Social Network Disclosure in Romantic Relationships:

Associations with Approval and Commitment

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Abstract
The specific topics that people disclose to their social networks, including their mothers, fathers, and friends, were investigated. Participants included 188 college-aged students who voluntarily completed an online survey. Results revealed that males and females disclose different amounts of information overall, and that their levels of disclosure depend on the social network to whom they are disclosing. Results also indicated that positive disclosure is associated with perceived levels of approval, perceived levels of approval are positively associated with commitment, and closeness to a social network is associated with amount of disclosure. Finally, partners in romantic relationships disclose more information overall (despite content) to their friends than to their parents. This finding suggests that people’s relationships with their parents differ greatly from their relationships with their friends, and consequently, their disclosure styles (i.e., what and how much they disclose) as well as their romantic relationships in general, are affected by their varying relationships with their social networks.
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Romantic relationships are not isolated units that exist within a social vacuum. They are not aspects of one’s life that are separate and distinct from other relationships and events. In contrast, they are integral elements of one’s world, subject to judgment and evaluation from others. Romantic relationships are affected by many factors including one’s friends and family (i.e., social network), situation in life, personal values, and environment.

Social networks have a particularly considerable impact on relationships. According to Cox, Wexler, Rusbult, and Gaines (1997), evidence suggests that the opinion of one’s social network regarding his or her relationship may be more important than one’s own personal beliefs. In addition, it is likely that some people may even value the relationships that they have with their families and friends so highly that they do not necessarily consider their romantic relationships to be more important. As romantic relationships materialize, preexisting platonic ones with social networks remain significant. This is due, in part, to the fact that relationships with social networks serve as sources of emotional support (Connolly & Johnson, 1996). Romantic relationships can be emotionally turbulent, and having others in which to confide is essential for sustaining one’s daily welfare. Therefore, individuals feel obliged to listen to, take advice from, and act according to the perceived opinions of their social networks in order to ensure that the network relationships will persist and remain significant resources for comfort and encouragement in the future (Cox et al., 1997).
Various aspects of social networks and their associations with romantic relationships have been explored and provide a stable background on the subject. One particular area of focus is on network sharing, which includes network overlap and cross-network contact (Parks, 2007). Research shows that the degree of linkage between two partners’ networks is strongly related to the developmental status of their relationship; couples with more overlapping networks and more frequent communication between members of the two networks are less likely to break up (Parks, 2007). As suggested by Agnew, Loving, and Drigotas (2001), this phenomenon may be related to the fact that partners who are more committed to one another are also less likely to spend time with their individual friends, meaning that they demonstrate their commitment by making sacrifices in the form of giving up valued individual preferences and behaviors such as interacting with their own friends. In fact, Parks, Stan, and Eggert (1983) even find that romantic involvement is associated with decreases in the size of one’s own friendship network and the amount of communication with one’s own friends.

Network overlap and cross-network contact also relate to relationship dissolution. According to Parks (2007), breakups lead to changes in the amount of contact with both one’s joint and one’s partner’s network, thereby causing one to move away from these friendships. Therefore, both overlap and cross-network contact are crucial to the stability of and commitment to relationships.

**Network Overlap**

Parks (2007) defines network overlap as “the number or proportion of people that are common members of the relational partners’ individual networks” (p. 43). As demonstrated by Agnew and colleagues (2001), couples whose social networks overlap
have more stable relationships. This is due to the fact that a greater number of joint friends may be an indicator that a couple likes each other’s company and therefore does more things together, both alone and with their shared friends. Also, spending time with joint friends helps to confirm, validate, and solidify a couple’s ongoing relationship (Agnew et al., 2001). Overlap itself is also related to preventing breakup: since it would be difficult for a joint friend to maintain an equal and healthy friendship with both partners after a relationship’s dissolution, partners worry that breaking up will cause them to lose not only a significant other, but also many friends (Parks, 2007). Therefore, overlap is extremely relevant to the association between social networks and romantic relationships.

**Cross-Network Contact**

Parks (2007) defines cross-network contact as the “linkage between…partners’ individual networks [that] occurs when one partner begins to communicate with the members of the other partners’ network” (pp. 43-44). According to Parks et al. (1983), couples with more romantic involvement (i.e., are more emotionally attached, interact more with each other, and have higher expectations that their relationships will continue into the future) have more contact and communication with their partner’s social networks. In fact, Parks and Adelman (1983) demonstrate that communication with and support from one’s partner’s social network is negatively associated with one’s level of uncertainty about his or her partner, and positively associated with the stability of the relationship. Like overlap, cross-network contact is also related to breakup. Parks and Adelman (1983) show that if one becomes involved with his or her partner’s social network, then breaking up could mean risking a whole series of other relationships and
activities. Therefore, cross-network contact is also important in regards to the connection between social networks and romantic relationships.

Along with network overlap and cross-network contact, research also focuses on two other aspects of social networks and their relationship with romantic dyads. The first is disclosure to and influence on social networks. This refers to the amount of information that one discloses and to which social network one is most likely to disclose. The second is perceived approval and support, particularly how much support social network members give, when they give more or less and how support affects the relationship. Both of these facets combine to have a strong influence on romantic involvement and commitment. The way that people interact with their social networks and the information that they disclose to them is associated with the levels of perceived support that are felt from these networks. In turn, the degree of perceived support is associated both with how partners act and their level of commitment. These two factors (disclosure and perceived approval) encompass the previous research regarding romantic and network relationships that is most pertinent to the present study.

Disclosure to and Influence on Social Networks

One primary reason that individuals disclose information to others about their romantic relationships is because they want psychological support (Baxter & Widenmann, 1993). Romantic relationships can be uncertain and confusing, and it is human nature to talk about issues or concerns in order to resolve them. Relationships can also be satisfying and rewarding, thereby compelling people to give information to those who are closest to them in the hopes of being able to share their happiness. Individuals also desire certain responses from those to whom they disclose, especially if those people
are close family or friends. Therefore, people do not disclose just any information to their social networks, but rather they carefully consider what they choose to talk about and they evaluate the impact of how and what they decide to disclose.

Individuals carefully monitor the information that they give to their social networks about their romantic relationships (Leslie, Huston, & Johnson, 1986). Because both the support that people receive from their social networks and their desire to maintain strong relationships with social networks is important, people put a great deal of consideration into determining the specific details that they share. A social network is affected in either a positive or negative way depending on what he is told regarding one’s romantic relationship, and consequently forms strong opinions about the relationship. Therefore, partners in romantic relationships often withhold certain information from those social networks from whom they anticipate negative reactions (Baxter & Widenmann, 1993). People desire certain levels of support and approval from their social networks, and therefore make conscious efforts to reveal to them only that information which will produce those positive opinions.

Past research also shows that throughout one’s life, certain social networks become more important to an individual than other networks (Due, Holstein, Lund, Modvig, & Avlund, 1999). Consequently, at one point in time, it is likely that some networks are subject to greater levels of influence. That is, members of romantic relationships consider what they disclose to a larger extent when they are sharing that information with a particularly important social network. According to Parks and colleagues (1983), people perceive greater support from their own family (not necessarily parents, but rather siblings or extended family) than from any other social network.
Friends are considered second to family in terms of how much support they are perceived to give. Sprecher and Felmlee (1992) also show that reactions from an individual’s own social network are more important than reactions from the partner’s network. Therefore, it is one’s own social network (as opposed to their partner’s) and, more specifically one’s family, that is of greatest concern to her when deciding what information to reveal about her romantic relationship and what information to withhold in order to receive the reaction or support that is desired.

Despite the fact that people perceive the most support from their families, parents appear to educe a different perception, thereby compelling people to use particular strategies when disclosing to their parents. According to Etcheverry and Agnew (2004), individuals actually perceive more positive support from their friends than from their parents, but are more motivated to comply with their parents’ wishes and opinions than with their friends’. Also, not only are individuals more concerned with their parents’ opinions, but parents are more likely to react negatively to information about their children’s romantic relationships (Baxter & Widenmann, 1993). Therefore, although individuals expect more negative reactions from their parents regarding their romantic relationships, their parents’ support is more important and more meaningful to them, and so they consequently make a greater attempt to receive that approval. To do this, they attempt to influence their parents to a high degree (Leslie et al., 1986) and they conceal more information from their parents than from other social networks (Baxter & Widenmann, 1993). Therefore, people try to persuade their parents more than their friends, thus demonstrating that the best way to influence one’s parents to have a good view of the relationship is to figure out the most positive information to reveal while also
determining that which one should conceal. It is in this manner that members of romantic relationships strategically disclose information and attempt to influence all of their social networks.

*Support from Social Networks and Perceived Approval: Predictors of Commitment*

As previously noted, social networks express certain levels of support and approval to members of romantic relationships. Depending on what is revealed to them, social networks form opinions about the relationships and view them in particular ways; in return, the partners in the romantic dyads are able to perceive the degree to which their social networks approve of and support their relationships. This perceived sense of approval serves two crucial functions: it compels the partners to act in certain ways, and also makes them feel more secure about their romantic relationships. Accordingly, both of these predict commitment and romantic involvement.

Commitment is defined by Cox et al. (1997) as “a long-term orientation toward a relationship, including feelings of psychological attachment and intentions to persist through both good and bad times” (p. 80). Commitment is enhanced by factors including satisfaction level, quality of alternatives, and investment size (Cox et al., 1997). In addition, Sprecher (1988) defines commitment as “an individual’s intent to maintain the relationship and to remain psychologically attached to it” (p. 318). Therefore, commitment is a critical aspect of romantic relationships and it is the strongest single predictor of decisions to endure in relationships (Le & Agnew, 2003). People remain in relationships because they feel a sense of commitment. Consequently, the notion that perceived approval predicts commitment is crucial to the understanding of influence on social networks in romantic relationships.
Perceived approval causes people to act in particular ways; and the intricate association between how people act in response to perceived support predicts commitment. The Theory of Reasoned Action, posited by Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) explains how this process takes place. As indicated by Etcheverry and Agnew (2004), according to this theory both normative beliefs and motivation to comply are necessary to predict whether a social network member will influence one’s intentions to perform a certain behavior. Normative beliefs are defined as a person’s perception that a social network member feels the person either should or should not perform a specific action. Motivation to comply is the tendency to act in accordance with the perceived opinions of a social network member. High levels of motivation to comply are associated with a strong impact of the normative beliefs attributed to that network member and low levels will lead to little or no impact of the normative beliefs attributed to that network member. In other words, normative beliefs determine whether one feels that a particular social network member thinks that he should carry out a certain action and if this feeling is strong, in accordance with motivation to comply, he will be more likely to perform the behavior. Therefore, normative beliefs and motivation to comply both contribute to one’s intention to actually behave in a certain way.

Theory of Reasoned Action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975) proposes that normative beliefs ascribed to a specific network member, weighted by the motivation to comply with that person will form subjective norms about performing or not performing a behavior. Subjective norms depict the overall degree and direction of social influence felt by a person when making a decision about what action to perform. They also significantly predict romantic relationship commitment level. Therefore, the Theory of
Reasoned Action serves as a good example of how perceived approval can effectively predict commitment (Etcheverry & Agnew, 2004).

Perceived approval also makes partners in romantic relationships feel more secure. This serves as another mechanism by which perceived approval positively correlates with commitment. Support predicts commitment, and commitment is greater to the extent that social support is high (Sprecher, 1988). In other words, the relationship is transitive. As romantic involvement intensifies, so does support; and as support increases, romantic involvement strengthens (Parks et al., 1983). According to Sprecher and Felmlee (1992), transitivity is just one of three aspects that is related to perceived approval and commitment. To begin with, they claim that transitive relationships are stable and fulfilling, whereas intransitive ones are upsetting. This is because those who feel that their networks approve of their romantic relationships experience more cognitive balance and consequently more attraction for their partners than those who receive expressions of disapproval from their networks. As the term transitivity implies, the more support one feels, the more likely he is to find his partner attractive, feel happy, be committed, and therefore have a positive and successful relationship; and in reverse, the happier and committed one is in his relationship, the better the relationship will be and the more support he is likely to receive.

Uncertainty Reduction Theory (Sprecher & Felmlee, 1992) is also related to perceived approval and commitment. According to this perspective, the best way to ensure that a relationship develops successfully is by reducing uncertainty and doubts about one’s partner and relationship. At the beginning of a relationship, one often knows very little about his or her partner and is unsure of the type of companion he or she will
be. Obviously, one way to reduce this uncertainty is to get to know the partner better and to form one’s own opinion. However, another significant way is to get confirmation from one’s network that the “right” choice has been made. If one’s social network feels that this person is a good mate and gives support for this choice, one is likely to agree and to feel more secure in his or her choice. People usually trust and rely on their social networks, and so therefore, getting approval of their partner from their networks leads them to believe that the partner is in fact a worthy companion.

Finally, Sprecher and Felmlee (1992) discuss the fact that expressions of support from networks act as barrier forces that help to keep people together. Receiving great amounts of support and approval from social networks helps to solidify relationships to such a high degree that it makes it harder than usual for negative reactions to affect them. This relates back to the notion of transitivity, in that relationships that receive support become stronger, and stronger relationships receive greater amounts of support, making the units so solid that they become difficult to penetrate with feelings other than approval. Perceived approval and commitment are tightly associated and the connection is an overlapping and reciprocal one.

To examine this topic further, it is important to consider both the difference between a social network’s view and a romantic partner’s view of the dyad, as well as the relationship between the social network’s opinion about the couple and the partner’s perceived belief about that social network’s opinion. Research shows that unlike members of romantic relationships, who have illusions that serve to both further the relationships and to shield the partners from negative aspects of the relationships, social networks, in comparison, have considerably unbiased opinions regarding the romantic
relationships. Because of this impartial outlook, and because social networks also receive a great deal of information about the relationships, their opinions and feelings about it are very accurate (Agnew et al., 2001). Network perceptions of commitment significantly predict relationship dissolution, and social network members are often correct about whether a relationship will persist (Agnew et al., 2001). Following this idea, the degree to which social network members feel a relationship will last, in turn, affects commitment (Cox et al., 1997). If a social network member feels that the romantic relationship will endure, commitment is likely to be stronger. In addition, commitment is also more intense if one believes that her social network member feels that the relationship will continue (Etcheverry & Agnew, 2004). Therefore, not only does a social network member’s actual opinion predict commitment, but people’s perceived beliefs about their social networks’ opinions also predict commitment.

It is at this point that many studies admit to limitations in their research because although it has been shown that social network members’ opinions predict commitment and that perceived approval predicts commitment, until recently, it has not been demonstrated that the two are equivalent. Work by Etcheverry, Le, and Charania (in press), however, does precisely that. They show that individuals’ reports of their opinions regarding particular romantic relationships are significantly positively associated with participants’ perceived beliefs. That is, members of romantic relationships are very accurate when it comes to correctly determining how their social networks feel towards their relationships and their romantic partners. This evidence is extremely beneficial for this type of research, for it implies that when attempting to determine how much support is felt by certain social network members towards a romantic relationship, it may be
sufficient to get information from only the members of the relationship regarding their perceptions of network approval as opposed to obtaining information from multiple sources.

The research on disclosure to social networks by members of romantic relationships covers many aspects. Studies include findings on things such as to whom one discloses, how one goes about disclosing, whether one chooses to withhold information, and how disclosed information affects both how social network members view a relationship and also the relationship itself. More specifically, research has focused on two particularly relevant topics to the current study. The first is strategic disclosure and influencing. As previously discussed, this includes making a conscious decision about whether to share specific information with certain people. Those who strategically disclose (Baxter & Widenmann, 1993) choose to withhold information from people depending upon the reactions that they expect to receive, and those who influence social network members choose to share information that they feel will cause people to develop particular opinions regarding their relationships. The second focus of research on this topic is perceived approval and support. Depending on the extent to which people strategically disclose and influence their social network, they will perceive a certain level of approval from that network member. One’s attempts to manipulate the information that her social network receives, serves the purpose of allowing the network member to form an opinion of the relationship, thereby allowing the member of the relationship to form her own opinion of how she feels her network member regards it. This perceived approval in turn predicts commitment and is associated with how much romantic
involvement is felt by the member of the relationship, and therefore, how likely the relationship is to persist.

While all of this research is notable, it overlooks one major aspect of this topic. Nowhere has one studied what people disclose to their social networks. And yet, Parks and Adelman (1983) suggest that the specific type or content of the information disclosed may be more important than other related factors. The particular topics that people disclose to their social networks may have a great effect on many aspects of romantic relationships. Therefore, we intend to explore the content of what people disclose to their social networks, focusing specifically on sexual activity, the personality of one’s partner, the partner’s daily activities, the partner’s social networks, events, the future of the relationship, and the status of the relationship. Participants will complete a survey assessing the extent that they disclose information regarding each of the seven above topics to their mother, their father, and their best friend. The survey will also ask participants to answer questions concerning their perceived approval from each of those three network members as well as their relationship commitment. This will allow us to examine the impact of what one discloses on his perceived level of approval from a particular social network member, and then the association between approval and commitment.

Hypotheses

**H1:** Males will disclose less information overall to social network members than females.

Research shows that women disclose more information to their social networks than do males (Agnew et al., 2001; Sprecher, 1988). Women discuss more intimate details of their lives, they censor less of what they disclose, and they share more realistic
portrayals of their lives (Agnew et al., 2001). Overall, women talk more about their personal lives and go into more detail than do men. This is due to the fact that women and men have very different relationships with their friends. Women tend to enjoy talking, listening, and sharing emotions and intimate information with their friends, whereas men prefer taking part in activities and discussing nonintimate topics like hobbies and sports (Caldwell & Peplau, 1982). While women consider sitting in a close setting and spending time conversing about their lives to be pleasurable and satisfying, men feel that physically doing things with their friends and talking about less personal information is more enjoyable and fulfilling. Because of this phenomenon, a woman’s family and friends are actually the most adept at predicting the survival of the relationship, and the more that they approve, the longer it is likely to survive (Sprecher & Felmlee, 1992). Women’s social networks receive a great deal of detailed, specific, and accurate information regarding their relationships, as opposed to men’s, who most likely only hear vague details, and in addition, receive that information sporadically. This further demonstrates the fact that women do indeed disclose more information to their social networks than do men, and that therefore, in accordance with our hypothesis, males will disclose less information overall to social network members than will females.

**H2:** Members of romantic relationships will disclose more information to females than to males, and therefore will also disclose more to their mothers than to their fathers.

Research by Aukett, Ritchie, and Mill (1988) is based on the notion that women talk more, share more emotions, and discuss problems more often with their female friends, while men more often partake in activities with their male friends. That is, work showing that women enjoy talking and sharing with their friends while men enjoy
actually doing things with theirs, applies for the most part to same-sex friendships. However, Aukett and colleagues (1988) find that when asked to compare same-sex and cross-sex friendships, both women and men say that they derive more emotional support and therapeutic value from their female friends than from their male friends. Therefore, even though women share more and tend to talk more often about their personal lives, both males and females are equally likely to cite their female acquaintances as the people to whom they disclose. Consequently, when men do choose to share intimate details of their lives, they do so with women. Because, as previously stated, people gain a great deal psychologically from earning emotional support, and because women tend to be the ones from whom people draw their emotional support, we propose that all people in general will disclose more to females than to males; and therefore, will also disclose more to their mothers than to their fathers.

**H3:** Positive disclosure will be positively associated with perceived levels of approval.

It is logical to imagine that the more positive things one discloses to someone, the more support she will expect to receive from that person. Baxter and Widenmann (1993) demonstrate that individuals are more likely to conceal information from their parents because they expect more negative reactions from them. According to Leslie et al. (1986), females perceive less approval from their parents than do males, but try to influence them more. This reveals that they expect that if they make a greater attempt to share positive things with their parents, their parents’ opinions regarding the relationships will change and become more positive. And finally, research shows that in general, negative events have a greater impact and more power than positive ones, implying that logically, negative disclosure items should have a very strong negative effect on
approval, thereby leaving a recipient with a disapproving view of a relationship, whereas positive disclosure items should give someone a less negative opinion (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001). Therefore, more positive disclosure will correlate with higher levels of perceived approval, and more negative disclosure will correlate with lower levels of perceived approval.

**H4**: *Perceived network approval will be positively associated with commitment.*

While it has been demonstrated that network perceptions accurately predict commitment, the important focus here is on perceived support from social network members, which, as previously mentioned, has also been reported in the literature. According to Cox and colleagues (1997), although commitment is usually strengthened by more personal factors such as “wanting to persist,” “feeling bound to persist,” or “having no choice but to persist,” it is also affected by what they refer to as “social prescription,” which they define as the belief that significant network members support persisting in a relationship. Therefore, social prescription refers to the conviction that one “ought to persist” and this accounts for feelings of commitment in ways that extend beyond the other factors. Research also shows that the more approval one perceives from his social network, the higher his level of feelings of commitment (Etcheverry & Agnew, 2004; Parks et al., 1983; Sprecher & Felmlee, 1992). Furthermore, as previously stated, network perceptions of couple commitment also predict couple breakup (Agnew et al., 2001). Therefore, perceived approval correlates with many aspects of commitment, and as a result, the two will be positively associated.
**H5:** *The closer a partner is to his or her social network, the more information overall he or she will disclose to that social network.*

In their research, Leslie and colleagues (1986) discuss the influencing of social networks by young adults in romantic relationships. They find a number of differences regarding who people attempt to influence, the extent to which they try to influence, and at what points or for what reasons they disclose or withhold information. One of their findings refers to closeness: people who are closer to their parents try to influence them more than those who are not as close. The closer people are to their social networks, the more important it is to them that the network members approve of their relationships. Therefore, they will disclose more to those people in order to guarantee that the network members will be more likely to support their relationships. From there, Leslie et al. (1986) also demonstrate that the closer one is to his or her social network member, the more likely that network member is to approve of the relationship. Therefore, they are also more likely to disclose information to that network member in order to attempt to keep the support levels high and to ensure that the network member’s opinion does not change. Past research suggests that the closer a partner is to his or her social network member, the more he or she will disclose to that social network member.

**H6:** *Members of romantic relationships will disclose more positive information to their parents than to their friends and more negative information to their friends than to their parents.*

Although it has been demonstrated that people are more likely to disclose positive information to those from whom they perceive more approval, research also shows that when it comes to parents, there is a slight discrepancy. While Parks and colleagues (1983) show that individuals perceive a greater level of support from their family than from any other social network group, when referring specifically to parents (as opposed
to siblings, extended family, etc.), the dynamics tend to change. According to Etcheverry and Agnew (2004), as well as Baxter and Widenmann (1993), people perceive more support from their friends than from their parents. However, they are more concerned with their parents’ opinion and are more likely to comply with their parents. They are also preoccupied with the fact that their parents are more likely to react negatively to their romantic relationships. Therefore, individuals conceal more information from their parents and monitor more carefully the information that they provide to them (Leslie et al., 1986). Despite the fact that they anticipate disapproval, people care much more about receiving support from their parents than from their friends, and therefore make greater attempts to influence their opinion. Consequently, we believe that members of romantic relationships will disclose more positive information to their parents and more negative information to their friends.

**H7: Exploratory Hypotheses:** Members of romantic relationships will disclose more information regarding sexual activity and events to their friends than to their parents, and more information regarding daily activities, personality, and the future of the relationship to their parents than to their friends.

A major aim of this study will be to create an inventory that will tap dimensions that have not been previously investigated. Therefore, these categories will be partially based on the past literature, and our hypotheses about them considered to be exploratory. Hence, we present our own rationale as to why these hypotheses should be supported, despite the fact that there is little past work to serve as the foundation for these predictions.

Individuals are likely to be uncomfortable discussing their sex lives with their parents. Because there is only a limited amount of research on this topic, and because the research pertains only to adolescents, the hypothesis remains exploratory. Papini, Farmer,
Clark, and Snell (1988) demonstrate that adolescents engage in more sexual disclosure with their friends than with their parents. Therefore, by extension, older individuals in romantic relationships may be more likely to discuss sex with their friends than with their parents. Once people reach sexual maturity and especially when they begin to develop an active sex life, they realize how private it is and often feel the most unwilling to discuss this topic with their parents. Their friends, however, are on a comparable level socially and at a similar stage in their lives, and thus are the perfect network with whom to discuss sexual activity. Therefore, it is our hypothesis that members of romantic relationships will be most likely to discuss this information with their friends.

In cases where participants go to school with their significant other as well as with their closest friend, it is also more likely that they will disclose information regarding events that occur in their relationships to friends than to parents. There are two major reasons why this could be the case. To begin with, a friend’s physical presence makes him or her a more probable candidate for conversation. One might return home from a date and physically see the friend and therefore be able to discuss the event that just occurred. Or, one may have to refuse an invitation to something from the friend because of an already planned event with her romantic partner, thereby causing her absence to be noticed and making the friend likely to ask about the event. Therefore, it is more probable that she will talk to her friends about it than to her parents. Also, because two people who go to the same school are both familiar with the school events, it is easier to discuss something like a school dance with a friend than with parents, who are unacquainted with the particular occurrences at school functions. While events such as these could potentially be discussed with parents, people will be less likely to do so since their
parents know less about the intricacies of school functions and conversations would have to include more detailed and unnecessary description. Therefore, primarily due to the logistics of living at school with one’s friends and romantic partner, one will discuss events more often with them than with her parents.

Events are very different from daily activities because while events must involve both members of a relationship, daily activities can belong to only one partner. This means that while an event could be interesting to both a friend and a parent because neither is included, a daily activity might be of no interest to a friend who also participates in that activity. In other words, if a person attends the same school as his friend and romantic partner, it is likely that some of their daily activities will overlap. For example, a person’s friend and partner may have a class together or play on the same sports team. Therefore, there is no need to disclose information about those activities to that friend. A parent, however, has no way of knowing about their child’s partner’s daily activities if not directly told. Also, a parent who is not present on a day to day basis, and therefore cannot observe for himself the activities in which his child’s partner partakes, might be more likely to ask questions and elicit information about how that person spends his time. Therefore, we hypothesize that individuals will be more likely to discuss their partner’s daily activities with their parents than their friends.

People will also talk about their partner’s personality with their parents more than with their friends. Again, if one goes to school with both his significant other and his closest friend, the friend is likely to know about the partner’s personality and is even likely to be friends with him or her. It may also be more important to parents to know about their child’s partner’s personality in order to ensure that he or she is a good person
who treats their child well and with respect. Friends, on the other hand, may be somewhat more interested in more superficial information like sexual activity and events. Parents tend to have a greater investment in their child’s well being than do friends, and therefore are more concerned that the partner is a good, honorable, well-meaning person.

And finally, we hypothesize that members of romantic relationships will be more likely to discuss the future of their relationships with their parents than with their friends. Because parents devote themselves to raising their children and providing them with happy and successful lives, they are more invested in their children’s futures than are friends. Therefore, they ask more questions about the futures of their relationships, and thus force more conversation about them and receive more information.

**Focus of Present Study**

The current study will use research on social networks and romantic relationships to consider disclosure from a new perspective. We will depart from the existing literature, which focuses primarily on whether disclosure in general affects romantic relationships, and instead look at what people disclose to their social networks and how that affects romantic relationships. Specifically, we will look at the particular items that are disclosed to certain social networks, then how what is disclosed is associated with perceived approval, and finally, how perceived approval is associated with commitment. As opposed to studying strategic disclosure or influencing, we will examine the specific categories of information that one is most likely to discuss in regards to his romantic relationship and then consider the further effects on the relationship.
Method

Participants

One hundred and eighty-eight participants (after empty and repeated lines were eliminated from an original 292) were recruited through online advertisements on the internet bulletin board Facebook (facebook.com; Le et al., under review). This is a very popular social network, which is primarily used by college students and utilized by many people on a daily basis. To encourage participation, respondents were entered into a lottery for two 50 dollar prizes. Sixty males and 128 females with a combined average age of 20.24 ($SD = 1.48$) participated. One hundred and seventy-nine people were students (with three not answering). The majority of participants were Caucasian (151), nine were Asian American, eight were Latino/Hispanic, four were African American, two were Middle Eastern, and 13 were either something unlisted or multiracial (one person did not answer). Although there were no constraints on how long the relationships must be, many had been together for at least one year (70) and the average duration was 19.08 months ($SD = 13.54$). Most participants (148) also stated that they defined their relationships as one in which they date only each other.

Materials

Participants were given a total of five distinct inventories. The first was a general background questionnaire, which included questions such as the subjects’ sex, age, ethnicity, location of residency, and whether he or she was a college student. The questionnaire also assessed the frequency of both face-to-face interactions as well as any other type of communication between participants’ social networks and themselves. Subjects were also asked how long they had been in their current relationships and what
the statuses of their relationships were. Finally, they were asked to identify their friend, other than their romantic partner, to whom they disclosed the most information about their romantic relationships (see Appendix A).

Participants also completed the commitment subscale from Rusbult, Martz, and Agnew’s (1998) Investment Model Scale ($\alpha = .84$; for all reliabilities see Table 1), which was comprised of seven questions rated on a Likert Scale that measured how committed one was to his relationship. It included statements such as, “I want our relationship to last for a very long time,” “I am committed to maintaining my relationship with my partner,” and “I am oriented toward the long-term future of my relationship” (see Appendix B).

Participants also completed Aron, Aron, and Smollan’s (1992) Inclusion of Other in the Self Scale, which measured interpersonal closeness between two people. This was used to measure how close one felt to each of his or her three social network members (mother, father, and friend). The scale was a single-item pictorial measure that consisted of seven Venn-like diagrams that each represented different degrees of overlap of two circles (see Appendix C). The figures were designed so that the total area of each figure remained constant (meaning that as the overlap of the circles increased, so did the diameter), and the degree of overlap progressed linearly, creating a seven-step, interval-level scale. Participants were told to select the picture that best described their relationships.

Participants also received Etcheverry and Agnew’s (2004) Perceived Approval Measure ($\alpha = .97$). This consisted of four questions, again rated on a Likert Scale. This scale included statements such as, “This person thinks I [should not/should] continue in my current romantic relationship,” and “This person thinks I [do not have/have] a current
romantic relationship worth keeping” (see appendix D). Again, participants were asked to answer the four questions in regards to all three of their network members.

The final inventory that participants received was Harmon and Layfield’s Disclosure Index ($\alpha = .98$). This was created by the experimenter and was meant to determine the specific matters that people disclose to their social networks. The scale consisted of seven categories, each containing three basic questions that were spun in both positive and negative ways in order to produce a total of 42 disclosure items. The seven categories were sexual activity, events, partner’s social networks, future of the relationship, status of the relationship, and partner’s daily activities. These categories were inspired by the research from Leslie et al. (1986), in which participants completed a survey regarding the methods of influence that are most frequently used by young adults and by parents. The questions in that study referred to a number of various influencing behaviors such as talking to one’s parents directly about his or her relationship and performing suggestive actions like bringing one’s partner home to meet his or her parents. The questions related to talking to parents prompted both our categories, which we felt were the most important topics of disclosure, as well as the determination of those individuals with whom people would be most likely to discuss these subjects. Some specific questions from that study were: “[I] talk about my partner’s family life and background,” “[I] talk to [my] parent about how my partner acts,” “[I] talk to my parent about what my partner and I do on dates,” and “[I] tell my parent how I feel about my partner and our relationship” (p. 60). These examples were direct inspirations for our items, which included statements such as, “I discuss positive things that my partner does for me,” “I talk about the qualities of my partner that I find endearing,” “I disclose things
that I like about my partner’s parents,” and “I discuss those activities in which my partner participates that I find interesting” (see Appendix E). Participants were asked how likely they were to talk about all 42 items with their mothers ($\alpha = .96$), fathers ($\alpha = .97$), and friends ($\alpha = .97$). We also discussed the disclosure inventory with a small focus group to determine whether the questions could be answered in regards to one’s mother, father, and closest friend. All participants reported that the questions were clear and logical.

Procedure

The study was advertised via Facebook over the internet at a number of different colleges and universities across the United States, as well as through community discussion-based internet boards at Haverford College. Participants voluntarily chose to take part in the study by answering the advertisement and completing the various surveys online.

Results

Overview of Analytic Strategy

In this study, various types of data analyses were run to test all of our hypotheses. Analyses of Variance (ANOVAs; both repeated measures and factorial) were run, as were $t$-tests (both independent and paired) to investigate Hypotheses 1, 2, 6, and 7. In addition, correlations and multiple regressions were used to test Hypotheses 3, 4, and 5. A significance level of $p < .05$ was used for all analyses conducted except where stated otherwise.

Hypothesis 1

Hypothesis 1, which stated that males would disclose less information overall to social network members than would females, was partially supported. An independent
samples $t$-test was performed to examine whether there was a significant difference between the mean disclosure by males to fathers ($M = 2.83, SD = 1.17$) and by females to fathers ($M = 2.57, SD = 1.21$). There was no significant gender difference between disclosure by males and by females to fathers ($t(184) = 1.37, p = .17$). Another independent samples $t$-test was performed to investigate whether there was a significant difference between the mean disclosure by males to mothers ($M = 3.39, SD = 1.03$) and by females to mothers ($M = 3.65, SD = 1.23$). Again, there was no significant gender difference between disclosure by males and by females to mothers ($t(186) = -1.42, p = .16$). And finally, a third independent samples $t$-test was run to test whether there was a significant difference between the mean disclosure by males to friends ($M = 4.71, SD = 1.25$) and by females to friends ($M = 5.17, SD = 1.19$). These results revealed a significant gender difference between disclosure by males and by females to friends ($t(186) = -2.46, p = .02$). Therefore, males did disclose less information than did females when talking to their friends, but not when talking to their parents.

_Hypothesis 2_

Hypothesis 2, which stated that members of romantic relationships would disclose more information to females than to males, and therefore would also disclose more to their mothers than to their fathers, also received partial support; a discrepancy was found in the amount disclosed by males and females to friends and to parents. First, a 2x2 Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used to determine whether males disclosed more to male friends ($M = 4.87, SD = 1.36$) or to female friends ($M = 4.24, SD = 0.78$) and whether females disclosed more to male friends ($M = 4.68, SD = 1.14$) or female friends ($M = 5.26, SD = 1.19$). There was no significant main effect for either friend sex.
(F(2,183) = .23, p = .80) or for participant sex (F(1,183) = 3.25, p = .07), although this was approaching significance in the predicted direction. There was, however, a significant interaction between friend sex and participant sex (F(1,183) = 7.12, p = .008) (see Table 2 and Figure 1). When nominating male friends, males disclosed more than when they nominated female friends. And, when nominating female friends, females disclosed more than when they nominated male friends.

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

A repeated measures ANOVA was performed to investigate the difference between the amount of information that males disclosed to both their mothers ($M = 3.39$, $SD = 1.03$) and fathers ($M = 2.83$, $SD = 1.17$) and that females disclosed to both their mothers ($M = 3.65$, $SD = 1.24$) and fathers ($M = 2.57$, $SD = 1.21$). A significant main effect was found such that regardless of sex, partners disclosed more to their mothers than to their fathers ($F(1,184) = 72.47, p < .001$). However, there was also a significant interaction between sex and disclosure to mothers and fathers, ($F(1,184) = 7.48, p = .007$; see Table 3 and Figure 2). Males disclosed more than females did to their fathers, and females disclosed more than males did to their mothers.
Hypothesis 3

A correlation was calculated to investigate the relationship between average positive disclosure and average perceived levels of approval; a strong positive relationship was found between the two ($r(184) = .51$, $p < .001$).

Another correlation was calculated to investigate the relationship between positive disclosure to fathers, mothers, and friends and average perceived approval from fathers, mothers, and friends. A strong positive relationship was found between positive disclosure and perceived approval for all three social networks (Fathers: $r(181) = .46$, $p < .001$; Mothers: $r(186) = .57$, $p < .001$; Friends: $r(185) = .31$, $p < .001$).

Finally, to test Hypothesis 3 further, perceived social network approval was regressed on disclosure to fathers, mothers, and friends. As shown in Table 4, disclosure to fathers and mothers, but not to friends, were each significant predictors of perceived approval, demonstrating that the previous correlation was driven by the relationship between positive disclosure and perceived approval to parents.

Hypothesis 4

Three different tests also revealed that this hypothesis was strongly supported. A correlation was calculated to investigate the relationship between perceived network approval and commitment; a positive association was found between the two ($r(186) = .28$, $p < .001$).

Another correlation was calculated to examine the relationship between perceived network approval from fathers, mothers, and friends and commitment from fathers, mothers, and friends. A positive relationship was found between perceived approval from friends and commitment ($r(185) = .45$, $p < .001$). However, a rather weak positive
relationship was found between perceived approval from fathers and commitment \( (r(182) = .16, p = .03) \), and no significant relationship was found between perceived approval from mothers and commitment \( (r(186) = .13, p = .08) \).

Due to this interesting finding, commitment was regressed on perceived social network approval from fathers, mothers, and friends to test this hypothesis further. As shown in Table 5, perceived approval from friends was a significant predictor of commitment, but perceived approval from mothers and fathers were not. Therefore, the association between perceived approval and commitment was being strongly driven by the relationship between the two in regards to friends.

**Hypothesis 5**

To test this hypothesis, a correlation was calculated to investigate the relationship between closeness to each social network (fathers, mothers, and friends) and average disclosure. A strong positive relationship was found between closeness to social network and average disclosure in all three cases (Fathers: \( r(184) = .45, p < .001 \); Mothers: \( r(186) = .50, p < .001 \); Friends: \( r(185) = .25, p < .001 \), thereby supporting our hypothesis.

To examine the relationships further, a test was performed to determine the difference between the magnitude of each correlation. There was a significant difference between the correlation with fathers and with friends \( (z = 2.18, p < .01) \), and between the correlation with mothers and with friends \( (z = 2.74, p < .01) \). However, there was no significant difference between the correlation with mothers and with fathers \( (z = .56, p = .58) \). Therefore, although closeness was a significant predictor of disclosure for all three social networks, it was a better predictor for mothers and for fathers than it was for friends. Accordingly, two possibilities existed: the first was that if people felt close to
their parents, then they disclosed a lot to them, but if people felt close to their friends, they did not necessarily disclose to them. The other possibility was that if people disclosed a lot to their parents, then they tended to be close to them, but if people disclosed to their friends, they did not necessarily need to feel so close.

**Hypothesis 6**

Two tests were used to examine the first part of this hypothesis. First, a paired samples *t*-test was calculated to compare the mean amount of positive disclosure to parents to the mean amount of positive disclosure to friends. The average amount of positive information disclosed to parents was 3.96 (*SD* = 1.30) and the average amount of positive information disclosed to friends was 5.74 (*SD* = 1.06). In contrast to our hypothesis, participants were significantly more likely to disclose positive information to their friends than to their parents (*t*(187) = 19.44, *p* < .001).

To investigate this finding further, a repeated measures ANOVA was calculated to test the difference between the mean amount of positive information disclosed to mothers (*M* = 4.48, *SD* = 1.38), fathers (*M* = 3.42, *SD* = 1.62), and friends (*M* = 5.74, *SD* = 1.06). A significant difference was found between positive information disclosed to social networks (*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 either their mothers (*t*(187) = -12.61, *p* < .001), or to their fathers (*t*(185) = -20.27, *p* < .001). Partners also disclosed significantly more positive information to their mothers than to their fathers (*t*(185) = -9.60, *p* < .001).
To test the second part of this hypothesis, a paired samples *t*-test was calculated to compare the mean amount of negative disclosure to parents to the mean amount of negative disclosure to friends. The average amount of negative information disclosed to parents was 2.27 (*SD* = 1.06) and the average amount of negative information disclosed to friends was 4.30 (*SD* = 1.77). In support of our hypothesis, participants were significantly more likely to disclose negative information to their friends than to their parents (*t*(187) = 17.64 *p* < .001).

To examine these relationships further, a repeated measures ANOVA was calculated to test the difference between the amount of negative information disclosed to mothers (*M* = 2.65, *SD* = 1.33), fathers (*M* = 1.88, *SD* = 1.11), and friends (*M* = 4.30, *SD* = 1.77). A significant difference was found between negative information disclosed to social networks (*F*(2,370) = 239.32, *p* < .001). Follow-up analyses using *t*-tests (alpha adjusted to *p* < .017 due to multiple comparisons) revealed that partners disclosed significantly more negative information to their friends than to either their mothers (*t*(187) = -13.59, *p* < .001), or to 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). Generally, therefore, people disclosed more information (both positive and negative) to their friends than to their parents, but more information (both positive and negative) to their mothers than to their fathers.

**Hypothesis 7**

To investigate our exploratory hypotheses, a number of *t*-tests were computed. To begin with, a paired samples *t*-test was calculated to compare the amount of information regarding sex disclosed to parents to the amount of information regarding sex disclosed
to friends. The mean amount of sexual disclosure revealed to parents was 1.53 ($SD = .88$) and the mean amount of sexual disclosure revealed to friends was 4.60 ($SD = 1.92$). Participants were significantly more likely to reveal information regarding sex to their friends than to their parents ($t(187) = 21.73, \ p < .001$), thereby supporting our hypothesis.

A paired samples $t$-test was calculated to compare the amount of information regarding events revealed to parents to the amount of information regarding events revealed to friends. The mean amount of event disclosure revealed to parents was 3.67 ($SD = 1.23$) and the mean amount of event disclosure revealed to friends was 5.61 ($SD = 1.15$). In support of our hypothesis, participants were significantly more likely to reveal information regarding events to their friends than to their parents ($t(187) = 20.25, \ p < .001$).

A paired samples $t$-test was calculated to compare the amount of information regarding partner’s daily activity revealed to parents to the amount of information regarding partner’s daily activity revealed to friends. The mean amount of partner’s daily activity information disclosed to parents was 3.61 ($SD = 1.24$) and the mean amount of partner’s daily activity information disclosed to friends was 4.95 ($SD = 1.39$). In contrast to our hypothesis, participants were significantly more likely to reveal information about their partner’s daily activity to their friends than to their parents ($t(187) = 13.63, \ p < .001$).

A paired samples $t$-test was calculated to compare the amount of information regarding partner’s personality revealed to parents to the amount of information regarding partner’s personality revealed to friends. The mean amount of personality
information revealed to parents was 3.41 (SD = 1.18) and the mean amount of personality information revealed to friends was 5.08 (SD = 1.30). Again, in contrast to our hypothesis, participants were significantly more likely to reveal personality information to their friends than to their parents (t(187) = 16.99, p < .001).

Finally, a paired samples t-test was calculated to compare the amount of information about the future disclosed to parents to the amount of information about the future disclosed to friends. The mean amount of future information disclosed to parents was 2.82 (SD = 1.16) and the mean amount of future information disclosed to friends was 4.79 (SD = 1.36). In contrast to our hypothesis, participants were significantly more likely to reveal future information to their friends than to their parents (t(187) = 16.92, p < .001).

Discussion

While a large number of our hypotheses were strongly supported, for each one, whether confirmed or not, there were interesting and often unexpected implications that evolved throughout the data analysis process. When in accordance with our hypotheses, the data demonstrated valuable information regarding disclosure to social networks in romantic relationship. And, similarly, when contrary to our hypotheses, again the results implied unanticipated but equally valuable knowledge. Overall, therefore, this study suggests that there are significant trends in disclosure and that the topic is an important one for research on romantic relationships.

Hypothesis 1

There was partial support for this hypothesis such that a difference occurred in relation to disclosure to friends and to parents. While initial research from Agnew et al.
(2001) and Sprecher (1988) led us to predict that males would disclose less information overall to social networks than would females, our results demonstrated that actually, they only disclosed less information to their friends. When speaking to their parents, however, both males and females disclosed similar amounts of information about their romantic relationships. This finding is very interesting for it suggests that there may be a fundamental difference between the relationship that one has with his or her parents and with his or her friends. Parents may be considered either more important or more interested and therefore more deserving of information. Or, males (who are generally less eager to share information) may be more willing to disclose to their parents because of a unique bond that the two have that does not exist between a male and his friends. A number of solutions to this finding may exist and only through further research might they be revealed.

Hypothesis 2

While the partial support for this hypothesis also demonstrated a divide between disclosure to friends and to parents, the interactions that were revealed proved to be the most telling findings. The original hypothesis, based on research by Aukett and colleagues (1988), that members of romantic relationships would disclose more information to females than to males and therefore would also disclose more to their mothers than to their fathers was supported to an extent. According to our results, both males and females disclosed more information overall to their mothers than to their fathers. However, the interaction here showed that males disclosed more than females to their fathers, and females disclosed more than males to their mothers.
Because participants selected only one friend, we were unable to compare disclosure by each participant to both a male and female friend. Therefore, we could only determine if people were more likely to nominate a male or female as their friend, but not whether there would have been a similar relationship between disclosure to friends and disclosure to parents (i.e., overall all people disclosing more to female than to male friends). In spite of this, however, there was still an interesting and related interaction in that males who disclosed to male friends shared more than males who disclosed to female friends. And females who disclosed to female friends shared more than females who disclosed to male friends. Therefore, while the prediction that males would disclose less than females overall was not fully supported, the interactions displayed an even more interesting finding, that the amount of disclosure by males and females depends to a great extend on the recipient of that disclosure. That is, it may be that while overall, people do feel more compelled to talk to females than to males, men may feel particular connections with other male counterparts that females do not, and therefore talk with them to a greater extent.

*Hypothesis 3*

While results demonstrated that this hypothesis, which stated that positive disclosure would be positively associated with perceived levels of approval, was also supported, multiple regression revealed that there was more underlying the association than originally thought based only on correlational analyses. Generally, average positive disclosure was associated with overall perceived levels of approval, and positive disclosure was also associated with perceived approval from each social network. However, after further investigation, the regression showed that disclosure to mothers
and fathers were each significant predictors of perceived approval, but disclosure to friends was not. Therefore, the original correlation was driven by the strong association between disclosure and perceived approval from parents. Because the relationship between positive disclosure and perceived approval for parents was significant, while the one for friends was not, this again implies that the relationships that people have with their parents and with their friends are very different and thus result in two distinct communication styles. That is, either people feel that the positive information that they share with their parents has a different affect on their perceived approval than it does on their friends’, or they believe that their parents and their friends express different levels of approval and therefore, require different types and amounts of disclosure in order to influence the support that they perceive. Regardless, it is evident that the two relationships differ and further investigation as to why is necessary.

Hypothesis 4

Much like Hypothesis 3, Hypothesis 4 was also strongly supported by correlational analyses; yet again multiple regression demonstrated that the data were more interesting than originally expected. This hypothesis was the most strongly supported by the past literature, for research by Etcheverry and Agnew (2004), Sprecher and Felmlee (1992), and Parks et al. (1983) showed that the more approval one perceives from her social network, the higher her level of feelings of commitment. Our results were consistent with these; a significant correlation was found between overall perceived network approval and average commitment, as well as between perceived approval from each social network and commitment. Again, however, the regression showed that the relationships that people have with their friends differ from those that they have with
their parents. According to our data, perceived approval from friends was a significant predictor of commitment, but perceived approval from both mothers and fathers was not. Therefore, in this case, the original correlation was being driven by the strong association between perceived approval from friends and commitment.

While it may seem curious that the relationship between positive disclosure and perceived approval was significant for parents but not for friends, whereas the relationship between perceived approval and commitment was significant for friends but not for parents, it can be better understood by recalling that according to Etcheverry and Agnew (2004), as well as to Baxter and Widenmann (1993), people perceive more support from their friends than from their parents. Therefore, it may be that because of this fact, the higher perceived levels of support from friends are more accessible and therefore correlate with commitment. And further, since people already have elevated levels of perceive approval from their friends, they seek it more from their parents and therefore see their positive disclosure as having more of an effect on the support from their parents. That is, since they don’t otherwise perceive as much approval from their parents, people are more likely to see their positive disclosure as making a difference.

These results again emphasize that the connections that people have with their parents and their friends greatly differ; that difference affects what people share with their various social networks, what they perceive from their networks, and how their associations with their networks affect them and their romantic relationships.

Hypothesis 5

Considering the interesting finding that people’s relationships with their parents and with their friends truly differ in a number of significant ways, Hypothesis 5 served as
a particularly crucial one for attempting to determine what some of the underlying reasons for this discovery might be. As stated previously, Leslie and colleagues (1986) demonstrated that the closer people are to certain social networks, the more important it is to them that the network members approve of their relationships. Therefore, people may disclose more to those individuals in order to ensure that the network members will be more likely to support their relationships. Our results supported this idea, for strong positive relationships were found between closeness to all three social network members and average disclosure. However, after further examination of the magnitudes of the correlations, the data revealed that there were significant differences between the correlations for fathers and friends as well as for mothers and friends, but not between the correlations for fathers and mothers. Therefore, these results imply that if one is close to his parents, he will disclose a lot of information to them, but if he is close to his friends, he will not necessarily disclose to them. Or, alternatively, if one discloses a lot to his parents, he will tend to be close to them, yet if he discloses to his friends, he will not necessarily feel very close. People seem not to discriminate between friends in terms of who they talk to about their relationships, yet they must have a close bond with their parents in order to talk to them.

This may imply that people who are close to their parents may perceive more support from them. Since, as previously demonstrated, people usually disclose more to those from whom they perceive greater levels of approval, people who are close to their parents disclose more to them. Alternatively, since people may perceive relatively high levels of approval from their friends despite whether or not they are close to them, they
may feel less of a need to censor what they disclose, and therefore share a significant amount of information with all friends.

Not only do these results again highlight that there is a serious difference between people’s relationships with their parents and with their friends, but this hypothesis points at where research might be directed in order to unravel why patterns of disclosure may vary so greatly between these two groups. Closeness may be the underlying reason for the differences between relationships with social networks, and therefore the differences in disclosure styles.

_Hypothesis 6_

Our data indicated that whether negative or positive, people disclosed significantly more information overall to their friends than to their parents. Further, they also disclosed both more positive and more negative information to their mothers than to their fathers. Because the relationship between positive disclosure and perceived approval is much stronger for parents than it is for friends (as seen in Hypothesis 3), people may feel that what they are disclosing to their mothers and fathers is having a stronger impact on how their parents view their relationships, despite the fact that they are disclosing more to their friends. That is, they may disclose less to their parents because they are concerned about not receiving the support that they desire from them and therefore are more careful about exactly what they disclose. Alternatively, they may not discriminate as much regarding what and how much they disclose to their friends since they can already expect approval from them. These results, therefore, again reveal that disclosure to friends significantly differs from disclosure to parents, for there is a great disparity between those two relationships.
Hypothesis 7

While Hypothesis 7 was only partially supported, the results for each part of it paralleled the results relevant to the other hypotheses. In support of our predictions, people were significantly more likely to disclose information about sexual activity and about events to their friends than to their parents. However, in contrast to our predictions, people were also significantly more likely to disclose information regarding daily activities, partner’s personality, and the future to their friends than to their parents. Therefore, overall, people disclosed more information to their friends than to their mothers or fathers. This is consistent with the findings in Hypothesis 6, in that because people have less of a vested interest in the effect of their disclosure on their friends’ approval, they disclose more to their friends while being more careful in what they reveal to their parents and thereby disclosing less.

Not only do these findings emphasize further the varying relationships that people have with their parents and with their friends, but they also help to summarize much of what has been seen in testing the other hypotheses. A distinction has been observed between disclosure to friends and to parents in regards to how positive disclosure affects perceived approval, how perceived approval is associated with commitment, how closeness affects average disclosure, and how the amount and quality of disclosure differs. Overall, therefore, the results in this study, whether or not they support the original hypotheses, display not only that there is a significant underlying difference between people’s relationships with their parents and their friends, but also that those contrasting relationships influence disclosure style (particularly what and how much people disclose), and consequently, people’s romantic relationships as well.
Theoretical Contributions

This study expanded on past disclosure research by exposing new and significant aspects of disclosure and its relation to romantic relationships. In attempting to determine whether the specific items that people disclose to their social networks have a particular affect on romantic relationships, findings regarding differences between relationships with certain social networks were revealed, and the implications were multifaceted.

A main conclusion from this research is that the relationships that people have with their parents and with their friends greatly differ. People feel certain obligations towards each of these social networks, have particular bonds with them, and desire certain things from them. As a result, not only is disclosure in general affected, but the particular topics that people talk about are also influenced.

To begin with, because of the varying relationships that people have with their social networks, the amount that they disclose depends on the recipient. People disclose different amounts of information to males and to females, to their mothers and to their fathers, and to their friends and their parents. This relates directly to the fact that their bonds with these people are so different. Males may feel more similar to males and females to females and therefore disclose more to them. People may have a unique bond with their mothers that they do not with their fathers that again make them disclose more. And finally, people may feel certain desires to withhold information from their parents or may feel that they can speak more openly and candidly with their friends, thereby causing them to disclose more to them. Generally, therefore, due to the differing relationship between social networks, the amount of disclosure depends considerably on the recipient.
Because of these varying relationships, people also perceive different levels of support and approval from their parents and from their friends, which in turn affects their disclosure. Because they feel that their friends generally approve of their relationships more, they discriminate less when disclosing to them and are less cautious in what they reveal. In contrast, they do not disclose as much to their parents so as to ensure that they do not share things that could negatively affect their parents’ perceptions of the relationships.

The romantic relationships themselves are also greatly influenced by these differing relationships between parents and friends. Due to their greater perceived levels of support, the approval from friends significantly affects people’s commitment to their relationships whereas the same does not hold for parents; people’s commitment to their romantic relationships are not affected by their perceived approval from their parents. Therefore, again, these two separate relationships have a clear effect on romantic dyads.

Finally, and most importantly, the distinct relationships that people have with their parents and with their friends impacts communication style, or rather what people disclose. In regards to the seven categories of disclosure created for this study, people share more of each category of information with their friends than with their parents. This truly highlights the difference between the two relationships. Despite whether one lives apart from his parents or how invested his parents are in his future, because people’s bonds with their parents and their friends differ to such a great extent, they disclose more of any kind of information to their friends than to their parents.

A primary underlying reason for this difference in relationships may be closeness. How close one feels to his parents and to his friends may influence his disclosure in every
sense. It may affect how much he discloses, what he discloses, and to whom he discloses. Closeness is a factor that has many implications for disclosure to social networks in romantic relationships.

**Practical Contributions**

A common issue that arises in therapeutic settings is difficulties in communication between people and their social networks. The current research could greatly impact that area, for by emphasizing the natural distinction between one's parents and one's friends and how that affects disclosure, people could be more enlightened as to why they have some of the issues that they do. By being made aware of the fact that there are inherent differences between people's relationships with their social networks that influence what people talk about, how much they talk about, and to whom they talk, patients could dissect their communication issues with more ease. Furthermore, by understanding the relationship between closeness to social networks and disclosure, therapists could more easily advise patients as to the underlying causes and reasons for their issues. Therefore, this research could have enormous implications for the therapeutic world.

**Strengths and Limitations**

While the present study was generally quite successful, there were a few limitations that if addressed would have made it more complete. To begin with, as previously stated, it would have been beneficial to have participants pick both a male and a female friend as opposed to just their closest friend. This idea was eliminated due to the length of the survey, but had it been done, tests could have been run to determine whether males and females disclose different amounts of information to their male friends and
their female friends. That way, rather than knowing only whether males and females nominated males or females as their friends, analyses could have been run that compared their disclosure to both males and females. Being able to see who people nominated, however, was useful in that it allowed us to determine who participants truly disclosed the most to and who they felt were their closest friends. Had they been forced to choose both a male and female friend, the data might have been less telling, for they may have been compelled to describe their disclosure patterns to someone to whom they do not actually disclose very much.

Secondly, it would have been interesting to get a sample that included more participants who were not college students. We intentionally aimed our survey at students because they are the demographic who are most likely to have relationships of the nature that we were most interested (i.e., longer-term, exclusive, but unmarried), and because their relationships with their parents are such that while they are independent, they still rely on their parents to a large extent. However, as research shows, throughout one’s life, certain social networks become more important to an individual than other networks (Due et al., 1999). Therefore, it is possible that our findings about people disclosing more to their friends than to their parents might have been different with either an older or younger population. So, while using a student population was beneficial to our study, researching other populations may be important because their varying relationships with social networks might reveal different trends in disclosure.

Future Research

The present study effectively prepared future researchers to examine more thoroughly the difference between relationships with people and their parents and people
and their friends. We have concluded through our research that a distinct difference exists between these two relationships, and that this difference affects disclosure style as well as a number of things involved in romantic relationships, including perceived approval and commitment. Future research should focus on the nature of people’s relationships with their social networks. That is, what are these relationships like, specifically, that make them so different and that consequently cause people not only to disclose different things to their social networks, but also to feel differently about them? Furthermore, research should examine certain aspects of the present study more closely, such as what people’s motivations are for trying to influence their parents more than their friends and why people do not seem to care as much about how close they are to the friends to whom they disclose. Do people care more about their parents and their relationships with them, and therefore choose what and how much they disclose more carefully? Are people closer to their parents and therefore have more of a vested interest in what their parents think and accordingly what they disclose? Generally, now that this study has confirmed the difference between people’s relationships with their parents and with their friends, and that their difference greatly affects what and how much people disclose, future research must determine why this is the case and what the motivating factors are.

Conclusions

Departing from the past literature, which concentrates predominantly on whether disclosure in general affects romantic relationships, this study went further by considering how what people disclose influences their romantic relationships. Through our research, we were able to determine that a significant difference exists between people’s relationships with their parents and with their friends, and this in turn impacts
what people disclose, to whom they disclose, how much they disclose, and the effects that their disclosure has on their perceived approval from social networks as well as their commitment to their romantic relationships. This study took the theories surrounding disclosure and romantic relationships to a new level and opened the door for further research on the topic.
References


Network, support, and relational strain. *Social Science & Medicine, 48*, 661-673.


Appendix A

Background Questionnaire

For the purposes of this questionnaire, you will need to identify your friend, other than your romantic partner, to whom you disclose the most information about your romantic relationship. Please provide the initials and sex of this friend for your reference while completing the questionnaire.

Friend’s Initials _____  Friend’s Sex:  M  F

*Please note that this information is only for your reference. We will not attempt to identify or contact this person for any reason.

**Please refer specifically to this person at any time when you are asked about your friend later in the questionnaire.

1) Your Sex:  M  F
2) Your Age:_______
3) Your Ethnicity: (Please circle one)
   Caucasian/White  African American/Black  Asian American  Latino/Hispanic
   Middle Eastern  Native American  Other/Multiracial_______________
4) Where do you currently live?____________________
5) Are you currently a college student?  Yes  No
6) Is your romantic partner currently a college student?  Yes  No
7) Sex of your partner:  M  F
8) How long have you and your partner been in a romantic relationship?
   (Please fill in the total number of years, months, and weeks; e.g., 1 year, 6 months, and 2 weeks)
   _____year(s) _____month(s) and _____week(s)
9) Right now, what is the status of your relationship with your current romantic partner? (Please check one)
__ We date others as much as we date each other.
__ We date others, but see each other a lot.
__ We date only each other.
__ We are about to live together or be engaged.
__ We are engaged.
__ We are married/in a committed life-long partnership.

Please use the following scale to answer the next six questions.

More than once a week  About once a week  Several times a month
About once a month  Once every few months  Several times a year
About once a year  Several times a year

10) On average, how often do you have face-to-face interactions with your **mother** during a school year?

11) On average, how often do you interact (i.e., via internet, telephone, or any other form of communication aside from face to face) with your **mother** during a school year?

12) On average, how often do you have face-to-face interactions with your **father** during a school year?

13) On average, how often do you interact (i.e., via internet, telephone, or any other form of communication aside from face to face) with your **father** during a school year?

14) On average, how often do you have face-to-face interactions with your **friend** during a school year?

15) On average, how often do you interact (i.e., via internet, telephone, or any other form of communication aside from face to face) with your **friend** during a school year?
Appendix B

*Rusbult, Martz, and Agnew's Investment Model Scale (1998)*

*Commitment Level Items*

Please read each question carefully and choose the answer which best describes your relationship with your partner.

1. I want our relationship to last for a very long time (please circle a number).
   
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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>1</th>
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<th>5</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Agree</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>At All</td>
<td>Somewhat</td>
<td>Completely</td>
<td></td>
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2. I am committed to maintaining my relationship with my partner.
   
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<tr>
<td>At All</td>
<td>Somewhat</td>
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</table>

3. I would not feel very upset if our relationship were to end in the near future.
   
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<tr>
<td>At All</td>
<td>Somewhat</td>
<td>Completely</td>
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</table>

4. It is likely that I will date someone other than my partner within the next year.
   
<table>
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<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
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<tr>
<td>At All</td>
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</table>

5. I feel very attached to our relationship—very strongly linked to my partner.
   
<table>
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</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Agree</td>
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<tr>
<td>At All</td>
<td>Somewhat</td>
<td>Completely</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

6. I want our relationship to last forever.
   
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>3</th>
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<tr>
<td>At All</td>
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</table>

7. I am oriented toward the long-term future of my relationship (for example, I imagine being with my partner several years from now).
   
<table>
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<tr>
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<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
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<tr>
<td>At All</td>
<td>Somewhat</td>
<td>Completely</td>
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</table>
Appendix C

Aron, Aron, and Smollan’s Closeness Scale: Inclusion of Other in the Self (1992)

Please circle the picture below that best describes your current relationship with your partner/mother/father/friend.
Appendix D

*Etcheverry and Agnew’s Perceived Approval Measure (2004)*

Indicate how your **mother/father/friend** views your romantic relationship.

1) This person thinks I [should not/should] continue in my current romantic relationship.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
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<th>7</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>No Opinion</td>
<td>Should</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

2) This person thinks I [do not have/have] a current romantic relationship worth keeping.

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<tr>
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<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do Not Have</td>
<td>No Opinion</td>
<td>Have</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3) This person thinks that this [is not/is] a good current romantic relationship for me.

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<tr>
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<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Is Not</td>
<td>No Opinion</td>
<td>Is</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

4) This person is [not supportive/supportive] of my current romantic relationship.

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<td>Not Supportive</td>
<td>No Opinion</td>
<td>Supportive</td>
<td></td>
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</table>
Appendix E

_Harmon and Layfield’s Disclosure Index_

Rate (on a scale from 1-7) the extent to which you agree with each statement when speaking to your **mother/father/friend**.

A) Sexual Activity
   1) I 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 discuss 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 share information about good times my partner and I have had.
   4) I talk about things that my partner does that annoy me.
   5) I 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 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 discuss things that I dislike about my partner’s personality.
   5) I discuss things that I would like to change about my partner.
   6) I 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 talk about things that I like regarding my partner’s friends.
   4) I 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 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 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 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 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 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 discuss my partner's hobbies in which I am uninterested.
### Table 1

*Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number of Items</th>
<th>Response Scale</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>α</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall disclosure</td>
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<td>3.75</td>
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<td>Overall disclosure to father</td>
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<tr>
<td>Overall disclosure to mother</td>
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<td>1 - 7</td>
<td>3.56</td>
<td>1.18</td>
<td>0.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall disclosure to friend</td>
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<td>1 - 7</td>
<td>5.02</td>
<td>1.23</td>
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<tr>
<td>Overall positive disclosure</td>
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<td>1 - 7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Overall negative disclosure</td>
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<td>1 - 7</td>
<td>2.95</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>0.97</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1 - 7</td>
<td>3.42</td>
<td>1.62</td>
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<tr>
<td>Positive disclosure to mother</td>
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<td>4.30</td>
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<tr>
<td>Overall sex disclosure items</td>
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<td>Overall event disclosure items</td>
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<tr>
<td>Overall daily activity disclosure items</td>
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<td>4.06</td>
<td>1.12</td>
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<tr>
<td>Overall personality disclosure items</td>
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<td>1.69</td>
<td>1.18</td>
<td>0.90</td>
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<td>1 - 7</td>
<td>4.24</td>
<td>1.47</td>
<td>0.86</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1 - 7</td>
<td>3.91</td>
<td>1.36</td>
<td>0.84</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1 - 7</td>
<td>3.19</td>
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<td>4.79</td>
<td>1.36</td>
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<tr>
<td>Overall perceived approval</td>
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<td>-3 - 3</td>
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<td>0.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0 - 8</td>
<td>6.85</td>
<td>1.35</td>
<td>0.84</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2

*Mean Disclosure by Male and Female Participants to Male and Female Friends*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subscale</th>
<th>Male Participant</th>
<th>Female Participant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male Friend</td>
<td>4.87 (1.36)</td>
<td>4.68 (1.14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>44</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female Friend</td>
<td>4.24 (.78)</td>
<td>5.26 (1.19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Values in parentheses are standard deviations; values in italic are sample size.
Table 3

*Mean Disclosure by Male and Female Participants to Mothers and Fathers*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subscale</th>
<th>Male Participant</th>
<th>Female Participant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td>2.83 (1.17)</td>
<td>2.57 (1.21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>60</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>3.39 (1.03)</td>
<td>3.65 (1.24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>60</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Values in parentheses are standard deviations; values in italic are sample size.
### Table 4

*Predicting Perceived Approval with Disclosure to Networks*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Std. β</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>R²</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Model</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>28.76</td>
<td>&lt; .01</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3, 185</td>
<td>&lt; .01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disclosure to Father</td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>4.08</td>
<td>&lt; .01</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disclosure to Mother</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>5.30</td>
<td>&lt; .01</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disclosure to Friend</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>-1.07</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5

*Predicting Commitment with Perceived Approval*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of Approval</th>
<th>Std. $\beta$</th>
<th>$t$</th>
<th>$p$</th>
<th>$R^2$</th>
<th>$F$</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>$p$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Model</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>17.47</td>
<td>3, 182</td>
<td>&lt; .01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Approval from Father</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Approval from Mother</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
<td>-0.85</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Approval from Friend</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>6.80</td>
<td>&lt; .01</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1. Disclosure by male and female participants to male and female friends.
Figure 2. Disclosure by male and female participants to fathers and mothers.