DISCLOSING ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP CONFLICTS WITH A THIRD PARTY:

A TEST OF THE DISCLOSURE DECISION-MAKING MODEL

by

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ABSTRACT

This study utilized Greene's (2009) health disclosure decision-making model (DD-MM) to better understand the process of romantic relationship conflict (RRC) disclosures to a confidant outside the relationship. In doing so, I investigated the changes in relational quality between the discloser and their romantic partner/confidant, while also proposing that the DD-MM would be valid for use in RRC disclosures. Results indicated that while relational quality does not change significantly between the discloser and their romantic partner/confidant after an RRC disclosure, the depth of disclosure is significantly correlated with greater relational quality with the confidant. The relational quality an individual had with their romantic partner and confidant was also positively correlated with the disclosure efficacy they had toward their confidant. Overall, this study successfully validated the DD-MM for use (with only minor adjustments) in the new context of RRC disclosures. Implications and future directions are discussed.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Self-disclosure involves the process of voluntarily revealing private information

(e.g., personal feelings, fears, stigmatized identities) that is otherwise unlikely to be

known by others (Greene, Derlega, & Mathews, 2006; Ignatius & Kokkonen, 2007;

Pearce & Sharp, 1973). Individuals often self-disclose to develop intimacy, gain support,

organize their own thoughts related to an experience, or reduce interpersonal conflict

(Bonnan-White, Hetzel-Riggin, Diamond-Welch, & Tollini, 2018; Greene et al., 2012).

Disclosure for each of these reasons can help validate self-worth and personal identity,

which, in turn, can increase the quality of interpersonal relationships (Greene et al.,

2006). Individuals tend to adjust levels of disclosure to accommodate their unique dyadic

relationships; but the more one discloses, the more likely they are to elicit reciprocity

from their confidant (Levesque, Steciuk, & Ledley, 2002). Thus, there is potential to

increase the levels of intimacy and relational quality through self-disclosure.

While self-disclosure has its advantages, there are also situations in which it may

have negative consequences. Disclosing information to others requires an individual to

release some control and be willing to co-own their private information (Petronio, 1991).

For example, individuals who reveal their secrets often ruminate about the potential

impression management they will have to enact in post-disclosure (Afifi & Caughlin,

2006). Similarly, while disclosing traumatic experiences can be important for working

through emotions, it also may be an upsetting experience itself, even if the confidant is

trying to be helpful (Bonnan-White et al., 2018). Individuals who disclose may not be

able to separate their identity from the information they are disclosing and may experience more anxiety through the co-ownership of the information, which can also decrease their self-esteem (Afifi & Caughlin, 2006).

There are two types of self-disclosure: disclosure about oneself (*personal)* and disclosure about one's relationship with another person or interactions that they have had (*relational*) (Greene et al., 2006). Within the context of romantic relationships, there is a dyadic relationship present prior to the introduction of the confidant. Disclosure about conflicts in one's *relationship* then becomes not about just one's personal information, but their partner's personal information as well. As the discloser navigates their way through the disclosure decision-making process, from assessing information, to the disclosure, to dealing with the consequences of disclosing, they consider their relational quality with their confidant (Greene et al., 2012). For *relational* disclosures, the discloser may also consider the relationship quality they have with their partner. Furthermore, the disclosure may impact the two dyadic relational quality assessments, understood through changes in relational quality between the discloser/confidant and the discloser/partner after the disclosure has occurred. Increased relational quality creates stronger interpersonal relationships that can help reduce stress (Burleson, 2003), which could be particularly important when experiencing romantic relationship conflicts. As such, it is important to not only explore relational quality as a variable influencing the decision to disclose, but also as an outcome of disclosure across the different relationships involved in the disclosure.

The purpose of this study is to examine how the relational quality between the discloser, their romantic partner, and a third-party confidant influences the disclosure of a

romantic relationship conflict (RRC) to the third party and how disclosure about that RRC then influences relational quality. Using the Disclosure Decision-Making Model (DD-MM; Greene, 2009) in the context of RRC disclosures, I plan to analyze how relational quality influences disclosure and vice versa between discloser/confidant and discloser/partner. Next, I will look at how the *depth* of disclosure influences relational quality between discloser/confidant and discloser/partner. Finally, I will explore whether the DD-MM is valid for use in the context of romantic relationship conflict disclosure. In the following section I will discuss the DD-MM, its components, and some critiques surrounding it. Then, I will examine RRCs, and finally I will draw the two together to discuss the DD-MM in the context of RRCs and why the model should translate to this new context.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The Disclosure Decision-Making Model

The Disclosure Decision-Making Model (DD-MM), is useful for understanding RRC disclosures because it analyzes the different steps one takes in deciding whether or not to disclose to others about personal issues (Greene, 2009). With uncertainty at its core, this model seeks to understand the dialectical nature of information sharing and examines what factors are more heavily weighted quantitatively in the process of disclosure (Greene et al., 2012). In Greene's (2009) original model there are four main components, including assessing the information, assessing the receiver, disclosure efficacy, and depth of disclosure, used to understand the decision-making process for disclosure. The model has been used in a number of health contexts such as HIV, mental illness, and invisible conditions disclosures (e.g. Greene, Carpenter, Catona, & Magsamen, 2013; Pahwa, Fulginiti, Rekke, Rice, & Brekke, 2017). Researchers have also extended the model with new components, including antecedent goals and long-term outcomes of disclosure (e.g., Chaudoir & Fisher, 2010; Choi et al., 2016; Jonzon & Lindblad, 2005). Long-term outcomes include psychological, behavioral, and health effects. For example, some long-term outcomes of HIV disclosure include the reclaiming of a stigmatized identity, educating others of the stigmatized identity's effects (Chaudoir & Fisher, 2010; Schrimshaw & Siegel, 2002), and increased well-being (Jonzon & Lindblad, 2005). Choi et al. (2016) used the model to understand the importance of disclosure efficacy and its impact on planning and scheduling for disclosure of

stigmatized identities surrounding illnesses. For the purpose of this study, I will be focusing on the original model, its four major components, and their outcomes as they relate to RRCs.

Assessing the Information

Assessing information is the first component of the DD-MM, which encompasses five factors to be considered: *stigma, preparation, prognosis, symptoms*, and *relevance to others* (Greene, 2009). Because this model was originally developed in the context of health, each factor relates directly to mental or physical health disclosure. *Stigma*, defined as "an attribute that is deeply discrediting" (Goffman, 1986, p. 3), may decrease intentions to disclose because there are potential negative effects from a stigma surrounding one's health issue (Greene, 2009). Divulging a stigmatized identity marker may require one to have to externally manage a previously hidden identity. Understanding the importance of the issue for oneself, and for others, may help decide whether or not support seeking, through disclosure, is the best route to take (Greene et al., 2012). Additionally, one's *preparation* for their diagnosis, whether it was anticipated or not, may cause uncertainty and uneasiness about their current state and whether they are ready to disclose. Those certain of their diagnosis, such as a disease that is hereditary, may be more apt to share information with others versus those who are new to their diagnosis (Greene, 2009; Greene et al., 2012).

Prognosis refers to consideration for all potential courses the diagnosis may take as well as potential outcomes. Topics such as HIV, cancer, and potential death require a great deal of consideration prior to disclosure (e.g., Catona, Greene, & Magsamen-Conrad, 2015; Checton, Greene, Magsamen-Conrad, & Venetis, 2012). Some individuals

may choose to openly disclose from the start, while others may conceal the information until it is absolutely necessary (Schrimshaw & Siegel, 2002). The *symptoms* also play a role as there are potential risks and complications to overcome with any disease or illness. Those who are more symptomatic may disclose about their disease sooner rather than later in search of support physically, emotionally, and/or mentally (Greene, 2009). Visible symptoms may also prompt others to ask questions, which may speed up the disclosure process as well (Schrimshaw & Siegel, 2002).

The last factor that plays into information assessment is analyzing the disease's *relevance to others* and whether or not they are directly affected by it (Greene, 2009). In situations such as STI diagnoses people may me more likely to disclose because they consider the risks of transferring the STI to their partner and want to let them know prior to engaging in a relationship (Greene, 2009). While figuring out *what* information one will disclose, the next component to assess is *who* one will choose as the confidant and the potential responses they may receive from that person.

Assessing the Receiver

After information assessment, one may begin assessing the potential receiver, including their relational quality with and the perceived support (i.e., anticipated response) from that person. Relational quality involves "the relative degree of positive, supportive, beneficent experiences as compared to the negative, potentially detrimental ones" within a relationship (Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009, p. 636). Relational quality is often increased through intimate self-disclosures, feelings of mutual engagement and commitment, length of relationship (Franzoi, Davis & Young, 1985), and feelings of happiness (Hecht, 1984). When considering relational quality, a person analyzes their

relationship with their potential confidant. People typically disclose to those they feel closer with, such as an informal partner (e.g., friend, family member), rather than formal partners or professionals (e.g., therapist) (Bonnan-White et al., 2018; Levesque, Steciuk, & Ledley, 2002).

Disclosers also perceive more support from close, informal relationship partners because they are typically more supportive and helpful than formal relationship partners (Bonnan-White et al., 2018; Choi et al., 2016; Greene et al., 2012). This relates to anticipated response as a consideration for disclosure; if a person expects a supportive response, they are more likely to disclose (Choi et al., 2016; Greene et al., 2012). For example, in HIV disclosures, an individual may choose to disclose in increments to gage the reaction of the confidant and maintain a level of control over the information so that negative stigmas can be managed (Catona, Greene, & Magsamen-Conrad, 2015). In sum, the higher the relationship quality, and the more positive the anticipated response (i.e., perceived support), the more likely one is to disclose.

Disclosure Efficacy

Disclosure efficacy roots itself in self-efficacy, which Bandura (1977) conceptualizes as the ability to perform an action to produce an outcome. The stronger the perceived self-efficacy, the more adversity an individual believes they may overcome (Bandura, 1977). Disclosure efficacy is the perceived ability in oneself to disclose private information to a target or confidant (Greene, 2009). Those with a higher level of disclosure efficacy have more confidence in their ability to disclose and are more likely to do so (Greene, Magsamen-Conrad & Venetis, 2012). Disclosure efficacy is also influenced by the relational quality between the discloser and potential confidant. The

DD-MM suggests that the greater the relational quality, the greater the disclosure efficacy and depth of disclosure to the confidant will be (Greene et al., 2012). For example, those who are diagnosed with cancer often feel an increased level of disclosure and communication efficacy if their perceived relational quality with the confidant is high (Magsamen-Conrad, Checton, Venetis, & Greene, 2015). Those who do not have high disclosure efficacy may resort to other modes of disclosure, such as finding a third party to disclose the information for them or disclosing through computer-mediated-communication (Greene, 2009; Greene et al., 2012). Disclosure efficacy is both the result of and resource for the closeness of relationships because it helps determine the depth of information to disclose to others (Greene, 2009).

Depth of Disclosure

As humans, we build relationships through self-disclosure, and some relationships may involve more disclosure than others. Self-disclosure can be achieved through verbal or written communication with another person about one's own private information, such as personal facts, opinions, attitudes, and beliefs (Omarzu, 2000). It may also indicate an individual's willingness to further develop a relationship (Baruh & Cemalcılar, 2018). In considering how much to disclose, one may evaluate the breadth and depth of information they want to be co-owned by another (Petronio, 2013). However, disclosing too much information too early in a relationship could lead to lower interpersonal attraction and relational quality because it may be viewed as inappropriate or a violation of social norms (Baruh & Cemalcılar, 2018). While superficial disclosures don't violate social norms, they often do not increase relational quality either (Omarzu, 2000; Baruh & Cemalcılar, 2018). Thus, rumination about one's self-esteem and how one's identity may

change post-disclosure heavily influences whether someone feels comfortable enough to disclose to their confidant (Afifi & Caughlin, 2006). Overall, depth of disclosure often depends on the relational quality and perceived support from the confidant, which may range from person to person.

Model Critiques

Being fairly new, the DD-MM has yet to receive any major critiques from other researchers, however Greene offers some critiques of her own. The first is that the model is retrospective rather than projected, and that the process may not properly be represented through reflections (Greene et al., 2012; Choi et al., 2016). Secondly, the model does not address the "ongoing nature of disclosure and disclosure updates" that may follow, it simply ends after the first occurrence of disclosure (Greene et al., 2009, p. 366). There is also limited understanding on the depth, breadth, and duration of disclosure. Third, there are potential interruptions not accommodated for in the model, such as someone asking questions and initiating the conversation (Greene, 2009). Lastly, the DD-MM has most often been used to analyze dyadic relationships between the discloser and the confidant.

The current study seeks to investigate the relationship between relational quality and disclosure among a discloser, their confidant, and the romantic partner. This study will also investigate whether the DD-MM is valid for use in the context of RRCs. While the addition of a third party creates a more complex model of disclosure with multiple relationships to consider, this research will help us better understand the effects of RRC disclosures to an external confidant. This then allows us to understand the impact the confidant's response has on the relationships between the discloser, the confidant, and the

discloser's romantic partner. The following sections introduce romantic relationships then highlight the relevance of the DD-MM when investigating the disclosure of RRCs.

Romantic Relationship Conflicts

From casual dating to more serious relationships, couples experience increasing levels of commitment and relationship satisfaction if their relational needs, such as physical affection (Guerrero & Andersen, 1994; Gulledge, Gulledge, Stahmann, 2003) or support (Cutrona, 1996) are met throughout the relationship (Umphrey & Sherblom, 2001). According to the social exchange theory (SET), the interdependence of couples influences individuals' tendencies to weigh the costs against the rewards to determine the worth of the relationship (Nakonezny & Denton, 2008). Often, costs come in the form of RRCs, or "relationship problems," which can be defined as "any form of emotional or problem-centered stress directly concerning the couple as a unit" that may create strains within the relationship (Bodenmann, 1997, p. 138). These RRCs may range in severity, intensity, and length of time. Totenhagen, Randall, and Lloyd (2018) found that the more severe a conflict was within a romantic relationship, the lower the overall perceived relationship quality was between the individuals. Similarly, other researchers have found that when RRCs are more serious or appear to be unresolvable, the partners involved are more likely to withdraw from that conflict (Prager, Poucher, Shirvani, Parsons, & Allam, 2019). This can result in decreased relationship quality. While there are many forms of RRCs, some examples include conflicts over infidelity (Bodenmann et al., 2007), jealousy (Guerrero, Andersen, Jorgensen, Spitzberg, & Eloy, 1995), and money (Hill, Allsop, LeBaron, & Bean, 2017; Papp, Cummings, & Goeke-Morey, 2009; Reese-Weber, Kahn, & Nemecek, 2015; Stanley, Markman, & Whitton, 2002).

Sexual infidelity involves "participation in sexual intercourse with a person other than one's partner" (Hertlein, Wetchler, & Piercy, 2005, p. 6). Emotional infidelity, however, is more prevalent than such physical affairs and roots itself in *emotional intimacy* (Hertlein et al., 2005). Aspects of *emotional intimacy* include companionship, respect, understanding, or self-esteem in an otherwise close relationship (Glass & Wright, 1992). These forms of *emotional intimacy*, if with someone outside the romantic relationship, may be interpreted as infidelity. Infidelity, in either form, is known to be one of the leading causes of relationship dissolution because it can result in diminished relational quality, trust and intimacy levels within a couple (Allen, 2005; Hertlein, Wetchler, & Piercy, 2005; Owen, Rhoades & Stanley, 2013; Platt, Nalbone, Casanova & Wetchler, 2008; Vangelisti & Gerstenberger, 2004). It also creates stress (Barelds & Barelds-Dijkstra, 2007) and can cause jealousy within the relationship (Barelds & Barelds-Dijkstra, 2007; Kennedy-Lightsey & Booth-Butterfield, 2011; Rotenberg, Shewchuk, & Kimberley, 2001).

Jealousy involves an array of behavioral, emotional and informational responses that occur when an existing relationship's norms and quality levels are threatened by a third-party (Pfieffer & Wong, 1989). Gatzeva and Paik (2011) found that marriages with jealousy conflicts often suffer the most in terms of relationship satisfaction. There are three major types of jealousy that can occur: *possessive, anxious, and reactive*. Unlike *reactive* jealousy, both *anxious* and *possessive* jealousy can be "triggered in the absence of an extra dyadic rival" (Swami et al., 2012, p. 797). *Possessive* jealousy occurs when one attempts to prevent a situation from ever occurring (Barelds & Barelds-Dijkstra, 2007; Barelds, Dijkstra, Groothof, & Pastoor, 2017; Swami et al., 2012). An example of

this could be an individual enacting surveillance or manipulation attempts toward their

partner to make sure they do not spend time with specific people outside the relationship

(Guerrero et al., 1995). *Anxious* jealousy occurs in anticipation of a situation (Barelds &

Barelds-Dijkstra, 2007; Barelds et al., 2017; Swami et al., 2012) while *reactive* jealousy

occurs after a situation has already taken place (Rotenberg, Shewchuk, & Kimberly,

2001). *Anxious* jealousy often lowers the relational quality, as rumination of hypothetical

situations causes anxiety and distress, while *reactive* jealousy has been shown to increase

relational quality because it is often viewed as showing love or care for one's partner

(Barelsds & Barelds-Dijkstra, 2007). However, prolonged or intense jealousy could prove

detrimental to a relationship (Guerrero & Eloy, 1992). For example, if a man constantly

worries about his partner talking to another man (*anxious* jealousy), the man may enact

higher surveillance responses designed to restrict his partner's interactions with the rival

relationship, which would then reduce their relational quality over time (Guerrero et al.,

1995). However, if that same man is jealous after witnessing his partner talking to

another man, that partner may view the *reactive* jealousy as showing care for the

relationship and its stability (Barelsds & Barelds-Dijkstra, 2007; Yoshimura, 2004).

Although jealousy often stems from interactions with others outside the romantic

relationship, it may also stem from societal or relational pressures, including quality time

together, decreased communication, or questions about who should provide financially

for the relationship or family (Jimenez, 2018).

Money is one of the top causes of relational conflict and low relationship

satisfaction, especially in married couples (Britt & Huston, 2012; Stanley et al., 2002).

RRCs surrounding money are the result of poor money management, including spending

and/or saving of any money that comes into the home (Miller, Yorgason, Sandberg, & White, 2003; Papp, 2018). While finances are typically not shared in newly developing romantic relationships, conflicts about money management still emerge. For example, RRCs surrounding money may ensue about who should pay for dates or how the couples should be saving for future events such as a vacation or wedding (Reese-Weber et al., 2015). In well-established and future-oriented couples, money has the most long-term importance in the relationship since financial strain or stability depend on the couple's everyday financial decisions (Papp, 2018; Reese-Weber et al., 2015). RRCs about money are often prevalent and problematic in the relationship because they seldom have one solution (Papp, Cummings, Goeke-Morey, 2009). Based on the different types of RRCs, and the impact they can have on relationships, it is important to understand the process of conflict disclosure (i.e., relational quality, disclosure efficacy, perceived support, depth of disclosure) and how bringing in a third party may influence relational quality among the individuals involved.

The DD-MM in RRCs

Bringing a third person into a dyadic interaction has the potential to create various complications in relationships, which make the decision to disclose an important one. For example, upon disclosure, triangulation may occur between the discloser, partner, and confidant. Triangulation exists in two forms, as a process and as a noun (Dallos & Vetere, 2012). As a process, triangulation is the action of bringing a third person into a dyadic conversation; as a noun it is used to speak of the dynamic relationships between the three individuals. In either form, triangulation is often associated with the sense of feeling caught or put in the middle (Afifi, 2003; Amato & Afifi, 2006; Schrodt & Afifi, 2018;

Schrodt & Ledbetter, 2012). The idea of feeling caught arises when boundary rules created, and efforts to maintain them, are incompatible. For example, when divorced parents disclose too much information to their children, it creates a tension and makes the child feel like they need to choose sides (Afifi, 2003). Disclosing RRCs to a third party could also create triangulation in a similar way. Whether the information is disclosed to a family member or friend, one's disclosure may cause the confidant to feel a need to pick a side based on information they were given. Specifically, negative relational disclosures may make the confidant in the triad feel caught because they now co-own negative information about another person with whom they may also be close (Schrodt & Afifi, 2018).

In romantic relationships, negative relational disclosures may also have similar effects. For example, RRC disclosures between a relationship partner and an outside confidant could create triangulation if the confidant feels caught between the two relationship partners after learning the relational disclosure and feels they have to choose sides. An individual's disclosure of an RRC to a third person may stem from desired support, but also creates a triadic relationship that could complicate the relational quality and disclosure in each of the involved relationships. Thus, triangulation has potential to decrease relational quality. However, there are potential positive outcomes of triangulation as well.

Through RRC disclosures, the discloser may experience increased relational quality in triangulation because they are maintaining, or increasing, their level of closeness with their confidant (Schrodt & Ledbetter, 2012). In parent-child triangulated relationships, positive confirming messages are important for creating support (Schrodt &

Ledbetter, 2012). Children and young adults often form a stronger bond with the parent that supports them more and offers more guidance (Amato & Afifi, 2006). Support and confirming messages from a confidant are also important in alleviating the effects of negative relational disclosure and creating a supportive environment surrounding a relationship (Schrodt & Afifi, 2018; Schrodt & Ledbetter, 2012). While triangulation has primarily been studied in parent-child relationships, there are other contexts in which it may occur that are worth studying and further understanding. For emerging adults, triangulation is often created, and has potential to increase or decrease relational quality, when individuals look to their friends and family for support about their romantic relationships (Schrodt & Ledbetter, 2012)

Social Support

In assessing the information and potential confidant, the DD-MM assumes there is some form of motivation for one to disclose. In the case of RRCs, support seeking may be a major motivating factor. Because RRCs are known to weaken relationships due to the stress they create (Kuster et al., 2017), seeking social support is crucial in creating a healthy functioning relationship to overcome these stressors (Don, Mickelson, & Barbee, 2013; Kuster et al., 2017; Lee & Goldstein, 2016). Social support is often a resource used to prevent the deterioration of mental or physical health and well-being otherwise caused by recent or ongoing stressors (Cutrona, 1996; Cohen & Hoberman, 2006; Lee & Goldstein, 2016; Porter & Chambless, 2017; Williams, Morelli, Ong, & Zaki, 2018). Weiss (1974) describes six major functions of social support including guidance, reliable alliance, reassurance of worth, opportunity for nurturance, attachment, and social integration. Each function offers an opportunity to increase relational quality and

satisfaction between individuals, which is why support may be an important reason to disclose RRCs.

Social support provided through close relationships has a great impact on helping with problem-solving, managing emotions, and creating deeper interpersonal relationships, which researchers claim are beneficial to legitimizing and combating stressors such as RRCs (Burleson, 2003; Don, Mickelson, & Barbee, 2013). Because relationships are built on reciprocity, self-disclosure and support are both ways of increasing relational quality (Gordon 2014; Hays, 1984). Individuals often rely on close friends or family to validate their romantic partner choices, so when conflicts arise and are disclosed, there may be changes in support and relational quality between the discloser and their confidant (Rodrigues et al., 2017). According to Sprecher and Felmlee (1992):

The positive effect of social support from networks on relationship quality may occur because there is greater cognitive balance (due to the transitive relationship between the network, dyad, and individual), a reduction in uncertainty concerning the partner (through the information acquired from the network), a stronger sense of identity with the dyad (due to being treated as a "unit" or couple), and/or a perception of network barriers to a breakup. (p. 897)

Thus, support from informal networks of a romantic relationship often increases the relationship quality within the romantic relationship as well. Because friends and family are central sources of support in romantic relationships and are influential for romantic relational quality, adjustment, and well-being (Collins et al., 2009; Lee &

Goldstein, 2015; Rodrigues et al., 2017), it is likely that individuals experiencing RRCs will disclose to those available networks.

Social support offers many benefits. Emotional support, specifically, may be beneficial because those who offer it provide expressions of care, love, interest and concern that may help individuals with their stresses surrounding a relationship (Burleson, 2003) and in return increase their relational quality. For example, when women of sexual assault and domestic violence are able to confide in someone and receive emotional support, it increases their success of coping and understanding the experience and strengthens their relationship with the confidant (Orbuch, Harvey, Davis, & Merbach, 1994). Specifically, in RRCs, if a discloser generally values emotional support and receives it from their confidant, their stress surrounding their relationship can be more quickly alleviated (Priem & Solomon, 2015). Informational support also holds importance in RRCs because it can include explicit advice (Xu & Burleson, 2004), generating concrete information that may be beneficial in dealing with stressful events (Jiang, Drolet, & Kim, 2018).

When it comes to such intimate RRC disclosures, people often have higher disclosure efficacy toward a friend or family member because they anticipate more support from those close networks (Schrodt & Ledbetter, 2012). Perceived support from one's own family and friends has a large influence on satisfaction, love, and commitment within the relationship (Lee & Goldstein, 2016; Sprecher & Felmlee, 1992). A friend, more specifically, may be the most natural confidant for RRC disclosures because people communicate most frequently, and on a deeper level, with their friends (Gordon, 2014). This aligns well with the DD-MM as it assumes that the stronger the relational quality

between the discloser and the confidant, the more depth of disclosure there will be (Greene et al., 2012). Additionally, if a confidant gives support to the relationship (not just the discloser) about a relational conflict, the discloser may be likely to feel a higher relational quality with their partner depending on the type of perceived, and later received, support. Because of this, perceived and received social support play a vital role in the progression of the individual's romantic relationship as well (Rodrigues, Lopes, Monteiro, & Prada, 2017; Schrodt & Ledbetter, 2012).

Unfortunately, when searching for potential support, disclosure (*personal* or *relational*) harbors the risk of being misunderstood, exploited, criticized, or even rejected (Afifi & Caughlin, 2006; Sermat & Smyth, 1973). These risks could decrease the likelihood of disclosure as well as the relational quality between the discloser and confidant. A person may regulate the information they disclose in fear of altering their explicit identity and potentially having others view them in a different light after the disclosure (Afifi & Caughlin, 2006). For example, one may choose to openly disclose superficial information knowing that there are less risks involved but omit intimate information when talking to their confidant because of the fear of negative repercussions (Omarzu, 2000). Any of the above-mentioned risks could cause the discloser to perceive that their personal thoughts and feelings are invalid and should be avoided (Lepore, Fernandez-Berrocal, Ragan, & Ramos, 2007).

In the DD-MM, fear of negative responses could change whether an individual chooses to disclose to a specific confidant. Because distressing information that requires support is naturally more intimate, a positive anticipated response from the confidant and high relational quality encourages individuals to disclose, even if they know the risks

(Omarzu, 2000). According to the model, anticipated support from the confidant also influences the individual's disclosure efficacy. If the discloser does not anticipate being supported due to a lower relational quality, they are less likely to disclose to that individual (Greene, 2009), or more likely to disclose less intimate information (Omarzu, 2000). Another potential challenge is that receiving social support may actually cause more stress on the individual because they worry about whether or not their distress is visible to others (Vangelisti, 2009) or they continue to experience the stress despite having perceived social support (Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, & Farley, 1988). Furthermore, if these risks come to fruition, it would be less likely that the discloser would disclose any more information to that, or any other, confidant because of the anticipated decrease in relational quality (Omarzu, 2000). Thus, the discloser must be willing to not only share ownership of information, but to then navigate the management of information and potential changes in relational quality that come along after the disclosure.

Overall, because relationships are built on reciprocity, a way of increasing relational quality is through self-disclosure and support (Gordon 2014; Hays, 1984). People often choose to disclose to confidants with whom they have a strong established relationship with and feel more comfortable disclosing to because of more anticipated support. This aligns with the DD-MM, as it shows how relational quality influences perceived support. The higher the relational quality, the more likely one is to have higher anticipated support. Higher anticipated support then leads to higher disclosure efficacy.

The DD-MM helps explain pre-disclosure reflection and decisions. Like other models of disclosure (e.g., The Risk-Revelation Model, The Disclosure Process Model), the DD-MM's focus is geared toward the pre-assessment and process of personal

disclosure (as opposed to relational disclosure), rather than the outcomes and impacts of disclosure (Afifi & Steuber, 2009; Chaudoir & Fisher, 2010). The emphasis has primarily been on how relational quality affects perceived support for disclosure, disclosure efficacy, and depth of disclosure. Consequently, few researchers have tied back how relational quality may be affected post-disclosure as well. The current study seeks to extend our understanding of the disclosure decision-making process through consideration of relational quality pre- and post-disclosure and disclosure outcomes in a context outside of health disclosure. Adding pre- and post-disclosure measures in the current study enables better understanding of relationship quality as a potential outcome of disclosure. Furthermore, the past decade of research with the DD-MM has primarily focused on HIV, stigma, and invisible illness disclosures. Contexts outside of health are far less represented, if at all, in the literature despite Greene's (2009) assertion that the model has the capability to be used in new contexts. Considering a new context (i.e., *relational* conflict disclosures) and adding a third party to the disclosure process increases our understanding of disclosure's impact on various relationships. The new context offers a platform to understand influences of relational quality with both confidant and partner on RRC disclosures.

Overall, the introduction of the DD-MM to romantic relationship conflicts moves the model in a new direction yet to be explored and/or validated. Whether it be for personal health or relationships, disclosure is crucial for support; thus, there is reason to believe that the DD-MM should be valid in the context of RRCs. Constant evaluation and validation of previously used scales and/or models is key to assurance that they are defined and measured properly (Hair, 2010). Testing validation in this study is important

to confirm that the measures used in the DD-MM are valid, hold their reliability in different contexts allowing them to be generalizable, and are measuring what they were intended to measure. Based on the aforementioned goals of the current study, in addition to testing specific hypotheses set forth by the DD-MM, the following research questions and hypotheses were posited:

RQ1: Is the Disclosure Decision-Making Model valid for use in romantic relationship conflict disclosure?

H1: Higher relational quality with a confidant is positively related to perceived support.

H2: Higher relational quality is positively related to disclosure efficacy toward the confidant.

RQ2: How does RRC disclosure influence relational quality between discloser/confidant and discloser/romantic partner?

RQ3: How does depth of disclosure to the confidant influence relational quality between discloser/confidant and discloser/romantic partner?

CHAPTER 3: METHOD

Participants & Recruitment

To be eligible to participate the study, participants had to meet a few inclusion criteria. They had to: a) be at least 18 years or older, b) currently (at the time of the study) be in a romantic relationship, c) self-identify as having experienced a romantic relationship conflict (RRC) within the past two months, and d) have disclosed to someone outside the relationship (the confidant) about the RRC. This study aimed to be inclusive and open to participants of all genders, sexuality expressions, and ethnicities. Network sampling and social media sampling was used to obtain participants of different ages, backgrounds, and experiences (see Appendix A). My advisor and I posted a recruitment link to the survey on Facebook inviting those who met the criteria to participate in the study. Through sharing the link, our networks then had access to share the survey with their own networks. Participants were encouraged to pass along information about the study, and the corresponding link, to others who met the criteria and had an interest in participating (i.e., snowball sampling) (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017). The final sample was comprised of 81 individuals (64 females, 16 males, 1 non-specified other) who met all inclusion criteria and completed the survey in full. The sample age ranged from 19 to 60 ($M = 29.5$). The majority of participants identified as White/Caucasian ($n = 66$), ten identified as Hispanic/Latino, three were Black or African American, and two were Asian/Pacific Islander.

Procedure

Upon approval from the Institutional Review Board, data was collected through an online survey using Qualtrics. Participants clicked on the link for the survey, posted on social media, where they were first presented with a consent form. Participants' continuation of the survey (i.e., clicking "next") represented consent (see Appendix B for consent form). The surveys lasted no longer than 10 to 15 minutes for the participants. All answers remained anonymous; they were collected and submitted online with no identifying information. Only the researcher and advisor had access to the survey responses, which were stored on a password-protected computer.

Upon consent, participants were first asked to recall a time in their romantic relationship where there was a conflict they disclosed to a confidant. The participants were not primed with examples of RRCs to ensure individual interpretation of the word "conflict," which allowed for more inclusive and varied responses. Next, participants had the option to write a brief description of their romantic relationship, state what their relationship was with their confidant, and respond to questions about the conflict's intensity. Participants then answered questions about their romantic partner and confidant (e.g., relational quality, perceived support, disclosure efficacy, depth of disclosure) before and after the disclosure occurred. These measures were included in order to answer the research questions and test the validation of the original DD-MM. Items about relational quality with the confidant and the romantic partner were added to parallel the original DD-MM but were adjusted to match the current study's relationship and context. Based on the likelihood of disclosing romantic relationship conflicts to gain support, an additional measure of general perceived support (Multidimensional scale of perceived

social support; MSPSS) was added in order to test convergent validity with the DD-MM's scale of perceived support. In the original DD-MM, information assessment was measured, however this measure has many components directly related to health disclosure (i.e., stigmas, preparation, prognosis, symptoms, relevance to others) that did not translate to romantic relationship conflicts. For this reason, information assessment was omitted from this study. Finally, participants responded to three (optional) demographic questions: age, gender, and ethnicity. Specific measures for all variables are described below (see Appendix for full survey measures).

Survey Measures

Intensity of Conflict

The intensity of the conflict was measures by three 5-point Likert scales: (1) Strongly disagree, (2) Disagree, (3) Neutral, (4) Agree, (5) Strongly agree. Sample items included, "The conflict was a major problem in my romantic relationship," "The conflict was intense," and "The conflict was ongoing (rather than a brief conflict)." This measure was tested with moderately high reliability (Cronbach's α=.71).

Perceived Support

The measure of perceived support from the confidant was measured using five 5-point Likert items: (1) Strongly disagree, (2) Disagree, (3) Neutral, (4) Agree, (5) Strongly agree. The measure has been tested with high reliability (Cronbach's α = .80; Checton, 2011). Sample items included, "My confidant supports me emotionally," "My confidant helps me find support," and "My spouse offers to help me." While this measure focuses on the perceived support from the confidant, it is important to test whether that aligns with the overall perceived support that individual has for their other relationships.

For this, I have chosen to add an outside scale to also later test convergent validity. The following measure allows us to understand perceived support in a more generalizable sense for the participant.

Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support.

        The survey questions for the MSPSS were duplicated from a previous study on support (Zimet et al., 1988). The items are divided into factor groups relating to sources of social support including family, friends, and significant other. All items were measured using a 7-point Likert scale: (1) Very strongly disagree, (2) Strongly disagree, (3) Mildly disagree, (4) Neutral, (5) Mildly agree, (6) Strongly agree, (7) Very strongly agree. The MSPSS scale has been tested with high reliability (Cronbach's α=.93; Zimet et al.,1988). Sample items included, "There is a special person who is around when I am in need" (significant other), "My family really tries to help me" (family), and "I have friends with whom I can share my joys and sorrows" (friends).

Relational Quality

        The survey questions for relational quality were recreated from a previous study using the DD-MM in regard to health disclosure (Checton, 2011). The survey statements were modified from the original health focus to reflect the romantic relationship conflict context while maintaining the overall spirit of the original statements. Items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale: (1) Strongly disagree, (2) Disagree, (3) Neutral, (4) Agree, (5) Strongly agree. The relational quality measure has been tested with high reliability (Cronbach's α=.82; Checton, 2011) and was used for pre- and post-disclosure for both the romantic partner and confidant.

Relational quality with a romantic partner and confidant, pre- and post-disclosure, were measured using eight items. Sample items (pre-disclosure) included, "I enjoy spending time with my romantic partner/confidant," and "I am not close with my romantic partner/confidant" (reverse scored), and "My romantic partner/confidant and I are equally committed to our relationship." Post-disclosure relational quality was measured using the same seven items, but the phrases will relate to feelings after the disclosure. Sample items included, "My romantic partner/confidant's opinion is still just as important to me," "My romantic partner/confidant does not fully understand my wants and needs" (reverse scored), and "My romantic partner/confidant and I are still equally committed to our relationship."

Disclosure Efficacy

Disclosure efficacy (related to the confidant) was measured using a 5-point Likert scale: (1) Strongly disagree, (2) Disagree, (3) Neutral, (4) Agree, (5) Strongly agree. The measure has been tested with high reliability (Cronbach's α = .84; Checton, 2011). Sample items for this measure included, "I am confident that I can share this information about my conflict with my confidant when I want to," "I have difficulty sharing information about my conflict with my confidant" (reverse scored), and "If I want to, I can talk to my confidant about my conflict".

Depth of Disclosure to Confidant

The depth of disclosure to the confidant was also measured using a 5-point Likert scale: (1) Strongly disagree, (2) Disagree, (3) Neutral, (4) Agree, (5) Strongly agree. The measure has been tested with high reliability (Cronbach's α = .75; Checton, 2011). The four items included, "I have heart-to-heart talks with my confidant about my relational

issues," "My confidant and I only talk about superficial issues related to my relationship," "I hold back from sharing *intimate* issues about my relationship with confidant" (reverse scored), and "I share my innermost fears and concerns about my relationship with my confidant."

Analyses of each measure are described below with respect to each research question and hypothesis.

Open-ended Questions

In this study, participants had the option to write their relationship with their confidant and the type of conflict they experienced before answering any other questions. For these open-ended responses, I used open-coding to create conceptual categories (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017). For confidant relationships, responses in which the participants wrote the confidant's initials, rather than their relationship with that person, or left answers blank were omitted. Open-coding was then performed on the remaining 77% of the participants' responses that were usable for analysis ($n = 62$). Of these participants, three groups emerged for confidant relationship: friends ($n = 37$, 60%), family ($n = 23$, 37%), and formal network ($n = 2$, 3%).

The RRCs that participants experienced were also open-coded (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017) by specific wording and overall spirit of the conflict within the conflict descriptions. All of the participants ($N = 81$) gave some form of description for their experienced RRC. After open-coding the conflicts experienced and described by the participants, just over 15 major codes emerged. These codes were then analyzed for commonalities among other codes, creating 9 overall themes. For example, "daughter's schedule" and "raising grandchild" were organized into the group *family* while

"irresponsible budgeting" and "unemployment" were grouped under *work/money*. Those that were unnamed were combined under *general*. The top two most common RRCs experienced were (mis)communication ($n = 22$; 27.2%) and work/money problems ($n = 16$; 19.8%). The other themes that emerged are as follows: jealousy/trust ($n = 8$; 9.9%), habits and cleanliness ($n = 8$; 9.9%), family relations ($n = 7$; 8.6%), general ($n = 7$; 8.6%), time spent together/ future plans ($n = 6$; 7.4%), personal desires for partner ($n = 4$; 4.9%), and infidelity/sex ($n = 3$; 3.7%).

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Validation of the DD-MM in RRCs

To answer RQ3, and to understand whether the DD-MM is valid for use in romantic relationship conflict disclosure, Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was tested using SPSS Statistics AMOS 25.0 (IBM Corp., 2017). CFA was chosen over exploratory factor analysis (EFA) because previous literature suggests that the process of disclosure should be similar for both personal health and romantic conflicts, and the factors used were fixed *a priori* (Stevens, 2009). Three steps were taken to measure the validation of the DD-MM in RRCs including: (1) testing reliability by comparing Cronbach's alphas between the DD-MM and MSPSS, (2) testing for convergent reliability between MSPSS and the perceived support variable from the DD-MM, and (3) using SPSS AMOS to test for model fit. Each step and its results are provided below.

Reliability

To measure the internal reliability, Cronbach's coefficient alphas were calculated for each variable and compared to the original DD-MM and MSPSS alphas. The reason for this is to test internal consistency and scale reliability of the DD-MM (Stevens, 2009). Coefficient α for the 12-item MSPSS was .92 (MSPSS original; α = .93). The coefficient α's for the 8-item relational quality scale was .83 for romantic partner pre-disclosure, .84 for romantic partner post-disclosure, .82 for pre-disclosure confidant, and .87 for post-disclosure confidant. The original model only measured relational quality with confidant pre-disclosure which had a coefficient α of .82. For the 5-item Perceived Support scale, a

coefficient α of .79 was calculated (as compared to the original DD-MM; α = .80). Next, the coefficient α calculated for the 4-item Disclosure Efficacy scale was .84 (DD-MM; α = .84). Finally, Cronbach's α = .80 calculated for the 4-item Depth of Disclosure scale (DD-MM; α = .75). All alphas show reliability of the DD-MM measures in an RRC disclosure context and with an additional individual considered as part of the disclosure process.

<u>Convergent Validity</u>

In order to test for convergent validity, the MSPSS scores were examined for correlations with the Perceived Support scores. The DD-MM tests anticipated response through a measure of general perceived support from a confidant. The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS), a 12-item scale that measures social support, follows the same idea of testing for anticipated social support, however it is directed toward general friends, family, and significant other support, rather than toward the individual confidant. The MSPSS was originally used to understand urban adolescents support and was found to be highly reliable in testing social support from three major sources of support (i.e., friends, family, significant other) (α = .93) from those who individuals choose to disclose to (Zimet et al., 1988). This made logical sense to use this in place of the perceived support scale because it accounted for the variation among the discloser/confidant relationship types. Thus, the MSPSS was selected as a secondary scale because it measures a similar population while also having a complementary design and goal. The model would have convergent validity if there were a significant correlation between perceived support (DD-MM measure) and the MSPSS. After running a PPMCC, a significant correlation was found between the two scales' scores (r = .366, p

< .001). These scores show that the MSPSS, an already established reliable scale, could take the place of the perceived support variable measure in the DD-MM, and the model would still maintain its reliability.

<u>Model Fit</u>

Finally, using SPSS AMOS, multilevel modeling was used to obtain factor loadings to test overall model fit. To ensure proper running of AMOS testing, three of the original 81 participants were removed due to one or more missing values (n = 78). To maintain consistency with previous testing of the DD-MM, three goodness-of-fit indices were analyzed and reported in this study: Chi-square/degrees of freedom ratio (X^2/df), comparative fit index (CFI), and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) (Checton, 2011; Stevens, 2009; Taylor, 2013; Witt, 2017). X^2/df scores assess the difference between the covariances matrices (Witt, 2017), CFI scores compare the fit of a target model to the fit of a null model (Lai & Green, 2016), and RMSEA scores are used to measure the lack of fit per degree of freedom and avoid sample size related issues through evaluation of discrepancies between model and sample matrices (Browne & Cudeck, 1992; Witt, 2017). Cutoffs for acceptable values are based on those used in previous validation studies: CFI cutoff score is .90 or higher (Bentler & Bonet, 1980), RMSEA scores between .05 and .10 suggest an "acceptable" fit (Browne & Cudeck, 1992), and X^2/df cutoff is less than 3.0 (Kline, 1998).

Prior to removing the items, model fit did not meet the cutoff levels for CFI or RMSEA (X^2[116] =265.9, p < .001; RMSEA = .13; CFI = .82). Stevens (1992) claims that factor loadings above .40 are reliable, however Tabachnick and Fidell (2007) suggest using more stringent cut-offs where only factor loadings above .55 may be considered

reliable. Thus, while having a few low factor loadings does not indicate that the entire measure does not hold internal consistency, the four variables with the lowest factor loadings (those less than .55) were removed from the model to align with more rigorous goodness-of-fit and to test improvements to the overall model fit. The lowest factor loadings included one item from each variable, with a second from pre-disclosure relational quality with the confidant. These items included the following: "I do not know what to say when trying to share information with my confidant about my conflict" (reverse coded; Disclosure Efficacy), "My confidant helps me find information" (Perceived Support), "I am not close with my confidant" (reverse coded; Relational Quality), and "I couldn't ask for more from my confidant" (Relational Quality). After these four items were eliminated, the factor loadings were highly reliable (see Table 1; see Appendix M for full items) and fit indices were satisfactory for Chi-square/degrees of freedom ratio ($X^2[63] = 113.6$, $p < .001$), comparative fit index (CFI = .92) and for the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA = .10). Thus, all three fit indices suggested that the model is an acceptable fit for the same used in this context.

Table 1   Factor Loadings for DD-MM Validation Studies

Factors	Items	Factor Loadings
Disclosure Efficacy	1	.89
	2	.60
	3	.83
Perceived Support	1	.81
	2	.56
	4	.80
	5	.71
Relational Quality Confidant	1	.77
	2	.75
	4	.81
	5	.92
	6	.75
	7	.62

Hypotheses 1 and 2

In order to test the study's hypotheses regarding the relationships between relational quality and disclosure-related variables (i.e., perceived support, disclosure efficacy), two Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient tests were run. Because the disclosure was directed only to the confidant (not the relational partner), the relationship between relational quality and perceived support was only tested with regard to the confidant. As predicted, relational quality with the confidant was significantly correlated with higher perceived support ($r = .800$, $p < .001$). Relational quality with both the confidant ($r = .311$, $p < .01$) and the romantic partner ($r = .725$, $p < .001$) were significantly correlated with disclosure efficacy. Both of these confidant correlations align with previous research using the DD-MM, while the correlation between romantic partner relational quality and disclosure efficacy is an unanticipated finding.

Research Question 2

To answer RQ2, and to understand how disclosure influences relational quality, the difference between pre-disclosure relational quality scores and post-disclosure relational quality scores for the confidant and the partner were analyzed using paired-sample t-tests. For the romantic partner, there was no significant difference between mean scores for pre-disclosure relational quality (M = 4.21, SD = .63) and post-disclosure relational quality (M = 4.24, SD = .63); $t(80)$ = -.539, p = ns. For the confidant, there was no significant difference found in the scores for pre-disclosure relational quality (M = 4.12, SD = .65) and post-disclosure relational quality (M = 4.12, SD = .70); $t(80)$ = -.022, p = ns.

Research Question 3

In order to answer RQ3, and to understand how depth of disclosure influences relational quality influences, a Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient (PPMCC) test was run. The PPMCC measured correlations between depth of disclosure and the post-disclosure relational quality with the confidant and romantic partner. The relationship between depth of disclosure and post-disclosure relational quality with their romantic partner was not significant (r = .061, ns). However, there was a significant correlation between the depth of disclosure and relational quality with the confidant (r = .380, p < .001). Overall, the depth of disclosure was significantly related to confidant relational quality post-disclosure, but not romantic partner relational quality post-disclosure.

Overall, the model was found to be valid for use in the context of romantic relationship disclosures with only removing four items from the original set. This study

showed associations between relational quality, perceived support, and disclosure efficacy, as the model predicts; however, it did not show a change in relational quality between the discloser and their romantic partner/confidant after a single disclosure. One unexpected finding in adding a third person to the model, was that relational quality with one's romantic partner was positively correlated with disclosure efficacy toward the confidant. These findings will be further examined in the discussion below.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was two-fold. The first goal was to understand changes in relational quality due to RRC disclosures and the second purpose was to validate the DD-MM in the context of romantic relationship conflict disclosures. The hypotheses and research questions guiding this study were designed to examine how a theoretically-based model translates to a context in which it has yet to be introduced. While this study reiterates the importance of positive relational quality between the discloser and confidant for disclosures, testing the DD-MM in a different type of disclosure also shows the complexities of the relationships involved. There were several findings within this study that were anticipated and some that were more unexpected. In the following sections I will discuss how relational quality influences RRC disclosures and what the validation of the DD-MM means for the future of the model. After discussing implications of the findings, I will discuss limitations and possibilities for future research.

Validation of the DD-MM in RRCs

In validating the DD-MM, I first posed two hypotheses. The first was that relational quality with the confidant would positively influence perceived support. The second was that relational quality with the confidant would be positively correlated with disclosure efficacy. For the first hypothesis, results showed that the higher the relational quality one feels with their confidant, the more they feel that they will also be supported if they disclose an RRC. This aligns well with the DD-MM and previous research on relational quality and perceived support. For example, long-term relationships (i.e., best

friends, family) often have a more extensive history of disclosures, which not only increases the relational quality but also sets a precedent for positive anticipated support where advice eventually becomes expected as well (Feng & Magen, 2016).

For the second hypothesis, findings illustrated a positive correlation between and individual's relational quality with their confidant and their disclosure efficacy. In the disclosure process, the stronger the relational quality, the more disclosure efficacy one has toward their confidant, which may later lead to more depth of disclosure as well (Greene, 2009; Greene et al., 2012; Riggio et al., 2013). The current findings align well with this previous research; relational quality is related to higher disclosure efficacy, increased depth of disclosure, and increased relational quality (Greene, 2009; Greene et al., 2012; Checton et al., 2012; Levesque, Steciuk, & Ledley, 2002). It makes sense that disclosure efficacy was positively related to relational quality, especially in this context, because higher relational quality and disclosure efficacy beliefs are critical when disclosing personal and difficult information, such as an RRC (Kearney & Bussey, 2013). These findings show that the process of disclosure between the confidant and the discloser, as stated in the DD-MM, translates to the new context as well.

One unexpected finding in extending the model to include a third party was that relational quality with one's romantic partner was also positively correlated with the person's disclosure efficacy toward their confidant. These results then shift the focus of the disclosure process; disclosure should not solely be viewed as a dyadic process between the discloser/confidant dyad, rather a process that involves the subjects of the disclosure as well. Close relationships that individuals have with their support systems lead to a healthier romantic relationship (Rodrigues et al., 2017). Thus, stronger

relationships likely have stronger support systems, making individuals in strong relationships feel more efficacy toward disclosing to these networks. Another reason for this finding may be that the higher the relational quality, the more stable an individual may feel within their relationship. This could then lead them to feel less risk and more efficacy in disclosing potentially negative aspects of their relationship to their confidant. In other words, they may be confident that their relational quality will not change with their romantic partner. This could also help explain why there were no changes between the pre- and post-disclosure relational quality with the romantic partner. In sum, the results from hypothesis two suggest that when considering the triad involved in *relational* disclosures, both the discloser's relationship with the partner and confidant have a positive influence on disclosure efficacy.

In testing for model validation, convergent validity was also assessed using a scale that had been identified as reliable for the desired population (i.e., friends, family, significant other) to see if it translated to the model in place of the less comprehensive DD-MM perceived support scale. The MSPSS worked well in place of perceived support in the DD-MM with RRCs, perhaps because it measures support from the same sources that participants reported as confidants. For example, participants' chosen confidants were primarily friends and family; family mostly consisting of "mother" ($n = 14$; 65%). This may be because friends and family most often have the strongest relational quality and closeness with the discloser and are more likely to offer support (Sprecher & Felmlee, 1992), which aligns well with the variables considered in the DD-MM. This opens the door for the MSPSS to be used in the DD-MM as it accounts for different

confidants including family members, friends, or (as the MSPSS also includes) significant other.

Finally, the validation in the context of RRC disclosures also demonstrates that even though *relational* disclosures include another person (i.e., the romantic partner), they still follow similar processes as *personal* disclosures (e.g., health disclosures). While there is little literature on the disclosure process of conflicts with family and friends, researchers can now look at these different types of relational disclosures using the DD-MM. This study could also be used as a foundation for research surrounding other romantic relational disclosures that are not RRCs; there may be experiences within the relationship that were not conflicts, but still required a disclosure. For example, if an individual doesn't know how to move their romantic relationship forward, or they are trying to end the relationship, they may disclose the current state of their relationship to a friend in search of advice. These various disclosure types and targets should be investigated in future research using the DD-MM.

Relational Quality and Disclosure

This study's first research question was aimed at understanding whether disclosure of an RRC would change the relational quality between the discloser and their confidant and romantic partner. Disclosing the conflict did not seem to have an effect on relational quality of the individuals involved. However, because participants were responding to the survey retrospectively about two different time points from the past, it may have been difficult for them to differentiate their relational quality between those moments in time. Research surrounding disclosure and relational quality consistently describes the correlation between the two (e.g., Bonnan-White, Hetzel-Riggin, Diamond-

Welch, & Tollini, 2018; Greene, 2009; Greene et al., 2012). However, the number of disclosures needed before relational quality increases is unknown. Rather, disclosure and relational quality are cyclical, so the level of disclosure adjusts with the intimacy of the relationship (Levesque, Steciuk, & Ledley, 2002).

While this study focused on the relational quality from the perspective of the discloser, it was not in its scope to capture the relational quality from the perspective of the romantic partner or confidant. It is possible that the romantic partner and/or confidant experienced changes in relational quality that even the discloser (i.e., the participant) did not experience and/or was unaware of. From the romantic partner's perspective, relational quality with the discloser may increase if the discloser brings advice or new viewpoints they received from their confidant back into the relationship. For example, their partner (the discloser) may approach the conflict differently the next time, based on the advice from the confidant, which may help with decision-making or outcomes. This could then lead to more positive experiences with conflict and increased relational quality for the partner, even in cases where they are unaware the disclosure occurred. Relational quality with the discloser may instead decrease if they did not want others to know about their RRC and do find out about the disclosure. Thus, through that disclosure, their partner potentially went against their privacy boundary rules (Petronio, 2013) resulting in distrust and unwanted triangulation. Meanwhile, the confidant may have an increased relational quality with the discloser because they feel trusted enough to receive such intimate information (Omarzu, 2000). On the other hand, the confidant may deal more with the negative effects of triangulation (i.e., feeling caught) because they may feel as though they have to pick a side in the romantic relationship.

While there may be challenges, it would be beneficial for future researchers to obtain the perspectives of all individuals involved in the disclosure at multiple points in time, both pre- and post- disclosure, to better understand the changes in relational quality throughout the disclosure process. This would provide more insight to the potential relational changes and triangulation that occurs with *relational* disclosures.

Although a change in relationship quality was not established, the current results did show that there was a strong correlation between the depth of disclosure and the post-disclosure relational quality with the confidant (r = .380, p < .001). This aligns well with previous research that the more an individual discloses, the higher their relational quality will be with their confidant (Levesque, Steciuk, & Ledley, 2002). This may be because disclosing intimate information to a confidant has been found to build more trust within that relationship (Franzoi, et al., 1985; Wheeless & Grotz, 1977). Having more trust within a relationship bolsters relationship efficacy, relational quality, and an individual's disclosure efficacy toward their confidant for future disclosures (Horne & Johnson, 2018). These findings allude to the understanding that the depth of the disclosure is more important than the disclosure itself when it comes to increasing relational quality (and vice versa). The current results also showed that there was no significant correlation between depth of disclosure and the discloser's relational quality with the romantic partner (r = .061, *ns*). One might expect that the relational quality would decrease between the romantic partner and the discloser if the confidant had a negative reaction toward the disclosure, thus negatively influencing the discloser's perspective on their partner or relationship. However, the structure of this study required participants to currently be in that committed relationship, so they may have been more likely to

retrospectively consider relational quality more positively. On the other hand, one might expect the relationship quality between the partners to go up if the confidant reminded the discloser about the positive qualities of their relationship/partner, or if the discloser was able to reflect on the conflict and come back with a more positive perspective. These possibilities need to be investigated in future research.

Over the past decade, researchers have acknowledged the DD-MM's contribution to disclosure research, however the validation of this model now adds forward movement to the potential outreach of the DD-MM in new contexts. The validation results show us that the DD-MM *can* be used outside of physical and mental illnesses/conditions disclosures and that the addition of a third person does influence the disclosure efficacy of the discloser.

Limitations & Future Directions

Although this study was useful in further understanding RRC disclosures and validation of the model, it was not without limitations. The first limitation is that the sample was quite homogenous and while it has enough participants to validate, a larger sample would have been preferable. Approximately 81% of the participants were White/Caucasian ($n = 66$) and 79% were female ($n = 64$). Future research should seek to have a larger and more diverse sample of participants to truly understand the process of disclosure and changes of relational quality among a variety of individuals.

Another limitation to the study is that it was heavily retrospective of an experience, which leaves much room for memory biases. For this reason, a better research design could be implemented so that there is more involvement and measuring *during* the process of conflict and disclosure rather than retrospectively. Future

researchers should consider having individuals use a journaling method to track the changes in their relational quality before, during, and after an RRC is disclosed. Creating a more longitudinal design for this study and giving participants a constant way to score their relational quality throughout the entire experience would give a more accurate reading of the possible changes of relational quality. While this may be a longer process, the participants could track changes in real-time and not have to reflect simultaneously on how they were once feeling before, and after, a conflict disclosure.

A third limitation that should be noted is the lack of dyadic (or triadic) responses for the survey and having only one perspective represented. Using individual data to analyze dyadic relationships and disclosure processes produces limited reports of relational quality. While this study sought to add a third party to considerations of disclosure and the DD-MM, to accurately understand the impact on relational quality, both parties must be assessed. Without reports from the others involved, we cannot know the full impact of the disclosure on relational quality. If all individuals' perspectives are accounted for, there may be more accuracy in understanding the changes of relational quality between each dyad. Similarly, having more perspectives on one event may decrease memory bias from an individual perspective. Future research should explore ways to recruit couples, and confidants, so that all three individuals can report on the conflict, disclosure variables, and relational quality to understand all relationship changes.

Lastly, future research may want to re-integrate the *information assessment* component to the model that was omitted from this study. The original DD-MM explains information assessment as encompassing five main components (i.e., stigma, preparation,

prognosis, relevance to others, symptoms), and it is possible that some could be translated to RRC disclosures using different conceptualizations and measurements. For example, stigma may still be applicable for RRCs, but conceptualized as whether or not the conflict is viewed as a taboo topic (i.e., sexual issues, infidelity). Preparation may also be adapted to work in RRCs when talking about whether the person anticipated that conflict or has had past experiences with conflicts like the one experienced. Prognosis may be viewed as the anticipation of the outcome of the conflict (i.e., break up or resolution). Relevance to others may be used to understand whether the participant feels like their conflict and decisions attached to it may affect others outside the relationship. Because they are health-specific, symptoms may be best replaced with measurements of depth and breadth (i.e., range, intensity) of the conflict.

Conclusion

Overall, despite its limitations, the current study served many purposes. From researching the influence of relational quality on disclosure, to testing whether a pre-existing model translates to a new context with an additional person, there were some findings that mirrored previous literature and some that elicited more calls to action. The results of the current study have relevant implications for academics, but by giving new insights to the relationship dynamics involved in relational disclosures, they also have relevant implications in day-to-day experiences with disclosure. For example, when searching for a confidant, one may want to choose someone they anticipate receiving the most support from, which is often someone they have high relational quality with. Likewise, if someone is experiencing a relational conflict, it is important for them to be aware that while disclosing to a confidant may be helpful for support, it may also bring

that confidant into triangulation with the existing dyad. Practically speaking, these findings can be useful not only for disclosers, but confidants as well. Because support is a key aspect for enabling the disclosure process and for increasing personal well-being, providing it helps make others feel more comfortable in disclosing personal information. As such, if a confidant wants to be the recipient of deeper disclosures, a great way to do so is by showing a willingness to listen and offering signs of support. However, confidants (and disclosers) could also use this study as a warning of the possible triangulation that may occur, positive or negative, when sharing intimate relational disclosures.

One goal of this study was to examine the effects of relational quality when disclosing romantic relationship conflicts to a confidant. This research adds to the existing literature on disclosure by reiterating how more intimate disclosures are positively related to higher relational quality between the discloser and confidant. It also brings forth an important finding that relational quality with one's romantic partner is positively related to their disclosure efficacy toward their confidant. This shows that our disclosures do not live in a relational vacuum, rather there are other relationship dynamics to consider (not just the discloser/confidant dyad) when understanding the entirety of the disclosure process. This opens doors for future research to examine new components that have yet to be focused on within the disclosure process such as the relationship between the discloser and any individual whom the *relational* disclosure is about. The second goal was to validate the DD-MM in a new context. Using the DD-MM as a heuristic for understanding RRC disclosure, validation of the model adds to the ongoing conversation of the generalizability of the DD-MM. Beyond RRCs, the model

could be used in other contexts including positive or negative disclosures about friends or family (e.g., sexual abuse, parental infidelity, personal achievements, new friendships/relationships). While the current study may be only the first step for the DD-MM expansion, it is the most necessary step for this model to move forward in disclosure research.

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APPENDIX A

Recruitment Post for Social Media

Greetings! As a Graduate Student at Boise State University, I am conducting a study about disclosure of romantic relationship conflicts to a third party.

For this survey, participation is voluntary and open to all individuals over the age of 18 who identify as: (1) currently being in a romantic relationship, (2) having experienced a conflict in that relationship within the past two months, and (3) having disclosed their romantic relationship conflict to a third-party.

If you are willing to share your experience through a 10 to 15-minute survey, please click the

link: https://boisestate.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8HyK46PZXWjXx3L

Please also share our link with others you think may be willing to participate.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me (michellejimenez@u.boisestate.edu) or Dr. Kelly Rossetto (kellyrossetto@boisestate.edu).

Thank you so much for your help!!!

APPENDIX B

Consent Form (First page of Survey)

Michelle Jimenez, a graduate student at Boise State University, is conducting a research study to further understand the disclosure of romantic relationship conflicts to a third-party.

Participation is voluntary. The survey will take approximately 10-15 minutes to complete. Participant requirements for this survey include: 1.) being 18 years of age or older, 2.) identifying as currently being in a romantic relationship, and 3.) having a romantic relationship conflict within the past 2 months that you have talked to someone outside the relationship about.

This study involves no foreseeable serious risks. We ask that you try to answer all questions; however, if there are any items that make you uncomfortable or that you would prefer to skip, please leave the answer blank. Your responses are anonymous.

If you have any questions or concerns, feel free to contact Michelle or her faculty advisor:

Michelle Jimenez, graduate student Dr. Kelly Rossetto, Professor michellejimenez@u.boisestate.edu kellyrossetto@boisestate.edu

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Boise State University Institutional Review Board (IRB), which is concerned with the protection of volunteers in research projects. You may reach the board office between 8:00 AM and 5:00 PM, Monday through Friday, by calling (208) 426-5401 or by writing: Institutional Review Board, Office of Research Compliance, Boise State University, 1910 University Dr., Boise, ID 83725-1138.

Approved under IRB # 041-SB18-268

There are resources available if any of these questions raise issues that you want to discuss with a mental health professional. If you wish to speak to someone, please contact your primary physician for a recommendation or visit either 211.org or crisiscallcenter.org

If you would prefer not to participate, please do not fill out a survey.

If you consent to participate, please continue the survey by clicking the "next" arrow below.

APPENDIX C

Measure of Conflict Intensity

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
1. The conflict was a major problem in my romantic relationship.	○	○	○	○	○
2. The conflict was intense.	○	○	○	○	○
3. The conflict was ongoing (rather than a brief conflict).	○	○	○	○	○

APPENDIX D

Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS).

	Very strongly disagree	Strongly disagree	Mildly disagree	Neutral	Mildly agree	Strongly agree	Very strongly agree
1. There is a special person who is around when I am in need.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
2. There is a special person with whom I can share my joys and sorrows.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
3. My family really tries to help me.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
4. I get the emotional help and support I need from my family.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
5. I have a special person who is a real source of comfort to me.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
6. My friends really try to help me.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
7. I can count on my friends when things go wrong.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
8. I can talk about my problems with my family.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
9. I have friends with whom I can share my joys and sorrows.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

10. There is a special person in my life who cares about my feelings.

〇 〇 〇 〇 〇 〇 〇

11. My family is willing to help me make decisions.

〇 〇 〇 〇 〇 〇 〇

12. I can talk about my problems with my friends.

〇 〇 〇 〇 〇 〇 〇

APPENDIX E

Measure of relational quality with partner pre-disclosure.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
1. I enjoyed spending time with my romantic partner	○	○	○	○	○
2. My relationship with my romantic partner was important to me.	○	○	○	○	○
3. I was not close with my romantic partner. (R)	○	○	○	○	○
4. My romantic partner's opinion was important to me.	○	○	○	○	○
5. Our relationship was satisfying.	○	○	○	○	○
6. I got everything I need out of this relationship	○	○	○	○	○
7. My romantic partner did not fully understand my wants and needs. (R)	○	○	○	○	○
8. I couldn't ask for more from my romantic partner.	○	○	○	○	○

(R) item is reverse-coded

APPENDIX F

Measure of relational quality with romantic partner post-disclosure.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
1. I enjoy spending time with my romantic partner.	○	○	○	○	○
2. My relationship with my romantic partner is important to me.	○	○	○	○	○
3. I am not close with my romantic partner. (R)	○	○	○	○	○
4. My romantic partner's opinion is still just as important to me.	○	○	○	○	○
5. Our relationship is satisfying.	○	○	○	○	○
6. I get everything I need out of this relationship	○	○	○	○	○
7. My romantic partner does not understand my wants and needs. (R)	○	○	○	○	○
8. I couldn't ask for more from my romantic partner.	○	○	○	○	○

(R) item is reverse-coded

APPENDIX G

Measure of relational quality with confidant pre-disclosure.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. I enjoyed spending time with my confidant	○	○	○	○	○
2. My relationship with my confidant was important to me.	○	○	○	○	○
3. I was not close with my confidant. (R)	○	○	○	○	○
4. My confidant's opinion was important to me.	○	○	○	○	○
5. Our relationship was satisfying.	○	○	○	○	○
6. I got everything I need out of this relationship.	○	○	○	○	○
7. My confidant did not understand my wants and needs. (R)	○	○	○	○	○
8. I couldn't ask for more from my confidant.	○	○	○	○	○

(R) item is reverse-coded

APPENDIX H

Measure of perceived support from confidant.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. My confidant supports me emotionally.	○	○	○	○	○
2. My confidant is not the one I go to for support. (R)	○	○	○	○	○
3. My confidant helps me find information.	○	○	○	○	○
4. I do not get much support from my confidant. (R)	○	○	○	○	○
5. My confidant offers to help me.	○	○	○	○	○

(R) item is reverse-coded

APPENDIX I

Measure of disclosure efficacy with the confidant.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
1. I am confident that I can share this information about my conflict with my confidant when I want to.	○	○	○	○	○
2. I have difficulty sharing information about my conflict with my confidant. (R)	○	○	○	○	○
3. If I want to, I can talk to my confidant about my conflict.	○	○	○	○	○
4. I do not know what to say when trying to share information with my confidant about my conflict. (R)	○	○	○	○	○

(R) item is reverse-coded

APPENDIX J

Measure of depth of disclosure to the confidant.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
1. I have heart-to-heart talks with my confidant about my romantic relationship conflicts.	○	○	○	○	○
2. My confidant and I only talk about superficial issues related to my relationship. (R)	○	○	○	○	○
3. I hold back from sharing intimate issues about my relationship with my confidant. (R)	○	○	○	○	○
5. I share my innermost fears and concerns about my romantic relationship with my confidant.	○	○	○	○	○

Does the way you answered the questions above reflect the depth of disclosure you had with your confidant for the specific relationship conflict you've been referring to in this survey?

○ Yes

○ Somewhat

○ No

(R) item is reverse-coded

APPENDIX K

Measure of relational quality with confidant post-disclosure.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
1. I enjoy spending time with my confidant.	○	○	○	○	○
2. My relationship with my confidant is important to me.	○	○	○	○	○
3. I am not close with my confidant. (R)	○	○	○	○	○
4. My confidant's opinion is still just as important to me.	○	○	○	○	○
5. Our relationship is satisfying.	○	○	○	○	○
6. I get everything I need out of this relationship.	○	○	○	○	○
7. My confidant does not fully understand my wants and needs. (R)	○	○	○	○	○
8. I couldn't ask for more from my confidant.	○	○	○	○	○

(R) item is reverse-coded

APPENDIX L

Demographics

Please specify your age:

_____

What is your gender?

○ Female

○ Male

○ Transgender

○ Other _____

○ Prefer not to answer

What is your ethnicity?

○ White

○ Hispanic or Latino

○ Black or African American

○ Native American or American Indian
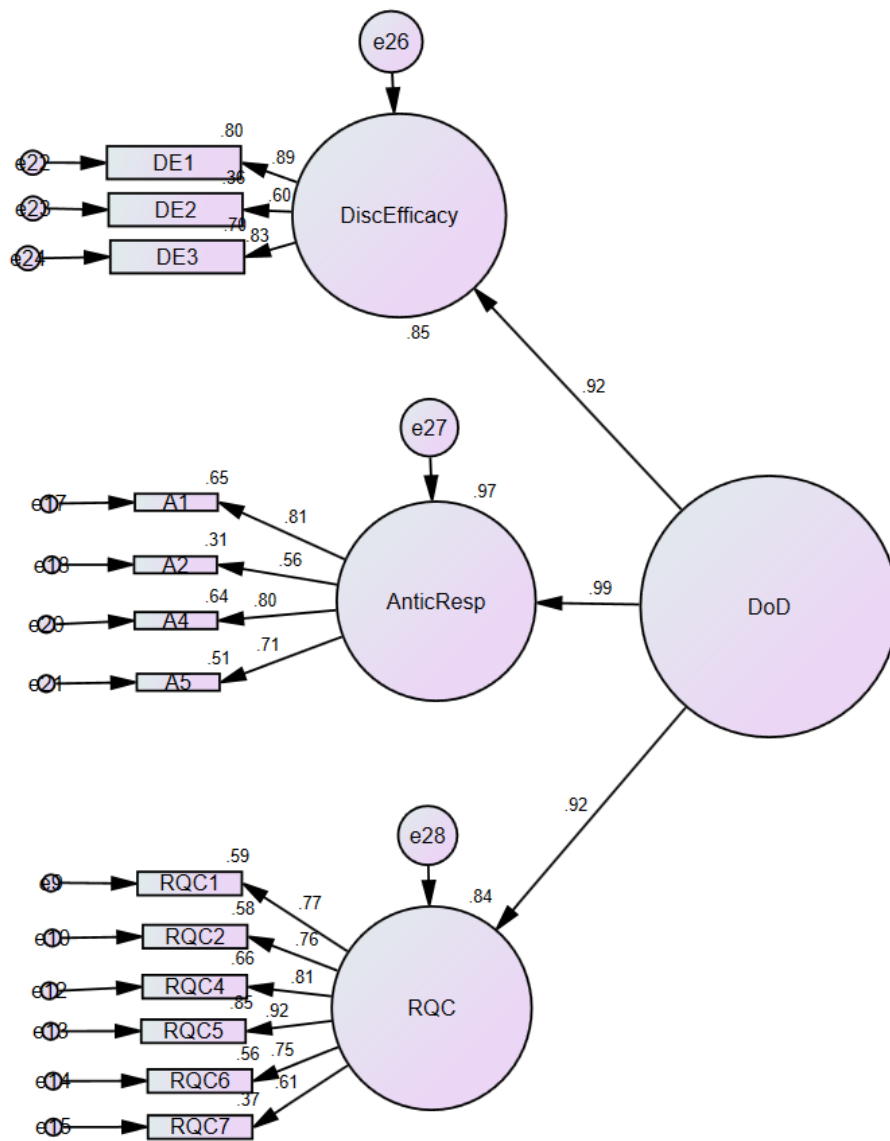
○ Asian / Pacific Islander

○ Other _____

APPENDIX M

Figure 1.   AMOS output with final factor loadings