and what they communicate about both have implications on relational outcomes (Allen et al., 2008). Research has consistently shown that couples that communicate positively toward one another are more successful in facilitating satisfaction in their relationships (Cupach & Comstock, 1990, Gottman & de Claire, 2002). Other studies have shown that the breadth and depth of couple communication is also predictive of greater satisfaction in couples (Mark & Jozkowski, 2013). Each of these findings may be better understood in terms of the developmental stages of relationships. New couples may lack significant depth in communication, however as relationships progress, greater depth and specificity may be necessary adjust to changes within the relationship (Wheeless, Wheeless, & Baus, 1984). Communication becomes crucial in long-term relationships and marriages in negotiating differences and in bringing couples together (MacNeil & Byers, 2005).

As an integral concept, connection, or emotional intimacy, has a well-established link to relationship satisfaction (Greeff, Hildegard, & Malherbe, 2001). The inverse has also been shown to be true, relationship satisfaction has been shown to be key in developing emotional intimacy and healthy communication in couples. (Yoo et al., 2014). In a recent study of married couples, researchers looked at the relationship between communication, emotional intimacy, and relationship satisfaction. This study and others illustrated that spouses' who communicated positively with each other showed higher levels of emotional and sexual intimacy, which in turn led to increased relationship satisfaction (Litzinger & Gordon, 2005; Yoo et al., 2014).

Communicating within a relationship may be a skill that has more to do with individual satisfaction than satisfaction with a partner. One study on interpersonal communication illustrated that those who are satisfied with their own ability to communicate are generally more satisfied with themselves than with their partner (Brown, 2006). This finding suggests that the self-satisfaction that comes from clearly communicating is directly linked to relationship satisfaction. Other studies have illustrated that higher social anxiety also contributes lower individual relationship satisfaction (Montesi et al., 2013). Therefore, the ability to correctly communicate and express vulnerability is an essential skill for individuals to develop within their relationships, and one that may be especially essential for the survival of a long-term relationship.

Litzinger and Gordon stated that the more couples were satisfied with their own communication, the sexual relationship became less influential in increasing relationship satisfaction (2005). However, the less significant the sexual relationship becomes, the greater likelihood the couples do not adjust their sexual life, leading to sexual dissatisfaction. Increased sexual satisfaction may also keep people in long-term relationships with poor communication and relationship satisfaction.

### **Sexual Satisfaction and Relationship Satisfaction**

Sexual satisfaction has long been shown as positively correlated with relational satisfaction, and is the most researched sexual topic involving relationships (Lawrance & Byers, 1995; Spanier, 1976). Because both sexual and relationship satisfaction are so closely related, directionality is difficult to establish (Strait, 2010). In a study of 387

community couples, Litzinger and Gordon (2005) found that sexual satisfaction becomes less influential in determining relationship quality as the communication within the couple increases. However, they also found that high relationship satisfaction may keep couples from adjusting sexually, leading to sexually inactive relationships. On the contrary, couples that have increased sexual satisfaction may also lead to staying in unhealthy relationships with low relationship satisfaction.

### **Gender Differences**

Gender differences in sexual satisfaction may also contribute to sexual outcomes. Women generally experience orgasm less frequently than men, however men generally tend to over-estimate the frequency of orgasm in their wives (Gagnon & Simon, 2011). In one study, men also tended to overestimate their partner's sexual satisfaction, whereas women were more accurate in estimating their partner's sexual satisfaction (Fallis, Rehman, & Purdon, 2014). Men also tend to report higher relationship satisfaction if their wives reported higher sexual satisfaction (Yoo et al., 2014).

With all of these differences in mind, a recent study which controlled for both genders, found that discrepancy in sexual desire may be the most predictive of a decrease in relationship satisfaction in individual spouses (Willoughby et al., 2014). In other words, gender differences do not necessarily predict sexual satisfaction in couples (Litzinger & Gordon, 2005), but rather that the quality and frequency of sexual encounters, compared to each partner's expectations, may be more predictive of individual sexual satisfaction.



While sexual satisfaction may not guarantee a satisfying relationship, it is consistently reported as one of the most influential contributing factors to satisfied couples and as a complaint in dissatisfied couples (Byers, 2005; Schaefer & Olson, 1981). In a longitudinal study looking at sexuality in long-term relationships, Byers (2005) found that sexual and relationship satisfaction generally correlated over time, but found that couples with better communication were generally more satisfied relationally over time. Because of the ambiguity among some of these findings, it is then helpful to understand other components that contribute to sexual and relationship satisfaction (MacNeil & Byers, 2009). Studying the role that couple communication plays in sexual relationships has further helped explain the relationship between sexual and relationship satisfaction (Christopher & Sprecher, 2000).

In some cases, it is observed that sexually satisfied partners do not feel emotionally close; similarly, partners' feelings of emotional closeness and connectedness may not guarantee sexual satisfaction (Sprecher, 2002). Interpreting gender differences may help clarify some of these seemingly contradictory findings. One study suggested that sexual satisfaction is much more important in determining relationship satisfaction in men than women (Allen et al., 2008). Also, over time, sexual satisfaction is generally significantly lower for men than for women as relationships progress (Byers, 2005). However, from the findings presented, we have reason to believe that couples tend to be more closely aligned in sexual desire if the couple communicates more about its sexual relationship (Mark & Jozkowski, 2013).

## **Communication and Sexual Satisfaction**

As with relationship satisfaction, dyadic communication contributes largely to sexual satisfaction (Mark & Jozkowski, 2013). Couples that report lower communication satisfaction often experience sexual problems and lower sexual satisfaction (Kelly, Strassberg, & Turner, 2004). Findings from a few longitudinal studies suggest that couples that improve communication interactions reported increases in sexual satisfaction (Litzinger & Gordon, 2005). Furthermore, when general communication skills are taught in sexual enhancement courses, it can also help to increase sexual satisfaction (Gossmann, Mathieu, Julien, & Chartrand, 2003).

Understanding the role that communication plays in relation to couple satisfaction begins to fill in the gaps of missing information about the connection between sexual and relational satisfaction. The communication regarding both sexual and nonsexual conflicts helps predict both relationship and sexual satisfaction (Mark & Jozkowski, 2013; Rehman, Janssen et al., 2011).

As mentioned previously, as communication satisfaction increases, the influence that sexual satisfaction has in determining relationship satisfaction diminishes (Litzinger & Gordon, 2005). However, we do not know if one of these three realms (communication, sexual, and relationship satisfaction) can compensate for another if there is a weakness. Yoo et al. (2014) found that when partners are satisfied with one another's communication, it makes them more willing to engage in intercourse.

Directional studies have helped illustrate that communication helps increase sexual satisfaction, however support for the opposite statement is not nearly as conclusive (MacNeil & Byers, 1997). One study, looking at 133 college-age couples, found that

communication mediated the relationship between relationship and sexual communication (Mark & Jozkowski, 2013). These studies support the idea that communication is a foundational skill for couples to have. While there may be reciprocal influence between sexual and relationship satisfaction on communication, the majority of literature supports communication as foundational.

However, a consistent weakness in this body of literature is that it fails to account for different topics of communication and how the communication influences the relationship after transitioning into a long-term relationship (Byers & Demmons, 1999). A growing body of literature has begun to develop which looks at sexual communication as a separate construct from general couple communication (Mark & Jozkowski, 2013). Understanding this distinction between types of communication increases the need to better comprehend how sexual communication may differ from other types of couple communication (Byers, 2005).

### **Sexual Communication and Relationships**

Given this inherent vulnerability in sexual communication, a number of researchers have aimed to see if sexual communication may correlate with relationship satisfaction. As discussed previously, efficient communication may be more closely associated with personal satisfaction. Hecht and Sereno (1985) conducted a study in which they found that in satisfied couples, being able to discuss sexual matters was affiliated with relationship satisfaction (Coffelt & Hess, 2014). From these findings we see a basic correlational association between these two concepts, however there is much to learn beyond this correlation.

Individuals with social anxiety tend to struggle in discussing vulnerable topics such as sexuality leading to lower relationship quality (Montesi et al., 2013). These findings suggest that individuals who struggle to communicate about sexuality may experience lower overall sexual and relational satisfaction. Other studies have also supported these findings that apprehension in discussing sexual topics was also associated with the personal satisfaction that individuals received from their relationships (Wheless & Parsons, 1995).

**Sexual communication content.** Beyond the inherent vulnerability in discussing sexuality, conversations about sex may be challenging due to cultural and familial beliefs about sex. In another study by Hess and Coffelt (2012), their findings showed that the vocabulary used by both men and women about sexuality are associated with their satisfaction and closeness in relationships. The findings suggest that having an expanded vocabulary may increase better ability to express desires and be more sexually satisfied. An increased vocabulary of sexual terms may be indicative of increased sexual knowledge, which has also been found to be influential in sexual communication and satisfaction (La France, 2010). However, discussions of sexual preferences are usually most effectively done outside of the act, as during intercourse nonverbal communication becomes more influential in determining sexual satisfaction (Babin, 2013).

Some evidence supports the notion that discussing the breadth of sexuality within couples is influential in improving sexual satisfaction. One study looked at found significant differences in couples who had or had not discussed their, or their partner's, masturbation (Conklin Flank, 2013). Those who had discussed masturbation with their

spouse had significantly higher levels of sexual satisfaction and desire. However, these findings failed to control for beliefs about masturbation and duration of the relationship. With all of these findings considered, individuals who grew up in homes and cultures where sexuality was taboo may have a harder time discussing sexuality within their relationship, which in turn may affect the sexual and relationship satisfaction of the individual (Mark & Jozkowski, 2013).

**Sexual communication and satisfaction.** Being willing to discuss sexual desires and preferences, along with sexual knowledge are two big predictors of sexual satisfaction (La France, 2010). Beyond general relationship satisfaction, the most important effects in sexual communication may come from its impact on sexual satisfaction (La France, 2010). One key study on sexual communication in dating couples has helped show the directionality of how sexual communication improves relationship and sexual satisfaction (MacNeil & Byers, 2005). For both men and women, sexual communication helped couples better understand preferences which led to a more favorable balance and higher sexual satisfaction. For women, sexual self-disclosure was also led to higher relationship satisfaction, which in turn improved sexual satisfaction. Not only is sexual communication beneficial in increasing relationship satisfaction, but it has also been shown effective in reducing sexual problems (Byers & Demmons, 1999).

**The influence of sexual communication on relationships.** While much of the research lacks evidence of directionality between sexual communication and relationship and sexual satisfaction, some evidence suggests bi-directionality. For example, one study found that relational uncertainty and interference from partners increase the threat of

discussing sexuality within the relationship (Theiss & Estlein, 2013). This heightened perceived threat in turn is associated with lower sexual satisfaction. Consistent with other studies, they also found that couples that are less satisfied sexually are more avoidant or indirect in their approach to communication (Khoury & Findlay, 2014; Theiss, 2011).

Along with these relational components there may be a number of individual factors that may impede sexual communication in couples. Avoidance of sexual discussions or using indirect communication to discuss sexual topics can have detrimental effects on the relationship (Theiss & Estlein, 2013). Also individuals who deal with social anxiety (Montesi et al., 2013), sexual dysfunction (Chang, 2013) a lack of intimacy (Haning et al., 2007), and insecure attachment (Davis et al., 2006; Timm & Keiley, 2011) may all experience increased difficulty in discussing sex as well a decrease in sexual satisfaction.

While we still have little knowledge about what role sexual communication plays in relationships, there is reason to believe that improving sexual communication within couples can improve sexual and relationship satisfaction (Christopher & Sprecher, 2000). Sexual communication can be improved in terms of content (different sexual topics, beliefs about sex, sexual knowledge) and process (avoidance, emotional opening up, anxiety, supportiveness). These differences play a key role in my analyses.

**Gender differences.** Differences in sexual communication may be more evident by gender distinctions than regular communication in terms of sexual satisfaction.

Women may have a more difficult time discussing sexuality, due to a belief that they may

be the cause of any sexual problem, especially if they have difficulty reaching orgasm (Gagnon & Simon, 2011). For example, wives have repeatedly been shown to have a greater understanding of their husband's sexual preferences than the husbands had of their partners (Miller & Byers, 2004). Men may tend to communicate more often about the frequency and variety of sex while women may tend to communicate more about the connection from sex (Theiss, 2011). While these patterns may differ from couple to couple, relationships may benefit from examining the different ways couples discuss sex.

### **Section Three: Outlining the Need for the Present Study**

In this section I will outline the current gaps within the literature on the role of sexual communication in couples. I also discuss how the present study intends to fill those gaps through surveying couples' relational outcomes in connection with their communication about sex. Lastly, the research questions for my study are presented.

#### **Need for Further Information**

**Process and content.** What we lack in the literature is an understanding of the role that sexual communication plays in relationships. First, we do not have an understanding of the differences between sexual communication content and process on sexual or relationship satisfaction. Communication may vary in breadth and depth. Is it necessarily the topics discussed? Or is the way in which the topics are discussed that really contributes to increased satisfaction? We also do not have a clear understanding the path of influence that this communication has throughout on different relationship outcomes, especially within a dyadic context.

We also do not know if there are differences in the impact of sexual communication for men and women. In using dyadic data, I was able to control for gender differences within my path analysis. Using path analysis also helps us to have a greater understanding of the reciprocal relational effects, beyond the individual influence of sexual communication.

In order to understand the differences in these types of sexual communication, we also need a broader range of couple satisfaction than in past research. The majority of studies on sexual communication have been done on satisfied couples. My sample provides a much broader range of satisfied and dissatisfied couples.

**Relationship duration.** There is a significant need to develop our understanding of the relationship between sexual communication, general communication, and sexual and relationship satisfaction in committed, longer-term, relationships. Much of the current research on how couples communicate about sex has dealt with samples derived predominantly from dating couples from a university campus that had been dating for no more than two or three years (e.g., Byers & Demmons, 1999; Hess & Coffelt, 2012; MacNeil & Byers, 2005; Mark & Jozkowski, 2013).

While understanding the transition into long-term relationships is important, especially in developing sexual scripts (Fallis et al., 2014), we have a significant lack of knowledge of the role of sexuality and how it is negotiated in long-term relationships. There is a need for more research that looks beyond the initial transition into relationships and into how sexuality is integrated into the normal flow of long-term relationships and through different developmental stages in the relationship. There is limited knowledge of



what role sexual communication in couples has throughout the development of relationships. While sexual communication has been proven crucial in young relationships, we do not know if its importance changes in later relationships.

The average duration of first marriages that end in divorce is eight years, with the first separation at 6.1 years (Copen, Daniels, Vespa, & Mosher, 2013; Kreider & Ellis, 2011). The current state of the literature fails to look beyond the first few years into marriage and long-term relationships. Thus understanding the effects on sexual communication on sexual and relationship satisfaction in these crucial years of a relationship and beyond may help us understand how to better contribute to couple's overall relational health. We wonder if being able to discuss preferences and desires after sexual scripts and routines have been set in place will help couples adjust to the difficulties in their relationship.

**Differences between sexual and general communication.** While there is a growing body of literature on sexual communication as its own construct. We have little understanding on how sexual communication might differ qualitatively and quantitatively from general communication in relationships. We do not know if sexual communication impacts different areas of the relationship than general communication. If there are differences in these types of communication, training and education in communication may change considerably in the future.

Additionally, the effects of sexual communication on married couples are not well understood. Sexual communication may mean much more than just sexual self-disclosure. Little has been done to explore what couples do to negotiate sexual behaviors,

attitudes, and disparities (e.g., desire, frequency, or scripts). We do not know what approaches couples use to communicate with each other about sexuality or how to effectively increase sexual communication in couples therapy.

### **Purpose of Study**

In my study, I plan to bridge some of these gaps in the literature by examining the connections between sexual communication, general communication, sexual satisfaction, and relationship satisfaction as they apply to long-term relationships. As mentioned above, we need a greater conceptual understanding on the role of sexuality in everyday relationships with a broader range of couples. Through quantitative dyadic data, I was able to gain more insight as to how talking about sex may potentially benefit relationships. The findings from the study have numerous implications for sex and couple's therapists who deal with sexual issues in long-term relationships.

### **Research Questions**

Research question 1: Are there different effects in content and process of sexual communication on each individual's sexual and relational outcomes?

Research question 1A: How do these effects differ between genders?

Research question 2: What are the differences between sexual and general communication processes and their effect on relational outcomes?

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODOLOGY**

In my study, I used self-report measures from couples in committed relationships to look at the relationships between communication satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, and relationship satisfaction. Utilizing both pre-existing measures and modified versions of those measures, I looked at the influence of each of these communication components in connection with sexual and relationship satisfaction. The survey was distributed through a number of different sources including therapeutic clinics, email listservs, and social media outlets. Data was collected and cleaned. Using a dyadic data approach within path analysis, I analyzed the paths of influence that sexual communication takes in influencing these two relational outcomes. The findings from this study, will be used to discuss possible implications and interventions for clinical practice.

#### **Sample**

In order to have the statistical power to answer my research questions, a large dyadic data set was needed for this project. A total of 513 individuals completed the 30 minute, online survey (Women  $n = 310$ , 60%, Men  $n = 201$ , 40%); all of whom were in heterosexual, committed relationships. Within those 513 individuals, were 142 complete and paired dyadic responses (total  $N = 284$ ). My analysis included only the 142 complete couples, thus all following numbers will be associated with those complete couple results.

The vast majority of the current body of literature on sexual communication has been based on studies that looked at young, college-aged couples transitioning into

committed relationships. The sample included a broad range of couples that have been together for different lengths of time in order to have a clearer picture of the role that sexual communication has in couples who have been together for longer periods of time. In order to expand on the past literature, my sample provides a much broader group of couples who had moved through the initial transition of relationship formation. Then length of the participants' current relationships ranged from 3 months to 61 years. In my sample, the average duration of the participants' current relationship was  $M = 9.61$  years ( $SD = 9.85$ ). Participants ages ranged from 20 to 83, ( $M = 32.38$ ,  $SD = 10.57$ ). The number of children that these couples had ranged from 0 to 8 ( $M = 1.50$ ,  $SD = 1.70$ ).

These participants came from various ethnic, educational, employment, and sexual backgrounds (see Tables 1 and 2). These individuals also had varying sexual experience before entering this committed relationship. The number of sexual partners the participants had had prior to entering the relationship ranged from 0 to 104 ( $M = 2.35$ ,  $SD = 7.70$ ). After entering the current relationship, the number of sexual partners ranged from 1 to 32 ( $M = 1.14$ ,  $SD = 2.39$ ). There were 70 participants who responded "0" to the question; 191 people responded "1," which may include the partner only, or possibly someone else. I assume these responses were meant to be "1" as the instructions to the question said to include the current partner in the number. All participants, other than one, otherwise indicated that they were sexually active with their partners.

The sample also consisted of various relationship types. 235 (82.6%) participants said they were in "monogamous, married" relationships, which consisted of being married, living together, and having no external sexual partners. Thirty-seven (13%)

Table 1

*Demographic Descriptives (n=284 individuals)*

Variable	Gender	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range
Age (years)	M	33.27	10.75	22-83
	F	31.49	13.20	20-82
	Couple	32.38	11.97	20-83
Relationship duration (years)	M	9.51	9.60	.20-61
	F	9.71	10.12	.20-61
	Couple	9.61	9.85	.25-61
Number of children	M	N/A	N/A	0-8
	F	N/A	N/A	0-8
	Couple	1.50	1.70	0-8
Number of sexual partners prior to current relationship	M	3.13	10.39	0-104
	F	1.57	3.13	0-16
	Couple	2.35	7.70	0-104
Number of sexual partners after entering current relationship (including partner)	M	1.14	2.81	1-32
	F	1.13	1.88	1-16
	Couple	1.14	2.39	1-32

participants indicated being in a “monogamous cohabiting” relationship, which consisted of living together and having no external sexual partners. Nine (2.2 %) indicated being in an “open or extra-marital sexual” relationship, where the partners live together with one partner being monogamous, and the other partner having, or having had, extra-marital sexual encounters, either known or unknown to the other partner. There were 6

participants who were in dating relationships, 3 (1%) were sexually active and free to have external partners, 3 were sexually active and committed to having sex only with their current partner (1%), and one participant indicated being in a dating and not sexually active relationship (.2%).

My sample consisted of a large Caucasian majority ( $n = 256$ , 90.3%). Other participants included: 4 African-Americans (1.4%), 8 Asian or Pacific Islander (2.8%), 13 Hispanic or Latino (4.3%), and 3 (1.2%) who indicated being bi-racial.

The achieved education levels of the participants were much more balanced. Thirty-seven had received a high school diploma (13.1%), 17 participants had received technical certifications (6%), 50 completed Associates degrees (17.6%), 115 had received Bachelor's degrees (40.5%), 49 received Masters degrees (17.3%), and 16 had received Doctorate degrees (5.6%).

The average combined yearly income was also fairly evenly balanced. Forty-one earned less than \$20,000 (14.4%), 56 reported earning between \$20,000-\$34,999 (19.7%), 47 reported earning between \$35,000 and \$49,999 (16.5%), 63 individuals reported earning between \$50,000 and \$74,999 (22.2%), and 41 reported earning between \$75,000 and \$99,999 (14.5%). Finally, 36 reported earning more than \$100,000 every year (12.7%).

Only heterosexual couples and those who had been in committed relationships for more than one year were invited to participate in the study. Couples who have not been sexually active, or were currently separated were not included in the final analysis. No additional exclusion criteria of satisfaction and sexual communication were used in the

study. In advertising for the survey, the inclusion criteria listed stated that participants needed to be in a relationship currently lasting more than 1 year. There were two couples who had been together and sexually active for less than a year. As these couples did not pose a threat to the final analysis or to the integrity of the study, the decision was made to include their data. Although we did not gather data on where each participant lived, GPS makers of those taking the survey (although these markers can be inaccurate) indicated representation from most of the U.S. States.

Table 2

*Summary of Demographic Characteristics of the Sample (n = 284 individuals)*

Variable Name	N	(%)	Men	(%)	Women	(%)
<b>Relationship Status</b>						
Monogamous married	235	(82.6)	117	(82.4)	118	(83.1)
Monogamous cohabiting	37	(13)	18	(12.7)	19	(13.5)
Extra-marital sexual partners	9	(2.2)	4	(2.7)	2	(1.4)
Dating, sexually exclusive	3	(1)	1	(1)	2	(1)
Dating, sexually non-committed	3	(1)	2	(1)	1	(1)
Dating, not sexually active	1	(.2)	1	(.2)	0	(0)
Total		(100)		(100)		(100)
<b>Race/ethnicity</b>						
Caucasian	256	(90.3)	128	(90.1)	125	(88)
Hispanic or Latino	13	(4.3)	3	(3.5)	8	(5.6)
Asian or Pacific Islander	8	(2.8)	4	(2.8)	4	(2.8)
African American	4	(1.4)	2	(1.4)	2	(1.4)
Bi-racial or Mixed Race	3	(1.2)	1	(.7)	2	(1.4)
Total		(100)		(100)		(100)
<b>Achieved education level</b>						
High School or equivalent	37	(13.1)	20	(14.1)	17	(12)
Vocational/technical school	17	(6)	7	(4.9)	10	(7)
Associates degree	50	(17.6)	25		25	(17.6)
Bachelor's degree	115	(40.5)	54	(17.6)	61	(43)
				(38)		

(Table Continues)

Variable Name	N	(%)	Men	(%)	Women	(%)
Master's degree	49	(17.3)	28	(19.7)	21	(14.8)
Doctoral degree (PhD)	16	(5.6)	8	(5.6)	8	(5.6)
Total		(100)		(100)		(100)
Employment status						
Employed full-time	139	(49)	90	(63.4)	49	(34.5)
Employed part-time	25	(8.8)	8	(5.6)	17	(12)
Self-employed	21	(7.4)	9	(6.3)	12	(8.5)
Full-time student	41	(14.4)	25	(17.6)	16	(11.3)
Homemaker	39	(13.7)	2	(1.4)	37	(26.1)
Unemployed	10	(3.5)	4	(2.8)	6	(4.2)
Retired or disabled	9	(3.1)	4	(2.8)	5	(3.5)
Total		(100)		(100)		(100)
Household income						
Under \$20,000	39	(13.7)	20	(14.1)	19	(13.4)
\$20,000 - \$34,999	56	(19.7)	28	(19.7)	28	(19.7)
\$35,000 - \$49,999	47	(16.5)	21	(14.8)	26	(18.3)
\$50,000 - \$74,999	63	(22.2)	36	(25.4)	27	(19.0)
\$75,000 - \$99,999	41	(14.4)	18	(12.7)	23	(16.2)
Over \$100,000	36	(12.7)	19	(13.4)	17	(12.0)
Missing	2	(.7)	0	(0)	2	(1.4)
TOTAL		(100)		(100)		(100)

## Procedures

Following IRB approval, the sample was procured through a number of different avenues. Using an online survey program (Qualtrics), couple participants were asked to separately fill out a 30-minute survey. Actions were taken to ensure the anonymity of the participants. I did not ask participants to identify the means through which they were informed about the study. However, I recognized surges in participant numbers after emphasizing certain advertising mediums, which may provide my best guess as to which



advertising mediums were most effective. I have ordered the advertising mediums the order which I consider to be most effective to least effective. As multiple advertising mediums were in use at all times, it is impossible to know which had the greatest impact.

A large increase in participation came from advertising in email listservs. An invitation to participate in my study was distributed to all registered members on smartmarriages.com, a marriage enhancement nonprofit organization. I also found a large amount of participants on findparticipants.com, a paid subscription site for the purpose of gathering research data. The study was advertised using Michigan State University's research listserv, and was distributed to more than 1,000 people. Over 200 Families Studies, Marriage and Family Therapy, and Psychology professors across the country were asked to elicit participation from their students and universities.

Participants were also collected through social media outlets. I created a Facebook group called "USU Communication Study" which was advertised on my personal Facebook page, as well as many others. Participants in the study were asked to share the survey on their Facebook page, or to email the link to their friends.

I used a number of different avenues in order to ensure a diverse sample from across the spectrum of couple satisfaction in order to better understand the relationships between these concepts. In order to ensure variability in relationship or sexual satisfaction, I distributed the survey through various therapy clinics across the country. More than 100 flyers were handed out to clinicians at the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT) national conference in Austin, Texas. Flyers were also sent to more than 300 clinicians across the country.

Each spouse was given information about the study and was told to read a letter of information before beginning the survey. The directions of the survey indicated that each partner should take the survey separately and independently from his or her spouse. Once both partners completed the survey, the participants could choose to be entered into a drawing for a \$50 Amazon gift card.

I took steps to ensure anonymity throughout the study. I asked that participants provide no information that can lead to their identification. Names of participants were not given in the research process; only a unique identifier was created so that partner responses could be linked for statistical analyses. The spouses' responses were paired through a unique couple code that consisted of the first letter of the first names of both partners, the numeric birth month of both partners, and the numeric birthday of both partners (e.g., RR06240330, for partners named Ruth and Ryan who were born on June 24 and March 30, respectively). Surnames and birth years were not used to further guard participant confidentiality. Email addresses of those who chose to enter into the drawing were not attached to the survey responses. Coding and pairing the couples' responses helped to us examine how the measures predict relationship and sexual satisfaction for each couple.

### **Measures**

A survey was distributed to participants using four formalized assessments, all of which were approved by written permission from the measures' authors. The measures include the Couples Satisfaction Inventory (CSI), the New Sexual Satisfaction Scale - Short (NSSS-S), the Communication Patterns Questionnaire – Short Form (CPQ-SF), and

a modified version of the Revised Sexual Self-Disclosure Scale (SSDS-R; refer to Table 3 for psychometric properties). Demographic information was also collected in order to determine the generalizable scope that my findings can provide (Refer to Appendix for demographic questions).

### **The Revised Sexual Self-Disclosure Scale**

The *Revised Sexual Self-Disclosure Scale* (SSDS-R) is originally a 72-item survey (30 questions in my survey) that consists of 24 three-item (9 in my study) subscales which measure the extent to which individuals have discussed a number of sexual topics. A factor analysis has determined that responses fall within four general categories: Sexual behaviors, sexual values and preferences, sexual attitudes, and sexual affect (Snell, Belk, Papini, & Clark, 1989). For my study I used only the sexual behaviors, and sexual values and preferences subscale because they provided the clearest picture of relational aspects of sex within couples. The nine subscales in my 30-item version included: Sexual behaviors, sexual sensations, sexual fantasies, sexual preferences, the meaning of sex, sexual accountability, distressing sex, sexual dishonesty, and sexual delay preferences (refer to Appendix for inventory). Participants used a 5-point Likert-type scale (scored 0 to 4) to respond to how willing he or she would be discussing a specific sexual topic.

The scoring of the survey consisted of dividing up the 3-question subscales and finding the sum of each section. These sums were added to provide an overall sexual communication score. However, the option remained to look at each subscale individually to further break down the results. The reliability coefficients for the SSDS-R

ranged from a low of .59 to a high of .91 (average = 8.1). The survey had good face validity, however responses to the SSDS-R varied between respondent gender and sexual topic (Snell & Belk, 1987). The SSDS-R produced very reliable results within this sample (male  $\alpha = .97$ , female  $\alpha = .95$ ). Male and female responses were moderately correlated ( $r = .42, p < .01$ ).

### **The Communication Patterns Questionnaire- Short Form**

The *Communication Patterns Questionnaire- Short Form* (CPQ-SF) is an 11-item self-assessment that measures how one partner perceives their relational interactions (Christensen, 1988). The CPQ-SF measures complimentary (woman pursues conversation while man avoids conversation) or symmetrical styles (both man and woman avoid conversation) of communication within relationships when conflicts arise. A 9-point Likert-type scale is used to rate the likelihood of each behavior occurring in their relationship during conflict (see Appendix for questionnaire). Scores were found by summing up the items in five different subscales: female demand/male withdraw, male demand/female withdraw, total demand/withdraw, total criticize/defend and overall positive interaction subscale (Futris, Campbell, Nielsen, & Burwell, 2010). Only the “overall positive interaction” subscale was used in my final analysis.

In this study, I also distributed a modified version of the questionnaire in order to assess for communication patterns surrounding sexual topics. The responses were worded the same, however the questions read, “When sexual issues or problems arise, how likely is it that....” and, “During discussion of sexual issues or problems, how likely is it that...” Comparing responses of the CPQ-SF as well as the modified version indicated if couples

have different communication patterns toward sex than they do in other relational areas. This modified version will be referred to as the Sexual Communication Patterns Questionnaire – Short Form (SCPQ-SF) throughout the article. Using the CPQ-SF to measure sexual communication patterns has been done in previous studies, with good success (Christensen, 1988).

The CPQ-SF was selected for the present study because it expands on a couple's satisfaction with their communication by giving insight into the relational processes associated with their communication. Comparing how couples communicate generally and how they communicate about sex will broaden my findings to include couple content and process. I scored the CPQ-SF using the method developed by Futris et al. (2010), which makes minor adjustments to the questions included in each subscale. This scoring method was considered to be better suited for research purposes (Futris et al., 2010). The alpha coefficients for the male demand/ female withdraw, female demand/male withdraw, and total demand/withdraw subscales were  $\alpha = .71$ ,  $\alpha = .66$ , and  $\alpha = .81$ , respectively (Futris et al., 2010; Noller & White, 1990). For this study, reliability of the CPQ-SF positive subscale was  $\alpha = .77$  (male  $\alpha = .78$ , female  $\alpha = .79$ ). For the modified, sexual communication version of the CPQ-SF, the reliability was very good (male  $\alpha = .82$ , female  $\alpha = .90$ ).

### **New Sexual Satisfaction Scale**

The *New Sexual Satisfaction Scale-Short* (NSSS-S) is a 12-item survey that uses 5-point Likert-type responses to measure to assess satisfaction in the following five dimensions: (1) sexual sensations, (2) sexual presence/awareness, (3) sexual exchange,

(4) emotional connection/closeness, and (5) sexual activity (Štulhofer, Buško, & Brouillard, 2011; refer to Appendix for inventory). The NSSS-S contains a list of sexual aspects such as “my partner’s emotional opening up in sex” and “the quality of my orgasms” of which the participant rates his or her satisfaction over the last six months. Finding the sum of the question responses produces survey scores, the total of which falls in the range between 12 and 50.

I selected the NSSS-S because it measures two different subscales, ego-focused and partner/activity-focused, which will be helpful in understanding relational sexual satisfaction, rather than just individual sexual satisfaction. In a recent psychometric comparison of the most commonly used sexual satisfaction scales, the NSSS-S received the strongest psychometric support as a bi-dimensional measure of sexual satisfaction and showed strong internal consistency ( $\alpha = .90$  to  $.93$ ), convergent validity, and test-retest reliability (Cronbach’s alpha  $\alpha = .90$ ,  $r = .81$ ; Mark, Herbenick, Fortenberry, Sanders, & Reece, 2014). Internal consistency was also strong in the present study (male  $\alpha = .88$ , female  $\alpha = .93$ ). Male and female sexual satisfaction was correlated at ( $r = .49$ ).

### **Couple Satisfaction Inventory**

*The Couple Satisfaction Inventory (CSI)* is originally a 32-item survey used to measure an individual’s satisfaction with a relationship (Funk & Rogge, 2007). We used the 16-question shortened version of the measurement (Refer to Appendix for inventory). The inventory has a variety of items with different response scales and formats to measure attitudes, frequency, accuracy, and to scale different relationship qualities. The CSI uses a 6-point Likert scale (7 on one item) to ask questions such as “My relationship

with my partner makes me happy,” and “How often do you and your partner have fun together?”

Scores range from 0 to 81, with the satisfaction cutoff for satisfied couples being a score of 52 or higher. CSI scores show strong convergent validity with other measures of relationship satisfaction and have shown higher precision in predicting relationship satisfaction than the typically used Marital Adjustment Test and the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Funk & Rogge, 2007). In a meta-analysis of multiple relationship satisfaction measures, the CSI showed moderately high reliability, with an average Cronbach’s alpha of .940 (Graham, Diebels, & Barnow, 2011). The measure shows good face validity as well as excellent construct validity.

In the present study, the sample represented a good range of satisfaction. The mean score for sexual satisfaction was 64.79 for men ( $n = 142$ ,  $SD = 13.77$ ) and 66.17 for women ( $n = 142$ ,  $SD = 13.20$ ). There were 31 couples (22%) where at least one partner was within the dissatisfied range. The CSI showed good reliability (male  $\alpha = .97$ , female  $\alpha = .96$ ). Relationship satisfaction was highly correlated between men and women ( $r = .57$ ).

### **Data Analysis**

Having collected and prepared a rich, dyadic data set, I determined that dyadic analysis was appropriate in analyzing the effects of sexual communication by gender. Doing so allowed us to have a much clearer picture of the different paths of that influence sexual communication has within relational dynamics. I also determined that a path

Table 3

*Psychometric Properties of Predictor Variables and Covariates (n = 284 individuals)*

Variable	Gender	M	SD	$\alpha$	r	Range	
						Potential	Actual
Relationship satisfaction (CSI)	M	64.79	13.77	.97			23–81
	F	66.17	13.20	.96			20-81
	Couple				.57**		0-81
Sexual satisfaction (NSSS)	M	44.42	7.73	.88			28–60
	F	45.07	9.20	.93			17–60
	Couple				.49*		12-60
General communication process (CPQ-SF)	M	20.40	4.39	.78			7-27
	F	20.76	4.43	.79			4-27
	Couple				.48**		0-27
Sexual communication process (SCPQ-SF)	M	19.55	4.71	.82			8-27
	F	20.49	4.88	.90			3-27
	Couple				.47**		0-27
Sexual communication content	M	81.11	29.53	.97			7-120
	F	86.34	24.97	.95			8-120
	Couple				.42**		0-120

\*  $p \leq .05$ . \*\*  $p \leq .01$ .

analysis was appropriate for this project because it allowed us to compare multiple dyadic variables simultaneously.

### Missing Data

Missing data was a relatively minor problem for the demographics and self-report measures (Schlomer, Bauman, & Card, 2010). There was less than 3% missing data for



sexual communication process, general communication process, relationship satisfaction, and sexual satisfaction variables. While there is no established cutoff in the literature regarding what is considered an acceptable amount of missing data, Schafer (1999) asserted that a missing rate of 5% or less is inconsequential. In my study however, approximately 7% of participants did not complete the sexual communication content questionnaire (valid cases  $N = 262$ ). While this percentage is slightly higher than recommended, Bennett (2001) maintained that having less than 10% of data missing does not likely lead to biased analyses. This missing data did not prove to be significantly detrimental in my final analysis.

### **Dyadic Data Analysis**

Because the focus in this project is couples, dyadic data analysis (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006) was the overarching framework used in my quantitative analyses. Dyadic data analysis is a statistical technique that provides a very useful paradigm for better understanding the nature and functioning of relationships (Ackerman, Donnellan, & Kashy, 2014). In dyadic data analysis, each individual is considered one part of a dyad, rather than an individual participant. This interdependence of couple relationships violates the assumption of independence of data, which requires a different approach.

Since partners in couples' responses are inherently related to one another, dyadic data analysis incorporates the potential influence of couples by examining partner and actor effects (Kenny et al., 2006). Couples were nested together in order to produce results with the assumption that each couple is unique, while examining generalized patterns across all of the couples. Dyadic data analysis provides an added advantage in

my analysis because it analyzes each couple as one unit, rather than two uninfluenced and unrelated entities.

In my analysis, I used the actor-partner interdependence model (APIM), which is one of several approaches to dyadic analysis (Kenny & Kashy, 2011). APIM provides an appropriate approach for this data set because it provides separate but simultaneous estimates of both actor and partner effects. *Actor effects* measure the association between one partner's predictor variables and his or her own outcome variables, while controlling for the interdependent relationship with the other partner. *Partner effects* measure the impact of one partner's predictor variable on the other partner's outcome variable(s) (Ackerman et al., 2014). As a result, APIM not only allowed us to examine how Partner A's sexual communication related to his/her own relationship or sexual satisfaction, but also how it related to Partner B's relationship and sexual satisfaction. APIM is most commonly used for basis dyadic analysis, which appropriately fits for this study. This dyadic analysis technique fills this need to understand not only how all couples are related, but how each couple uniquely contributes to the overall observed model.

### **Path Analysis**

For the purposes of this study, I used path analysis because it allowed me to examine multiple interrelated outcome variables within one analysis. Path analysis is a statistical analysis tool commonly used to help understand complex and interrelated concepts (Ackerman et al., 2014). Path modeling lends itself easily to systems thinkers, as it examines the relationships and paths of influence between multiple interrelated and interdependent constructs (Kline, 2015). As discussed previously, communication, sexual

satisfaction, and relationship satisfaction are all interrelated and interdependent. From the literature, it is difficult to understand how these variables affect and are affected by one another; thus it was important to conceptualize a model using all of these variables together in order to find the different paths of influence that sexual communication has within relationships.

There are a number of advantages in using path analysis over regression analyses. First, path analysis examines multiple paths, while taking into account the disturbance, or combined error terms created when looking at multiple variables at once (Streiner, 2005). In using a path analysis, one can also account for how closely the hypothesized model fits the presented data (Olsen & Kenny, 2006). Finally, while the calculations in a path analysis are similar to those in a multiple regression, path analysis allows us to postulate other hypotheses about the relations among variables and see whether they have a significant impact between variables and partners (Streiner, 2005; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001).

A path analysis for this study was appropriate because it allowed us to examine the impact of two types of sexual communication on multiple outcome variables (Hershberger, 2003). Doing so allowed us to more clearly examine the differences in these types of communication because of the different effects for both sexual communication types. Furthermore, by utilizing the APIM within my Path Analysis, I was able to distinguish different hierarchies in my conceptual design and organize them by gender. Merging these two statistical approaches gave us the unique opportunity to look at the role of sexual communication in relationships, while controlling for male and

female differences (Ackerman et al., 2014). The result of this analysis is a useful model that outlines male and female differences in sexual communication and the significant associations of those relationships on greater relationship outcomes.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

Due to the lack of information on the role that sexual communication plays in committed relationships, I set out to gather important dyadic data in order to expand and deepen the literature base. One of the primary goals of the study was to see what differences there were in sexual communication by gender. In order to provide insight into these relational processes, I determined it would be essential to gather complete dyadic data. After surveying 142 couples I was able to analyze each couples' responses in order to find generalizable patterns. This dyadic data analysis helped us not only see the impact of sexual communication on one's own relationship and sexual satisfaction, but it also allowed us to examine reciprocal effects between male and female partners.

Another primary goal of the study was to be examine the differences between sexual and general communication processes. It remains unclear in the literature if there are differences in the impact of general and sexual communication on other relational outcomes. Understanding the differences in these impacts may have crucial implications on education and intervention of couples. In order to find generalizable patterns of couple interaction, it was decided that a quantitative analysis would be the most appropriate method for answering the research questions of the study. Using the data from the paired couple responses, I analyzed the 142 complete couple responses using a path analysis. Using dyadic data analysis within path modeling, I designed my model to understand the paths of influence that sexual communication has on various relational outcomes.

### **Data Preparation and Preliminary Analysis**

In preparation for my data analysis, the first step was to prepare the data set to perform the path analysis. The first step in this process was to determine to which extent I would consider answers as “complete.” I determined that if couples completed at least 50% of the survey they would be considered complete. There were 756 people who began the survey and completed the demographic information. After sifting through these responses, I removed 243 responses that were either considered incomplete or duplicates of existing responses, leaving us with 513 complete responses. Using these 513 individuals, I was able to match the couples together to create a dyadic data set.

Participants were matched using a unique couple identify which consisted of the first initials for the men and women, the woman’s birthday and month, and the male’s birthday and month. There were a few couples (less than 10), where the partners’ birthdays or initials were mismatched, however these mistakes were easily identifiable and partnered data was verified by other matching demographic information (i.e., relationship duration, socio-economic status, etc.). After pairing the responses, the result was 142 complete coupled responses (284 individuals) and 229 complete individual responses.

The data set was further cleaned and prepared by replacing missing entries with an identifier (-99). I then calculated the totals for the measurements based on the previously defined scoring instructions for each measurement. Once scores were calculated, bivariate correlations for men and women and between men and women were

Table 4

*Variable Correlations*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Sexual communication process (1)	.47**	.46**	.60**	.52**	.37**	.23**	.12	.03	-.01
Sexual communication content (2)	.46**	.42**	.39**	.52**	.50**	.27**	.01	-.00	.02
General communication process (3)	.60**	.39**	.48**	.52**	.51**	.20*	-.03	.01	-.07
Sexual satisfaction (4)	.52**	.52**	.52**	.49*	.63**	.32**	.21*	-.03	-.13
Relationship satisfaction (5)	.37**	.50**	.51**	.63**	.57**	.33**	.06	-.10	-.07
Sexual intercourse frequency (6)	.23**	.27**	.20*	.32**	.33**	.78**	.15	-.25**	-.25**
Orgasm frequency (7)	.12	.01	-.03	.21*	.06	.15	-.02	-.02	.00
Age (8)									
Relationship duration (9)	-.01	.02	-.07	-.13	-.07	-.25**	.00	.86**	.97**

*Note:* Upper-right cells - correlations between variables for women

Lower-left cells - correlations between variables for men

Trace - correlations between men and women

(\*)  $p \leq .05$ , (\*\*)  $p \leq .01$

calculated in order to ensure that all of the variable relationships were in the expected directions (see Table 4 below). Finally, factor analyses and tests of reliability were also performed in order to ensure similar results to the existing literature of each assessment. (The reliability is reported in Table 3 earlier).

After the scoring variables were created, a dyad level data set was made in which both male and female results were separated and included on the same participant line of

the data spreadsheet. Thus making each participant a complete dyad, rather than a single participant. The males and females were separated as actors and partners to coincide with the Actor-partner Interdependence Model (APIM; Kenny et al., 2006).

In path analyses, Grand Mean Centering is often advisable in order to standardize each of the assessment scores based on their ratio to the mean. The result of the centered data provides standardized results that are more readily interpretable. However, as obtaining standardized coefficients can be detrimental to estimating the APIM, there was potentially some risk in grand mean centering the dyadic data. Thus, I decided to leave the data un-centered in my final analysis (Ackerman et al., 2014).

### **Model Construction**

Performing these preliminary analyses confirmed to me that a path analysis was more appropriate than SEM, because latent variables in SEM are constructed by three or more predicting variables (O'Rourke, Psych, & Hatcher, 2013). As I had two sexual communication variables, a path analysis proved more useful. By analyzing sexual communication content and process separately, I could then easily view the differences in their roles within relationships (Refer to Figure 1).

In my model, I looked at the paths of two different types of sexual communication within couples. The first was based on the sexual topics couples have discussed and the extent to which they have discussed those topics (derived from the SSDS-R), and positive communication processes surrounding sex (derived from the CPQ-SF-Modified). Correlations between sexual communication content and process were medium for both men and women ( $r = .46, p < .01$ ).



Relationship and sexual satisfaction were the two outcome variables in the model.

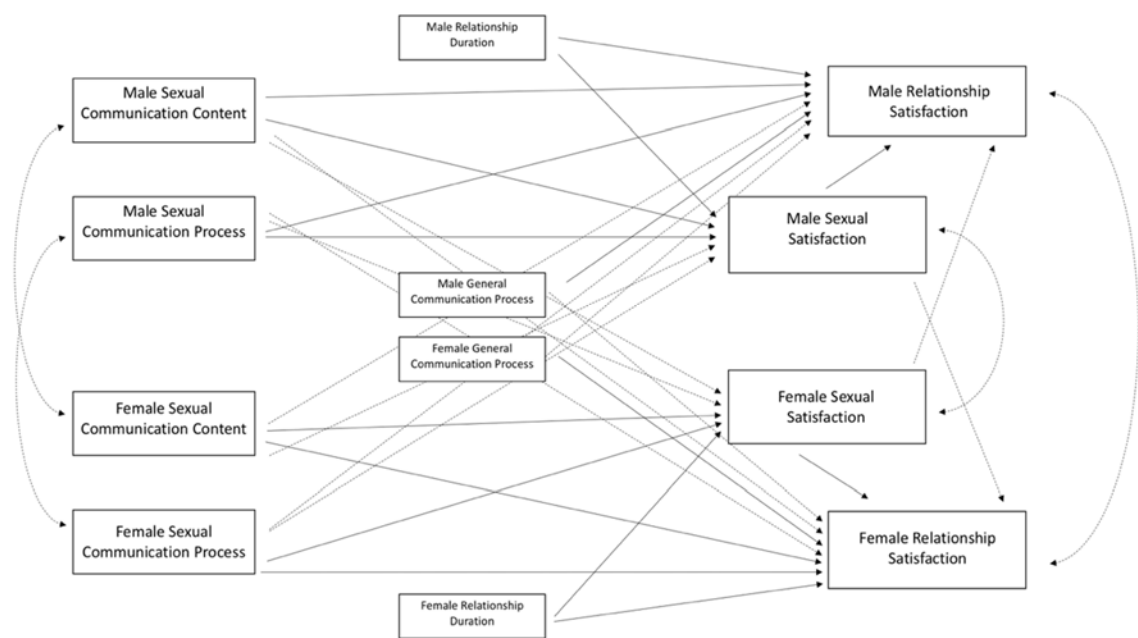
Relationship and sexual satisfaction were more strongly correlated for men and women ( $r = .633, p < .01$ ). General communication process and relationship duration were used as covariates in the model.

One of the primary goals of the study was to find a sample that represented a broader range satisfied couples. Much of the previous literature used samples where most couples were highly satisfied with the relationship. My study provides a much broader range of satisfaction within the relationship based on the Couple Satisfaction Index ( $M = 65.49, SD = 13.48, Range = 20-81, satisfaction\ cut\ of = 52$ ). In my study, 31 of the couples had at least one partner that was clinically dissatisfied (22% of total couples), which helps to strengthen the results of the study.

As is customary within the APIM, gender was used as a distinguishing dichotomous variable in my data analysis. Within the APIM, it is important to determine the conceptual and empirical distinguishability of the data. As my research questions were based on the differences in gender, it was important to determine that the female and male responses were distinctly different to the point that I could justify analyzing males and females differently.

Within an SEM/path analytic framework, the omnibus test of distinguishability consisted of two primary steps. The first step examined the assumption that scores for women differed from scores for men. To do this, I specified a model where all means, variances, and covariance were constrained to be equal for men and women. I then

examined the chi-square for significance. Because it was significant,  $\chi^2 = 28.17, p = .01$ , I then proceeded to the second step which involved running the same model again with freely estimated means for men and women. The chi-square result for this model was again significant,  $\chi^2 = 19.18, p = .004$ . Overall, the results from these two models highlighted the differences between men and women on these variables and provided justification for conducting APIM with distinguishable dyads.



*Figure 1:* Proposed sexual communication path analysis model.

### Primary Analysis

The model in Figure 1 shows the all the possible relationships between sexual communication, sexual satisfaction, and relationship satisfaction when being controlled for relationship duration and general communication processes. In the present study, I

looked to add strength to the current body of literature, as well as expand the current understanding of how sexual communication impacts sexual relationships and other relational outcomes (Refer to Figure 2 below).

Two first order manifest variables were used to predict two outcome variables. I separated the sexual communication variables in order to show the differences in these types of communication. My manifest variables were sexual communication content and process. I used these variables to look at the actor and partner influences of sexual communication on the various areas of the relationship. My outcome variables were relationship and sexual satisfaction.

My model included two control variables: general communication processes and relationship duration. I used these general communication as a control variable to examine the differences in sexual and general communication processes. By analyzing both within the model, I could see if there were different effects between the two of them. For each of these variables I examined both actor and partner effects.

I used relationship duration as a control for relationship and sexual satisfaction. As mentioned in the review of literature, we lack knowledge on if the effects of sexual communication change throughout the course of relationships. Many relationship-oriented constructs have been known to change over time; sex is one of these (Byers, 2005). I wanted to control for relationship duration in order to show that my model remained consistent through various relationship durations.

## Model Estimation

Acceptable models generally have an RMSEA less than .05, a Comparative Fit Index that exceeds .93, a Tucker Lewis Index that exceeds .90, and a SRMR below .08 (Browne & Cudeck, 1993; Byrne, 1994; Hu & Bentler, 1999). I used Mplus to run my proposed model. In my study, the baseline model hypothesizing that all variables were uncorrelated was rejected,  $\chi^2 (38) = 401.78, p < .001$ . A Chi square difference test found that the proposed model represented a significant improvement in fit over the independence model,  $\chi^2 (20) = 22.20, p = .33$ ; CFI = .99; TLI = .99; RMSEA = .03 (90% CI [0, .08]; SRMR = .04. Overall, these fit statistics provide evidence of a good fitting model.

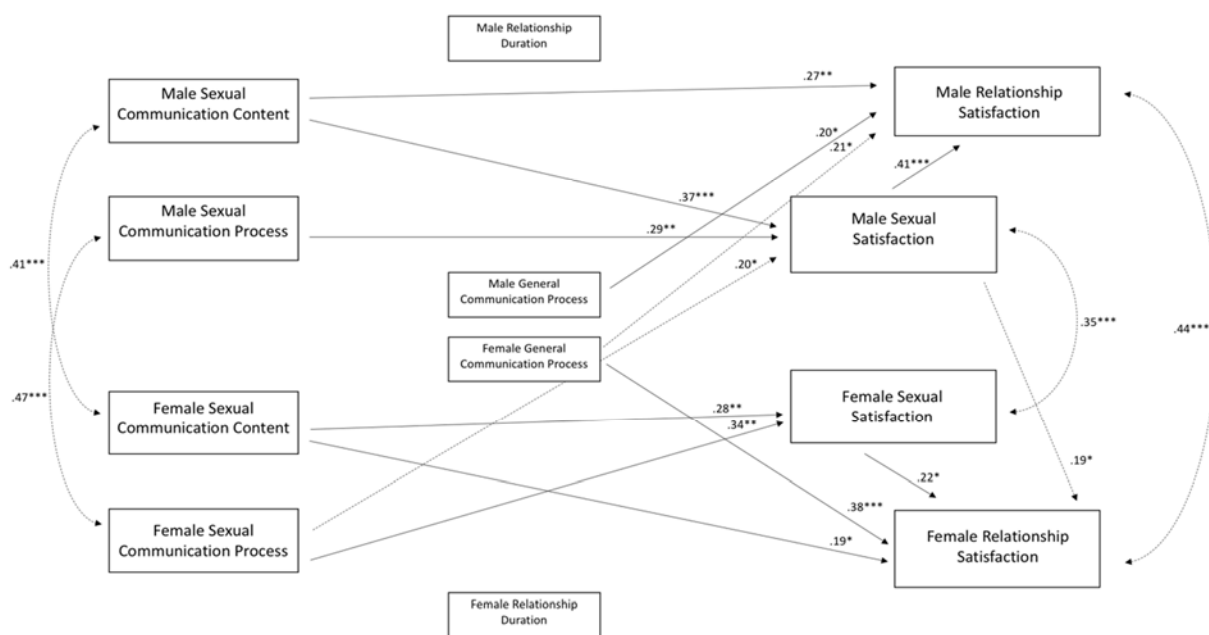


Figure 2 – Empirical sexual communication path analysis model.

\*  $p > .05$ ; \*\*  $p > .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p > .001$

## Direct Effects

Figure 2 provides the same model expressed above, indicating only the significant pathways of influence. Relationship duration did not have any significant effects on the designated outcome variables for either men or women. The actor and partner effects are described below.

**Sexual communication content. Actor effects.** The extent to which couples communicated about sex (or sexual communication content) was significantly correlated with both relationship satisfaction for both males and females (male standardized coefficient  $\beta = .27, p = .002$ ; female standardized coefficient  $\beta = .19, p = .05$ ; from here on, I will refer to the standardized coefficients as  $\beta$ ). Sexual communication content was also significantly associated with sexual satisfaction in males and females (male  $\beta = .37, p < .001$ ; female  $\beta = .28, p = .002$ ). In other words, discussion of more sexual topics was associated with higher levels of both sexual and general couple satisfaction for both men and women.

**Partner effects.** There were no significant partner effects of sexual communication content for males or females on sexual or relationship satisfaction.

**Sexual communication process. Actor effects.** There was a significant association between sexual communication processes and sexual satisfaction for both men and women (male  $\beta = .29, p = .001$ ; female  $\beta = .34, p = .001$ ). Interestingly, there was no significant relationship between sexual communication process and general couple satisfaction, at least when controlling for general communication process. As a

result, more positive communication process about sex was related to greater sexual but not relationship satisfaction.

**Partner effects.** Female sexual communication processes were significantly associated with male sexual satisfaction ( $\beta = .20, p = .02$ ). Thus, when women reported more positive interactions in their sexual communication, their partners reported greater sexual satisfaction.

**General communication process. Actor effects.** General communication processes were significantly associated with relationship satisfaction for both males and females (male  $\beta = .20, p = .03$ ; female  $\beta = .38, p < .001$ ). No significant association between general communication processes and sexual satisfaction were found.

**Partner Effects.** Female general communication process was significantly related to male relationship satisfaction ( $\beta = .21, p = .04$ ). Similar to sexual communication processes, men reported greater relationship satisfaction when their partners reported more positive general communication processes.

**Sexual satisfaction. Actor effects.** As expected, sexual satisfaction was highly associated with relationship satisfaction for both men and women (male  $\beta = .41, p < .001$ ; female  $\beta = .22, p = .01$ ). In other words, individuals reporting higher sexual satisfaction also were more satisfied in their overall relationship.

**Partner effects.** Male sexual satisfaction was also directly related to female relationship satisfaction ( $\beta = .19, p = .05$ ). This partner effect was the only male variable that predicted a female outcome variable. Thus, as men reported greater sexual satisfaction, women reported more satisfaction in their overall relationship.

## **Findings Summary**

The direct effects of the proposed model provided very important findings related to my proposed research questions. Of particular interest are the findings related to the different types of sexual communication, and their relationships to the outcomes of sexual and relationship satisfaction. Sexual communication content was significantly associated with both relationship and sexual satisfaction. However, a significant relationship existed only between sexual communication process and sexual satisfaction. These findings were both consistent for men and women. The partner effects also provided useful insight into the reciprocal effects of sexual communication within relationships. I found that for women, both sexual and general communication processes impacted male satisfaction levels. Also, as men were more sexually satisfied, their female partners were more likely to be relationally satisfied. Finally, there was an important difference between sexual and general communication processes, as they each predicted only one outcome variable (sexual and relationship satisfaction, respectively). In the next chapter, these findings will be discussed in greater detail, along with their implications on previous findings within the literature.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

Researchers have indicated that communicating about sex in relationships has been associated with relationship and sexual satisfaction (i.e., MacNeil & Byers, 2005). However, in the current literature, there is little evidence about how sexual communication impacts committed relationships for those couples who have been in relationships of much longer duration. Likewise, few studies on sexual communication have addressed the topic using dyadic data analysis, thus neglecting the reciprocal nature of relationships and their impact on sexual and relational outcomes. In my survey of 142 couples, I looked to expand the existing literature on sexual communication within couples by finding a more diverse sample and using a unique statistical approach.

The procured sample of this study allowed for a broader examination of couple dynamics in a number of different ways. The average duration of relationships in my sample was much higher ( $M = 9.61$ ,  $SD = 9.85$ ), as the majority of previous studies (including many which are considered to be landmark studies on this topic) only examined college-aged students with a maximum relationship duration of 36 months (e.g., Byers & Demmons, 1999; Hess & Coffelt, 2012; MacNeil & Byers, 2005; Mark & Jozkowski, 2013). I made sure to control for relationship duration in the model so I could see if the changes in relationships weren't better explained by patterns of change over time.

Relationship duration wasn't significantly correlated with any of the relational outcome variables. Within my model, duration remained insignificant in affecting any



relationship outcomes. This was a surprising finding as some studies indicated that sexual satisfaction generally tends to decrease in long-term committed relationships, especially for men (Byers, 2005). Because my sample had a much higher mean for relationship duration than previous studies, we can infer that the amount of time a couple has been together does not have an association with the satisfaction of the couple.

I assumed that sexual communication would increase throughout the duration of the relationship. I anticipated that the extent to which couples had communicated about sexual content would be positively correlated with their relationship duration, merely due to the assumption that couples being together for longer would naturally lead to more breadth in topical conversation. My concern was that my findings wouldn't be generalizable because I would not be able to distinguish between those who were actually communicating about sex more versus those whose longevity merely accounted for the breadth of communication. No such correlation was found. Therefore, duration was not an indicator of sexual communication. Therefore, I am more confident that my model represents the general impact of sexual communication on relationships, because my findings remain consistent for relationships of varying durations.

Another strength of my sample is that it included a broad range of relationship satisfaction. Many previous studies were used with highly satisfied samples, which was usually mentioned in the limitations section (e.g., Byers & Demmons, 1999; Fallis, Rehman, & Purdon, 2014; MacNeil & Byers, 2005). These previous studies paint an incomplete picture of sexual communication in relationships, leaving us to wonder how the results might differ for couples with varying levels of satisfaction. My broader sample

allows us to state that I have more generalizable findings and clearer picture of the impact that sexual communication has in couple relationships. I can state with confidence that these findings represent the broad spectrum of couple relationships.

Using dyadic data analysis within a path analysis adds to the extant literature by expanding our understanding of both actor and partner effects. Many studies claim to discuss couples, but only examine one partner in the relationship. Of the existing sexual communication studies that use dyadic data only a few used sexual communication as a predicting variable (MacNeil & Byers, 2009; Mark & Jozkowski, 2013; Rehman, Rellini, & Fallis, 2011; Theiss, 2011; Theiss & Estlein, 2013). None of these studies used these same variables to examine the role of sexual communication within committed relationships, however they provided a conceptual road map in preparing for my analysis. I will discuss how my study expands on the findings of each of these studies and provides a foundation for needed future research.

### **Research Questions and Analysis**

Within the context of my research questions, I will discuss the significance of my findings. I outline how my findings fit within the extant literature and discuss what I can infer from my findings. Lastly, implications and limitations of my study and the important steps to be taken in future research on sexual communication, are discussed.

#### **Research Question 1: Are There Different Effects in Content and Process of Sexual Communication on Each Individual's Sexual and Relational Outcomes?**

**Content.** According to the results of the model, only sexual communication

content (measured by the SSDS-R) was significantly associated with male and female relationship satisfaction. In fact, it was the only sexual communication type that showed effects on both relationship and sexual satisfaction. I can conclude from my findings then, that the more couples have discussed different sexual topics (content) is significantly associated with increased sexual and relational satisfaction. The Revised Sexual Self-Disclosure Scale hasn't been used very often in examining the impact of sexual communication in couples, despite being one of the most reliable questionnaires for sexual communication content (Montesi et al., 2013; Snell et al., 1989).

This finding is consistent with previous studies on sexual communication content. Sexual communication content in the literature is often synonymous with "sexual self-disclosure." Those studies that focus on sexual self-disclosure focus on the disclosure of sexual experiences, preferences, and attitudes (i.e., MacNeil & Byers, 2009; Theiss & Estlein, 2013). "Sexual Communication Content" as this study is concerned, focuses on the extent to which various sexual topics are discussed. The SSDS-R provides a broad range sexual communication topics, covering the breadth of most topics regarding sex (Montesi et al., 2013). The content or breadth of sexual communication has been the only shown sexual communication type to be associated with both sexual and relationship satisfaction (Hess and Coffelt, 2012; La France, 2010).

By having a diverse sample, I could control for relationship duration when determining the role of sexual communication in relationships. As mentioned previously, I assumed that naturally relationship duration and sexual communication would be positively correlated, because the amount of time together may naturally correlate to

greater topic conversation. However, the relationship duration did not have a correlation with the extent of sexual communication, resulting in more generalizable findings for all committed couple relationships, regardless of duration.

This finding about sexual communication content corroborated a number of previous studies on the topic. Hess and Coffelt (2012) found similar findings to mine. They examined the sexual vocabulary that couples used on a regular basis. Those couples who used more expansive vocabulary, including slang and anatomically correct language, were associated with relationship and sexual improved communication. My study expands this finding as I examined the actual topics discussed, indicated that it's not only the knowledge of terms, but the integration of those terms into topical conversation that impacts relational and sexual satisfaction.

Another study looked at sexual knowledge and willingness to communicate about sex (La France, 2010), and found that these variables were associated with improved sexual satisfaction. However, relationship satisfaction was not an outcome variable in La France's study. My findings about sexual communication process support the notion that the sheer volume of communication about sex directly affects the sexual and relational satisfaction couples. Until this study, we knew that the knowledge, the vocabulary, and the willingness to communicate all impacted sexual satisfaction. My study took these findings one step further by examining the actual application of these abstract concepts (knowledge, vocabulary, and willingness). Knowledge and willingness are foundational in discussing sex, however just because one knows or is willing to discuss something does not mean that he or she *has* discussed it with his or her partner.

My dyadic data analysis allowed us to look at the actual extent to which each couple had discussed sex in relation to their satisfaction levels. In my survey, I also collected data on how comfortable each spouse felt in discussing the same sexual topics. However, in my preliminary analyses, I found that the comfort level was not correlated with neither sexual nor relationship satisfaction. Because of this, my final analysis excluded the sexual communication comfort variable. However, it is important to note, that there was a significant difference between the imagined and the actual. A perceived comfort level did *not* indicate greater comfort level, only the actual extent of communication.

These findings on sexual communication have numerous implications into other fields of study. For example, one recent study analyzed the use of vibrators in sexual partnerships (Herbenick et al., 2010). There were significant differences between heterosexual women who used vibrators with and those who used them without their male partners' knowledge. Those who had discussed the use of vibrators with their partners and used them with his approval tended to be more sexually satisfied than those who used vibrators without their partner's consent or knowledge (Herbenick et al., 2010). We might assume that the very discussion of sex toy usage might be an important link in increasing sexual satisfaction in couples.

There may be many hypothesized reasons as to why using sex toys may help couples increase their sexual satisfaction. Many have hypothesized that using vibrators, sex toys, role plays, or trying new positions may help couples improve their sexual and relationship satisfaction because these practices help the couple break out of routines

(Rubin, 2014), however, from these findings I suggest that these activities may be most effective because they encourage negotiation and communication between couples. From my finding, these or other activities that promote communication about sex may help improve both the relationship and sexual satisfaction within relationships.

Another recent study looked at long-term intranasal oxytocin (commonly termed “the Female Viagra”) using a randomized, prospective, double-blind, placebo-controlled, crossover trial that lasted 22 weeks (Muin et al., 2015). The findings stated that there was no statistically significant treatment, sequence (placebo first/second), or interaction effect; in fact, all groups improved throughout the course of the study. The authors hypothesized that the reason the treatment was not found effective was because each couple began to communicate more about sex after taking the placebo. The findings of my study support this hypothesis.

The findings from my study, when compared to this oxytocin study, also provide excitement for the future. I believe that as we aid couples in communicating about a broader spectrum of their sexual experience, that we will aid them in improving both sexual and relationship satisfaction.

**Process.** I found it very important to include sexual communication processes in the study because the content measurement only gives us one part of the relational functioning. My Family Systems Theory lens informed the importance of not only analyzing what couples communicate about, but how they communicate. In order to have a more complete picture of relational functioning, I wanted to know if couples communicate differently about sex than they do about other topics. In my analysis, I

looked at the likelihood of positive relational processes and their impact on satisfaction levels.

I can conclude from the findings that sexual communication processes have a direct effect on the sexual satisfaction of couples. This finding suggests that in order to improve sexual satisfaction, the sheer volume of communication isn't the only important component; it is important to also ensure that couple processes are positive and supportive. It may be that the breadth of sexual communication content is most impactful on the sexual relationship when done within positive sexual communication processes.

This finding both supports and contradicts findings from previous studies. In two different studies, Theiss examined different sexual communication processes (communication directness, and perceived threat in communication) and their impacts in relationship satisfaction. In both of these studies, avoidance and indirect sexual communication were associated with lower levels of sexual satisfaction (Theiss, 2011; Theiss & Estlein, 2013). However, these studies did not reveal the impact of positive *sexual* communication processes because they only indicated what is *not* associated with sexual satisfaction. My study showed that positive processes were associated with higher sexual sexual satisfaction, helping clarify Theiss's findings.

In another study, sexual satisfaction was not directly impacted by sexual communication. Sexual satisfaction only increased through improved relationship satisfaction, which was directly affected by sexual communication processes (MacNeil & Byers, 2005). However, in my study sexual communication processes were not associated with relationship satisfaction for either men or women. Contradictory to the MacNeil and

Byers finding, my analysis found a direct association between the sexual communication processes and sexual satisfaction for both men and women, with no mediating factors.

It is interesting to note the differences between sexual communication content and process. Both of these variables predicted sexual satisfaction, but only communication content influenced relationship satisfaction. This finding might be counterintuitive to many. One might assume that supportive processes would be the expected variable to directly affect both sexual and relationship satisfaction. However, in this case, it was the extent of self-disclosure that directly affected both outcome variables. Honestly, I do not understand why positive sexual communication processes did not effect relationship satisfaction. One assumed explanation for the difference be that while couples may have supportive and positive processes, the actual extent to which couples discuss sexual topics might have the only impact on relationship satisfaction. This may again point to the gap between the perceived and the actual levels of communication.

**Summary.** One important and overlooked key in improving sexual and relationship satisfaction is that of sexual communication. Communicating about sex may be the simplest solution of many different approaches to improve sexual aspects in relational areas, yet there are possibilities that it may be found just as impactful in improving sexual relationships as medications and sex toys. While it is important to broaden a couple's sexual communication content, it is likewise important to understand the how to have these important communications that can likely improve couples' sexual relationships.



### **Research Question 1A: How Do These Effects Differ Between Genders?**

Path analysis allowed us to have a more complete picture of the reciprocal nature of relationships by examining partner effects. The actor effects were the same for both genders. Sexual communication content predicted both sexual and relationship satisfaction, sexual communication process predicted sexual satisfaction, and general communication process predicted relationship satisfaction. However, some of the most interesting findings in the model come from observing the partner effects within this sample.

**Process for women.** Women's perceptions of communication processes directly affected the men's sexual and relationship satisfaction. The female perceptions of sexual communication process directly affected the male's sexual satisfaction. This finding is almost identical to a previous finding that women's self-disclosure was related to men's sexual satisfaction (likewise, my findings are identical in that the same relationship did not exist for men; Rehman, Rellini, et al., 2011). This study did not look at general communication processes or relationship satisfaction in their model.

In another study Gagnon and Simon (2011) suggested that women may have a more difficult time discussing sexuality, due to a belief that they may be the cause of any sexual problem, especially if they have difficulty reaching orgasm. My finding clarifies that assumption because women who feel like they positively contribute to sexual communications are more likely to have sexually satisfied husbands, and to be satisfied themselves.

Also, the female perceptions of general communication process directly affected the male's relationship satisfaction. We can assume, if women feel that the communication processes are supportive and friendly, that men will likewise be satisfied. However, the male perceptions of communication processes did not have any significant association with female sexual or relationship satisfaction.

This is an important finding for educators and clinicians, because it highlights what women might ideally hope for in relationships. Educators and clinicians can confidently tell couples that encouraging collaborative conversations can directly influence both of their sexual and relationship happiness. There may be many men who believe that women have the responsibility to "satisfy" their sexual needs or sexual desires. However, this finding supports the idea that women who feel that they and their partner's positively contribute and negotiate their sexual relationship tend to be more sexually satisfied. This finding from my study may support the findings in a previous study (Hess & Coffelt, 2012), which found that as women discussed their preferences and developed a vocabulary to discuss their sexual desires, they were more satisfied.

**Sexual satisfaction for men.** There was only one partner effect from men to women. Male sexual satisfaction directly affected female relationship satisfaction. This may be a condemning finding for men; there is a common idea that in order for women to have a happy relationship that they need to make sure their male partners' are sexually satisfied. Much to my own dismay, this single partner effect from the model may support that belief. While this finding may seem to condemn men, it is important to note that

women's sexual communication indirectly influenced their own relationship satisfaction by satisfying their male partners.

This finding about male sexual satisfaction seems to directly contradict another recent study (Yoo et al., 2014). In this study, wives' relationship satisfaction was not associated with their husbands' sexual satisfaction, but husbands tended to report high levels of relationship satisfaction when their wives reported greater sexual satisfaction. However, my study did not specifically examine all of the relationships between relationship satisfaction. Therefore, the difference may be solely due to methodological approaches.

### **Research Question 2: What Are the Differences Between Sexual and General Communication Processes and Their Effect on Relational Outcomes?**

Throughout the last several years, sexual communication has begun to emerge as its own construct. Researchers have found merit in distinguishing between everyday conflict resolution practices and the distinct process of disclosing beliefs, preferences, and behaviors of sex (Christopher & Sprecher, 2000). For many years, sexual communication was no more than a topic area within the greater communication processes in the relationship (i.e., Ross et al., 1987). In more recent years, researchers have begun to examine sexual communication as its own distinct construct (i.e., Mark & Jozkowski, 2013). In the extant literature, it is difficult to identify how these types of communication might differ from one another. My path analysis provides strong evidence for considering these two types of communication as separate and distinct. I also discuss the benefits of viewing these concepts separately.

General communication processes had direct effects on each partner's relationship satisfaction. There was one partner effect, that of female general communication processes on male sexual satisfaction (discussed more under research question #1A). It is important to note that general communication processes did not directly affect sexual satisfaction for men or women. Likewise, positive sexual communication processes had direct effects on each partner's sexual satisfaction, but had no effect on their relationship satisfaction.

This finding is contradictory to numerous findings in the extant literature. One other study examined both sexual and nonsexual communication types in their association with sexual and relationship satisfaction (Mark & Jozkowski, 2013). In that study, the results indicated that both sexual and nonsexual communication significantly affected sexual satisfaction as mediating effects of sexual and relationship satisfaction (another study also used communication processes as a mediating variable with similar results [Litzinger & Gordon, 2005]). In their sample of 133 college-age couples, sexual and nonsexual communication were very highly correlated.

My sample provided some key differences. First, my sample had a much broader range of relationship duration and relationship satisfaction levels. Second, in my sample, sexual and general communication processes were correlated with one another, but not so much that they became indistinguishable ( $r = .60, p < .01$ ). Third, my study looked at both sexual and general communication as predicting variables, not mediating variables. My path analysis allowed us to see how these different paths of influence of communication types as distinct constructs and to view their paths of influence

differently. These differences and others might explain the contradictory findings.

Sexual communication process only predicted sexual satisfaction, and did not predict relationship satisfaction for either men or women. Similarly, general communication processes were significantly related to relationship satisfaction, but not sexual satisfaction for both men and women. This finding is especially unique, because it assumes that sexual and general communication processes are distinct constructs with distinct effects. While the sexual and general process questionnaire has only three items on it, and while the reliability is fairly high on both ( $\alpha = .87$  and  $\alpha = .77$  respectively), it may be that the items fail to provide enough information. However, because I trust the validity and reliability of my preliminary analyses, this result leads me to the conclusion that there may be qualitative differences between sexual and general communication.

These findings from my study highlight the need to distinguish between sexual and general communication process in couples. Intuitively, one might assume that if one couple can positively contribute to their communication process, that they will show improvement in all relational areas, including sexual areas. However, this finding assumes that there might be couples who excel at communicating generally, but do not communicate positively when it comes to sexual matters.

By assuming that meliorating general communication processes can aid in every other relational area, one may grossly underestimate its impact on sexual satisfaction. Unfortunately, this assumption permeates my educational, clinical, and religious settings. By ignoring the distinct need to improve sexual communication processes, we may be unintentionally harming those whom we are trying to help. I call upon educators

everywhere to integrate sexual communication into their relational work. The benefit of integrating sexual communication into relational education is that it is shown in this study to improve both sexual and relationship satisfaction, rather than relationship satisfaction alone. It may be of worth to suggest some possible qualitative differences that may further support this distinction.

**Possible qualitative differences.** There are direct benefits in looking at sexual communication and general communication as different constructs. Depending on one's upbringing, each individual may experience sexual communication in a number of different ways. Some children may never hear their parents communicate about sexual issues, where as they may hear them resolve any number of other conflict. Thus general communication processes may be familiar to them when entering a relationship, while sexual communication processes may be completely foreign.

Discussing sexuality may be a very different experience for men and women. The partner effects described in question #1A may further illustrate these differences. Women may discuss more of the meaning and connection of sex, while men might discuss more the frequency and variety of sex (Theiss, 2011). Societal expectations and gender roles may be manifest more in the bedroom than in any other relational area, meaning that our sexual schemas may influence how we discuss sex, apart from regular conflicts.

Sex may be deeply symbolic in nature. A positive or negative sexual encounter may carry much more meaning for an individual than any other type of interaction. Inherent in this symbolism is a deep vulnerability that is required in opening up about sex. Individuals and couples may experience shame in being "too sexual" or "not sexual

enough,” based on their expectations of sex. The continual conversation about sexuality requires much more vulnerability than many of the day-to-day problem-solving tasks. Thus, couples may easily manage less risky conversations, but may struggle to engage in topics of sexuality.

Discussing sex constantly requires adjustment and negotiation. Like many conflictual topics in relationships, differences in desire, attitudes, and preferences may put constant tension in the relationship. These perpetual differences center topics that couples must learn to manage in order to stay together (Gottman, 1999). Due to all of the previously mentioned reasons, discussing sex may be exponentially more difficult for many couples.

My significant model supports the distinction between the two concepts. While many couples may focus on improving their communication generally, that change may have little or no effect on their sexual relationship and vice versa. This distinction has numerous implications for educators, clinicians, and couples.

### **Implications**

The findings of this study have a number of large implications for application into educational, clinical, or medical services and parenting approaches. Sexual communication may be neglected as a distinct construct from general communication, which may fail to reach the desired outcomes.

**Parenting implications.** Parents may find it difficult and awkward to discuss sex with their children, thus much of what children or adolescents learn about sex may come from unreliable or inaccurate sources. Furthermore, children may never hear their parents

discussing their own sexual relationship, thus making it difficult for children to have a healthy working model of how to resolve sexual differences.

My hope is that as parents more openly discuss sexuality, at appropriate developmental stages, they will provide a solid foundation for generating their own sexual communications. This change in parenting approaches may have an important impact on risky sexual behavior in adolescence and emerging adulthood.

**Medical implications.** Through my findings, I can assume that by integrating sexual communication components into partner discussions those in helping professions can improve a number of relational and sexual areas. This integration would potentially help couples to reach orgasm more often, have better sexual functioning, enjoy their sexual encounters, and promote relational bonding. Addressing sexual topics on a regular basis may help each partner to feel more comfortable to explore and enjoy their sexuality to the fullest.

Furthermore, every year millions, if not billions, of dollars are spent on sex toys, novelty sex items, medications, or medical procedures that are meant for the purpose of enhancing one's sex life or treating sexual dysfunction. However, with all of these approaches, medical professionals may be neglecting a much simpler and cost effective approach. With these findings, we can assume that sexual communication studies in the future will show that communicating about sex may reduce sexual dysfunction and other issues. While novelty items or medication may have an immediate effect, they may not be considered as long-term solutions to sexual problems. Of course, there may be instances where sex toys and medication may be needed, but it is very possible that a simpler



solution may be the best.

**Clinical and educational implications.** It is essential that clinicians know the differences in sexual and general communication processes. Often couples may communicate differently about sex than they do about other relational areas. In order to have a complete picture of relational processes, it is essential to know how things are discussed in the bedroom. Therefore, it is important to always assess for both sexual and general communication. Failing to do so may lead to ineffective therapy.

The goal of promoting these sexual communication conversations is not to aggrandize the role that sexual communication plays in relationships, rather it is to normalize the common difficulty negotiating sexuality and to provide couples with tools to navigate these conversations in a manner that promotes connection. As couples practice starting these conversations, they may become more comfortable and more relationally and sexually satisfied.

When couples are dealing with relational and sexual issues, therapists are often trained to focus on improving general communication patterns. Many therapists assume that if couples can negotiate conflict safely, that they will naturally integrate those same patterns into their sexual issues. However, this may not be the case. Sexual issues may remain largely untreated if not dealt with directly.

As clinicians and educators develop approaches to improving communication, including a sexual component should be heavily considered. For example, one commonly used sex therapy intervention “Sensate Focus” developed by Virginia Johnson (Weiner & Avery-Clark, 2014) focuses on helping couples connect through touch. However, I

propose that the intervention's effectiveness may come from communicating about each partner's sexual experience. These considerations may change how these interventions are used in the future. By integrating a sexual communication aspect, these types of interventions may be especially useful in improving both sexual and relationship satisfaction, perhaps even more than those that might focus on communication or mindfulness of sensations alone. In fostering these conversations, couples develop and expand their own symbolic world, and create shared meanings with each other. More efforts may be needed in developing interventions that work toward similar ends, perhaps even without the focus on sexual or relational dysfunction.

Integrating sexual communication concepts into therapeutic interventions may be a magic bullet. While general communication processes only impacted relationship satisfaction in my model, sexual communication variables influenced both relational and sexual satisfaction. Therefore, the unique properties of discussing sex might have impacts on all relational outcomes, rather than just happiness.

### **Limitations**

There are a number of limitations on the implications and generalizability of my data. My analysis provides only a snapshot into the relational processes affected by sexual communication and does not provide a complete picture into the dynamic and changing nature of relationships. My survey responses mostly focused on variables that may be drastically different for each couple depending on the day. We will never have a clearer picture of the intricacies of sexual communication until longitudinal data is

collected, however my study provides an excellent foundation on which these studies can be built.

My study also lacked some important components of diversity in the sampled participants. As more than 95% of my sample consisted of monogamous married or cohabiting, heterosexual relationships, we lack understanding on how these relationships might change in terms for heterosexual dating relationships, LGBT married or cohabiting relationships, or other alternative relationship paradigms (i.e., open sexual relationships). Also, nearly 90% of my sample was Caucasian, therefore, we would need to gather more data on diverse races and ethnicities for more generalizable findings.

### **Future Research**

There are a number of future directions for sexual communication research. Through this study I have identified important differences in sexual communication processes and content, I have also observed the qualitative differences between general and sexual communication. More studies should be done in order to better understand the qualitative differences between these various concepts.

As mentioned previously, there is also a great need for more longitudinal studies on sexual communication. My study controlled for relationship duration in the impact of sexual communication on relational outcomes, however, we have no knowledge about how this communication changes over time. Providing greater insight into how couples change in their negotiation and discussions about sex throughout the lifespan would provide further distinctions between general and sexual communication.

We also need to more closely examine how sexual and general communication

processes are qualitatively different. By understanding generalizable patterns, we may be able to develop typologies of sexual communication in different couple relationships. Examining these typologies may better assist us in intervening and educating the next generation of adults. We might also better examine these differences by re-imagining many of the already existing communication interventions to include sexual elements.

Future research on sexual communication interventions would also contribute greatly to our knowledge on the subject. As I mentioned in the implications section, focusing efforts on interventions that improve sexual communication may have a greater impact than those on communication alone. More interventions and programs may be developed in order to help couples from numerous cultural backgrounds develop healthy and productive discussions about sex within the context of relationships.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to examine the paths of influence that sexual communication has on relational outcomes. Although many other studies have looked at the impact of sexual communication on individual satisfaction, no studies have looked at dyadic data to look at the impact of sexual communication within an entire dyadic partnership. In order to look at this influence, I used nested dyadic data to conduct a path analysis on the extrapolated patterns across partners.

My analysis expanded the previous literature by analyzing the differences between sexual content and process by gender. My findings also supported the distinction between sexual general communication processes and their significant paths of influence, as distinction is often overlooked in the literature. Furthermore, these findings have a

number of important implications for general couples, educators, and clinicians in strengthening couple relationships. If therapists can apply these findings into their daily therapeutic practice, it may result in enhancing couple satisfaction and sexual satisfaction simultaneously. Overall, I am confident that the findings from this study shed light on general couple processes and the reciprocal interactions between very dynamic and complex relationships.

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## Appendix

## Sexual Communication Survey

### Demographic Questionnaire-

D1 The Female Partner/ Spouse's First Initial (Ex. Joan Stacy Peterson = J)

D2 The Male Partner/Spouse's First Initial (Ex. John Peter Stevensen = J)

D3 The Female Partner/Spouse's Birthday and Month (Ex. February 22nd = 02/22)

D4 The Male Partner/Spouse's Birthday and Month (Ex. February 22nd = 02/22)

D5 Your Current Age

D6 Gender

Male

Female

D7 In which ethnic group do you mostly place yourself?

African-American/Black

American Indian / Alaskan Native

Asian/Pacific Islander

Caucasian

Hispanic/ Latino

Other, Please Describe \_\_\_\_\_

D8 Your age when you and your partner/spouse began living together

D9 Duration of your current relationship in years (If less than one year, use a decimal. i.e. 6 months = .5 years)

D10 How many years have you and your current partner/spouse been sexually active with each other (If less than one year, use a decimal. i.e. 6 months = .5 years)

D11 For how many years have you and your partner/spouse been living together?

D12 Number of sexual partners before the formation of your current relationship

D13 Number of sexual partners after the formation of your current relationship (including your partner/spouse)

D14 Your highest achieved education level

- Some High School
- High School Diploma
- Technical Certification
- Associates Degree
- Bachelor's Degree
- Master's Degree
- Doctorate Degree

D15 How many children do you currently have? (Including step children and adopted children)

D16 Current Employment

- Employed Full Time or more
- Employed part-time (Less than 30 hours a week)
- Self-employed
- Full-time Student
- Homemaker
- Unemployed
- Retired or disabled

D17 Average Combined Yearly Income:

- Less than \$20,000
- \$20,000 – \$34,999
- \$35,000 - \$49,999
- \$50,000 - \$74,999
- \$75,000 - \$99,999
- \$100,000 or more

D18 Choose which description best fits your current relationship

- Monogamous Married (Married, living together, no external sexual partners)
- Monogamous Cohabiting (Living together, no external sexual partners)
- Open (Living together, but both partners are free to have external sexual encounters with other people)
- Compromised (Living together, one partner monogamous, one partner has/had extra-marital sexual encounters, either known or unknown to the other partner)
- Dating- Sexually active (Not living together, sexually active with each other, both partners free to have external sexual partners)
- Dating-Not sexually active (Not living together, not sexually active with each other, no external sexual partners)
- Other Please Describe \_\_\_\_\_

### **Orgasm Questionnaire-**

O1 In the last year, what is your average sexual intercourse frequency?

- We haven't had sex
- Less than once or twice a year
- Less than once a month
- Once a month
- Two times a month
- 1-2 times a week
- 3-5 times a week
- Almost daily

O2 What is your preferred sexual intercourse frequency?

- We haven't had sex
- Less than once or twice a year
- Less than once a month
- Once a month
- Two times a moth
- 1-2 times a week
- 3-5 times a week
- Almost daily

O3 In what percent of your sexual encounters do you reach orgasm?

- 0-20%
- 20-40%
- 40-60%
- 60-80%
- 80-100%

O4 In your best guess, in what percent of your sexual encounters does your partner reach orgasm?

- 0-20%
- 20-40%
- 40-60%
- 60-80%
- 80-100%

O5 >If you are unable to reach orgasm, what are reasons for being unable to do so?

O6 If your partner/spouse is unable to reach orgasm, what are reasons for being unable to do so?

O7 Has there been anything in this past year that has impeded your sexual intercourse frequency (i.e., pregnancy, illness

O8 Has there been anything in this past year that has impeded your ability to reach orgasm?

O9 How important is reaching orgasm in your sexual encounters to you?

1- not important, 2 somewhat important 3, important, 4 very important 5 essential

O10 How important is reaching orgasm in your sexual encounters to your husband?

1- not important, 2 somewhat important 3, important, 4 very important 5 essential

### **Revised Sexual Self-Disclosure Scale (SSDS-R)**

INSTRUCTIONS: This survey is concerned with the extent to which you have discussed the following topics about sexuality with an intimate partner. To respond, indicate how much you have discussed these topics with an intimate partner. Use the following scale for your responses IN THE LEFT COLUMN:

(1) = I HAVE NOT DISCUSSED THIS TOPIC WITH MY INTIMATE PARTNER.

(2) = I HAVE SLIGHTLY DISCUSSED THIS TOPIC WITH MY INTIMATE PARTNER.

(3) = I HAVE MODERATELY DISCUSSED THIS TOPIC WITH MY INTIMATE PARTNER.

(4) = I HAVE MOSTLY DISCUSSED THIS TOPIC WITH MY INTIMATE PARTNER.

(5) = I HAVE FULLY DISCUSSED THIS TOPIC WITH MY INTIMATE PARTNER.

In the RIGHT COLUMN:

(1) = I DO NOT FEEL COMFORTABLE DISCUSSING THIS TOPIC WITH MY PARTNER.

(2) = I FEEL SLIGHTLY COMFORTABLE DISCUSSING THIS TOPIC WITH MY PARTNER.

(3) = I FEEL MODERATELY COMFORTABLE DISCUSSING THIS TOPIC WITH MY PARTNER.

(4) = I FEEL MOSTLY COMFORTABLE DISCUSSING THIS TOPIC WITH MY PARTNER.

(5) = I FEEL COMPLETELY COMFORTABLE DISCUSSING THIS TOPIC WITH MY PARTNER.

Comfort	Have Discussed	
1. My past sexual experiences.....	1. _____	1. _____
2. The kinds of touching that sexually arouse me.....	2. _____	2. _____
3. My private sexual fantasies.....	3. _____	3. _____
4. The sexual preferences that I have.....	4. _____	4. _____
5. The types of sexual behaviors I have engaged in.....	5. _____	5. _____
6. The sensations that are sexually exciting to me.....	6. _____	6. _____
7. My "juicy" sexual thoughts.....	7. _____	7. _____
8. What I would desire in a sexual encounter.....	8. _____	8. _____
9. The sexual positions I have tried.....	9. _____	9. _____
10. The types of sexual foreplay that feel arousing to me.....	10. _____	10. _____
11. The sexual episodes that I daydream about.....	11. _____	11. _____
12. The things I enjoy most about sex.....	12. _____	
12. _____		
13. What sex in an intimate relationship means to me.....	13. _____	
13. _____		
14. My private beliefs about sexual responsibility.....	14. _____	
14. _____		
15. Times when sex was distressing for me.....	15. _____	
15. _____		
16. The times I have pretended to enjoy sex.....	16. _____	
16. _____		
17. Times when I prefer to refrain from sexual activity.....	17. _____	
17. _____		
18. What it means to me to have sex with my partner.....	18. _____	
18. _____		
19. My own ideas about sexual accountability.....	19. _____	
19. _____		

20. Times when I was pressured to have sex..... 20. \_\_\_\_  
 20. \_\_\_\_
21. The times I have lied about sexual matters..... 21. \_\_\_\_  
 21. \_\_\_\_
22. The times when I might not want to have sex..... 22. \_\_\_\_  
 22. \_\_\_\_
23. What I think and feel about having sex with my partner..... 23. \_\_\_\_  
 23. \_\_\_\_
24. The notion that one is accountable for one's sexual behaviors.... 24. \_\_\_\_  
 24. \_\_\_\_
25. The aspects of sex that bother me..... 25. \_\_\_\_  
 25. \_\_\_\_
26. How I would feel about sexual dishonesty..... 26. \_\_\_\_  
 26. \_\_\_\_
27. My ideas about not having sex unless I want to..... 27. \_\_\_\_  
 27. \_\_\_\_
28. What I consider "proper" sexual behavior..... 28. \_\_\_\_  
 28. \_\_\_\_
29. The sexual behaviors that I consider appropriate..... 29. \_\_\_\_  
 29. \_\_\_\_
30. How satisfied I feel about the sexual aspects of my life..... 30. \_\_\_\_  
 30. \_\_\_\_

### Couples Satisfaction Index – (CSI)

1. Please indicate the degree of happiness, all things considered, of your relationship.	Extremel	Fairly	A Little		Very	Extremel
	y Unhappy 0	Unhappy 1	Unhappy 2	Happy 3	Happy 4	y Happy 5
	All	Most of	More	Occa-	Rarely	Never
	the time	the time	often than not	sionally		
2. In general, how often do you think that things between you and your partner are going well?	5	4	3s	2	1	0



	Not at all TRUE	A little TRUE	Some- what TRUE	Mostly TRUE	Almost Comple tely TRUE	Comple tely TRUE
3. Our relationship is strong	0	1	2	3	4	5
4. My relationship with my partner makes me happy	0	1	2	3	4	5
5. I have a warm and comfortable relationship with my partner	0	1	2	3	4	5
6. I really feel like <u>part of a team</u> with my partner	0	1	2	3	4	5

1. Please indicate the degree of happiness, all things considered, of your relationship.

	Extremely Unhappy 0	Fairly Unhappy 1	A Little Unhappy 2	Happy 3	Very Happy 4	Extremely Happy 5	Perfect 6
7. How rewarding is your relationship with your partner?	0	1	2	3	4	5	
8. How well does your partner meet your needs?	0	1	2	3	4	5	
9. To what extent has your relationship met your original expectations?	0	1	2	3	4	5	

10. In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?      0            1            2            3            4            5

For each of the following items, select the answer that best describes *how you feel about your relationship*. Base your responses on your first impressions and immediate feelings about the item.

- |     |              |   |   |   |   |   |   |           |
|-----|--------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|-----------|
| 11. | INTERESTING  | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 0 | BORING    |
| 12. | BAD          | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | GOOD      |
| 13. | FULL         | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 0 | EMPTY     |
| 14. | STURDY       | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 0 | FRAGILE   |
| 15. | DISCOURAGING | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | HOPEFUL   |
| 16. | ENJOYABLE    | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 0 | MISERABLE |

**Partner Perception CSI-**

Please respond to the following questions based on your perception of your partner’s level of satisfaction with your relationship.

1. Please indicate your perception of your partner’s degree of happiness, all things considered, of his/her relationship with you.

- |                      |                   |                     |       |               |                    |             |
|----------------------|-------------------|---------------------|-------|---------------|--------------------|-------------|
| Extremely<br>Unhappy | Fairly<br>Unhappy | A Little<br>Unhappy | Happy | Very<br>Happy | Extremely<br>Happy | Perfe<br>ct |
| 0                    | 1                 | 2                   | 3     | 4             | 5                  | 6           |

Rank the truth of the following statement based on your perception of your partner’s satisfaction.

- |   |                       |                  |                       |                |                               |                    |
|---|-----------------------|------------------|-----------------------|----------------|-------------------------------|--------------------|
|   | Not at<br>all<br>TRUE | A little<br>TRUE | Some-<br>what<br>TRUE | Mostly<br>TRUE | Almost<br>Complete<br>ly TRUE | Completely<br>TRUE |
| 5. My partner feels that he/she has a warm and comfortable relationship with me | 0                     | 1                | 2                     | 3              | 4                             | 5                  |

	Not at all	A little	Some- what	Mostly	Almost Complete ly	Completely
7. How rewarding does your partner feel his/her relationship with you is?	0	1	2	3	4	5
10. In general, how satisfied do you feel your partner is with his/her relationship with you?	0	1	2	3	4	5

### **New Sexual Satisfaction Scale (NSSS)**

Using the following scale, respond to the following questions about your satisfaction with your sexual relationship.

<sup>a</sup>Responses are anchored on the following scale: 1 = *not at all satisfied*, 2 = *a little satisfied*, 3 = *moderately satisfied*, 4 = *very satisfied*, 5 = *extremely satisfied*

1. The quality of my orgasms
2. My “letting go” and surrender to sexual pleasure during sex
3. The way I sexually react to my partner
4. My body’s sexual functioning
5. My mood after sexual activity
6. The pleasure I provide to my partner
7. The balance between what I give and receive in sex
8. My partner’s emotional opening up during sex
9. My partner’s ability to orgasm
10. My partner’s sexual creativity
11. The variety of my sexual activities
12. The frequency of my sexual activity
13. The frequency of my orgasms

### **Partner Perception- NSSS**

Using the following scale, respond to the following questions in YOUR PERCEPTION OF YOUR PARTNER'S SEXUAL SATISFACTION

<sup>a</sup>Responses are anchored on the following scale: 1 = *not at all satisfied*, 2 = *a little satisfied*, 3 = *moderately satisfied*, 4 = *very satisfied*, 5 = *extremely satisfied*.

1. The quality of his/her orgasms
2. His/her "letting go" and surrender to sexual pleasure during sex
3. The way he/she sexually reacts to me
4. His/her body's sexual functioning
5. His/her mood after sexual activity
6. The frequency of his/her orgasms
7. The pleasure he/she provides to me
8. The balance between what he/she gives and receives in sex
9. My emotional opening up during sex
10. My ability to orgasm
11. My sexual creativity
12. The variety of his/her sexual activities
13. The frequency of his/her sexual activity

### **Communication Patterns Questionnaire- Short Form (CPQ-SF)**

For the following questions choose the best answers.

When issues or problems arise (Specifically conflicts that are NOT sexual in nature), how likely is it that... .

1. Both spouses avoid discussing the problem-
2. Both spouses try to discuss the problem
3. Female tries to start a discussion while male tries to avoid a discussion
4. Male tries to start a discussion while female tries to avoid a discussion

During a discussion of issues or problems (Specifically conflicts, issues, or problems that are NOT sexual in nature), how likely is it that...

5. Both spouses express feelings to each other
6. Both spouses blame, accuse, or criticize each other
7. Both spouses suggest possible solutions and compromises
8. Female pressures, nags, or demands while male withdraws, becomes silent, or refuses to discuss the matter further
9. Male pressures, nags, or demands while female withdraws, becomes silent, or refuses to discuss the matter further

10. Female criticizes while male defends himself
11. Male criticizes while female defends herself

### **Sexual Communication Patterns Questionnaire – Short Form (SCPQ-SF)**

For the following questions choose the best answers.

When sexual issues or problems arise, how likely is it that...

1. Both spouses avoid discussing the problem-
2. Both spouses try to discuss the problem
3. Female tries to start a discussion while male tries to avoid a discussion
4. Male tries to start a discussion while female tries to avoid a discussion

During a discussion of sexual issues or problems, how likely is it that...

5. Both spouses express feelings to each other
6. Both spouses blame, accuse, or criticize each other
7. Both spouses suggest possible solutions and compromises
8. Female pressures, nags, or demands while male withdraws, becomes silent, or refuses to discuss the matter further
9. Male pressures, nags, or demands while female withdraws, becomes silent, or refuses to discuss the matter further
10. Female criticizes while male defends himself
11. Male criticizes while female defends herself

### **Couple Communication Satisfaction Scale (CCSS)**

For the following questions rate your satisfaction with the communication between you and your partner/spouse

<sup>a</sup>Responses are anchored on the following scale: 1 = *not at all satisfied*, 2 = *a little satisfied*, 3 = *moderately satisfied*, 4 = *very satisfied*, 5 = *extremely satisfied*.

1. My ability to clearly communicate what I need from my partner
2. My willingness to listen when my spouse needs to talk
3. My focus/concentration during conversation
4. My emotional opening up in conversations
5. My mood after our conversations
6. The balance between what I give and receive when communicating
7. My partner's emotional opening up during conversation
8. My partner's initiation of conversation
9. My partner's effort to understand my point of view
10. My partner's ability to discuss without becoming defensive
11. The variety of topics in her/her communication with me
12. The frequency of his/her communication with me

### **Partner Perception CCSS**

For the following questions rate your PERCEPTION OF YOUR PARTNER'S satisfaction with the communication between your partner/spouse and you.

<sup>a</sup>Responses are anchored on the following scale: 1 = *not at all satisfied*, 2 = *a little satisfied*, 3 = *moderately satisfied*, 4 = *very satisfied*, 5 = *extremely satisfied*.

1. My ability to clearly communicate what I need from my him/her
2. His/her willingness to listen when I need to talk
3. His/her focus/concentration during conversation
4. His/her emotional opening up in conversations
5. His/her mood after our conversations
6. The balance between what he/she gives and receives when communicating
7. My partner's emotional opening up during conversation
8. My initiation of conversation
9. My effort to understand his/her point of view
10. My ability to discuss without becoming defensive
11. The variety of topics in our communication
12. The frequency of our communication

### **Open Ended Qualitative Questions**

Q27 NOTE: For the following questions- Do NOT include any names or potentially identifying information. When you and your partner have conversations about sex, what do you talk about?

Q30 Describe what happens for both you and your partner when you discuss your sexual relationship.

Q31 Describe what you and your spouse do to negotiate the frequency of sex in your relationship. (How is the topic brought up? What is discussed? How is it resolved?)

Q32 Describe what you and your spouse do to negotiate the sexual variety in your relationship. (How is the topic brought up? What is discussed? How is it resolved?)

Q33 Describe what you and your spouse do to negotiate sexual positions in your relationship. (How is the topic brought up? What is discussed? How is it resolved?)

Q34 How has your sexual relationship changed throughout the course of your relationship?

Q35 What do you wish you had discussed with your partner about sex before becoming sexually active with each other?

Q36 What advice about sex would you give to new couples?

Q52 What specific topics, in relation to sex, did you and your partner discuss before you became sexually active? Check all that apply.

Frequency of sex  
Sexual positions  
Variety of Sexual Activities  
Pornography  
Differences in Sexual Desire  
Emotional Safety in Sex  
Sexual Needs  
Birth Control  
Contraceptives  
The Wedding Night  
Human Sexual Response  
Sexual or Love making skills  
Pregnancy  
STD's  
Sexual Boundaries  
Comfort Level with Sex  
Foreplay

Initiation of sex  
Turning down sex  
Sexual Fantasies

Q53- What specific topics, in relation to sex, have you and your partner discussed since becoming sexually active? Check all that apply.

Frequency

Positions

Variety of Sexual Activities

Pornography

Differences in Sexual Desire

Emotional Safety in Sex

Sexual Needs

Birth Control

Contraceptives

The Wedding Night

Human Sexual Response

Sexual or Love making skills

Pregnancy

STD's

Sexual Boundaries

Comfort Level with Sex

Foreplay

Initiation of sex

Turning down sex

Sexual Fantasies



Date

Name

Address

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