

A Dyadic Assessment of Romantic Partners' Disclosures during Stressor Conversations

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This study tested whether romantic partners' stressor disclosures mediated the association between commitment and relational satisfaction. A dyadic analysis of 54 romantic partners' stressor conversations found that disclosers and confidants were empirically indistinguishable from one another. Although disclosure amount was unrelated to relational satisfaction, both actors' and partners' disclosure accuracy and accuracy reciprocity (i.e., high similarity) were positively related to relational satisfaction. Actors' disclosure negativity was associated with relational dissatisfaction after the couples' stressor conversation. Commitment was unrelated to disclosure; however, actors' commitment was positively related to relational satisfaction. Results, as a whole suggest that when romantic couples discuss stressors, they should disclose accurately and positively to benefit their relationship.

Keywords: disclosure, commitment, relational satisfaction, romantic, dyadic analysis

Introduction

Within romantic relationships, there is a fundamental understanding that difficult disclosures will occur (e.g., Derlega et al., 1993; Petronio, 2002). Generally, the more romantic partners disclose to one another, the more satisfied they are with the relationship over time (Finkenauer et al., 2004). However, the topic of the disclosure likely matters. Disclosures during stressor conversations may contribute to relational dissatisfaction (e.g., Afifi et al., 2017); yet, romantic partners' disclosures about stressors can help manage the stress and contribute to obtaining social support (Willems et al., 2020). Common stressors in romantic relationships include finances, work, health, and aspects of the romantic relationship itself (Randall & Bodenmann, 2009). Therefore, this study explores *how* individuals disclose (e.g., Derlega et al., 1993; Pennebaker 1995; Petronio, 2002) and the impact of commitment (e.g., Derlega, et al., 1993; Rusbult & VanLange, 2008) to gain insight into how disclosure is associated with relational satisfaction during romantic partners' stressor conversations.

Literature Review

Stressor Disclosures in Romantic Relationships

Disclosure is the voluntary, intentional revealing of private information not already known by the confidant (Derlega et al., 1993; Omarzu, 2000; Petronio, 2002). Confidants typically are close relational others, such as family members or romantic partners (e.g., Coates & Winston, 1987; Pennebaker, 1995; Vangelisti & Daly, 1997). In both dating and married romantic relationships, disclosure is associated with relational satisfaction (e.g., Brunell et al., 2007; Finkenauer & Hazam, 2000; Rosenfeld & Bowen, 1991), which is consistent with communication privacy management theory's (CPM) contention that disclosure is vital for relationship maintenance and satisfaction (Petronio, 2002, 2013). As CPM (Petronio, 2002) and other disclosure scholarship (e.g., Derlega et al., 1993; Willems et al., 2020) argues, relational satisfaction is affected by both the discloser and the confidant because disclosure is a dyadic activity in which both individuals have an active role.

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Discussing stressors requires revealing personal information related to the stressor or problem; therefore, individuals necessarily disclose during stressor conversations (Coates & Winston, 1987; Wills & DePaulo, 1991). Although disclosing difficult personal information is a basic expectation in romantic relationships (Baxter et al., 2001; Petronio, 2002), for stressors, disclosing does not always have a consistent positive outcome (Randall & Bodenmann, 2009). For instance, among college dating couples, when one partner talked about a stressor every day for a week, it decreased relational satisfaction (Afifi et al., 2017). Conversely, wives' stressor disclosures to their military deployed husbands were positively related to their own relational satisfaction, even when they thought it would put their husbands at risk (Joseph & Afifi, 2010). Some of the discrepancies may arise from how disclosure is studied. For instance, Afifi et al.'s (2017) participants were assigned to one of four conditions: talk about the stressor, avoid talking about the stressor, write about the stressor, or the control group, and Joseph and Afifi (2010) measured wives' general willingness to be open about their stressors to their husband. Therefore, it is unclear *how* the disclosure behaviors themselves affected relational satisfaction; there may be something unique about *how* disclosure occurs in stressor conversations.

How romantic partners disclose and respond during stressor conversations may be more important for relational satisfaction than whether or not they disclose (Pennebaker, 1995). While CPM focuses on the rules that influence peoples' disclosures (Petronio, 2002, 2013), the disclosure decision-making model (DD-MM) suggests that when disclosing about difficult or stressful health-related topics, the outcomes of the conversation depend, in part, on the characteristics of the disclosure (Greene, 2009). Disclosures can be characterized along several dimensions, including amount, accuracy, and valence. *Amount* refers to the quantity and breadth or how much is shared (Greene et al., 2006; Petronio, 2002; Wheelless, 1976). In intimate relationships, disclosure amount is positively related to relational satisfaction (e.g., Brunell et al., 2007; Gable et al., 2006; Rosenfeld & Bowen, 1991; Sprecher & Hendrick, 2004). *Accuracy* captures the degree of sincerity and honesty of the information revealed (Greene et al., 2006; Wheelless, 1976). When exploring more general disclosures in married couples, the quality of disclosure content (such as its accuracy) explained more variance in relational satisfaction among married couples than the amount disclosed (Finkenauer & Hazam, 2000). *Valence* refers to the general tone or degree of positivity versus negativity characterizing the information revealed (Petronio, 2002; Wheelless, 1976). Highly positively valenced disclosures involve revealing enjoyable, pleasant, and rewarding information; conversely, highly negatively valenced disclosures convey unfavorable, sensitive, or upsetting information (Afifi et al., 2007; Gilbert & Horenstein, 1975). With some exceptions, highly negatively valenced disclosures are associated with lower relational satisfaction in romantic couples (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985; Bograd & Spilka, 1996; Kobak & Hazan, 1991). This suggests that disclosures during stressor conversations may involve large amounts of accurate, negatively valenced information. Thus, in line with Pennebaker's contention, examining the *how* of disclosure (i.e., amount, accuracy, and valence) may help explain the variations in the association between romantic partners' disclosures and relational satisfaction. This leads to our first hypothesis:

H₁: Disclosers' relational satisfaction after a stressor conversation will be positively related to their own disclosure (a) amount, (b) accuracy, and (c) negative valence.

Confidants

Both CPM (Petronio, 2002) and DD-MM (Greene et al., 2006) contend that people anticipate romantic partners will respond to their disclosures. Indeed, confidants (i.e., romantic partners) often feel compelled to respond (Derlega et al., 1993; Magsamen-Conrad, 2014). Disclosure responses are a confidant's immediate communicative verbal and nonverbal reply to a disclosure (Magsamen-Conrad, 2014). Disclosure responses can be characterized using the same dimensions of amount, accuracy, and valence. Confidants' disclosure responses influence both confidants' and disclosers' relational satisfaction (Afifi et al., 2013; Greene et al., 2006; Reis & Shaver, 1988). However, the specific dimensions of confidants' disclosures generally are not examined; therefore, the following research question is posed:

RQ₁: Are confidants' relational satisfaction after a stressor conversation related to their own disclosure (a) amount, (b) accuracy, and (c) valence?

Reciprocity

CPM (Petronio, 2002) and other scholarship on disclosure (e.g., Magsamen-Conrad, 2014) argue that one aspect of a disclosure response is reciprocity. Reciprocity often is conceptualized as the extent to which a disclosure response matches, or is similar to, the disclosure's characteristics (i.e., its amount, accuracy, and valence; Derlega et al., 1993; Greene, 2009; Omarazu, 2000; Petronio, 2002). In essence, one person serves as a model for the other regarding what is appropriate and fitting to reveal the conversation in terms of amount, accuracy, and valence (Rosenfeld & Bowen, 1991). Confidants may respond with disclosure amount, accuracy, and valence reciprocity to meet conversational expectations and maintain equity with the discloser (Derlega et al., 1993). Generally, romantic partners' relational satisfaction increases as the degree of similarity between disclosers' and confidants' disclosures increase (Meeks et al., 1998; Rosenfeld & Bowen, 1991). This indicates disclosure amount, accuracy, and valence reciprocity and relational satisfaction should be positively related.

Although there is a felt obligation to respond to disclosures, the traditional notion of reciprocity, or disclosure similarity, tends to be stronger in stranger relationships than in established, ongoing relationships (Derlega et al., 1993) in which there often is no expectation for high degrees of disclosure reciprocity (Willems et al., 2020). In romantic relationships, a confidant's disclosure may be responsive, or convey understanding, validation, and care by revealing personal information that is similar in terms of overall vulnerability, rather than disclose to a similar degree of amount, accuracy, and valence (Magsamen-Conrad, 2014; Reis & Gable, 2015). For instance, over the course of two weeks, individuals who disclose a high amount to a romantic partner report their romantic partner to be more responsive than people who disclose less (Pagani et al., 2019). Similarly, people are more responsive to partners' stressor disclosures when they perceive romantic partners to be responsive to their own stressor disclosures (Pauw et al., 2021). These studies indicate it is not similarity in amount, accuracy, or valence but similarity in vulnerability of the disclosure response that matters, which contradicts earlier research on disclosure reciprocity in romantic relationships (e.g., Meeks et al., 1998; Rosenfeld & Bowen, 1991). Therefore, we ask:

RQ₂: Does reciprocity characterize disclosers' and confidants' disclosure (a) amount, (b) accuracy, and (c) valence during stressor conversations?

RQ₃: Is the degree of reciprocity in disclosure (a) amount, (b) accuracy, and (c) valence related to disclosers' and confidants' relational satisfaction after their stressor conversation?

Commitment, Disclosure, and Relational Satisfaction

As CPM (Petronio, 2002, 2013) and the DD-MM (Greene, 2009) argue, disclosure and relational satisfaction are affected by the nature of the relationship. Relationship commitment, according to the investment model, motivates people to behave in ways that maintain the relationship (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993; Rusbult et al., 1998). Commitment can be defined as a person's subjective belief about the long-term nature of the relationship (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993; Rusbult et al., 1998). It conveys a vested interest in a partner's well-being and a willingness to cooperate (Rusbult et al., 1994). Commitment has been associated with relational satisfaction in everyday interactions and in times of stress and difficulty (Weigel, 2008; Weigel & Ballard-Reisch, 2014). Further, according to the investment model, romantic partners' disclosures, including disclosures about difficulties or disappointments, should be explained by commitment (Rusbult & VanLange, 2008). Past research supports this contention. For instance, disclosure is positively related to commitment among college dating partners (Sprecher & Hendrick, 2004) and married individuals (Stafford, 2010; Stafford et al., 2000). Among married partners, commitment is positively associated with the disclosure of general thoughts and feelings, the amount of

information disclosed, and disclosures about differences (Finkenauer & Hazam, 2000). Based on the foregoing, we test whether commitment predicts romantic partners' stressor disclosures:

H₂: For both disclosers and confidants, commitment will positively predict disclosure (a) amount, (b) accuracy, and (c) negative valence during stressor conversations.

RQ₄: For both disclosers and confidants, does commitment predict reciprocal disclosure (a) amount, (b) accuracy, and (c) valence during stressor conversations?

According to both CPM (Petronio, 2002, 2013) and the investment model (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993; Rusbult et al., 1998), a relationship's characteristics influence romantic partners' behaviors and relational outcomes; therefore, disclosure may mediate the influence of commitment on relational satisfaction. Indeed, actors' own communication with romantic partners mediate the effects of their commitment on relational satisfaction (Givertz et al., 2016). However, this is based on more general reports of disclosure rather than disclosure in specific stressor conversations and on correlational data. To explore whether disclosure during stressor conversations mediates the effects of commitment on relational satisfaction, we ask:

RQ₅: For both disclosers and confidants, does disclosure (a) amount, (b) accuracy, and (c) valence mediate the relationship between commitment and relational satisfaction?

Partner effects

Romantic partners' behaviors and perceptions are inherently intertwined (Weigel, 2008), and "the ability to communicate self-relevant information is limited by interdependence" (Rusbult & VanLange, 2008, p. 2057). Because romantic relationships are an interdependent system, the behaviors and attributes of one person in the dyad can influence the outcomes of the other person; in other words, there are partner effects (Ackerman et al., 2011; Kenny et al., 2006). Partner effects help explain the interpersonal reality within which romantic partners act, understand, and respond to one another, and they provide insight into how cognitions and behaviors shape a conversation and influence a relationship (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2008). As theories on commitment postulate, romantic partners' commitment ought to affect the other's communication and satisfaction, even during times of difficulty (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993; Rusbult & VanLange, 2008; Weigel, 2008). Yet, Givertz et al. (2016) found only a small positive partner effect for wives' commitment on husbands' relational satisfaction and no partner effects for husbands' commitment on wives' relational satisfaction. Givertz et al. (2009) concluded that commitment is primarily associated with one's own thoughts and feelings about the relationship and not the partner's thoughts and feelings. Thus, the extent of partner effects is unclear. To explore partner effects, we ask our final research question:

RQ₆: Do disclosers' and confidants' disclosure (a) amount, (b) accuracy, (c) valence, and (d) commitment affect partners' relational satisfaction after a stressor conversation (i.e., are there partner effects)?

Methods

Sample

Fifty-one heterosexual and three same-sex romantic pairs ($n = 108$ individuals) participated. The average length of the relationship was 2.5 years ($SD = 1.9$ years, 3 months to 9.5 years). The discloser (randomly assigned) was 23.56 years old on average ($SD = 6.24$; 18-44 years old). 46.3% identified as White, 20.4% as Hispanic/Latinx, 13.0% as Asian or Asian American, 7.4% as Black or African American, and 13% identified as other or multiple races. Although we recruited from a college student

population, 37% of disclosers were not enrolled in school at the time of participation, 14.8% were freshman, 22.2% were sophomores, 9.3% were juniors, 5.6% were seniors, and 3.7% were graduate students (4 did not answer this question). The majority of disclosers (61%) lived with parents or other family members (e.g., grandparent, cousin), 20.4% lived alone or with roommates, 2 did not respond, and remaining 8 lived with their romantic partner. Confidants' average age was 22.65 ($SD = 5.81$, 18-52 years old). 57.4% identified as White, 16.7% as Hispanic or Latinx, 13.0% as Asian or Asian American, 3.7% as Black or African American, and 9.3% identified as other or multiple races. 18.5% were freshman, 29.6% were sophomores, 31.5% were juniors, and 9.3% were seniors (6 did not answer this question). A majority of confidants (57%) lived with family members, 29.6% lived alone or with roommates, 8 lived with their romantic partner.

Procedures

Romantic couples were recruited from introductory communication courses at an urban, Western U.S., public, 4-year university designated as a minority serving (according to US Title III eligibility) and Hispanic serving institution (per US Title V eligibility). Recruitment occurred via in-class announcements and information posted in an online research participation system. Across both approaches, students were informed the study was investigating how people communicate about stressors with romantic partners (individuals they had been romantically involved with for at least three months; see e.g., Farrell et al., 2014), and they needed to recruit their romantic partner to participate with them. Romantic pairs scheduled an appointment to participate by contacting the first author or choosing from available times in the online research participation management system. The day before the appointment, both members of the pair received an email reminding them of the time, location, and purpose of the study.

Participation was completed in a 90-minute visit to an on-campus research facility resembling an apartment living space. When participants arrived, they were greeted by the first author or research assistant (RA) who guided participants through the study. Participants were asked to sit at separate tables, where participants provided informed consent. To start the study, participants individually completed a pre-conversation questionnaire, which assessed demographic characteristics and commitment. Then, they were presented the statement: "Stressors are things, interactions, or events that are taxing or difficult to deal with. Stressors may be normal and expected or may be unanticipated and surprising. Sometimes they are a daily hassle that you must deal with, and other times they can be major life events...These might be stressors you personally are trying to deal with, you and someone else are trying to cope with, or stressors someone else is trying to cope with that troubles you." This explanation, based on prior definitions offered by Folkman and colleagues (1986), was used to encourage participants to think broadly about their stressors. Participants individually brainstormed stressors they experienced within the previous six months. On a separate sheet of paper, they each wrote down one to five of the brainstormed stressors that they were willing to talk about with their romantic partner during the study and then indicated how stressful each stressor was for them personally.

The RA then had participants sit on a couch for several conversations. First, the romantic pair had a "warm up" conversation, intended to acclimate the participants to the research space. Next, the randomly assigned discloser chose one of the stressors off their list to discuss with the confidant. The pair was instructed to talk about the stressor just as they would at home, and then the pair was left alone in the room to talk privately. After 15 minutes, or earlier if the pair indicated they were done, the pair completed a second conversation in which the roles of discloser and confidant were switched and the procedures were repeated. This study uses data from the first conversation only to minimize practice effects. The stressors discussed in the first stressor conversation included familial and nonfamilial relationships (20.4%), academics and school-related activities (16.7%), work (14.8%), the romantic relationship (11.1%), money (9.3%), living arrangements (7.4%), car and transportation (7.4%), time management (5.6%), the future (5.6%), and health (1.9%); these are similar to stressors experienced by college students in past research (North et al., 2016). Conversations lasted between two and ten minutes.

After the conversations, participants were separated to complete a post-conversation questionnaire, which asked about their own disclosures, relational satisfaction, and several measures unrelated to the current study. Each measure was completed twice: The first half of the post-conversation questionnaire focused on the first stressor conversation and the second half of the questionnaire focused on the second stressor conversation. Each stressor was written at the top of the two halves of the questionnaire to help the participants focus their thoughts on each of the two conversations. After completing the post-conversation questionnaire, participants were debriefed, provided a copy of the informed consent, and thanked for their time.

Participants were compensated with course or extra credit if they were enrolled in a course in which instructors were offering the option (the amount of credit was at the discretion of the instructor but no more than 2% of the course grade); individuals not enrolled in a course offering credit were not compensated.

Measures

Commitment

On the pre-conversation questionnaire, both participants completed Rusbult et al.'s (1998) Global Commitment Scale, which was selected due to its established validity and reliability (Rusbult et al., 1998). Participants responded to the seven items (e.g., "I am committed to maintaining my relationship with my romantic partner.") using a 9-point scale (0 = *Do not agree at all* to 8 = *Agree completely*). After reverse scoring one item, the items were averaged; higher scores indicated greater commitment ($M = 7.89$, $SD = 1.07$, $\alpha = .87$).

Disclosure

On the post-conversation questionnaire, both participants reported their own disclosure during the stressor conversation using Wheelless' (1976) Revised Self-disclosure Scale. The measure was chosen because the items do not specify the topical content one reveals to a partner (Wheelless & Grotz, 1976) making it amenable to participants' conversations regardless of the stressor they discussed. Additionally, the measure allowed participants to report their own disclosures (Wheelless & Grotz, 1976). Participants responded to the items using a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = *Strongly disagree* to 7 = *Strongly agree*). *Amount* was assessed via five items (e.g., "I talked about myself for fairly long periods of time"). Three items were reverse coded then all five items were averaged to obtain a single score; higher scores reflected a greater amount disclosed ($M = 4.10$, $SD = 1.22$, $\alpha = .72$). *Accuracy* was assessed with eight items (e.g., "I always felt completely sincere when I revealed my own feelings and experiences"). After reverse coding four items, the items were averaged, and higher scores reflected greater accuracy ($M = 5.78$, $SD = 0.98$, $\alpha = .83$). Six items captured *valence* (e.g., "On the whole, my disclosures were more positive than negative"). Two items were reverse coded, then the six items were averaged; higher scores indicated more negative disclosures ($M = 3.34$, $SD = 1.47$, $\alpha = .89$).

To assess the degree of correspondence, or the degree of similarity or dissimilarity, between two partners' responses on a measure, a dyadic index is necessary (Kenny et al., 2006). The dyadic index used to assess reciprocity in this study was a dissimilarity score. As Kenny et al. (2006) argued, a dissimilarity index (such as the one used here) assumes a perfect match between the two measures and the size of the dissimilarity score then reflects how different the two scores are. In other words, a dissimilarity score is useful when assuming partners act in highly similar ways (Kenny et al., 2006). Additionally, a dissimilarity score, as used here, is appropriate when the level, or average value across a set of items, is the focus of the investigation (Kenny et al., 2006). We calculated the absolute value of the differences between actors' versus partners' disclosure scores as they each reported for the first stressor conversation (e.g., amount reciprocity was calculated by taking the absolute value of the discloser's self-reported amount minus the confidant's self-reported amount). Thus, *smaller* values reflected *greater reciprocity*.

(or highly similar scores), and *larger* values indicated *less reciprocity* (or greater dissimilarity between scores; Kenny et al., 2006).

Relational satisfaction

On the post-conversation questionnaire, both participants completed the Marital Opinion Questionnaire (Huston et al., 1986) to assess their romantic relational satisfaction after discussing the stressor. Directions asked participants to respond with respect to how they felt about their relationship following the conversation. The scale consisted of eight, 7-point semantic differential items (e.g., “miserable-enjoyable”). A final item provided a global assessment of relational satisfaction immediately after the conversation; response options ranged from “Completely dissatisfied” (1) to “Completely satisfied” (7). The eight items were averaged, with higher scores indicating greater relational satisfaction ($M = 6.13$, $SD = 1.70$, $\alpha = .97$); the eight-item average was strongly correlated with the single global item ($r = .77$, $p < .01$).

Results

Analytical Procedures and Preliminary Analyses

Analyses were conducted using SPSS 24. For all tests, we set alpha to .05 (i.e., when $p < .05$, the null hypothesis was rejected, and the alternative hypothesis was accepted). Preliminary analyses indicated disclosers’ and confidants’ perceived realism of the conversation, as measured by five items on a 7-point Likert-type scale (Afifi & Afifi, 2009; 3 missing cases of perceived realism were replaced with mean scores), was correlated with several variables and, therefore, included as a covariate in analyses.

To test the dyadic effects examined in H_1 , H_2 , RQ_1 , RQ_3 , RQ_5 , and RQ_6 , multi-level regression modeling (MLM) was used; MLM is ideal for interdependent data, an inherent characteristic of dyadic interactions (Kenny et al., 2006). Disclosers’ and confidants’ scores on all continuous variables were grand mean centered.

As a part of preliminary analyses for MLM, we assessed whether role in conversation and sex should be treated as distinguishing factors using maximum likelihood estimation (Kenny et al., 2006). All χ^2 results indicated that adding role or sex as a distinguishing factor failed to significantly improve model fit¹. Because sex was not a distinguishing factor for the heterosexual romantic relationships, we included the same-sex romantic relationships in the analysis, leaving our sample for analysis at 54 dyads. Thus, MLM analyses treated individuals within dyads as indistinguishable. In other words, the models were the same for the discloser as the confidant and for males and females. Therefore, the discloser and confidant are not separated, and instead, we refer to actors (each individual’s self-report of their own commitment, disclosure, and relational satisfaction) and partners (the effects of the romantic partner’s commitment and disclosure). This allowed us to retain statistical power, which was important given the small sample (see Kenny et al., 2006 for discussion). Because disclosers and confidants were not unique, identifiable actors in the analyses (as initially assumed based on existing theory), H_1 and RQ_1 were revised into a single hypothesis (Revised H_1): Relational satisfaction after a stressor conversation will be positively related to actors’ and partners’ own disclosure (a) amount, (b) accuracy, and (c) negativity.

Because of indistinguishability by role and sex, MLM with REML estimation procedures was applied, and we used compound symmetry with correlation parameterization as the residual structure (i.e., the model was constrained to have constant variance and constant covariance across actor and partner). Role in conversation (discloser vs. confidant) and participant sex (male vs. female) were effects coded

¹ When sex was added as a distinguishing factor with disclosure valence as an independent variable and relational satisfaction as the dependent variable, data suggested sex did improve overall model fit. However, the model testing the hypotheses involving these variables failed to converge. Therefore, analyses treated individuals as indistinguishable and compound symmetry with correlation parameterization was used as the residual structure for all three disclosure models.

(due to indistinguishability). Perceived realism of the conversation was covaried in all MLMs by entering both participants' responses as the first two variables in the models (Hayes, 2006). For Revised H₁, RQ₃, RQ₅, and RQ₆ (which test effects of commitment and disclosure on relational satisfaction), three models were run: one for each disclosure dimension (amount, accuracy, and valence). Both actors' and partners' commitment, disclosure, and disclosure reciprocity were included. To test the effects of commitment on disclosure (H₂), three additional MLMs were tested. Each had disclosure amount, accuracy, or valence as the dependent variable.

For RQ₂ and RQ₄, MLM could not be used because reciprocity is a single outcome reflecting a dyadic-level characteristic. To answer RQ₂ (i.e., whether the disclosure in stressor conversations reflected reciprocity) three paired samples *t*-tests were used – one for each dimension of disclosure. To answer RQ₄, which asked if disclosure reciprocity was explained by commitment, three separate hierarchical linear regression models with ordinary least square estimation and non-centered variables were used (one regression model for each disclosure dimension). Actors' and partners' reports of conversation realism were entered as covariates in the first block, then actors' and partners' commitment were entered into the second block of the regression model.

Effects on Relational Satisfaction

Results for Revised H₁, RQ₃, and RQ₆, which tested the actor and partner effects of stressor disclosures and commitment on relational satisfaction, are summarized in Table 1. As the top third of Table 1 indicates, actors' and partners' disclosure amount (Revised H_{1a}) and disclosure amount reciprocity (RQ_{3a}) were unrelated to relational satisfaction. However, actors' commitment statistically significantly contributed to relational satisfaction, answering RQ_{6d} in the affirmative ($\beta = 0.257, p < .01$).

The middle third of Table 1 presents the results for the effects of disclosure accuracy. Disclosure accuracy had statistically significant actor ($\beta = 0.291, p < .01$) and partner ($\beta = 0.176, p < .05$) effects on relational satisfaction, supporting Revised H_{1b}. After controlling for the main effects of actors' and partners' disclosure accuracy, disclosure accuracy reciprocity was statically, negatively related to relational satisfaction ($\beta = -0.368, p < .05$), answering RQ_{3b} in the affirmative.

The bottom third of Table 1 presents the results for disclosure negativity. Revised H_{1c} was supported: As actors' disclosures became more negative, relational satisfaction decreased ($\beta = -0.199, p < .05$). Disclosure negativity reciprocity was unrelated to relational satisfaction (RQ_{3c}). However, actors' commitment was related to an increase in actors' relational satisfaction after the stressor conversation ($\beta = 0.216, p < .05$), answering RQ_{6d} in the affirmative.

Table 1.

Multilevel model results for relational satisfaction as predicted by actor and partner commitment, disclosure dimension, and disclosure dimension discrepancy (i.e., reciprocity).

	<i>b</i>	β	<i>t</i> (<i>df</i>)	Pseudo <i>R</i> ²
Model 1: Disclosure amount				0.118
Intercept	.139	0.000	.000 (49)	
Actor perception of conversational realism	-.030	-.032	-.344 (84)	
Partner perception of conversational realism	.038	.041	.434 (84)	
Actor self-reported commitment	.305	.257**	2.824 (85)	
Partner self-reported commitment	.157	.132	1.455 (85)	
Actor disclosure amount	.026	.027	.259 (65)	
Partner disclosure amount	.115	.121	1.160 (65)	
Disclosure amount reciprocity	-.095	-.093	-.737 (49)	
Model 2: Disclosure accuracy				0.360**
Intercept	.549	0.000**	.000 (49)	
Actor perception of conversational realism	-.117	-.124	-1.465 (92)	
Partner perception of conversational realism	-.042	-0.044	-.524 (92)	
Actor self-reported commitment	.180	0.151	1.873 (93)	
Partner self-reported commitment	.063	0.053	.659 (93)	
Actor disclosure accuracy	.348	0.291**	3.359 (87)	
Partner disclosure accuracy	.212	0.176*	2.041 (87)	
Disclosure accuracy reciprocity	-.582	-0.368**	-3.728 (49)	
Model 3: Disclosure negativity				0.165
Intercept	-.023	0.00	.000 (49)	
Actor perception of conversational realism	-.025	-.026	-.294 (89)	
Partner perception of conversational realism	.043	.045	.505 (89)	
Actor self-reported commitment	.257	.216*	2.390 (85)	
Partner self-reported commitment	.121	.102	1.127 (85)	
Actor disclosure negativity	-.158	-.199*	-2.194 (80)	
Partner disclosure negativity	-.114	-.144	-1.580 (80)	
Disclosure valence reciprocity	.017	.015	.125 (49)	

Notes. *N* = 54 dyads; * *p* < .05, ** *p* < .01.

Disclosure reciprocity

For RQ₂, the paired sample *t*-tests found no statistically significant differences between disclosers' and confidants' disclosure amount ($t(53) = 1.00, p > .05, r = -.202, p > .05$), accuracy ($t(53) = 1.971, p = .053, r = .202, p > .05$), or negative valence ($t(53) = 1.450, p > .05, r = .232, p > .05$). This indicated there were no differences in the amount, accuracy, or negative valence between actors and partners' disclosures during the stressor conversation. However, the correlations between actors' and partners' disclosure showed that amount, accuracy, and valence were not significantly correlated. As a whole, this provides mixed results for RQ₂.

Commitment's Influence on Disclosure

Results for H₂ are presented in Table 2. After controlling for both actor and partner perceived conversation realism, there was no evidence supporting H₂: Actors' and partners' commitment were

unrelated to amount, accuracy, or valence. Because of this, disclosure's mediating effects could not be tested. As such RQ₅ was answered in the negative: Disclosure (a) amount, (b) accuracy, and (c) negativity did not mediate the effect of commitment on relational satisfaction after a stressor conversation for disclosers or confidants.

Three hierarchical linear regression models tested whether commitment was related to disclosure reciprocity (RQ₄). Actors' ($b = .125, se = .209, \beta = .088, p > .05$) and partners' ($b = .109, se = .134, \beta = .117, p > .05$) commitment were unrelated to disclosure amount reciprocity. Actors' ($b = .041, se = .135, \beta = .044, p > .05$) and partners' ($b = -.161, se = .087, \beta = -.264, p > .05$) commitment were unrelated to disclosure accuracy reciprocity. Actors' ($b = .179, se = .194, \beta = .135, p > .05$) and partners' ($b = .043, se = .125, \beta = .050, p > .05$) commitment were unrelated to actors' disclosure negativity reciprocity. Thus, RQ₄ was answered with the null: There was no statistically significant association between commitment and disclosure.

Table 2.

Multilevel model results for disclosure dimension as predicted by actor and partner commitment

	<i>b</i>	β	<i>t</i> (<i>df</i>)	Pseudo <i>R</i> ²
Model 4: Disclosure amount				0.051
Intercept	0.009	0.000	0.000 (51)	
Actor perception of conversational realism	0.050	0.051	0.487 (87)	
Partner perception of conversational realism	0.173	0.174	1.674 (87)	
Actor self-reported commitment	0.119	0.095	0.932 (89)	
Partner self-reported commitment	-0.080	-0.064	-0.629 (89)	
Model 5: Disclosure accuracy				0.172**
Intercept	-0.002	-0.000	-0.00 (51)	
Actor perception of conversational realism	0.226	0.285**	3.063 (100)	
Partner perception of conversational realism	0.099	0.125	1.344 (100)	
Actor self-reported commitment	0.165	0.166	1.806 (101)	
Partner self-reported commitment	0.066	0.069	0.725 (101)	
Model 6: Disclosure valence				0.033
Intercept	-0.003	0.000	0.000 (51)	
Actor perception of conversational realism	-0.102	-0.085	-0.853 (101)	
Partner perception of conversational realism	0.119	0.100	1.000 (101)	
Actor self-reported commitment	-0.059	-0.039	-0.398 (102)	
Partner self-reported commitment	-0.191	-0.127	-1.285 (102)	

Notes. $N = 54$ dyads; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Discussion

Because disclosure helps manage stress and contributes to obtaining social support (e.g., Coates & Winston, 1987; Willems et al., 2020), improving our understanding of disclosure in romantic couples' stressor conversations is important. Therefore, this study examined how individuals' disclosures (Derlega et al., 1993; Greene, 2009; Pennebaker 1995) and commitment (Derlega, et al., 1993; Rusbult & VanLange, 2008) affect romantic couples' relational satisfaction after a stressor conversation. Although disclosers and confidants are indistinguishable from one another, results show that *how* romantic couples disclose during stressor conversations does, indeed, matter. While disclosure amount is unrelated to relational satisfaction after a stressor conversation, actors' and partners' disclosure accuracy and accuracy reciprocity (high similarity) are related to higher relational satisfaction, and actors' (but not partners') disclosure negativity is associated with lower relational satisfaction. Finally, commitment is unrelated to

all three dimensions of disclosure and disclosure reciprocity; however, actors' commitment is positively related to relational satisfaction after the stressor conversation. These results are discussed in turn.

Important to our results is the indistinguishability of the individuals in the stressor conversation. Disclosure theories assume disclosers and confidants are unique and identifiable (Derlega et al., 1993; Greene, 2009; Petronio, 2002) and men and women disclose differently (Dindia & Allen, 1992; Petronio, 2002). The lack of empirical distinguishability between disclosers and confidants and between men and women in this study is consistent with research examining how married couples disclose and respond to stressor talk (Pagani et al., 2019). Our results suggest romantic partners disclose and experience stressor conversations similarly. It is possible the topics discussed (e.g., academics, friends) are stressors for both individuals. Thus, although one person selected the stressor and was assigned to be the discloser, both were disclosers and both were confidants. The lack of distinguishability also may be related to the high commitment levels among the dyads, which on average was 7.89 on a 9-point scale. Elevated commitment levels may create a relational context in which the couples have a shared understanding and sense of shared responsibility towards one another, including one another's stress (i.e., a "what's yours is ours" mentality). Both individuals' beliefs about the long-term nature of the relationship may contribute to a sense that they are "in this together" and create a communal orientation towards stressors.

Another reason for the indistinguishability of the romantic partners (i.e., the discloser and confidant being statistically the same in these conversations) is the degree to which the partners identified the stressor as a communal one. A communal versus individual orientation to a stressor is defined by the extent to which a person experiences a stressor's effects and perceives its severity and implications (Basinger, 2017). A communal, as opposed to individual, orientation changes the way couples communicate and respond to it (Afifi et al., 2020; Lyons et al., 1998). Generally, greater support and shared efforts occur for communal stressors compared to individual stressors (Afifi et al., 2006). Although only one person needs to appraise a stressor as shared for relational partners to be implicated in managing it (Basinger, 2017; Lyons et al., 1998), partners may disagree about whether a stressor is communal or individual, which makes managing the stressor more difficult (Afifi et al., 2006). Due to the small sample size (54 dyads), we could not statistically test the extent to which the stressors discussed were listed by both partners on their recent stressor list and, thus, possibly communal stressors for the pair. The extent to which one's family or friends or schoolwork were communal stressors for the pair likely affected the way the couples disclosed and responded to one another. Future research should explore how partners appraise each other's stressors to better account for each person's roles in the conversation; this may be relevant for related communication processes, such as social support and communal coping, as well as disclosure.

Although disclosers and confidants are indistinguishable in the current study, evidence supports the theoretical contention that *how* individuals disclose explains relational satisfaction (e.g., Greene, 2009; Pennebaker, 1995). Results show that actors' accuracy and valence, partners' accuracy, and dyads' accuracy reciprocity each uniquely contribute to relational satisfaction. Consistent with past research indicating that disclosure quality is important for relational satisfaction (Finkenauer & Hazam, 2000; Greene et al., 2012; Venetis et al., 2018), these findings indicate that when discussing a stressor, how much or how little is disclosed (i.e., amount) is irrelevant; rather, both individuals' disclosure accuracy and valence is vital. In other words, being genuine and earnest as well as positive is relationally satisfying during conversations about stressors. Stressors by definition are situations or experiences a person perceives to be taxing and difficult *and* for which they believe they lack the necessary resources or abilities to manage (Folkman et al., 1986); as such, they can be difficult to disclose because they inherently involve revealing personal weaknesses and vulnerabilities. Being completely forthcoming while also positive during conversations about stressors can be a challenging balancing act. Yet, these results suggest that doing so may be a means of expressing confirmation and support for the relationship and for one another in the face of difficulties, which may be how partners engage in disclosure responsiveness, defined as expressions of understanding, validation, and care (Magsamen-Conrad, 2014).

The current study's results also highlight the importance of dyadic interdependence, with partner and dyadic effects (reciprocity) emerging for disclosure accuracy. Individuals in a romantic relationship

create an interdependent system in which the attributes of one person influence the behaviors or outcomes of the other person (i.e., partner effects; Ackerman et al., 2011; Kenny et al., 2006). These results imply that disclosure accuracy begets disclosure accuracy; the more honest and sincere one person is during a stressor conversation, the more honest and sincere the other will be. Further, the more accurately a romantic partner discloses *and* the more similar a partner's accuracy to one's own disclosure accuracy, the more relationally satisfied one is. This finding is consistent with traditional norms of reciprocity stating that matching a discloser's disclosure is relationally satisfying (e.g., Derlega et al., 1993). However, the partner and dyadic effects only emerged for accuracy – not amount or valence. This suggests accuracy may play an especially important role in romantic couples' disclosures by conveying information about the stressor and one's experiences with it.

Although disclosure accuracy reciprocity is related to relational satisfaction, amount and valence reciprocity are not significant factors explaining relational satisfaction in the current study. This supports the idea that disclosure responses in ongoing relationships prioritize similarity in tone – the degree of vulnerability – through the expression of understanding, validation, and care (Magsamen-Conrad, 2014; Reis & Gable, 2015). Matching disclosure amount or valence may be viewed as changing the subject or disconfirming the other person's experiences. Thus, this pattern of results suggests there may be a felt obligation to match the disclosure's honesty and sincerity but manage disclosure amount and valence depending on the conversational topic and context. Empirically, these results suggest that, when studying multidimensional variables like disclosure, operationalizing each dimension rather than the construct as a whole may provide better insight into the dyadic process. Future research ought to consider identifying the conditions and disclosure characteristics that are best suited for reciprocity.

Prior theory (e.g., investment model, Rusbult & Buunk, 1993) and research (e.g., Givertz et al., 2016; Stafford et al., 2000) indicate commitment is associated with relational satisfaction through how individuals communicate with one another. Results support the direct effect between commitment and relational satisfaction: Actors' (but not partners') commitment prior to a stressor conversation is positively associated with post-conversation relational satisfaction. The actor effect and the absence of a partner effect suggests one's relational commitment is a useful tool for one's own understanding of a relationship but not for the partner's understanding of the relationship. In other words, although dyads' perceptions may be inherently intertwined (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2008; Weigel, 2008), as Givertz et al.'s (2009) concluded, commitment is largely relevant for one's *own* thoughts and feelings about the relationship and *not* a partner's thoughts and feelings about the relationship. Further, commitment and relational satisfaction likely have a recursive relationship – one influencing the other in a cyclical manner. In fact, the investment model argues that relational satisfaction is an important factor predicting commitment (e.g., Rusbult & Buunk, 1993; Le & Agnew, 2003). Thus, future research ought to continue exploring the directional, and possibly recursive, effects of commitment and relational satisfaction.

Although the direct effect is supported in the current study, the indirect effect is not. Neither actor nor partner effects emerged for commitment's influence on disclosure during stressor conversations; therefore, the influence of commitment may not occur through how individuals' disclosed during stressor conversations. These results are unexpected as past research indicates commitment is positively associated with communication behaviors that benefit the long-term maintenance of the relationship (e.g., Sprecher & Hendrick, 2004; Stafford et al., 2010; Weigel & Ballard-Reisch, 2014). As a global characteristic describing the general nature of a relationship, commitment may not be relevant for specific behaviors in a particular conversation. Instead, it may better explain people's perceptions about how they generally behave and communicate (e.g., Ackerman et al., 2011; Weigel, 2008). Alternatively, commitment, as a motivator for acting in ways that show a vested interest in the relationship and partner (Rusbult et al., 1994), may be more salient when disclosures are used strategically to maintain the relationship compared to when it is used managing stressors (e.g., gaining catharsis, problem-solving, or seeking support).

Limitations

These results must be considered within the study's shortcomings. The sample was small with mostly heterosexual couples. Additionally, they were primarily university students living with their parents. Even though university students provide insight into how processes work (Peterson, 2001), the results reflect unique subsample of college-aged and largely college-enrolled individuals. Although couples indicated their living arrangements, marital status was not measured. Dating and married couples' commitment tends to differ (Givertz & Segrin, 2005). Interestingly, however, the romantic couples in the current study all reported high commitment. One's general sense of commitment may be relative – something evaluated based on previous romantic relationship experiences and age, as the married sample in Givertz and Segrin's (2005) study was about 8 years older than their dating sample and the current study's sample. Finally, we did not ask whether the couples had previously discussed the stressor. This is an important caveat because disclosers may have revealed a great amount about the stressor in a prior conversation, leaving less to disclose in the conversation observed in the current study.

Conclusion

Stressors are ubiquitous, and romantic partners are expected to serve as confidants when disclosing difficult personal information (Baxter et al., 2001; Petronio, 2002). Yet, because of the complexity of stressor conversations, our understanding of disclosure during these conversations is partial. The current study examined romantic dyads' perceptions of their stressor conversations to better understand how they disclosed and its influence on relational satisfaction. As a whole, results indicate that neither the level of commitment nor one's role as discloser or confidant matter when thinking about how to disclose during stressor conversations with a romantic partner; rather, both partners should disclose accurately and positively.

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