A Master Narrative Approach to Examining Romantic Relationship Deviations

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Abstract

The present research aimed to investigate the ways in which people in romantic relationships interpret how their relationships differ from what is considered normal. A sample of 200 individuals in relationships completed a survey that asked them to describe their relationship deviation in narrative form and to give an example of when this deviation was manifested. They were also asked to describe an experience in which they discussed their relationship deviation with another person. These narratives were coded for a variety of themes. As hypothesized, several personality characteristics, namely Extraversion and a growth-oriented implicit theory of relationships, were correlated with several narrative themes, specifically positive growth, disclosure, resolution, positive affect, and approval. These narrative themes were also correlated with relationship quality. The narrative theme of positive growth was also found to mediate the relationship between a growth-oriented implicit theory of relationships and relationship quality. Future research can investigate the effect that the severity or centrality of a relationship deviation to an individual’s relationship has on relationship quality, and can also expand upon the efficacy of using narratives to study master narrative deviations.
A Master Narrative Approach to Examining Relationship Deviations

My father is 18 years older than my mother. That is the largest discrepancy in age of any married couple I know. Growing up, the age separation seemed strange. They were virtually from two different generations, and all of my friends’ parents were much closer in age. This difference caused me to feel that my parents weren’t normal. They differed from the norm in a way that made me uncomfortable at times but never seemed to bother them. Over time, though, as I grew used to their unique relationship difference, I began to view it with a sense of pride. It was a fun fact about my family that I would share with others. My parents gradually seemed less like outliers as I grew to realize that “normal” was a subjective idea, one that was not only unique to me, but that was also malleable over time. Ultimately, I realized that what I perceived as normal affected how I viewed someone or something else.

What comprises a “normal relationship” is all but impossible to define or concretely state, for, as I realized with my parents, everyone has their own meaning of normal. Yet, some people can still feel as though their own relationships differ from the norm or standard. Examining why and in what way people feel their relationships differ from the standard relationship can offer insight into one or both partners in the relationship and how they interact as a dyad. This topic surrounding deviations from relationship norms is encompassed in a larger field known as relationship science. Relationship science has emerged recently as a way of understanding romantic relationships using various psychological disciplines to understand relationship dynamics and processes (Berscheid, 1999). Fulfilling close relationships have been shown to be closely linked with individual
happiness, and people view little else as more vital and meaningful to their overall well-being as the close relationships they share with others (Berscheid & Reis, 1998). Thus, the importance of understanding these close relationships and analyzing what causes them to prosper or decline is clear.

The aim of this study is to examine how individual narratives of relationship deviations affect relationship quality. That is, how do individuals who feel that their relationship differs from the norm describe this difference, and how does this description affect relationship quality. Taking a narrative approach to examining relationship deviations offers insight into what types of relationships or relationship aspects cause people to feel different from the norm, as well as how individuals interpret deviations differently. It is believed that individual differences in how deviations are narrated will mediate the relationship between personality factors and relationship quality.

Research on Close Relationships

Le and colleagues (2010) broke down the factors associated with relationship persistence into three levels: individual-, relationship-, and external-level variables. The breakdown of close relationships into these three levels is a helpful way of organizing the factors that serve to promote or hinder relationship quality and stability.

**Individual factors.** First, the individual level consists of broad individual facets such as Big Five personality traits and other personality characteristics like self-esteem (Cate, Levin, & Richmond, 2002; Karney & Bradbury, 1995), as well as traits linked specifically to relationships such as implicit theories of relationships (Knee, 1998). The broad personality factors have been shown to have a very limited association with relationship stability, but
those factors specific to close relationships have been found to have some predictability with regards to relationship stability (Le et al. 2010).

While some studies have found broader personality traits like those of the Big Five (Extraversion, Agreeableness, Neuroticism, Conscientiousness, and Openness; McCrae & Costa, 1996) or self-esteem were poor predictors of relationship stability, other research has found that personality traits are associated with other aspects of relationships. With respect to social relationships in general, Asendorph and Wilpers (1998) found that several Big Five traits were associated with certain behavioral trends. Specifically, Extraversion, and two of its subcategories, Shyness and Sociability, had a significant effect on the size of participants’ social networks, the amount of time spent interacting with others, the extent to which participants felt they could rely on the people in their social networks, and whether or not they fell in love with a member of their network (only Shyness and Sociability significantly impacted this last effect). In addition, high Agreeableness was associated with limited conflict with members of the opposite sex. Conscientiousness was also found to be significant, as it predicted high levels of contact with family members.

Although these findings are fairly broad with regards to their impact on close relationships, other research has taken a step further and investigated the role of personality traits in romantic relationships. White, Hendrick, and Hendrick (2004) found that Neuroticism was negatively correlated with both relationship satisfaction and intimacy, and that this process was mediated by dependent, possessive love in females. Similarly, Karney and Bradbury (1995) also found a significant, negative correlation between Neuroticism and romantic relationship outcomes, specifically relationship stability. On the other hand,
Extraversion and Agreeableness were found to be positively associated with satisfaction and intimacy in romantic relationships. Lastly, Conscientiousness was found to be significant, as it was positively correlated with intimacy, but only for male participants (White, Hendrick, & Hendrick, 2004).

Big Five personality traits are not the only individual-level factors shown to impact relationship constructs. Another factor from the individual level that can be linked to romantic relationship stability and quality are the implicit theories each partner holds in a relationship. Implicit theories, as first proposed by Dweck and Leggett (1988), are the way in which people view individual characteristics of others. They possess either a fixed mindset, known as entity theory, which is the belief that traits like intelligence or personality are set in stone and cannot be changed, or a growth-oriented mindset, called an incremental theory, which is the belief that individual traits are subject to change and improvement over time. Implicit theories impact how people view individuals, including themselves, and how they behave when faced with certain stimuli. For example, if a young man failed a test in high school, an entity theorist would suggest that he failed the test because he is not very intelligent and never will be. On the other hand, and incremental theorist may suggest that the young man failed the test because he did not study very much for it, and if he works harder to prepare in the future, he can perform better on the next test. This difference in mindsets can also be illustrated in the context of personality. Entity theorists believe that individuals are who they are, and are not subject to change as people, whereas incremental theorists believe that people can always change themselves, for better or for worse (Dweck & Leggett, 1988).
It is this belief in the ability of individuals to change or improve themselves that connects implicit theories to romantic relationships. One’s belief in their partner’s ability, or lack thereof, to grow as a person over the course of the relationship can affect the way they interact with their partner, which in turn has an effect on relationship dynamics. Ruvolo and Rotondo (1998) found that the link between individuals’ view of their partner and the quality of their relationship was weaker for individuals with an incremental theory of personality. That is, one partner’s characteristics had less bearing on relationship quality for incremental theorists because they believed these characteristics could change. If one partner is perceived as having negative characteristics, this would not necessarily decrease overall relationship quality if the individual believed that their partner’s negative qualities could be improved. Similarly, the traits of one’s partner that are perceived as positive may not necessarily increase relationship quality for incremental theorists because they believe that those positive attributes are subject to change, and therefore may not be present forever. In sum, incremental theorists are more able to maintain overall relationship satisfaction despite their partner’s negative qualities because they believe these qualities can be improved.

Implicit theories have also been shown to have a distinct effect on conflict in romantic relationships. Individuals who believe their partner can change their personality are more likely to actively try and resolve a conflict because they believe that the situation can be improved, whereas someone who believes their partner cannot change who they are is more likely to react passively to a conflict or negative situation because they do not believe that the situation can be changed or mended. Kammrath and Dweck (2006)
demonstrated this difference by exploring relationship conflict both retrospectively, through a reflective self-report study, and prospectively through a daily diary study. They found that individuals who possessed an incremental theory of personality were more likely to openly voice their displeasure with their partner in the event of a conflict and work actively towards a mutually beneficial solution than those who held an entity theory of personality. It was also revealed that incremental theorists became increasingly vocal about their dissatisfaction with their partner during a conflict when the perceived severity of the act that caused the conflict was increased. In other words, the more upset an incremental theorist was about their partner’s behavior, the more likely he or she was to confront their partner and work to resolve whatever was bothering him or her. Entity theorists, however, showed an opposing strategy. An increase in negative emotions perceived towards one’s partner was associated with a decrease in vocal response. That is, the more displeased an entity theorist was with their partner, the less likely they were to confront them about it. Thus, entity theorists were more likely to address the conflicts that affected them the least on an emotional level, whereas incremental theorists tended to tackle the most emotionally intense conflicts.

People can hold implicit theories about more than the personality factors of their partners. Individuals can also have implicit theories regarding their relationship as a whole. It has been theorized that similar to the general ideas of entity vs. incremental theory of individual traits, people can possess either a fixed or growth-oriented mindset towards their relationship. Knee (1998) suggested that individuals can believe in relationship destiny, the idea that romantic partners are “soul mates” and either meant for each other or not, or
believe in relationship growth, the idea that romantic relationships develop and grow over time with effort. Knee (1998) found that initial indicators of satisfaction and closeness were predictive of relationship stability for individuals with a destiny view of their relationship. That is, individuals who believed that they were either meant to be with their partner or not were more likely to continue their relationship if they perceived high levels of satisfaction early on in their relationship and more likely to terminate their relationship quickly if they felt less satisfied with their relationship or less close with their partner initially. Destiny theory was also associated with the belief that relationship outcomes were outside of one’s control, implying that a destiny theorist’s main objective in a relationship may be to evaluate whether or not their current partner is who they are destined to be with or not (Knee, 1998).

Conversely, a belief in relationship growth was associated with relationship maintenance behaviors. That is, growth theorists aimed to cultivate and sustain their relationship with their partner instead of trying to determine if the person is whom they are meant to be with. Growth theorists also tended to have longer relationship duration than destiny theorists, and destiny theorists took more responsibility for ending a relationship than growth theorists, especially for women. Thus, the way in which individuals implicitly view their relationships affects the stability and quality of those relationships.

**Relationship factors.** In addition to individual-level factors that affect relationship stability or quality, dyadic-level factors have also been found to impact romantic relationships. These variables generally assess the state of ongoing relationships. The interpersonal connection and interaction between each member of a dyad is examined at
this level. Specifically, the impact of variables such as commitment and satisfaction, facets stemming from Rusbul’t’s (1983) Investment Model on relationship quality or stability are assessed at the relationship level. Rusbul’t’s model demonstrates the relationship between an individual’s satisfaction in their relationship, and his or her commitment to that relationship.

In their meta-analysis examining relationship stability, Le and colleagues (2010) found that relationship factors were significantly better predictors of break-up than individual factors. Specifically, commitment was a highly significant predictor of relationship dissolution. Additionally, satisfaction was shown to be a weaker predictor of relationship stability, but its effect on relationship dissolution was still significant. In this study, however, satisfaction and commitment are being used as the dependent variables in the form of a composite score comprised of these two variables that will be used to measure relationship quality. Le et al (2010) provide a helpful way of examining romantic relationships from multiple levels, and Rusbul’t (1983) demonstrates the importance of satisfaction and commitment in relationship maintenance and dynamics. Ultimately, this study aims to focus on other factors that may or may not influence the dyadic level variables of satisfaction and commitment.

**External factors.** Lastly, external factors, namely those regarding the social networks of one or both partners, have been shown to be significantly associated with relationship stability as well. All romantic relationships exist in some social context. People often meet through mutual friends, colleagues, coworkers, or family members. Rarely do relationships form and grow without any overlap of partners’ networks. Social network approval and
overlap were found to positively impact relationship dynamics and stability (Agnew, Loving, & Drigotas, 2001; Sprecher, Felmlee, Orbuch, & Willetts, 2001). Overall, external and contextual factors like one’s social network have been found to predict relationship dissolution at comparable rates to several dyadic-level factors, such as satisfaction and commitment (Le et al., 2010).

Social networks influence relationships via indirect processes outside of individuals’ perceptions of their networks or closeness with others in them. Specifically, individuals derive relationship scripts from their social networks. Relationship scripts (Holmberg & MacKenzie, 2002) refer to the particular order of events in the typical relationship, but they can also be used to extrapolate beliefs or ideas of how romantic relationships operate in general. Scripts can pertain to many facets and stages of romantic relationships from how they typically come about to how partners usually act with one another to how they are supposed to end. Relationship scripts ultimately determine what individuals believe to be normative, and, therefore influence how they behave in their own relationships. Individuals’ behavior has been shown to mirror their own internalized relationship script (Rose & Frieze, 1993). In other words, people tend to behave how they believe they are supposed to behave. By the same token, relationship scripts can also influence how one partner expects the other partner to behave. Thus, people interpret normative behavior for both themselves and their significant others from relationship scripts.

Cultural norms, along with social networks, help create these scripts. People learn how to act in relationships based on watching others in relationships around them. Generally speaking, there is consensus among North American individuals with respect to
both the order of significant events in romantic relationships and what those events are (Holmberg, Prosser & Reeder, 2002; Honeycutt, Cantrill, & Greene, 1989). This finding also pertains to individual stages within relationships. For instance, people generally agree on how to first get a partner to go on a date, the key components of a first date, and terminating a dating relationship (Holmberg & MacKenzie, 2002). Thus, most people have a common understanding of what is normal behavior for people in relationships and will act according to this perception of normative behavior in their own relationships.

While scripts have an impact on the individual level in terms of individual partner’s behavior and expectations in relationships, they can have an effect on the dyadic level with respect to overall relationship quality or well-being. Agreement between one’s script and one’s perceptions of his/her relationship, as well as partner agreement on relationship scripts, has been shown to be associated with relationship quality. Holmberg and MacKenzie (2002) demonstrated this relationship in the laboratory by having dating couples sort a series of dating events into what they believed to be the appropriate order. They sorted these events based on both a personal relationship script and what they believed to be a normative relationship script. Afterward, they completed several measures of relationship quality. The results showed that agreement between individuals’ personal relationship scripts and their normative relationship scripts was associated with higher relationship quality. In other words, people whose relationships were developing in a way that aligned with their beliefs of how normal relationships develop perceived their relationships more positively. Also, partner agreement on personal relationship script was associated with higher relationship quality as well.
Individual relationship scripts have also been found to affect not only how people behave in and view their own relationship, but also how they view other people’s relationships. Conley and Rabinowitz (2004) investigated the role of relationship scripts in people’s perceptions of relationships in the context of contraceptives. Participants who observed a couple in which one partner suggests transitioning contraceptive methods from condoms to female birth control, which was considered a normative transition script, reported that couple to have high relationship quality, whereas those who perceived a couple in which a partner suggests transitioning contraceptive methods from female birth control to condoms, which was considered a counternormative script, reported perceiving that couple as having low relationship quality. Similarly, the results also revealed that participants believed that couples who adhered to a counternormative script were more likely to be dealing with infidelity or STD’s in their relationship than couples who followed the normative script. Thus, the relationship scripts or normative beliefs of individuals not in a relationship were shown to influence how those people perceived the relationships of others. In addition, the study also asked people in relationships to imagine their partner suggesting either the normative or counternormative transition in contraceptive methods, and it was found that the individuals who imagined their partner suggesting the normative transition reported experiencing much more positive reactions to the suggestion and less negative emotions overall than those who imagined their partner suggesting the counternormative transition. These findings served to support those of earlier research by demonstrating that behavior that aligned with what an individual perceived as normative was associated with more positive relationships.
Conley and Rabinowitz’s (2004) work not only elaborates on the impact of relationship scripts on perceptions of relationship quality, but it also illustrates how people perceive relationships and the impact of social network approval. When couples were perceived as following a counternormative script, the relationship was perceived more negatively. Thus, deviating from what one believed to be normative behavior was viewed negatively. Support for this belief or perception was offered by Keneski, Loving, and Neff (2012) in a study using relationship scripts to illustrate what is known as the Goldilocks Principle, which is the idea that nature tends to favor averageness. Similar to the Holmberg and MacKenzie (2002) study, they asked couples to arrange significant events of a romantic relationship in the order they believed to be most appropriate, and then had them report their current relationship satisfaction. The results revealed that couples who deviated more from the typical order of events, which was determined by averaging the participants’ responses when asked to put the events in order, reported lower levels of relationship satisfaction. Deviations from relationship scripts, therefore, have been shown to be negatively correlated with relationship quality.

As mentioned, relationship scripts, and subsequently normative relationship behavior, are derived from social networks. Thus, it would follow that the reason individuals perceive less relationship satisfaction when their relationships deviate from the normative script had to do with their social network. Research regarding the effect of social networks on romantic relationships, in fact, has found a positive effect of network approval on relationship quality. Sprecher and Felmlee (1992) found that perceived network approval of one’s relationship was positively associated with relationship quality. Network approval at
one point in time was found not only to predict current relationship quality, but also to significantly predict relationship quality 18 months later. Fluctuations in perceived network approval were closely correlated with fluctuations in perceived relationship quality over time. That is, increases in perceived relationship quality occurred at the same time as increases in perceived network approval, and vice versa. Network support, in addition, was found to have a stabilizing effect in women’s romantic relationships in that perceived network support negatively correlated with breakup. Also, perceived support from an individual’s own social network was found to have a larger effect on relationship quality than perceived support or approval from one’s partner’s social network.

The interaction between one’s own social network and one’s partner’s has also been explored (Felmlee, 2001). The combination of perceived approval of one’s relationship from their friends and their partner’s family was found to reduce the likelihood of relationship dissolution. Additionally, actual, as opposed to perceived, approval from an individual’s close friend significantly predicted relationship stability, assuming the close friend knew the individual’s partner, thus implying that close friends can directly influence each other’s behavior in their relationships. Perceived support from an individual’s friends, however, was found to be an even better predictor of relationship stability than actual support or approval from one’s friends. This may suggest that one’s perception of reality, and not reality itself, is what truly affects romantic relationships.

Interestingly, however, Felmlee (2001) found that not all types of network approval were positively associated with relationship stability or quality. Contrary to the findings of Sprecher and Felmlee (1992), social networks were revealed not to have a direct, positive
influence on romantic relationships always. Specifically, the combination of perceived approval from one’s own family and perceived overall encouragement from others to date one’s partner was correlated with higher rates of breakup over time. These findings provide some support for what is known as the “Romeo and Juliet” theory proposed by Driscoll et al. (1972), which suggests that parental disapproval or opposition to one’s relationship actually brings couples closer together. This effect of family opposition, however, was only shown to be significant when accounting for the opinions and closeness of an individual’s friends. That is, family resistance alone does not bring couples together. Family resistance in conjunction with affirming and supportive close friends can promote relationship stability. This finding, again, demonstrates the effect that social network approval and support, or lack thereof, can have of relationships.

Etcheverry and Agnew (2004) examined the impact of social network approval in the form of adherence to subjective norms. Specifically, they investigated the perceived normative beliefs of a member of one’s social network with respect to one’s relationship and one’s desire to conform to these norms on commitment in romantic relationships. These norms were found to be a significant predictor of relationship commitment. Additionally, subjective norms were found to be associated with relationship stability over time, as well as current stability. Initial measures of subjective norms were significantly correlated with remaining in a relationship over time. Commitment was also found to mediate this relationship between subjective norms and the decision to remain in a relationship. Thus, the influence of subjective norms on relationship persistence was due to
their impact on individual partner’s commitment to the relationship as a whole (Etcheverry, Le, & Charania, 2008).

Overall, external factors affect relationship quality in a number of ways. Relationship scripts are determined from one’s social network, and relationships that differ from these scripts often experience lower relationship quality as a result. This may be due to a lack of perceived social network approval, which is positively associated with relationship quality. These external factors become especially relevant in relationships that clearly deviate from relationship scripts, and, subsequently, receive less social network approval. The general goal of this study is to understand how people in these types of relationships make sense of their differences from the norm, and how that affects the quality of their relationship.

When thinking of relationship deviations, however, relationship scripts are not the only reference point from which couples can differ. Perceived cultural and social norms that do not pertain specifically to the order of major relationship events can also be violated by people in relationships. Again, culture and social networks dictate what people perceive as normal. This idea of perceived normative behavior can apply to many other facets of relationships, such as the age, gender, race, and sexuality of individuals in relationships, just to name a few. One of the reasons why scripts and cultural norms are so powerful is because when individuals’ relationships violate them, they tap into broader dominant narratives in society called master narratives. When master narratives are violated, the individuals and relationships doing so are perceived as violating a set of assumptions that our culture views as valuable in a relationship. For instance, in the Conley and Rabinowitz (2004) study, the reason the switch from the pill to condoms as a means of contraception
was perceived negatively was because it violated the aspects of a relationship that we as a culture value, namely trust, monogamy, etc.

In order to gain a greater understanding of deviations from normative beliefs, it is necessary to investigate these ideas of master narratives and narrative identity, two constructs stemming from personality psychology that are very useful in understanding relationship dynamics, quality, and stability when applied to the relationship field.

**Research on Narrative Identity**

Master narratives refer to generally understood and accepted ideas that serve as a reference for what constitutes normative behavior in a given situation (Boje, 1991). Typically derived from cultural and societal norms, master narratives exist for a plethora of contexts in everyday life, ranging from an individual’s life at work to their life at home, and virtually anything in between. For instance, if an individual is giving a presentation in front of several colleagues at work, there is a generally accepted, and ultimately expected, procedure that everyone in the meeting is aware of and tends to adhere to. Thus, this procedure would be the master narrative of presentations. The master narrative in this situation would dictate that the person offering the presentation would have prepared what was going to be said and that the others in the meeting would listen quietly and attentively and would ask questions at the end of the presentation. Normative behavior for both the presenter and the audience would therefore be determined by the master narrative of the situation.

The idea of a master narrative stems from a larger approach to personality known as the narrative approach to identity. The narrative identity approach posits that people
interpret their experiences in unique ways, and that an individual’s understanding or interpretation of their own experiences is how they develop their personality and identity (Singer, 2004). Two individuals, therefore, could share the same experience but come away with two divergent understandings of what happened. If each person was asked to recount the experience, they could tell two very different stories depending on how they each interpreted what went on. They could also derive varying types and degrees of meaning from their experience. As a result, the two individuals would, in turn, develop differing personalities.

Studying personality with a narrative approach requires researchers to code written narratives of participants for various themes. Narrative identity research has found that stories that incorporate certain themes have been linked to higher personal well-being. Individuals who demonstrated positive self-growth after a negative experience in their narratives have been shown to have higher individual well-being than those whose narratives did not include this aspect. In addition, positive processing, the general tendency to interpret life events positively rather than negatively, was found to be a significant predictor of overall well-being, regardless of the emotional valence of the event. That is, individuals who described their life events more positively, regardless of the nature of that event, scored higher on well-being (Lilgendahl & McAdams, 2011). Similarly, individuals whose narratives concluded with an emotionally positive ending tone showed higher levels of life satisfaction (Pals, 2006) than individuals whose narratives concluded with a different emotional valence.
The narrative theme of resolution has also been found to be related to well-being. Pals (2006) found that coherent positive resolution, defined as when an account of a difficult life event ends positively and conveys a sense of closure or emotional resolution, predicted an increase in ego-resiliency from young adulthood to midlife. Ego-resiliency refers to one’s ability to adapt to changing life events and restore a positive outlook or mindset in light of emotionally trying experiences. Thus, an individual’s ability to adapt and bounce back from a difficult life event is associated with the extent to which that individual has resolved or come to peace with the issue at hand. Pals also discovered that this facet of increasing ego-resiliency mediated the relationship between coherent positive resolution and life satisfaction, specifically in late midlife.

Furthermore, resolution has been linked to other developmental phenomena as well. Bluck and Gluck (2004) investigated the meaning making capacity of narrative processing by examining how individuals perceive themselves as “wise.” They found that a majority of the wisdom narratives provided by participants revolved around challenging experiences that led one to an insightful lesson or resolution. By the same token, Bauer and McAdams (2004) found that narratives that contained relationship memories involving a struggle and subsequent resolution were correlated with both ego development and social-emotional development. Consequently, resolution as a theme of narrative identity has been linked to various positive aspects of life, namely well-being and satisfaction, as well as other positive developmental aspects.

Narratives have also been found to be connected to personality traits. Lilgendahl and McAdams (2011) found that positive processing was negatively correlated with Neuroticism,
while the emotional valence of significant life events was not associated with any traits. Thus, the negative outlook or mindset associated with Neuroticism was expressed in individuals' negative interpretations of life events, not simply as a facet of a negatively charged event. This finding, therefore, serves to support the positive relationship between positive processing and general well-being. Similarly, Pals (2006) revealed that the personality trait of coping openness, or the extent to which individuals are open to the complex and potentially negative thoughts associated with difficult life experiences, was associated with narrative identity processing. In particular, exploratory narrative processing mediated the relationship between coping openness and maturity, which was defined in this study as the level of awareness individuals have regarding their own self-understanding and affective experience. Thus, in sum, individual traits affect the way in which people understand their lives, which in turn affects how they frame their own narratives.

In addition, the narrative identity literature has shown that sharing one’s narratives with others can induce self-change (McLean, Pasupathi, and Pals, 2007) and aid in organizing and understanding one’s experiences through the construction and reconstruction of those experiences through narratives (Weber et al., 2007). In addition, self-disclosure, or sharing one’s self with others, has been shown to be associated with satisfaction in romantic relationships as well (Hendrick, 1981; Hendrick, Hendrick, & Adler, 1988). Because a relationship deviation from the cultural norm could result in judgment from others, the experience of sharing one’s story of a deviation could positively or negatively affect relationship quality. These findings regarding the experience of sharing a deviation narrative with others reinforce the importance of social network and network
approval of one’s relationship. In addition to perceiving one’s own relationship deviation, how one’s friends and family perceive that deviation can have a significant impact on the relationship as a whole. Also, how members of one’s social network react to being told a deviation narrative can influence how the person sharing that narrative develops their own narrative identity.

The degree of self-disclosure is especially relevant when investigating the approval of an individual’s social network on his or her relationship deviation. That is, the extent to which one tells others about a deviation will impact, and possibly determine, the external reaction to that deviation. Pasupathi, McLean, and Weeks (2009) investigated the theme of disclosure with respect to the nature of the life events being discussed. Interestingly, they found that the main discrepancy in what individuals choose to disclose to others centered on the emotionality of the event discussed and whether or not that individual felt as though that event was a transgression. In particular, for more significant and longer retained events, increased negative emotion and decreased positive emotion were correlated with lower likelihoods of disclosure. Consequently, in the context of relationship deviations, the way in which individuals perceive his or her deviation, especially in terms of emotionality, can predict the extent to which they disclose the details of their deviation, and how they feel about it, to others.

Master Narratives. When people interpret their experiences and create these narratives, they do so with master narratives in mind. They examine their own behavior with respect to what they believe to be normative behavior in a given context. Hammack (2008) argued that the idea of a narrative identity, or linking identity and narrative in an
individual, inherently links an individual life story to a specific cultural narrative of a group. Thus, if an individual’s identity takes form in a life story, it would follow that that story has meaning and coherence only in its interaction with a given society and the broader narrative that goes with that society. As a result, the narrative of a given culture can tend to become the narrative of the individuals in it as those people fuse aspects of their daily experiences with the experience of belonging to the broader collective. Personal narratives are thus formed in the context of the given culture and society as individuals identify with, or sometimes remain outside of, the group.

The intersection between personal and cultural narratives is where master narratives become relevant. As was found in the context of relationship scripts, individuals view their relationship more positively when it aligns with their script, or what they think is normal or expected of them. This finding first and foremost acknowledges the existence of relationships scripts, which are really a part of the master narratives of relationships, and it demonstrates how people interpret their own experience (their relationship) with respect to the master narrative of that situation.

Master narratives are much more encompassing than scripts, though. Whereas scripts center on the order of certain events in a given situation, master narratives can apply to individuals, interactions, behavior, and more. Master narratives permeate culture more so than scripts, in that master narratives can be applied to countless types and numbers of situations. As a result, master narratives hold more cultural value than simple scripts. Scripts tend to be viewed more neutrally, whereas master narratives include a certain aspect of expectation that makes violating them a more serious event than when one deviates from a
McLean (2008) argues that in studying master narratives, one can learn how people construct their own life stories in relation to these broader narratives, as well as what types of stories, and subsequently individuals, are silenced by master narratives. Society inherently gives voice to those whose personal narratives match the master narrative of a given culture and situation and silences those whose narratives differ from the norm, as their experiences are treated as unacceptable, uninteresting, or irrelevant. Master narratives can be naturally oppressive in this way.

McLean (2008) references the experiences of the LGBTQ community to illustrate the silencing mechanism of master narratives. Gay and lesbian individuals do not embody the traditional heterosexual narrative of most cultures, and, as a result, their narratives are silenced actively through the overt oppression of their experiences and passively through their exclusion from the master or canonical narrative. The fact that the narratives of many homosexual individuals include an experience in which they “come out” demonstrates how these individuals are left out of the canonical narrative and are then presented with the task of openly acknowledging their difference from the master narrative as a means of developing their own identity. The value that we as a society place in master narratives serves to award social capital to those whose personal narratives align with what is generally accepted, leaving those whose narratives differ from the master narrative at a distinct, social disadvantage. This disadvantage often manifests itself in the form of judgment or stigmas against those who differ from the norm. In this sense, master narratives serve not only as a reference for normative behavior, but also as a set of
expectations that, when violated, can result in much more serious consequences than when a simple script is not followed.

In the context of romantic relationships, for instance, if the male in a heterosexual couple met his female partner’s parents before she met his parents, an event which would contradict the relationship script found by Keneski, Loving, and Neff (2012), that switch in the order of events from the average relationship would most likely be perceived as harmless or neutral. On the contrary, relationships that deviate from master narratives, such as same-sex marriages, are more likely to be perceived negatively and met with opposition, as discussed by McLean (2008).

While master narratives contain definite theoretical appeal, there has been very little empirical work on the topic, and the little that has been done has been strictly qualitative in nature. Nevertheless, this research can be helpful in exploring the effects of relationship deviations from the master narrative. Bergen (2010) examined how commuter wives in the US interpreted their own marriages based on how, if at all, they believed their relationships differed from the master narrative of marriage. Bergen first argued that the master narrative of marriage in the US is comprised of several assumptions, three of which are especially relevant to commuter wives. First, it is generally believed that married couples cohabitate with one another. Married Americans rarely live permanently in separate locations. Second, there is the belief that the division of labor amongst a married couple is based on gender. That is, the wife is responsible for the caretaking of the husband and children, as well as jobs around the house, and the husband is assumed to be the main financial breadwinner. And, in cases in which both partners work outside the home, the
man’s job is assumed to be the primary source of income (Green, 1997). Lastly, people in the US assume that copious amounts of face-to-face communication are essential to a successful marriage (Stafford, 2005). Thus, commuter marriages, or relationships in which the partners are separated at least three nights a week for job-related reasons and have different permanent residences, by nature deviate from these aspects of the master narrative of marriage.

Bergen (2010) collected narratives from commuter wives through the use of focus groups as well as in-depth interviews. It was revealed that the narratives of most of the commuter wives contained an account or explanation of why their marriage differed from the master narrative of marriage. Most reported feeling compelled to provide an explanation for why they did not live with their husbands. Several main themes in these accounts of justification or explanation included framing the decision to be in a commuter marriage as a mutual one, describing the time that one partner is alone as a positive aspect and not problematic, and describing the relationship as a whole in terms that minimize the distance or time apart. Others insisted that the commuting aspect of their relationship was only temporary. Many commuter wives also tried to illuminate some similarities between their own marriage and the cultural norm, as well. Overall, the master narrative of marriage influenced how the commuter wives framed their own marriages through the inclusion of justifications for the ways in which their relationships deviated from the norm.

Similarly, research has been done on couples whose relationships differ from a changing master narrative. Gipson and Hindin (2007) investigated the childbearing preferences of Bangladeshi spouses with respect to the master narrative of marriage.
Traditionally, the master narrative of marriage and families dictated that Bangladeshi women gave birth nearly seven times in their lifetimes. In recent years, however, efforts have been made to reduce the culturally accepted number of births down to roughly three, subsequently altering the master narrative. As a result, women have obtained access to contraception. Bangladeshi men, though, dislike this change in the master narrative, as they preferred that their wives birthed more children who would eventually enter the work force and help support the family. Using a narrative approach, Gipson and Hindin found that wives’ desire for their behavior to align with the master narrative influenced their behavior in the marriage. Both husbands and wives acknowledged a new wife’s powerlessness when it came to child-bearing negotiations. Subsequently, many wives confessed in their narratives to have acted independently, and even contrary to their husband’s wishes through the covert use, or non-use, of contraception, in effect giving them control of the couple’s fertility. Thus, while the previous master narrative called for women to birth many children as per their husbands wishes, that narrative has changed in recent years causing many wives to take matters of fertility into their own hands, against their husbands’ will, in order to conform to the new master narrative.

In addition, Hammock, Thompson, and Pilecki (2009) explored the narratives of sexual minority youths as a means of understanding how master narratives affect the narrative identity of this marginalized demographic. Narratives from four youths from the LGBT community were analyzed and the impact of master narratives was examined. The impact of cultural context was clear, as several of the subjects described difficulties making sense of their differing sexual identity with respect to the master narrative of sexual
orientation in their respective cultures. The narratives examined also showed a trend of normalization of same-sex identity, a theme that illustrates the feeling of abnormality experience by these individuals. This finding sheds light on the judgment perceived by individuals whose personal narratives do not align with the master narrative.

Overall, the presence and impact of master narratives on individual behavior, especially in romantic relationships, has been demonstrated. Understanding master narratives, as well as narrative identity, is crucial to comprehending when and why individuals deviate from a master narrative at all.

The Current Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the effect of master narrative deviations on relationship quality using a narrative approach. A narrative approach has not typically been used in conjunction with master narratives to study close relationships, but these relationships are integral parts of the life story and narrative identity, so it would follow that employing this approach could offer insight into relationship quality and dynamics. Such an approach would seem especially useful when examining challenging experiences such as a relationship deviation. Also, given the narrative identity literature detailing the experience of sharing a narrative with someone else, it is expected that individual differences in describing or making sense of a deviation will be associated with relationship quality. These differences are expected to manifest themselves in the aspects of growth, ending tone, and communion in the narratives.

Participants were presented with two sets of prompts: one asking them to describe a way in which they felt their relationships differed from the cultural norm and a specific
experiencing pertaining to the deviation, and one asking them to describe what they tell people about their deviation and a specific time in which they shared their perception of that deviation with another person. Given what we know about the individual, dyadic, and external factors that affect relationships, as well as master narratives and narrative identity, we are able to make informed predictions about how narratives and relationships may interact. In particular, it is believed that individual and external factors will affect relationship quality, which will be measured by dyadic factors such as commitment and satisfaction. In addition, narrative identity shown in the personal narratives participants provide will mediate this relationship between the relationship factors and relationship quality.

Specifically, we examined three distinct hypotheses:

**H1a:** Individuals with high levels of 1) Extraversion and 2) Openness, and who possess 3) a growth-oriented implicit theory will show positive growth, a sense of resolution about deviating, disclosure about their relationship, positive affect, and a sense of approval from others regarding their relationship in their narratives.

**H1b:** In contrast, individuals with high levels of 1) Neuroticism and 2) a destiny-oriented implicit theory will show low levels of growth, resolution, and disclosure, and high levels of negative affect and disapproval from others in their relationship deviation narratives.

This first hypothesis is essentially predicting a correlation between personality factors and narrative factors. Given the research on narrative identity, it is known that certain narrative themes are linked to certain personality traits. Thus, it is expected that the above positive narrative variables will be linked with personality traits. By positive narrative
variables, we are referring to this which we expect to promote higher relationship quality. We expect growth, resolution, disclosure, positive affect, and approval to be found in the narratives of individuals who are more extraverted or outgoing, open to new experiences, and believe that their relationship is subject to change over time.

**H2:** The narrative aspects of 1) **positive growth**, 2) **resolution**, 3) **disclosure**, 4) **positive affect**, and 5) **approval** in narratives will be positively correlated with **relationship quality**, whereas 6) **negative affect** and 7) **disapproval** in narratives will negatively predict **relationship quality**.

This hypothesis addresses the idea that how people narrate their relationship deviations will affect relationship quality. Narrative identity research has demonstrated that certain narrative themes are correlated with satisfaction and well-being. Thus, with respect to romantic relationship narratives, it would follow that positive narrative themes would correlate positively with relationship satisfaction and well-being. That is, having a positive narrative, with positive growth, resolution, disclosure, positive affect, and approval should help people accept their deviation and maintain a happy, healthy relationship. Conversely, certain negative narrative themes are expected to correlate negatively with relationship quality, as well.

**H3:** The narrative aspects of **positive growth, resolution, disclosure, positive affect**, and **approval** will mediate the relationship between the personality factors of **Extraversion**, **Openness**, and a **growth-oriented implicit theory** and **relationship quality**.

Given what is known about the relationship between personality variables and relationship quality, and the research on narrative identity and narrative aspects, it is expected that narrative variables will impact the association between personality and
relationship quality. By the same token, it follows that negative narrative variables will negatively predict relationship quality. In particular, low levels of positive growth, resolution, and disclosure, and the aspects of negative affect and disapproval in individuals’ narratives will mediate the relationship between the personality factors of Neuroticism, Openness, and destiny-oriented implicit beliefs and relationship quality.

In sum, it is expected that the process of describing one’s narrative of a relationship deviation and a narrative about telling someone else about the deviation will offer new insight into the relationship between personality and romantic relationships.

**Methods**

**Participants**

A sample of 200 individuals in romantic relationship was recruited online using MTurk, an online interface used to recruit individuals to perform tasks for other users and receive monetary compensation in return. Participants were asked to complete a survey online using Qualtrics survey software (See Appendix 1). A demographically diverse sample was recruited in an attempt to collect the widest range of relationship deviations possible.

The mean age of the participants was 31 years of age ($SD = 9.1$, min = 18.0, max = 63.0), while the average age of their partners was 32 years of age ($SD = 9.7$, min = 18.0, max = 63.0). Approximately, 55% of the sample was female, nearly 45% was male, and one participant identified as an alternative gender. With respect to race, 39.5% identified as white, 3.1% identified as black, 2.9% identified as Latino, 3.4% identified as Asian, 1.7% identified as Native American, and 6.5% identified as multiracial. More than 87% of the sample identified as heterosexual, 10% identified as bisexual, and approximately 1% of the
remaining participants identified as lesbian, gay, or other, respectively. Approximately 93% of the participants identified their partner as heterosexual, 5% said their partner was bisexual, 1.5% identified their partner as lesbian, and 1% said their partner was gay.

A wide array of relationship types was also represented in the sample. More than 39% of the participants were married or in a committed, life-long partnership, 24% were dating seriously, 21% were living together and/or engaged, 8% were about to live together and/or be engaged, and 5% were dating casually. In addition, 93% of the participants were in exclusive relationships, 5% were in non-exclusive relationships, and 2% were in somewhat exclusive relationships. Nearly 14% of the participants were in a long-distance relationships, and the average relationship duration of the participants was 5.5 years (SD = 5.9, min = .2, max = 28.8).

**Measures**

**Big Five Inventory.** Participants completed the Big Five Inventory (John & Srivastava, 1999), a well-established measure of the dispositional personality traits (McCrae & Costa, 1996). This measure contains 44 total items that are distributed accordingly: ten items in the Openness scale (α = .83), nine in both the Conscientiousness (α = .85) and Agreeableness (α = .82) scales, and eight in the Extraversion (α = .88) and Neuroticism (α = .89) scales. Each item asks participants to rate the extent to which they agree with the way the item completes the statement, “I see myself as someone who...” The rating scale ranges from one to five (1 = Disagree Strongly; 5 = Agree Strongly). Complete items in the scale included statements like, “I see myself as someone who is talkative,” or, “I see myself as
someone who is curious about many different things,” or, “I see myself as someone who prefers work that is routine.”

**Implicit Theories.** In addition to the BFI, participants were asked to complete two separate scales measuring implicit theories. The first was developed by Dweck (1999) as a measure of an individual’s belief that characteristics are either fixed or malleable. This study employed only the personality version of this scale, not the intelligence/ability version. The scale consists of eight statements that promote either a fixed or malleable mindset towards personality traits. Items included statements such as, “The kind of person you are is something very basic about you and it can’t be changed much,” or, “You, no matter who you are, can significantly change your behavior.” This measure requires participants to rate the extent to which they agree with these statements on a scale of one to six (1 = Strongly Agree; 6 = Strongly Disagree). The scale proved to be very reliable (α = .93).

The other measure of implicit theories was developed by Knee (1998) and is used to measure implicit theories of relationships. Specifically, the measure consists of eight items, four describing destiny belief (α = .76) and four describing growth view (α = .82). Destiny view items included statements such as, “potential relationship partners are either compatible or they are not,” or, “potential relationship partners are either destined to get along or they are not.” Growth view items were comprised of statements like, “the ideal relationship develops over time,” or, “a successful relationship is mostly a matter of learning to resolve conflicts with a partner.” Similar to Dweck’s measure, participants were asked to rate the extent to which they agreed with each item in the scale, though Knee used a seven-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree; 7 = Strongly Agree).
Social Network Approval. The perceived approval of participants’ social networks was measured using a scale derived from Etcheverry and Agnew (2004) that defined social network as one’s friends, family, colleagues, and other personal contacts. The scale consisted of four items ($\alpha = .96$), each of which completed the sentence, “My social network…” Items included sentence completions such as, “thinks I [should not/should] continue in my current romantic relationship,” or, “thinks I [do not have/do have] a current romantic relationship worth keeping.” Each item used a seven-point Likert scale in which a rating of 1 indicated the first word in the brackets, a rating of 4 indicated no opinion, and a rating of 7 indicated the second word in the bracket (e.g., $1 = \text{Should not}, 4 = \text{No Opinion}, 7 = \text{Should}$).

Relationship Quality. Lastly, relationship quality was measured using a composite of the commitment and satisfaction subscales developed by Rusbult and colleagues (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998). Items in the satisfaction scale included statements like, “I feel satisfied with our relationship,” or, “My relationship is close to ideal.” The commitment scale was formatted slightly differently as it contained seven items in total, all of which required participants to rate their level of agreement with each item using the same nine-point Likert scale used in the other measures in the model. The scale used in this study was a composite scale that combined the measures of satisfaction and commitment used in the Investment Model. Both the satisfaction ($\alpha = .95$) and commitment ($\alpha = .90$) subscales proved to be very reliable.

Narrative Prompts and Coding Procedures

As mentioned, participants were presented with two narrative prompts. The first asked participants to describe how they felt their relationship deviated from cultural norms.
and to share a specific experience that demonstrated that deviation. Specifically, the first
prompt read as follows:

Sometimes our relationships, or aspects of our relationships, don’t completely match what others (society, culture, family, friends, etc.) expect of us, or what is considered to be typical, normal, or acceptable for relationships. The following questions ask you to think about your relationship in this way, in terms of how it deviates from what is considered to be typical, normal, or acceptable.

First, think of a way that your relationship deviates from what is considered to be typical, normal, or acceptable. Please describe it in the space provided below.

Next, share a memory of a specific experience that illustrates how your relationship deviates from what is considered to be typical, normal, or acceptable. Please describe it in the space provided below, including what happened, who was involved, and your thoughts and feelings about it, both at the time and currently. In addition, please describe its significance to you and your relationship, if any.

The second prompt asked participants to share an experience in which they had a conversation with someone about how their own relationship was different. That prompt read:

What do you typically tell others about how your relationship deviates from what is considered to be typical, normal, or acceptable for relationships?

Finally, please describe a specific conversation with someone where you discussed your relationship deviation. Whom did you tell and how did the conversation go? How did the conversation affect your understanding of your relationship, if at all?

Participants’ narrative responses to these prompts were each coded for several factors by three coders. Two of the three coders coded each coding category. Responses to the first set of prompts were coded for deviation type, positive growth, relational resolution, positive affect, negative affect, disapproval, and approval. Categories of deviation types were determined after reading through each of the narrative responses. They were broken down into the categories based on the themes that persisted most
throughout all of the responses. In total, 19 deviation types were determined, and coders selected all the deviation types that applied, as well as the best, most applicable deviation type, for each narrative (See Table 1). Agreement on deviation types, which was defined as when at least two of the three coders chose the same main deviation type, occurred in 192 of the 200 narratives. For the other eight narratives, discrepancies were resolved through discussion.

Positive growth was adapted from a number of sources in the narrative identity literature (Pals, 2006; Lilgendahl & McAdams, 2009; Singer et al. 2007; Bauer, McAdams, & Sakaeda, 2005) and was described as any kind of positive development or change that served to enhance the individual or the relationship. Growth could have been attributed to the event itself, the subsequent events that occurred as a result of the event described, or to the experience of reflecting on the event. Two coders were instructed to consider the extent to which the description of growth was elaborated on, the extent to which the growth seemed important to the author of the narrative, and the extent to which the growth was described as transformative for the author. The narratives were coded on a three-point scale (1 = No evidence whatsoever for positive growth; 3 = Growth is clearly stated and is either elaborated [e.g., stated more than once] and/or transformative/important). Unfortunately, positive growth for first prompt was coded with fairly low reliability, ICC = .45.

The scale for relational resolution was adapted from Pals (2006). Two coders were instructed to determine to what extent the narrator expressed a mutual acceptance of his or her relationship deviation. The scale was broken down into two subscales. The first was a
two-point scale that determined whether or not there was resolution present in the narrative (0 = no information relevant to relational resolution; 1 = information relevant to relational resolution). If the coder determined that information relevant to relational resolution was present, they would then determine the level of quality of that information using a three-point scale (1 = unresolved, 2 = mixed, somewhat unresolved, somewhat resolved; 3 = resolved). Relational resolution was coded with substantial reliability, ICC = .74.

Positive and negative affect were defined as the extent to which positive or negative emotions were clearly expressed in the narratives. The two variables were coded individually by two coders. Both were measured on a three-point Likert scale (1 = No positive/negative emotion; 3 = pronounced positive/negative emotion). Both positive (ICC = .67) and negative (ICC = .64) affect were coded fairly reliably.

Approval and disapproval were defined as the extent to which the participant described experiencing either approval and support or disapproval regarding their deviation. Similar to positive and negative affect, approval and disapproval were coded individually by two coders and were measured on a three-point Likert scale (1 = No approval or support/disapproval; 3 = Strong approval or support/disapproval). Disapproval was coded very reliably (ICC = .74), but the reliability for approval was rather low (ICC = .45).

After responding to the first prompt, participants were asked to rate how severely they believed their relationship differed from the norm on a five-point scale ranging from, “Not severe at all,” to, “Extremely severe.” They were also asked to rate the extent to which they believed they had control or choice over their relationship with respect to type, status,
and situation. Similarly, responses were scored on a five-point scale, with answers ranging from, “No control,” to, “Complete control.”

Responses to the second prompt, in which participants shared an experience in which they described their deviation to another person, were coded for several other variables, namely disclosure, reactions from others, ending tone, and positive growth. Disclosure was determined as level or extent to which the participant told others about their relationship deviation. Two coders measured disclosure on a three-point Likert scale (1 = Very private – tells no one or very few people; 3 = Disclosing – seems to tell most people and not have a problem with disclosure). Disclosure was coded with high reliability, ICC = .84.

The reactions from others to participants’ deviations were broken down into two separate ratings. Two coders analyzed the variable of outsider reactions and were instructed to determine the level of positivity and negativity of the primary conversation partner in the narratives. Positive and negative reactions were each rated on three-point Likert scales (1 = No positive/negative reaction is present; 3 = A very positive/negative reaction is present). Positive reactions were defined as including approval, support, understanding, or empathy, or could also take the form of input or advice from the conversation partner. Conversely, negative reactions were defined as including disapproval, judgment, criticism, rejection, lack of support, or exclusion. Overall, reactions from others were coded with modest reliability for positivity, ICC = .61, but weaker reliability for negativity, ICC = .48.
Ending tone was defined as the emotionality of the narrative’s conclusion. Coders rated ending tone on a three-point scale (1 = Negative ending tone, 2 = Neutral or Mixed ending tone, 3 = positive ending tone). For narratives that were rated as having either a neutral or mixed ending tone, coders than specified whether the ending was neutral or mixed on a two-point scale (1 = mixed, 2 = neutral). The tone of narratives’ ending was rated with strong reliability, ICC = .66.

The same criteria were used to measure positive growth in the responses to the second prompt as was used in the responses to the first prompt. Two coders measured positive growth separately, using the same three-point scale. Growth was coded with moderate reliability, ICC = .65.

Results

Hypothesis Testing

Bivariate correlation analyses were run to test the first two hypotheses. For Hypothesis 1, which predicted that personality variables would correlate positively with certain narrative themes, the results provided some support. With regards to the first set of narrative responses, referred to as the “Deviation Narrative Responses,” which asked participants to describe their deviation, Extraversion was significantly positively correlated with positive affect, and Neuroticism was significantly negatively correlated with positive growth and positive affect and positively correlated with negative affect. In addition, growth-oriented implicit theory of relationships was significantly positively correlated with positive growth and approval (See Table 2). With respect to the second set of narratives, referred to as the “Telling Narrative Responses,” which asked participants to describe
talking about their deviation with someone else, little support for our hypotheses was found. Extraversion was positively correlated with disclosure as predicted. However, contrary to our hypothesis, positive growth in the telling narrative was negatively correlated with extraversion and openness and positively correlated with neuroticism. (See Table 3).

Hypothesis 2, in which we predicted that certain narrative themes would be correlated with relationship quality, was also partially supported by the results. As shown in Table 2, positive growth, resolution, and positive affect from the Deviation Narrative Responses were positively correlated with relationship quality, and negative affect was negatively correlated with relationship quality. In addition, both disclosure and ending tone from the Telling Narrative Responses were positively correlated with relationship quality (See Table 3).

Hypothesis 3 addressed the idea that narrative themes would mediate the relationship between personality variables and relationship quality. The conditions for mediation were met in only one case: positive growth from the Deviation Narratives mediated the relationship between a growth-oriented theory of relationships and relationship quality. Growth-oriented theory of relationships (ITR Growth) was regressed on relationship quality; $F(1,199) = 13.47, p < .01; R^2 = .064, \beta = .25$. Next, a regression was run with ITR Growth and positive growth from the Deviation narratives predicting relationship quality, and the overall model was significant; $F(2,199) = 10.39, p < .01; R^2 = .095$, and positive growth from the Deviation narratives was a significant predictor of relationship quality; $\beta = .31, p < .01$. The effect of ITR Growth on relationship remained significant, but was reduced when positive growth from the Deviation narratives was added to the model, $\beta$
= .22, \( p < .01 \). Ultimately, the Sobel test revealed that positive growth partially mediated the relationship between ITR Growth and relationship quality (\( Z = 1.96, p < .05 \); see Figure 1).

**Additional Analyses**

Bivariate correlations were used to analyze the relationships between the all of the narrative variables coded for (See Table 4). Specifically, positive growth from the Deviation responses was positively correlated with positive growth from the Telling responses, although this correlation was relatively small. Ending tone from the Telling responses was positively correlated with resolution and positive affect from the Deviation responses, and negatively correlated with negative affect and disapproval from the Deviation responses. Additionally, positive reactions from primary conversation partners in the Telling responses were positively correlated with positive growth and disapproval in the Deviation responses. Lastly, disclosure in the Telling responses was positively correlated with resolution and positive affect and negatively correlated with negative affect from the Deviation responses.

In addition, the narrative themes that were found to be significantly correlated with relationship quality were included in a multiple regression model predicting relationship quality. Specifically, social network approval, growth oriented implicit theory of relationships, resolution, positive affect, negative affect, positive growth from the Deviation responses, disclosure, and ending tone, as well as the control variables of age, gender, and relationship duration, were included in the multiple regression analysis. Table 5 reports the results of this regression. With these variables included, social network approval, resolution, and disclosure were all found to be significant independent predictors of relationship quality, while positive affect, negative affect, positive growth, and ending tone no longer
predicted relationship quality. Gender was also found to predict relationship quality, whereas age and relationship duration did not (See Table 5).

**Discussion**

This study aimed to investigate the relationship between personality, narrative identity, and romantic relationships. Using a narrative approach, it was revealed that personality variables were correlated with narrative themes, which were correlated with relationship quality. In addition, narratives were also found to mediate the relationship between personality and relationship quality.

**Results Interpretation**

Overall, each of the hypotheses received support, to some extent, from the analyses run. Generally speaking, several of the personality factors were correlated with several of the narrative themes, but this was only true for the narrative themes coded from the Deviation narrative responses and not from the Telling narrative responses. In the Deviation responses, the narratives of individuals higher on Extraversion expressed higher levels of positive emotion, whereas the narratives of individuals high on Neuroticism expressed lower levels of positive emotion and higher levels negative emotion, and also contained lower levels of positive growth. Lastly, individuals with a growth-oriented theory of relationships (ITR Growth) contained more positive growth and higher levels of approval from others in their narratives than individuals with a destiny-oriented theory of relationships. All of these findings were consistent with the predictions of Hypothesis 1.

In the Telling narrative responses, however, the results, for the most part, did not support the hypothesis. The narratives of individuals high on Extraversion contained more disclosure, which was aligned with what was predicted in Hypothesis 1, but they also
contained lower levels of positive growth, a finding that was inconsistent with what was predicted. By the same token, individuals high on Neuroticism expressed higher levels of positive growth in their narratives, and individuals high on Openness expressed lower levels of positive growth in their narratives as well. These findings were inconsistent with the predictions of Hypothesis 1, as well as with previous research on personality variables and both narratives and romantic relationships, suggesting that the theme of positive growth may have been more difficult to accurately code for in the Telling narrative responses.

Next, most of the narrative themes were correlated with relationship quality in the direction predicted by the hypotheses. Individuals whose narratives contained higher levels of positive growth (in the Deviation narratives only), relational resolution, positive affect, and disclosure reported having higher relationship quality. These findings aligned with Hypothesis 2, as well as with what one might expect from individuals whose descriptions of their relationship deviations contained growth and resolution. That is, it would follow that an individual who has grown personally or learned a positive lesson from their deviation would be more satisfied with or committed to their relationship, and, thus, report higher relationship quality, because their deviation has had a positive impact on them as a person. Similarly, one would expect that individuals who felt more accepting of or resolved toward their deviation in the context of their relationship would subsequently feel more satisfied with that relationship.

The predictability of resolution on relationship quality is magnified when one considers that resolution remained a significant, independent predictor of relationship quality when included in the multiple regression model with all other significantly correlated
and control variables. Thus, high levels of relational resolution, independent of any other contributing factors, predicted high relationship quality. This finding suggests that individual perceptions of one’s own relationship deviation are exclusively tied to relationship quality outside of the input from the external world. That is, individuals who feel more resolved about their relationship deviation have higher relationship quality regardless of how their friends and family feel about their deviation. For reference, the following is an example of a narrative with high resolution written by an individual with high relationship quality:

*I am a Afro-American woman married to a Latin man, we have been married for 14 years now, and we have three children. My husband and I are very happy together and our relationship gets stronger as the years pass. We share many things in common, but also have different likes as well.*

*I guess I could say that our relationship is different in the aspect that I am fine with my husband traveling to a different state for work or to visit friends without me. I actually encourage him to go. Just a few months ago, he went to Arizona to visit his best friend and I really encourage him going on that trip. Not many wives would be comfortable with their husbands going away, but I trust my husband and he trust me. SO maybe that is how are relationship may be different.*

Conversely, the following is an example of a narrative with low resolution written by an individual with low relationship quality:

*My marriage deviates from the norm because although we are exclusive to each other, there have been times when affairs have been discovered. This is something that ends many marriages, however so far we have been able to look past the affairs and continue to work on our marriage. This has caused a significant trust issue in our relationship, however normally people are not able to forgive, accept and move on when they find their partner has cheated on them.*

*Something specific that has occurred that deviates from the norm was when I became friends with the woman my husband had an affair with. In fact, I have become friendly with each of the 4 people he has strayed from our marriage for. My thoughts about this is that I need to stop being so insecure about myself and stop putting everyone else first. This is significant because when I realized it, it has made me reevaluate our marriage.*
This emphasis on the individual perception of one’s relationship deviation exemplifies the underlying idea behind this study that the way in which individuals feel that their relationship differs from the norm, as well as how they themselves interpret this difference, affects the quality of their relationships.

The relationships between positive and negative affect and relationship quality also support Hypothesis 2 and are consistent with logical expectations. One would anticipate that individuals who described their relationship deviations in a more positive light and felt positively about their deviation would have higher relationship quality, whereas individuals who described their deviations in a more negative light and, thus, felt more negatively about their relationship deviation would, in turn, experience lower relationship quality.

Ending tone was also positively correlated with relationship quality, and although this narrative theme was not explicitly included in any of the hypotheses, this finding can be interpreted similarly to those regarding positive and negative affect. That is, a positive ending to an individual’s description of his or her relationship deviation may indicate that he or she feels more positively about the deviation altogether, and, therefore, would feel more positively about their relationship as a whole.

The positive relationship between disclosure and relationship quality is consistent with what was predicted in Hypothesis 2 and complements previous research exploring this relationship. Research has shown that self-disclosure between partners is associated with romantic relationship satisfaction (Hendrick, 1981; Hendrick, Hendrick, & Adler, 1988), and a similar relationship was exhibited in this study. Similar to the benefits of self-disclosure between partners, we found that disclosure about one’s relationship deviation to a member of his or her social network also had a positive effect on relationship quality. Individuals who
were more open with others about their relationship deviation and disclosed more information when discussing their deviation with others reported having higher relationship quality. Similar to relational resolution, the predictability of disclosure on relationship quality is magnified due to the fact that disclosure was found to be a significant, independent predictor of relationship when included in the multiple regression model with all other significant narrative variables. The regression model showed that this effect of disclosure was independent of other factors, meaning that the benefits of disclosure for relationship quality cannot be explained by simply disclosing more positive information about the relationship.

This strong relationship between disclosure and relationship quality could be the result of several mechanisms. First, withholding information about one’s relationship from one’s family and friends, specifically information that is about how one’s relationship differs from the norm, may be a stressful process and may impact his or her understanding or level of acceptance regarding the relationship deviation. In turn, the stress from not feeling comfortable or willing to disclose the details of one’s deviation with others may have a negative effect on how that individual views his or her relationship as a whole, thus negatively impacting relationship quality. On the other hand, sharing one’s deviation with family and friends may be a rewarding or validating experience, which could subsequently have a positive effect on how individuals view their relationship deviation and their relationship altogether. By the same token, if an individual feels comfortable enough to disclose information about their relationship deviation to others, that may be indicative of other positive factors such as resolution or positive affect. That is, in addition to its
predictability of relationship quality on its own, disclosure may be associated with other positive predictors of relationship quality.

Lastly, modest support was found for Hypothesis 3, which stated, generally speaking, that narrative themes would mediate the relationship between personality factors and relationship quality, essentially emphasizing the role of the narrative process. The narrative theme of positive growth (from the Deviation narrative responses only) partially mediated the relationship between ITR Growth and relationship quality. In other words, individuals who believe that relationships are open to growth and improvement over time reported higher relationship quality, and one mechanism of this relationship may be the narrative process of developing growth from interpreting and dealing with relationship deviations. It is not surprising, however, that this mediation is only partial, as one could imagine many other ways in which individuals might derive growth from their relationship. Other sources of growth may include significant life events, such as getting married, having children, or the death of a family member, or possibly major conflicts, like significant fights or arguments that could be resolved and subsequently contribute to a boost in relationship quality after the resolution (e.g. how a bone grows back stronger after it breaks).

**Additional Findings**

The multiple regression model revealed several other interesting findings that were not directly linked to the hypotheses. First and foremost, social network approval was the strongest significant independent predictor of relationship quality of all the significant variables included in the model. The Social Network Approval scale, however, is a fairly general measure of romantic relationships, and, thus, does not sufficiently take into account
the effect of interpreting one’s relationship deviation. The narrative variables of approval
and disapproval, which were designed to measure social network approval in individuals’
narratives about their deviations, were not significant predictors of relationship quality. This
suggests that although social network approval strongly predicted relationship quality, when
accounting for relationship deviations, how individuals in a relationship feel about and
interpret their deviations, or the aspects of their relationship that may elicit the most
judgment from their social network, also has a significant effect on relationship quality.

Several control variables were also included in the multiple regression analysis,
namely gender, age of participant, and relationship duration. Gender was a significant
predictor of relationship quality, such that females reported having higher relationship
quality than males. The age of the participants and the duration of a relationship were not
significant predictors of relationship quality. Thus, the effects of significant narrative
variables such as resolution or disclosure on relationship quality hold regardless of how old
the individuals in a relationship are or how long they have been together.

In addition to the multiple regression analyses, bivariate correlations revealed
several interesting associations between the narrative themes coded for in the Deviation
narrative responses and those coded for in the Telling narrative responses. Perhaps the
most intriguing finding was that positive growth in the Deviation narratives was positively
correlated with positive growth in the Telling narratives, although this correlation was not
particularly strong. This may imply that although the coding instructions for positive growth
were the same for both sets of narratives, the theme of positive growth may have
manifested itself differently in each set of narrative. This may partially explain why the
correlations between growth from the Deviation narratives and the personality variables were consistent with Hypothesis 1 but the correlations between growth from the Telling narratives and the personality variables were not. See Table 4 for all of the significant correlations between these two sets of variables.

Strengths, Limitations, and Future Directions

Several aspects of the current study and its design strengthened the legitimacy of the study as a whole. First, this study examined a very large and diverse sample. As a result, there were a fairly equal number of men and women. Also, the diversity of the sample led to a wide array of deviation types, indicating not only that people deviate in many different ways, but also that what people consider to be normal also varies greatly. In addition to the size and diversity of the sample, using a narrative approach to examine master narratives in the context of romantic relationships is a relatively new procedure. This process should be employed in further studies of romantic relationships and in more general studies of master narratives as well.

Nevertheless, while this study found numerous interesting and significant results, there were several limitations that should be addressed in future research on master narrative deviations in the context of romantic relationships. First, the reliability for positive growth coded from the Deviation narratives, which was one of the variables included in the mediation that supported Hypothesis 3, was fairly low. This weak reliability detracts from the significance of the mediation, as well as from other hypotheses. Specifically, the correlations between growth from the Deviation narratives and the variables of Neuroticism, ITR Growth, and relationship quality, which provided support from Hypothesis 1, are less reliable when considering that they may not be replicable due to the low
reliability with which positive growth was coded. In turn, the support behind both Hypothesis 1 and 3 is less reliable because of the low reliability of positive growth from the Deviation narratives.

Positive growth seemed to be an especially difficult variable to code for, as was demonstrated by both the low reliability of growth from the Deviation narratives and by the differences in relationships between positive growth from each set of narratives and the personality variables. The fact that positive growth from the Deviation narratives correlated with the personality variables in the direction predicted by the hypotheses and positive growth from the Telling narratives was correlated with the personality variables in nearly the opposite direction demonstrates the difficulty in coding for positive growth. For reference, the following is an example of a Deviation narrative that was high on positive growth (and high on resolution, as well):

*We spend a lot more time with each other than a lot of other couples do. Almost all of our free time is devoted to being with each other. I know a lot of other couples have large groups of friends, hobbies, or demanding jobs. Luckily, our hobby is each other. We find things that both of us already enjoy, and then get even more pleasure out of doing it together. Other couples are surprised by how often we are together, or how infrequently we fight. I think a key to our success is exactly how much time we spend together, and the fact that it always gives us an opportunity to discuss anything that is bothering us. We have extremely open communication, and it has facilitated growth for each of individually, as well as us collectively, as a relationship.*

Next, the following is an example of a Telling narrative that was rated as having moderate positive growth (and was high on disclosure, as well):

*I was having a conversation with one of my male friends, while he was single. He wasn’t sure why I enjoyed spending so much time with my partner. He was having a hard time trying to figure out what would make you want to spend so much time with a girl, rather than playing video games with him. It was pretty difficult to describe to him the enjoyment that I get from spending time with my partner. It still*
fairly difficult. I just feel more safe, more comfortable. He listened carefully, and tried to understand. Eventually, it was clear that he wasn’t going to be able to fully see things from my perspective, but that he would respect my perspective as rational. That was an important step, because about two months later he found himself in a relationship. Now, he has about the same feelings towards his partner that I have towards mine, and he looks back on that conversation with a bit of humor. The only real take-away I had from the conversation was that maybe my relationship isn’t all that aberrant, but people are just conditioned to imagine a relationship as functioning a certain way.

Both of these narratives were rated as containing positive growth, but the extent of that growth and how it was expressed is different. In the Deviation narrative, the participant talks about growing as an individual and as a dyad. Thus, growth in this narrative took the form of positive change. In the Telling narrative, however, the participant talks about coming to a realization about his relationship, learning something new about the relationship after discussing his or her deviation with someone else. These varying types of growth demonstrate the ambiguity with which positive growth was coded. Future narrative research that plans on coding for positive growth might consider modifying the coding instructions so that coders have a clearer and more coherent understanding of what constitutes both the presence and extent of positive growth in narratives.

In addition to low reliability, the lack of attention paid to the severity and centrality of deviations in the analyses was another limitation of the study. As mentioned, participants were asked after the first prompt to rate how severe they felt their relationship deviation was and to what extent they felt they had control over these deviations. Severity did not correlate with relationship quality, meaning that more extreme deviations did not necessarily have a more negative effect on relationship quality. However, more analyses
using this information are needed in the future to fully understand how more objective qualities of deviations may moderate the current findings of this study.

In this sample, the most frequent type of deviation was that of individuals who felt that their relationship quality was significantly higher than most other couples. These individuals reported having relationships that were, “perfect,” or reported that he or she, “never fought,” with their partner. This perceived relationship superiority is a much different type and degree of deviation than, for instance, individuals with a large age difference or individuals whose partner is of a different race than they are. The, “perfect relationship,” deviation does not warrant the same kind of constant attention and interpretation that other deviation types warrant. This type is significantly easier to deal with. Individuals whose narratives belonged to this deviation type would most likely report that their deviation was not severe. Therefore, future research should take into account the severity of deviations and the perceived control over them when designing a study and forming hypotheses. Such research might also choose to exclude individuals who report having a, “perfect,” relationship from the sample if their aim is to investigate the effect of how individuals interpret relationship deviations, for people do not need to deal with perceived relationship superiority in the same manner that they do with other, more central or severe deviations.

Furthermore, the coding of deviation types limited the study in another way as well. In particular, although there was complete agreement among coders regarding the main deviation type of each narrative, many narratives were coded as belonging to several deviation types. These narratives, however, were treated the same as narratives with only
one deviation type in analyses. By the same token, several narratives contained multiple deviations, yet they, too, were treated the same as narratives with one straightforward deviation in statistical analyses. Future research should consider investigating deeper into these types of narratives in which there were multiple deviations or where the one deviation discussed belonged to multiple categories.

Lastly, this study examined individuals in relationships at one point in time. Future research using this narrative approach to examining romantic relationships should consider employing a longitudinal design, so as to capture a larger, more comprehensive appreciation of how individuals deal with their deviations. Subsequently, researchers could investigate whether changes in relationship quality are predicted by changes in narratives of relationship deviations.

Implications and Conclusion

Despite the limitations discussed, our work establishes several important findings. Overall, the relationship between deviations and relationship quality was two-fold. The external factor of social network approval was a significant predictor of relationship quality, indicating that what others think of an individual’s relationship, and specifically of his or her deviation, matters in terms of the quality of that individual’s romantic relationship. Nevertheless, the fact that several of the narrative variables also significantly predicted relationship quality signifies that how the individual interprets and feels about his or her relationship deviation also has an impact on that person’s relationship quality. Thus, the act of differing from the master narrative of relationships does not necessarily affect the quality of romantic relationships in and of itself. Rather, how the people in that relationship, as well
as members of their social network, interpret that difference will impact relationship quality. Individuals struggling to deal with their relationship deviation should be encouraged by the finding that perceiving their deviation positively or coming to terms with their deviation over time can have a positive effect on their relationship quality, regardless of what other people think of their relationship.

Moreover, this study demonstrated that the master narrative of romantic relationships may be more difficult to define than previous research might suggest. In this sample of 200 participants, 18 deviation types were determined as most frequent, and yet 10% of the narratives in the sample were ultimately placed in the, “Other,” category. Clearly, there is a wide array of ways in which people feel that their relationship differs from the norm, which implies that there may be a wide array of ways in which people perceive what that norm is to begin with. While most of the focus of this study was on how people perceive their relationships as different from normal, perhaps what people perceive to be a normal relationship has an equally significant impact on relationship quality. Thus, the master narrative of romantic relationships seems to differ from person to person, and may diverge across geographical and societal differences, as well. In sum, feeling as though one’s relationship differs from the norm is essentially arbitrary, as the definition of normal is vastly different. The way in which one deals with this feeling, however, is more deliberate. Individuals interpret their deviations in unique ways, and it is these interpretations that can impact relationship quality, not simply the feeling that one’s relationship is off the beat and path.
References


### Table 1

*Frequencies: Main Deviation Type*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Deviation Type</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Timeline</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Gender Roles</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Age</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Interracial</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Sexual Orientation</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Interfaith</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Personality Differences</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Long Distance</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>12.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Sexual Behavior</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Relationship Quality: Positive</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>12.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Relationship Quality: Negative</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Met Online</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Not Married/Cohabiting</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. No Children</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Blended Family</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Appearance</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Mental Health</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Activities</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Other</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2

Bivariate Correlations: Deviation Narrative Themes, Personality Measures, and Relationship Quality

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Measures</th>
<th>Deviation Narrative Themes</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Growth Deviation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Extraversion</td>
<td>-.016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neuroticism</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Openness to Experience</td>
<td>.024</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Growth/Fixed Mindset</td>
<td>-.085</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ITR – Growth</td>
<td>.204**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ITR – Destiny</td>
<td>-.072</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship Quality</td>
<td>.226**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: (N=200); *Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed); **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)
### Table 3

**Bivariate Correlations: Telling Narrative Themes, Personality Measures, and Relationship Quality**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Measures</th>
<th>Growth Telling</th>
<th>Ending Tone</th>
<th>Positive Reaction</th>
<th>Negative Reaction</th>
<th>Disclosure</th>
<th>Relationship Quality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Extraversion</td>
<td>-.163*</td>
<td>.041</td>
<td>-.055</td>
<td>.045</td>
<td>.168*</td>
<td>.055</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neuroticism</td>
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<td>.052</td>
<td>.007</td>
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<td>-.131</td>
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<tr>
<td>Openness to Experience</td>
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<td>-.007</td>
<td>.091</td>
<td>-.014</td>
<td>-.080</td>
<td>.132</td>
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<td>Growth/Fixed Mindset</td>
<td>.136</td>
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<td>-.081</td>
<td>-.065</td>
<td>-.097</td>
<td>-.083</td>
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<td>ITR – Growth</td>
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<td>.006</td>
<td>-.027</td>
<td>-.099</td>
<td>.026</td>
<td>.252**</td>
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<td>-.073</td>
<td>-.125</td>
<td>.002</td>
<td>.017</td>
<td>-.041</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship Quality</td>
<td>.044</td>
<td>.267**</td>
<td>.013</td>
<td>-.071</td>
<td>.278**</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

*Notes: (N=200); *Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed); **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)*
Table 4
Bivariate Correlations: Deviation Narrative Themes and Telling Narrative Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>All Narrative Themes</th>
<th>Growth Deviation</th>
<th>Resolution</th>
<th>Positive Affect</th>
<th>Negative Affect</th>
<th>Approval</th>
<th>Disapproval</th>
<th>Growth Telling</th>
<th>Ending Tone</th>
<th>Positive Reaction</th>
<th>Negative Reaction</th>
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<tr>
<td>Resolution</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Positive Affect</td>
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<td>.678**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative Affect</td>
<td>-.176*</td>
<td>-.702**</td>
<td>-.563**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>Approval</td>
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<td>.094</td>
<td>-.065</td>
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<td>.149*</td>
<td>.003</td>
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<td>.003</td>
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<td>Ending Tone</td>
<td>.124</td>
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<td>.353**</td>
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<td>.187**</td>
<td>.012</td>
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<td>Disclosure</td>
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<td>.270**</td>
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<td>.058</td>
<td>-.038</td>
<td>.102</td>
<td>.267**</td>
<td>.064</td>
<td>.028</td>
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Notes: (N=200); *Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed); **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)
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<th>Model</th>
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<th>R²</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>df</th>
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<td>-.50</td>
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<td>Relationship Duration</td>
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<td>1.04</td>
<td>.30</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
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</table>
Figure 1
Growth implicit theory of relationships predicting relationship quality, mediated by growth in the deviation narrative.

\[ ITR \text{ GROWTH} \rightarrow \text{GROWTH DEVIATION} \rightarrow \text{RELATIONSHIP QUALITY} \]

\[
\begin{align*}
0.25^* \\
(0.22^*)
\end{align*}
\]

\[
0.20^* \\
\]

\[
0.18^*
\]

*p < .01
Appendix 1: Qualtrics Survey

Informed Consent Form

**Study Title**: A Master Narrative Approach to Examining Relationship Deviations

**Haverford College Faculty Advisors**: Jennifer Lilgendahl and Benjamin Le

**Student researchers**: Lucas Colombo, Dayle Comerford, and Amanda Fletcher

**Purpose and Procedure**: This study is being carried out by faculty and students in the Psychology Department at Haverford College. The purpose of this study is to examine people’s experience of deviating from master narratives (i.e., social norms, scripts, and expectations) within their romantic relationships. As a participant, you will be asked to write about an experience of a master narrative deviation in your relationship as well as an experience of telling someone else about this deviation. You will also be asked to complete several questions regarding your relationship, personality, your emotions, and your feelings about your relationship as well as how others perceive your relationship. Once you have started, this study should take you approximately 20-30 minutes to complete. Approximately 150 people will participate in this study.

**Compensation**: You will be paid $1 for your participation in this study. You will receive your compensation through MTurk upon completion of the survey.

**Benefits/Risks**: Participation in this study poses no physical risk to you. However, you will be asked to reflect on your relationship, and you will be asked to write about what may be sensitive, difficult, or private aspects of your relationship. We do not expect these activities to cause psychological discomfort beyond the normal emotional ups and downs encountered in everyday life. However, if participation in this study causes you emotional discomfort beyond what you perceive to be acceptable, you may discontinue your participation at any time without penalty. In terms of possible benefits, you may find that you gain self-insight and knowledge about your relationship as well as an increased understanding of psychological research through your participation in this study.

**Confidentiality/Anonymity**: This is an anonymous study. No identifying information will be collected in the survey, and compensation takes place via MTurk, without researchers’ involvement or access to identifying information. The data collected in this study will also be stored and maintained confidentially. Only the supervising faculty members and student researchers will have access to survey responses, which will be stored in a locked lab on password-protected computers and will only be viewed in the laboratory, for the stated purposes of the research study. The researchers are interested in patterns of results at the aggregated, group level of analysis rather than the responses of any single individual. Data will be reported in the form of summaries about groups, not particular individuals. However, direct quotes from narrative responses will sometimes be used in order to illustrate general points in publications or presentations based on this project. If this happens, all possible identifying information included in your open-ended narrative responses will be changed or removed.

**Voluntary Nature of Participation**: Your participation in this research project is voluntary. In addition, you can decline to answer any question you don’t want to answer or discontinue your participation at any time without any penalty.

**Contact Information**: If you have any questions about this research project or your rights as a research participant, please contact Prof. Jennifer Lilgendahl via email at jililgend@haverford.edu or Prof. Ben Le
at ble@haverford.edu. You may also address concerns to Prof. Richard Ball (rball@haverford.edu),
chairperson of Haverford College’s IRB (a committee with oversight on human subject research).

Please click “agree” below to acknowledge that you have been informed about this study’s purpose,
procedures, possible benefits and risks. In addition, you voluntarily agree to participate in this study. By
stating that you agree to these terms, you are not waiving any of your legal rights.

__ Agree

General Survey Instructions

Thank you for agreeing to participate in our study. Please note that you qualify for participation in this study
ONLY IF you are currently in a romantic relationship. This questionnaire contains several sections
and a variety of different kinds of questions. Please read the instructions for each section carefully and
answer as thoroughly and honestly as possible. After you complete each page, click on the button at the
bottom that will advance you to the next page. There will be a bar at the top of the survey that will indicate
your progress.

Narrative Questions about Relationship Deviations

Sometimes our relationships, or aspects of our relationships, don’t completely match what others (society, culture, family, friends, etc.) expect of us, or what is considered to be typical, normal, or acceptable for relationships. The following questions ask you to think about your relationship in this way, in terms of how it deviates from what is considered to be typical, normal, or acceptable.

1. First, think of a way that your relationship deviates from what is considered to be typical, normal, or acceptable. Please describe it in the space provided below.

2. How much do you think your relationship deviates from what is considered to be typical, normal, or acceptable for relationships?

   1 = Very little
   2
   3
   4 = Somewhat
   5
   6
   7 = A great deal

3. How important is this deviation to your relationship?

   1 = Not important
   2
   3
   4 = Somewhat important
   5
6   7 = Very important

4. How difficult was it to come up with a way that your relationship deviates from what is typical, normal, or acceptable?

1 = Not at all difficult
2
3
4 = Moderately difficult
5
6
7 = Very difficult

5. How much control do you feel over the way your relationship deviates from what is typical, normal, or acceptable?

1 = No control
2
3
4 = A moderate amount
5
6
7 = Total control

6. Next, share a memory of a specific experience that illustrates how your relationship deviates from what is considered to be typical, normal, or acceptable. Please describe it in the space provided below, including what happened, who was involved, and your thoughts and feelings about it, both at the time and currently. In addition, please describe its significance to you and your relationship, if any.

7. How difficult was it to come up with a specific experience that illustrates how your relationship deviates from what is considered to be typical, normal, or acceptable?

1 = Not at all difficult
2
3
4 = Moderately difficult
5
6
7 = Very difficult

8. What do you typically tell others about how your relationship deviates from what is considered to be typical, normal, or acceptable for relationships?

9. Finally, please describe a specific conversation with someone where you discussed your relationship deviation. Whom did you tell and how did the conversation go? How did the conversation affect your understanding of your relationship, if at all?
10. How difficult was it to come up with a specific experience that illustrates how your relationship deviates from what is considered to be typical, normal, or acceptable?

1 = Not at all difficult
2
3
4 = Moderately difficult
5
6
7 = Very difficult

Demographic Questions

1. What is your age? ______

2. What is your current romantic partner’s age? ______

3. Which of the following best describes you?
   - Biologically male, identify as a man
   - Biologically female, identify as a woman
   - Transgender man
   - Transgender woman
   - Other _________________________________

4. Which of the following best describes your partner?
   - Biologically male, identify as a man
   - Biologically female, identify as a woman
   - Transgender man
   - Transgender woman
   - Other _________________________________

5. What is your sexual identity?
   - Straight (heterosexual)
   - Lesbian
   - Gay
   - Bisexual
   - Queer
   - Asexual
   - Other _________________________________

6. What is your partner’s sexual identity?
   - Straight (heterosexual)
   - Lesbian
   - Gay
   - Bisexual
   - Queer
   - Asexual
   - Other _________________________________
7. What is your race/ethnicity? (please select all that apply)
   White
   Black or African-American
   Latino or Hispanic
   Native American or American Indian
   Asian / Pacific Islander
   Other ______________________

8. What is your partner’s race/ethnicity? (please select all that apply)
   White
   Black or African-American
   Latino or Hispanic
   Native American or American Indian
   Asian / Pacific Islander
   Other ______________________

9. What is your current relationship status?
   Dating casually
   Dating seriously
   About to live together/be engaged
   Living together/engaged
   Married/in a committed, life-long partnership
   Should we add an “other, please describe” answer here?

10. How long have you been in a relationship with your current romantic partner?
    Years _____________
    Months ____________
    Weeks _____________

11. Right now, how exclusive is your relationship with your current romantic partner?
    We see others as often as we see each other
    We see others but we see each other a lot
    We see only each other

12. Are you in a long-distance relationship (do we want to define this?) with your current romantic partner? Yes/No

   The Big Five Inventory (BFI; John & Srivastava, 1999)

   Here are a number of statements that may or may not apply to you. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each statement.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I see myself as someone who...</th>
<th>Disagree Strongly</th>
<th>Disagree a little</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th>Agree a little</th>
<th>Agree Strongly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tends to be lazy</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
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<tr>
<td>is full of energy</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
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<tr>
<td>is emotionally stable, not easily upset</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
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<tr>
<td>is relaxed, handles stress well</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worries a lot</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
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<tr>
<td>has a forgiving nature</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
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<tr>
<td>Can be tense</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>is reserved</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>can be somewhat careless</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>is depressed, blue</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>is helpful and unselfish with others</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
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<tr>
<td>is curious about many different things</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
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<tr>
<td>Generates a lot of enthusiasm</td>
<td>○</td>
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<tr>
<td>is talkative</td>
<td>○</td>
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<tr>
<td>is original, comes up with new ideas</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
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<tr>
<td>Does a thorough job</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tends to be disorganized</td>
<td>○</td>
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<tr>
<td>is a reliable worker</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tends to find fault with others</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
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<tr>
<td>is ingenious, a deep thinker</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
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<tr>
<td>Starts quarrels with others</td>
<td>○</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
### MASTER NARRATIVE APPROACH TO RELATIONSHIP DEVIATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Disagree Strongly</th>
<th>Disagree a little</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th>Agree a little</th>
<th>Agree Strongly</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Has an active imagination</td>
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<tr>
<td>Perseveres until the task is finished</td>
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<tr>
<td>Likes to reflect, play with ideas</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tends to be quiet</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Is easily distracted</td>
<td></td>
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<thead>
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<th></th>
<th>Disagree Strongly</th>
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<th>Neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th>Agree a little</th>
<th>Agree Strongly</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Has few artistic interests</td>
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<tr>
<td>Values artistic, aesthetic experiences</td>
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<tr>
<td>Is inventive</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gets nervous easily</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Is sometimes rude to others</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Is sometimes shy, inhibited</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Disagree Strongly</th>
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<th>Neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th>Agree a little</th>
<th>Agree Strongly</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Can be cold and aloof</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Is generally trusting</td>
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<td>Can be moody</td>
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<tr>
<td>Is considerate and kind to almost everyone</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Prefers work that is routine</td>
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<tr>
<td>Makes plans and follows through with them</td>
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<th></th>
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<th>Neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th>Agree a little</th>
<th>Agree Strongly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Does things efficiently</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Has an assertive personality</td>
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<tr>
<td>Is outgoing, sociable</td>
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<tr>
<td>Remains calm in tense situations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Likes to cooperate with others</td>
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<tr>
<td>Is sophisticated in art, music, or literature</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Implicit Personality Theory Scale (IPT; Dweck, 1999)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree

-Personality version of scale:
1. The kind of person you are is something very basic about you and it can’t be changed much.
2. You can do things differently, but the important parts of who you are can’t really be changed.
3. You, no matter who you are, can significantly change your behavior.
4. As much as I hate to admit it, one can’t teach an old dog new tricks. You can’t really change your deepest attributes.
5. You can always substantially change the kind of person you are.
6. You are a certain kind of person, and there is not much that can be done to really change that.
7. No matter what kind of person you are, you can always change very much.
8. You can change even your most basic qualities.

Implicit Theories of Relationships Scale (ITR; Knee, 1998)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree

1. Potential relationship partners are either compatible or they are not.
2. A successful relationship is mostly a matter of finding a compatible partner.
3. Potential relationship partners are either destined to get along or they are not.
4. Relationships that do not start off well inevitably fail.
5. The ideal relationship develops gradually over time.
6. Challenges and obstacles in a relationship can make love even stronger.
7. A successful relationship is mostly a matter of learning to resolve conflicts with a partner.
8. A successful relationship evolves through hard work and resolution of incompatibilities.

Social Network Approval Scale (Derived from Etcheverry & Agnew, 2004)

Four questions were used to assess perceived social network approval:

Your social network includes your friends, family, colleagues, and other personal contacts. Please answer the following questions about the opinions of those in your social network.

My social network...

1. ...thinks I [should not/ should] continue in my current romantic relationship.
2. ...thinks I [do not have/have] a current romantic relationship worth keeping.
3. ...thinks that this [is not/is] a good current romantic relationship for me.
4. ...is [not supportive/supportive] of my current romantic relationship.

Each question will have a 7 point Likert scale where a rating of 1 indicates the first word in the brackets of each question, 4 indicates no opinion and 7 indicates the second word in brackets. For example, for number 1 the scale would look like:
Relationship Quality Measure (Derived from Investment Model Scale; Rusbult, Martz & Agnew, 1998)

A composite score using the satisfaction and commitment components (questions below) from the Investment Model scale will be composed to form the measure of relationship quality.

**Satisfaction Level Facet and Global Items**

1. Please indicate the degree to which you agree with each of the following statements regarding your current relationship (circle an answer for each item).

(a) My partner fulfills my needs for intimacy (sharing personal thoughts, secrets, etc.)
   - Don’t Agree
   - Agree At All
   - Slightly
   - Moderately
   - Completely

(b) My partner fulfills my needs for companionship (doing things together, enjoying each other’s company, etc.)
   - Don’t Agree
   - Agree At All
   - Slightly
   - Moderately
   - Completely

(c) My partner fulfills my sexual needs (holding hands, kissing, etc.)
   - Don’t Agree
   - Agree At All
   - Slightly
   - Moderately
   - Completely

(d) My partner fulfills my needs for security (feeling trusting, comfortable in a stable relationship, etc.)
   - Don’t Agree
   - Agree At All
   - Slightly
   - Moderately
   - Completely

(e) My partner fulfills my needs for emotional involvement (feeling emotionally attached, feeling good when another feels good, etc.)
   - Don’t Agree
   - Agree At All
   - Slightly
   - Moderately
   - Completely

2. I feel satisfied with our relationship (please circle a number).

   - Do Not Agree
   - At All
   - Agree
   - Somewhat
   - Agree Completely

3. My relationship is much better than others’ relationships.

   - Do Not Agree
   - At All
   - Agree
   - Somewhat
   - Agree Completely

4. My relationship is close to ideal.

   - Do Not Agree
   - At All
   - Agree
   - Somewhat
   - Agree Completely

5. Our relationship makes me very happy.

   - Do Not Agree
   - At All
   - Agree
   - Somewhat
   - Agree Completely

6. Our relationship does a good job of fulfilling my needs for intimacy, companionship, etc.

   - Do Not Agree
   - At All
   - Agree
   - Somewhat
   - Agree Completely
4. It is likely that I will date someone other than my partner within the next year.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>0</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
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<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do Not Agree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Somewhat</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Completely</td>
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5. I feel very attached to our relationship—very strongly linked to my partner.

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do Not Agree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Somewhat</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Completely</td>
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6. I want our relationship to last forever.

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do Not Agree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Somewhat</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Completely</td>
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7. I am oriented toward the long-term future of my relationship (for example, I imagine being with my partner several years from now).

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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do Not Agree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Somewhat</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Completely</td>
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**Commitment Level Items**

1. I want our relationship to last for a very long time (please circle a number).

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do Not Agree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Somewhat</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Completely</td>
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2. I am committed to maintaining my relationship with my partner.

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</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do Not Agree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Somewhat</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Completely</td>
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3. I would not feel very upset if our relationship were to end in the near future.

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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>Somewhat</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Completely</td>
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**The Experiences in Close Relationships Scale- Short Form (Wei, Russell, Mallinckrodt, & Vogel, 2007)**

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<th>4</th>
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<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Avoidance Subscale of the Experiences in Close Relationships (ECR) – Short Form Scale**

I want to get close to my partner, but I keep pulling back.
I am nervous when partners get too close to me.
I try to avoid getting too close to my partner.
I usually discuss my problems and concerns with my partner.
It helps to turn to my romantic partner in times of need.
I turn to my partner for many things, including comfort and reassurance.

**Anxiety Subscale of the Experiences in Close Relationships (ECR) – Short Form Scale**

I worry that romantic partners won’t care about me as much as I care about them.
My desire to be very close sometimes scares people away.
I need a lot of reassurance that I am loved by my partner.
I do not often worry about being abandoned.
I find that my partner(s) don’t want to get as close as I would like.
I get frustrated if romantic partners are not available when I need them.

Debriefing Page

1. What is the general aim of this research?
The general purpose of our study was (a) to examine how individuals react when their relationships follow a course that seems to deviate from social norms and expectations that are shared by and are dominant within our culture, and (b) to examine how differences in people’s understanding of these relationship deviations relate to personality characteristics, relationship quality, and positive vs. negative experiences of sharing these deviations with others. For example, we hypothesized that holding the belief that relationships can grow and also having the trait of “openness to experience”, which involves being comfortable with unconventionality, would help people to understand their relationship deviations in positive and growth-promoting ways that would, in turn, enhance one’s satisfaction in and commitment to the relationship. We also hypothesized that having more positive and connected experiences with sharing one’s deviation with others would help people to feel more supported in their relationships, which should also enhance relationship quality.

2. Is this experimental or correlational research?
This is correlational research. There was no experimental manipulation -- all participants completed all parts of the same survey -- and there was also no deception involved in this study.

3. Where can I learn more about this kind of research?


4. Who are the faculty members supervising this research and how can I contact them?
This research is supervised by Jennifer Lilgendahl and Ben Le in the Psychology Department at Haverford College. If you have any questions about this research or concerns about this study, you may reach them by telephone at (610) 896-1236 or via email at jilgend@haverford.edu or ble@haverford.edu. You may also address concerns to Prof. Richard Ball (rball@haverford.edu), chairperson of Haverford College’s Institutional Review Board (a committee with oversight on human subject research).

Please Note: We understand that being asked to write about how your relationship does not follow the expected course might be upsetting or difficult. We want to offer our sincere thanks for your willingness to do so for our study. However, if participating in this study has caused you emotional distress and you are having difficulty coping with this distress, please do not hesitate to contact Jennifer Lilgendahl (jilgend@haverford.edu) or Ben Le (ble@haverford.edu) or get in contact with your physician. And again, please feel free to ask questions if you are interested in learning more about our research. Thanks again for your participation!