

TABOO TOPICS IN CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS: AN UPDATE

by

Lauren J. Johnsen

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ABSTRACT

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Lauren Johnsen

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Under the Supervision of Professor Erin Sahlstein Parcell, PhD

This study updates Baxter and Wilmot's (1985) seminal study that generated a list of taboo topics in close relationships. Their original list included seven topic categories: (a) state of the relationship; (b) extra-relationship activity; (c) relationship norms; (d) prior relationships; (e) conflict-inducing topics; (f) negatively-valenced self-disclosure; and (g) other. Participants in the current study reported taboo topics for a friendship and a current (or past) romantic relationship. While the current results did find overlapping topic categories (extra-relationship activity, relationship norms, prior relationships, and other), the topic frequencies reported differed from the original and the topics expanded by nine: (a) sex, (b) hot button topics, (c) health, (d) personal issues, (e) individual past/present/future, (f) death/dying, (g) money/finances, and (h) previous state of the relationship, (i) other. Participants reported not explicitly designating these topics as taboo. Avoiding topics without explicit discussion suggests talking about *if* a topic is taboo *is taboo* in close relationships.

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First published 30 years ago, Baxter and Wilmot's (1985) seminal study sought to shed light on an understudied area: taboo topics in close, interpersonal relationships. Their study was one of the first to examine whether or not topic avoidance was detrimental to relationship development (e.g., Parks, 1982). The aims of their study were to understand what topics are considered taboo and why individuals perceived those topics as such. Prior studies had posited possible categories and reasons that individuals might avoid talking about certain topics (e.g., Goffman, 1967; Kurth, 1970; Rawlins, 1983), but none resulted in lists of specific topics avoided by individuals. Since its publication, Baxter and Wilmot's study has been cited over 300 times (as of April 2015) but not replicated. References to Baxter and Wilmot's work typically acknowledge the existence of topic avoidance and taboo topics in close relationships (e.g., Caughlin & Golish, 2002; DePaulo & Kashy, 1998; Donovan-Kicken, Guinn, Romo, & Ciceraro, 2013; Donovan-Kicken, McGlynn, & Damron, 2012; Malachowski & Dillow, 2011) or focus on specific topics generated from the original list and reasons for avoiding those topics (e.g., Afifi & Burgoon, 1998; Afifi & Guerrero, 1998; Anderson, Kunkel, & Dennis, 2011; Baumgarte, 2002; Bisson & Levine, 2009; Dillow, Dunleavy, & Weber, 2009; Guerrero & Afifi, 1995; Jang & Yoo, 2009; Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004; Roloff & Ifert, 2000; Roloff & Johnson, 2001; Sargent, 2002; Thompson & Vangelisti, 2016; Weger & Emmett, 2009). Furthermore, no existing study since Baxter and Wilmot's has sought to update the taboo topics list in the context of opposite-sex romantic relationships, or platonic relationships. This thesis investigated whether their topics remain taboo, whether any new categories emerged, as well as what topics are taboo in same-sex relationships.

Literature Review

Self-disclosure, or sharing information about yourself with another person (Cozby, 1973), was once assumed to only bring about positive outcomes in a relationship. For example, Altman and Taylor's (1973) influential social penetration theory posits that as individuals spend more time with relationship partners, they are more likely to disclose information about themselves to their partner. This theory states that as relationships become more intimate, individuals disclose more information about themselves, which in turn makes relationships more intimate – and the cycle continues. On the contrary, Parks (1982) found that information control (i.e., a lack of self-disclosure) has positive effects on relational development. Parks was one of the first to note that not sharing information with others can result in more intimate relationships, and aid in relational development, because it potentially protects one or both parties from possible embarrassment.

In an attempt to further investigate a lack of self-disclosure and balance out the existing pro-self-disclosure literature, Baxter and Wilmot (1985) focused on the “taboo topic,” which at the time had yet to be defined. In their seminal study, Baxter and Wilmot noted that a lack of self-disclosure did not indicate the presence of a taboo topic; rather, “a topic is 'taboo' if it is avoided because the person anticipates negative outcomes from its discussion” (p. 254). Their study was the first to not only define taboo topics but also to create a list of taboo topics avoided in close relationships.

Baxter and Wilmot (1985) Study

Baxter and Wilmot (1985) conducted 90 ethnographic interviews with undergraduate students at a small liberal arts college. They asked their participants to list taboo topics for a platonic cross-sex friendship, a romantic-potential cross-sex relationship, or a romantic cross-sex relationship. Participants reported 172 taboo topics that the researchers coded into seven

categories: (a) state of the relationship, (b) extra-relationship activity, (c) relationship norms, (d) prior relationships, (e) conflict-inducing topics, (f) negatively-valenced self-disclosure, and (g) other.

Prior to Baxter and Wilmot's (1985) study, only a few researchers studied a lack of self-disclosure and taboo topics specifically. Rosenfeld (1979) examined why self-disclosure is avoided but he did so without identifying specific topics. Rawlins (1983) studied friendships and found that friends are hesitant to discuss topics that might hurt their friend's feelings, topics that were 'touchy' for their friend, past experiences that they would prefer not to re-live, and topics that would jeopardize their friend's opinion of them. Goffman (1967) argued that embarrassing, humiliating, or painful topics for the self or another person could be avoided, and Kurth (1970) singled out issues of conflict and relationship involvement levels as potential taboo topics. Neither Goffman (1967) nor Kurth (1970) generated an exhaustive list of taboo topics within close relationships. Each taboo topic and the reasons for their avoidance (as reported by Baxter and Wilmot) are discussed below.

State of the relationship. State of the relationship topics involved the explicit discussion of the current or future state of the relationship. The state of the relationship was most often avoided due to relationship destruction, which was most frequently attributed to unequal commitment between the individual and their partner. A second reason was individual vulnerability; one participant noted that if “you leave yourself vulnerable, which I don't like to be, your feelings can get hurt” (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985, p. 261). Talking about her relationship itself was taboo for that individual, and others, due to feeling vulnerable and being open to hurt feelings. A third reason, effectiveness of the tacit mode, basically notes that individuals felt they were not able to communicate their feelings about the relationship, that words “were at best a

weak substitute for what was ‘just understood’” (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985, p. 261). A fourth reason, futility of talk, encompassed the idea that relationships are controlled by forces beyond the partners. Participants felt that they did not have control over the future of their relationship, and that discussing the relationship state would not change where the relationship was going. One participant noted that because the future “was always up in the air... nothing would have been concluded from talking about it” (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985, p. 261). The fifth reason, closeness cueing, was reported primarily by participants in platonic or romantic potential relationships. These participants “view[ed] relationship talk as something that occurs only in very close relationships...[and] the very act of relationship talk would convey greater closeness than they intended” (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985, pp. 261–262).

Extra-relationship activity. Extra-relationship activity refers to networks and activities outside of the relationship. Most respondents expressed concern that discussing extra-relationship activity would have negative relationship implications — anger or jealousy was most anticipated as their partner’s reaction. Another reason was the right to privacy — some participants felt that either they or their partner had a right to “autonomy and privacy outside of their particular relationship” (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985, p. 262). The potential for negative network implications was another reason participants avoided discussing extra-relationship activity. In general, respondents noted that what their partner did with certain others would ‘put them in the middle’ and would be awkward. For example, one participant avoided discussing “things that her boyfriend tells me... we both know that I shouldn’t talk about stuff that her boyfriend says to me in confidence” (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985, p. 262).

Relationship norms. Relationship norms encompassed topics involving explicit discussion of relationship rules (e.g., don’t show affection in public). Two of the main reasons

reported for avoiding talking about relationship norms were the potential for negative relationship implications (e.g., conflict) and embarrassment (e.g., it's embarrassing to talk about sexual preferences). Participants felt that discussing normative behaviors in their relationship would cause an argument. One participant noted that her boyfriend's aggressive behavior was a taboo topic and that bringing it up would just make him defensive. Many topics falling under relationship norms were sexual behavior rules/norms (e.g., birth control), and many participants felt that it would be an embarrassing subject to discuss with their partner (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985).

Prior relationships. Prior relationships topics were those regarding previous relationships with members of the opposite sex. The first reason noted for avoiding prior relationships was the threat it could cause to the current relationship. One participant noted that his girlfriend "wouldn't bring up my old girlfriends because she was afraid I would start thinking about them or start seeing them again" (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985, p. 263). About a third of the participants who listed prior relationships as a taboo topic simply felt that it was irrelevant; one participant noted that talking about past relationships "places the emphasis on the past rather than on the present" (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985, p. 263). Impression management was the third reason individuals avoided prior relationship discussion, indicating that it might result in their partner having a negative image of them. One participant noted that she had been in a lot more relationships than her partner and did not want him to think negatively of her because of it.

Conflict-inducing topics. Conflict-inducing topics were those that pointed out how dissimilar or different the two relationship parties were, resulting in conflict. A broad range of conflict-inducing topics were included in this category, but participants noted that these topics potentially pointed out ways that they were different from their partner, "resulting in an

argument, or the ultimate break-up of the relationship” (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985, p. 264).

Individuals avoided these topics in case the differences were enough to potentially destroy their relationship.

Negatively-valenced self-disclosure. Negatively-valenced self-disclosure referred to topics that were damaging to one’s image or were unpleasant to discuss. While this category included a broad range of topics, the commonality between topics was a negative perception of the participant. Participants reported that maintaining a positive image was their reason for avoiding topics in this category (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985)

Baxter and Wilmot: An Update

In three decades of research, no researcher has aimed to replicate Baxter and Wilmot’s (1985) list or test whether it needs an update, even though this study has been cited hundreds of times. It is likely that new categories for topics could emerge from the data, and some categories could be eliminated altogether, which is why this update is needed. In the original study, Baxter and Wilmot (1985) found topics relating to sex, sexual health, and sexual experiences to be considered taboo by participants, and categorized them under two different categories (prior relationships and relationship norms). In subsequent studies, sexual encounters and sexual history has shown to be taboo (e.g., Afifi & Guerrero, 1998; Anderson et al., 2011; Golish & Caughlin, 2002; Guerrero & Afifi, 1995; Sargent, 2002) so it is likely that topics relating to sex or sexual health will be reported by participants in this study. In the original study, sexual past and sexual health related topics were noted within multiple categories, but should instead be given a new category altogether (e.g., sexual behaviors, sexual health, etc.). Further, some categories should be eliminated from the original list before analyzing data (e.g., conflict inducing topics; negatively-valenced self-disclosure). Noting that a topic would cause a conflict

or make the individual look bad in the eyes of their relational partner conceptually reflect reasons for avoiding specific topics rather than substantive topic categories.

Another consideration is the type of relationships participants report on, and the sex of the participant and relational partner. Baxter and Wilmot (1985) asked participants to report taboo topics with one specific *cross-sex* relationship and then noted the type of relationship (platonic friend, romantic potential, or romantic partner) in their analyses. Given the increased attention given to same-sex romantic relationships, same-sex romantic relationships should be considered in this study.

The original study only included cross-sex friendships, but other scholars have investigated same-sex and cross-sex friendships and found there may be differences found in the types of topics same-sex and cross-sex friends avoid. Werking (1994) found cross-sex friends to be less affective than same-sex friend. Pilkington and Bilbro (1993) reported that cross-sex friends interact less frequently and have shorter interactions than same-sex friends. Buhrke and Fuqua (1987) investigated same-sex and cross-sex friends and found that women feel closer to and feel they know their same-sex friends better than their cross-sex friends; men reported their cross-sex friendships as closer than women. These findings could relate to the amount and kinds of topics (i.e. closer may have fewer topics; relationships with fewer contact may avoid more due to infrequent contact). Based on the issues above, the following research questions are posed:

RQ1: What are taboo topics in the close relationships (same-sex and opposite-sex friendships and romantic relationships) of college students?

RQ2: Why are these topics considered taboo?

RQ3: How does Baxter and Wilmot's (1985) list of taboo topics compare with the list derived in the current study?

Baxter and Wilmot (1985) tested for differences in relationship type and taboo topics by participant sex. While they did not find significant differences between men and women's content and frequency of taboo topics, nor in the participant sex-relationship type interaction, later studies have found differences in taboo topics by sex and relationship type. Guerrero and Afifi (1995) found that adolescents avoided discussing sexual matters with opposite-sex family members; males avoided discussing relationship issues, negative life experiences, dating experiences, and friendships more than females; and female dyads avoided topics the least. Hacker (1981) investigated self-disclosure in same-sex and cross-sex friendship dyads. Women and men were equally as likely to disclose in their same-sex friendships, but men were more likely to disclose information about themselves in their cross-sex friendships. Afifi and Guerrero (1998) also compared same-sex and cross-sex friends and found that individuals avoided discussing negative life experiences and relationship issues with males more than females; cross-sex friends avoided disclosing issues related to dating and sexual experiences more than with same-sex friends.

Due to the fact that subsequent studies found differences tied to sex and relationship type, it is likely that the current study would also yield similar findings. Therefore, the following research question is posed:

RQ4a: Do taboo topics differ by participant sex and relationship type?

RQ4b: Do taboo topics differ between same-sex and cross-sex friends?

Baxter and Wilmot (1985) intended to test if reasons differed by participant sex and relationship type, but small cell sizes prohibited these analyses. The current dataset should have enough cases for friendships and romantic relationships in order to conduct an analysis of differences by participant sex and relationship type. Afifi and Guerrero (1998) found some sex

differences in the reasons topics were avoided. Specifically, they found that participant unresponsiveness, or a perception of participant unresponsiveness (i.e., “a feeling that the partner will be unable or unwilling to provide the necessary advice or support,” [p. 236]) was more likely a reason why males avoided topics with other males, and found that females were more likely to note information-based motivations (i.e., “wish to control information or receive information of high quality,” [p. 244]) as a reason for avoiding topics. They also found that individuals avoided topics for self-protection. Guerrero (1997) and Leary, Downs, and Radford-Davenport (1993) found that individuals were most concerned with managing their own identity with cross-sex friends than with same-sex friends; suggesting that individuals may report different reasons for topic avoidance with same-sex and cross-sex friends. Therefore, the following research question is posed:

RQ5a: Do reasons for having taboo topics differ by participant sex and relationship type?

RQ5b: Do reasons for having taboo topics differ between same-sex and cross-sex friends?

Another line of research in this area has been in the dynamics of taboo topic negotiation within close relationships, and whether or not individuals explicitly decided that a given topic was taboo. Roloff and Ifert (1998) investigated implications of explicitly declaring topics as taboo, and found that explicit agreements are more likely when individuals declare the topics “unimportant to their relationship, but are less likely when the topic is perceived to be relationally harmful” (p. 191). While their study did not note specific topics, it did shed light on the broader categories of topics that individuals explicitly decided were “off limits.” I want to extend this line of research with the following research question:

RQ6: What percentage of taboo topics have been explicitly declared as taboo within these relationships?

Subsequent studies have investigated the original topics (e.g., Afifi & Burgoon, 1998; Afifi & Guerrero, 1998; Bisson & Levine, 2009; Guerrero & Afifi, 1995; Knoblach & Theune, 2004) and reported different topics as taboo (e.g., Afifi & Burgoon, 1998; Afifi & Guerrero, 1998; Anderson et al., 2011; Guerrero & Afifi, 1995; Golish & Caughlin, 2002; Knoblach & Theune, 2004; Sargent, 2002). Baxter and Wilmot's (1985) study was originally published. This indicates that over the years, the kinds of taboo topics that individuals avoid discussing have changed and some have remained the same. The original study focused solely on cross-sex close relationships, the present study includes both same-sex and cross-sex relationships; scholars have found differences in the kinds of topics and reasons individuals related to relationship type and sex (e.g., Afifi & Burgoon, 1998; Afifi & Guerrero, 1998; Guerrero & Afifi, 1995; Golish & Caughlin, 2002) so it is likely that this study will follow suit and find differences. The original Baxter and Wilmot (1985) study was not able to test for sex and relationship type differences due to a low number of cases, and the present study increased the sample size in order to be able to test for differences by sex and relationship type. Given that there are likely to be changes to the types of topics reported, as well as possible differences between topic type and reasons for sex and relationship type, an update of the original Baxter and Wil mot (1985) study is warranted.

Method

Participants

In total, 178 surveys were received, 30 surveys were unusable (i.e., noting no topics as taboo, leaving all questions blank, or low closeness measure) and eliminated, resulting in 148 usable surveys. One hundred and eleven participants self-identified as female (75%), 35

participants self-identified as male (23.6%), and two participants (1.4%) did not disclose; participants ranged in age from 18-59 years ($M = 21.5$ years, $SD = 5.5$ years).

Out of the 148 participants, 136 participants reported a total of 153 topics for a platonic friendship ($M = 1.1$ topics per participant); 20.9% ($k = 32$ topics) were explicitly declared taboo, while 79.1% (121 topics) were not. Eighty-six participants (63.2%) reported on a female friend, 48 participants (35.3%) reported on a male friend and two participants (1.5%) did not disclose the gender of their friend. Ninety-one participants (66.9%) reported on a same-sex friendship, 43 participants (31.6%) reported on a cross-sex friendship, and two participants (1.5%) did not disclose whether or not it was a same-sex or cross-sex friendship. Friendships ranged in length from three months to 32 years ($M = 61.8$ months, $SD = 65$ months).

Seventy-six participants reported 89 topics ($M = 1.2$ topics per participant) for a current romantic relationship (casual dating = 7; serious dating = 62; married/life partner = 3; other = 4); 42.7% ($k = 38$ topics) were explicitly declared taboo, and 57.3% ($k = 51$ topics) were not. Ten participants noted their romantic partner was female, 65 participants noted their romantic partner was male, and one participant did not disclose their partner's gender; relationships ranged in length from one month to 13 years ($M = 24.8$ months, $SD = 29.2$). Seventy-four participants (97.2%) reported on a cross-sex romantic relationship, two participants reported on a same-sex romantic relationship (2.8%).

Thirty-four participants reported a total of 41 topics ($M = 1.2$ topics per participant) for a recent (within the last two years) romantic relationship (casual dating = 11; serious dating = 23); 57.1% ($k = 24$ topics) were explicitly declared taboo, and 42.9% ($k = 18$) topics were not. Twelve participants noted their romantic partner was female and 22 participants noted their romantic partner was male; relationships ranged in length from 1 month to 6 years ($M = 16.8$, SD

= 17.14 months). Thirty-two participants (94.1%) reported on a cross-sex romantic relationship, and two participants (5.9%) reported on a same-sex romantic relationship.

Procedures

After IRB approval was granted, participants were recruited from a 100-level communication course at a large, Midwestern university via an email that outlined the purpose, possible risks and benefits, and a description of the survey (See Appendix A). The survey took no more than 30 minutes to complete, and participants earned extra credit for participating. An alternative assignment was offered to participants if they wished to receive extra credit but could not or did not want to complete the survey (see Appendix B).

Survey

After the initial informed consent page (see Appendix C), the participants completed the online survey via Qualtrics (see Appendix D). At the start of each question block participants were provided Baxter and Wilmot's (1985) definition of taboo topics (i.e., “a topic is 'taboo' if it is avoided because the person anticipates negative outcomes from its discussion,” p. 254). Survey questions were modeled after Anderson et al.'s (2011) survey about past sexual experiences as a taboo topic. The first block of questions asked participants to think about a specific, close platonic friend. Participants then reported demographic information and answered seven 7-point Likert-type questions measuring closeness, modified from Vangelisti and Caughlin (1997) (e.g., “I like my friend,” “my friend and I are close,” “my friend and I talk about personal things”). Reliability for this measure is acceptable ($\alpha = .95$); any participant that reported satisfaction below 28 was excluded from analysis. Participants were then asked to list up to six taboo topics for their close platonic friend, what could happen if the topics were discussed, and whether or not this topic was explicitly declared taboo (if not, participants were asked to explain

how they knew the topic was taboo with their friend. If participants were currently in a romantic relationship (or had been in one in the last two years) they then answered the same set of questions for their current or most recent romantic partner (see Appendix A). Reliability for the closeness measure is acceptable for current ($\alpha = .97$) and past ($\alpha = .93$) romantic relationships; any participant that reported satisfaction below theoretical middle point of the satisfaction measures (28) was excluded from analysis to ensure that participants were reporting on a close relationship.

Data Analysis

Once all of the responses were received and disqualifying answers had been discarded, data were coded by the researcher and an undergraduate research assistant. First, half of the data was archived for analysis at a later point. Next, the first half of the taboo topics for friendships and romantic relationships were coded using the original list generated by Baxter and Wilmot (1985), which was modified, given that two topics were determined to be reasons and not substantive categories (i.e., the original topics of negatively-valenced self-disclosure and conflict-inducing topics were eliminated). Any topics that could not be categorized into the modified list were placed into the catch-all “other” category.

The undergraduate research assistant was trained on the initial four codes (state of the relationship, extra-relationship activity, prior relationships, and other), and both the researcher and the research assistant coded the first half of the topics for friendships and romantic relationships. Once an acceptable level of intercoder reliability was reached (*Cohen's Kappa* = .80), the topics in the first half of the friendship and romantic relationships in “other” were re-categorized by the researcher using the constant comparison method to create new categories. The researcher took the first topic listed, categorized it, then compared the second to the first; if

it was deemed similar it was put into the first category, if not a new category was created, and this was done for every topic reported that did not fit into the original category list (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The undergraduate research assistant was then trained on the new codes, and coded the “other” topics to check for intercoder reliability in the first half of the topics for friendships and romantic relationships, and an acceptable level was reached for both relationship types (*Cohen’s Kappa* = 1.00). Once the topic categories were finalized, the undergraduate research assistant coded the archived topics.

After all topics were categorized, and fewer than 10% of the topics were noted as “other,” the reasons were analyzed using the same procedure as the topic coding. The first half of the reasons for friendships and romantic relationships were coded using the original reasons noted within the original topic categories, along with an “other” category. The undergraduate research assistant and the researcher independently coded the first half of the reasons for both friendships and romantic relationships, and an acceptable level of intercoder reliability was achieved (*Cohen’s Kappa* = .82). Next, the researcher used the reasons coded into “other” to elaborate the existing coding scheme using the constant comparison method. Then, the research assistant coded the “other” reasons using the new scheme. Once an acceptable level of intercoder reliability was reached (*Cohen’s Kappa* = .80), the archived reasons were then coded by the researcher. For both topics and reasons, any coding differences were resolved by the researcher for inclusion in the final dataset.

Thirteen topic categories (state of the relationship, previous state of the relationship, relationship norms, prior relationships, extra-relationship activity, health, individual’s past/present/future, personal issues, hot button topics, sex, finances/money, death/dying, and other) and 14 reason categories (negative relational implications, relationship destruction, threat

to current relationships, negative network implications, effectiveness of the tacit mode, inappropriate for relationship type, change in relationship status, protect self/other from negative feelings/emotions, embarrassment, negatively-valenced self-disclosure/impression management, individual vulnerability, right to privacy, irrelevance of past, and other) emerged from the current dataset (See Tables 1 & 2). Given the large number of topic and reason primary codes, the researcher created second-level codes for both lists to conduct more robust tests when answering RQ4 and RQ5. The primary-level taboo topic types were collapsed into four second-level categories: (a) relational talk (state of the relationship, previous state of the relationship, relationship norms, and prior relationships); (b) individual talk (extra-relationship activity, health, individual's past/present/future, and personal issues); (c) emotional talk (hot button topics, sex, finances/money, and death/dying); and other. The primary-level reasons codes were collapsed into three second-level categories: (a) relational reasons (negative relational implications, relationship destruction, threat to current relationships, negative network implications, effectiveness of the tacit mode, inappropriate for relationship type, and change in relationship status); (b) individual reasons (protect self/other from negative feelings/emotions, embarrassment, negatively-valenced self-disclosure/impression management, individual vulnerability, right to privacy, and irrelevance of past); and (c) other.

Results

RQ1 and RQ2

The first research question asked what topics were considered taboo for same-sex and cross-sex friends and romantic relationships, the second research questions asked why those topics are considered taboo. Following the coding procedures noted previously, nine new

categories emerged from the data, resulting in 13 total categories of taboo topics and 14 reason categories emerged.

Extra-relationship activity. The most frequently reported topic ($k = 55$, 19.5% of topics) was extra-relationship activity. This category referred to a relationship or activity outside of the relational dyad. Participants across both relational types (platonic friend and current or past romantic partner) reported a variety of outside relationships as taboo, such as family (e.g., my mother, his relationship with his dad, my dislike for his sister), friends/coworkers, and one participant noted that having feelings for other people or cheating was a taboo topic with their current romantic partners. There were five reasons participants reported for why extra-relationship activity was a taboo topic: (a) negative relational implications; (b) protect self/others from negative feelings/emotions; (c) potential for negative network implications; (d) right to privacy; and (e) negatively-valenced self-disclosure/impression management.

Negative relational implications. Negative relational implications included one or both partners feeling jealous, or relational partners having a conflict or argument. Participants mainly noted they would disagree or argue if a specific relationship outside of the dyad was brought up. One participant reported that bringing up their friend's dad would result in an argument and they "would stop talking for a day or two." Another participant reported discussing the ways her friend raises their children was taboo, and she worried that discussing this topic would result in her friend getting angry at her and possibly even ending the relationship.

Protect self/others from negative feelings/emotions. This reason refers to participants avoiding a topic because talking about it might upset their partner or themselves. Participants reported that they or their partner might feel sad, upset, irritated, awkward, and uncomfortable if the topic was discussed.

Potential for negative network implications. Topics were also avoided due to the *potential for negative network implications*, which meant talking about it could damage or affect a relationship outside of the one with their partner or friend. One participant described how discussing family issues with their romantic partner could get back to their family and upset them. Another participant shared that discussing roommates' behavior with their friends was a taboo topic because it could get back to the roommates and affect those relationships.

Right to privacy. Right to privacy referred to participants recognizing their partner as having the right to autonomy outside of their relationship, with one participant noting that discussing his friend's romantic partner would seem as if he were overstepping and discussing something that was not his business.

Negatively-valenced self-disclosure/impression management. The last reason was *negatively-valenced self-disclosure/impression management*, which referred to one partner judging the other, or one partner looking bad in the eyes of the other. For example, one participant reported avoiding discussions about their romantic partner with their friend because the friend might judge them.

Sex. The second most frequently reported taboo topic was Sex ($k = 47$, 16.6% of topics). This category covered a range of topics such as sexual intercourse and other sexual activity, specific current or past sexual activity/partners, and pornography viewing. For example, one participant noted that "having a threesome, bringing another guy into the bedroom" was a taboo topic for their current romantic partner. Participants reported four reasons that topics related to sex were taboo: (a) protect self/other from negative feelings/emotions; (b) negative relational implications; (c) negatively-valenced self-disclosure/impression management; and (d) potential change in relational status.

Protect themselves or their partner from negative feelings/emotions. The main reason participants avoided discussing sex and sexual topics was to *protect themselves or their partner from negative feelings/emotions*. Participants noted discussing topics related to sex could potentially make them uncomfortable, or even hurt by their partner's past sexual relationships. A few participants noted that discussing pornography was a taboo topic with their current romantic partner, and all worried it would offend or hurt their partner. For example, one participant noted their romantic partner might feel as if they are not good enough if they discussed pornography.

Negative relational implications. Some participants noted discussing sex would have *negative relational implications*, for example they would argue or have some sort of falling out from the discussion of topics related to sex.

Negatively-valenced self-disclosure/impression management. Some participants worried their friend or romantic partner would judge them or view them negatively based on their past or current sexual relationships (i.e., *negatively-valenced self-disclosure/impression management*).

Potential change in relational status. One participant worried that discussing sex with their friend could lead to a *potential change in relational status*, noting "we might start to cross a line between being friends and wanting more."

Hot button topics. The third most reported taboo topic category was Hot Button Topics ($k = 46$, 16.3% of topics), which covered a range of societal debates or cultural ideals. Religion and politics were the most reported topics in this category. Topics such as race, gender issues, and other debates was also reported as taboo. Participants reported five main reasons for avoiding the discussion of hot button topics: (a) negative relational implications; (b) protection

of self/other from negative feelings/emotions; (c) negatively-valenced self-disclosure/impression management; (d) individual vulnerability; and (e) effectiveness of the tacit mode.

Negative relational implications. The majority of participants reported a hot button topic was taboo because it could lead to *negative relational implications*. Most people noted that they disagree with one another on the specific cultural issue, and a conflict or argument would arise from bringing up that specific topic, some participants even noted their friend might get so angry they would not speak with them for a few days.

Protecting themselves and their partner from negative emotions/feelings. Another reason for avoiding these topics was to protect themselves or their friend from getting upset or hurt. Participants noted their friend or romantic partner would be uncomfortable discussing hot button topic or the discussion would be awkward.

Negatively-valenced self-disclosure/impression management. One participant, who mentioned that the friend they reported on was also their boss, and they did not want their political views affecting their boss's perception of them (i.e. *negatively-valenced self-disclosure/impression management*).

Individual vulnerability. Participants reported *individual vulnerability* (feeling exposed) when they stated they would feel targeted if the subject of religion were discussed.

Effectiveness of the tacit mode. This reason referred to not needing to discuss a topic because it was simply known, and specifically noted that they know their friend is wrong without needing to discuss it. Other participants noted knowing their partner's or friend's beliefs without having to discuss it, and that discussing it would not change how they or their partner views the topic.

Prior relationships. This category covered topics relating to relationships in the past that did not occur between the participant and the individual they reported on, was the next most frequently reported topic ($k = 46$, 16.3% of topics). Most participants simply listed some version of the term “past relationships,” (e.g., exes, ex partners) while one participant noted a specific ex-partner. Participants avoided the discussion of prior relationships for five reasons: (a) negative relational implications; (b) threat to the relationship; (c) protect self/other from negative feelings/emotions; (d) negatively-valenced self-disclosure/impression management; and (e) inappropriate for relational type.

Negative relational implications. Participants mainly felt that bringing up past relationships (almost entirely romantic relationships) or specific individuals would result in an argument or fight (i.e., *negative relational implications*).

Threat to current relationship. Similarly, some participants felt talking about prior relationships would threaten their current relationship, meaning they would break up as a direct result of discussing a past relationship, and some felt that bringing up the past would bring up old feelings that might threaten their current relationship.

Negatively-valenced self-disclosure/impression management. Bringing up past relationships would potentially lead to a friend or current romantic partner judging them or viewing them negatively for their past (i.e., *negatively-valenced self-disclosure/impression management*).

Inappropriate for relational type. One of the participants noted that discussing exes was something that should be done with friends and not a romantic partner (i.e., *inappropriate for relational type*).

Health. Health involved topics related to either the participant's or their partner's physical or mental health ($k = 22$, 7.8% of topics). Participants reported topics such as weight problems, alcohol addiction, mental health issues, eating habits, and "TMI" health information. Two reasons were noted for avoiding the discussion of physical or mental health: (a) protect self/other from negative feelings/emotions; and (b) negative relational implications.

Protect self/other from negative feelings/emotions. Participants mainly felt that bringing up personal health issues (either their partner's or their own) would make one or both partners upset, uncomfortable, or even offended and defensive.

Negative relational implications. Other participants reported bringing up physical or mental health topics would result in an argument or some sort of conflict that could harm the relationship.

State of the relationship. The State of the Relationship involved the explicit discussion of the current or future state of the relationship ($k = 12$, 4.3% of topics). Most topics reported in this category were from participants reporting on a current romantic relationship, and topics included things such as marriage, having kids, and moving in together. One participant shared that the uncertainty of their partner's military future and how it may affect their future relationship was a taboo topic. Reasons for avoiding the state of the relationship included: (a) negative relational implications; (b) relationship destruction; (c) effectiveness of the tacit mode; (d) individual vulnerability; and (e) protect self/other from negative emotions/feelings.

Negative relational implications. Others felt that discussing the current or future state of the relationship could result in an argument or conflict. One participant explained questioning the

state of the relationship might make their current romantic partner feel that the “relationship is unwanted” which is why they avoided discussing this topic.

Relationship destruction. Some participants reporting on a current romantic relationship felt that discussing where the relationship could go in the future (e.g., marriage or moving in together) would result in the relationship ending.

Effectiveness of the tacit mode. Another participant felt that discussing the future was not worthwhile, as it was just understood that both partners preferred to live and focus on the moment.

Protect self/other from negative feelings/emotions. One participant reported their current romantic partner felt guilty about the uncertainty of their future in the military and how it may or may not affect the future of the relationship, so in order to avoid their partner feeling guilty, the topic is avoided.

Previous state of the relationship. A subcategory of State of the Relationship was Previous State of the Relationship ($k = 7$, 2.5% of topics), which involved the discussion of an event or prior relationship status (i.e., participant and friend used to date) that occurred in the past between the participant and the relational partner they reported on. For example, participants noted they used to date their now platonic friend and discussing that period of time of their relationship is now considered off-limits. Other participants reported a conflict or fight that occurred in the past that altered their current relationship status and perhaps even made their future uncertain. Participants reported three reasons for avoiding the discussing of the previous state of their relationship: (a) protect self/other from negative feelings/emotions; (b) irrelevance of the past; and (c) negative relational implication.

Protect self/other from negative feelings/emotions. In order to avoid feeling awkward or uncomfortable about something that happened in the past (i.e., *protect self/other from negative feelings/emotions*), participants avoided the discussion of topics such as “what happened last year when we moved in together” or the period of time that they used to date.

Irrelevance of the past. Some participants felt it was not necessary to discuss their past, with one participant noting it was something they have already worked through and moved on from negative events in their past (i.e., *irrelevance of the past*).

Negative relational implications. Bringing up past events could also lead to *negative relational implications*, such as arguing or getting angry with one another.

Individual’s past/present/future. This category referred to topics or events that occurred in one of the individuals’ lives (either the participant or the relational partner being reported on) that only affected the individual ($k = 13$, 4.6% of topics). This category included topics such as “their adoption,” career choices, going to different colleges, and going out partying/drinking. Two reasons for avoiding these topics were reported: (a) negative relational implications; and (b) protect self/other from negative feelings/emotions.

Negative relational implications. Participants reported that bringing up topics in their individual lives could result in arguments (i.e., *negative relational implications*). For example, participants reported that going to a different college than their friend or recent romantic partner made them feel jealous of their partners’ new, separate lives, and so they avoided discussing things they were doing on their own.

Protect self/other from negative feelings/emotions. Participants also avoided the discussion of events in the past/present/future to *protect self/other from negative*

feelings/emotions. Participants who reported particularly negative events from their past said that discussing these topics would make them upset or uncomfortable. One participant shared that they (and their current romantic partner) felt unhappy with choices they had each made in the past and preferred not to discuss those events with each other. Another participant noted their romantic partner could be doing better in school if they just tried a little harder, but she felt that bringing this up would make him uncomfortable or even defensive.

Personal issues. Personal Issues were reported across all three relationship types and covered a variety of topics that affected either the individual or partner (e.g., legal troubles, grades, and tattoos) ($k = 11$, 3.9% of topics). Three reasons were reported for avoiding personal issues: (a) protect self/other from negative feelings/emotions; (b) negative relational implications; and (c) right to privacy.

Protect self/others from negative feelings/emotions. Participants felt that discussing topics such as grades, or anything personal, would result in their friend or romantic partner being uncomfortable, upset, or defensive.

Negative relational implications. Other participants felt their relational partner might get angry at them, or that an argument could occur if a personal topic was brought up.

Right to privacy. Participants also reported that asking their partners about personal issues was inappropriate because they had a right to private information, and they would feel like they were being intrusive in their partners' lives.

Death or dying. Topics categorized as Death or Dying were reported only for platonic friend or a current romantic partner ($k = 7$, 2.5% of topics). Some participants reported that the

idea of death was a taboo topic, while others noted talking about specific people who had died (e.g., partner's child, sibling, or parent) was taboo.

Protect self/other from negative feelings/emotions. The only reason participants noted for avoiding discussing the concept of death, or the death of a specific person was to protect themselves or their partner from negative emotions. For example, one participant noted that discussing the death of a friend's child made them both upset and angry at the circumstances surrounding the child's death.

Money/finances. Money/Finances covered anything related to money, though it was not always clear if it was an issue specific to the participant, their partner, or both ($k = 7$, 2.5% of topics). Most participants' responses in this category were vague (i.e., they listed topics such as "money," "money issues," "finances," or "family financial issues"), but some participants specifically noted income or their partner's spending habits as a taboo topic in their relationship. Reasons for avoiding these topics were: (a) protect self/other from negative feelings/emotions; (b) negatively-valenced self-disclosure; and (c) negative relational implications.

Protect self/other from negative feelings/emotions. Participants mainly felt discussing money would make them uncomfortable (i.e., *protect self/other from negative feelings/emotions*).

Negatively-valenced-self disclosure/impression management. Some participants reported that discussing their own money issues could result in their partners feeling bad for them and viewing them negatively (i.e., *negatively-valenced-self disclosure/impression management*).

Negative relational implications. One participant noted that their past romantic partner valued money more than they did, and discussing money usually resulted in a fight, and other participants noted that they would argue about money (i.e., *negative relational implications*).

Relationship Norms. Relationship norms, or specific discussion of relationship rules, was the least reported topic across participants ($k = 4$, 1.4% of topics). Participants citing this taboo topic reported, for example, in their platonic friendships discussing things they disliked about each other was taboo. A participant wrote that pointing out a partner's "loose thread" or other minor flaw equated to "declaring her a mess and finding fault with her" which in turn hurt her feelings. Discussing or comparing a current romantic partner to others (in terms of personality, or appearance) was also reported as a taboo topic. Two reasons were given for avoiding relational norms: (a) negative relational implications; and (b) embarrassment.

Negative relational implications. Participants felt that discussing things like other people (and comparing their characteristics to a romantic partner) or specific things both partners disliked about each other would result in a fight, or jealousy (i.e., *negative relational implications*).

Embarrassment. Embarrassment was also reported as a reason for not discussing relationship norms. For example, the participant who noted discussing flaws in their partner's appearance was taboo, and felt that bringing up those flaws would cause their partner to feel extremely embarrassed or self-conscious.

RQ3

The third research question asked how Baxter and Wilmot's (1985) original list of taboo topics in close relationships compared to the one derived from the current study. Baxter and

Wilmot (1985) reported seven categories of taboo topics in close relationships: (a) state of the relationship; (b) extra-relationship activity; (c) relationship norms; (d) prior relationships; (e) conflict-inducing topics; (f) negatively-valenced self-disclosure; and (g) other. Prior to data analysis, conflict-inducing topics and negatively-valenced self-disclosure were deemed reasons for avoiding topics rather than categorical labels for specific taboo topics. A modified version of the list was used when initially coding topics: (a) state of the relationship; (b) extra-relationship activity; (c) relationship norms; and (d) other. These four categories were present in the current dataset but reported frequencies differed from Baxter and Wilmot's results (See Table 3).

State of the relationship. Baxter and Wilmot reported that the state of the relationship was the most frequently reported taboo topic type, representing 34.4% ($k = 59$) of all topics reported. In the current study, topics related to the state of the relationship was the sixth most reported topic, representing only 4.3% of the total reported topics ($k = 12$). An additional subcategory was added under state of the relationship (i.e., previous state of the relationship) – an additional 7 reported topics (2.5% of all topics reported) – bringing the total topics categorized as state of the relationships up to 20 topics (6.8% of the total).

Extra-relationship activity. Baxter and Wilmot reported extra-relationship activity as the second most frequent taboo topic type ($k = 27$, 15.7% of total taboo topics). In the present study extra-relationship activity was the most reported taboo topic ($k = 56$, representing 19.5% of the total taboo topics).

Relationship norms. The third most frequently reported taboo topic reported by Baxter and Wilmot was relationship norms ($k = 22$, 12.8% of the total taboo topics), which in the present study was the least reported taboo topic type ($k = 4$, 1.4% of the total taboo topics).

Prior relationships. Baxter and Wilmot reported prior relationships as the fourth most frequently reported taboo topic type ($k = 22$, 7.8% of the total taboo topics); prior relationships topics were similarly situated in the present study ($k = 41$, 14.5% of total taboo topics report) and was also noted as the fourth most frequently reported taboo topic.

The majority of the topics ($k = 162$, 57.4% of total) were placed in categories not found in the original study that were created throughout the coding process. An additional nine categories emerged from the data, resulting in a total of 13 taboo topic categories (sex, hot button topics, health, individual's past/present/future, personal issues, death/dying, money/finances, and other) (see Table 1 & 2).

RQ4 and RQ5

Research question 4a asked whether or not there were differences in topics reported by sex and relationship type; 4b asked if there were differences between same-sex and cross-sex friends. Research question 5a asked whether or not there were differences in reasons reported by sex and relationship type; 5b asked whether there were differences in reasons reported by same-sex and cross-sex friends. A series of factorial ANOVAs were conducted using gender and relationship type as fixed variables and topic frequencies and reason frequencies as dependent variables. No significant differences between women and men were found for topics or reasons, and no significant differences were found between same-sex and cross-sex friends for topics or reasons. There were some significant differences for relationship types for both topics and reasons, discussed below (See Tables 4 & 5).

There was a significant difference for relational talk topics ($F_{(2, 240)} = 14.72, p < .01$), and post hoc tests reflected significant differences ($p < .01$) between platonic friends ($M = .21, SD =$

.45) and current romantic partners ($M = .60, SD = .60$). There was also a significant difference between current romantic partners ($M = .60, SD = .60$) and past romantic partners ($M = .31, SD = .47$) for relational talk topics ($p < .05$). Further, there was a significant difference by relationship type for emotional talk ($F_{(2, 240)} = 5.48, p < .05$), and post hoc tests reflected significant differences between platonic friends ($M = .53, SD = .56$) and current romantic partners ($M = .28, SD = .53$) ($p < .05$). There were no significant differences between relationship types for individual talk or other talk.

The data also reflect some differences in reason frequencies based on relationship type. There were significant differences between relationship types detected for relationship reasons ($F_{(2, 240)} = 4.54, p < .01$), in particular between platonic friends ($M = .46, SD = .65$) and past romantic partners ($M = .83, SD = .75$) ($p < .01$). There was a significant difference between relationship types for individual reasons ($F_{(2, 240)} = 5.56, p < .01$). Follow up tests detected a significant difference between platonic friends ($M = .63, SD = .59$) and current romantic ($M = .43, SD = .57$) ($p < .05$) as well as past romantic partners ($M = .31, SD = .47$) ($p < .01$). There were no significant differences between relationship type and other reasons.

Research question 6 asked if there were any differences between same-sex friends and cross-sex friends in terms of taboo topic types or reasons. A factorial ANOVA was conducted and found no significant differences between same-sex and cross-sex friends in terms of topics or reasons.

RQ6

Research question 7 asked which topics were explicitly declared taboo. Participants were asked to report whether or not a topic had been explicitly declared taboo in their relationship. Of

the 286 topics reported, 65.7% ($k = 188$) were reported as not being explicitly deemed as such, while 34.3% ($k = 98$) were explicitly declared taboo. In other words the majority of taboo topics were merely assumed to be taboo between participants and their friends or romantic partners (see Table 6).

Discussion

Comparing the present study to the original study conducted 30 years ago by Baxter and Wilmot (1985) has revealed some interesting differences between the kinds of topics reported as taboo then and now. Some categories were reported more frequently, others less, and some did not appear in the current dataset, paving the way for new categories to emerge.

State of the relationship (with an added subcategory of previous state of the relationship) made up 15% of the total reported topics in the present study, in contrast to 34.4% of Baxter and Wilmot's (1985) data. Their results extended Wilmot's (1980) finding that explicit relationship metacommunication was an infrequently reported phenomenon due to being intentionally avoided (Cline, 1979). The present study's finding of state of the relationship talk being not as prevalent suggests that this kind of relational metacommunication may no longer be a dominant taboo topic among close relationships. Participants were able to report as many as six topics, but most only reported one or two, likely the most important (or obvious?) one. Relational metacommunication may still be a taboo topic in close relationships, but in the current study it may not have been the most dominant taboo topic, since it was not reported as frequently. Future research could investigate how relational partners feel about specific kinds of metacommunication to see if it is still as dominant a taboo topic.

Extra-relationship activity was reported more frequently in the present study than by Baxter and Wilmot's (1985) participants, suggesting that discussing outside relationships is just as if not more taboo than when the original study was conducted. Participants noted different kinds of outside relationships as taboo, however, topics related to an outside relationship were all coded as "extra-relationship activity," topics were not further categorized by specific outside relationship type (e.g., family member, or other friend). Future research could investigate whether or not a specific kind of relationship is taboo (i.e., parent, past romantic partner, coworker, etc.), and if the relational context plays a role (i.e., discussing a boyfriend's is being taboo vs. discussing a friend's parent is taboo).

Baxter and Wilmot (1985) reported relationship norms as their third most reported taboo topic (12.8%), while the present study found it to be the least reported taboo topic (1.4%). This finding may suggest that discussing norms within a relationship is more acceptable, though it may also be due to participants reporting a small number of topics. Participants could report up to six topics, but most reported one. They likely reported the most important taboo topic. This could suggest that even if relationship norms is considered a taboo a topic, it is not as important or dominant a taboo topic as it was in the original study, and could warrant further investigation.

Beyond the original categories, nine new categories emerged in the present study (sex, hot button topics, health, individual's past/present/future, personal issues, death/dying, and money/finances). Consistent with previous studies (Afifi & Guerrero, 1998; Anderson et al., 2011; Guerrero & Afifi, 1995; Sargent, 2002) in which sex and sexual topics were found to be taboo topics, sex was the second most frequently reported topic overall. Participants reported that discussing sex or sexual encounters could make them or their partners feel uncomfortable, reflecting on past sexual partners might led to arguments and hurt feelings, and talking about sex

in certain relationships was considered particularly inappropriate (i.e., platonic friends). Baxter and Wilmot's (1985) data hinted at this, as sex and sexual topics were listed under both their prior relationships and relationship norms topics, but due to the amount of different topics reported that were all related to sex in the current dataset, sex as its own topic category was warranted.

Analyses did not find significant differences between women and men for their reported topics or reasons, but a few significant differences between relational type and topics as well as relational type and reasons did emerge. Participants reporting on a current romantic relationship reported significantly more relational talk topics than both friends and past romantic (though there was no significant difference between friends and past romantic). It may seem odd that current romantic partners were more likely to avoid engaging in relational talk, but one of the categories housed under relational talk was prior relationships, and participants almost entirely reported prior romantic relationships in this category. Participants reporting on a current romantic relationship stated their reasons for avoiding discussing past romantic relationships is that it would do more harm than good to their romantic current relationships, which is why this was housed under the relational talk second-level code. Some individuals may avoid discussing past relationships to help maintain their current ones. Baxter and Wilmot (1985) found that platonic and romantic potential friends avoided discussing the state of the relationships because they were not a close enough relationship to engage in relational metacommunication, which could potentially explain why friends avoided topics that fell under the relational talk second-level code. This finding supports the findings of the original study that individuals avoid both explicit and implicit relational metacommunication. Baxter and Wilmot (1985) included topics such as extra-relationship activity, and prior relationships as implicit relational

metacommunication. This kind of talk was implicitly tied back to the relationship but did not include the explicit discussion of the relationship being reported on.

A lack of significant differences could be explained by the low numbers of reported topics (per person) in the present dataset. Even though this study had more participants, and participants were given the opportunity to list as many as six taboo topics per relationship, participants on average reported one. The majority of participants reported on a platonic friend, and far fewer participants reported on a current romantic relationship, and a recent romantic relationship, making it less likely to find significant differences between groups. A possible explanation could be that people have fewer, or less salient, taboo topics in their close relationships. Replicating this study with a larger sample size, or interviewing participants could result in participants reporting a higher number of taboo topics.

Friends were more likely to report emotional topics as taboo (i.e., hot button topics, sex, finances/money, and death/dying) than current romantic partners; moreover, participants reported that talking about these topics within their friendships could result in hurt feelings, arguments, or just general negative emotions from both parties. In romantic relationships partners might be more open to talking about emotional topics if they feel close or comfortable disagreeing, and this pattern might be found in friends (i.e., many participants in the current study did note that these kinds of topics were too personal, even though they were reporting on a close friend). Friendships are by nature voluntary conceptualized by Wiseman (1986) as “exceedingly fragile” (p. 191). The fragile nature of friendships may lead participants to believe that bringing up emotional talk topics (i.e., topics that they may fundamentally disagree with their friends on) would be too risky and potentially cause more harm than good.

Interestingly, there were significant differences only between the reasons reported for past romantic partners and the reasons reported for friends. Friends reported more individual reasons (such as protecting themselves or their partner from negative feelings, or a right to privacy). Friends felt that a number of different topics were either too personal to discuss, or the topic was none of their business. Participants worried more about upsetting or offending their friend, perhaps thinking that doing so might lead to the eventual demise of the friendship. Participants also noted not wanting to make themselves upset, or make themselves look bad in the eyes of their partner, supporting previous research. Afifi and Guerrero (1998) found that individuals avoided topics for self-protection; Guerrero (1997) and Leary, Downs, and Radford-Davenport (1993) found that individuals were concerned with self-preservation with cross-sex friends.

Participants reporting on a recent romantic relationship reported more relational reasons, even though those relationships are no longer intact, and in particular reported avoiding topics so as not to harm the relationship. Participants were not asked if any of the taboo topics specifically led to their past romantic relationship ending, but perhaps this could be investigated in a future study to understand the extent to which discussing specific taboo topics have detrimental effects on relationships that participants reported on. The definition of taboo topics given for each set of questions, regardless of relationship type being reported on, was written in present tense (e.g., “For the following questions, think about your most recent romantic partner and topics that you do not talk about because they are considered taboo”) which may have primed participants reporting on a past romantic partner to think about topics they avoid now, although all specific questions about taboo topics with a past romantic partner were written in past tense.

The present study asked participants to note whether or not a topic was explicitly declared taboo, and the majority of topics reported as taboo had not been explicitly labeled as such. This indicates that the majority of participants are assuming a given topic is taboo without confirming that directly in conversations with their partners. This finding suggests that talking about taboo topics is taboo in close relationships. Many participants expressed that the topic had been brought up in the past and the reaction of their relational partner led them to believe it was taboo. Others had brought up a topic that was taboo for personal reasons (e.g., it was something they did not like discussing and would rather their partner not bring it up either), but many participants did not know definitively whether or not a topic was taboo (but avoided it anyway). Baxter, Dun, and Sahlstein (2001) investigated the ways that individuals communicated the rules of relating, and found that many participants communicated these rules through the use of gossip. Participants in this study may have discovered a specific topic was taboo through gossiping about the topic in relation to other people and gauged their partner's reaction. Future studies could be done to investigate the ways that individuals indirectly determine whether or not a topic is taboo. Future studies should also look into the topics that both relational partners report as taboo in their relationship. Dyadic data could shed light on whether or not both relational partners consider the same specific topics taboo or not.

Limitations

As noted earlier, one limitation of this study was the small number of topics reported per participant. Had participants reported more topics perhaps more significant differences could have been teased out of the current dataset. Replicating this study with a larger sample, or utilizing in-depth interviews could solicit a higher number of taboo topics per participant. The majority of participants ($n = 148$, 91.9%) reported on a platonic friendship, and fewer participants

reported on a romantic relationship ($n = 110, 75.3\%$), which may account for the lack of significant differences between relationship types. Participants were first asked to report on a friendship, then asked if they were currently or recently in a romantic relationship. Some people may have not wanted to report on a romantic relationship after reporting on a friendship, or the sample may just have included a lot of people currently or recently in a romantic relationship. Had the survey order been randomized (i.e., some report on a friend first, some report on a romantic first) more participants may have reported on a romantic relationship. Another limitation was that mostly young ($M = 21.5, SD = 5.5$ years) women ($n = 111, 75.3\%$ of total participants) completed the survey. Low numbers of men could have made it difficult to find significant differences between groups, replicating this study with a larger sample size may result in more significant differences between men and women.

Conclusion

The present study intended to test and update Baxter and Wilmot's (1985) "Taboo Topics in Close Relationships" to generate a list of the topics that individuals avoid discussing in close relationships and the reasons they do so. Supporting the findings of studies published since the original, the present study investigated the original topics and also found differences in terms of the types of topics individuals avoid in their close relationships (e.g., Afifi & Burgoon, 1998; Afifi & Guerrero, 1998; Anderson, et al., 2011; Bisson & Levine, 2009; Guerrero & Afifi, 1995; Knoblach & Theune, 2004, Sargent, 2002). The present study had enough cases to be able to test for sex and relationship type differences in terms of topics and reasons for topics being taboo, and was able to find differences between for topics and reasons between friends and romantic relationships, differentiating these results from the original Baxter and Wilmot (1985) study, and supporting previous research that has found differences by sex and relationship type (e.g., Afifi

& Burgoon, 1998; Afifi & Guerrero, 1998; Golish & Caughlin, 2002; Guerrero & Afifi, 1995).

While the present study did find some of same types of topics that the original Baxter and Wilmot (1985) study found, the frequency with which those topics were reported was different than the original study. These changes indicate that the types of topics individuals avoid in their close relationships have in fact changed over the last 30 years; as scholars continue to study taboo topics and topic avoidance in close relationship, it is important to keep in mind that these topics may change over time, warranting future updates to the list generated by the present study.

Table 1
Topic Categories

Individual Talk	
Extra-Relationship Activity	Topics relating to relationships or relational activity outside of the dyad being reported on “His relationship with his Dad”; “Other friends”
Health	Topics relating to one of the individuals physical or mental health. “His mental health issues” “her weight”
Personal Issues	Personal things only pertaining to one partner “His tattoos” “Grades”
Individual's Past/Present/Future	Specific events in one of the individuals past, present, or plans for their individual future “Going to different colleges” “His adoption”
Relational Talk	
Prior Relationships	Previous (romantic) relationships (this category was not limited to romantic relationships but the only prior relationships reported were romantic in nature) “Ex-partners” “His first love”
State of the Relationship	Topics relating to the current or future state of the relationship. “Moving in together” “Marriage”
Previous State of the Relationship	A prior event or state of the current relationship being reported on. “The time we dated (reported for a platonic friend)” “Things he did in the past that upset me”
Relationship Norms	Rules or behaviors in the relationship. “Comparing each other to other people” “Pointing out a loose thread or a zit”
Emotional Talk	
Sex	Topics relating to sex, sexual health, or sexual history. “Sex” “Pornography”
Hot Button Topics	Topics relating to cultural ideals or debates. “Religion” “Politics”
Death/Dying	Topics relating to death or a specific person who had died. “Their child who recently passed” “The death of their parent”
Money/Finances see	Topics relating to money or finances. “Income” “His spending habits”

Other

Table 2
Reason Categories

Relational Reasons	
Negative relational implications	Conflict between relational partners, jealousy by one or both, anger towards one another. “We would fight” “He would become jealous”
Relationship destruction	Relationship could/would end. “He would break up” “he might freak out and break up with me”
Threat to current relationship	Discussion of topic would negatively affect the state of the relationship “Talking about exes may make us realize we want to be with them instead of with each other”
Negative network implications	Affecting outside networks or relationships in their network. “His family would find out if we talked about them, it would upset them” “The things we say about our teammates might accidentally get back to them and cause unnecessary drama”
Effectiveness of the tacit mode	Talking about it wouldn't do or change anything “Because I know she is wrong due to the facts that she presents (which have been proven to be incorrect)” “It's stupid talking about it”
Inappropriate for relationship type	Topic not appropriate for the relationship context. “She should talk about ex-boyfriends with her friends but not with me (her current boyfriend)”
Change in relationship status	Could alter the current relationship status. “Talking about sex with my friend might make us realize we want to be more than friends”
Individual Reasons	
Protect self/other from negative feelings/emotions	One or both partners may feel upset, angry, uncomfortable or some other negative emotion. “He would become angry and defensive” “I would be uncomfortable”
Embarrassment	One of the partner's might specifically feel embarrassed. “Pointing out a flaw would make my spouse feel embarrassed and self-conscious”
Negatively-valenced self-disclosure/impression management	Topics that might make one partner look bad in the eyes of the other, or something negative about them. “He would judge me” “my friend is also my boss, I don't talk about politics because I don't want that to affect the way they view me as their employee”

Individual vulnerability

Discussion of a topic would leave an individual feeling vulnerable or exposed.

“I would feel targeted”

Right to privacy

Individual has the right to private information.

“She would feel like I am butting into her love life”

Irrelevance of the past

Bringing up past events or relationships are not relevant anymore.

“Bringing up things we have already worked out or gotten past keeps us from moving forward”

Other

Table 3

Percentage (*k*) of Taboo Topics in Current Study vs. Baxter & Wilmot (1985)

	Current Study	Baxter & Wilmot
Individual Talk		
Extra-Relationship Activity	19.5% (55)	15.7% (27)
Health	7.8% (22)	-
Individual's Past/Present/Future	4.6 % (13)	-
Personal Issues	3.9% (11)	-
Relational Talk		
Prior Relationships	14.5% (41)	12.8% (22)
State of the Relationship	4.3% (12)	34.4% (59)
Previous State of the Relationship	2.5% (7)	-
Relationship Norms	1.4 % (4)	12.8% (22)
Emotional Talk		
Sex	16.6% (47)	-
Hot Button Topics	16.3% (46)	-
Death/Dying	2.5 (7)	-
Money/Finances	2.5% (7)	-
Other	2.8% (8)	4.7% (8)
Total Cases	282	172

Table 4
Frequencies of Taboo Topics by Relationship Type

	Platonic Friend	Current Romantic Partner	Past Romantic Partner	Total
Individual Talk				
Extra-Relationship Activity	29	19	7	55
	19%	21.4%	17.9%	19.5%
Health	14	3	5	22
	9.2%	3.3%	12.8%	7.8%
Individual's Past/Present/Future	4	2	7	13
	2.5%	2.2%	17.9%	4.6%
Personal Issues	6	4	1	11
	4%	4.4%	2.6%	3.9%
Relational Talk				
Prior Relationships	10	25	6	41
	6.6%	28.1%	15.4%	14.5%
State of the Relationship	1	11	-	12
	.7%	12.5%	-	4.3%
Previous State of the Relationship	6	1	-	7
	4%	1.1%	-	2.5%
Relationship Norms	1	2	1	4
	.7%	2.2%	2.6%	1.4%
Emotional Talk				
Sex	34	9	4	47
	22.4%	10.2%	10.3%	16.6%
Hot Button Topics	31	9	6	46
	20.4%	10.2%	15.4%	16.3%
Death/Dying	6	1	-	7
	4%	1.1%	-	2.5%
Money/Finances	4	1	2	7

	2.5%	1.1%	5.2%	2.5%
Other	6	2	-	8
	4%	2.2%	-	2.8%
Total	152	89	39	282

Table 5
Frequency of Reasons by Relationship Type

	Platonic Friend	Current Romantic Partner	Past Romantic Partner	Total
Relational Reasons				
Negative relational implications	51	27	18	96
	39.8%	34.1%	50%	39.5
Relationship destruction	1	3	0	4
	0.8%	3.8%	-	1.7%
Threat to current relationship	0	3	0	3
	-	3.8%	-	1.2%
Negative network implications	3	1	0	4
	2.4%	1.3%	-	1.7%
Effectiveness of the tacit mode	2	0	2	4
	1.5%	-	5.6%	1.7%
Inappropriate for relationship type	0	1	0	1
	-	1.3%	-	0.4%
Change in relationship status	1	0	0	1
	0.8%	-	-	0.4%
Individual Reasons				
Protect self/other from negative feelings/emotions	49	29	10	88
	38.2%	36.7%	27.8%	36.2%
Embarrassment	0	1	0	1
	-	1.3%	-	0.4%
Negatively-valenced self-disclosure/impression management	6	1	1	8
	4.8%	1.3%	2.8%	3.3%
Individual vulnerability	1	1	0	2

	0.8%	1.3%	-	0.8%
Right to privacy	2	0	0	2
	1.5%	-	-	0.8%
Irrelevance of the past	1	0	0	1
	0.8%	-	-	0.4%
Other	11	12	5	28
	8.6%	15.1%	13.8%	11.5%
Total	128	79	36	243

Table 6
Frequency of Explicitly Decided Taboo Topics By Relationship Type

	Platonic Friend		Current Romantic Relationship		Past Romantic Relationship	
	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Individual Talk						
Extra-Relationship Activity	23	6	12	7	-	7
	19.2%	18.8%	23.5%	18.4%		30.4%
Health	11	3	2	1	3	2
	9.3%	9.4%	3.9%	2.6%	17.6%	8.6%
Personal Issues	4	2	3	1	1	-
	3.3%	6.2%	5.9%	2.6%	5.9%	
Individual's Past/Present/Future	4	-	1	1	3	4
	4.2%	-	2%	2.6%	17.7%	17.4%
Relational Talk						
Prior Relationships	7	3	11	14	2	4
	5.8%	9.4%	21.5%	36.8%	11.7%	17.4%
State of the Relationship	1	-	7	4	-	1
	.8%	-	13.7%	10.6%		4.4%
Previous State of the Relationship	5	1	1	-	-	-
	4.2%	3.1%	2%			
Relationship Norms	1	-	1	1	-	1
	.8%	-	2%	2.6%		4.4%
Emotional Talk						
Sex	28	6	5	4	4	-
	23.3%	18.8%	9.8%	10.6%	23.5%	
Hot Button Topics	23	8	6	3	3	3
	19.2%	25%	11.7%	8%	17.7%	13%
Death/Dying	5	1	-	1	-	-
	4.2%	3.1%		2.6%		
Money/Finances	4	-	1	-	1	1
	4.2%	-	2%		5.9%	4.4%

Other	4	2	1	1	-	-
	3.3%	6.2%	2%	2.6%		
Total	121	32	51	38	17	23
	79%	21%	57.3%	42.7%	42.5%	57.8%

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Appendix A
Recruitment Email

Hello,

I am conducting a study about the kinds of topics people avoid discussing in their close relationships, and why they avoid discussing those topics. I am seeking participants who are at least 18 years old and would be willing to complete an online survey, this survey should take approximately 30 minutes.

Although participation in this study is optional, it would be greatly appreciated. This study will provide valuable information to help better understand what kinds of topics people avoid discussing and why.

The responses to the questionnaire will be confidential. Your participation is voluntary, and you will earn extra credit. The amount of extra credit is determined by the instructor based on 1 unit of research credit (30 minutes or less). An alternative assignment is available if you do not wish to participate in this study. There is no penalty for non-participation. Furthermore, you may refuse to answer any question or withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

Thank you,

Lauren J. Johnsen,

ljohansen@uwm.edu

Communication MA Student

IRB Approval: #16.148 11/13/2015

Appendix B

Extra Credit Alternative

1. Find a clip from a TV show or movie in which a character is avoiding the discussion of a topics or has declared a topic to be taboo with another character, and what might happen if they were to discuss the topic.
2. Write a one-page (12 pt., Times New Roman, double-spaced, 1-inch margins -top, right, left, and bottom) report:
 - a. First line of the document: write your name, course name that you want to get extra credit, section #, and course instructor's name
 - b. Identify the TV show or movie, the characters involved, and a brief summary of the clip
 - c. Identify and briefly explain the taboo topic, why that topic is taboo, and what might happen if they discuss it
3. Send your report to Lauren Johnsen via email (ljohnsen@uwm.edu). Your instructor will not be informed about whether you participated in the survey or took this alternative option. In other words, only the names of student that are eligible for extra credit will be sent to instructors.

Appendix C

Consent Form

University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee Consent to Participate in Online Survey Research

Study Title: Taboo Topics in Close Relationships: An Update

Person Responsible for Research: Erin Sahlstein Parcell, PhD (Principal Investigator, Communication Department) and Lauren Johnsen, MA (Student Investigator, Communication Department)

Study Description: The purpose of this research study is to create a list of taboo topics individuals avoid discussing in their close relationships, and why those topics are considered taboo. This study is intended to update the list Baxter and Wilmot (1985) created in their study. Approximately 100 subjects will participate in this study. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to complete an online survey that will take approximately 30 minutes to complete. The questions will ask you to list taboo topics in your close relationships and explain why they are taboo.

Risks / Benefits: Risks to participants are considered minimal. However, if participants feel uncomfortable or do not want to complete the entire study, they may skip or refrain from answering questions on the questionnaire. In addition, participants may withdraw from the study at any time. Collection of data and survey responses using the internet involves the same risks that a person would encounter in everyday use of the internet, such as breach of confidentiality. While the researchers have taken every reasonable step to protect your confidentiality, there is always the possibility of interception or hacking of the data by third parties that is not under the control of the research team.

There will be no costs for participating. A possible indirect benefit of completing the study is gaining a better understanding of taboo topics within close relationships. Extra credit is being offered for this study if you are enrolled in a class where the instructor awards extra credit for research participation. After you complete participation, the Principle Investigator and Student Investigator of this study will notify the instructor of your designated class that you have completed participation. An alternative option for extra credit for students who are not eligible or choose not to participate in the study will be offered. The amount of extra credit is determined by the instructor based on 1 unit of research credit (30 minutes or less). Be sure you understand your instructor's extra credit policy before you participate.

The alternative option for extra credit is as follows:

4. Find a clip from a TV show or movie in which a character is avoiding the discussion of a topics or has declared a topic to be taboo with another character, and what might happen if they were to discuss the topic.
5. Write a one-page (12 pt., Times New Roman, double-spaced, 1-inch margins -top, right, left, and bottom) report:
 - a. First line of the document: write your name, course name that you want to get extra credit, section #, and course instructor's name
 - b. Identify the TV show or movie, the characters involved, and a brief summary of the clip
 - c. Identify and briefly explain the taboo topic, why that topic is taboo, and what might happen if they discuss it

6. Send your report to Lauren Johnsen via email (ljohnsen@uwm.edu). Your instructor will not be informed about whether you participated in the survey or took this alternative option. In other words, only the names of student that are eligible for extra credit will be sent to instructors.

Limits to Confidentiality

Identifying information such as your name, TA, course section number and the Internet Protocol (IP) address of this computer will be collected on a separate survey for extra credit distribution. Data will be retained on the Qualtrics website server for one year and will be deleted after this time. However, data may exist on backups or server logs beyond the timeframe of this research project and may be analyzed in future studies. Data transferred from the survey site will be saved in an encrypted format for 3 years. Only the PI and Student PI will have access to the data collected by this study. However, the Institutional Review Board at UW-Milwaukee or appropriate federal agencies like the Office for Human Research Protections may review this study's records. The research team will remove your identifying information after data has been downloaded, during the analysis process, and all study results will be reported without identifying information so that no one viewing the results will ever be able to match you with your responses.

Voluntary Participation: Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may choose to not answer any of the questions or withdraw from this study at any time without penalty. Your decision will not change any present or future relationship with the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee.

Who do I contact for questions about the study: For more information about the study or study procedures, contact Dr. Erin Sahlstein Parcell at eparcell@uwm.edu or Lauren Johnsen at ljohnsen@uwm.edu.

Who do I contact for questions about my rights or complaints towards my treatment as a research subject? Contact the UWM IRB at 414-229-3173 or irbinfo@uwm.edu

Research Subject's Consent to Participate in Research:

By entering this survey, you are indicating that you have read the consent form, you are age 18 or older and that you voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

IRB Approval: 16.148 11/13/2015

Thank you!

Appendix D

Taboo Topics Survey

Consent form – Agree/Disagree

Demographics:

1. What is your age __ (years)
2. What is your gender_____

Platonic Close Friendship Block

For the following questions, think about a platonic close friend.

Demographics:

1. How long have you been friends (months)_____
2. What is your partner's gender?_____

Closeness Measure (Likert)

1-Strongly Disagree 2-Disagree 3-Slightly Disagree 4-Neither Agree Nor Disagree 5-Slightly Agree 6-Agree 7-Strongly Agree

1. My friend and I are close. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
2. I like my friend. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
3. My friend and I talk about personal things. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
4. My friend's opinion is important to me. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
5. I am satisfied with my relationship with my friend. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
6. I enjoy spending time with my friend. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
7. My relationship with my friend is important to me. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

For the following questions, think about a platonic close friend and topics that you do not talk about because they are considered taboo. A topic is considered 'taboo' if it is avoided because you anticipate negative outcomes from its discussion (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985).

1. What is one topic that is considered taboo to discuss with your friend?
2. What could happen if you talk about it with your friend? In other words, what is the potential negative outcome(s) of discussing it with them?
3. Did you and your friend explicitly decide it was taboo?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No (if so route to #4)
4. How do you know that it is taboo with your friend?
5. Are any other topics considered taboo with your friend?
 - a. Yes (route to copy of the taboo topic questions)
 - b. No (route to #6)
6. What else would you like me to know about taboo topics with your friend?

1. Are you currently in a romantic relationship?
 - a. Yes (route to Current Romantic Block)
 - b. No (route to #4)

2. Have you been in a romantic relationship in the last 2 year(s)?
 - c. Yes (route to Past Romantic Block)
 - d. No (skip both Romantic Partner Blocks, route to Close Friendship Block)

Current Romantic Partner Block

For the following questions, think about your current romantic partner.

Demographic:

1. How long have you been together (months)?_____
2. What is your partner's gender?_____
3. What is your relationship status?
 - a. Casual Dating
 - b. Serious Dating
 - c. Married/Life Partner
 - d. Other_____

Closeness Measure

1-Strongly Disagree 2-Disagree 3-Slightly Disagree 4-Neither Agree Nor Disagree 5-Slightly Agree 6-Agree 7-Strongly Agree

1. My romantic partner and I are close. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
2. I like my romantic partner. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
3. My romantic partner and I talk about personal things. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
4. My romantic partner's opinion is important to me. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
5. I am satisfied with my relationship with my romantic partner. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
6. I enjoy spending time with my romantic partner. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
7. My relationship with my romantic partner is important to me. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Taboo [Copy and repeat 6 times]

For the following questions, think about your current romantic partner and topics that you do not talk about because they are considered taboo. A topic is considered 'taboo' if it is avoided because you anticipate negative outcomes from its discussion (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985).

1. What is one topic that is considered taboo to discuss with your romantic partner?
2. What could happen if you talk about it with your romantic partner? In other words, what is the potential negative outcome(s) of discussing it with them?
3. Did you and your romantic partner explicitly decide it was taboo?
 - a. Yes

- b. No (if so route to #4)
- 4. How do you know that it is a taboo topic with your romantic partner?
- 5. Are any other topics considered taboo with your romantic partner?
 - a. Yes (route to copy of the taboo topic questions)
 - b. No (route to #6)
- 6. What else would you like me to know about taboo topics with your romantic partner?

Past Romantic Partner Block

For the following questions, think about your most recent romantic partner.

Demographic:

- 4. How long were you together (months)? _____
- 5. What is your partner's gender? _____
- 6. What was your status?
 - a. Casual Dating
 - b. Serious Dating
 - c. Married/Life Partner
 - d. Other _____

Closeness Measure

1-Strongly Disagree 2-Disagree 3-Slightly Disagree 4-Neither Agree Nor Disagree 5-Slightly Agree 6-Agree 7-Strongly Agree

- 1. My romantic partner and I were close. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- 2. I liked my romantic partner. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- 3. My romantic partner and I talked about personal things. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- 4. My romantic partner's opinion was important to me. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- 5. I was satisfied with my relationship with my romantic partner. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- 6. I enjoyed spending time with my romantic partner. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
- 7. My relationship with my romantic partner was important to me 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Taboo: [copy and repeat 6 times]

For the following questions, think about your most recent romantic partner and topics that you do not talk about because they are considered taboo. A topic is considered 'taboo' if it is avoided because you anticipate negative outcomes from its discussion (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985).

- 1. What is one topic that was considered taboo to discuss with your romantic partner?
- 2. What could have happened if you talked about it with your romantic partner? In other words, what was the potential negative outcome(s) of discussing it with them?
- 3. Did you and your romantic partner explicitly decide it was taboo?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No (if so route to #4)
- 4. How did you know that it was taboo with your romantic partner?

5. Were any other topics considered taboo with your romantic partner?
 - a. Yes (route to copy of the taboo topic questions)
 - b. No (route to #6)
6. What else would you like me to know about taboo topics with your romantic partner?

Thank you for your time! Please exit the survey by clicking the submit button below, which will take you to a separate survey that will collect your information for extra credit in your COMMUN course.