Social Network Disclosure in Romantic Relationships: Associations with Approval and Commitment

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Abstract

Past romantic relationship research has focused on disclosure, perceived approval, and commitment to the romantic relationship. Our current study examined these same relationship factors but with an emphasis on which specific disclosure items were being revealed to which specific social network members (i.e. fathers, mothers, and friends). Through the use of electronically administered inventories completed by 188 college-aged participants, our work demonstrated that social network disclosure significantly predicts perceived levels of approval from social network members and that perceived level of approval is positively associated with commitment level to the romantic relationship. Additionally, significant interactions were found among the sex of the partner in the romantic relationship and their disclosure to male and female social network members. Males were found to disclose more to their male friends and to their fathers than females, while females were found to disclose more to their female friends and to their mothers than males. Findings also indicated that, regardless of sex, individuals disclose more about their romantic relationships to their closest friend than to their parents. Overall, the results support that college-aged individuals have different relationships with their parents than with their closest friend in terms of disclosing information about their romantic relationships.
Social Network Disclosure in Romantic Relationships: Associations with Approval and Commitment

Relationships are a relevant component of all people’s lives. Close relationships have been described as the “best thing in life.” Berscheid (1999) asserts that no other part of anyone’s life is more meaningful or essential to both physical and mental health than the relationships individuals form with other people. Essentially, relationships with other human beings define one’s life: they are both the foundation and theme for all humans. It is impossible for people to escape close relationships since all humans are born into relationships, live their lives in relationships with others, and even when they die, leave surviving relationships that had previously been intricate parts of their lives (Berscheid, 1999).

Relationships become an important part of individuals’ lives early on. Practically all adolescents have expressed an interest in dating, and by the time they reach late adolescence and early adulthood, almost all of them have been involved in an exclusive romantic relationship (Connolly & Johnson, 1996). Being a member of a romantic dyad is actually a marker of maturity for adolescence since dating is a typical interest of so many young adults (Moss & Schwebel, 1993). Having experienced a romantic relationship has a profound effect upon the social development, personal adjustment, and physical health of members of these relationships (Moss & Schwebel, 1993). Because relationships are such a prevalent aspect of our society and are important for both physical and mental health, it seems that investigating factors that not only affect but also predict success or failure in a relationship is a useful exploration.
Previous findings indicate that individuals in intimate relationships are more resistant to a number of diseases and physically disabling conditions, have a lower rate of mental illness, and are actually involved in fewer automobile fatalities than others in the general population (Moss & Schwebel, 1993). All outcomes of relationships, however, are not positive. For example, in the North American society, 38% of college students have reported infidelity within their romantic dyads (Zak et al., 2002). If relationships are characterized by involvement, dependency, commitment, and secure attachment, though, extradyadic sex (cheating on one’s romantic partner) is less likely to occur in the relationship (Buunk and Dijkstra, 2006). Additionally, Zak et al. (2002) found that a person who experiences support for his or her romantic relationship from his or her social network is less likely to commit infidelity. Therefore, it becomes apparent, at least in the context of infidelity, that relationships do not exist in a vacuum, but instead affect and are affected by numerous influences.

Social network members, those who would either support or dissuade a relationship, are able to have a profound impact on the success or failure of romantic relationships. In some instances, it has even been found that partners of romantic relationships may increase the size of their social networks in order to enhance the amount of social support that their romantic relationship is receiving (Burger & Milardo, 1995). In general, previous findings have indicated that the beliefs and opinions of social network members are associated with the quality and functioning of romantic partners embedded within that social network (Etcheverry & Agnew, 2004).
Defining Social Networks in the Context of Romantic Relationships

It is necessary to define the concept of a social network before one can truly understand the effect that these network members may have on a partner’s romantic relationship. An individual’s social network is comprised of close friends and family members with whom that individual feels comfortable sharing their personal thoughts and feelings, without reservation (Agnew, Loving, & Drigotas, 2001). Social networks members, as defined by Milardo and Helms-Erikson (2000), are an individual’s array of close associates including companions and kin relations. Johnson and Leslie (1982) even extend the definition of social network members to include all “those people whose opinions of your life are important to you” (p.38). These networks serve as a social context in which relationships grow and develop (Milardo & Helms-Erikson, 2000).

People in romantic relationships commonly share their thoughts and emotions concerning their romantic relationships with their social networks. Romantic involvement, both positive and negative aspects, can be shared with one’s close friends and family as an outlet. Social network members are excellent informants in which individuals can evaluate and understand their romantic associations (Agnew et al., 2001). Simply having an individual or a group to discuss and analyze one’s relationship with can be therapeutic. Parks and Adelman (1983) assert that partners of romantic dyads experience less insecurity about their relationships and are actually less likely to break-up when they communicate more with their social network members and perceive more support from friends and family who are considered a part of their network.

An individual’s social network, in fact, is an excellent supplier of information regarding their own personal, romantic relationship. A partner’s network may be extremely
informed about the interconnections of their friend or family member’s relationship. Because the social network member is an outside source who was familiar with the partner prior to the romantic involvement, they may be able to supply explanations about the partner’s behavior in the relationship or assist in the interpretation of certain aspects of the relationship (Parks & Adelman, 1983). It is difficult for the partner in the relationship to objectively analyze their own romantic relationship without the assistance of a close friend or family member. Social networks have been found to be able to assess their friend or family member’s relationship more realistically than the actual member of the relationship (Agnew et al., 2001). Couple members tend to view their relationship in a biased way which can affect their prediction of the future of the relationship as well as the current status of the relationship. Research has indicated that partners in relationships tend to exaggerate their partner’s assets and minimize their partner’s flaws (Murray & Holmes, 1997). Social network members, though, can provide an accurate perspective on the romantic relationship.

Social networks may play a large role in an individual’s romantic relationship. It is possible that the opinion of one’s social network member is highly valued; this indicates a great deal of possible influence in one’s romantic relationship. Social network members may aid a partner in a romantic relationship in evaluating their own capabilities within that relationship, legitimizing their own self-image, and creating a context in which they can assess their own relationship (Parks & Adelman, 1983). Having individuals to confide in, who are outside of the romantic dyad, is an important outlet to have. This is especially true because it provides a fresh perspective on the relationship from a point of view beyond that
of the romantic dyad. These external sources possess useful analytical information about
the dyad’s ongoing relationship (Agnew et al., 2001).

Social networks play such a vital role in one’s romantic relationship that failure to
meet a partner’s social network has been found to be a point of tension in many romantic
relationships. Not meeting a romantic partner’s social network contributes to the
uncertainty of the relationship and may lead to the other partner feeling neglected and
unimportant (Parks & Adelman, 1983). Although women are generally thought to be more
sensitive to the issue of not being introduced to her partner’s social network, a gender
difference has not been empirically shown (Parks, 2007). Directionality will be discussed
later in this section since social network relationships have a cyclical connection with
romantic relationships.

Because social network members are able to influence romantic relationships so
greatly, they assume an extremely significant position in the lives of members of romantic
relationships. Family and friends can have a notable effect upon a romantic relationship.
Social network members possess certain normative beliefs, feelings on how a member of
the relationship should act within the context of the relationship, about a romantic dyad
(Etcheverry & Agnew, 2004). These normative beliefs may be expressed in numerous ways
ranging from subtle clues through observation to directly specifying how the network
member believes the relationship partner should act. Each member of a partner’s social
network holds his or her own set of normative beliefs for that specific romantic
relationship. Normative beliefs are imperative in order for close friends and family to
impact the romantic relationship (Etcheverry & Agnew, 2004).
Aside from social network members possessing normative beliefs about their friend or family member’s romantic relationship, the partner in the relationship must have the motivation to comply with these normative beliefs in order for them to actually have an effect (Etcheverry & Agnew, 2004). A motivation to comply is the likelihood that the partner in the relationship will attribute enough value to the social network member’s opinion that they will fulfill the expectations of their social network member’s beliefs. Normative beliefs of the social network member, in conjunction with the motivation to comply, form subjective norms. Subjective norms are the general degree of influence that a normative belief has on a partner in a romantic relationship (Etcheverry & Agnew, 2004). Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) assert that subjective norms influence behavioral intentions which are ultimately translated into actual behavior. Therefore, as a result of subjective norms, partners of romantic relationships conform and change in accordance with the opinions of their social network members. When social network members hold strong beliefs about necessary change in a friend or family member’s romantic relationship, and the member of the romantic relationship attributes merit to the network member’s beliefs, it is likely that the partner in the relationship will be influenced by his or her social network’s opinions (Etcheverry & Agnew, 2004).

While it is clear that social networks have a strong influence on couple members, it is also important to address the stresses that a romantic relationship can cause on a social network relationship. Time and energy spent with a romantic partner ultimately reduce the time and energy available for the social network member. It can be difficult for social network members to deal with a decreased amount of attention that was previously available to them prior to the start of the romantic relationship. By an individual choosing
to engage in a romantic relationship, resources that were originally available for his or her social network are minimized (Milardo, 1982). Additionally, it is necessary to acknowledge that resources once provided by one’s social network are no longer necessary after the romantic relationship has been established (Milardo, 1982). As the romantic dyad becomes more involved with one another, their personal social networks tend to shrink in size; however, their mutual social networks tend to grow in size, which is beneficial for the romantic relationship and allows it to prosper (Milardo, 1982).

**Overlapping Social Networks**

Research has examined the size, the composition, the amount of interaction, and the degree of overlap of social network members in the context of romantic relationships (Agnew et al., 2001). Network overlap is defined as the number of close friends who would be classified as mutual companions for both members of the romantic dyad (Surra & Milardo, 1991). Essentially, network overlap is the number of people common to both relationship members’ social network (Parks, 2007). The degree of linkage among the romantic couples’ overlap should be correlated with the progression of their romantic relationship (Milardo, Johnson, & Huston, 1983; Parks, 2007). The more joint friends a couple has in their social network, the more committed their relationship should be.

The overlapping of social networks is an asset for members of the romantic dyad because being in a romantic relationship inherently decreases the amount of time one has to spend with other network members besides his or her partner. The size of one’s individual social network and the frequency of interaction with that individual network decrease as the involvement with a romantic partner increases (Agnew et al., 2001). These individual social networks may actually hinder the progression of the partners’ romantic involvement.
Research findings also indicate that couples whose social network members are integrated have more stable relationships than those whose friends are in separate social circles (Agnew et al., 2001). Although not empirically shown, a couple whose social networks are more individualized are speculated to be more likely to interact with other friends in a variety of social settings without their dyad, which ultimately increases the likelihood (intentionally or unintentionally) of finding a more attractive alternative to one’s current romantic relationship partner (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998). Regardless of whether a more attractive alternative is found, having separate social circles may ultimately mean spending less time with one’s romantic partner which can hinder the development of the romantic relationship because of reduced occasions for self-disclosure, intimacy, or participation in new activities with one another (Agnew et al., 2001).

When a partner’s individual social network begins to enter the overlapping network, it leads to a more stable and satisfying romantic dyad. The degree to which a partner in the romantic relationship is attracted to the partner’s social network members including factors such as personality, skills, knowledge, and/or physical characteristics can affect how quickly a social network member can shift from an individual friend or family member to a joint friend (Parks, 2007). One may become so involved with a romantic partner’s social network that it actually intensifies their own romantic relationship because terminating the romantic relationship would jeopardize not only the relationship with the romantic partner but also numerous other valued friendships (Parks, Stan, & Eggert, 1983). Once an individual has gained the companionship of these new social network members, ending the romantic relationship may terminate an entirely new network of social members. Spouses have actually reported having the most positive interactions with their husbands or wives in
the presence of mutual friends. These couple members reported that members of their overlapping social network “transform the attention of spouses from the mundane, constant, and ordinary business of family life to the more playful, unpredictable, and unique qualities of the partners” (Milardo & Helms-Erickson, 2000, p. 39).

In addition to a partner’s social network becoming one’s own social network, a partner in a romantic relationship can be motivated for more social network overlap by benefiting from increased communication with the partner’s network. The partner’s social network is a rich source of information about the romantic partner that can bridge gaps in the relationship and provide justification for certain behavioral tendencies (Parks et al., 1983). In fact, it can be highly detrimental to a romantic relationship to keep one’s social network completely private. Partners of the romantic relationship may feel that their romantic partner is ashamed of them because of not introducing them to his or her friends and family, which may ultimately cause increased uncertainty within the romantic dyad (Parks et al., 1983).

Overall, the more interaction that partners of romantic relationships have with their partners’ social network members, the stronger the romantic relationship becomes. Romantic dyads are more certain of their relationship when there are numerous social network members that overlap as friends of both romantic partners.

*Strategic Disclosure to Social Network Members*

It is evident that social network members can have an effect on partners in romantic relationships. Due to the influential power of network members, partners in romantic relationships attempt to sway their network members’ views of their own relationship through strategic disclosure (Baxter & Widenmann, 1993). Partners involved in
relationships are aware of the strong impact that their surrounding friends and family may have on their romantic relationship. Because members of the romantic relationship may be conscious of the weight that their social network members carry, they intentionally reveal certain aspects concerning their relationships while concealing other information. This process of influence is known as strategic disclosure (Leslie, Huston, & Johnson, 1986).

Partners in romantic relationships have a strong psychological desire for social support, and therefore, are highly conscious of which specific information they share with their social networks and which information remains confidential (Baxter & Widenmann, 1993). Leslie et al. (1986) found that there is an even greater amount of strategic disclosure when discussing information about one’s romantic relationship with parents than with friends. Young adults censor the information that they reveal to their parents about their relationship in an attempt to influence and alter their parent’s view on their own romantic involvement. If members of romantic relationships disclose negative information about their partners, there is a possible risk that it would result in disapproving reactions from social network members (Baxter & Widenmann, 1993). Therefore, the motivation behind strategic disclosure may be justified. Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, and Vohs (2001) have also suggested that negative emotions and negative feedback have more impact than positive emotions and positive feedback. Partners of a romantic relationship will attempt to conceal negative aspects of their relationship so that the bad elements do not override the good elements when social network members evaluate a partner’s romantic relationship.

Specifically, it has been found that strategic disclosure is most likely to be found in the mother-daughter relationship. Because this has been found to be the main source of
information flow between generations, daughters feel the most pressure to reveal certain aspects of their romantic relationships and to conceal other aspects when talking to their mothers (Leslie et al., 1986). While daughters more commonly influence their mothers than do sons, the vast majority of young adults tend to intentionally reveal and conceal particular aspects of their romantic relationships when discussing them with parents: more attempted influence is directed toward mothers than fathers (Leslie et al., 1986). It has also been found that the closeness of the relationship among parents and children is correlated with the amount of strategic disclosure and influence provided by the child involved in a romantic relationship. The closer a child feels to his or her parent, the more likely he or she is to engage in influence-oriented behaviors (Leslie et al., 1986).

The influence of social network members on a romantic relationship is so great that partners in romantic relationships have been found to display “public faces” in an attempt to conceal certain negative aspects of their relationship from network members (Loving & Agnew, 2001). Concealing troublesome areas and downplaying negative aspects of a romantic relationship are defense mechanisms used by partners in a relationship to seek approval from their social network members. Strategic disclosure, however, may have reverse effects. Because network members spend such large amounts of time with the partners in romantic relationships, the social network members expect to have information about the partner’s romantic relationship disclosed to them. In the absence of this sharing of relationship details, these network relationships may undergo a negative transformation (Baxter & Widenmann, 1993). Social network members may become hurt and sometimes feel deceived when details of the romantic relationship are concealed from them. Prior to the existence of the romantic partner, most things were probably disclosed to social
network members and few things were hidden. When romantic partners begin to mask certain aspects of their lives from their social network members, though, this can leave these social network members feeling betrayed and ultimately result in a negative effect on the friendship.

*Perceived Approval from Social Network Members*

The extensive time and dedication spent on strategically disclosing information about one’s romantic relationship to social network members stems from the idea of perceived approval. Psychological support from social network members motivates partners in romantic relationships to intentionally share or intentionally mask information about their involvement (Baxter & Widenmann, 1993). This motivation is derived from the finding that partners in romantic relationships desperately yearn for approval from their social network members. If a member of a romantic relationship perceives approval from their network members, then they are able to achieve the emotional and psychological support that they desired.

Perceived approval from network members should create a sense of stability and less uncertainty in a romantic relationship because couple members will feel that their decision to maintain their romantic relationship is validated by individuals whose opinion they respect (Parks & Adelman, 1983). If close friends and family do not analyze aspects of one’s romantic relationship, then the actual members of the relationship are not forced to question and evaluate their personal interactions with their partner. Unless the partner in the romantic relationship perceives approval from his or her social network, a certain sense of uncertainty and insecurity may exist for the romantic relationship partner (Parks & Adelman, 1983). Sprecher and Felmlee (1992) found that individuals who perceive a
higher level of approval from their own social network will experience more stability within their relationship, and ultimately, a stronger attraction for their romantic partner, as opposed to those individuals who experience low levels of perceived approval. Parks and Adelman (1983) determined that members of romantic relationships are more certain in their relationships and less likely to break up when they perceive higher levels of support from their close family and friends. A greater establishment of intimacy and closeness within the romantic relationship has also been found to occur when partners in romantic relationships believe that their family and friends approve of their romantic involvement (Baxter & Widenmann, 1993).

The more social network members approve and support the romantic relationship by using terms such as a “good match” (Berger, 1987 as cited in Sprecher & Felmlee, 1992) and having made the “right choice” (Parks & Adelman, 1983), the more romantically involved individuals in the relationship become with one another. Relationships with high levels of perceived approval from social networks are more likely to continue and increase in level of involvement over time (Leslie et al., 1986). Not only does perceived social network approval enhance dating relationships, but it has also been found that partners have had more success in marital adjustment when high levels of approval were perceived from the relationship members’ parents (Parks & Adelman, 1983).

While these past findings have shown a correlation among perceived levels of approval and success in romantic relationships, the direction of causality is unclear. Parks, Stan, and Eggert (1983) found that social network members, both family and friends, will become more supportive if they believe that the partners in the romantic relationship are becoming more seriously romantically involved with one another. Therefore, this process is
probably more cyclical than causal. If levels of perceived approval are high, then the relationship will progress in a positive manner, just as if the relationship appears to be becoming more serious, perceived levels of approval will increase. Overall, perceived judgments of one’s romantic relationship from their network members are correlated with relationship members’ satisfaction and commitment to their relationship (Sprecher & Felmlee, 1992).

Perceived levels of approval do not necessarily indicate actual support and approval feelings from social network members. Past findings suggest, however, that the perceived beliefs and attitudes of social network members are highly correlated with the actual beliefs and attitudes of the network members (Etcheverry, Le, & Charania, in press). Partners in romantic relationships are very perceptive and aware of the true feelings of their social network members regarding their romantic relationship. While it is noteworthy that actual approval and perceived approval are highly correlated, Parks, Stan, and Eggert (1983) also assert the idea that the level of perceived approval is just as important as the actual level of approval. Psychological support can only be derived from the approval to the extent to which it is perceived. Therefore, if a partner in a romantic relationship believes that his or her social network highly approves of his or her romantic involvement, this will have the same effect regardless of whether the network member’s beliefs are in accordance with this notion or not.

Contributors to Commitment in Romantic Relationships

Perceiving approval from social network members has been positively correlated with commitment levels to romantic relationships (Parks et al., 1983). Commitment, in turn, has been identified as the most powerful predictor of the persistence of a relationship
Social Network Disclosure in Romantic Relationships (Le & Agnew, 2003). Since commitment is such a dominant predictor of relationship success or failure, it is initially important to understand what exactly is encompassed by this characteristic. Commitment to a romantic relationship is defined as dedication to the longevity of a relationship, including emotional attachment and a desire to remain in the relationship through both good and bad times (Cox, Wexler, Rusbult, & Gaines, 1997). Commitment levels in a relationship are predicted through three main variables: satisfaction, quality of alternatives, and investment size (Rusbult et al., 1998). If a partner in a romantic relationship is satisfied by the relationship, does not perceive alternative partners to be more attractive than his or her current partner, and has already devoted time and energy into making the relationship work, then he or she is involved in a highly committed relationship.

Network support and levels of romantic commitment can influence one another and should ultimately be positively associated with one another (Parks et al., 1983). Sprecher and Felmlee (1992) found that at an initial testing time, young adults who reported more perceived approval from friends reported higher levels of commitment at a later testing time. Past research has specifically found significant correlations among network member opinions of the relationship and the commitment level of each partner to the relationship (Etcheverry & Agnew, 2004).

A relationship among strategic disclosure and perceived approval certainly exists given that young adults who tried the most to influence their parents’ opinion of their romantic relationship also perceived the most approval from their social network members (Leslie et al., 1986). Those partners perceiving the most approval are also the members of romantic relationships with the highest levels of involvement and commitment within their
dyad (Parks et al., 1983). While these variables are correlated, it is important to mention that no empirical research has determined a causal relationship among the association of perceived levels of approval and commitment. The level of commitment and involvement in the romantic relationship also affects the number of attempts of strategic disclosure; the more committed the partner is to the relationship, the more he or she will attempt to influence his or her parents about the romantic relationship (Leslie et al., 1986).

Overview of the Present Study

Because previous research has demonstrated a correlation among levels of strategic disclosure and perceived approval, as well as perceived approval and level of commitment to the relationship, our study will examine how these three factors are associated with one another.

Disclosure has been measured in past studies by investigating whether information is concealed or actively revealed to social network members (Agnew et al., 2001; Baxter & Widenmann, 1993; Leslie et al., 1986). Exactly what is being shared with network members about romantic relationships, however, is an under-researched area of relationship psychology. Strategic disclosure has been studied in past analyses, but which specific items of disclosure are being revealed to mothers, fathers, and/or friends has not been investigated. Since this is an under-researched area of romantic relationship studies, our work will investigate which specific information is shared with and which specific information is concealed from network members. Our study will contribute to previous literature on relationship psychology by specifically investigating the relationship between partners in romantic relationships and their social network members based on which
information is shared and which information is concealed about their romantic relationships.

Separating the social network into three categories (mother, father, and closest friend whom they felt they revealed the most to) should lead to very specific findings about which topics are being discussed with particular members of the social network and which topics are being concealed from particular members of the social network. Past research has indicated differences in disclosure to parents in comparison to friends in one’s social network in addition to sex differences in disclosure (Leslie et al., 1986). Perceived support has also been shown to correlate with perceptions of both the parents of the partner in the romantic relationship and the best friend of the partner in the romantic relationship (Connolly & Johnson, 1996). Therefore, our study will assess three categories of social network members in order to determine distinct differences among these network members. The distinct aspects that are disclosed to social network members will then be investigated for associations with perceived approval and level of commitment to the romantic relationship.

**Hypotheses**

**H1:** Disclosure of positive information will be positively associated with perceived levels of approval. Leslie et al. (1986) found that young adults do censor and attempt to influence the information they provide to their social networks concerning their romantic relationship. They also assert that social networks were perceived as more supportive when the commitment level of the relationship flourished. Therefore, it is likely that the more positive information disclosed about the romantic relationship the higher the level of approval will be perceived from all social network members.
**H2: Perceived network approval will be positively associated with commitment.**

Numerous studies have examined the relationship between perceived network approval and level of commitment and found that if an individual interprets his or her social network members as approving of his or her romantic relationship, then a higher level of commitment will occur between the dyad (Agnew, et al., 2001; Etcheverry & Agnew, 2004; Parks & Adelman, 1983; Parks et al., 1983; Sprecher & Felmlee, 1992).

**H3: The closer a partner is to his or her social network member, the more information (both positive and negative) he or she will disclose to that social network member.** Leslie et al. (1986) found that the level of emotional closeness among parents and their children is likely to influence the interaction parents and offspring have concerning the child’s romantic relationship. This study also concluded that the closer an individual felt toward his or her mother, the more likely it was that he or she would attempt to influence his or her mother’s opinion of their romantic relationship. This finding leads to the belief that the closer one is to his or her network member, the more he or she will attempt to strategically disclose relationship information, and thus, share more details of the romantic relationship with this network member.

**H4: Males will disclose less to all social networks.** Specific research with North American participants indicates that females tend to share more about their romantic relationships than do males and that men are more likely to repress certain aspects of their romantic relationships than women (Agnew et al., 2001). Leslie et al.’s (1986) findings are also relevant to this hypothesis in that the mother-daughter relationship is the primary connection between generations and that daughters more frequently attempt to strategically...
influence their mothers than sons do. Therefore, it is hypothesized that males will share less, overall, than females will share to all social network members.

**H5A: Regardless of sex, partners will disclose more to female social network members than male social network members.** In a study on sex differences in platonic relationships, it was found that men receive more emotional support and therapeutic reinforcement from their female friends than from their male friends. Women, however, found more psychological support from their female friends (Aukett, Ritchie, & Mill, 1988). These findings imply that regardless of sex, individuals look to females for more support and will, therefore, disclose more to female social network members than to male social network members.

**H5B: Regardless of sex, partners will disclose more to their mothers than their fathers.** Young adults as a whole, regardless of their sex, tend to influence their parents about their personal, romantic relationships to some degree. The overall trend is that more focus is placed on impacting their mother’s opinion than their father’s opinion (Leslie et al., 1986). Although the mother-daughter relationship has been suggested to be the most open about romantic relationships, sons still reveal more about their romantic involvements to their mothers than to their fathers (Leslie et al., 1986).

**H6A: Partners will disclose more positive aspects of their relationships with parents than friends.** Because parents are generally perceived to respond negatively to their children’s romantic involvements, information is more commonly concealed from them than from close friends in one’s social network (Baxter & Widenmann, 1993). Proportionately, information is withheld much more from parents than from friends (Baxter & Widenmann, 1993). Since more information is suppressed from parents, our hypothesis
implies that more positive aspects will be shared with parents while the negative aspects of the romantic relationship will be concealed. Negative information has also been shown to be processed and analyzed more than positive information. Negative impressions and stereotypes are formed more quickly and are more resilient to change than are positive impressions and stereotypes (Baumeister et al., 2001). Therefore, since parents inherently respond more negatively to their children’s romantic relationships and these impressions are more difficult to overcome, partners of romantic relationships will disclose more positive information to their parents than to their friends.

*H6B: Partners will disclose more negative aspects of their relationship with friends than parents.* While parents are perceived to react negatively toward their children’s romantic relationship, close friends are thought to be more supportive listeners (Baxter & Widenmann, 1993). Therefore, less is concealed from close friends in an individual’s social network. This translates into more negative aspects of one’s romantic relationship being shared with friends than with parents.

*H7: Partners will disclose more to their friends about sexual activity than to their parents.* No specific evidence for this hypothesis exists for college-aged students; however, Papini, Farmer, Clark, and Snell (1988) found that more high school students disclosed information about their sexual experiences with friends than with parents. Therefore, we believe that the results of these findings will also be applicable to college-aged participants.

Our first seven hypotheses are grounded in past research findings. Our following hypotheses, however, are exploratory predictions since no prior relationship studies have investigated specific items being disclosed to or concealed from social network members.
**H8A: Partners will disclose more about events that occur within their romantic relationship with their friends than their parents.** While attending college in such close proximity with friends in one’s social network, it is likely that many events (such as school functions) in the partner’s life will overlap with the events in his or her friend’s life. Since this will be the case, it seems plausible that these events will be discussed more frequently with an individual’s friends than with his or her parents. In addition to overlap, as soon as a partner returns from an event with his or her romantic partner, it is likely that he or she will discuss where they went or what they did, since this information will be readily accessible. Depending upon how frequently or infrequently the partner communicates with his or her parents, mothers and fathers may experience less communication about events within the romantic dyad. Since time may have passed between when the event occurred and when the partner communicated with his or her parents, they will disclose less information about events with their parents than their friends.

**H8B: Partners will disclose more about their romantic partner’s personality with their parents than friends.** While in college, it is more likely that romantic partner’s close friends at school will know or at least have met his or her romantic partner. Therefore, our hypothesis is that more about an individual’s romantic partner’s personality will be disclosed to parents than to friends because parents will have had less opportunity to gather information about his or her personality first hand.

**H9: Partners will disclose more about their romantic partner’s daily activities with their parents.** Because parents are less likely to be in close proximity with their child and his or her romantic partner, discussing an individual’s romantic partner’s daily activities may be more necessary, and therefore, occur more frequently in conversations with parents.
Friends in close proximity with the romantic partner may have more interaction with their friend’s significant other. Therefore, daily activities may be discussed directly with the friend’s partner and it would not be necessary for them to disclose this information. It is less likely, though, that the parents of a partner in a romantic relationship will have direct contact with their son or daughter’s partner, therefore, it would be necessary to disclose information about his or her significant other’s daily activities to his or her parents.

**H10: Partners will disclose more about the future of their relationship with their parents.** Since partners perceive a higher level of approval from their parents the more committed they are to their romantic partner, it would seem plausible that the parents would also be more invested in the romantic relationship. If the premarital romantic relationship remains highly committed and involved, the romantic partner may one day be a member of the parents’ family. Due to this personally relevant effect, our hypothesis is that more information about the future of the romantic relationship will be revealed to the partner’s parents. This information may also be revealed more to parents than to friends in the partner’s social network because parents will be more likely to illicit this information from their child than friends would be.

**Method**

*Participants*

One hundred eighty-eight participants, 68.1% female, who averaged 20.24 (SD = 1.48) years old, were 80.3% Caucasian/White (4.8% Asian American, 6.9% Other/Multiracial, 4.3% Hispanic/Latino, 2.1% African American/Black, and 1.1% Middle Eastern). In this study, 95.2% of participants identified themselves as students. All participants were involved in romantic relationships with no constraints on duration – on
average, participants had been in their romantic relationships for 19.08 months ($SD = 13.54$). The majority of participants, 78.7%, were in exclusive relationships, 17.6% were about to live with one another or become engaged, and 1.6% were engaged.

Participants for this study were recruited through advertising on Facebook.com (Le et al., under review), a social networking website that allows individuals to connect with one another online. We targeted members of Facebook.com who were involved in romantic relationships according to their profiles. After the advertisement had run for a few days, we changed the settings to recruit only males in relationships, in an attempt to obtain equal numbers of men and women as participants. Students at Haverford College were also alerted to this study via the Go! Boards (an online discussion forum). To encourage participation, a lottery was run by randomly selecting two participants to receive prizes of fifty dollars.

Procedure

Once a potential participant viewed our website, they were asked to complete a consent form and then they proceeded with the online questionnaire. Participants were initially asked to answer a series of questions about their background. They were first asked to identify a friend, other than their romantic partner, to whom they disclosed the most information to about their romantic relationship. Other background information such as their sex, age, ethnicity, and student status were also recorded. Participants were asked to report on the frequency and nature of communication with their father, mother, friend (other than their romantic partner) to whom they disclose the most to, and romantic partner. Finally, participants were asked to identify the sex of their romantic partner and the duration of their romantic relationship.
Measures

Participants were asked to electronically complete Rusbult, Martz, and Agnew’s Commitment Inventory (1998) (Appendix A) in order to reveal their commitment level to their romantic relationship. This index has been used in prior studies to assess commitment levels of partners in romantic relationships. The commitment scale consists of seven questions (e.g., “I am committed to maintaining my relationship with my partner.”) to be completed on a 9-point Likert scale (0 = do not agree at all, 4 = somewhat agree, and 8 = agree completely); $\alpha = .84$.

The Inclusion of the Other in the Self (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992) (Appendix B) was then electronically administered to each participant. This scale was used to determine levels of closeness among participants and their three different social network members in addition to their romantic partner. This scale includes a series of Venn diagrams with varying degrees of overlap, in which one circle represents the self and one circle represents the other. The choices range from two separate circles to two circles with almost complete overlap. The directions are for respondents to select the Venn diagram that “best describes” their relationship for each social network member and their own romantic partner (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992).

Harmon and Layfield’s Disclosure Survey (Appendix C) was then electronically completed to reveal amounts of disclosure to father, mother, and friend to whom they disclose the most. This index ($\alpha = .98$) was created for our study and is compiled of 42 possible items that may or may not be disclosed to the social network members of a partner in a romantic relationship. The seven overarching categories of disclosure each include six separate items. Three of the items under each category relate to positive disclosure and
three of the items under each category relate to negative disclosure. The categories include sexual activity (e.g., “I discuss details regarding the positive aspects of my sex life.”); \(\alpha = .84\), events (e.g., “I talk about things that my partner does that annoy me.”); \(\alpha = .85\), personality (e.g., “I discuss things that I admire about my partner.”); \(\alpha = .84\), partner’s social network (e.g., “I talk about things that bother me regarding my partner’s parents.”); \(\alpha = .85\), the future of the relationship (e.g., “I talk about if I think the relationship is headed in a negative direction.”); \(\alpha = .78\), the current status of the relationship (e.g., “I talk about how successful the relationship is.”); \(\alpha = .86\), and the partner’s daily activities (e.g., “I discuss those activities in which my partner participates that I find interesting.”); \(\alpha = .85\). These disclosure items were measured on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, and 7 = Strongly Agree). The survey also had high reliability for overall disclosure to father \(\alpha = .97\), mother \(\alpha = .96\), and friend to whom they felt they revealed the most to \(\alpha = .97\). A comprehensive list of Cronbach’s alphas for sub-dimensions and overall scores can be found in Table 1.

The items found within the Harmon and Layfield Disclosure Survey are a result of the collaboration of the members of the research group. Specific areas of interest were reflected upon in past research (Baxter & Widenmann, 1993; Leslie et al., 1983; Papini et al., 1988), but since no former studies explicitly measured exact items of disclosure, the disclosure items are a speculative compilation of issues discussed among romantic partners and the members of their social networks. The final product of disclosure items was reviewed by a small focus group to ensure clarity of the items chosen.

Finally, participants were asked to complete Etcheverry and Agnew’s perceived approval measure (2004) (Appendix D) to determine the level of perceived approval they
felt from their father, mother, and friend to whom they disclose the most. Four questions compile this inventory (e.g. “This person thinks I [should not/should] continue in my current romantic relationship.” and “This person is [not supportive/supportive] of my current romantic relationship.”), each on a 7-point Likert scale. Etcheverry and Agnew’s (2004) scale (α = .97) determined the perceived level of approval from each social network member.

Results

Overview of Analytic Strategy

Pearson correlations were used for Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3 to test associations among relationships between disclosure, perceived approval, closeness, and commitment. Linear regressions were used for Hypotheses 1 and 2 to determine which correlations were driven by specific social network members. T-tests were run on Hypotheses 4, 5B, 6A, 6B, 7, 8A, 8B, 9, and 10 in order to compare means of gender specific disclosure, positive and negative disclosure, and the different dimensions of disclosure. Analyses of Variance (ANOVAs) were run for Hypotheses 5A, 6A, and 6B to measure the difference in gender and disclosure. To investigate an exploratory hypothesis, a Spearman correlation was calculated to test associations among amount of communication with social network members and average disclosure to social network members. A significance level of $p < .05$ was used for all analyses unless otherwise stated. Means and standard deviations for all scales used can be found in Table 1.

Testing Hypothesis 1: Positive Disclosure and Perceived Approval

In support of Hypothesis 1, correlational analyses indicated that partners who disclosed positive information to their social network members perceived high levels of
approval. A strong positive relationship was found between these two variables, $r(184) = .51, p < .001$.

Breaking down the network into its specific members, a Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated to investigate the relationship between positive disclosure to father, mother, and friend and average perceived approval from father, mother, and friend. A strong positive relationship was found between positive disclosure to fathers, mothers, and friends and perceived levels of approval from fathers ($r(181) = .46, p < .001$), mothers ($r(186) = .57, p < .001$), and friends ($r(185) = .31, p < .001$).

Further analyses were calculated in order to better understand this finding. Perceived social network approval was regressed on disclosure to fathers, mothers, and friends. As shown in Table 2, disclosure to fathers and mothers, but not to friends, were each significant predictors of perceived approval.

**Testing Hypothesis 2: Perceived Approval and Commitment**

In support of Hypothesis 2, correlational analyses indicated that partners who perceived high levels of approval from their social network members reported high levels of commitment to their romantic relationship. A Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated to investigate the relationship between perceived network approval and commitment. A strong positive relationship was found between these two variables, $r(186) = .28, p < .001$. Perceived approval from friends was significantly correlated with commitment ($r(185) = .45, p < .001$), but perceived approval from fathers ($r(182) = .16, p = .03$) and mothers ($r(186) = .13, p = .08$) was not significantly correlated with commitment.
Further analyses were calculated in order to better understand this finding. Commitment was regressed on perceived social network approval from fathers, mothers, and friends. As shown in Table 3, perceived approval from friends was a significant predictor of commitment, but perceived approval from fathers and mothers was not. Therefore, the correlation between perceived approval and commitment is being strongly driven by the friend social network member.

Testing Hypothesis 3: Closeness and Disclosure

In support of Hypothesis 3, correlational analyses indicated that partners who are closer to his or her social network member disclose more information about their relationship to this network member. A Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated to investigate the relationship between closeness to social network member and average disclosure. A strong positive relationship was found between closeness and average disclosure to fathers ($r(184) = .45, p < .001$), mothers ($r(186) = .50, p < .001$), and friends ($r(186) = .25, p < .001$).

Through the use of further analyses, magnitudes of these correlations were calculated. There were significant differences in the magnitude of the correlation between fathers and friends ($Z_{difference} = 2.18, p < .01$) and mothers and friends ($Z_{difference} = 2.74, p < .01$). No significant difference in the magnitude of the correlation between fathers and mothers was found ($Z_{difference} = 0.56, p = .58$). The association between closeness and disclosure is bigger for friends than for mothers or father. This indicates that if the partner felt close to his or her mother or father, then they disclosed a great deal of information about the romantic relationship; however, a partner does not necessarily need to feel close to his or her friend in order to disclose information about the romantic relationship.
Testing Hypothesis 4: Sex Differences in Amounts of Disclosure

An independent samples t-test was performed to test whether there was a significant difference in the amount of disclosure of males to fathers ($M = 2.83, SD = 1.17$), mothers ($M = 3.39, SD = 1.03$), and friends ($M = 4.71, SD = 1.25$) as compared to the amount of disclosure of females to fathers ($M = 2.57, SD = 1.21$), mothers ($M = 3.65, SD = 1.23$), and friends ($M = 5.17, SD = 1.19$). The results revealed a significant sex difference between average disclosure by males to friends and average disclosure by females to friends ($t(186) = -2.46, p = .02$); however, there was no significant sex difference between disclosure to either father ($t(184) = 1.37, p = .17$) or mother ($t(186) = -1.42, p = .16$).

Therefore, Hypothesis 4 was partially supported for disclosure to friends but not supported for disclosure to mothers or fathers.

Testing Hypotheses 5A and 5B: Disclosure to Females versus Males

When participants were asked to nominate their friend (other than their romantic partner) to whom they felt they disclosed the most to, 65.4% of respondents nominated female friends and 34% of respondents nominated male friends. Males nominated male friends 73.3% of the time and males nominated female friends 26.7% of the time. Females nominated female friends 83.6% of the time and females nominated male friends 15.6% of the time.

To test Hypothesis 5A, a 2x2 Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used to study whether males disclose more to male friends ($M = 4.87, SD = 1.36$) or to female friends ($M = 4.24, SD = 0.78$) and whether females disclose more to male friends ($M = 4.68, SD = 1.14$) or to female friends ($M = 5.26, SD = 1.19$). There was no significant main effect for either the friend’s sex ($F(2, 183) = 0.23, p = .80$) or for the romantic partner’s sex ($F(1,$
183) = 3.25, \( p = .07 \), although the main effect for the romantic partner’s sex approached significance. There was, however, a significant interaction (Table 4) between the friend’s sex and the romantic partner’s sex, \( F(1, 183) = 7.12, p = .008 \) (Figure 1). This significant interaction indicates that males disclose more to male friends than to female friends and females disclose more to female friends than to male friends.

A repeated measures Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was calculated to test the difference between the amount of information that males disclose to both their mothers (\( M = 3.39, SD = 1.03 \)) and fathers (\( M = 2.83, SD = 1.17 \)) and that females disclose to both their mothers (\( M = 3.65, SD = 1.24 \)) and fathers (\( M = 2.57, SD = 1.21 \)). In support of Hypothesis 5B, a significant main effect was found among information disclosed by males and females to their mothers and their fathers, \( F(1, 184) = 72.47, p < .001 \). Regardless of sex, partners disclosed more to their mothers than to their fathers; however, there was also a significant interaction (Table 5) between sex and disclosure to mothers and fathers, \( F(1, 184) = 7.48, p = .007 \) (Figure 2). Males disclosed more than females to their fathers, and females disclosed more than males to their mothers.

To test Hypothesis 5B, a paired samples \( t \)-test was calculated to compare the amount of disclosure to mothers to the amount of disclosure to fathers. The average disclosure to mothers was 3.57 (\( SD = 1.18 \)) and the average disclosure to fathers was 2.66 (\( SD = 1.20 \)). Regardless of sex, participants were more likely to disclose information to their mothers than their fathers, \( t(185) = -9.97, p < .001 \).

**Testing Hypotheses 6A and 6B: Positive and Negative Disclosure**

A paired samples \( t \)-test was calculated to compare the amount of positive information disclosed to one’s parents versus the amount of positive information disclosed
to one’s friend. The average positive information disclosed to one’s parents was 3.96 ($SD = 1.30$) and the average positive information disclosed to one’s friend was 5.74 ($SD = 1.06$).

In contrast to Hypothesis 6A, participants were significantly more likely to disclose positive information to their friends than their parents, $t(187) = 19.44, p < .001$.

In further analyses, a repeated measures Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was calculated to test the difference between the amount of positive information disclosed to one’s mother ($M = 4.48, SD = 1.38$), father ($M = 3.42, SD = 1.62$), and friend ($M = 5.74, SD = 1.06$). A significant difference was found among positive information disclosed to social network members, ($F(2, 370) = 228.16, p < .001$. Follow-up analyses using $t$-tests (alpha level adjusted to $< .017$ due to multiple comparisons) revealed that partners disclosed significantly more positive information to their friends than to their mothers ($t(187) = -12.61, p < .001$) or their fathers ($t(185) = -20.27, p < .001$). Partners also disclosed significantly more positive information to their mothers than their fathers ($t(185) = -9.60, p < .001$).

A paired samples $t$-test was calculated to compare the amount of negative disclosure to one’s parents versus the amount of negative disclosure to one’s friend. The average negative information disclosed to one’s parents was 2.27($SD = 1.06$) and the average negative information disclosed to one’s friend was 4.30 ($SD = 1.77$). In support of Hypothesis 6B, participants were significantly more likely to disclose negative information to their friends than their parents, $t(187) = 17.64 p < .001$.

In further analyses, a repeated measures Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was calculated to test the difference between the amount of negative information disclosed to one’s mother ($M = 2.65, SD = 1.33$), father ($M = 1.88, SD = 1.11$), and friend ($M = 4.30,
A significant difference was found among negative information disclosed to social network members, $F(2, 370) = 239.32, p < .001$. Follow-up analyses using $t$-tests (alpha level adjusted to $< .017$ due to multiple comparisons) revealed that partners disclosed significantly more negative information to their friends than to either their mothers ($t(187) = -13.50, p < .001$) or their fathers ($t(185) = -19.34, p < .001$). Partners also disclosed significantly more negative information to their mothers than to their fathers, $t(185) = -8.78, p < .001$.

**Testing Hypothesis 7: Sexual Activity Disclosure**

A paired samples $t$-test was calculated to compare the amount of sexual activity information disclosed to parents with the amount of sexual activity information disclosed to friends. The average sexual activity disclosure revealed to parents was $1.53$ ($SD = 0.88$) and the average sexual activity disclosure revealed to friends was $4.60$ ($SD = 1.92$). In support of Hypothesis 7, participants were significantly more likely to disclose sexual activity information to their friend than to their parents, $t(187) = 21.73, p < .001$.

**Testing Hypotheses 8 – 10: Dimensions of Disclosure**

Only Hypothesis 8A of our exploratory predictions was supported. A paired samples $t$-test was calculated to compare the amount of information regarding events attended by the romantic couple disclosed to parents with the amount of information regarding events attended by the romantic couple disclosed to friends. The average disclosure about events revealed to parents was $3.67$ ($SD = 1.23$) and the average disclosure about events revealed to friends was $5.61$ ($SD = 1.15$). Participants were significantly more likely to reveal information about events to their friend than to their parents, $t(187) = 20.25, p < .001$. 
In contrast to Hypothesis 8B, a paired samples \( t \)-test was calculated to compare the amount of information about the romantic partner’s personality disclosed to parents with the amount of information about the romantic partner’s personality disclosed to friends. The average disclosure about the romantic partner’s personality revealed to parents was 3.41 (\( SD = 1.18 \)) and the average disclosure about the romantic partner’s personality revealed to friends was 5.08 (\( SD = 1.30 \)). Participants were significantly more likely to disclose information about their romantic partners’ personality to their friend than to their parents, \( t(187) = 16.99, p < .001 \).

In contrast to Hypothesis 9, a paired samples \( t \)-test was calculated to compare the amount of partner’s daily activity disclosure revealed to parents with the amount of partner’s daily activity disclosure revealed to friends. The average partner’s daily activity disclosure revealed to parents was 3.61 (\( SD = 1.24 \)) and the average partner’s daily activity disclosure revealed to friends was 4.95 (\( SD = 1.39 \)). Participants were significantly more likely to disclose information about their partner’s daily activity to their friend than to their parents, \( t(187) = 13.63, p < .001 \).

In opposition to Hypothesis 10, a paired samples \( t \)-test was calculated to compare the amount of information about the future of the romantic relationship revealed to parents with the amount of information about the future of the romantic relationship revealed to friends. The amount of information about the future of the relationship revealed to parents was 2.82 (\( SD = 1.16 \)) and the amount of information about the future of the relationship revealed to friends was 4.79 (\( SD = 1.36 \)). Participants were significantly more likely to disclose information about the future of the romantic relationship to their friend than to their parents, \( t(187) = 16.92, p < .001 \).
Overall, the trend of our findings is that partners of romantic relationships are revealing more to their friends than to their parents in all sub-dimensions of our disclosure scale.

*Testing an Exploratory Hypothesis: Communication with Average Disclosure*

A Spearman correlation was calculated to test associations among amount of communication with social network members and average disclosure to social network members. A strong positive relationship was found between communication with social network members and average disclosure to fathers \( r(186) = .29, p < .01 \) and to mothers \( r(188) = .25, p = .001 \). No significant relationship was found between communication and average disclosure to friends \( r(188) = .05, p = .52 \).

**Discussion**

As expected, based on past research conducted by Leslie et al. (1986), our study revealed that there was a strong correlation among positive disclosure to social network members and the level of approval perceived from these same social network members. If partners of romantic relationships are revealing positive qualities about their romantic partner and positive aspects of the relationship, then theoretically, the social network members should have no reason to not support the relationship. Regardless, though, of whether these social networks are actually supporting the relationship, if a member of the romantic couple is sharing positive qualities about the relationship, then they may believe that they are successfully influencing their friends and family to support their romantic affiliation (Etcheverry et al., in press).

In conjunction with Leslie et al.’s (1986) finding that individuals more frequently strategically disclose information to their parents than to their friends, we had predictions
that partners in romantic relationship would share more positive information about their romantic relationships with their parents and more negative information about their romantic relationships with their friends. Our results, however, indicated that regardless of the nature of the disclosure, more information was disclosed to friends than to parents. While we believed that partners of romantic relationships would attempt to strategically conceal negative information from their parents and emphasize positive information, it seems that regardless of the nature of the disclosure, partners in a romantic relationship are sharing more information with their friend than with their parents.

If partners in the romantic relationship are perceiving support from their social networks, then in accordance with past research (Agnew et al., 2001; Etcheverry & Agnew, 2004; Milardo, 1982; Parks & Adelman, 1983; Parks et al., 1983; Sprecher & Felmlee, 1992), members of the romantic dyad should be more committed to the relationship. In support of our hypothesis, we found that the level of approval that romantic partners perceive is positively correlated with the level of commitment that they feel toward their relationship. This finding supports past research, but the directionality of this effect still cannot be determined. It remains unclear whether the perceived approval causes relationship members to feel more committed to their relationship or whether a higher level of commitment to the relationship causes partners to perceive more approval from members of their social network.

One of our most interesting findings was investigating the relationship between closeness and the amount of disclosure one would reveal about their romantic relationship based on this variable. As our hypothesis predicted, the closer individuals feel to their mother or their father, the more information about their romantic relationship they will
share. This finding was grounded in past research which alluded to offspring strategically sharing and concealing specific information (Leslie et al., 1986). We initially hypothesized that this finding would extend itself to the entire social network, including both parents and friends. This aspect of our hypothesis, however, was not supported. By comparing the magnitudes of the correlations, we found that closeness to mothers and fathers predicted amounts of disclosure, but closeness to friends did not yield a significant difference in the magnitude of the correlation. This information implies that partners in romantic relationships will disclose information about their relationship to their friends, regardless of how close they feel to them.

We can speculate that in a college setting, where many students reside in close living quarters, the time spent with one another would lend itself to disclosure. While students are away at college, they must make a concerted effort to communicate with their parents. If they feel close to their parents, they may make this one of their priorities, but if they do not feel close with their parents, this may result in less disclosure about one’s romantic relationship being revealed. Perhaps, then, feelings of closeness are not what predict the amount of disclosure, but instead, it is the time spent communicating with the social network member that predicts the amount of disclosure revealed concerning romantic relationships. Our exploratory analysis of communication and average disclosure revealed that individuals who spent more time communicating with their mothers and fathers also disclosed more information about their romantic relationships with their parents. It makes sense that the closer one feels to his or her parents, the more he or she will communicate with his or her parents. Simply by attending a residential college or having moved away from home, partners of romantic relationships may be forced into
interaction and communication with their closest friend on a daily basis. If the partners of
the romantic relationship feel close to their parents and spend time communicating with
them while living away from home in an environment where they are forced to have daily
interaction with their closest friend, then, it is conceivable that the amount of
communication is actually what is predicting disclosure to social network members.

Findings from Leslie et al. (1986) and Agnew et al. (2001) also led us to believe
that males would disclose less information to all social networks than females would. Our
findings for this hypothesis, though, are only partially supported. We found that there is no
sex difference among how much information partners of romantic relationships are sharing
with their parents. Neither males nor females are sharing significantly more information
about their romantic relationships with their mothers and fathers. In terms of how much
disclosure these couple members reveal to their friends, though, a significant difference
was found. Females reveal more information about their romantic relationships to their
closest friend than males reveal to their closest friend.

We could speculate that this is because of Caldwell and Peplau’s (1982) finding that
females are more interested in talking and sharing emotions with other female friends while
men are more interested in planning activities and doing things together with their male
friends. If our female participants have more female friends, then, it is only logical that
they would discuss their relationships more with them, while males would not be
discussing their romantic relationships with their male friends. Our results, however,
combat this previous finding. Females are disclosing more to their female friends about
their romantic relationships than males are disclosing to their female friends; however,
males are disclosing more to their male friends about their romantic relationships than
females are disclosing to their male friends. This significant interaction is a noteworthy finding. Perhaps sex stereotypes are influencing general thoughts as to who is discussing romantic relationships, but in accordance with our results, no one sex is discussing romantic involvements any more than the other sex with their same-sex friends. Males are disclosing more to their male friends and females are disclosing more to their female friends about their romantic relationships. It is possible that as our society continues to grow and evolve, males are placing more emphasis on talking about emotions with their male friends rather than exclusively focusing on planning and participating in activities. It is conceivable that if Caldwell and Peplau’s (1982) study were replicated today, their findings may be more congruent with our study’s results.

This fascinating interaction extends past the sex of an individual’s friend whom they are disclosing information about their romantic relationship to – it is also found among parents. While our results indicate that both males and females are disclosing more information about their romantic relationship to their mothers, we still have a significant interaction among disclosure from males to their fathers and females to their mothers. These same-sex bonds seem to facilitate discussion about romantic relationships. Males are disclosing information about their romantic relationships to their fathers more than females are disclosing and females are disclosing more information about their romantic relationships to their mothers than males are disclosing.

Similar to our prediction that the positivity or negativity of disclosure would affect which information was shared with parents over friends, we made predictions about the nature of certain disclosure within the overarching category of romantic relationship disclosure that would be shared more frequently with either friends or parents. We found
that regardless of whether disclosure involved sexual activity, personality of one’s romantic partner, events that the romantic couple participated in together, daily activities of one’s romantic partner, or future speculations of the romantic relationship, partners in the romantic relationship are always disclosing more to their closest friend than to their parents.

In short, this finding demonstrates that individuals, especially college-aged students, have a different relationship with their closest friend than they do with their mothers and fathers in regard to discussing romantic relationships. Disclosing information to one’s parents about his or her romantic relationship can be stressful because their opinion of their son or daughter’s romantic relationship can have numerous repercussions. As Leslie et al. (1986) found, partners of romantic relationships utilize strategic disclosure much more frequently when discussing details of their relationships with parents than with friends.

No empirical evidence specifically states that parental support is more influential in the commitment of romantic relationships than friends are, but theoretically, it seems conceivable that this may be the case. Friends could choose to disassociate with a friend if they did not approve of his or her romantic partner. If parents, though, were to disassociate from their offspring because they disapproved of their son or daughter’s romantic relationship, this would be a much more drastic separation. If parents disapproved of their son or daughter’s romantic relationship and simply chose to not be supportive rather than to disassociate themselves from their kin, this could still cause extreme family tension, especially if the two romantic partners decided to marry. While this speculation is not empirically shown, because Leslie et al. (1986) found that individuals tend to strategically
disclose information to their parents more than to their friends about their romantic relationships, it is conceivable that this is because parents have a stronger influence on their children’s romantic relationships than do friends.

The simple nature of the relationship that romantic partners have with their parents and their friends is, however, extremely different. Friends are typically closer in age to the romantic partner than parents and therefore may have a better understanding of how relationships function and what is currently perceived as “normal” for relationship progression, since this seems to change from generation to generation. In fact, friends may encounter similar experiences within their own romantic relationships concurrently with the couple members who participated in our study. Social network members who have recently experienced similar situations may offer more pertinent advice than parents are able to, ultimately making them more desirable recipients for disclosure about romantic relationships. It is also possible that friends would be less judgmental about these relationships because they have recently dealt with similar experiences in their own dating lives.

Another aspect of friendship to consider is the selective nature of friendships. Friends may have just as much influence as parents on their social network members’ romantic relationship, but the key to friendship is that individuals have the opportunity to choose who constitutes as a social network member. Empirical research demonstrates that when individuals are selecting friends, they tend to prefer people who are similar to themselves (Hamm, 2000). Hamm’s (2000) finding indicates that adolescents choose friends who have similar goals and values especially with respect to academic orientation and substance abuse. While relationship views were not specifically tested to find
similarities in romantic partners and their closest friend, it would be logical that this category would follow the trend of academic orientation and substance abuse. Therefore, friends of the romantic partner may have similar outlooks on the quality of their friends’ romantic relationship and would be therefore be supportive of and approve of the romantic relationship.

**Strengths, Limitations, and Future Directions**

While our study yielded numerous significant findings, our results are limited by their ability to be generalized to all individuals currently involved in a romantic relationship. Although we attempted to recruit a diverse population for our study, the majority of our participants were white college students. By studying romantic relationships in such an analogous population, our results are not very generalizable to the entire population involved in romantic relationships. Our findings are therefore limited in how many people can relate to and benefit from our results. Focusing on college-aged students does, however, allow our study to determine relationship differences with parents and friends while individuals are away from home and living in close contact with friends. Studying a different population of individuals would not successfully yield significant findings about the relationships of individuals who are embedded within their social network.

Breaking disclosure down into subscales rather than testing for amounts of overall disclosure was intended to reveal specific differences in what was being disclosed to parents in comparison to what was being disclosed to friends. Our findings, however, yielded no specific information that was being disclosed more frequently to parents than to friends. While our scale yielded significant results in that partners of romantic relationships
were revealing more information to their friends than to their parents on every sub-dimension, perhaps if we had broken down the sub-dimensions into more specific categories, we may have been able to identify specific information that individuals were discussing more frequently with their parents than with their closest friend. We attempted to compile an exhaustive list of potential disclosure items, but if we had provided the open-ended question, “What, if anything, do you disclose to your parents/friend about your romantic relationship that was not specifically addressed in these questions?” then our investigation of disclosure would have been more complete. This information may have also aided future studies in creating a more exhaustive disclosure scale. Or, at the very least, asking this question could have verified that, in general, college-aged individuals in romantic relationships are discussing every aspect of their romantic relationships more with their closest friend than with their mother or father.

In future investigations of disclosure to social network members, asking an open-ended question about what other topics concerning romantic relationships are discussed and disclosed to social network members could enhance the findings of our study. Additionally, it would be noteworthy to have participants report on disclosure to both their closest male friend and their closest female friend. If we had obtained disclosure information to the participant’s closest male friend and closest female friend then we could further support the theory that males disclose more about their romantic relationships to male friends and females disclose more about their romantic relationships to female friends. Without having initially collected this data, we had to base our analyses off whether the participant chose to nominate either a male or a female as their closest friend to whom they felt they disclosed the most.
Another future direction that this research may take would be to investigate romantic relationships in a longitudinal study. Since the average duration of relationships for this study was a little over a year and a half, it is conceivable that those relationships, where negative information was disclosed to parents or to friends, had ended before either romantic partner would have ever considered him or herself in a position to participate in a relationship study. By monitoring amounts of disclosure and perceived levels of approval from the onset of romantic relationships, these variables could be tracked as the commitment of the relationship intensifies or dwindles. It would be noteworthy to investigate the nature of disclosure to see trends that develop as the relationship grows. A longitudinal study would also lend itself to examine the transformation that individuals may have in their relationships with their social networks as they grow older and mature.

A final suggestion for future research might entail investigating a causal relationship among disclosure to social network members, perceived approval, and commitment. Numerous studies, including the present research, have demonstrated correlations among these variables, but future investigations attempting to establish a causal relationship would be beneficial to relationship science research.

Investigating disclosure to social networks about romantic relationships, perceived levels of approval from social network members, and commitment to romantic relationships in our study will advance relationship science literature. Future relationship researchers will be able to utilize the reliable scale created in our study to measure which specific disclosure items are discussed with specific social network members.

The findings of our study may also be applicable to therapists counseling patients with relationship issues. Having a more comprehensive understanding of the associations
among strategic disclosure, perceived approval, and commitment will aid counselors in advising their patients about motivations behind and interactions with their romantic partner and social network members.

Conclusions

Overall, this study indicates that the relationships college-aged individuals have with their parents greatly differs from the relationship they have with their closest friend, in terms of the amount of information they are disclosing about their romantic relationships. The majority of participants in this study were disclosing more information on all sub-dimensions of romantic relationships to their closest friend than to either their mother or their father. Our findings in this study also led to a unique sex difference in disclosure to social network members of the same sex as the romantic partner. While we are unable to determine a cause for same sex disclosure, our findings indicate that college-aged individuals are more likely to disclose information about their romantic relationship with a social network member of the same sex. These findings emphasize the relationship among disclosure, perceived social network approval, and commitment to one’s romantic relationship. It is evident that the success or failure of a romantic relationship is not only contingent upon the interactions of both romantic partners, but rather the interactions of the romantic partners and all members of their collective and individual social networks.
I am extremely grateful to Becky Harmon for working with me on our senior thesis research. Without her dedication and sense of humor, this thesis would not have been nearly as fun to complete. I would also like to thank Professor Le for his guidance and leadership in our research and for always making time to answer all of my questions. Outside the realm of academics, I would like to thank all of my friends who spent endless hours studying and working with me in my office on the fifth floor of Sharpless. I am truly blessed to have such incredible friends. Annick, Charles, Devon, Jordan, Susannah, and Bea – I couldn’t have survived Haverford without you. Jeff, thank you for being my rock. And finally, I would like to thank my parents and my brother for their endless support, unconditional love, and encouraging words.
References


Le, B., Loving, T. J., Lewandowski, G. W. Jr., Feinberg, E. G., Johnson, K. C.,


Appendix A

Commitment Level Items

1. I want our relationship to last for a very long time (please circle a number).
   
   0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
   Do Not Agree Agree Agree
   At All Somewhat Completely

2. I am committed to maintaining my relationship with my partner.
   
   0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
   Do Not Agree Agree Agree
   At All Somewhat Completely

3. I would not feel very upset if our relationship were to end in the near future.
   
   0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
   Do Not Agree Agree Agree
   At All Somewhat Completely

4. It is likely that I will date someone other than my partner within the next year.
   
   0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
   Do Not Agree Agree Agree
   At All Somewhat Completely

5. I feel very attached to our relationship—very strongly linked to my partner.
   
   0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
   Do Not Agree Agree Agree
   At All Somewhat Completely

6. I want our relationship to last forever.
   
   0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
   Do Not Agree Agree Agree
   At All Somewhat Completely

7. I am oriented toward the long-term future of my relationship (for example, I imagine being with my partner several years from now).
   
   0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
   Do Not Agree Agree Agree
   At All Somewhat Completely
Appendix B

**The Inclusion of Other in the Self scale (IOS)**

Instructions: Please select the picture below that best describes your current relationship with your romantic partner/mother/father/closest friend (other than your romantic partner) to whom you disclose the most.
Appendix C

Rate the extent to which you agree with each statement when speaking to your mother/father/closest friend (other than your romantic partner) to whom you disclose the most.

A) Sexual Activity
   1) I do not discuss details regarding the positive aspects of my sex life.
   2) I talk about the gratifying parts of my physical relationship.
   3) I discuss satisfying aspects of my physical relationship.
   4) I do not share troubling aspects of my physical relationship.
   5) I talk about the unpleasant parts of my sex life.
   6) I discuss details regarding the negative aspects of my sex life.

B) Events
   1) I discuss positive things that my partner does for me.
   2) I discuss occasions when my partner has made me happy.
   3) I do not share information about good times my partner and I have had.
   4) I do not talk about things that my partner does that annoy me.
   5) I do not talk about times that my partner has upset or angered me.
   6) I talk about bad times that my partner and I have had.

C) Personality
   1) I do not discuss positive aspects of my partner’s personality.
   2) I discuss things that I admire about my partner.
   3) I talk about the qualities of my partner that I find endearing.
   4) I do not discuss things that I dislike about my partner’s personality.
   5) I discuss things that I’d like to change about my partner.
   6) I do not talk about ways that I wish my partner were different.

D) Social Networks
   1) I disclose things that I like about my partner’s parents.
   2) I discuss things that I like about my partner’s extended family (and/or siblings if applicable).
   3) I do not talk about things that I like regarding my partner’s friends.
   4) I do not talk about things that bother me regarding my partner’s friends.
   5) I talk about things that bother me regarding my partner’s parents.
   6) I do not discuss things that I dislike about my partner’s extended family (and/or siblings if applicable).

E) Future of Relationship
   1) I discuss the future of the relationship in a positive manner.
   2) I disclose whether I feel the relationship will endure for a long time.
   3) I do not discuss whether I think the relationship could lead to marriage.
   4) I talk about if I think the relationship is headed in a negative direction.
   5) I do not talk about how likely it is that my partner and I will break up.
6) I discuss the possibility of ending the relationship.

F) Status of Relationship
   1) I talk about how well the relationship is going.
   2) I disclose how happy I am with the relationship.
   3) I talk about how successful the relationship is.
   4) I talk about whether the relationship is going badly.
   5) I do not discuss difficulties that my partner and I are experiencing.
   6) I discuss whether my partner and I are having troubles.

G) Partner’s Daily Activities
   1) I discuss those activities in which my partner participates that I find interesting.
   2) I do not talk about my partner's interests that I respect.
   3) I talk about those organizations or clubs with which my partner is involved of which I think highly.
   4) I talk about those activities with which my partner wastes his/her time.
   5) I discuss my partner's activities that interfere with him/her spending time with me.
   6) I do not discuss my partner's hobbies in which I am uninterested.
Appendix D

Indicate how your mother/father/closest friend (other than your romantic partner) to whom you disclose the most views your romantic relationship.

1) This person thinks I [should not/should] continue in my current romantic relationship.
   1                  2                  3                  4                  5                  6                  7
   Should Not                             No Opinion                                 Should

2) This person thinks I [do not have/have] a current romantic relationship worth keeping.
   1                  2                  3                  4                  5                  6                  7
   Do Not Have                 No Opinion                                  Have

3) This person thinks that this [is not/is] a good current romantic relationship for me.
   1                  2                  3                  4                  5                  6                  7
   Is Not                             No Opinion                                      Is

4) This person is [not supportive/supportive] of my current romantic relationship.
   1                  2                  3                  4                  5                  6                  7
   Not Supportive                            No Opinion                             Supportive
Table 1. Descriptions and Reliabilities of Scales

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Table 2. Predicting Perceived Approval with Disclosure to Networks

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Table 3. Predicting Commitment with Perceived Approval

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Table 4. Mean Levels of Males’ and Females’ Disclosure to Male and Female Friends

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Values in Parentheses are Standard Deviations
Table 5. Mean Levels of Males’ and Females’ Disclosure to Father and Mother

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Values in Parentheses are Standard Deviations
Figure 1. Disclosure of Males and Females to Male and Female Friends
Figure 2. Disclosure of Males and Females to Mothers and Fathers