“I DON’T WANNA TALK ABOUT IT”: REINTRODUCING TABOO TOPICS IN ROMANTIC DATING RELATIONSHIPS

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Abstract

THESIS: “I Don’t Wanna Talk About It”: Reintroducing Taboo Topics in Romantic Dating Relationships

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The purpose of the current study is to understand the reintroduction of taboo topics between romantic dating partners. Through a qualitative methodological approach, the current study discovers the most prominent taboo topic between romantic partners, why romantic partners reintroduce taboo topics, and what effect the reintroduction has on the relationship. The findings present that “previous relationships” is the most prominent taboo topic. Partners either avoid the taboo topic discussion altogether or the taboo topic discussion is reintroduced because a situation occurred in which one partner saw, spoke with, or spent time with a previous partner. Finally, the current study found that reintroducing taboo topics causes conflict and the use of self-protective mechanisms within the relationship.

Keywords: taboo topics, topic avoidance, conflict, relational repair, relational maintenance
Chapter I

Introduction & Rationale

Kelly and Taylor are in the third year of a romantic dating relationship. Overall, they are both satisfied with their relationship and consider their communication to be open and spontaneous; self-disclosure is a relationship norm. Though they do not regularly discuss marriage, they would seem to be moving toward that end. On the one occasion that Taylor brought up the topic of marriage toward the end of their second year together, Kelly seemed very uncomfortable, and Taylor had the distinct feeling that this was a topic Kelly did not want to discuss. Though Kelly and Taylor did not explicitly declare “marriage” as a topic to be avoided, it has not been brought up again by either partner and remains “under the surface.” Taylor, however, believes that this is a topic they need to discuss but is afraid to bring it up again for fear of Kelly’s negative reaction and the potential harm to the relationship.

Communication processes between romantic partners have long been studied within the realm of interpersonal communication. Scholars have focused on what is communicated between partners and how that is communicated; yet, there is very little information regarding the topics that are not easily communicated between romantic partners. There could be a number of reasons as to why partners, such as Kelly and
Taylor, have a difficult time discussing certain topics that are classified as “taboo” within the romantic dyad.

Taboo topics are defined as topics that are perceived as off limits and are avoided (Anderson, Kunkel, & Dennis, 2011; Baxter & Wilmot, 1985) by romantic partners. Taboo topics are declared (either explicitly, or as in the example above, more implicitly) by the relationship partners and are not necessarily the same as other couples’ taboo topics. Although taboo topics are considered off limits for discussion, taboo topics do not always vacate relationships entirely and may linger as a potential problem. However, romantic relationships may not be terminated because of taboo topics, so the taboo topic may reside in the relationship indefinitely. There is also a possibility that topics, which have been brought forth for discussion, or different taboo topics, may surface within the relationship time and time again. However, partners, such as Kelly and Taylor, may strategically avoid any possible discussion that deals with their specific taboo topic due to anticipated negative reactions from the other partner (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985). The negative reactions to taboo topics may cause conflict within the relationship.

When conflict arises, relationship partners go through a period of time in which individual and dyadic goals are interfered with (Barki & Harwick, 2004; Cloven & Roloff, 1991). Often times, perceived disagreements arise and interdependent partners experience negative emotions (Barki & Harwick, 2004). If the relationship does not terminate during the conflict phase, partners are likely to undergo a period of relational repair post-conflict. The goal of relational repair is to fix what has gone awry in the relationship and to return the relationship to a previous, desirable state (Brandau-Brown & Ragsdale, 2008). Once partners have reached a desirable state, then partners work to
maintain their specified and satisfactory condition (Dindia & Canary, 1993). This allows
the relationship to preserve a status quo to which both partners are accustomed.
Throughout the duration of the relationship, there is potential for the taboo topic to
resurface. If one partner initiates a conversation regarding a taboo topic, then the once
avoided taboo topic is reintroduced. Due to the avoidant nature of taboo topics, the
reintroduction process is likely to cause the relationship to revert back to the state it was
in throughout the aforementioned process or worsen the severity of the taboo topic within
the relationship. Therefore, partners are likely to reintroduce their taboo topics with
uncertainty, hesitancy, and caution.

The current study seeks to understand the most prominent taboo topic between
romantic partners, why partners reintroduce their taboo topics, and the effect the
reintroduction has on the relationship. Though taboo topics have been studied within
romantic relationships, the majority of reviewed literature focuses broadly on revealing
sexual taboo topics and media influences over the process of revealing taboo topics (e.g.,
Anderson, Kunkel, & Dennis, 2011; Moyer-Guse, Chung, & Jain; 2011). There is no
literature that pairs taboo topic discussions with conflict, relational repair, or relational
maintenance. Conflict in marital and dating relationships is a common topic of study, but
is seldom paired with taboo topics (e.g., Cloven & Roloff, 1991; Cloven & Roloff, 1993;
Siegert & Stamp, 1994). Relational repair and relational maintenance are studied
predominately in marital relationships rather than romantic relationships more broadly
defined (e.g., Brandau-Brown & Ragsdale, 2008; Dainton, 2008; Dunleavy, Goodboy,
Booth-Butterfield, Sidelinger, & Banfield, 2009; Goodboy & Bolkan, 2011; Ragsdale,
Brandau-Brown, & Bello, 2010). Once partners are solidified in a relationship through
marriage, partners generally engage in relational repair when needed and relational maintenance regularly. Although relational maintenance has been studied within the context of dating relationships (e.g., Dainton & Gross, 2008; Dailey, Hampel, & Roberts, 2010; Goodboy & Myers, 2010), few studies have examined relational repair during the dating phases of relationships. Yet, if the dating phase is practice for potential marriage, romantic partners are likely to practice relational repair throughout the dating phases of their relationship. This demonstrates that there is a gap in communication research that does not include how relational repair is practiced within dating relationships.

There is only one article that examines the reintroduction of taboo topics (Roloff & Johnson, 2001). Roloff and Johnson (2001) examine what potential factors lead romantic dating partners to the reintroduction of taboo topics, the differences in planned and unplanned taboo topic conversations, and positive and negative reactions to the reintroduced taboo topic conversation. Roloff and Johnson (2001) do not, however, include why taboo topics are reintroduced or the potential effects that the reintroduction might have on the relationship. Roloff and Johnson (2001) state, “Research does not, unfortunately, describe the processes that lead to reintroducing taboo topics and the effects of putting them back on the table” (pp. 37-38). Although this statement was made over 12 years ago, my review of the literature finds that this statement is still consistent. Due to this gap in the literature, the current study examines why romantic partners, such as Kelly and Taylor, revisit taboo topics and the effects on the relationship. Because taboo topics can be considered private matters by nature or because they become conditioned as private matters by relationship partners, this study utilizes a Communication Privacy Management theoretical framework.
Overview

The next four sections examine the process of reintroducing taboo topics. The following section includes a review of previous literature in which taboo topics, conflict, relational repair, relational maintenance, and the reintroduction of taboo topics are examined thoroughly. Next, the literature review presents the Communication Privacy Management theoretical framework. This section concludes with the study’s research questions. The subsequent section describes the methodology used to understand why romantic partners reintroduce their taboo topics and the effects that reintroducing taboo topics has on their relationships. The third section includes the findings of the current study, which describes why romantic partners reintroduce taboo topics and the effects of the reintroduction. The current study concludes with a discussion section that reemphasizes the study’s research questions and implications of the research. Finally, the current study suggests limitations and directions for future research.
Chapter II

Literature Review

This review of literature focuses on romantic partners reintroducing taboo topics within their dating relationships. The review begins with a discussion about taboo topics and topic avoidance. Next, conflict is examined, followed by discussions of relational repair, relational maintenance, and the reintroduction of taboo topics. The final section to the literature review provides an overview of Communication Privacy Management Theory.

The review of the literature reflects the following process. There is a committed ongoing romantic relationship. At some point, a topic is introduced that prompts conflict. The couple resolves the conflict through topic avoidance, thus creating the taboo topic. Relational repair occurs and the couple moves to relationship maintenance. Once they are in a state of satisfactory maintenance, they may then move to reintroduce the taboo topic. The linear progression, therefore, proceeds in the following way:

Taboo topic exists >> conflict >> repair >> maintenance >> reintroduction

Although these constructs, and the literature review, are presented in a linear fashion, this review recognizes that the reintroduction of a taboo topic will not invariably progress in the following manner; some steps may be skipped, revisited, or the relationship may terminate prior to the reintroduction. However, to capture the essence
the reintroduction process, this review argues that the following steps account for and create one viable path to the reintroduction of taboo topics.

**Taboo Topics**

Taboo topics are subject matters that can be difficult to express. Within each romantic relationship, there is almost always a topic that is considered taboo and is uncomfortable or forbidden to talk about. Baxter and Wilmot (1985) claim, “A ‘taboo topic’ is conceptualized as an interaction topic that is perceived as ‘off limits’ to one or both of the relationship parties” (p. 254). When a topic is described as taboo within a romantic relationship, the topic is typically problematic within the relationship. Therefore, partners often avoid the topic. Anderson, Kunkel, and Dennis (2011) state, “Topics potentially considered ‘off limits’ or ‘taboo’ within relationships are likely to reside at the primary intersections of opposing desires regarding self-expression and privacy” (p. 381). Taboo topics are declared by the partners and are not necessarily parallel with other couples’ taboo topics.

However, previous research depicts several categories of taboo topics that are consistent through much of the literature. Baxter and Wilmot (1985) examined various taboo topics within close relationships and discovered seven categories of topics that are often classified as taboo: (1) state of the relationship, (2) extra-relationship activity, (3) relationship norms, (4) prior relationships, (5) conflict-inducing topics, (6) negatively-valenced self-disclosure, and (7) other. Several years later, Guerrero and Afifi (1995a, 1995b) found five more topics that are often avoided within relationships: (1) relationship issues, (2) negative life experiences, (3) dating experiences, (4) friendships, and (5)
sexual experiences. Because these topics are commonly avoided, they can also be classified as taboo.

When a topic is defined as taboo within a romantic relationship, the taboo topic is generally avoided. The reason it is avoided is “because the person anticipates negative outcomes from its discussion” (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985, p. 254). Because people do not generally like to deal with the negative outcomes that can result from a specific topic, partners simply avoid the topic that causes issues. Topic avoidance is “a goal-oriented communicative behavior whereby individuals strategically try to keep a conversation away from certain foci” (Dailey & Palomares, 2004, p. 472). For the purpose of this study, the focus that is causing topic avoidance is the taboo topic. Aside from negative outcomes, there are various reasons why partners may choose to avoid their taboo topic. Dailey and Palomares (2004) claim that topics are often avoided for relationship-based reasons, individual-based reasons, and information-based reasons. The reason(s) that cause individuals to engage in topic avoidance are dependent upon the individuals within the partnership and can be classified as the driving force behind topic avoidance. Dailey and Palomares (2004) claim:

Topic avoidance, thus, occurs when interactants (because of their interaction goals) strategically try not to talk about something or disclose information on a particular topic, or it occurs when individuals try to talk about something or disclose information on a particular topic, or it occurs when individuals try to not let another person talk about something or disclose information on a particular topic. (pp. 472-473)
Depending on the interaction goals that the partners may have, topics are avoided. Roloff and Ifert (1998) examined taboo topics within college students’ romantic relationships and found that partners are more likely to explicitly declare a topic as taboo if the topic is unimportant to their relationship. However, if the topic is perceived to be relationally harmful, partners are less likely to explicitly declare the topic as taboo (Roloff & Ifert, 1998). There is a possibility that this occurs because partners would rather avoid the taboo topic altogether than discuss the topic long enough to explicitly declare the topic as taboo. This could also be a possibility because partners view the taboo topic as detrimental enough to the relationship that declaring the topic taboo would cause more harm than good to the relationship.

When a topic is taboo within a romantic relationship, partners often have a difficult time expressing, and therefore dealing with, the taboo topic. As a result, individuals may either refuse to reintroduce the taboo topic or take caution when revealing other private information to make sure the relationship is not threatened. Durham and Braithwaite (2009) state, “If negative reactions are anticipated by a discloser, he/she may delay a disclosure or hint at the concealed information over time, which can prepare potential confidants for a disclosure” (p. 45). By hinting information over a period of time and witnessing how the partner reacts to that information, the self-discloser tends to be more comfortable when revealing his/her private information. Now, however, the discloser must formulate a method of how to begin the discussion. Brenner (2010) claims that the struggle with communication is finding ways to speak about difficult, shameful, and painful topics that are typically taboo. If a conversation has begun and progresses in a positive manner between partners, the conversation is not necessarily
difficult to continue. Rather, the difficulty lies within the start of the conversation due to the uncertainty that either partner may have about how the other partner may react.

There are instances when a discloser reveals a taboo topic to his/her romantic partner and the conversation progresses in a positive manner. However, the reverse can also happen. When a discloser reveals a taboo topic to his/her romantic partner and the conversation does not progress positively, many couples discontinue the conversation and attempt to ignore the issue (Moyer-Guse, Chung, & Jain, 2011). Though ignorance may appear to be the most attractive method of dealing with the problem, ignorance may not be the best answer. Roloff and Johnson (2001) state, “Although agreeing to stop arguing about an intractable conflict would seem to be a reasonable means of retaining a satisfying relationship, it may have drawbacks” (p. 37). One extreme drawback of not discussing such topics could be the termination of the relationship. Yet, less extreme drawbacks often exist as well. For example, one partner may create an uncomfortable situation for the discloser so the discloser feels as though he/she can no longer participate in self-disclosure of any kind without an argument forming. Other drawbacks could include one partner neglecting or losing respect for the other partner (Derlega, Winstead, Mathews, & Braitman, 2008). The fear of these drawbacks often restricts partners from self-disclosing (Derlega, Winstead, Mathews, & Braitman, 2008); however, there are times when the topic being disclosed must be discussed, regardless of potential conflict that may arise.

Conflict

When partners have made the decision to discuss their taboo topic, individual and/or dyadic goal attainment often becomes blurred and conflict arises. Currently,
according to Sillars (2010), “conflict is now one of the most studied communication phenomena” (p. 273). Because conflict is widely studied, there are various definitions of conflict. Barki and Harwick (2004), in an article conceptualizing the construct of interpersonal conflict, synthesized various definitions and created a definition of their own. According to Barki and Harwick (2004), conflict is “a dynamic process that occurs between interdependent parties as they experience negative emotional reactions to perceived disagreements and interference with the attainment of their goals” (p. 234). In this particular definition, the key concepts are: a) interdependence; b) negative emotions; c) perceived disagreements; and d) goal interference. In addition, my review of conflict, primarily taken from the communication literature, provided the following three aspects of conflict: a) the normalcy of conflict; b) cognitive approaches to conflict; and c) individual versus dyadic goals.

To begin, it is important to note the normalcy of conflict within interdependent partnerships. Within each romantic relationship, interpersonal conflict is a common occurrence. As relationships advance and progress, conflict progresses also, since “conflict is a natural by-product of relational escalation” (Roloff & Chiles, 2011, p. 425). Although the term “conflict” often presents itself with a negative connotation, conflict can be healthy within relationships. In fact, an early conflict scholar (Fahs, 1981) argues that not partaking in conflict is restricting to the development of the relationship, and partners should embrace conflict rather than attempt to abolish it. Fahs (1981) further states:

Strategies aimed at eliminating conflict assume social systems can exist and
develop through purely cooperative orientations; however, a conflict-free social system is not only an abstract ideal beyond relational expectation, but also less than desirable for the continued development of the system. (p. 38)

It is evident that maintaining a relationship with absolutely no conflict would be setting an unrealistic expectation on the relationship, and if partners attempt to do so, the relationship is not likely to survive. Therefore, partners should accept the fact that conflict will occur. However, conflict does not need to guide the entire relationship. When conflict is continually (re)occurring, relational quality decreases (Roloff & Chiles, 2011) and undesirable systemic equilibrium is apparent (Fahs, 1981). Because relational quality and variety within the relationship are, most often, desirable, discovering a healthy balance of conflict may lead to greater relationship satisfaction.

The second premise of conflict is the individual cognitive approach to conflict. Whether conflict is ongoing or arising for the first time, individual sensemaking of the disagreement has proven to affect the conflict situation. Cloven and Roloff (1995) state, “people intending to communicate about conflicts are more likely to engage in cognitive activity that prepares them to receive information” (p. 2). By cognitively mapping out the anticipated disagreement, individuals are more receptive to the various possibilities of how the disagreement may proceed. However, individually anticipating the argument for extended periods of time can be just as detrimental to the relationship as not cognitively processing the argument. After conducting a study that examined this very concept, Cloven and Roloff (1991) found, “prolonged thinking about disputes in the absence of communication focuses individuals on their own perspectives and enhances biases toward seeing disputes as serious and holding partners responsible for conflicts” (p. 153). When
spending relentless amounts of time considering the conflict, partners are more likely to worsen the conflict situation by perceiving the conflict to be severe and unequivocally the other partner’s fault. Because this makes for an irrational, one-sided disagreement, it is more conducive for conflict management when partners attempt to cognitively process the argument, but only for the time needed to make sense of the specific situation. When individuals partake in this type of focused cognitive activity, they prepare themselves to effectively communicate, be less self-serving, more open to their partner’s perspectives of the conflict, and express their arguments differently (Cloven & Roloff, 1991; Cloven & Roloff, 1993). In a dyadic romantic relationship, it is particularly healthy for each partner to take into consideration the opinion of the other partner.

The third aspect of conflict is that individuals consider the goals of the dyad just as much, if not more, than their individual goals. In fact, conflict is rarely a product of a specific situation, but rather, a combination of partners’ goals and desires. Sillars (2010) claims, “The reference to goal incompatibility, both actual and perceived, suggests that conflict is not strictly about objective circumstances so much as subjective definitions and desires” (p. 274). When one partner has specific ideas of how things should be done and the other partner interferes with those ideas, conflict is likely to arise. In order to maintain a successful, healthy relationship, sacrificing one’s own goals and desires for the betterment of the relationship is often the key. In fact, Siegert and Stamp (1994) examined how couples handled their “First Big Fight (FBF)” in their relationship. They found that non-survivors of the FBF were more likely to admit a lack of communication during troublesome times, while survivors of the FBF realized that work and sacrifice are imperative in relationships. Siegert and Stamp (1994) state:
The survivors generally believed that a successful relationship required a joint effort in problem-solving, some sacrifice from both parties, and the ability and/or willingness to adjust one’s own ways of doing things in order to mesh with the partner’s way of doing things. (p. 357)

In order to successfully sustain a relationship, it is vital to realize that one’s method of doing things may seem right to one individual, but that does not necessarily make it the right way for the relationship. Rather, partners need to work on a give-and-take basis in order to discover how they can manage conflict together. In doing so, both partners are able to achieve their individual goals, and thus, the ultimate dyadic goal of relational satisfaction.

To achieve both individual and relational goal satisfaction, it is important that partners attempt to fully understand their quarrels. In order to create a solution that overcomes conflict and avoids potential, similar conflicts in the future, partners should individually comprehend each conflict episode (Cloven & Roloff, 1991). In doing so, goal attainment is not interfered with as regularly (Cloven & Roloff, 1991). When fully understanding each conflict, partners are able to consider the other partner’s goals just as much as their own. Then, partners are more likely to be relationally satisfied. Lakey and Canary (2002) state:

The more satisfied people feel as the result of an interaction, the more positively they tend to rate their own behaviors and the behaviors of their partners. More precisely, they rate themselves as more effective and their partners as more appropriate and competent. (p. 231)
After individually and interpersonally processing conflict, partners tend to positively evaluate the behaviors of themselves and their partners, which aids individuals with viewing their partner in a more positive light. However, once conflict has transpired, the remnants of the conflict may still exist, leading to a need to get the relationship back on track so as to eventually reintroduce the taboo topic. This process proceeds with relational repair.

**Relational Repair**

Relational repair occurs when romantic partners engage in interactions with a common goal of mending a relationship gone awry. Brandau-Brown and Ragsdale (2008) define relational repair as: “verbal and nonverbal communication that individuals use to return their relationships to previous, desirable states. We believe relational repair normally follows negative interactions or the realization that the relationship has declined” (p. 72). After conflict has occurred, relationship partners typically want the conflict to subside so the relationship can return back to its normal state. However, relationships do not simply go through these phases by themselves. Therefore, partners tend to engage in relational repair strategies in order to mend the problem so the relationship may move forward.

Once the conflict and relational repair stages have passed, partners may then use relational maintenance strategies. Relational repair is often equated with relational maintenance; however, these two constructs are different. When relationship partners do not engage in repair strategies, the relationship tends to decay and maintenance becomes a moot point (Brandau-Brown & Ragsdale, 2008). Furthermore, Dindia and Canary (1993) state:
Relational repair contrasts markedly from relational maintenance from the standpoint of the second definition where maintenance refers to *keeping* the relationship in its present state. Repair means *changing* a relationship from its present condition and restoring it to a previous (more advanced) state after decline or decay. (p. 166)

If partners do not engage in relational repair after conflict arises, then the relationship is likely to remain in a state of conflict. Therefore, after a conflict—such as a serious disagreement, argument, misunderstanding, or oversight—occurs, partners attempt to engage in repair strategies to restore the relationship before engaging in relational maintenance (Bello, Brandau-Brown, & Ragsdale, 2008). If partners do not fix the problem and restore the relationship prior to attempting to return the relationship to status quo, the issue may not be solved, but rather, ignored, which can create a reoccurring dysfunction within the relationship. Thus, despite the lack of extensive research regarding relational repair strategies (Brandau-Brown, & Ragsdale; 2008), it would seem that relational repair and relational maintenance are separate concepts.

Relational repair exists as a process of fixing or mending a strained relationship. As Brandau-Brown and Ragsdale (2008) claim, “In the case of relational repair, an individual is attempting to undo some type of relational damage” (p. 80). By engaging in relational repair, partners are able to focus on what has gone wrong in an attempt to restore the relationship.

After engaging in relational repair, both partners typically make the decision to continue with the relationship. One of the factors influencing this decision is the degree of satisfaction within the relationship. Aune, Metts, and Ebesu Hubbard (1998)
discovered that partners who report being satisfied within their relationship are the most likely to utilize relational repair strategies. If partners are not satisfied within their relationship, partners will be less likely to engage in relational repair strategies, prompting a reoccurring disagreement, and thus, more dissatisfaction.

Brandau-Brown and Ragsdale (2008) also examined how marital couples use relational repair strategies. Using the typology developed by Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, and Lipkus (1991) in which dissatisfied partners have four responses to their partner and the relationship: exiting, voice (talking about the relationship), loyalty (waiting for change), or neglect (doing nothing), they found repair to be most closely aligned with one response. They state, “We identified repair as fitting the type of accommodation known as voice and noted that accommodation takes place when a relationship is distressed and when partners are quite committed to each other and to the relationship” (pp. 79-80). In addition, commitment impacts repair. That is, the more intense the degree of commitment, the more rigorous the relational repair strategies.

Using previous theoretical work that commitment (Johnson, Caughlin, & Huston, 1999) can be personal, moral, or structural, Brandau-Brown and Ragsdale (2008) found, “whether an individual wants to, feels obligated to, or has to stay married predicts the use of different relational-repair strategies” (p. 80). Therefore, couples who are personally committed to the relationship are more likely to engage in repair strategies.

Partners must, however, determine when, or if, the relationship has been repaired so the relationship can move on to maintenance strategies. And, what constitutes repair can differ greatly from one relationship to another. For instance, as an extreme example, Dunleavy, Goodboy, Booth-Butterfield, Sidelinger, and Banfield (2009) state, “If an
individual perceives the termination process as prohibitive, then he or she may view the relationship as being ‘repaired’ once an equal amount of relational suffering has been inflicted on his or her partner” (p. 81). In the case of married relationships, or dating relationships that are serious enough that partners do not believe they can terminate the relationship, equal suffering is a viable way to measure how long the relational repair should last.

Relationship partners are likely to set norms for how the relationship will be repaired. For example, repair strategies are not necessarily a product of commitment or designed for the betterment of the relationship. Rather, repair strategies can be the result of individual self-motivated goals. As Rusbult and Buunk (1993) claim, “Some partners in some relationships may routinely engage in pro-relationship behaviors; others may typically act on the basis of self-interest” (p. 189). Along with the idea of self-interest is the notion that some partners engage in relational repair strategies that are only favorable to themselves through providing justifications for their actions post-conflict. For example, Dunleavy, Goodboy, Booth-Butterfield, Sidelinger, and Banfield (2009) found, “Married partners reported that justification was the most preferred strategy for relational repair after communicating a hurtful message” (p. 78). Instead of admitting fault, partners may prefer to express defensiveness and rationalization with hopes of bettering the relationship. Dunleavy et al. state, “Moreover, justifications may be common repair strategies because they are perceived as socially appropriate by partners” (p. 78). Although the term “justification” may typically accompany a negative connotation within relationships, Dunleavy et al.’s (2009) study demonstrates that partners perceive that justifications are not only acceptable, but in some cases, a preferable relational repair
strategy.

Finally, silence or neglect (Rusbult, et. al., 1991) has been found to be a less effective strategy to repair relationships since it is a passive strategy (Dunleavy et. al., 2009). Further, its “perceived ineffectiveness can be explained by the fact that conflict resolution is often more important to relational satisfaction than the type of conflict itself” (Dunleavy et. al., 2009, p. 78). As stated previously, satisfaction within relationships is a positive indicator of whether or not partners will engage in relational repair. However, silence has been shown to be an ineffective form of relational repair. This demonstrates, once again, the importance of communicating post-conflict with a goal of repairing the relationship prior to engaging in relational maintenance. If there is no relational repair, but there is relational maintenance, the only status quo that will be retained within the relationship will likely be the conflict itself.

**Relational Maintenance**

Following, and often coupled with relational repair, is relational maintenance. Once relational repair has occurred, relational maintenance serves to help the relationship preserve a level of normalcy to which both partners are accustomed. Dindia and Canary (1993) provide “four common definitions of relational maintenance: (1) to keep a relationship in existence, (2) to keep a relationship in a specified state or condition, (3) to keep a relationship in satisfactory condition and (4) to keep a relationship in repair” (p. 163). Each definition is relevant to relational maintenance depending on the current state or condition of the relationship. For instance, if partners are primarily working to continue a relationship that is in danger of ending, then the “to keep a relationship in existence” (Dindia & Canary, 1993, p. 164) definition would be the most relevant. If
partners are in the middle of a repair phase and they want to continue that repair phase until both partners feel as though the relationship is fully prepared, then the “to keep a relationship in repair” (Dindia & Canary, 1993, pp. 165-166) is the most relevant definition.

The current study does not exclude the “to keep a relationship in existence” or “to keep a relationship in repair” definitions of relational maintenance; however, this study focuses more on how partners utilize the second and third definitions of relational maintenance. Dindia and Canary (1993) claim, “The second definition of relational maintenance [to keep a relationship in a specified state or condition] refers to sustaining the present level of certain dimensions or qualities thought to be important in relationship development” (p. 164). Since relational repair has just occurred between partners, in which partners have worked to return their relationship to previous desirable states (Brandau-Brown & Ragsdale, 2008), maintenance can serve to keep the relationship in that specific state or condition. Dailey, Hampel, and Roberts (2010) state, “The application of relational maintenance to relationships currently intact is relatively straightforward: maintenance behaviors serve to maintain the current status or characteristics of the relationship” (p. 77). Because people often long for consistency and stability in their romantic relationships, relational maintenance can be extremely beneficial, especially after experiencing a setback, such as a conflict. In order to keep their relationship in a specified state, partners can utilize specific maintenance behaviors like “sharing tasks and spending time with one’s partner” (Brandau-Brown & Ragsdale, 2008, p. 70). Although spending time together may seem like an insignificant act, such action actually has the potential to make a difference by helping to maintain the
relationship, especially if spending time together is something that partners are accustomed to pre-conflict and pre-relational repair. Nonetheless, maintaining the current state of the relationship provides consistency post-conflict and post-relational repair.

Furthermore, and as previously noted, partners are more likely to engage in relational repair if they are satisfied in their relationship, rather than if they are unsatisfied (Aune, Metts, & Ebesu Hubbard, 1998). Due to this finding, and because relational repair has just occurred between partners, the third definition of relational maintenance, which “refers to maintaining a satisfying relationship,” (Dindia & Canary, 1993, p. 165) is further explored and emphasized in the current study. If partners plan to engage in relational repair and/or relational maintenance, then either satisfaction within the relationship is likely to be present or the alternative to maintaining the relationship (a break-up) is worse than maintaining an unrepaired relationship. Dainton and Gross (2008) found that changes in maintenance behaviors often foster changes in relational satisfaction. The more often maintenance behaviors are practiced within the relationship, the more relational satisfaction is present. After a conflict, and the subsequent occurrence of relational repair, relational maintenance can act as a means to produce relational satisfaction. Since conflict often results in negative feelings, relational satisfaction may not be experienced between partners during or after the conflict. However, Weigel and Ballard-Reisch (1999, 2001) found that the more partners use maintenance behaviors, the more satisfied, committed, and happier they are likely to be. Because people typically desire commitment, happiness, and satisfaction, relational maintenance is pertinent post-conflict and post-repair.
Once romantic partners return to a point of satisfaction within their relationship, they are typically able to proceed with the relationship and the taboo topic discussion. Although the taboo topic has already been introduced once, conflict occurred. Therefore, the taboo topic was not fully examined; rather, conflict became the focal point of the conversation. Although the conflict was repaired and the relationship was successfully maintained, the taboo topic still stands within the relationship. This may require partners to reintroduce the taboo topic.

**Reintroducing Taboo Topics**

There has been very little research that addresses whether, or how, taboo topics can be reintroduced between romantic partners (Roloff & Johnson, 2001). However, there is no doubt that taboo topics are often reintroduced. Simply because the initial taboo topic conversation may have produced conflict does not mean that the taboo topic is no longer put back on the table. It may be necessary for relational partners to reintroduce their taboo topics (Roloff & Johnson, 2001). According to my review of literature, Roloff and Johnson (2001) are the only scholars thus far to examine the reintroduction of taboo topics. Consequently, this literature review section is limited.

Although Siegert and Stamp (1994) do not focus specifically on the reintroduction of taboo topics, their study focuses on the First Big Fight (FBF), which provides insight into the reintroduction process. Siegert and Stamp (1994) claim that the FBF could be an indicator of future conflict. They state, “The FBF, though a singular relationship milestone, can, however, introduce a recurring problem. What couples fight about for the first time in their FBFs may be fought about again and again as their relationships grow” (p. 354). Furthermore, Siegert and Stamp (1994) also claim that although each individual
fight may be resolved, the underlying issue may still linger and be brought up several times before it stops causing issues within the relationship. Therefore, there may be a relationship between the FBF and reoccurring conflict.

Roloff and Johnson (2001) examined what conditions encourage or discourage partners to reintroduce their taboo topic, the differences in planned and unplanned reintroduction discussions, and positive and negative reactions to the re-visitation. Within their study, Roloff and Johnson (2001) surveyed 101 participants involved in heterosexual relationships. Participants responded to several open-ended questions, and their answers were coded into various categories. First, Roloff and Johnson (2001) found that taboo topics that have been dismissed for a period of time can be reintroduced, and when the relationship is perceived as strong and the reintroduction is planned, the reintroduction is received with positive reactions. However, there was not a significant relationship between the urgency of reintroducing the taboo topic and the partner’s positive response.

Although Roloff and Johnson (2001) found several correlations, their study does have limitations. As they acknowledge, their study is based solely on self-report data, rather than behavioral observations, thus there may actually be disconnect between what is said and what could actually be occurring. Further, Roloff and Johnson (2001) only interviewed one half of the romantic partnership, which means their conclusions are based on the perspective of one partner. According to Roloff and Johnson (2001), the study of taboo topic reintroduction can be furthered by examining why the reintroduction of taboo topics is not correlated with urgency, why planned interactions are more likely
to create positive reactions, whether or not the immediate positive reactions aid in the problem being resolved, and the overall situations in which topics are reintroduced.

The current study acknowledges the implications, limitations, and directions for future research from the Roloff and Johnson (2001) study regarding the reintroduction of taboo topics. To further the work of Roloff and Johnson (2001), the current study contends that the taboo topics are, or have been, conditioned by relationship partners as private matters that are difficult to discuss. Thus, the current study uses a Communication Privacy Management theoretical framework.

**Communication Privacy Management Theory**

Communication Privacy Management Theory (CPM) was developed by Petronio (2002) to explain self-disclosure processes associated with private information. Since then, there has been an enormous amount of literature published that uses this theory. In the past ten years alone, CPM literature has examined: instructor/student privacy matters in academia (e.g., Hosek & Thompson, 2009; Thompson, Petronio, & Braithwaite, 2012), privacy on social networking sites (e.g., Child, Pearson, & Petronio, 2009; Waters & Ackerman, 2011), the process of exposing personal matters (such as STDs and infertility) for the first time to romantic partners, parents, and in-laws (e.g., Durham, 2008; Mikucki-Enyart, 2011), the exploration of privacy and espionage (Youngquist, 2010), privacy in friendships (Hollenbaugh & Egbert, 2009; McBride & Bergen, 2008), the expression of private matters with medical doctors and nurses (e.g., Lewis, Matheson, & Brimacombe, 2011; Petronio & Sargent, 2011), and basic theory exploration (e.g., Petronio, 2004, 2007; Vik, 2006). However, none of this research examines how taboo topics are revisited within romantic relationships. The only article that does examine this situation
(Roloff & Johnson, 2001) is over 12 years old and does not utilize Communication Privacy Management Theory. The current study’s theoretical perspective seeks to shed light on the process of revealing private information through the reintroduction of a taboo topic.

When a person is considering revealing private information, there is often a mental tug-of-war that seeks to find balance between what things to share with a partner and what not to share since the goal, for CPM, “is to offer a theoretical perspective that suggests a way to understand the tension between revealing and concealing private information” (Petronio, 2007, p. 218). Before distinguishing how to reveal private information, Petronio (2004) claims that individuals must separate the content of what is being disclosed from the process of disclosure. The difficulty of revealing the content of what is being disclosed can vary from person to person, but the process of revealing typically remains constant. CPM, therefore, focuses on the process of disclosure, rather than the various contents of what is disclosed. CPM is a rule-based management system of maintaining boundary structures (Hollenbaugh & Egbert, 2009; McBride & Bergen, 2008) that houses five principles regarding how people regulate disclosure (Child, Pearson, & Petronio, 2009; Petronio, 2007).

The rules that underpin CPM include: (1) ownership, (2) control, (3) management, (4) co-ownership, and (5) turbulence.

**Ownership.** People feel as though they have a sense of ownership over their private information. Most people believe that if information is private, it is personal, and since people often feel as though they possess their personal information, people also believe they own their personal information (Petronio, 2007). Ownership also causes
people to believe it is in their discretion to determine what is shared and how much is shared.

Control. Due to the feeling of ownership that people have over their personal information, people also tend to believe they have a certain amount of control over their information. Individuals believe they have control over who can know their private information (Child, Pearson, Petronio, 2009). Therefore, individuals are careful with whom they share their information with.

Management. Once people come to the conclusion that they have ownership and control over their information, they begin managing their information. Disclosers set personal privacy rules and regulations to help them decide what they want to share, how much they want to share, and with whom they would like to share (Petronio, 2007). Often times, these rules aid disclosers in the disclosing process, which helps disclosers feel as though they have ownership, control, and management over their personal information, even after it is shared.

Co-Ownership. When management and rules are distinguished, disclosers may share their personal information with others. The exchange of information then causes the recipient of the disclosure to gain a sense of ownership over the discloser’s personal information (Petronio & Sargent, 2011). Although the co-owner may not have as much ownership over the information, the co-owner still has a sense of agency regarding the information. Thus, disclosers presume that co-owners will follow the same rules that were originally set by the owner, controller, and manager (Petronio, 2007). If the original privacy rules cannot be followed, the owner and co-owner often negotiate new rules (Petronio, 2007) that are expected to be followed by the owner and co-owner.
**Turbulence.** Once private information is exposed and shared, there is always a chance of turbulence. When private information is co-owned, there is no assurance that shared management will not be problematic. Petronio (2007) claims, “Boundary turbulence often results in mistrust, anger, suspicion, or uncertainty about sharing private information” (p. 219). These issues can cause an immense amount of tension between the owner and the co-owner, and potentially, taint the relationship.

It is evident that Communication Privacy Management Theory focuses on the process of revealing private matters. Because taboo topics are often the cause of conflict and topic avoidance, taboo topics become private matters that are rarely discussed. Yet, if one partner makes the decision to reintroduce a taboo topic, the partner will go through a process that involves exposing private matters, such as the aforementioned process. The partner is likely to experience ownership, control, management, co-management, and possibly turbulence while reintroducing the taboo topic. Therefore, CPM serves as a viable theory to utilize to further understand the taboo topic reintroduction process.

Due to the avoidant and conflict-evoking nature of taboo topics, reintroducing taboo topics may cause hesitancy and tentativeness between partners. Yet, this does not mean that taboo topics are not reintroduced. In fact, Roloff and Johnson (2001) found that dating partners often reintroduce their taboo topics. However, there is no literature that examines the experience of partners who reintroduce these conflict-evoking (or avoided) subjects. There is also no literature that examines the most prominent taboo topic or why partners reintroduce these taboo topics. The current study seeks to do just that.

**RQ1:** What taboo topic is the most prominent among undergraduate, college aged, romantic relationship partners?
RQ2: Why are taboo topics reintroduced within romantic dating relationships?
Because taboo topics are likely to evoke conflict or be avoided, once partners have reintroduced their taboo topics, it is likely that the reintroduction will cause an after-effect on the relationship. The third research question in the current study seeks to discover the effects of the reintroduction on the relationship.

RQ3: What effect does the reintroduction of taboo topics have on the relationship?
Chapter III

Methodology

Taboo topics are likely to exist in any romantic dating relationship. Therefore, the reintroduction of taboo topics is also likely to occur in any romantic dating relationship, despite the lack of previous research regarding how taboo topics are reintroduced and the effects that the reintroduction may cause. The current study argues that reintroducing taboo topics involves a process in which topics are declared taboo, topics are potentially avoided, conflict occurs, relational repair occurs, and relational maintenance ensues prior to taboo topics being reintroduced. Unfortunately, previous research rarely combines these concepts together. The goal of this study is to understand why taboo topics are reintroduced within romantic dating relationships and the resulting effects of the reintroduction.

Qualitative methods are used for this study, in order to examine why taboo topics are reintroduced within romantic dating relationships, as well as the effect the reintroduction has on the relationship. Arnett (2007) claims, “Qualitative research seeks not to impose, but to engage the communication event that centers a study” (p. 30). A qualitative approach allows the communicative event, in this case the reintroduction of taboo topics, to produce itself organically and become the focal point of what the researcher studies. A qualitative approach encourages the researcher to collaborate with
the participant to attempt to understand the social world around him/her. A qualitative approach also encourages each individual and independent case to speak for itself, rather than allowing numbers taken from large samples to explore the probability of the communicative event. A qualitative approach invites personal interpretation from listeners and readers. Listeners and readers are able to examine more thoroughly the questions of “how” and “why” a communicative event exists from the perspective of the participants. Finally, qualitative methods seek to achieve what Max Weber (1864-1920) calls “Verstehen:”

Verstehen refers to understanding the meaning of action from the actor's point of view. It is entering into the shoes of the other, and adopting this research stance requires treating the actor as a subject, rather than an object of your observations. (Drislane & Parkinson, 2002, p. 1)

By using a qualitative approach, I immersed myself in the actors’ viewpoints to more fully understand how and why romantic partners reintroduce taboo topics. By providing agency and immediacy during face-to-face interviews, interviewees were able to answer questions more thoroughly, I was able to elicit more thorough responses, and I was able to better understand their actions. I uncovered the thoughts, feelings, and experiences that romantic partners have when taboo topics were reintroduced, as well as shed light on the relationship effects that transpire from reintroducing taboo topics.

**Participants and Data Collection**

I first obtained IRB approval for this research. To recruit participants, I announced a five-point extra-credit opportunity in an entry-level communication course at a medium-sized Midwestern university. Following the oral announcement, all students
in the course received an e-mail with an online Qualtrics link to a preliminary survey that functioned as a screening tool. To participate in the current study, participants had to be at least 18 years of age. Participants who were interested filled out the survey and received two extra-credit points. The survey was open for one week and, altogether, 576 people participated in the survey.

Following the closing of the survey, I examined the responses provided by the participants. Of the 576 participants, 278 indicated that they were currently in a heteronormative romantic relationship. Ninety-five participants claimed that they had at least one topic that was classified as “uncomfortable,” and 129 participants indicated that they had at least one topic that had been classified as “uncomfortable” in the past. Of these participants, 85 claimed they were willing to participate in an interview by themselves at a later date, and 28 claimed they would be willing to participate in an interview with their romantic partner at a later date. Because the current study was constructed from interview data, and the survey functioned as a basic screening tool to find participants to interview, only the taboo topics of the participants who said they were willing to be interviewed were examined.

To participate in the interview, participants had to be at least 18 years of age and currently involved in a heterosexual romantic relationship that had lasted at least six months. Participants must have classified “previous relationships” as the taboo topic within their romantic relationships. Individuals who met the aforementioned criteria received an e-mail requesting their participation in an interview. These participants also received three additional extra-credit points. Individuals who filled out the initial survey,
but were not interviewed, were given the opportunity to complete an alternative assignment to earn the three additional points.

I set up a mutually agreed upon time and place to meet with the individuals who volunteered to be interviewed. Participants were encouraged to invite their romantic partners to join them in the interview; however, if it was problematic (logistically or for any other reason), they were welcome to participate individually. Altogether, there were three individual interviews (Evelyn, Fiona, Gail) and two romantic dyad interviews (Anne and Bill, Clay and Diane). Participants varied in age from 18-22. Participants signed a form providing their formal consent to participate prior to answering any questions. Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed. All information provided by participants was confidential, and to assure confidentiality, participants were given pseudonyms for the excerpts taken from the interviews.

**Coding and Method of Analysis**

Through the coding process, the current study employed constant comparison analysis. Each transcript was first read thoroughly. Then, each transcript was reread and color-coded using Owen’s (1984) method of analysis for relational discourse. He states, “A theme was noted in relational discourse when three criteria were present: (1) recurrence, (2) repetition, and (3) forcefulness” (p. 275). After reading through the transcripts, themes were identified from commonly discussed subjects, in which participants provided similar examples, but used different wording to describe these examples (reoccurrence). This commonly occurred when participants described the most difficult topic of conversation that they have had with their partners. Next, themes were
picked from participants’ repetition of specific words and phrases (repetition). For example, participants often claimed they felt defensive when revisiting their taboo topic. Because participants used the same wording to describe their feelings of defensiveness, this repetition emerged as a theme. Finally, themes were picked from participants using words emphatically to describe a specific situation (forcefulness). This commonly occurred when participants claimed that the taboo topic did (not) cause conflict and was (not) resolved within the relationship; as though participants attempted to convince themselves.

After going through each transcript and developing themes based on recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness, each theme was coded in a different color. Then, all of the discourse that was color-coded in one specific color was moved into one document. This allowed each common theme to be grouped together; then, comparisons among the commonalities were made. Fifteen themes initially emerged. However, through comparing and contrasting these fifteen themes, the current study, once again, used Owen’s (1984) method of analysis (recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness) to determine the themes that were the most prominent. Six themes emerged and were addressed in the current study. Four themes were placed into individual categories, while two themes were placed into one common category. Altogether, five categories of emerging themes were present.

The five categories, which answered the research questions, were:

1) Taboo Topic: "The Underlying Issue."
2) Avoidance: “Let’s Just Change The Subject.”
3) Situational Occurrence: “Something Happened Today That I Think You Should Know About.”

4) Conflict: “Every Time We Talk About It, We Fight About It.”

5) Self-Protective Mechanisms
   a. Implicit Understanding: “I Don’t Even Have To Say His Name.”
   b. Equal Suffering: “You Do It Too.”

Within the first category (Taboo Topic), research question 1 was answered (RQ1: What taboo topic is the most prominent among undergraduate, college-aged, dating partners?). Within the second and third categories (Avoidance & Situational Occurrence), research question 2 was answered (RQ2: Why are taboo topics reintroduced within romantic dating relationships?). Within the fourth and fifth categories (Conflict & Self-Protective Mechanisms) and sub-categories (Implicit Understanding & Equal Suffering), research question 3 was answered (RQ3: What effect does the reintroduction of taboo topics have on the relationship?).
Chapter IV

Findings

The results from the analysis of the interviews are provided in the following sections. The first section provides an overview of the most prominent taboo topic; the second and third sections examine why romantic partners reintroduce these taboo topics; and the fourth and fifth sections analyze the effects the reintroduction has on the relationship.

Taboo Topic: “The Underlying Issue”

Based on the survey, as provided by the participants, there were various taboo topics. The breakdown of the content of taboo topics was as follows: Twenty-seven participants classified their taboo topics as “previous relationships,” 18 participants classified their taboo topics as “sex,” and ten participants classified their taboo topics as the “title/future of their relationship.” The remainder of the participants’ taboo topics were classified as follows: Family issues (7), the emotions of one partner (5), time spent together (3), money issues (3), personal issues (2), honesty (2), weight issues (2), drinking (2), drugs (1), pornography (1), new experiences (1), communication (1), religion (1), and other (9). The remainder of the participants claimed their taboo topics as “not applicable.” Because there were such a variety of taboo topics reported by the participants, the current study focused on one taboo topic. “Previous relationships”
(N=27), the most common taboo topic, was chosen to be the content area of focus during the interview process. The term “previous relationships” is a rather vague term and could be defined in several different ways, such as past romantic relationships, past sexual relations, or previous friendships. As such, one of the first questions asked in the interviews was, “Could you describe the most difficult conversation that you and your partner have had?” In response to this question, six participants claimed that “previous romantic relationships” was the most difficult conversation topic; however, one participant claimed “boys and flirting” was the most difficult topic of conversation. The six participants who claimed that “previous romantic relationships” was the most difficult topic of conversation focused the remainder of the interview on one specific previous relationship that caused issues and resided as a taboo topic in the relationship. However, the one participant who claimed that “boys and flirting” was the most difficult topic of conversation described several “previous relationships” that caused issues, thereby creating a taboo topic in the relationship. Thus, in response to research question 1, “previous romantic relationships” was the most prominent taboo topic in this sample of undergraduate, college-aged, dating relationship partners.

Upon establishing the most prominent taboo topic, each participant was asked why he/she thought that “previous romantic relationships” was the most uncomfortable, and difficult, topic for them to discuss. Among the reasons the interviewees provided were the fear of increased fighting, jealousy, hurt feelings, and that one’s partner may return to the previous relationship. In the couple interview with Diane and Clay, Diane claims, “Umm, it’s the most difficult because it causes a fight. So, I just kinda, it’s hard to talk about because I know like, if I—if it get—does get brought up, it will end in an
argument.” In this particular example, it is clear that if the topic of previous relationships is brought forth for discussion, an argument is likely to occur. However, contrary to Diane, when Evelyn, and Bill and Anne discuss why it is difficult to talk about previous relationships, they each claim that jealousy and hurt feelings transpire when these topics are brought forth for discussion. For example, Anne said, “It’s just awkward,” and Bill follows Anne’s lead by claiming:

Yeah, it’s a touchy situation with everybody, I mean, talkin’ about your ex or somethin’ just because… Just like with both of us, both of our ex relationships were lengthy relationships, as well. So, it kind of brings up, like, a jealousy type feeling.

In this example, Anne and Bill both state that simply talking about a past once shared with another romantic partner brings up feelings of jealousy and becomes an awkward topic to discuss.

Similar to Anne and Bill, in her individual interview, Evelyn expresses that she and her romantic partner have a difficult time talking about previous relationships because during a break-up, she had another romantic relationship partner. Evelyn states that this previous relationship has been a taboo topic in her current relationship, “Because it hurt him, and I know it, but, and it wasn’t right of me, I guess, at all. But, it happens. Haha.” Evelyn feels as though what she did was wrong and she knows that it hurt her boyfriend, which is why talking about it currently is difficult. There is a possibility that talking about those times brings up old feelings with Evelyn’s boyfriend and the topic becomes one that is difficult to discuss, and thus, a taboo topic.
Finally, in her individual interview, Gail claims that talking about her previous relationship with her current romantic partner is difficult. Gail states, “Well, he’s afraid that I’m gonna go back to my ex. So, he don’t like like hearin’ about ‘em or nothin’. So, haha. ‘Cause like I’m still friends with my ex.” Because Gail is still friends with her previous romantic partner, Gail and her current romantic partner have a difficult time discussing anything about that previous relationship. In an interview with Clay and his girlfriend Diane, Clay makes a similar statement:

And I would say guys that she did things with in the past that she still likes to talk to [is the most difficult topic of conversation]. That’s ultimately what’s my hang-up. Is that I think that, if, she says she’s over them, yet she still has contact, so that to me is a big red flag.

Based on these two responses, Gail’s partner and Clay seem uncomfortable with their current romantic partners maintaining open lines of communication with their previous relationship partners. Similar to Anne, Bill, and Evelyn, the possibility exists that talking with, and about, previous romantic partners sparks jealousy with Gail’s boyfriend and Clay, thereby creating an uncomfortable situation and an uncomfortable conversation to have.

In each of these instances, the discussion of “previous relationships” generates an uncomfortable situation between romantic partners. Thus, a taboo topic is created. Anderson, Kunkel, and Dennis (2011) state that taboo topics “are likely to reside at the primary intersections of opposing desires regarding self-expression and privacy” (p. 381). According to my findings regarding the taboo topic of “previous relationships,” this is consistent. It is possible that the individuals who are in contact with their previous
romantic partners feel as though talking with their previous romantic partners is a valuable form of self-expression, and their current romantic partners should respect their opinion and right to do so. As such, these individuals perceive they have a sense of ownership and control over their personal information. In the current study, the personal information that participants feel they own and control is the information regarding their previous relationships.

According to Communication Privacy Management Theory, most people believe that their personal information is private and owned by them (Petronio, 2007). Furthermore, the individual who owns the information also controls the information and decides with whom the information is shared. However, the individuals whose romantic partners still communicate with their previous romantic partners may not agree with this belief. These individuals may feel as though their relationships are threatened because there is communication with a third party who was previously involved romantically with their current partner. They may also feel as though they have an investment in their current relationship, so they deserve to know if, when, and why their current romantic partner is communicating with his/her previous romantic partner. As a result of these divergent beliefs, there is a tension between both romantic partners. Therefore, this topic of “previous relationships” may end up being a topic that is off limits within the relationship (Baxter and Wilmot, 1985). Because these topics are off limits, they are also often avoided.

**Avoidance: “Let’s Just Talk About Something Else”**

Throughout the interviews, I found that participants often avoid discussions about the taboo topic of “previous relationships.” With regards to research question 2, which
seeks to understand why taboo topics are reintroduced, these taboo topics are often times not reintroduced at all. According to Dailey and Palomares (2004), topic avoidance occurs when individuals intentionally keep a conversation away from a specific focus. In the current study, romantic partners often intentionally avoid the conversation of “previous relationships” when talking with their current romantic partners. As a result, avoiding the taboo topic discussion can cause participants to be more self-conscious, allow the taboo topic to linger in the relationship, and help participants remain more focused on the future.

In the current study, all participants claim that at some point in time, the taboo topic within their relationships is, or has been, avoided because they want to withdraw from an uncomfortable or tense situation that may occur. Instead of dealing with the uncomfortable situation, participants would rather act as though there is no topic that is classified as taboo. When discussing her avoidance of talking about a previous relationship, Diane states:

Yeah, umm, it’s never really been like off-limits, it is avoided. If it happens, instead of explaining what I’m doing, it’s easier for me to just say, “Okay, you’re right, sorry,” and just not talk about it, at all. And he know—he—I mean he picks up on that.

Following Diane’s preliminary explanation, she goes on to state, “Uhh, b—well, I mean, it is uncomfortable. I would ra—I, at this point, I would rather just say, ‘Sorry,’ and just not talk about it. Just because… it, I don’t like the argument.” However, her boyfriend, Clay, says, “And my thing is, I don’t like to avoid it.” In the example brought forth by Diane and Clay, Diane claims that she strategically avoids any discussion regarding her
previous relationship; yet, Clay would rather talk about the previous relationship than ignore it. This creates a tension between Clay and Diane. Similar to what Baxter and Wilmot (1985) claim, it is possible that Diane wants to avoid this discussion because she anticipates negative outcomes. If an argument is going to ensue, Diane cannot justify discussing something that is already uncomfortable to talk about.

By claiming that Clay “picks up on” Diane’s avoidant behavior, one can assume that Clay and Diane have implicitly declared the topic “taboo.” However, there are instances in which a topic is explicitly declared taboo. Although Roloff and Ifert (1998) found that college students are more likely to explicitly declare a topic taboo if the topic is unimportant to the relationship, within this sample, there are instances in which the topic is pertinent to the relationship, but partners are still likely to explicitly declare the topic taboo. In an individual interview, Gail claims that her boyfriend makes it clear that he does not want to talk about previous relationships. Gail states, “He says it, haha. He made it clear that he doesn’t wanna, like, talk about [previous relationships] want anything to do with ‘em or nothin’, so. Ha.” In this example, Gail’s boyfriend explicitly declares that talking about previous relationships is completely off-limits. Yet, Gail also claims, “It’s off-limits, but I bring it up anyway. Haha.” Regardless of whether or not her boyfriend wants to discuss previous relationships, Gail brings forth the discussion whenever she deems it appropriate. This, however, was not a reoccurring theme within my findings.

In a similar situation, Bill claims he and Anne were once in a situation in which their taboo topic was avoided. Bill claims he and Anne avoided the taboo topic discussion “Just to keep down overall tension and everything,” while Anne says, “Just to keep peace
within the relationship. Haha.” In this example, neither partner wanted to cause “uproar” within the relationship, so if the topic was avoided altogether, at least each partner could take comfort in knowing that they were not causing relationship problems. However, Bill and Anne no longer avoid the taboo topic, and Anne now says:

I’d say they were avoided, but now it’s easier to talk about them, I guess. Like the longer we’re together in our relationship, the easier it is to talk about past relationships ‘cause they happened longer ago. Does that make sense?

Although discussing their previous romantic relationships was difficult at the beginning of their relationship, Anne and Bill have found that as time progresses, talking about their previous relationships is an easier task. Further, they claim that each partner’s previous relationships have helped shape each individual’s thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Rather than allowing the previous relationships to cause anger and jealousy, the previous relationships are viewed as a springboard that helps the current relationship grow. In fact, Bill refers to previous relationships as “building blocks.” By viewing each partner’s previous relationships in a way that helps the current relationship, and through time itself, Anne and Bill have discovered ways to accept the discussion of each person’s previous relationships without strategic avoidance or conflict occurring.

Contrary to Anne and Bill, most of my findings demonstrate that the topic of previous relationships is avoided due to an uncomfortable situation occurring. Evelyn states, “I mean, I guess [the conversation is avoided]. Just ‘cause I know not to bring it up, but if a situation like today, I – I don’t know what to tell him.” Later, Evelyn says, “Like why am I avoiding it? Just so we don’t get in an argument, and I don’t make him mad.” When I asked Evelyn why she thinks the conversation is avoided, she replied,
“Just because then we’re happy when we don’t talk about it, so we don’t have to deal with the difficult situation.” By avoiding the situation of discussing an uncomfortable topic, Evelyn believes that she and her boyfriend can keep the peace within their relationship; however, when discussing it, the happiness may diminish. Further, it is obvious that Evelyn had a situation regarding a previous relationship occur on the day of her interview, and she feels she should share what happened with her boyfriend. Yet, Evelyn does not know how to tell her boyfriend what happened. This is very consistent with Brenner’s (2010) claim that the struggle of communication is discovering ways to talk about topics that are considered taboo. If relationship partners generally avoid one specific topic, initiating a conversation about that topic can prove to be a difficult task.

Initiating a conversation regarding taboo topics can be so difficult that it prohibits relationship partners from discussing such topics altogether. Yet, avoiding the topic can sometimes cause more harm than good in the relationship. In the current study, I found that avoiding the taboo topic discussion could cause participants to be more self-conscious, promote the taboo topic to linger in the relationship, and help participants focus on the future. When asked what effect avoiding the taboo topic has on her relationship, Evelyn claims:

Us avoiding it? I guess just never – We kept, I felt like I kept walking on eggshells, and still sometimes, like when I go out, I still like am so cautious of who I talk to, so, because I know I’ve messed up, I guess. And I don’t want that feeling anymore, so I guess avoiding it kind of prolonged it.

While it is sometimes easy to avoid such topics, Evelyn has found that avoiding them creates tentativeness, therefore, making Evelyn more self-conscious of her actions. Roloff
and Johnson (2001) claim, “Although agreeing to stop arguing about an intractable conflict would seem to be a reasonable means of retaining a satisfying relationship, it may have drawbacks” (p. 37). In Evelyn’s case, the drawback of not talking about the taboo topic of previous relationships causes her to gain a feeling that she does not want to possess any longer. As such, her taboo topic is prolonged and lingers in the relationship but is never really addressed and resolved.

Similarly, Gail, and Clay and Diane, all claim there are limited, if any, benefits in avoiding the taboo topic. When asked if any goals are being addressed or accomplished by avoiding their taboo topic, Clay and Diane state:

Clay: None.
Diane: None.
Diane: If it’s being avoided, no ‘cause we’re not talking about it.

Likewise, Gail says, “None. Haha, none. It doesn’t solve anything by not talkin’ about it.” Although the taboo topic may be avoided to keep tension to a minimum and avoid uncomfortable situations, by avoiding the taboo topic, nothing is being solved or addressed and the taboo topic continues to linger in the relationship.

In contrast, Fiona found that avoiding her taboo topic is beneficial to her relationship, claiming, “It’s personal and I don’t wanna make him upset if he hears something that he doesn’t like from what I say.” Therefore, Fiona claims that avoiding the topic of previous relationships addresses the goal of “Leavin’ it behind pretty much.” In this example, not discussing the taboo topic encourages Fiona and her boyfriend to leave the past in the past and place their attention on the future of their relationship. For
Fiona, there is no justifiable reason to focus on something that has already occurred and cannot be changed.

The interviewees express various opinions regarding what goals they are addressing and what outcomes are surfacing when partners strategically avoid a taboo topic. When compared with the literature, it appears that not discussing a specific topic may seem like an attractive way to deal with the topic but is not necessarily the best way to deal with a topic (Roloff & Johnson, 2001). Therefore, if partners invest time into discussing these taboo topics, they may find more satisfaction with the taboo topic, and therefore, more satisfaction within the relationship.

According to Communication Privacy Management Theory, when personal information is owned and controlled by a specific person, the individual also manages that information. Management allows individuals to set personal privacy rules and regulations that help them decide what information they want to share, how much they want to share, and with whom they would like to share (Petronio, 2007). In the case of Clay and Diane, Diane would rather avoid discussing their taboo topic of previous relationships, yet Clay would rather talk about this topic. Because Diane perceives she both owns and controls personal information regarding her previous relationship, she also feels as though she manages this personal information. Thus, she creates privacy guidelines and boundaries that help her decide what, how much, and with whom she will share. Diane’s belief about privacy management is consistent with each individual in the current study, all of whom feel as though he/she owns his/her private information.
Situational Occurrence: “Something Happened Today That I Think You Should Know About”

As previously noted, the current study examines why romantic partners reintroduce their taboo topics once declared taboo. In response to research question 2, I found that each relationship reintroduces a taboo topic because at least one partner is in a situation that prompts and/or encourages the taboo topic discussion. There are, however, diverse reasons that cause each partner to initiate the taboo topic discussion. These reasons include: interaction with a previous partner, one partner provoking the current relationship, and one partner taking precautionary measures. Each reason promotes one outcome: either the taboo topic is resolved or the taboo topic lingers in the relationship for an extended period of time.

Throughout the interviews, at least one partner is involved in a situation that prompts current romantic partners to discuss their taboo topic of “previous relationships.” For Gail and Fiona, a situation occurs in which they engage in a conversation with their current romantic partners because of interactions that they have had with their previous partners. For example, Gail claims that she and her boyfriend regularly discuss her previous relationship. Gail states, “it’s like talked about all the time.” When asked why she thinks this topic is reintroduced regularly, Gail says, “Cause I still talk to my ex. Haha.” Because Gail frequently talks with her previous partner, she and her current partner talk about their taboo topic regularly. Regardless of her current partner’s feelings and avoidant nature about this topic, Gail initiates a conversation about her previous relationship whenever she sees or talks with her previous partner. Similar to Gail, Fiona and her boyfriend also communicate about previous relationships when either one of
them talk to their previous romantic partners. Although Fiona’s current boyfriend was not present at the interview, Fiona recalls a conversation that she and her boyfriend had:

I think he brought it up first. Umm, (pause) I guess I, I think I just got off the phone with my ex. And he called and he asked me what I was doing. And I said, “I just got off the phone.” And he said, “With who?” I said, “Jackson.” Which is my ex. And he goes, “Why…” He said, “Why are you talkin’ to him still?” I said, “Because he makes me feel, I don’t know, he calms me down when I’m upset, and when you’re not answering, I, you know, call him. I mean it’s not like we’re talking about anything that’s affecting you and I, but it’s just… to talk to him.” And he goes, “Well…” He got, he got upset. He says, “Well, when you get upset, don’t you feel like you should come to me and maybe I can help you calm down?” I said, “Well, you were doing something and you obviously wasn’t answering.”

In this situation, Fiona’s current boyfriend is upset with her because she talks with her previous boyfriend. This interaction that she has with her previous partner constructs a situation that invites her current partner to initiate a conversation about their taboo topic.

According to Fiona and Gail, the taboo topic of previous relationships is reintroduced specifically when one partner sees, spends time with, or talks with the previous romantic partner. By having a conversation, Fiona, Gail, and their partners attempt to repair their current relationships with a goal in mind of returning their current relationships back to a previous, desirable state (Brandau-Brown & Ragsdale, 2008). However, if Gail’s and Fiona’s current partners perceive that the communication with previous partners is maintained, and if Gail and Fiona continue to act on the basis of self-interest (Rusbult &
Buunk, 1993), the state of the relationship is not necessarily being repaired as much as it is simply being sustained. Therefore, the taboo topic may still linger as an unresolved issue within the romantic relationship.

Anne and Bill also communicate about previous relationships when one partner sees a previous partner; however, for Anne and Bill, they initiate this conversation in a different manner. They claim:

Anne: I don’t know of like specific instant, but—instance—but I’m sure at the beginning of our relationship, we would bring ‘em up just to like light fuel to the fire. Just to get under each other’s skin if we were angry or mad or frustrated and, I—oh, I guarantee there was times that happened. Haha.

Bill: It all goes back to protecting oneself and making yourself feel better about the situation that you were in and why you handled it the way you did originally in the other relationship.

Although they would use their taboo topic conversation as a means to provoke the other partner and protect themselves, as their relationship progresses, Anne and Bill now discuss their previous relationships through casual conversation. They say:

Anne: I think now, when it gets brought up it’s, again, because like instances happen, but they’re not bad instances. It’d be like, “Oh, so-and-so’s mom talked to me the other day,” or, you know, you, do you understand where I’m going with this?

Bill: Or, or, “I saw so-and-so the other day.”

Anne: Yeah, so then it gets brought up, but it’s not hard feelings, it’s just
kind of like sharing news.

When this conversation is brought forth for discussion, it is typically because there is an encounter with a previous relationship partner, but instead of the situation causing conflict or avoidance within the relationship, it is now another casual point of discussion. For Anne and Bill, there is a possibility that discussing previous relationships helps them to keep their relationship in a satisfactory condition (Dindia & Canary, 1993). If Anne and Bill have set the standard in their relationship to openly communicate about their previous relationships whenever a previous partner is seen or talked with, then by communicating about previous relationships, Anne and Bill keep their current relationship in a condition that is satisfactory to them. This also means that Anne and Bill consistently take part in relational maintenance behaviors. Weigel and Ballard-Reisch (1999, 2001) found that the more often partners use maintenance behaviors, the more satisfied, committed, and happier they are likely to be. Because Anne and Bill work to keep their relationship at a level of status quo, according to the research, they are likely to be happier, more satisfied, and committed to their relationship.

For Evelyn and her boyfriend, the topic of previous relationships was reintroduced when her boyfriend knew that Evelyn was preparing to be in a situation similar to that which occurred when this topic was initially defined as “taboo.” Therefore, Evelyn’s boyfriend initiated a conversation about his and Evelyn’s taboo topic to take precautionary measures. Previously, Evelyn left her boyfriend and began dating another man. Evelyn and her boyfriend broke off their relationship, but began dating again several months later. Evelyn says, “I had found somebody else I liked and I liked all the
attention from the basketball guys, and he didn’t want that to happen again with football.”

She also says:

I guess we still kinda talk about it. Not lately, but this past year when I started to, with football, he like brought it up and said like, ‘We’re not gonna go through what you did with basketball,’ and it was a lot easier to talk about it.

There was a previous situation in which Evelyn and her boyfriend went through a hardship, and when Evelyn was going to be in a similar situation, her boyfriend wanted to take precautionary measures by talking about the taboo topic to make sure that the same result would not occur. Evelyn’s boyfriend reintroduced the taboo topic that was once avoided and conflict-inducing. In this specific instance, Evelyn’s boyfriend uses the response called “voice,” in which he talks about the relationship in order to repair the relationship (Rusbult, Verette, Witney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991). By making sure that a similar situation does not produce the same outcome that it did the last time, Evelyn and her boyfriend attempt to repair that which needed mending. By communicating about their taboo topic, Evelyn and her boyfriend are able to maintain the status that they currently have and keep their relationship in a state of repair and in satisfactory condition (Dindia & Canary, 1993).

Reintroducing taboo topics can be used as a tool for mending a relationship. For Clay and Diane, this is the case. When asked why this topic is reintroduced, Diane states:

Umm, probably because when him and I were apart on Christmas break, then, umm, when I had met this guy, and then like we became friends or whatever, and then, after he came an—umm, down to Ball State, and we like hung out after Clay and I had decided to like try things again, that’s when it was reintroduced just
because it wa—it was there, and it needed to be talked about…Yeah, it was just brought up because it was something that needed to be brought up before we could be back together.

As pointed out in this example, when Clay and Diane separated, Diane had relations with other males, but when she and Clay decided to date again, they felt the need to talk about their taboo topic of previous relationships in order to move forward. Further, this example also illustrates that Clay and Diane discussed the taboo topic as a precautionary measure to make sure that if they began dating again, the same situation of Diane dating other males would not occur. Comparing this with the literature, I argue that Clay and Diane used their conversation about previous relationships in order to repair their strained relationship. As Brandau-Brown and Ragsdale (2008) claim, when undergoing relational repair, “an individual is attempting to undo some type of relational damage” (p. 80). Because Diane’s relations during her break with Clay strained the relationship, by communicating about this issue, Clay and Diane attempted to repair the damage that was done.

Despite the amount of relational repair and relational maintenance that each couple has attempted to undergo, the majority of interview participants claim that the taboo topic of previous relationships has yet to be resolved within their current relationships. When asked if their taboo topics have ever been resolved, Clay and Diane state:

Clay: Never for me.

Diane: No.

Clay: Definitely not.
Diane: Hmm-mm.

Similarly, Gail also says, “it don’t get resolved.” When asked what effect this non-resolved issue has on her relationship, Gail says:

It sucks sometimes, it’s like, I can’t tell you how my – I really feel about stuff or that situation particularly. Or, it’s like, when you ask me how my day is, I had to like blurt out some things I did in my day ‘cause it’s like with [my previous partner] or somethin’. And that’s – I mean, I should be able to talk to you about anything. And you shouldn’t get mad about it, either. Ha.

For Gail, the lingering taboo topic that is not resolved causes her to be extra-cautious about what she tells her current partner about her previous partner. If she sees, talks with, or spends time with her previous partner, she does not feel as though she can go to her current partner and talk about it. Thus, the taboo topic of previous relationships lingers in her current relationship and has yet to be resolved. Fiona has a similar experience with her current partner. Although Fiona claims that she and her partner have “probably” resolved their taboo topic, Fiona still holds back on telling her current partner when her previous partner contacts her. Fiona says:

Umm, I mean he doesn’t know that my ex contacts me every now and then to see if I’m okay, but we don’t – I tell them, “Yeah, I’m fine.” It’s like a short conversation, and I’m done. There’s no asking about, you know, family or whatever to get into a topic, but he—he would just check up on me every now and then, but I haven’t told him that.

When I asked Fiona if she plans to tell her partner that her previous partner contacts her, Fiona says:
No. ‘Cause I’d rather avoid it. You know, I don’t wanna bring it up, then he’ll get upset, then we’ll start a whole argument, then we’ll both be mad, and, you know. It just leads into something else entirely different that has nothing to do with it, so, I’d rather not. I mean, he contacts me every now and then. It’s not like he does it every day, so. I think it’ll be fine. And he doesn’t even like his ex-girlfriend like that, so, ha, I doubt if she contacts him.

Although Fiona believes that she and her boyfriend have “probably” resolved their taboo topic, her inability to openly communicate with her partner demonstrates that their taboo topic is not fully resolved, and therefore, her relationship is not fully repaired. As noted in the “Avoidance” section, partners would rather avoid the taboo topic and withdraw from any type of taboo topic discussion than talk about the lingering topic. Rusbult et al. (1991) and Dunleavy et al. (2009) claim that silence or neglect are two less effective strategies to repair relationships since they are both passive strategies. As such, Gail’s and Fiona’s current relationships would appear to be simply maintaining the taboo topic rather than repairing the taboo topic and maintaining a desirable and satisfactory state within the relationship.

On the other end of the spectrum, Evelyn claims that she and her boyfriend have resolved their taboo topic, and they have not discussed it for about seven months. Evelyn says, “Back then, it was, I would get mad that he would always ask. And I’m like, ‘It’s over, it’s done, I don’t wanna talk about it.’” However, if the taboo topic of previous relationships is brought up now, Evelyn says:

I mean, it doesn’t make us worse, like bad. If anything, I feel like this whole
bringing it up and reassurance has made us better because I can reassure myself that I am staying true and loyal and he, like, is making sure of himself that he can still trust me and that I haven’t done anything wrong. So, that’s what it’s been the past year of, if we do bring it up, it’s just to like reassurance to make us better to make sure our future’s still going in the same track.

When Evelyn and her boyfriend discuss previous relationships, they are able to use a respectful discussion as a checkpoint of reassurance without any hard feelings surfacing. Similarly, Bill and Anne claim they have resolved their taboo topic and that it no longer affects their relationship like it once did. While describing the effect that the taboo topic once had on his and Anne’s relationship, Bill states:

And it would have a huge negative effect for sure, and then, how she said where, I mean, I can’t think of a specific conversation, but I guarantee that a conversation that we had then, that kept us mad at each other for three or four days, that we talked about for three or four days, now we could have that same conversation and it would last less than a minute. That we—yeah, probably less than a minute. And the effects wouldn’t be… Polar opposite of what they were before.

To describe the current effect of discussing their taboo topic, Bill says:

All the effects that those types of topics have on our relationship happened at the beginning. All those, I mean, negative effects, per se, and now, like I said, it’s just… I don’t know because now it’s not, it—it’s somethin’ that doesn’t even remotely bother me. It’s just so common, I mean talkin’ about the topic that was so touchy in the beginning, now is just so relaxed that it – I mean, we could talk
about it just like we talk about our day, and the mood wouldn’t change. You know, to a certain extent, but you know…

Anne agrees with Bill’s statement. Anne claims that she and Bill can now entertain a conversation about an uncomfortable topic that they once could not do. Anne mentions that talking about the past, and time, have helped her overcome the hesitancy of discussing Bill’s previous relationships. Anne states:

I think it’s a combination of both [talking about the taboo topic and time itself], like talking about it more, but over time. Like not talking—sitting down and talking about it in an hour, like, let’s talk about everything you and your ex-girlfriend did, but like gradually talking about it and adding more to it because then it’s not all like a big, huge surprise all at once. It’s like slowly easing your way into it.

Similarly, Bill says:

We just had to find a common meeting place and then, you know, just for knowin’ each other for so long, you learn, you know, what certain, not necessarily certain topics, but certain areas are touchy and which ones aren’t and the ways to handle those, and it just goes all the way back to the basics of, you know, how you talk about it, tone of voice, you know, and then now, it’s a lot better to talk about those topics face-to-face, where before it would be over the phone or text message because, I’m sure, as you know, you can never tell a person’s expression over a text message, ever.

In this example, Anne and Bill both attribute their ability to resolve their taboo topic to open, and understanding, communication. Anne claims that being able to talk about their
taboo topic over a period of time has been the most beneficial strategy. Each of them recognizes that they can both entertain a respectful conversation, yet end the conversation when one partner perceives that the other is not responding well. As a result, open communication lines exist. Further, Bill claims that how they talk about the taboo topic is key. He says that nonverbal communication is just as important as face-to-face verbal communication.

While communicating about their taboo topics used to be a difficult task, Anne, Bill, Evelyn, and Evelyn’s boyfriend have found ways to resolve their taboo topics in order to currently discuss their taboo topics with ease. It is possible that this can be attributed to relational repair and maintenance strategies. Although neither Anne and Bill nor Evelyn provided detail regarding how they each repaired their relationship to get it to a desirable state, it is obvious that something has occurred which allowed the relationship to move from a state of conflict to a state of satisfaction. Therefore, it can be assumed that successful repair and maintenance strategies have been implemented so they were able to resolve their taboo topic.

**Conflict: “Every Time We Talk About It, We Fight About It”**

Research question 3 attempts to understand what effect the reintroduction of taboo topics has on the relationship. As a response to this question, a common theme emerged about romantic partners undergoing a state of conflict when the taboo topic of previous relationships was discussed. According to Barki and Harwick (2004), conflict is “a dynamic process that occurs between interdependent parties as they experience negative emotional reactions to perceived disagreements and interference with the attainment of their goals” (p. 234). Since the interviews involved individuals in romantic
relationships, each relationship can be classified as “interdependent.” Further, as this section uncovers, many of the relationship participants experienced negative emotions, perceived disagreement, and interference with respective goal attainment. The reasons for conflict occurring are partners’ jealousy/possessiveness and partners’ tendency to avoid the taboo topic discussion initially. These reasons, then, have outcomes of partners partaking in defensive communication and/or feeling threatened.

Upon asking each participant if the taboo topic of previous relationships generates (or once generated) conflict within the romantic relationship, six out of the seven participants claim that it does (or once did). There is only one participant (Fiona) who claims that the taboo topic does not produce conflict within the relationship; however, later in the interview, Fiona implicitly acknowledges that she and her boyfriend were previously in a state of conflict multiple times because of this taboo topic. Of the participants who indicate that this taboo topic generates conflict within the romantic relationship, there were various reasons regarding why. For Bill, the reason that conflict arises when he and Anne discuss their previous relationships is, “Pure jealousy. Without a doubt.” Bill and Anne state:

Bill: Umm, I mean, just like with any other relationship, I mean, I guess…

Anne: It’s different on each side…

Bill: Yeah. I mean, it’s almost a jealousy type thing, but it’s almost like an anger type thing, as well because, you know, with some of the things and the ways she was treated and the things he would do to her made me angry. And it’s the same way, I think with you
towards me. I mean, some of the ways I was treated and some of the things that were done sorta makes you angry.

Anne: Right.

Bill: And then that sorta like, two wrongs don’t make a right, so it sorta just creates tension and everything because it would—we would both be angry about it and we’d be tryin’ to express that and then, it would—we would just kinda conflict in that way. I think. Yeah.

Because jealousy increases when discussing their previous respective relationships, talking about these previous relationships becomes a difficult task. Further, this jealousy and the difficulty of the discussion produce feelings of anger between partners, which produces conflict, as well. Similar to Bill and Anne, Evelyn claims that talking about previous relationships with her boyfriend generates conflict due to pride, which seems to imply possessiveness. Evelyn states:

And, it’s like a pride thing on my – I’m his. And obviously he doesn’t wanna share me, and I wouldn’t want any girls doing what I did to him. I don’t know why I did it. Haha, but it’s just, it’s wrong, and it hurt him, and that’s why.

Even though Evelyn was involved in a romantic relationship, there were several other men who were attracted to her, flirted with her, and wanted to date her. In this particular example, Evelyn states that she would not want other girls flirting with and seeking to date her current boyfriend. The impact that Evelyn’s previous situation caused on her current relationship, and the fear of Evelyn’s boyfriend and other females being attracted to one another, triggers possessiveness, and possible jealousy, with Evelyn. This
possessiveness and possible jealousy makes talking about Evelyn’s previous relationships difficult and therefore, generates conflict.

Evelyn’s possessiveness, and therefore jealous tendencies, can fall into a similar category as Bill and Anne’s incident regarding jealousy. People typically value devotion and commitment, and a break in those constructs stirs up negative emotions and produces conflict. Furthermore, as Bill stated, when he said, “just like with any other relationship,” it is important for partners to realize that conflict is a “natural by-product of relational escalation” (Roloff & Chiles, 2011, p. 425). Although it may seem uncomfortable at the time, the literature demonstrates that a certain amount of conflict is actually a natural occurrence as relationships intensify. In fact, Fahs (1981) claims that not partaking in conflict is constraining to the relationship’s development. Therefore, partners should embrace conflict, rather than ignore it. However, too much conflict does more harm than good. When conflict occurs too often, relational quality decreases (Roloff & Chiles, 2011) and an unbalanced relationship transpires. Thus, too much conflict, especially if it is unresolved, is likely to lower satisfaction within the relationship.

While discussing taboo topics has a tendency to generate conflict between romantic partners, conflict is also produced when partners refrain from this discussion altogether. In the interview with Diane, Clay claims:

Umm, I think ‘cause she—she really likes to avoid it, and I’m like so the other way, I’m just—I’d rather just get the cards out on the table and figure it out together because it’s probably way easier to figure it out together than have her just push it off and not even wanna talk about it.
Because Diane would rather avoid the taboo topic than discuss the taboo topic, and Clay would rather discuss the taboo topic than avoid the taboo topic, Clay and Diane experience conflict. While Diane has one goal in mind, Clay has another goal, thus creating the interference of goal attainment for both individuals. As pointed out by Sillars (2010), goal incompatibility is not just about certain circumstances, but rather, subjective aspirations. When two people depend on one another regularly, and they find that each person has different goals, that interdependence becomes agitated and conflict occurs. Therefore, it is vital that relationship partners take turns sacrificing individual goals and desires in order to maintain the communal, dyadic relationship. While studying the “First Big Fight (FBF),” Siegert and Stamp (1994) reached a similar conclusion. They found that the survivors of the FBF realized and understood that sacrifice and work are essential to the relationship. Further, understanding the overall conflict episode will ensure that goal attainment is not interfered with as regularly (Cloven & Roloff, 1991) and partners are likely to be more relationally satisfied (Canary, 2002). When partners invest time into understanding why the conflict occurs and what happens during the period of conflict, partners begin to consider the goals of the other partner, rather than just their individual goals. As this happens, one half of the dyad tends to evaluate the behaviors of the other half of the dyad more positively (Canary, 2002). In itself, this cognitive processing and positive evaluation creates a higher level of relational satisfaction.

According to Communication Privacy Management Theory, when individuals feel as though they own, control, and manage their personal information, they may share their personal information with others. This disclosure allows the recipient of the information to gain a sense of ownership of the discloser’s personal information (Petronio & Sargent,
Thus, the recipient of the information becomes a co-owner of the personal information that was initially disclosed. The discloser, and owner, then, presumes that the co-owner will abide by the same rules of management that the owner does; yet if these rules cannot be followed, the owner and co-owner negotiate new rules (Petronio, 2007). Within the current study, each time an individual shares personal information about previous relationships with his/her current romantic partner, the current partner becomes a co-owner of the information regarding the previous relationship and is expected to follow the rules that the owner set. For instance, when Diane discloses to Clay about her previous relationships, Clay becomes a co-owner of that information. Diane does not enjoy talking about her previous relationships with Clay, and she would prefer that they not discuss them. Clay, the co-owner, wants to discuss Diane’s previous relationships, but he is expected to follow Diane’s rules, which include avoiding the previous relationship discussion altogether. However, Clay (the co-owner) cannot follow these rules. If this is the case, there is a possibility that Diane (the owner) has one goal in mind of following the privacy rules and avoiding a taboo topic discussion, while Clay has another goal in mind of disobeying the privacy rules and initiating a taboo topic discussion. Therefore, Clay and Diane each have subjective aspirations, and they experience an interference of goal attainment. As a result, relational turbulence may occur. Relational turbulence occurs when the co-owner of private information exposes or shares the owner’s information against the owner’s privacy rules (Petronio, 2007). As a result, the owner is likely to experience feelings of mistrust, anger, suspicion, or uncertainty about sharing private information (Petronio, 2007). When Clay breaks Diane’s privacy rules by initiating a conversation that Diane does not want to have, Clay and Diane are likely to
experience relational turbulence. This situation is likely to result in Diane experiencing negative emotions, such as anger or mistrust.

As conflict occurs, typically, the conversation progresses in a manner that can be uncomfortable for both partners. Therefore, partners react in a way that demonstrates they feel threatened or defensive. This is a common experience with the participants in this study, as a majority of them claim they get defensive when the taboo topic produces conflict. Evelyn claims:

Hm… (Pause 3 seconds) I guess when we talk about it, he says I get defensive. And I try to explain why I did everything. But, he doesn’t care why I did it, it’s the fact that I did it. But, threatened wise, no, it’s just the same.

When discussing her previous relationships with her current boyfriend, Evelyn attempts to explain why everything occurred, which makes her act and communicate defensively. Correspondingly, Anne states:

I feel like you [Bill] feel defensive because you want to, like, stand up for like your side of things. Like, I mean, you wouldn’t still have feelings about your ex’s, but you feel like you have the right to stand up for yourself in that situation. Umm, so, you’re defensive, not because you still have feelings, but you’re defensive because you wanna stand up for yourself or you don’t…

Following Anne’s remark, Bill agrees. In both examples, it is clear that Evelyn and Bill want to stand up for themselves. Similar to what Evelyn said previously, this could be a “pride [possessiveness] thing.” Evelyn and Bill were both involved in previous relationships, which have caused uncomfortable situations in the current relationships. However, by criticizing the previous relationships, the individuals involved also feel
criticized. Therefore, each individual feels as though he/she needs to stand up for him/herself and defensive communication takes place. At the same rate, defensive communication may occur because each individual feels as though he/she needs to justify his/her actions. Justifications are often used because they are perceived to be socially appropriate by partners (Dunleavy et al., 2009). By justifying one’s actions, one may perceive that he/she is bettering the current relationship. However, this is not always the case.

Similarly, Diane perceives that when she and Clay talk about previous relationships, she feels defensive. Diane states, “I feel defensive. I’m always defensive ‘cause I always feel like I’m being accused.” Clay, on the other hand, does not feel threatened or defensive. Clay claims:

Umm, I’d say neither, I just—I feel almost left out of the loop. You know, I fee—I feel like I’m not getting the, the full truth, and it doesn’t really threaten or make me defensive, it just makes me wanna dig deeper and just figure out what—what’s really happening.

Rather than feeling defensive or threatened, it appears that Clay feels suspicious when he and Diane discuss previous relationships. There is a possibility that Clay feels suspicious because he perceives that Diane is avoidant and defensive. As a result, this could make him feel as though he needs to “dig deeper” and “figure out what’s really happening.” At the same rate, because Diane always feels accused and defensive, while Clay does not, there could be a tension regarding the way in which previous relationship discussions are communicated. Therefore, the previous relationships may not be the problem; rather, communication about the previous relationships may be the problem.
Although more people within this study feel defensive than threatened, Bill provides a contradictory response, in which he claims that, at one point in time, he felt threatened. Bill states:

Maybe just a hint of [feeling threatened] here and there, but, we got so much of that stuff out of the way so early that it was just, I mean… I didn’t ever feel threatened or anything…

Although Bill explicitly states that he has never felt threatened, at the beginning of his phrase, he states that there is a “hint of that here and there.” Based on my observations in the interview, I contend that Bill, at one point in time, felt somewhat threatened in terms of a possible break-up, but since then, Bill has not felt threatened whatsoever. As previously mentioned, when partners invest time into understanding and cognitively processing the conflict that occurs, partners are more likely to positively evaluate each other and increase satisfaction within the relationship (Cloven & Roloff, 1991; Canary, 2002). Furthermore, when this occurs, partners prepare themselves to be less self-serving, more open to their partner’s perspective of the conflict, more effective communicators, and better able to express their arguments (Cloven & Roloff, 1991; Cloven & Roloff, 1993). As partners cognitively process each conflict and go through these steps, they may find that through effectively communicating about their conflict, they do not feel threatened or defensive, but rather, they feel as though they may speak and listen in an open, non-judgmental fashion.

**Self-Protection Mechanisms**

To answer research question 3, which seeks to understand what effect the reintroduction has on the relationship, I found that participants often engage in self-
protective mechanisms. Throughout the interviews, I observed that participants often spoke in ways that protected themselves from delving into uncomfortable conversation, thereby avoiding a potential face-threatening interview or reintroduction. There were two separate ways that participants demonstrated self-protection, therefore, I categorized self-protective mechanisms into two categories: “Implicit Understanding” and “Equal Suffering.”

**Implicit Understanding: “I Don’t Even Have To Say His Name.”** Throughout the interviews, participants communicated their taboo topics with implicit understanding. As such, each partner spoke with ambiguity and vagueness yet appeared to know and understand what the other partner was communicating. Because each partner comfortably engaged in implicit understanding in the interviews, this may demonstrate that partners regularly engage in implicit understanding within their relationships, as well, to protect themselves. Yet, this implicit understanding can result in a lack of clarity, which can lead to confusion.

Throughout the interviews, one behavior I noticed was that names were rarely used when one participant discussed how he/she communicates about a previous relationship partner within the current relationship. Rather than asking, “Is [insert previous partner’s name] going to be there?” I found that partners have a tendency to ask, “Is he/she going to be there?” In fact, Evelyn even claims that her boyfriend does not use the name of Evelyn’s previous romantic partner, but Evelyn and her boyfriend know exactly what they are both talking about. Evelyn says:

When I say that I’m goin’ to the – I guess, basketball game, he goes, “Well, why you goin’ to the basketball game?” I’m not going to see Kyle, I’m going to just
watch the basketball game. So, I’m like, “I’m not going to watch him,” and I don’t even have to say “Kyle,” I just say “him,” and he like knows like what we’re talking about ’cause I’m like, “I’m not going because of him, I’m going to watch a basketball game.”

In this situation, neither Evelyn nor her boyfriend need to say Kyle’s name, but they both know exactly about whom the other is referring. Thus, Evelyn and her boyfriend use subtle words and implicit understanding to communicate rather than explicitly describing and discussing the situation.

Throughout the interviews, I also noticed that specific situations are brought forth that both partners understand, but these situations are rarely described with detail. For example, when Evelyn’s boyfriend reintroduced their taboo topic, her boyfriend asked, “You’re not going to let what happened during basketball season happen during football season?” Rather than specifically discussing the situation and possible similar situations, Evelyn’s boyfriend makes a subtle reference to the previous situation, and Evelyn and her boyfriend both know exactly what is being said. In the couple interviews, Anne, Bill, Diane, and Clay all exhibit similar behaviors. Instead of talking about a situation with clarity and detail, each participant briefly references a situation. While doing this, both partners know exactly what is going on. No one voluntarily describes the specifics of the circumstances that make the topic of previous relationships taboo within their current relationships; it is only through a series of questions that clarity surfaced. It is possible that this only occurs because these participants were in couple interviews, rather than single interviews, so reprocessing the entire taboo topic would make for an uncomfortable experience. Durham and Braithwaite (2009) state, “If negative reactions

are anticipated by a discloser, he/she may delay a disclosure or hint at the concealed information over time, which can prepare potential confidants for a disclosure” (p. 45). If one partner perceives (based on previous interactions) that the other partner will respond negatively to the conversation about taboo topics, then the participants are unlikely to explicitly describe and rehash the taboo topic in the interviews. Therefore, the participants may be more likely to hint about the topic. However, it is also possible that the taboo topic still holds weight within the relationship, and despite claims that the topic is resolved, the partners still do not freely discuss the taboo topic.

When partners do not freely discuss their taboo topics, there may be a lack of clarity between partners. Each partner may think that he/she knows what the other partner is saying; however, each partner may not truly understand what the other is communicating. Because there is a lack of concrete examples when discussing such taboo topics, there is also a lack of clarity, and misunderstandings are likely to occur. Yet, this miscommunication may never be detected because partners prefer to not discuss the topic any further. Therefore, each partner may perceive the discussion of taboo topics occurs in a way that it does not. One may also argue that partners refrain from detailed discussions about such taboo topics as a method of avoidance. Through using implicit understanding, subtle statements, and vague statements, partners do not have to explicitly discuss the taboo topic. Therefore, the effect that the reintroduction has on the relationship is the act of implicit understanding, which is a self-protective mechanism.

**Equal Suffering: “You Do It Too.”** As another response to research question 3, which seeks to understand what effect the reintroduction has on the relationship, I found that equal suffering often occurs between romantic partners. When one partner questions
the other partner about his/her behaviors, the partner being questioned turns the attention onto the partner doing the questioning. Thus, the partner being questioned turns the blame away from him/herself to avoid a face-threatening situation or re-introduction. The outcome of the equal suffering is revenge, which one partner may use against the other to make him/herself feel better.

When one partner feels accused or questioned, the other partner becomes self-protective and has a tendency to defend him/herself by bringing up a situation about the other partner to “get even.” For example, Diane says:

I mean there is the topic like because then he’s so accusing of other guys, so then like, I know that sometimes then I’m like, “Well, what about the other girls?” I don’t wanna like open a whole new can of worms, but like, that—it’s just like, “Well if you’re gonna act like that towards other guys, then I should have the right to do that too” even though that’s like getting even or whatever. It’s like this… It just makes me wonder, you know, like what, what you’re doing.

Because she perceives there are accusations regarding her actions, Diane feels as though she should point her finger at Clay and figure out if he has done anything similar to what she has done. Bill and Anne, and Gail all claim they have gone through similar situations. Gail says, “if I have some dirt on him, then I bring it up. It’s like, ‘you can’t get mad at me because you did x, y, and z.’” By doing this, the person being questioned (Gail) turns the attention and blame onto the person doing the questioning (her boyfriend). As such, Gail, who may perceive that she has experienced a certain amount of relational suffering, wants her boyfriend to experience an equal amount of relational suffering. When Gail’s boyfriend has experienced as much relational suffering as she has, they both may
perceive that the relationship, or taboo topic, has been resolved. Dunleavy, Goodboy, Booth-Butterfield, Sidelinger, and Banfield (2009) state that if one partner perceives that ending the relationship is not possible, then that partner may perceive that the relationship (or taboo topic) is repaired once the other partner undergoes an equal amount of relational suffering. In the aforementioned situations, there is a possibility that casting blame on the other partner is how the relationship partners go through the repair phase.

When partners create a situation in which equal suffering takes place, revenge also occurs. When partners speak in a self-protective manner, they turn the blame from themselves onto their partners. Much like Diane and Gail exemplify in the most recent examples, when they feel as though they are being accused or questioned, Diane and Gail simply turn the focus from what they have done onto what their partners have done. As previously mentioned, this can be described as a type of relational repair. However, this equal suffering, or revenge, can also be described as a form of avoidance. When partners do not want to discuss the taboo topic, they may change the focus of the conversation and engage in equal suffering, or revenge, tactics. Each partner may say something that is not necessarily the current point of focus, so that the topic is no longer discussed and a new subject becomes the point of focus. Therefore, one effect that the reintroduction has on the relationship is revenge.

Within this “Findings” section, the most prominent taboo topic for undergraduate, college-aged, students in romantic dating relationships is “previous relationships.” In current romantic relationships, the discussion of previous relationships has a tendency to cause a fight, jealousy, hurt feelings, and the fear that the current partner may return to a previous relationship. Therefore, romantic partners often avoid the discussion of taboo
topics to withdraw from an uncomfortable, or tense, situation. However, this avoidance may cause partners to be more self-conscious, experience a lingering taboo topic within the romantic relationship, or remain focused on the future. When romantic partners reintroduce the taboo topic of previous relationships, a situation has occurred that prompts or encourages the conversation. This situation, and the following taboo topic discussion, is either a product of one partner interacting with a previous partner, one partner provoking the current relationship, or one partner taking precautionary measures. The outcome of this situational occurrence, and resulting taboo topic discussion, is either a resolved or a lingering taboo topic. The current study found that one effect that the reintroduction has on the relationship is conflict. The conflict may occur because there is a jealousy, or possessiveness, issue. The conflict may also occur because one partner wants to avoid the taboo topic discussion, while the other partner does not. This results in partners engaging in defensive communication or experiencing feelings of threat within the relationship. Another effect that the reintroduction has on the relationship is that partners have a tendency to engage in self-protective mechanisms. Partners have a tendency to use implicit understanding, in which they communicate with subtle, vague statements, rather than explicit examples. Therefore, partners may avoid a face-threatening reintroduction of taboo topics. Partners also have a tendency to turn the blame away from themselves and onto their current romantic partners. Thus, partners often engage in equal suffering, or revenge, tactics.
Chapter V

Discussion

The three goals of the current study, as represented by the research questions, were to understand: (1) if there is one prominent taboo topic among undergraduate, college-aged, romantic dating partners, (2) why these taboo topics are reintroduced once declared (explicitly or implicitly) taboo, and (3) what effect the reintroduction has on the relationship. As explained in the “Methodology” section, the current study used one online survey, which functioned as a screening tool, and five interviews (3 individuals, 2 couples) to examine the aforementioned areas of focus. The following contains a discussion of the findings related to each research question

RQ1: What taboo topic is the most prominent among undergraduate, college-aged, romantic relationship partners?

Through personal analysis and interpretation of the survey and interviews, I found that the most prominent taboo topic between romantic partners was “previous relationships.” The discussion of previous relationships has a tendency to cause conflict, jealousy, hurt feelings, and the fear that the current partner may return to the previous relationship. Therefore, the topic of previous relationships becomes known as “taboo” within the current romantic relationships.
As noted in the “Methodology” and “Findings” sections, 27 participants claimed their current relationship’s taboo topic was “previous relationships,” and they were willing to be interviewed to discuss why this is so. However, only seven participants actually responded to my e-mail, or arrived, to the interview. There could be various reasons for why the response was so low. For instance, extra-credit was used as an incentive for people to take the survey and be interviewed, but it is possible that the participants did not want, or need, the extra-credit. Another reason for the low response rate may be participants not having enough time in their schedule to invest into an interview. Finally, the reason for the lack of participants could be partners feeling uncomfortable discussing their taboo topics. Therefore, partners would rather not invest time into discussing a situation that is uncomfortable.

RQ2: Why are taboo topics reintroduced within romantic dating relationships?

The second research question attempted to understand why romantic partners reintroduced taboo topics once declared (explicitly or implicitly) taboo. This research question was answered with two separate categories. The first category was “Avoidance.” I found that romantic partners rarely reintroduced their taboo topic of “previous relationships.” Partners preferred to withdraw from an uncomfortable conversation and ignore the taboo topic altogether, rather than entertain a conversation about previous romantic partners. However, the avoidance caused partners to become more self-conscious, have a lingering taboo topic within the romantic relationship, or remain focused on the future of their relationship, rather than the past.

The second category pertaining to research question two was “Situational Occurrence.” When partners engaged in a conversation about previous relationships, it
was because a situation occurred that prompted and/or encouraged a conversation. These situations included: one romantic partner having an interaction with a previous partner, one current partner trying to provoke the relationship, or one partner taking precautionary measures to make sure that a situation similar to that in which the topic was initially declared “taboo” does not produce a similar outcome. These situations either assisted the couples to resolve the taboo topic or kept the taboo topic unresolved and lingering within the romantic relationship.

Partners who resolved their taboo topic of previous relationships attributed this resolution to open communication and time. Participants who discussed previous relationships over a period of time, as a point of reassurance, felt both more comfortable with the taboo topic and expressed that the taboo topic was no longer as “taboo” as it had been in the past. However, the partners who claimed that the taboo topic was not resolved were also the individuals still in contact with their previous relationship partners. The possibility exists that because one partner was in contact with a previous partner, the taboo topic was likely to reside in the current romantic relationship and remain unresolved. Thus, severed lines of communication with the previous romantic partner, and open lines of communication with the current romantic partner, may aid in resolving the taboo topic.

**RQ3: What effect does the reintroduction of taboo topics have on the relationship?**

The third research question sought to discover the possible effects that the reintroduction had on the relationship. This question was also answered with two separate categories. The first category was “Conflict.” When partners reintroduced their taboo topics, they underwent a period of conflict, which was produced because of jealousy and
possessiveness, as well as avoidance. When one partner avoided the taboo topic
discussion, the other partner felt uncomfortable and conflict occurred. As a result, the
first partner engaged in defensive communication and experienced feelings of threat.

The second category was “Self-Protective Mechanisms.” This category was
divided into two additional categories: “Implicit Understanding” and “Equal Suffering.”
As partners reintroduced their taboo topics, partners often engaged in communication that
was protective over oneself. Through the self-protective mechanisms, partners made
subtle, vague statements to describe a specific person or situation. Although the other
partner may have thought that he/she knew what was being communicated, without
explicit examples, the specific message may not have gotten across. Thus, there was a
lack of clarity between partners, and miscommunication easily occurred. Further,
participants engaged in self-protective mechanisms by using equal suffering tactics.
Participants often turned the focus and blame from themselves onto the other partner.
Therefore, revenge continually occurred.

When the discussion of “previous relationships” created conflict, participants
began defensively communicating and feeling threatened. There is a possibility that these
feelings encouraged partners to use self-protective mechanisms when communicating.
Upon feeling threatened and engaging in defensive communication and self-protective
mechanisms, one partner may have perceived that the other half of the dyad was
defending his/her previous relationship, and thus, his/her previous romantic partner. This
created jealousy and fear in the other partner, and the previous relationship was no longer
the focal point of the conversation. Rather, the defensive communication, feelings of
threat, and self-protective mechanisms regarding the previous relationship became the
focal point of the conversation. This did not allow for clarity between partners, which may have resulted in mixed messages being sent. Therefore, the topic of previous relationships evolved into a taboo topic because of the way it was communicated, rather than because the previous relationship occurred. There is a possibility that this is the way taboo topics are formed.

**Implications**

The first implication of the current study reinforces previous research studies that are similar. For example, Baxter and Wilmot (1985) discovered seven categories of topics that are often classified as taboo: (1) state of the relationship, (2) extra-relationship activity, (3) relationship norms, (4) prior relationships, (5) conflict-inducing topics, (6) negatively-valenced self-disclosure, and (7) other. Guerrero and Afifi (1995a, 1995b) discovered five additional topics that are often avoided within relationships: (1) relationship issues, (2) negative life experiences, (3) dating experiences, (4) friendships, and (5) sexual experiences. The current study found very similar taboo topics, which reinforces the findings of Baxter and Wilmot (1985) and Guerrero and Afifi (1995a, 1995b). However, the current study also found topics for which the previous research does not account. These topics include: family issues, time spent together, money issues, honesty, weight, drinking/drugs, pornography, and religion. Each of these is an additional topic that is uncomfortable between partners and worthy of further study.

The current study adds to the communication literature by building off Siegert and Stamp’s (1994) study that examines how couples handled their “First Big Fight (FBF)” in their relationship. Siegert and Stamp (1994) found that the FBF has the potential to introduce a recurring problem into the relationship. Although the current study does not
examine whether or not the taboo topic of “previous relationships” was the FBF between partners, the current study does solidify that one conflict episode may reoccur as the relationship progresses. Furthermore, the current study acknowledges, and confirms, Siegert and Stamp’s (1994) claim that although each individual fight may be resolved between romantic partners, the underlying issue may linger, and be discussed several times, before the issue stops causing problems within the relationship.

The current study also adds to the communication literature by advancing Roloff and Johnson’s (2001) study about reintroducing taboo topics. Similar to Roloff and Johnson’s (2001) article, the current study relies on self-report data and also found that taboo topics that have been dismissed for a period of time can be reintroduced. Contrary to their study, which only interviewed one half of the romantic partnership, the current study incorporated interviews with two couples. Roloff and Johnson’s (2001) study also provided the following limitation: “Research does not, unfortunately, describe the processes that lead to reintroducing taboo topics and the effects of putting them back on the table” (pp. 37-38). Further, Roloff and Johnson (2001) provided an additional direction for research to discover the situations in which topics are reintroduced. These limitations served the current study as directions for research. Although the current study does not fully address the processes that lead to reintroducing the taboo topics, the study found that the situations in which topics are reintroduced occur after a situational occurrence (such as interaction with the previous partner, one partner instigating the relationship, partners taking precautionary measures) that prompts the taboo topic discussion. The effects of the reintroduction are conflict and self-protective mechanisms.
Finally, the current study adds to our knowledge about Communication Privacy Management Theory (Petronio, 2002). There are numerous articles that use the eleven-year-old theory (i.e., Durham, 2008; Hollenbaugh & Egbert, 2009; Mikucki-Enyard, 2011), but no articles examine taboo topics, why romantic partners reintroduce uncomfortable topics once declared (explicitly or implicitly) taboo, or the effects of the reintroduction. Therefore, the current study uses CPM in a way not previously done. This strengthens the theory, as well as the literature within the communication discipline.

**Limitations**

As with any study, the current study has limitations. The first limitation is the small sample size. If more participants were involved in the current study, more data would have been generated through interviews. As a result, the potential for theoretical saturation (Strauss, 1987) of the categories might have been realized, as well as the possibility of other categories being developed.

Although seven interviewees participated in the current study, there were only five interviews. Three interviews involved one partner by herself. Two interviews involved both romantic relationship partners, leading to the next limitation of the current study. While it was beneficial to have mixed interviews (3 individual interviews, 2 couple interviews), this may affect the way that the questions were answered. One may argue that participants are likely to elicit more thorough responses to the questions in an individual interview because the other half of the dyad is not present. Therefore, the solo participant can respond to questions with thoroughness and little fear of what his/her partner may think. However, this can also be a limitation because the behaviors of the dyad are communicated solely from the perspective of one partner. With that said, the
couple interviews can be seen as a benefit to the current study because part of the current study includes the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of both partners. However, this can also be seen as a limitation because partners may not have answered truthfully due to a fear that conflict might ensue. By having interviews that were either only individuals or only couples, the current study could have held more elements constant.

The final limitation within the current study is the ambiguity and difficulty of expressing the reintroduction of taboo topics. The reintroduction of taboo topics is difficult to follow, assess, and analyze because partners do not always account for the same experiences. For example, one partner may think that the taboo topic was declared taboo (either explicitly or implicitly) two months into the relationship, while the other partner may not have thought the topic was taboo until two years into the relationship. Because the initial introduction and declaration of the taboo topic can be ambiguous to partners, either partner may have difficulty expressing why the taboo topic was reintroduced and the effects that the reintroduction had on the relationship.

**Directions for Future Research**

In terms of directions for future research, the current study offers several suggestions. The current study contends that the participants who remain in contact with their previous romantic relationship partners also have an unresolved, lingering taboo topic of “previous relationships” in their current relationships. However, the current study suggests that with a larger sample size, future research could attempt to confirm whether or not continual contact with a previous romantic partner promotes the current relationship to have that lingering, unresolved taboo topic of “previous relationships.” Furthermore, future research could examine whether or not participants who are no
longer in contact with their previous partner have resolved a taboo topic of “previous relationships” within their current relationship.

A second direction for future research is to get to the root of “how” romantic partners reintroduce their taboo topics. As previously mentioned, there was difficulty with expressing and understanding how the reintroduction of taboo topics occurs between romantic partners because each partner may have a different perspective. However, through monitoring the behavior of both partners within the relationship, researchers may be able to better understand the entire process of how romantic partners reintroduce their taboo topics.

Finally, the current study suggests that other taboo topics are examined in a similar fashion to the current study. The current study found that the two most common taboo topics within romantic relationships, aside from previous relationships, are “sex” and the “title/future of one’s relationship.” Future research could use either one of these taboo topics and uncover why partners reintroduce these taboo topics, as well as what effect the reintroduction has on the relationship. Then, future research may be able to understand “how” these taboo topics are reintroduced, as well.

Through the current study, the communication discipline, as a whole, may now recognize more taboo topics between romantic relationship partners. To build off Baxter and Wilmot’s (1985) and Guerrero and Afifi’s (1995a, 1995b) lists of taboo topics, the current study noted that family issues, spending time together, money issues, honesty, weight, drinking/drugs, pornography, and religion, are topics that are also considered “taboo” among this sample of undergraduate, college-aged, romantic dating partners. Further, the communication discipline now better understands why taboo topics are
reintroduced, or avoided, and the effect that the reintroduction, or avoidance, may cause. The current study demonstrates that topic avoidance is a common occurrence within romantic relationships; however, my review of literature expresses that there is a limited amount of literature about topic avoidance. Therefore, the current study presents a gap in the communication discipline. Finally, the current study demonstrates that Communication Privacy Management Theory can be used to better understand topics that become conditioned as private matters by romantic partners, rather than only using Communication Privacy Management Theory to understand topics that are considered private matters because society, as a whole, claims they are “private matters.”
References


Appendix A:

Oral Recruitment Script

My name is Katie Sroufe and I am a graduate student in the Communication Studies Department here at Ball State University. I am also a Communication 210 Instructor. I would like to invite all of you to participate in this study regarding uncomfortable topics within romantic relationships. The purpose of this study is to better understand how romantic partners reintroduce topics that are uncomfortable to talk about.

Your participation will be comprised of one survey administered online. Upon completion of the survey, you will get 2 extra credit points for COMM 210. You will also have the opportunity to participate in an interview as a selected participant or fill out an alternative assignment for 3 more extra credit points. The alternative assignment asks you to write a 1-2 page critique regarding what you think a taboo topic is and how taboo topics can be addressed between romantic partners.

In order to participate you need to be 18 years of age. Participation in this research study is completely voluntary and your responses will remain confidential. The online survey should not take longer than 5 minutes. The interview or alternative assignment should not take longer than one hour or one hour and a half.

There are only minimal risks associated with participating in this study. There is a possibility that this study may promote your uncomfortable topics being brought up more often than they would naturally within your romantic relationship. This could also provide the possibility of disagreement occurring. However, this study will provide you and the communication discipline with many benefits. This study will attempt to understand why and how couples reintroduce uncomfortable topics, as well as what leads them to do so. This study will serve to strengthen the literature within the communication discipline, which aids scholars who use this literature to conduct more well-rounded research that is pertinent to society. In terms of potential benefits to you, you may find that talking about uncomfortable topics and understanding why those topics are uncomfortable may provide more insight into you and your relationship, as well as help you to be able to communicate more effectively with your partner. You will also have the opportunity to get 5 points of extra credit by participating.

Your responses will be kept confidential. They will be stored in a secured location and will only be accessible to me, the Principal Investigator and Dr. Glen Stamp, the Faculty Advisor.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the study at any time for any reason without any prejudice or penalty. Please feel free to ask any questions before beginning this study and at any point during this study.

Questions can be directed to myself, the Principal Investigator, Katie Sroufe at kksroufe@bsu.edu or Dr. Glen Stamp, Faculty Advisor, at gstamp@bsu.edu.
If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, do not hesitate to contact Ball State University’s Institutional Review Board:

Director, Office of Research Integrity  
2000 West University Avenue  
Room 409-Teacher’s College  
Muncie, IN 47306  
Phone: (765) 285-5070  
Fax: (765) 285-1328
Appendix B

Project Information for Potential Participants Initial Questionnaire

**Title of Project:** “I Don’t Wanna Talk About It”: Reintroducing Taboo Topics in Romantic Relationships

**Principle Investigator:** Katie K. Sroufe, Graduate Student, Department of Communication Studies

**Faculty Advisor:** Glen H. Stamp, Ph.D., Professor, Chair and Director of Graduate Studies, Department of Communication Studies

**Organization:** Ball State University

**Purpose:** The purpose of the current study is to understand how romantic partners reintroduce uncomfortable topics, what leads them to do so, and what effects the reintroduction has on the relationship.

**Procedures:** Participants will be asked to fill out a short series of questions pertaining to taboo topics in romantic relationships. Participation in this study is completely voluntary and participants may withdraw from this study at any time without prejudice or penalty from the researcher.

**Data collection and storage:** Data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in the Principal Investigator’s office in the Letterman Building at Ball State University. No one will have access to the data except the Principal Investigator (Katie) and the Faculty Advisor (Glen Stamp, Ph.D.) The data will be kept for 3 years after the study in case there are any questions. After the 3 years, the data will be destroyed.

**Contact Information:** At any point in time, for whatever reason, Katie Sroufe can be contacted at kksroufe@bsu.edu. If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, do not hesitate to contact Ball State University’s Institutional Review Board:
Director, Office of Research Integrity
2000 West University Avenue
Room 409-Teacher’s College
Muncie, IN 47306
Phone: (765) 285-5070
Fax: (765) 285-1328

**Informed Consent Statement:** I have read or had someone read to me the preceding information that describes the current study. All my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I am 18 years of age or older. I understand that by completing this survey, I freely consent to participate and to have my information used in the current study.

(Click to Continue Button in Qualtrics)
1. What is your age?
   a. __________

2. Are you currently involved in an opposite-sex romantic relationship?
   a. Yes   b. No

   (If you are involved in an opposite-sex romantic relationship, proceed to question 3 and answer all the remaining questions; if you are not involved in an opposite-sex romantic relationship, proceed to question 16 and answer questions 16-19)

3. How long have you been in a romantic relationship with your partner?
   a. 1-5 months   b. 6-11 months   c. 1 year +

4. How would you define your communication with your partner to be?
   a. Open   b. Avoidant   c. Difficult at Times

5. On a scale from 1-10, how satisfied are you with the communication between you and your partner? (1 being low, 10 being high)
   1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7 – 8 – 9 – 10

6. Is there one topic between you and your partner that is uncomfortable to talk about?
   a. Yes   b. No

7. What is the topic that is uncomfortable to talk about?
   a. ______________

8. If there is not a topic that is currently uncomfortable to talk about, has there been one topic in the past that was uncomfortable to talk about with your partner?
   a. Yes   b. No

9. What is the topic that used to be uncomfortable to talk about?
   a. ______________

10. On a scale from 1-10, how did this topic affect your relationship satisfaction? (1 being the topic did not affect it, ten being the topic affected it greatly)
    1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7 – 8 – 9 – 10

11. On a scale from 1-10, how did this topic affect your relationship closeness? (1 being the topic did not affect it, ten being the topic affected it greatly)
    1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7 – 8 – 9 – 10

12. On a scale from 1-10, how did this topic affect your relationship connection? (1 being the topic did not affect it, ten being the topic affected it greatly)
    1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7 – 8 – 9 – 10
13. On a scale from 1-10, how did this topic affect your overall willingness to communicate with your partner?
   (1 being the topic did not affect it, ten being the topic affected it greatly)
   1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7 – 8 – 9 – 10

14. Are you willing to participate by yourself in an interview at a later date regarding your specified uncomfortable topic?
   a. Yes   b. No

15. Would you be willing to participate with your partner be willing to participate in an interview at a later date regarding your specified uncomfortable topic?
   a. Yes   b. No

16. What is your name?
   a. __________

17. What is your COMM 210 section lab number?
   a. __________

18. What is your COMM 210 lab instructor’s name? (Not Denker)
   a. __________

19. What is your e-mail address?
   a. __________
Appendix C
Participant Interview Consent Form

Study Title: “I Don’t Wanna Talk About It”: Reintroducing Taboo Topics in Romantic Relationships – Katie K. Sroufe, Principal Investigator

Study Purpose and Rationale: The current study intends to understand how romantic partners reintroduce uncomfortable topics, what leads them to do so, and what effects the reintroduction has on the relationship. Most romantic relationships have at least one topic that is uncomfortable to talk about and may linger as a potential problem. Once described as “uncomfortable,” the current study seeks to understand how those topics are reintroduced within the dyad.

Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria: To participate in the current study, all individuals must be at least 18 years of age or older and provide informed consent. Participants must be currently involved in a heteronormative romantic relationship that has lasted at least six months. Participants' romantic relationships must have at least one topic that partners have classified as uncomfortable.

Participant Procedures and Duration: For the current study, you will be asked various questions that seek to understand how you and your partner reintroduce topics that are uncomfortable. The interview will last one to one and a half hours.

Audio and Videotaping: With your permission, the interview will be audiotaped using a Sony Cassette Recorder. This will ensure accuracy. The audiotaped interview will not be used for any reason aside from the current study. The audiotapes will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in the principal investigators office and destroyed at the conclusion of the research.

Data Confidentiality: All data will be confidential. The interviews will be transcribed by the primary investigator. There will be no identifying information, such as your name, used in the current study.

Data Storage: Data will be stored on a password protected personal laptop computer and in a locked filing cabinet in the Principal Investigator’s office in the Letterman Building at Ball State University. No one will have access to the data except the Principal Investigator and the Faculty Advisor (Glen Stamp, Ph.D.) The data will be kept for 3 years after the study in case there are any questions. After the 3 years, the data will be destroyed.

Risks or Discomforts: The current study is of minimal risk to participants. There is a possibility that this study may promote the partners’ uncomfortable topics being brought up more often than they would naturally within their romantic relationships. This could also provide the possibility of disagreement occurring.
**Benefits:** The current study will provide potential benefits to society and/or the individual participants. In terms of the benefits to society, this study will attempt to help researchers understand why and how couples reintroduce uncomfortable topics, as well as what leads them to do so. This study will also serve to strengthen the literature on uncomfortable topics, conflict, relational repair, relational maintenance, reintroducing taboo topics, and Communication Privacy Management Theory. In terms of potential benefits to individuals, the participants may find that talking about uncomfortable topics, and understanding why those topics are uncomfortable, may provide more insight into themselves as individuals as well as being able to more effectively communicate with each other.

**Compensation:** There is no compensation for this study.

**Voluntary Participation:** Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the study at any time for any reason without any prejudice or penalty from the researcher. Please feel free to ask any questions before beginning the study and at any point during the study.

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, do not hesitate to contact Ball State University’s Institutional Review Board:

Director, Office of Research Integrity  
2000 West University Avenue  
Room 409-Teacher’s College  
Muncie, IN 47306  
Phone: (765) 285-5070  
Fax: (765) 285-1328

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Consent:

I, ________________________________, agree to participate in this research project entitled, “I Don’t’ Wanna Talk About It’: Reintroducing Taboo Topics in Romantic Relationships” I have had the study explained to me and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I have heard the description of this study, read the consent form, and give my consent to participate. I understand that I will receive a copy of this informed consent form to keep for future reference.

_________________________  ___________________________
Participant’s Signature  Date

Investigator Contact Information:  Faculty Advisor Contact Information:
Katie K. Sroufe  Glen H. Stamp, Ph.D.
Communication Studies  Communication Studies
Appendix D

Interview Script for Individuals

Thank you for meeting with me today. The majority of this interview will consist of uncovering how and why you and your partner interact. The data from this interview will be incorporated into my master’s thesis. All of your answers and participation will be confidential. May I record this interview?

1. What is your age?
2. What is the age of your partner?
3. Could you describe how your relationship began?
4. How long have you and your partner been involved in this romantic relationship?
5. How often do you and your partner see each other?
6. How often do you and your partner communicate with each other (either on the phone, texting, social networking site, or face to face)?
7. Describe a typical, everyday conversation between you and your partner.
   a. What do you typically talk about?
   b. Why?
8. Describe the most enjoyable topic of conversation you have had with your partner.
   a. Why is this topic the most enjoyable?
9. Describe the most difficult topic of conversation you have had with your partner.
   a. Why is this topic the most difficult?
10. Has this topic ever been avoided or off-limits to you and/or your partner?
    i. Why are (were) these avoided or off-limits?
       1. Did you feel threatened? Why?
       2. Did you feel defensive? Why?
       3. What goals were being addressed?
    ii. How long were you and your partner involved in the relationship before you discovered topics that are avoided?
    iii. Describe specifically what happened when this topic was initially brought up?
       1. What was the context/situation?
       2. Describe (or recreate) the interaction.
    iv. What effect did this have on the relationship?
11. Has this topic ever generated conflict between you and your partner?
    i. Why were these topics conflict-inducing?
       1. Did you feel threatened? Why?
       2. Did you feel defensive? Why?
       3. What was being addressed?
    ii. How long were you and your partner involved in the relationship before you discovered topics that generate conflict?
    iii. How do you deal with those topics?
    iv. Describe specifically what happened when this topic was initially brought up?
1. What was the context/situation?
2. Describe (or recreate) the interaction.
   v. What effect did this have on the relationship?
12. Once recognized as “avoided” or “conflict-inducing” topics, was there ever a time in which you and/or your partner reintroduced this topic?
   a. Why were these topics reintroduced?
   b. How was the decision made to bring it up again?
      i. Did you plan the conversation or was it spontaneous?
   c. Describe specifically what happened when it was reintroduced?
      i. What was the context/situation?
      ii. Describe (or recreate) the interaction.
   d. What effect did this have on the relationship?
Appendix E

Interview Script for Couples

Thank you for meeting with me today. The majority of this interview will consist of uncovering how and why the two of you interact with each other. The data from this interview will be incorporated into my master’s thesis. All of your answers and participation will be confidential. May I record this interview?

1. Can each of you tell me your ages?
2. Could you describe how your relationship began?
3. How long have the two of you been involved in this romantic relationship?
4. How often do the two of you see each other?
5. How often do the two of you communicate with each other (either on the phone, texting, social networking site, or face to face)?
6. Describe a typical, everyday conversation between the two of you.
   a. What do you typically talk about?
   b. Why?
7. Could each of you describe the most enjoyable topic of conversation the two of you have had?
   a. Why is this topic the most enjoyable?
8. Could each of you describe the most difficult topic of conversation the two of you have had?
   a. Why is this topic the most difficult?
9. Has this topic ever been avoided or off-limits by the two of you?
   i. Why were these avoided or off-limits?
      1. Did you feel threatened? Why?
      2. Did you feel defensive? Why?
      3. What goals were being addressed? Why?
   ii. How long were you and your partner involved in the relationship before you discovered topics that were avoided?
   iii. Describe specifically what happened when this topic was initially brought up?
      1. What was the context/situation?
      2. Describe (or recreate) the interaction.
   iv. What effect did this have on the relationship?
10. Has this topic ever generated conflict between the two of you?
   i. Why were these topics conflict-inducing?
      1. Did you feel threatened? Why?
      2. Did you feel defensive? Why?
      3. What was being addressed? Why?
   ii. How long were you and your partner involved in the relationship before you discovered topics that generate conflict?
   iii. How did you deal with those topics?
   iv. Describe specifically what happened when those topics were initially brought up?
1. What was the context/situation?
2. Describe (or recreate) the interaction.
   v. What effect did this have on the relationship?
11. Once recognized as “avoided” or “conflict-inducing” topics, was there ever a time in which you and/or your partner reintroduced this topic?
   a. Why were those topics reintroduced?
   b. How was the decision made to bring it up again?
      i. Did you plan the conversation or was it spontaneous?
   c. Describe specifically what happened when it was reintroduced?
      i. What was the context/situation?
      ii. Describe (or recreate) the interaction.
   d. What effect did this have on the relationship?