

**Discussing my romantic problems with my best friend:  
Longitudinal examinations of relationship work in younger and older couples**

by

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## Abstract

All couples experience romantic challenges and sharing these problems with others seems innately human. This dissertation underscores the importance of carefully considering with whom and how often one should discuss romantic relationship problems. Further, it highlights the importance of taking a developmental approach when investigating these processes, as the frequency and impact of romantic problem disclosures appear to change over time. Among two distinct samples, we investigated how frequently partners discussed relationship problems with one another and with a best friend as well as the impact of these discussions on the relationship over time (e.g., romantic stability, relationship satisfaction).

The first study examined a sample of 82 romantically-involved young adults and revealed that they were more likely to discuss romantic problems with partners than with friends and that discussions with partners increased over time. Logistic regression analyses revealed that when individuals discussed relationship problems with partners, they were more likely to remain in that relationship over time, whereas discussing problems with friends was associated with greater likelihood of breaking up. Furthermore, structural equation modeling suggested that those who experienced more conflict early in the relationship were less likely to later speak with their partners about romantic problems. Failing to discuss romantic problems with either the partner or the friend was linked with greater conflict, whereas discussing the issue with only the partner was associated with less conflict. Overall, young adults appeared to benefit most when discussing their romantic challenges with their partners.

The second study examined similar processes among a sample of 53 older-adult married couples. Results suggested that both wives and husbands more frequently discussed marital problems with one another than with friends, however, these discussions decreased in frequency over time. Multi-level modeling (MLM) analyses indicated that frequently discussing marital problems with the spouse was associated with declines in marital satisfaction over the course of one year. MLM results also suggested that those who were less maritally satisfied were more likely to discuss marital problems with friends one year later. Unlike younger adults, older adults appear to benefit from not engaging in discussions of romantic problems with their spouses.

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## I. General Introduction

Intimate couples do not exist in isolation, but rather are impacted by the complex social networks in which they are embedded (Birditt & Antonucci, 2007; Felmlee, 2001). Members of a couple's social circle, including friends (Sprecher, 2011) and family members (Sprecher & Felmlee, 1992) may act as vital sources of information and support (Julien et al., 2000). The feedback provided by such individuals shapes multiple avenues of couple functioning, from contributing to the formation of the couples' dyadic identity to influencing couple dynamics (Etcheverry & Agnew, 2004; Sprecher, 1988). Although the social network appears to influence intimate relationships, we still know very little regarding the nature of what couples discuss with their friends. Despite the fact that the empirical literature on the influence of the social network on intimate relationships is relatively underdeveloped in comparison to work on other predictors of relationship functioning (e.g., personality, attachment; Feeney & Noller, 1990; Lehnart & Neyer, 2006), those attempting to understand the dyadic processes of successful couples continue to include a social component in their theoretical frameworks.

Huston (2000) presented a model that suggested that the social network is a critical piece for understanding intimate relationships. In his framework of marriage as a behavioral ecosystem (see Figure 1), he posited that three distinct factors, 1) the macroenvironment, 2) individual characteristics, and 3) relationship behavior in context, should be considered when attempting to understand intimate relationship functioning and outcomes. With regards to the marital relationship in context, Huston asserted that both interactions within the dyad and interactions with members of the social network contribute to relationship functioning. He added that

although dyadic interactions form the foundation of intimate relationships, the social network contributes both indirectly and directly to intimate-partner relationships. Merely being in the presence of some friends is enough to indirectly impact certain couple interactions (e.g., displays of affection). Moreover, Huston asserted that couples' joint and independent direct interactions with friends also impact the couple's relationship. Therefore, researchers aiming to capture factors influencing intimate relationship dynamics must begin with a theoretical framework that accounts for the social influences that affect couples as their relationships progress.

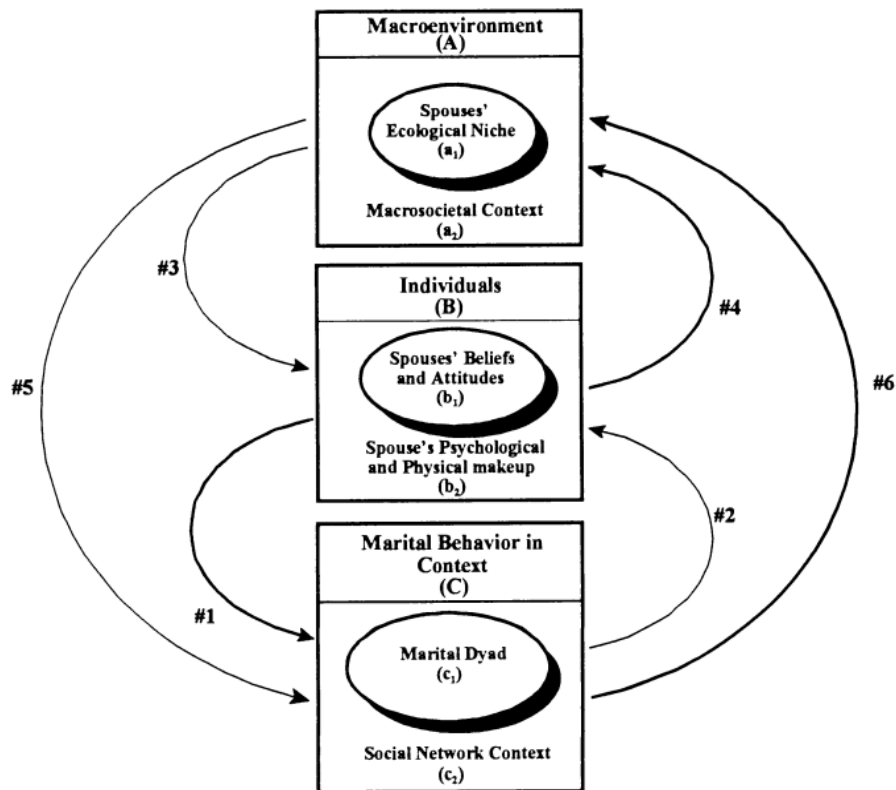


Figure 1. *Huston's (2000) Three-level Model for Viewing Marriage*

Although friends and others clearly impact intimate relationships in meaningful ways, a couples' social network is dynamic, which suggests that its impact on a couple may change over the lifespan (Luong, Charles, & Fingerman, 2011). Explaining these changes in the network, Carstensen's (1992) Socioemotional Selectivity Theory (SST) posits that individuals

intentionally prune their social network across the lifespan in order to maximize emotionally-rewarding experiences as they grow older. Therefore, although the size of the social network tends to decrease with age, it increases in quality. The benefits of selectively trimming the social network with age are evident, as older adults report having more satisfying and positive interactions with members of their social network than do younger adults (Charles & Piazza, 2007). Due to the fact that older adults tend to retain friends who are supportive of and invested in the well-being of their marital relationship (Luong et al., 2011), it is likely that members of the social network in older adulthood may thus be more inclined to offer positive feedback about one's intimate relationship. Further, Sprecher, Felmlee, Orbuch, and Willetts (2002) suggested that young adults' social networks are not as supportive as is often assumed due to friends occasionally offering feedback that is incorrect or unsupportive of the couple. Therefore, consistent with the tenets of SST, it appears that the influence of the social network on intimate relationships may change as a function of an individual's age and life stage.

Nicely combining Huston's (2000) social ecology framework and Carstensen's (1992) SST is a small body of work that examines the extent to which friends' influence is explicitly solicited by intimate partners and the effects of this on the intimate relationship. Pioneering this line of work, Helms, Crouter, and McHale (2003) examined how the disclosures of marriage problems to spouses and friends, a construct known as "marriage work" (MW), were related to marital functioning. They noted significant gender differences in MW behaviors with husbands primarily disclosing marital problems to spouses, and wives disclosing nearly equally to spouses and friends. They found that when wives exclusively turned to friends to discuss marital challenges, spouses reported less marital love and more arguing (see also Proulx, Helms, & Payne, 2004). Extending this work to a sample of romantically-involved younger adults, Jensen

and Rauer (in press) found that both males and females turned more frequently to partners than to friends when experiencing intimate-relationship problems at this earlier romantic stage.

Although the authors also found that young adults who turned exclusively to friends had poorer romantic functioning, Jensen and Rauer additionally discovered that turning to *both* the partner and a friend often resulted in the most favorable evaluations of the intimate relationship, especially for males. Such findings hearken back to Huston's (2000) claim that both dyadic interactions and contact with members of the social network uniquely and significantly impact intimate relationships.

Despite the meaningful contributions made by these studies to what we know regarding the social network and intimate relationships, conclusions drawn from their findings are limited due to the nature of the samples examined and the design of the studies. First, previous work examining disclosures to partners and friends did not account for the dyadic nature of intimate couples. For example, Jensen and Rauer (in press) examined intimately-involved individuals, but not couples. Therefore, their results should be interpreted with caution given that disclosure patterns from both partners likely impact relationship satisfaction (Morry, 2005). Further, even though Helms and colleagues' (2003) examined both spouses, their use of separate regression models for husbands and wives did not account for the linked nature of the data. To simultaneously examine outcomes for both members of the dyad, a technique such as Actor-Partner Interdependence Modeling (APIM; Cook & Kenny, 2005) or multi-level modeling (MLM; Hruschka, Kohrt, & Worthman, 2004) should be utilized. Moreover, previous studies in this area have been cross-sectional in design, which prevents conclusions about whether turning outside of your relationship is a cause or a consequence of relationship distress. It is equally plausible that an intimate partner would turn outside the relationship to disclose to a friend as a

result of an unsatisfying intimate relationship as it is that disclosing to a friend instead of a partner could lead to less favorable evaluations of the intimate relationship. Only by examining couples over time can researchers begin to identify the etiology of these processes.

The two studies that constitute this dissertation will extend current research by addressing these limitations and by utilizing SST to understand how individuals tap into their social networks over time at different relationship and life stages. Although the two studies nicely complement one another, each stands on its own as a unique and necessary addition to the literature. Study 1, a follow-up examination of Jensen and Rauer's (in press) study of romantic-problem disclosures in young adulthood, examines the extent to which disclosures to partners and friends predict changes in the stability and quality (i.e., love, conflict) of the romantic relationship. Building off of this work, Study 2 takes a dyadic approach via MLM to examine the interplay between spouses' MW and marital satisfaction over time in a sample of older couples, a heretofore unstudied population that is uniquely situated in an emotionally-rewarding social context. Given the complexity of the marital relationship and its implications for adult and child (Brown, 2010; Waite & Lehrer, 2003) well-being, researchers must continue their efforts to understand how partners maintain a healthy and positive intimate relationship. Given that both theoretical and empirical work highlight the importance of the social network for these efforts (Helms et al., 2003; Huston, 2000), these two proposed studies make a significant contribution to the literature by illuminating how romantic disclosures to both partners and friends are linked to romantic functioning over time.

II. Paper 1 - Young adults' relationship work over time: The impact of disclosing romantic problems to partners and friends

Abstract

The current study examined the frequency with which 82 young adults from the Southeastern United States discussed romantic relationship problems with their partners and with a best friend, a process referred to as “relationship work” (RW). Results from data collected over two time points revealed no gender differences in RW patterns, yet suggested young adults engage in more frequent RW with partners than with friends. Logistic regression analyses suggested that frequent RW with partner predicted greater romantic stability, whereas frequent RW with friend was linked with increased likelihood of romantic breakup. Results using structural equation modeling indicated that those reporting greater conflict were less likely to later share their romantic problems with their partners. Finally, moderation analyses suggested that individuals who did not discuss romantic problems with either their partners or friends experienced greater romantic conflict later in the relationship, whereas those who frequently discussed these problems with only their partner reported less conflict. Results suggest that discussing romantic challenges with one's partner likely has a positive impact on the relationship both immediately and over time. Clinicians may therefore significantly aid couples by encouraging partners to turn to one another rather than to friends to work through romantic trials.

*Keywords:* young adults, romantic disclosure, romantic stability, romantic quality

## Young adults' relationship work over time: The impact of disclosing romantic problems to partners and friends

Successful romantic relationships in young adulthood have been found to promote health and well-being including lower rates of physical and emotional distress and more favorable physiological functioning (Schneiderman, Zagoory-Sharon, Leckman, & Feldman, 2012). Thus, it is critical that we understand factors influencing the ability to maintain such relationships over time across young adulthood once they are formed (Conger, Cui, Bryant, & Elder, 2000). One powerful but understudied predictor of romantic stability during this time is the social network in which the relationship occurs (Huston, 2000). Although there is variability in the extent to which individuals and couples permit influence from network members, the importance of the social network is not surprising as romantic relationships begin and develop in the presence of others. Members of the social circle are not mere passive observers of the relationship but oftentimes actively affect the romantic relationship in both positive and negative ways (Felmlee, 2001; Sprecher, Felmlee, Orbuch, & Willets, 2002). For example, friends often serve as sources of aid when young couples face challenges, providing constructive insight to help the young adult learn from and process romantic experiences (Seiffge-Krenke, 2003; Sprecher et al., 2000), which is one reason Seiffge-Krenke suggested that social connections with friends are linked to romantic relationship stability in young adulthood. Given that friends appear to play a key role in romantic stability in young adulthood, it is imperative to understand how turning to one's friend when problems arise may affect both the short- and long-term success of one's romantic relationship. Recent research finds that the effects of turning to one's friend may depend largely on whether it is complementary or supplementary to turning to one's romantic partner. Examining a construct they identified as "marriage work", or the disclosure of romantic issues to a spouse or close

friend, Helms, Crouter, and McHale (2003) examined a sample of 142 middle-aged married couples with children. They found that middle-aged wives who disclosed marital problems to friends and excluded husbands from such discussions experienced poorer marital outcomes (e.g., less love, more arguing). Jensen and Rauer (in press) expanded upon these findings by examining the frequency of “relationship work” (RW), or the disclosure of romantic problems to partners and best friends, in a sample of 106 romantically-involved young adults. Similar to Helms and colleagues, they found that engaging in frequent RW with friends to the exclusion of romantic partners was linked with poorer romantic outcomes (e.g., less happiness, commitment, love), whereas engaging in frequent RW with partners, regardless of RW performed with friends, was associated with positive romantic functioning.

Although these studies significantly enhance our comprehension of how partners involve friends in romantic problems and how this is linked with romantic quality, capturing the effects of disclosing problems to friends is challenging given that such disclosures may vary over time according to the current state of the romantic union and the friendship. Because we know that both romantic (Raley, Crissey, & Muller, 2007) and social (Roberts, Caspi, & Moffitt, 2003) relationships in young adulthood are dynamic, assessing the frequency and impact of RW with partners and friends at only one time point offers a limited view of the potential consequences of these disclosures for the couple’s relationship. Further, due to the fact that previous research on RW has been cross-sectional, researchers have not yet been able to comment on direction of effects. Do individuals turn to friends when their relationship is troubled or does turning to friends cause problems in the romantic relationship? Accordingly, to address this gap in the existing literature, the current study will take a dynamic approach by capturing RW over approximately one year and its effects on romantic stability and functioning. In this study we aim



to (1) capture change in frequency of RW with partners and friends over time, (2) discover whether or not RW is linked with romantic relationship maintenance or dissolution, and (3) to describe how RW with partners and friends predicts change in romantic love and conflict.

### **Discussing Romantic Problems with Partners and Friends**

Experiencing romantic difficulties is inevitable, yet not devastating for most couples (Shulman, 2003). Couples have developed numerous ways for coping with relationship problems such as practicing forgiveness (Paleari, Regalia, & Fincham, 2010) or taking the perspective of the partner (Schroder-Abe & Schutz, 2011). Regardless of the specific strategy chosen to handle the issue, overcoming romantic challenges begins with the ability to openly disclose and discuss problems (Caughlin & Afifi, 2004). Not only has the disclosure of personal problems to others (e.g., partners, friends, family members) been linked with increased physical and mental health (Pennebaker, 1990), but specifically discussing romantic challenges with partners is linked to greater romantic satisfaction (Finkenauer & Hazan, 2000). On the other hand, when partners avoid discussing romantic issues, they experience lower perceptions of romantic closeness (Dillow, Dunleavy, & Weber, 2009). Downey, Freitas, Michaelis, and Khouri (1998) suggested that some individuals fear disclosing romantic problems to their partners because they fear rejection or conflict escalation. Although some partners may feel that avoiding certain problematic topics is beneficial, topic avoidance often leads to perceptions of concealment, which have been linked with reports of poorer romantic well-being and feelings of romantic exclusion (Finkenauer, Kerkhof, Righetti, & Branje, 2009). Therefore, it appears that romantic relationships benefit much more from open discussions of romantic problems as opposed to avoiding discussions of such topics with partners. It is important to note that the vast majority of studies examining communication about romantic problems between members of a romantic

dyad have been conducted among White, middle-class individuals in relatively healthy and stable romantic relationships. Additionally, many of these studies have examined samples of newlywed or middle-aged couples and individuals.

Although discussing romantic challenges with a partner has been found to be beneficial for both men's and women's relationships, women seem to be more willing than men to engage in such discussions with a partner (Barbee et al., 1993), perhaps because women are socialized to be more expressive than are men (Hook, Gerstein, Detterich, & Gridley, 2003). Guerrero and Afifi (1995) noted that men, more than women, avoided discussing specific issues including romantic challenges and dating experiences. This comes as no surprise given that men in the United States are typically socialized to appear in control, to appear less reliant upon others, and to maintain a position of leadership and assertion (Reevey & Maslach, 2001). Despite men's hesitancy to discuss romantic challenges, the benefits of disclosing romantic problems persist for both sexes, with some researchers actually discovering that men may experience greater personal and relational gains from open discussions of such issues (Jensen & Rauer, in press).

In the pioneering study of this type of relationship work, Helms and colleagues' (2003) found that these discussions of marital problems were not limited to the couple, but often involved a third-party in the form of a close friend. Further, involving a friend in discussions of one's marriage was found to have significant effects on the marriage for some wives. Wives who turned exclusively to their friends about their marital problems, thus excluding their husbands from these discussions, reported poorer marital functioning (i.e., less love, greater ineffective arguing). In contrast, when wives frequently addressed marital issues with husbands, the act of turning to a friend was unrelated to love or ineffective arguing. These findings were supported in a follow-up study of wives conducted by Proulx, Helms, and Payne (2004). Further, recent work

by Jensen and Rauer (in press) on young adults also found that despite both sexes disclosing more to partners than to friends, those individuals who turned exclusively to friends reported experiencing poorer romantic functioning (e.g., less happiness, commitment, and love).

Although these findings certainly suggest the importance of disclosing relationship problems to partners, the cross-sectional nature of these studies prevents definitive conclusions about the nature and effects of relationship work. Does RW with a friend lead to declines in romantic relationship quality or does RW with a friend develop as a result of negative relationship functioning? Although certain studies (Jensen & Rauer, in press) have argued that their direction of analyses was theoretically driven, whereby RW with a friend leads to romantic problems, they cannot rule out the possibility that individuals in an unfulfilling romantic relationship may be more likely to turn outside their relationship to discuss romantic problems. Perhaps some participants turned to friends only after it became clear that turning to the partner would not improve the relationship. Only assessing RW and romantic functioning over time can show direction of influence. Not only will examining these constructs over time establish whether RW patterns drive romantic functioning or vice versa, but will also allow us to account for the natural progression that occurs in relationships over time as well as their stability (Shulman, Tuval-Mashiach, Levran, & Anbar, 2006). Specifically, as intimacy grows in a relationship, so likely will self-disclosure (Kito, 2005; Schneiderman et al., 2012). On the other hand, turning to someone other than the partner may convey exclusion and distance (Finkenauer et al., 2009), both of which are predictors of divorce (Gottman & Levenson, 2002), and thus RW with a friend may predict romantic relationship instability. We anticipate that these changes in disclosure over time will influence the romantic relationship functioning and stability in significant ways.

## **Change in Romantic Relationships in Young Adulthood**

Examination of relationship stability over time is especially pertinent among young adults (i.e., those between 18 and 30 years old) given that romantic relationships at this time are often turbulent. Raley and colleagues (2007) examined unmarried young adults ages 18 to 26 and found varying levels of commitment both within and across relationships (Raley et al., 2007). Banker, Kaestle, and Allen (2010) conducted a qualitative study in which they asked young adults ages 18 to 24 to describe how they knew they were in a romantic partnership. Participants were found to use a complex array of labels and definitions regarding romantic standing, leading Banker and colleagues to posit that young adulthood is a time when defining romantic status and determining levels of romantic quality (e.g., love) may be somewhat nebulous. Upon concluding their examination of 285 Israeli young adults, averaging 23 years of age, Shulman, Scharf, Livne, and Barr (2013) asserted that because young adults increasingly engage in casual romantic encounters, examining factors contributing to romantic stability over time is vital to gain an accurate understanding of young people's romantic relationships.

Not only has previous research established that romantic conflict predicts relationship stability over time (Shulman et al., 2006), but it also appears that communication with partners and others about this conflict predicts stability. In a longitudinal study of the effects of self-disclosure on romantically-involved young adults' relationships, Sprecher and Hendrick (2004) examined a sample of 101 heterosexual couples who had been dating for an average of 18 months. They discovered that greater self-disclosure to a partner was positively associated with relationship satisfaction, love, and commitment over time. The more women perceived the partner disclosed at Time 1, the less likely the couple was to break up by Time 2. Not only did their findings highlight the importance of capturing men's disclosure patterns to partners, but

also they suggested that disclosure to a romantic partner may predict romantic stability over time in young adulthood. Beyond communicating with one's partner, young adults also frequently disclose romantic information to friends and others (Sprecher et al., 2002), and these disclosures affect romantic stability. Sprecher and Felmlee (1992) found that among dating couples in their early twenties, greater support from family and friends of romantic couples predicted increased love, satisfaction, and commitment in the romantic union in young adulthood over a two-year span. Findings from these longitudinal studies suggest that communication about the romantic relationship with both partners and members of the social network contributes to whether or not couples who have been dating for several months will remain together in young adulthood. What is now needed is a study that unites these two lines of research by examining disclosure of romantic problems to both partners and friends over time, as this will better capture how communication about the romantic relationship predicts romantic stability.

### **Current Study**

Because healthy romantic relationships in young adulthood have been linked to better physical and psychological health (Burman & Margolin, 1992), researchers should focus on identifying antecedents predictive of healthy romantic functioning. Previously, researchers have considered individual antecedents (e.g., attachment; Simpson, Collins, Tran, & Haydon, 2007) as well as couple factors including communication patterns such as negative affect reciprocity, harsh start-up, de-escalation strategies (Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998). Additionally, as suggested by Huston (2000), some studies have considered the impact of interactions with friends on romantic stability in young adulthood (Seiffge-Krenke, 2003). However, very few studies have considered how specifically involving friends in romantic problems shapes romantic dynamics. With few exceptions (Jensen & Rauer, in press), those that

have examined the impact of disclosing romantic problems to partners and friends have focused primarily on middle-aged couples with children (e.g., Helms et al, 2003; Proulx et al., 2004). Given that young adulthood represents a time of life involving considerable instability, especially with regards to romantic relationships (Banker et al., 2010), researchers should now not only turn their attention to understanding disclosure processes at this critical life stage, but also track disclosure patterns to partners and friends over time and their potential effects on relevant romantic constructs. Not only will this allow researchers to chart natural relationship trajectories and capture precursors of romantic stability, but also it will enable researchers to identify the potential etiology of romantic problems and instability.

Accordingly, the present study will consider romantic disclosures to partners and friends as well as self-reports of love and conflict from romantically involved young adults across two time points. This data will help us answer the following questions: 1) Does the frequency of disclosure of romantic problems to partners and friends, or RW, change as romantic relationships progress across young adulthood? 2) Does RW with partners and friends predict romantic stability among young adults? 3) Do these patterns predict change in romantic outcomes (e.g., love, conflict) over time among young adults (see Figures 1 and 2)? This study aims to provide a greater understanding of the antecedents of romantic problems and instability in young adulthood and aid researchers and clinicians alike as they seek to improve the quality of romantic relationships in young adulthood.

## **Method**

### **Participants and Procedures**

Data in this paper are drawn from a larger study and only relevant procedures are discussed. One hundred and six romantically-involved young adults from a Southern University

in the United States participated at Time 1 (T1). Participants were recruited from statistics, social sciences, engineering, and political science courses. To qualify for the study, individuals had to be 19 years or older. At T1, participants were 21.3 years old ( $SD = 1.7$ ; range 19-30 years), with 77% of the sample being female and most indicating they were Caucasian (88%). Average romantic relationship length was 25 months ( $SD = 20.2$ ; range 1-96 months). None of the participants reported having children. Of the participants, 91% reported having same-sex best friends. Participants' average friendship length was 8.3 years ( $SD = 5.7$ ; range 1-22 years).

Eighty-two of the original 106 participants agreed to participate in the second wave of data collection and completed Time 2 (T2) questionnaires, reflecting a retention rate of 77%. Of those who completed a T2 questionnaire, 93% were unmarried and 7% married. The 24 participants who did not complete the T2 questionnaire either asked not to be recontacted ( $n = 12$ ) or were unable to be reached ( $n = 12$ ). Of the 82 participants that completed both T1 and T2 questionnaires, 56 indicated that they remained in the same romantic relationship approximately one year later, with 26 indicating that they had broken up with their former romantic partners. Data were analyzed for all 106 participants at T1 and all 82 who completed a T2 questionnaire, regardless of relationship status. Attrition analyses revealed that compared with the retained sample, young adults lost to attrition did not differ based on age ( $t(104) = .18, p = .86$ ), sex ( $t(104) = 1.75, p = .09$ ), romantic relationship length ( $t(104) = .40, p = .69$ ), or friendship length ( $t(104) = .78, p = .44$ ). Attrition analyses further revealed that the retained sample did not differ from those lost to attrition based on RW with partner ( $t(104) = 1.35, p = .18$ ), RW with friend ( $t(104) = .18, p = .86$ ), love ( $t(104) = .92, p = .36$ ), or conflict ( $t(104) = .92, p = .36$ ). Therefore, those lost to attrition did not significantly differ on any variable examined in the current study.

Participants completed both the T1 and T2 questionnaires in one sitting (usually 15-20 minutes). They were compensated with extra credit points in their classes for completing the T1 questionnaire. Participants who completed the T2 questionnaire were compensated ten dollars for their time.

## **Measures**

**Relationship work.** The degree to which participants engaged in RW with their romantic partner and with a best friend was measured at both T1 and T2 using a modified version of the Marriage Work Scale (Helms, Crouter, & McHale, 2003; Jensen & Rauer, in press). This measure can be seen in Appendix A. This scale assesses the degree to which participants bring up romantic problems to a partner and to a best friend on a 9-point scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 9 (*always*). When reporting on discussions with a friend, participants were specifically asked to report about their “best friend, who was not the romantic partner”. For purposes of the current study, we used 5 items from the original 10-item scale. The retained items were those that were more relevant to younger couples (i.e., dropped items related to childrearing and couple household tasks): relationship communication, decision making, current financial situation, relations with the partner’s family members, and social life and leisure (e.g., “How often do you bring up the way that you and your partner spend free time (e.g., the activities you do, and/or the people you socialize with)?”). Participants were specifically directed to report on romantic relationship “concerns or problems” in each area and how frequently these concerns were discussed with a partner and with a friend. The modified version of this scale demonstrated good reliability for both the romantic partner scale (T1:  $\alpha = .79$ , T2:  $\alpha = .77$ ) and the best friend scale (T1:  $\alpha = .80$ , T2:  $\alpha = .85$ ).



**Romantic love.** To assess love for the partner, participants completed the 10-item love subscale from Braiker and Kelly's (1979) Intimate Relations Questionnaire. This subscale measured the individual's degree of belonging, closeness, and interdependence with a romantic partner (e.g., "To what extent do you have a sense of belonging with your partner?") on a 9-point scale (1 = *not at all* to 9 = *very much*; T1:  $\alpha = .82$ , T2:  $\alpha = .84$ ).

**Romantic conflict.** To assess conflict in the relationship, participants completed the 5-item conflict subscale from Braiker and Kelly's (1979) Intimate Relations Questionnaire. This subscale measured the individual's overt behavioral conflict and communication of negative affect with a romantic partner (e.g., "How often do you and your partner argue with one another?") on a 9-point scale (1 = *not at all* to 9 = *very much*; T1:  $\alpha = .80$ , T2:  $\alpha = .76$ ). Braiker and Kelly's Questionnaire can be seen in Appendix B.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

To answer our first research question, we examined descriptive statistics, correlations, and *t*-tests to determine whether or not the frequencies of RW with partner and friend significantly change over time and whether this depends on gender. To answer our second research question regarding whether or not RW predicts romantic stability, we utilized logistic regression to determine the fitted odds ratio of an individual in our sample remaining in a romantic relationship at T2 based on RW behaviors with both the partner and the best friend at T1. To answer our final research question, we conducted cross-lagged analyses controlling for autoregressive effects to examine how RW behaviors at T1 predicted romantic love and conflict at T2. To ensure a conservative estimation, we attempted to reduce potential confounds by controlling for length of romantic relationship, length of friendship, age, and sex as these may influence romantic relationship functioning and disclosures (Aron et al., 2005; Kito, 2005;

Sprecher, 1999). Also to note, due to sample size constraints, we examined autoregressive effects for love and conflict in separate models (See Figures 1 and 2). To determine whether or not the relationship between RW with partner and T2 love (or conflict) was influenced by level of RW with friend, we also included in our models an interaction term representing the interaction between RW with partner at T1 and RW with friend at T1. Significant interactions were plotted using equations containing high and low values of RW with partner and RW with friend (plus and minus one standard deviation from the centered mean). To note, all continuous controls and predictors were centered prior to analyses (Aiken & West, 1991).

## Results

Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations are presented for all study variables in Table I.

### **Does Relationship Work Change Over Time in Young Adulthood?**

The first goal of our study was determine whether or not the frequencies of RW with partner and friend significantly change over time and whether this depends on gender (see Table 1). To note, the somewhat small number of men in our sample should be taken into account when interpreting results as the effects for males may not be as stable as those for females. Paired *t*-tests to examine mean-level differences revealed that participants engaged in more frequent RW with their partners at T2 than at T1 ( $t(55) = 3.56, p < .001; d = .48$ ). Young adults, however, did not engage in more frequent RW with their friends at T2 than at T1 ( $t(55) = .94, p = .35; d = .12$ ). *T*-tests also revealed that young adults engaged in significantly more RW with partners than with friends at both T1 ( $t(55) = 7.70, p = .00; d = 1.03$ ) and T2 ( $t(55) = 9.12, p = .00; d = 1.81$ ). *T*-tests to examine sex differences revealed that females ( $M = 6.51$ ) and males ( $M = 7.28$ ) did not differ in the frequency of RW with partner at T1 ( $t(54) = 1.71, p = .33; d = .59$ ), nor did females ( $M = 7.28$ ) and males ( $M = 7.38$ ) differ in RW with partner at T2 ( $t(54) = .24, p$

= .74;  $d = .09$ ). Additional  $t$ -tests examining sex differences revealed that females ( $M = 4.80$ ) and males ( $M = 5.04$ ) did not differ in the frequency of RW with friend at T1 ( $t(54) = .44, p = .73; d = .16$ ), nor did females ( $M = 5.03$ ) and males ( $M = 5.30$ ) differ in RW with friend at T2 ( $t(54) = .43, p = .19; d = .15$ ). To note,  $t$ -tests revealed that T2 love was significantly greater than T1 love ( $t(54) = 4.39, p = .00; d = .58$ ). Also,  $t$ -tests revealed that T2 conflict was marginally lower than T1 conflict ( $t(54) = 1.75, p = .09; d = .23$ ). In conclusion, we found no gender differences in RW with partner or friend at either time point. Further, although participants increased their RW with partners from T1 to T2, their RW with friends remained stable over time.

### **Does RW with Partners and Friends Predict Romantic Stability?**

Next, to determine whether RW predicted romantic relationship stability, we conducted a logistic regression to determine the fitted odds ratio of an individual in our sample remaining in a romantic relationship at T2 based on RW behaviors with both the partner and the best friend at T1. To note, RW with partner at T1 was significantly positively correlated with romantic stability, suggesting that early RW with partner was linked with greater romantic stability (see Table 1). RW with friend at T1, however, was not significantly correlated with stability.

A summary of our findings using logistic regression analyses can be found in Table 2. To ensure a conservative estimation of our findings, romantic relationship length, friendship length, age, and sex were included as controls in the model. To note, the Nagelkerke R-square value (which is similar to the  $R^2$  in multiple regression; Peng, Lee, & Ingersoll, 2002) indicated that we accounted for 24% of the variance in romantic stability. Logistic regression analyses revealed a significant positive association between RW with partner and romantic stability (see Table 2), suggesting that greater RW with partner at T1 was linked with greater romantic stability. Furthermore, the odds ratio indicated that for every one unit increase in RW with partner at T1,

participants were 2.09 times more likely to remain in the same relationship over time, controlling for all other variables in the model. In other words, a participant who had a 6 (i.e., often bring up relationship problems) on RW with partner was twice as likely to remain in the same relationship one year later as someone who had a 5 (i.e., sometimes bring up relationship problems) on RW with partner. Conversely, results revealed a significant negative association between RW with friend and romantic stability, suggesting that greater RW with friend at T1 was associated with less romantic stability (see Table 2). The odds ratio indicated that for every one unit increase in RW with friend, the odds of remaining in the same relationship decrease by 34%, controlling for all other variables in the model<sup>1</sup>. Thus, we discovered that greater RW with partner at T1 predicted greater odds of remaining in the same relationship over time, whereas greater RW with friend at T1 predicted greater likelihood of breaking up with one's partner.

### **Do Early RW Patterns Predict Later Romantic Outcomes?**

To determine whether T1 RW patterns predict T2 romantic outcomes (e.g., love, conflict), we utilized Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), including cross-lagged analyses controlling for autoregressive effects in MPlus 6.12 (Muthen & Muthen, 2009). Given our limited power due to our sample size, love and conflict were examined in separate models. To ensure a conservative estimation for both models, we controlled for length of romantic relationship, length of friendship, age, and sex on all dependent variables in the models. Finally, independent variables were allowed to covary with one another as were dependent variables.

Looking first at love, the fully-saturated model (i.e., a perfect fitting model with zero degrees of freedom; Cook & Kenny, 2005) explained meaningful variance in T2 RW with partner, in T2 RW with friend, and in T2 love. As expected, there was significant stability over time in the constructs. RW with partner at T1 significantly predicted RW with partner at T2; RW

with friend at T1 significantly predicted RW with friend at T2; love at T1 significantly predicted love at T2 (see Figure 1). No other longitudinal links were found between T1 and T2 constructs. Thus, neither T1 RW with partners nor with friends predicted T2 love. Looking at the concurrent links between the constructs, T1 love was significantly positively correlated with T1 RW with partner, but was not associated with T1 RW with friend. Also, T1 RW with partner was significantly positively correlated with T1 RW with friend. Similarly, T2 love was significantly correlated with T2 RW with partner but was not associated with T2 RW with friend. T2 RW with partner was significantly positively correlated with T2 RW with friend.

Looking next at conflict, the fully-saturated model explained meaningful variance in T2 RW with partner, in T2 RW with friend, and in T2 conflict. In addition to the stability found in relationship work with partners and friends, there was significant stability over time in conflict (see Figure 2). Further, T1 conflict significantly negatively predicted T2 RW with partner, suggesting that the more conflict reported at T1, the less RW individuals engaged in with partners at T2. We also discovered that the interaction between RW with partner and RW with friend significantly predicted T2 conflict (see Figure 2). To illustrate how the relationship between T1 RW with partner and T2 conflict was moderated by T1 RW with friend, we plotted equations containing high and low values (i.e., one standard deviation above and one standard deviation below the mean) of RW with partner and RW with friend and mean values of the controls (see Figure 3). We found that at low RW with partner, those who engaged in low RW with friend reported greater conflict than those who engaged in high RW with friend. Alternatively, at high RW with partner, those engaging in high RW with friends reported greater conflict compared to those engaging in low RW with friends.

## **Discussion**

Young adulthood is a time of major change and instability in romantic relationships with communication between romantic partners about the relationship being especially challenging at this life stage (Banker et al., 2010). As romantic trials are inevitable, partners often seek to discuss such challenges with one another and with members of their social network. In this study, we set out to understand how frequently young adults disclosed these problems to partners and friends, whether or not the frequency of these disclosures changed over time, and how such actions impacted romantic stability and quality (i.e., love, conflict). Overall, our findings suggested that young adults are more likely to disclose their relationship problems to partners than to friends and that discussions of these problems increase in frequency over time with partners but not with friends. Further, frequently discussing romantic challenges with partners was linked with greater romantic stability and quality, whereas frequently discussing such challenges with friends resulted in inconsistent findings. Although those who engaged in frequent RW with friends were more likely to break up with their partners, those who remained together despite frequent RW with partners experienced less conflict a year later. Given that achieving intimacy in a romantic relationship is considered to be critical for developmental success at this life stage (Erikson, 1968), understanding how young adults handle romantic challenges is critical. Our study suggests that focusing in particular on the longitudinal effects of deliberately involving friends in romantic challenges in young adulthood may be especially important for understanding romantic functioning among this population (Huston, 2000).

### **Relationship Work and Stability: With Whom You Work on Your Relationship Matters**

Maintaining romantic relationships over time is a critical part of successful romantic relationships in young adulthood (Rauer, Pettit, Lansford, Bates, & Dodge, 2013). Investigating stability is especially important given that it has been found to promote mental and physical

well-being throughout the lifespan (Waite, 1995). In our examination of possible antecedents of romantic stability in young adulthood, we discovered that greater RW with partner at T1 predicted greater likelihood of being in the same romantic relationship approximately one year later. These results were not surprising as Hendrick, Hendrick, and Adler (1988) discovered that self-disclosure to a partner was significantly greater among couples who remained together over time. Turning toward a partner to work on one's relationship often fosters opportunities for increased intimacy (Laurenceau, Barrett, & Pietromonaco, 1998), which likely leads to greater commitment and stability in the union. Moreover, actively working through romantic challenges with a partner has been found to strengthen the relationship and has been linked with greater romantic stability (Billingham & Sack, 1987). Our results also support previous RW studies that suggest that when partners turn toward one another to discuss romantic challenges, relationships flourish (Helms et al., 2003; Proulx et al., 2004).

Whereas engaging in frequent discussions of romantic problems with the partner appeared to help stabilize the relationship, engaging in such discussions with friends was linked with greater likelihood of the romantic partners ending their relationship. Multiple potential reasons exist for why turning to one's friends might be linked to romantic instability. First, friends have been found to have more negative perceptions of couples' romantic relationships than couple members themselves (Agnew, Loving, & Drigotas, 2001). Receiving counsel from someone who has a more negative slant on the relationship may adversely affect the partner's perspective. Loving (2006) clarifies, however, that friends are not necessarily negatively biased, but that romantic partners may be positively biased regarding the relationship. Loving argued that given the amount of effort individuals exert toward their romantic relationships, they are likely motivated to view these relationships in a positive light. Unfortunately, this motivation

may be at odds with objective assessment of relationship characteristics. Therefore, although not necessarily beneficial for the stability of the relationship, perhaps friends offer more realistic assessments of the relationship, negatively skewing the partner's viewpoint on a romantic challenge. Even in the event that the friend does not possess a more negative view of the relationship, turning to a friend regarding romantic conflicts may further entrench partners in their original positions, as friends often validate controversial opinions of the disclosing partner (Eaton & Sanders, 2012). In addition to this, friends are not always kept abreast of the current romantic relationship standing. If, for example, the friend is not aware that partners have reconciled a difference in their relationship, the friend may continue harboring negative opinions of one partner which may spill over into feedback given. For these and other complex reasons, it seems that turning to friends to handle romantic challenges has the potential to bring about unintended negative consequences including less romantic stability.

### **RW Influences Love and Conflict Differently**

Extending our findings beyond the links between RW and romantic stability, we now turn our attention to how RW patterns are associated with romantic love and conflict for those who remained in an intact relationship over time. In addition to discovering that early RW with partner predicted greater romantic stability, we also found that young adults increased their RW with partners over time, but not with friends. This is consistent with research finding that among younger couples, romantic partners become more central figures over time and young adults are more likely to turn to them than to others for social support and intimacy (Furman, Simon, Schaffer, & Bouchey, 2002).

Underscoring the multifaceted nature of relationship quality, we found that the concurrent and longitudinal associations between RW with partner and friend and romantic processes



depended greatly on which process was being examined. Looking first at love, we found that neither RW with partner or friend nor the interaction between these variables at T1 was linked with love at T2. This was somewhat surprising as Helms et al. (2003) found that engaging in low RW with partner and high RW with friend was linked with less self-reported love among their sample of middle-aged wives. Yet, similar to Helms and colleagues we did find concurrent links at both T1 and T2 between RW with partner and love. At both time points, greater RW with partner was associated with greater love, suggesting that those who engaged in more frequent talks with their partners about their romantic challenges also reported feeling more love, and vice versa. As to why only concurrent links were found, perhaps discussing romantic challenges with a partner immediately impacts (or is impacted by) the love one feels in that relationship. Knobloch and Solomon (2004) reported that romantic interdependence, a component of the love construct measured in the current study, is linked with current emotional investment in the relationship. A reflection of one's current emotional investment may be willingness to discuss romantic challenges with a partner. Therefore, disclosures of romantic problems may simply be more impactful at the time they are enacted and their influence may dwindle and become insignificant over the course of a year, at which time the new current RW patterns will more meaningfully influence love.

Our findings for conflict revealed an entirely different pattern of associations between RW and relationship functioning, one that highlighted the importance of considering the bidirectional influences of RW and relationship processes. Although RW with either the partner or the friend at T1 did not predict conflict at T2, greater conflict at T1 predicted less RW with partner at T2. Thus, conflict appeared to act as a deterrent from engaging in discussions of romantic problems with partners. Because individuals who display poorer conflict resolution

skills have also been found to possess undesirable individual traits (e.g., less empathy, insecure attachment, more neuroticism; Caughlin & Vangelisti, 2000; Creasy, 2002; de Wied, Branje, & Meeus, 2006), partners may turn away from such individuals who are more prone to conflict. Alternatively, perhaps frequent conflict poisons RW attempts, rendering them ineffective as the damage to the relationship done by conflict prevents future RW attempts from improving romantic dynamics. Accordingly, perhaps in attempting to prevent additional conflict in the relationship, individuals simply learn to avoid discussing certain topics with partners, choosing to keep these issues to themselves or to turn elsewhere for support. Although this may function as a temporary solution, given that successful resolution of daily disagreements has been linked with romantic stability (Carrere, Buehlman, Gottman, Coan, & Ruckstuhl, 2000), this strategy is unlikely to prove successful long-term. Rather than keeping such issues to themselves, some partners may have learned to take their romantic problems elsewhere (i.e., to friends, family members, coworkers) to individuals who support their stances (Eaton & Sanders, 2012). In such instances, it may be easier to disclose problems to someone who likely agrees with one's position than to a partner with whom conflictual interactions are frequent. Unfortunately, our findings on romantic stability suggest that turning away from the partner to a friend may only exacerbate relationship problems and contribute to more romantic instability down the road.

### **Involving Others in Our Relationships brings Complex Consequences**

Underscoring the complex nature of RW in young adulthood, despite finding that neither RW with partner nor RW with friend directly impacted later evaluations of love or conflict, when considered together, these two RW patterns impacted romantic conflict at T2. Our findings challenge the supposition that simply turning to a partner is always best and suggest a more nuanced approach is needed when considering the long-term benefits and costs of working on

one's relationship with partners and friends. First, consistent with previous work (e.g., Jensen & Rauer, in press), we found that those who engaged in low RW with both partners and friends at T1 reported the greatest conflict a year later. Failure to disclose romantic problems to others may be associated with greater conflict given that disclosure of personal problems to others has been linked with better mental health (Sarason & Sarason, 2009). Moreover, because actively processing and expressing emotions to others during stressful times has been linked with greater quality of life (Stanton et al., 2000), choosing to not discuss romantic challenges with anyone likely reduces the opportunity for these positive benefits and may contribute to more negativity (i.e., conflict). When experiencing a relationship challenge, it appears more beneficial to share that challenge with someone else than to keep it to oneself. Also consistent with previous RW work, moderation analyses suggested that engaging in more RW with partner and less RW with friend at T1 was associated with low conflict at T2. Consistent with the fact that romantic fondness and intimacy are higher when partners actively work on their relationships together (Finkenauer et al., 2009), our findings suggested that discussing romantic challenges frequently with one's partner can bring long-term benefits to the relationship.

In addition to uncovering results that supported previous RW findings, we also discovered unexpected patterns regarding RW and romantic outcomes. In contrast previous RW findings, moderation analyses suggested that those who engaged in less RW with partner and more RW with friend at T1 reported low levels of conflict at T2. Although previous moderation work has found that turning to a friend instead of one's partner was linked to more romantic conflict (Proulx et al., 2004) and even our own findings on romantic stability suggest turning to one's friend can be problematic, we may be detecting critical information regarding how these processes operate differently over time. Certain individuals may, indeed, benefit from avoiding

particular issues with partners and disclosing them instead to friends. Although some researchers may identify this strategy as a type of ineffective conflict avoidance (Laurenceau, Troy, & Carver, 2005), it may also be framed as wisely “choosing one’s battles”. This strategy may be particularly advantageous in longer-term relationships (Birditt & Fingerman, 2003), as some couples may have learned over time that certain issues inevitably foster conflict in their relationship. For select individuals, actively avoiding particular topics with partners could be seen as quite constructive when attempting to maintain a healthy and positive relationship. Alternatively, this finding may simply reflect that those who inherently experience low RW with partner are aided by sharing their romantic problems with a friend as young adults seem to benefit from disclosing their romantic problems to someone.

Another unexpected finding was that young adults who sought to work on their relationship challenges with both their partners and their friends at T1 actually reported more conflict at T2, a finding inconsistent with previous cross-sectional work (Helms et al., 2003). Given the more rigorous methodological approach utilized in the current study, our unique results may have been due to the fact that we captured the influence of RW with partners and friends on romantic quality over time. Perhaps disclosing romantic problems to multiple individuals is helpful in reducing conflict in the short-term as it allows the person to repeatedly work through challenges in distinctive ways. However, this solution may prove to be problematic long-term as it may also introduce the potential for competing and/or inconsistent feedback from multiple sources. If partners begin sharing with one another the perspectives of their friends, they may perceive that their own social network is more supportive of their perspectives than their partner’s (Klein & Milardo, 2000). Thus, over time, if an individual learns that his or her partner

has disclosed the issue to a friend after discussing the matter together as a couple, he or she may feel betrayed.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

Our confidence in the findings of this study is bolstered by strengths in its methodological design. The longitudinal nature of the study allowed us to clarify that disclosing romantic problems to friends operates as a cause of later romantic instability. Further, whereas previous RW studies (e.g., Helms et al., 2003; Proulx et al., 2004) surmised that RW impacted reports of romantic conflict, our longitudinal approach revealed that RW with partner and friend at T1 did not impact conflict at T2. In fact, we discovered the opposite to be true -- conflict at T1 actually predicted RW with partner at T2. Our longitudinal approach also allowed us to discuss the stability of RW patterns over time which revealed differences in RW with partner and RW with friend. Moreover, our inclusion of both love and conflict revealed differing results for positive and negative indicators of romantic relationship quality, highlighting important differences in the way that RW with partner and friend impacts romantic dynamics over time and is in turn differentially impacted by these dynamics. Our differential findings for positive and negative indicators of relationship quality underscore the importance of treating relationships as dynamic, multifaceted systems.

However, certain limitations suggest that our results should be interpreted with caution. First, the generalizability of our results is limited due to our sample being comprised of mostly highly-educated, heterosexual, Caucasian individuals from relatively affluent homes. Given that same-sex couples and African-Americans rely more heavily on their social networks than do Caucasian, heterosexual couples (Julien, Chartrand, & Begin, 1999; Shook, Jones, & Forehand, 2010), RW with friends may be linked with more positive indicators of relationship stability and

quality among these groups given the increased importance of the role of the social network for such individuals. Next, we failed to assess for whether or not individuals were cohabiting with romantic partners. Because cohabitation has been linked with poorer communication between partners (James & Beattie, 2012) future studies should consider whether living with one's partner impacts RW patterns. Further, the results of our study may not generalize to lower-income young adults. Given that research has shown that financial strain is linked with more stress between partners (Falconier & Epstein, 2011), lower-income young adults may be more likely to turn to friends given that financial struggles may increase stress between partners. Also to note, our discovery that RW was linked with conflict over time, yet only concurrently with love, may have been due, in part, to the RW assessment itself. Specifically discussing romantic "concerns or problems" may more readily foster or hinder conflict in the relationship. It is possible that other types of RW, including discussions of positive aspects of the relationship with the partner or a friend, may more meaningfully impact reports of love over time. It is also possible that the RW items (see Appendix A) were interpreted differently by young adults as compared to Helms and colleagues' (2003) middle-aged sample. Next, due to power constraints associated with our limited sample size, we examined the love and conflict outcomes in separate models. Because relationship outcomes exist together, future research should aim to examine a larger sample in order to consider multiple outcomes in the same model. Additionally, as romantic disclosure patterns from both partners impacts relationship outcomes (Morry, 2005), capturing dyadic data is critical for future research. Further, information about friends' romantic relationship status and quality, as well as their perceptions of the partners' relationship, should also be assessed. Receiving feedback from a friend who is highly supportive of the couple and is also in a

satisfying romantic relationship may impact a couple differently from turning to someone who does not approve of the partner and is in an unsatisfying union.

## **Conclusions**

Young adult couples do not exist in isolation, but rather are continually impacted by the complex social network that surrounds them (Birditt & Antonucci, 2007). The findings of the current study significantly enhance our knowledge of how frequently partners solicit help from members of their social network when experiencing romantic challenges and how friends' engagement impacts romantic stability and quality over time. Our findings may have significant implications for clinicians as they consider the vital role that the social network can play in shaping romantic dynamics. Therapists and counselors will be able to design more effective treatment plans for couples if they assess for involvement of members of the social network in romantic problems. Underscoring the importance of outside perspectives on romantic disputes is recent literature detailing a couples' intervention by Finkel, Slotter, Luchies, Walton, and Gross (2013). They encouraged participants to reflect upon how a neutral, unbiased person might see the disagreement and then attempt to take the perspective of that person during interactions with the partner. This intervention proved quite successful as it mitigated much of normal declines in marital quality over time. Thus, it appears that feedback from outsiders is so powerful that even considering the stance of an unbiased, albeit imaginary, person was beneficial for couples. However, if couples are unwilling or unable to only consider unbiased third-party opinions regarding their relationship, therapists may simply encourage them to turn toward one another to discuss relationships issues. By persuading romantic partners to remove the abdication of relationship problems to friends who may be biased and actively turn instead toward one another, clinicians and the couples themselves may come to notice improvement in romantic quality and

stability. In this way, the findings of this study may prove quite significant as clinicians work to strengthen couples' romantic relationships through frequent and effective discussions of romantic challenges together.



#### Footnote

<sup>1</sup> In addition to fitting a logistic regression model that controlled for romantic relationship length, length of friendship, age, and sex, we also examined the results for a model with no controls per recent recommendations (Simmons, Nelson, & Simonsohn, 2011). The results of both models were quite similar in direction and magnitude, though the model containing the controls (shown in Table 2) had a slightly greater fitted odds ratio for RW with partner and a slightly smaller fitted odds ratio for RW with friend. Given the importance of providing a conservative estimate of these links (Aron et al., 2005; Sprecher, 1999), we report on the model with the controls included in the paper.

Table 1.

*Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations for study variables. (N=56)*

Variables	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.	13.
1. Rom Relationship Length	-												
2. Friendship Length	.04	-											
3. Age	.45**	.18	-										
4. Sex	-.11	.07	-.31*	-									
5. Rom Relationship Stability	-.08	.06	.06	.02	-								
6. T1 RW Partner	.33*	-.00	.23†	-.22†	.29**	-							
7. T1 RW Friend	-.13	.02	-.00	-.06	-.14	.27*	-						
8. T1 Love	.46**	-.09	.20	-.23†	.35**	.59**	.02	-					
9. T1 Conflict	.13	-.12	-.05	.13	.07	.06	.06	-.06	-				
10. T2 RW Partner	-.06	-.05	.04	-.03	.10	.35**	.09	.29*	-.24†	-			
11. T2 RW Friend	-.06	.04	.15	-.06	-.13	-.07	.36**	-.15	-.12	.29*	-		
12. T2 Love	.28*	-.13	.20	-.08	.22†	.46**	-.08	.69**	-.08	.49**	-.11	-	
13. T2 Conflict	-.04	.02	-.08	.12	.32**	-.07	.05	-.25†	.61**	-.23†	.16	-.34*	-
<i>M</i>	28.79	8.31	21.18	.82	.68	6.64	4.83	7.38	3.81	7.30	5.08	7.80	3.55
<i>SD</i>	21.39	5.85	1.83	.39	.47	1.32	1.57	.99	1.29	1.08	1.80	.75	1.13

*Note.* RW = Relationship Work; T1 = Time 1; T2 = Time 2; Rom = Romantic; Rom. Relationship Stability = Remained in the same relationship from T1 to T2. Romantic relationship length is in months and friendship length is in years. Sex was coded as male = 0, female = 1.

† $p < .10$ .

\* $p < .05$ .

\*\* $p < .01$ .

Table 2.

*Logistic regression analysis of individuals' likelihood of remaining in the same romantic relationship over time, controlling for romantic relationship length, friendship length, age, and sex. (N=82).*

Predictor	$\beta$	SE $\beta$	Wald's $\chi^2$	df	p	$e^\beta$ (odds ratio)
Constant	.78	4.23	.03	1	.86	2.17
Rom. Relationship Length	-.00	.00	1.06	1	.30	1.00
Friendship Length	.03	.05	.31	1	.58	1.03
Age	-.13	.21	.41	1	.52	.88
Sex	.29	.70	.17	1	.68	1.34
T1 RW with Partner	.74**	.23	10.16	1	.00	2.09
T1 RW with Friend	-.42*	.21	4.28	1	.04	.66

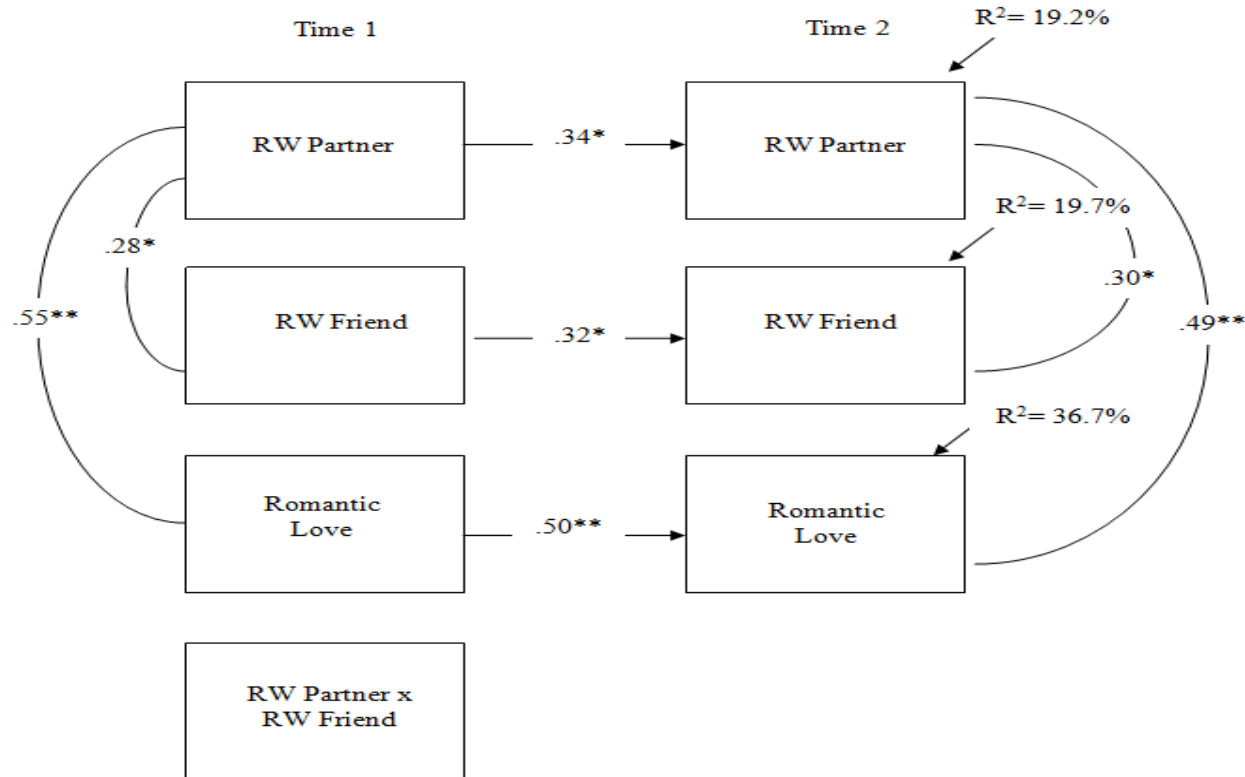
Note. Rom. = Romantic; T1 = Time 1; RW = Relationship Work

\* $p < .05$ .

\*\* $p < .01$ .

Figure 1.

*Autoregressive effects for a model examining RW with partner, RW with friend, romantic love, and an interaction term at Time 1 predicting RW with partner, RW with friend, and love at Time 2, controlling for romantic relationship length, friendship length, age, and sex (N = 56).*

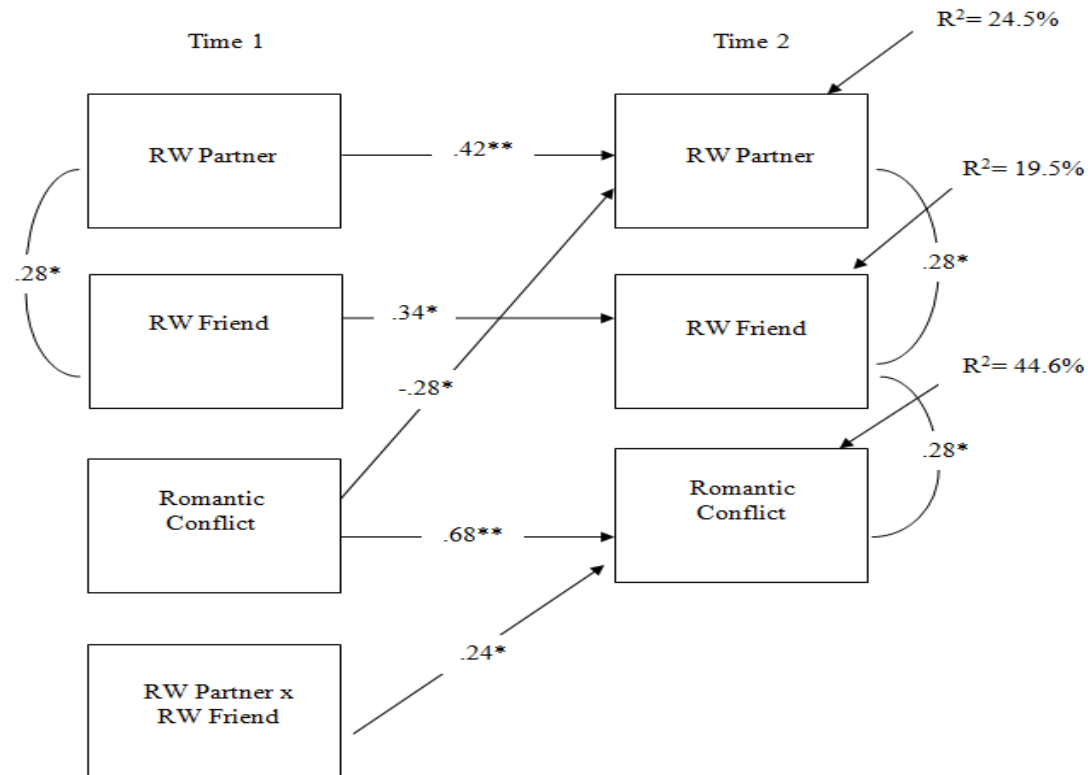


Note: All path coefficients are standardized. For ease of interpretation, significant pathways and correlations are presented; other non-significant pathways are not shown. \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ .

Model fit statistics:  $\chi^2 = 0.00$ ,  $df = 0$ ; CFI = 1.00; RMSEA = .00.

Figure 2.

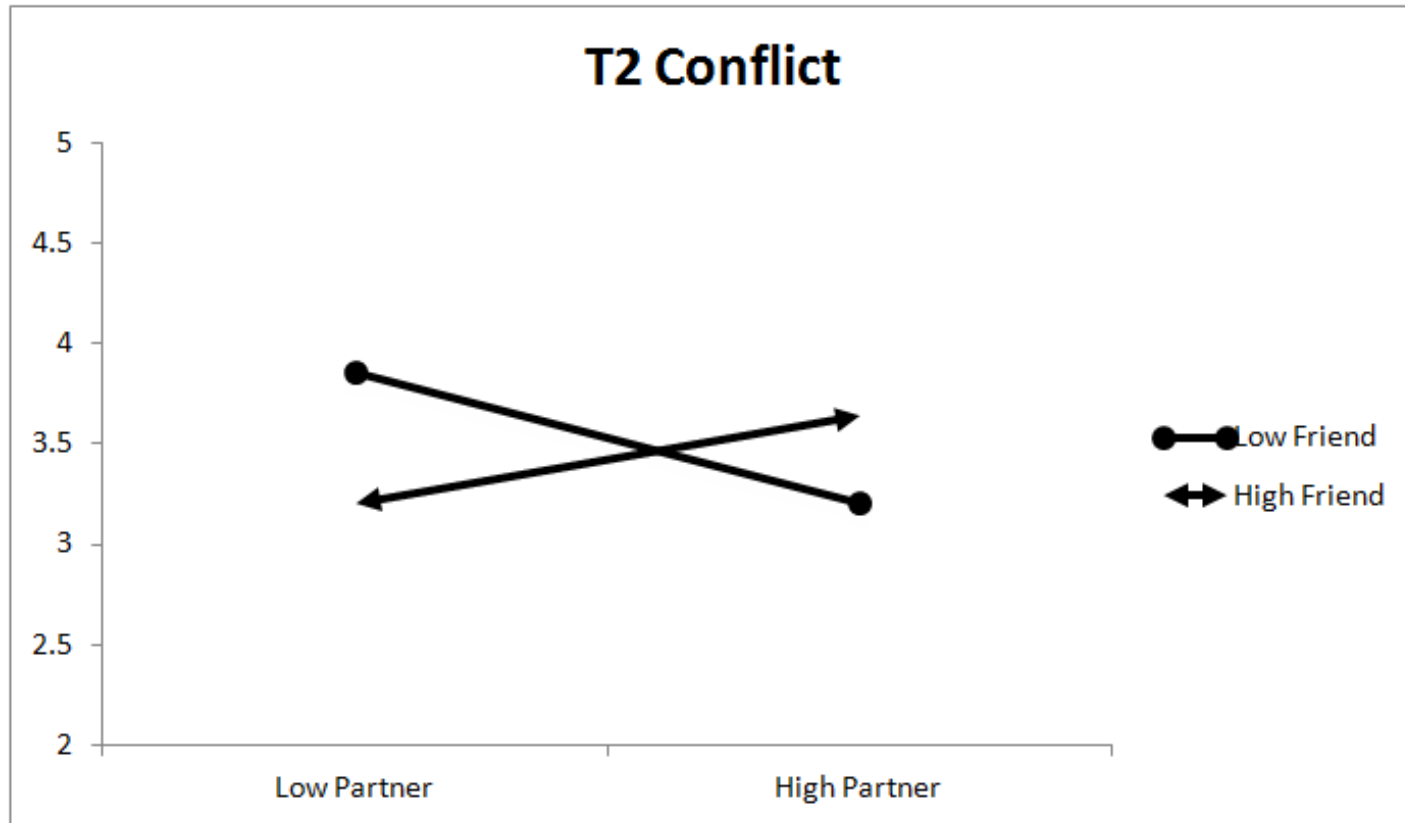
*Autoregressive effects for a model examining RW with partner, RW with friend, romantic conflict, and an interaction term at Time 1 predicting RW with partner, RW with friend, and conflict at Time 2, controlling for romantic relationship length, friendship length, age, and sex (N = 56).*



*Note:* All path coefficients are standardized. For ease of interpretation, significant pathways and correlations are presented; other non-significant pathways are not shown. \*  $p \leq .05$ ; \*\*  $p \leq .01$ . Model fit statistics:  $\chi^2 = 0.00$ ,  $df = 0$ ; CFI = 1.00; RMSEA = .00.

Figure 3.

*Prototypical plot for T2 conflict, as explained by T1 RW with partner, moderated by T1 RW with friend, controlling for romantic relationship length, friendship length, age, and sex (N = 56).*



III. Paper 2 – Marriage work in older couples: Disclosure of marital problems to spouses and friends over time

Abstract

This study examined “marriage work” (MW), or the act of discussing marital problems with spouses and friends, among a sample of older married couples ( $N=64$ ). Multi-level modeling (MLM) techniques were utilized to assess both changes in MW over time and the impact of MW on later reports of marital satisfaction. Results revealed that both wives and husbands engaged in more MW with spouses than with friends, yet only MW with spouse decreased over time. MLM analyses suggested that frequently discussing marital problems with the spouse was associated with declines in marital satisfaction over the course of one year. Additionally, results indicated that those who were less maritally satisfied were more likely to later discuss marital problems with friends. Findings suggest that older adulthood may represent a unique relationship stage at which frequent discussions of romantic problems with a spouse may be linked with negative marital outcomes. Given that older adults tend to actively avoid conflictual interactions in an attempt to maximize emotional rewards, researchers and clinicians may note that traditional approaches to working through romantic conflict may not be appropriate for aging couples. Therapists working with older couples may benefit from tailoring interventions to focus more on positive marital dynamics.

*Keywords:* marriage work; marital satisfaction; socioemotional selectivity theory

Marriage work in older couples: Disclosure of marital problems to spouses and friends  
over time

Older adulthood represents a unique life stage in which the onset of retirement not only brings changes in employment status, income, and day-to-day routine, but also introduces noteworthy social changes (Bosse, Aldwin, Levenson, Spiro, & Mroczek, 1993). After decades of relative social stability across middle adulthood, older adults experience significant changes in both the quantity and, perhaps more importantly, the quality of their social networks (Carstensen, 1992). As older adults perceive that they have less time remaining in their lives, they begin to actively prune their social circles to maximize emotional rewards (Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999). Therefore, although older adults tend to have smaller social networks than their younger counterparts, the nature of their interactions with members of those social groups is more intimate. Friends that are retained as members of older adults' social circles tend to be those who support their broader life goals, one of which is to maintain a healthy and positive intimate relationship (Luong, Charles, & Fingerman, 2011). Thus, it seems likely that the changes in the social network that accompany aging may spill over and influence marriage in distinct ways in older adulthood.

In support of this supposition, Sprecher (2011) examined young adults from the Midwestern United States and determined that the social network importantly influences intimate relationship functioning at earlier points in the lifespan. This is not surprising as friends can affect intimate relationships through interactions with partners, participation in joint activities, and provision of positive and negative feedback regarding the relationship (Sprecher, Felmlee,



Orbuch, & Willetts, 2002). In their examination of middle-aged married couples with children, Helms, Crouter, and McHale (2003) found that friends' influence may actually be explicitly solicited by intimate partners. Examining a process they labeled "marriage work" (MW), or the disclosure of marital problems to spouses and friends, they discovered that when wives discussed their marital problems with best friends but not with spouses, spouses reported less marital love and more arguing. Looking at intimately-involved young adults from the Southeast United States, Jensen and Rauer (in press) similarly found that both males and females reported less happiness, commitment, and love when discussing relationship problems with friends and not with partners. Although these studies suggest that interactions with friends can shape relationships among younger couples, they cannot necessarily generalize across the lifespan in light of the significant changes in older adults' social networks.

Not only do older married couples enjoy a particularly intimate social circle that is not common among younger adults, but also they deal with a unique set of problems not common earlier in the lifespan. For example, retirement brings change in finances, perhaps opening the door for conflict regarding money (Dew & Yorgason, in press). Additionally, due to increasing challenges with physical health that accompany aging (Coe & Zamarro, 2011), older adults may experience more problems when trying to agree upon leisure activities that are enjoyable for both partners. Due to the distinct challenges facing older adults and their changing social network, examining MW processes and their influences on aging couples' evaluations of their marriage seems warranted. The supportive social environment experienced in older adulthood may provide a unique window into how the social network is utilized to support one's intimate relationships, suggesting that MW with friends likely enhances older couples' marital satisfaction. Additionally, it may be critical to examine social interactions among this age group

due to the social changes that accompany retirement (Bosse et al., 1993). For example, although retirees report having less extensive social networks and fewer social interactions (van Tilberg, 2003), researchers have found that older adults who have recently retired often want to reestablish social ties lost in the retirement transition (Cozijnsen, Stevens, & van Tilburg, 2010). Therefore, older adulthood may represent a time when individuals are actively seeking social connections to compensate support provided previously by coworkers. Moreover, in light of the fact that previous MW studies have been cross-sectional in nature, they cannot specify whether turning outside the marriage to discuss marital problems occurs as a result of poor marital dynamics or whether characteristics of the marriage influence individuals to turn away from spouses. Finally, the interdependent nature of couples' lives requires research that utilizes a dyadic approach to understand the impact of spouses' MW not only on their own marital satisfaction, but that of their spouses'. Therefore, to address the gaps in the current MW literature, the current study will examine MW and its impact on marital satisfaction using dyadic data collected across two time points from 64 high-functioning older couples.

### **Socioemotional Selectivity Theory**

To understand the nature of the social network in older adulthood, we draw upon Carstensen's (1992) socioemotional selectivity theory (SST). SST posits that reduced rates of social interaction observed in old age represent the finale of a lifelong process of selectively trimming the social network to strategically maximize social and emotional gains over the lifespan. In other words, SST claims that as individuals age and naturally feel their lives drawing to a close, they purposefully shrink their social network in order to glean the most out of relationships with their closest friends and family members. In support of this claim, Luong and colleagues (2011) have reported that interactions with friends in older adulthood are markedly

more positive as aging individuals actively seek relationships that are most rewarding and disband ties that are less so. As a result of their comparison of a sample of older adults (age 65 to 87) and younger adults (age 18 to 29), Penningroth and Scott (2012) added that although the maximization of emotional gains is a lifelong social process, as individuals age they increasingly attempt to enhance personal relationships that are already intimate. Therefore, it appears that the process of pruning the social network to maximize emotional rewards accelerates in older adulthood.

Previous research finds that older adults appear to be quite successful in these efforts to create a social environment that is emotionally-rewarding and intimate. For example, compared to younger adults (ages 20 to 29), older adults (ages 60 and up) report greater satisfaction and less negativity in their relationships (Birditt & Fingerman, 2003) and perceive more support from their social network (Schnittker, 2007). Involvement with a social network that is ever-increasing in intimacy situates older couples in a social environment that is quite invested in both their individual and relational well-being (Luong et al., 2011). It is likely, therefore, that across the lifespan adults may gradually become more open with their friends regarding their personal lives, including their marriage. This likely occurs as a result of increased intimacy with the social network, as self-disclosure is a measure of emotional closeness (Kito, 2005). Due to the social context enjoyed in older adulthood, aging couples likely receive feedback that is more supportive of their marriage during challenging times than would younger adults. Due to the fact that older adults engage in strategies that optimize positive social experiences even when discussing discouraging topics, social partners tend to reciprocate by responding in positive and supportive manners (Luong et al., 2011). Nevertheless, because some studies have found that not all social communication among older adults is positive, particularly as it relates to family life, (i.e.,

discussions regarding role expectations, finances, physical health; Adams & Blieszner, 1995), more research is needed to understand how social interactions influence marital satisfaction in older adulthood. The changes in the social network across this life stage offer researchers a unique population for examining the influence of the social circle on marital satisfaction.

### **“Marriage Work”: What We Know**

To begin to understand the influence of the social network on marital satisfaction, researchers first began to assess to which individuals in the network partners were most likely to turn. Oliner (1989) determined that wives frequently disclosed their marital problems to their closest female friends. In addition to identifying close friends as the primary confidants of married women, she also attempted to discover the impact of wives’ disclosures of marital problems to these friends on their own attitudes and feelings about their marriages. Among the middle-class women in her study, she found that friends not only validated wives’ marital feelings, but also introduced new supportive perspectives. Wives who frequently discussed marital problems with friends enjoyed greater marital satisfaction and commitment. To note, Oliner did not assess whether engaging in MW with spouses moderated the impact of engaging in MW with friends and marital outcomes. Although Oliner’s findings suggest that disclosures to friends may impact evaluations of the marriage in specific ways for wives, research regarding gender differences in motivation for engaging the social network suggest that these same patterns may not hold true for husbands. Aukett, Ritchie, and Mill (1988) concluded that whereas wives’ friendships tend to serve as sources of emotional support based on reciprocal communication, husbands’ friendships tend to function as sources of companionship based on shared interests and activities. Thus, husbands may be less likely to disclose marital problems to friends given

that their interactions with the social network are more likely to focus on engaging in mutually satisfying activities and less on intimacy.

In their study examining the links between MW and marital evaluations, Helms and colleagues (2003) found significant sex differences that supported the above-mentioned disparate motivations for engaging the social network. Husbands' disclosure patterns to wives and friends were unrelated to marital quality as men much more frequently discussed marital problems with spouses. Conversely, wives' MW was linked with marital quality as wives engaged in similar levels of MW with spouses and friends. Alternatively, Jensen and Rauer (in press) discovered that young adult men and women did not differ in the frequency of disclosure of intimate relationship problems to partners or to friends. Surprisingly, they found that both sexes disclosed significantly more to partners. This was especially unexpected for young adult women given that Helms and colleagues' found that married women disclosed equally to spouses and friends. Perhaps the unique romantic stage of being in a new relationship is associated with more frequent disclosure to the partner as young adults place great importance on establishing romantic intimacy (Boden, Fischer, & Niehuis, 2009). Given these conflicting findings, it seems that to truly capture the influence of disclosing relationship problems to friends, researchers must account for the relationship stage and explore MW across the lifespan.

Although previous studies consistently suggest that spouses appear to benefit most when disclosing relationship problems to one another, existing MW findings are limited due to certain considerations that have gone unaddressed. Previous studies have not considered the emotionally-rewarding nature of the intimate social circle enjoyed by older adults (Carstensen, 1992). It is possible that due to the intimate and supportive nature of their social network, aging couples, unlike their younger counterparts, may actually enjoy marital benefits when discussing

marital problems with friends, even in the absence of such discussions with spouses. Beyond a lack of attention to the developmental context of the individuals within the relationship, previous MW research has relied on cross-sectional studies that limit our ability to understand the etiology and changing nature of these processes. Do couples experience marital challenges as a result of disclosing problems to friends in lieu of spouses or do couples who experience marital problems then turn outside of their unsupportive relationship to seek support from a friend?

It is probable that both processes are occurring to some extent, though to our knowledge the latter pathway has yet to be examined. Finally, in addition to these limitations, previous work (e.g., Jensen & Rauer, in press) examined intimately-involved individuals, not couples, which restricted their conclusions given that disclosure patterns from both partners likely impact relationship satisfaction (Morry, 2005). In sum, it appears that a study is needed which not only examines the understudied population of older adults and accounts for their unique social networks, but also considers the intertwined nature of couples' married lives and evaluates couples over time.

### **Current Study**

Due to the unparalleled growth in the number of older adults in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011), coupled with the rising divorce rates among this group (Brown & Lin, 2012), the time has never been more critical to identify and understand processes influencing marital well-being in older adulthood. In light of previous work revealing the influence of members of the social network on intimate relationships (Helms et al., 2003; Jensen & Rauer, in press; Proulx et al., 2004) examining the impact of interactions with close friends on marital satisfaction appears warranted. The current study therefore elucidates how the social network

significantly contributes to both individual and spousal well-being in older adults by examining how MW with a best friend impacts marital satisfaction of both spouses.

To accomplish this goal, we seek to answer the following questions: 1) Do older adults disclose marital challenges more frequently to spouses or to friends and are there gender differences in these patterns? 2) Do the frequencies of marital dyads' disclosure patterns change over the course of a year? 3) Do MW behaviors with a spouse and a friend predict later reports of marital satisfaction? To ensure a conservative estimate of our findings, we control for age and marital duration. Because those in new relationships actively engage in behaviors (e.g., self-disclosure) designed to increase intimacy (Boden et al., 2009), marital duration may be a key control related to rates of MW with spouse and friend. In light of the fact that older adults seek to maximize already intimate relationships, with the spousal relationship being the most intimate of all (Penningroth & Scott, 2012), we hypothesized that both husbands and wives would engage in significantly more MW with one another than with friends at both time points. Next, given that our two time points only differed by one year, we did not anticipate that these couples (who have been married for an average of 42 years) would engage in significantly different rates of MW with spouses or friends across this time. Finally, due to previous significant links between MW patterns and marital outcomes (Helms et al., 2003; Jensen & Rauer, in press), we hypothesized that engaging in more frequent MW with spouses than with friends would result in greater marital satisfaction.

Unlike previous work (Helms et al., 2003), the current study examined spouses simultaneously in the same model to account for their interdependencies. Therefore, we not only hypothesized that those who engaged the spouse more often would report greater marital satisfaction, but also that their spouses would benefit from having a partner who prioritizes MW

within the marriage. On the other hand, we predicted that those who disclosed more to friends than to spouses would not experience these marital benefits, nor would their spouses.

## **Method**

### **Participants and Procedures**

Sixty-four married heterosexual couples were recruited at Time 1 (T1) as part of The Marriage and Retirement Study, a larger study examining marital relationships and individual and relationship well-being in older adulthood. Couples were recruited from newspaper advertisements, churches, and other community organizations in the Southeast United States. Recruitment materials described the study as an exploration of the links between marriage and health in retirement. To be eligible to participate, spouses had to meet three criteria: (1) be married, (2) be at least partially retired (i.e., working less than 40 hours a week), and (3) be able to drive to the on-campus research center to ensure that participants still had relatively high functional health.

At T1, couples participated in a visit lasting around 2-3 hours at an onsite research laboratory. During this visit, couples participated in several marital communication tasks (e.g., a relationship narrative task, a problem solving task, a support task). At the conclusion of the visit, wives and husbands each received a questionnaire that assessed individual, marital, and social functioning. Couples were compensated \$75 for their participation in T1 data collection once they returned these questionnaires. Approximately 1 year ( $M = 16.4$  months) after the first data collection occurred we recontacted couples. Those who agreed to participate in a second wave of data collection were sent a second set of questionnaires via mail. These questionnaires again assessed individual, marital, and social functioning. Couples were compensated \$45 once they returned these Time 2 (T2) questionnaires.



At T1, wives and husbands were, on average, approximately 70 years old ( $SD = 7.0$ ; range = 56-89) and 71 years old ( $SD = 7.4$ ; range = 59-93), respectively. Wives and husbands were predominantly white ( $n = 60$  and  $61$ , respectively). With regard to education, 10 wives had a high school education or less and 54 engaged in or completed some form of higher education. For husbands, 4 had a high school education or less and 60 engaged in or completed some form of higher education. Although perhaps not an ideal measure of income in older adulthood due to varying retirement plans, couples' median annual income was US\$74,000 ( $SD = US\$64,074$ ) and the median total wealth (i.e., property, pensions, IRAs, and income) was US\$750,000 ( $SD = US\$1,277,611$ ). Forty-seven of the couples were fully retired (73.4%) and at least one spouse was currently working for pay in 17 couples. Fifty-one couples (79.7%) were in their first marriage and couples were married for an average of 42 years ( $SD = 15.0$ ). On average, the couples reported having 2.6 children ( $SD = 1.3$ ; range = 0-6).

At T2, 53 of the original 64 couples agreed to participate in the second wave of data collection. This reflected a retention rate of 83%. The 11 couples who did not complete the T2 questionnaire were unable to be reached. Attrition analyses revealed that wives lost to attrition did not differ from those retained at T2 based on age ( $t(60) = .99$ ,  $p = .32$ ), MW with spouse ( $t(58) = .64$ ,  $p = .52$ ), MW with friend ( $t(57) = .53$ ,  $p = .60$ ), or marital satisfaction ( $t(62) = 1.30$ ,  $p = .20$ ). Furthermore, attrition analyses showed that husbands lost to attrition did not differ from those who were retained based on age ( $t(62) = .55$ ,  $p = .59$ ), MW with spouse ( $t(61) = 1.49$ ,  $p = .14$ ), MW with friend ( $t(61) = .22$ ,  $p = .83$ ), or marital satisfaction ( $t(62) = .71$ ,  $p = .48$ ). Finally, attrition analyses revealed that couples lost to attrition did not differ from those retained at T2 based on marital duration ( $t(62) = .99$ ,  $p = .32$ ). Therefore, those lost to attrition did not significantly differ on any variable examined in the study.

## Measures

**Marriage work.** The degree to which participants engaged in MW with their spouse and with a best friend was measured using a modified version of the Marriage Work Scale (Helms et al., 2003). This scale assessed the degree to which participants bring up relationship problems to a spouse and to the best friend on a 9-point scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 9 (*always*). When reporting on discussions with a friend, participants were specifically asked to report about their “close friend” who was not the spouse. For purposes of the current study, we used 7 items from the original 10-item scale. The three items we chose to remove were not applicable for our retired couples (i.e., they either asked about current employment or about factors related to raising younger children such as discipline and/or taking children to activities). Retained items assessed disclosure of challenges in the following areas of the marriage: communication, housework, parenting, decision making, finances, relations with in-laws, and social life and leisure (e.g., “How often do you bring up the way that you and your spouse spend free time (e.g., the activities you do, and/or the people you socialize with)?”).

Participants were specifically directed to report on marital “concerns or problems” in each area and how frequently these concerns were discussed with a spouse and with a friend. The modified version of this scale demonstrated good reliability for both the spouse scale (Wives T1:  $\alpha = .83$ , Husbands T1:  $\alpha = .92$ , Wives T2:  $\alpha = .88$ , Husbands T2:  $\alpha = .93$ ) and the best friend scale (Wives T1:  $\alpha = .81$ , Husbands T1:  $\alpha = .89$ , Wives T2:  $\alpha = .80$ , Husbands T1:  $\alpha = .91$ ).

**Marital Satisfaction.** Participants’ satisfaction with their marriage was assessed using the Marital Satisfaction Questionnaire for Older Persons (Haynes et al., 1992). This 24-item questionnaire measured various dimensions of marital satisfaction thought to be developmentally appropriate for older adults (e.g., how satisfied are you with your spouse’s physical health) in

addition to more standard questions on specific topics such as satisfaction with time spent with spouse and conflict management. Questions were rated on a scale of one to four, one to five, or one to six with higher scores indicating greater satisfaction. Reliability for this measure was excellent (Wives T1:  $\alpha = .93$ , Husbands T1:  $\alpha = .93$ , Wives T2:  $\alpha = .91$ , Husbands T2:  $\alpha = .95$ ).

### **Data Analysis Plan**

To answer our first two research questions regarding whether older adults engage in more frequent MW with spouses or with friends and whether this changes over time, as well as to determine whether there are gender differences in these patterns, we examined descriptive statistics, bivariate correlations, and *t*-tests. Before answering our third research question regarding how MW patterns predict later evaluations of marital satisfaction, we first determined whether accounting for the nesting of individuals within couples using multi-level modeling (MLM) would be a proper analytic technique to answer this question. Although exploratory analyses and examination of descriptive statistics may provide some evidence of variability in the sample, the calculation of the Intra Class Correlation (ICC) is a better indicator of the amount of shared variance between any two scores (i.e., reveals whether the non-independence assumption has been violated; Hruschka, Kohrt, & Worthman, 2004). Subsequently, we fit an unconditional means model (Model 1) to assess the amount of variability in marital satisfaction at T2 that was attributable to between-couple differences. Given that the ICC was equal to .61, we concluded that 61% of the variability in marital satisfaction was attributable to between-couple differences, suggesting the need to account for the fact that individuals were nested within couples using MLM (Hruschka et al., 2004). Thus we proceeded to answer the question of how MW patterns predict later reports of marital satisfaction using this analytic by fitting a one-

way ANCOVA with no controls (Model 2), followed by a one-way ANCOVA containing level-1 (i.e., individual-level) and level-2 (i.e., couple-level) variables and controls.

## Results

Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations are presented for all study variables in Table 1.

### **To Whom Do Older Adults Disclose Their Romantic Problems?**

To first determine whether older adults engage in more MW with spouses or friends, we examined descriptive statistics, bivariate correlations, and paired *t*-tests (see Table 1). To note, a Cohen's *d* value of .30 or less signifies a small effect size, a value of .30 to .60 signifies a moderate effect, and a value greater than .60 signifies a large effect size; Cohen's *d* can also be greater than one, representing a large effect size and signifying that the difference between the two means being compared is greater than one standard deviation (Rosenthal, 1991). First, results of paired *t*-tests revealed that wives engaged in significantly more MW with spouses than with friends at both T1 ( $t(58) = 13.19, p < .01; d = 1.72$ ) and at T2 ( $t(50) = 11.75, p < .01; d = 1.64$ ). Next, results of paired *t*-tests revealed that husbands engaged in significantly more MW with spouses than with friends at both T1 ( $t(62) = 13.41, p < .01; d = 1.69$ ) and at T2 ( $t(51) = 13.39, p < .01; d = 1.86$ ).

Looking next at gender differences in MW with spouses and friends at both time points, results of our paired *t*-tests revealed that wives and husbands did not significantly differ in frequency of MW with spouse at T1 ( $t(58) = .92, p = .36; d = .12$ ), nor did wives and husbands significantly differ in the frequency of MW with spouse at T2 ( $t(49) = 1.06, p = .30; d = .15$ ). Wives did, however, engage in more MW with friends than did husbands at both at T1 ( $t(57) = 2.30, p < .05; d = .30$ ) and T2 ( $t(49) = 1.77, p < .10; d = .25$ ).

### **Does MW with Spouses and Friends Change Over Time among Older Adults?**

Next we examined whether wives' and husbands' MW patterns changed over time (see Table 1). Results of the paired *t*-tests revealed that wives' engaged in marginally greater MW with spouse at T1 than at T2 ( $t(48) = 1.77, p < .10; d = .25$ ). Wives' MW with friend, however, at T1 and T2 remained stable ( $t(48) = 1.33, p = .19; d = .19$ ). Next, paired *t*-tests revealed that husbands engaged in significantly more MW with spouse at T1 than at T2 ( $t(50) = 2.18, p < .05; d = .31$ ). Similar to wives, husbands' MW with friend remained stable from T1 to T2 ( $t(50) = 1.09, p = .28; d = .15$ ). Therefore, both wives and husbands decreased their MW with spouses over the course of approximately one year in older adulthood, whereas their MW with friends remained stable.

### **Do MW Behaviors with a Spouse and a Friend Predict Later Marital Satisfaction?**

To determine whether marital satisfaction at T2 was predicted by MW patterns among older adults, MLM was used to account for the fact that individuals were nested within couples. Table 2 shows the parameter estimates and fit statistics from each of the MLM models. We began by fitting a model that included random effects for all level-1 predictors. However, none of the random effects were significant, indicating that the relationship (i.e., slope) between each predictor and the outcome did not differ across couples. Therefore, we proceeded to estimate models in which only the intercept was allowed to vary across couples. We fit a multi-level model that contained no control variables (Model 2), followed by one which included level-1 and level-2 controls (e.g., gender, age, marital duration; Model 3). Model 3 had the lowest deviance statistic and included controls that provided a conservative estimate of our findings. Therefore, results from Model 3 were interpreted as it proved to be the most appropriate model for answering our research questions.

The average T2 marital satisfaction, controlling for all other variables in the model, was 50.81. Results confirmed a significant increase in marital satisfaction over time, with a .42 difference in marital satisfaction from T1 to T2. Further, we unexpectedly found that those who engaged in more MW with spouse at T1 reported significant declines in marital satisfaction from T1 to T2 (see Table 2, Model 3). However, MW with friend was not significantly linked with marital satisfaction. As previously noted, random effects were estimated for the intercept only as the relationship between other predictors and the outcome did not differ across couples. Results revealed significant variability in marital satisfaction at T2, suggesting couples meaningfully differed in their reports of marital satisfaction. To ensure that we could confidently comment on the direction of effects among the constructs examined, we tested an alternative model in which marital satisfaction was treated as a predictor of MW with spouses and friends. Results revealed that, controlling for gender, age, and marital duration, neither marital satisfaction at T1 nor at T2 significantly predicted MW with spouse at T2. However, we did discover that those reporting less marital satisfaction at T1 reported greater MW with friend at T2 both in the controlled ( $\beta = -.02, p < .05$ ) and uncontrolled ( $\beta = -.02, p < .05$ ) MLM models.

### **Discussion**

Given the changing nature of socioemotional needs in older adulthood and its possible effects on the quality of older adults' relationships (Luong et al., 2011; Penningroth & Scott, 2012), the aims of the current study were to understand how older adults' discussions of their marital problems with one another and with friends changed over time and the effects of these discussions on their marriages. Overall, our findings suggest although wives are more likely than husbands to disclose marital problems to friends, both spouses are much more likely to discuss these issues with one another than with a friend. In contrast to previous MW studies (Jensen &

Rauer, in press; Helms et al., 2003; Proulx et al., 2004), we found that older adults who engaged in more MW with spouse at T1 reported less marital satisfaction at T2, suggesting that discussing romantic challenges with the spouse is actually counterproductive in older adulthood. Our study highlights the importance of accounting for the life cycle stage when examining couple dynamics and suggests that older adults may not glean the same marital benefits as younger adults when discussing marital problems with one another.

### **Discussing Marital Problems with the Spouse in Older Adulthood: It May not be Worth It**

It is noteworthy that against the backdrop of cognitive decline accompanying older adulthood (e.g., slower processing speed, poorer short- and long-term memory functioning; Morris & Price, 2001), research has suggested that emotional functioning and self-regulation may be enhanced at this time (Carstensen & Mikels, 2005). Birditt and Fingerman (2003) suggested that the resulting increase in positivity may be due in part to older adults actively abstaining from situations that have the potential to lead to conflict. This may help to explain why older adults in our sample significantly decreased their frequency of discussing marital problems with their spouse over time. Further supporting this line of thought, those who engaged in more MW with spouse at the first time point were less happy with their marriage a year later. Active avoidance of conflict in the pursuit of maintaining harmonious relationships has proven to be an effective and common strategy enacted by aging individuals (Birditt & Fingerman, 2003). Therefore, frequently discussing romantic problems likely runs counter to older adults' primary social goals of increasing positivity and securing emotional intimacy. As previous research suggests (e.g., Charles & Piazza, 2007; Luong et al., 2011), discussing romantic problems may be replaced by more positive interactions even among spouses. Nevertheless, caution should be

used when interpreting our results, given that they may not generalize to all older couples due to sample characteristics.

Aging couples' increasing conflict avoidance with the spouse may be partially explained by the tenets of SST, which assume that aging individuals place a greater emphasis on enhancing intimacy (Carstensen & Charles, 1998). Carstensen and colleagues (1992) posit that older adults' perception of time likely leads to prioritization of positive and rewarding interpersonal interactions. As the end of one's life draws nearer, the importance of maximizing emotional rewards from those who constitute our most intimate interpersonal ties grows ever more important (Penningroth & Scott, 2012). Because the spouse is generally the most important member of the social network (Dakof & Taylor, 1990), fostering emotionally-rewarding interactions with this person becomes paramount as individuals age.

Aging couples may also have learned to choose their battles sparingly because previous attempts to discuss certain issues have proven ineffective or costly. Gottman and Levenson (1999) reported that the majority of marital issues are perpetual problems that persist across the course of the relationship. Most often, these types of problems concern fundamental differences between partners (e.g., one partner is more social) that may be quite challenging to resolve to the satisfaction of each spouse. Wile (1988) also added "[e]ach potential relationship has its own set of inescapable recurring problems... There is value in realizing that you will inevitably be choosing a particular set of irresolvable problems that you'll be grappling with for the next ten, twenty, or fifty years" (pp. 12-13). By the time spouses reach older adulthood, it is likely that most have come to understand that certain marital problems will likely remain unresolved and that repeatedly discussing those issues with each other may do more harm than good.



Our findings underscore the need to consider the life cycle stage when examining marital and social communication. In contrast to what has been found in both young adulthood (Jensen & Rauer, in press) and middle adulthood (Helms et al., 2003; Proulx et al., 2004), we found that engaging in more MW with a spouse in older adulthood was linked with poorer marital satisfaction. There appears to be a shift between middle-age and older adulthood in which actively discussing marital problems changes from a positive relational practice to one that is less helpful. Prominent life occurrences during this time such as the transition to retirement may partially account for this shift. Although retirement often permits spouses to spend considerably more time together, this transition has been linked with increased conflict and decreased marital quality as couples adjust to new roles and routines (Kulik, 2001; Moen, Kim, & Hofmeister, 2001). Spending more time in the presence of a loved one may lead to greater intimacy but also has the potential to result in more frequent negative interactions. In this distinct context of transitioning to new roles and to spending more time together, discussing marital challenges may prove burdensome, resulting in unnecessary focus on negative topics instead of the positivity and emotional rewards older adults seek.

Although actively engaging in discussions about marital problems with the spouse appeared problematic for the marriage, discussing these issues with friends was unrelated to later marital satisfaction. Perhaps this was due to the fact that the social network in older adulthood tends to be quite invested in spouses' marital success (Luong et al., 2011). Therefore, friends may have provided feedback supportive of the marriage, which may not significantly impact marital satisfaction. Despite older adults' MW with friends being unrelated to later marital satisfaction, we discovered that those who were less maritally satisfied at T1 turned more often to friends to discuss their marital problems at T2. Individuals need emotional outlets when

experiencing challenges (Sarason & Sarason, 2009), and thus those who find discussing their problems with their spouses ineffectual may instead turn to friends. Friends may provide a listening ear and validate the spouse's feelings, but are less likely than younger adults to provide feedback that would be detrimental to the marriage.

### **Therapeutic Considerations of Marriage Work in Older Adulthood**

Young married couples often believe they can afford to spend considerable time solving problems in their relationship, both with each other and with others, because solutions may prevent future conflicts (Carstensen et al., 1999). Conversely, aging couples appear to benefit from abstaining from such discussions as the potential payoff does not appear to outweigh the cost, a conclusion in line with our own findings regarding the effects of marriage work on later marital satisfaction. This age difference in approaching marital problems is clearly illustrated by Flori's (1989) "age gradient hypothesis" of psychotherapy, which states that chronological age in adulthood is inversely related to psychotherapy attendance. Miller, Yorgason, Sandberg, and White (2003) noted that older couples were significantly less likely than younger couples to attend marital therapy to work through problems.

Perhaps explaining this reticence is that older couples who choose to engage in marital therapy may not experience the same marital benefits as younger couples. Given that we found that older spouses were overall unlikely to disclose their marital problems to even their closest friends, it comes as no surprise that older couples have historically been hesitant to seek couples counseling. An unfortunate consequence of this disparity in help-seeking is that theory-building and clinical intervention development within the mental health field have somewhat overlooked aging couples (James & Haley, 1995), perhaps resulting in less effective clinical treatment for such persons. The belief that older adults are rigid, ill, or incompetent, and lack interest in social

interaction, has too often lead therapists to believe that the elderly are poor candidates for therapy (Reekie & Hansen, 1992). Unfortunately, these stereotypes have likely played a role in the infrequency of older adults seeking clinical aid. However, new cohorts of older adults may be more willing to share their marital problems with others. Although we did not examine how frequently spouses disclosed to a clinician, we did find that when spouses reported less marital satisfaction, they were more likely to turn outside their marriage and discuss their problems with a friend. Zarit and Knight (1996) predicted that older adults will continue to become more inclined to share their marital challenges and even attend marital therapy as newer cohorts become more amenable to clinical treatment and an ever-greater portion of the population is affected by aging issues. As the number of older adults in therapy is likely to increase, it is imperative that clinicians become more adept at working with aging couples and considering the unique marital and social context that such couples bring to the therapy office. In addition to this, given their focus on emphasizing positive relationship dynamics and emotional stability (Adler-Baeder et al., 2010), marital education programs may also be quite effective for strengthening older adults' marriages.

Though caution should be exercised in making recommendations due to the high-functioning nature of our sample, the findings of the current study may provide a helpful example of the importance of considering the life stage of the couple. Unlike the conclusions of the current study, most clinical approaches to working with couples suggest that couples will benefit from spending time working through marital problems together (e.g., structural family therapy; Minuchin & Fishman, 1981). For example, Greenberg and Goldman (2008) posit that couples experience positive change when they openly risk being vulnerable with one another by sharing their underlying emotions surrounding a challenge in the relationship. Therefore,

traditional techniques emphasized in clinical training programs may be less well-suited for working with aging couples (Ivey, Wieling, & Harris, 2000). Despite its shortcomings, the current study suggests that clinicians working with older couples may therefore benefit from adjusting their intervention strategies to encourage aging couples to devote more time to focusing on positive aspects of their marriage. Unlike most younger couples, perhaps older adults would enjoy greater peace and emotional rewards by avoiding problematic topics and simply letting irresolvable issues remain as they are.

### **Strengths and Considerations**

Our confidence in our findings is augmented by the fact that we acknowledged the nesting of individuals within couples by utilizing MLM. This allowed us to discuss individual differences by accounting for variance in marital satisfaction at the couple level (Hruscha et al., 2004). The current study also extended the examination of MW with spouse and friend to older adults, a previously unexamined population. Focusing on older adults revealed that this population may differ from their younger counterparts in the frequency and effects of discussing marital problems with spouses and friends. Moreover, capturing MW and marital satisfaction over time strengthened our study by allowing us to discuss change in the constructs and illustrated how early MW can influence later marital satisfaction and vice versa.

In spite of these strengths, our findings should be interpreted with caution. Because our sample was primarily composed of highly educated, financially well-off, White couples, it is not representative of all older adult couples. In light of the fact that education, income, and race have all been associated with marital satisfaction (Broman, 1993; Karney & Bradbury, 1995), the findings of the current study may not be generalizable to all older adult couples. For example, given that insufficient financial resources have been linked with heightened marital conflict

(Conger, Ge, Elder, Lorenz, & Simons, 1994), examining a lower-SES sample may reveal that these couples discuss financial challenges more frequently, resulting in more opportunities for conflict and potentially less marital satisfaction. Moreover, because our sample was highly maritally satisfied (i.e., at T1, the mean scores for both husbands and wives were over 1 SD above the means presented in the development of the assessment; Haynes et al., 1992), it may not be representative of the larger population of long-term marriages given that some have found that marital happiness declines with marital duration (VanLaningham, Johnson, & Amato, 2001). Also to note, it is possible that although older married couples do not appear to garner the same benefits as younger couples when engaging in MW with one another, other types of marital work (e.g., compassion, caring, meeting each other's needs) may become more important. As these other types of marital work were not captured in this study, future research should consider assessing for the relevance of these constructs among aging couples. Finally, although we captured the frequency with which spouses discussed marital problems with one another and with a friend, we did not collect information regarding the type of feedback provided about the problem by either the spouse or the friend. Previous research (e.g., Felmlee, 2001) has shown that feedback from friends may influence romantic quality and stability. Future research in this area should prioritize the capturing of actual feedback from spouses and friends and consider how the type of feedback influences marital dynamics.

## **Conclusions**

Our study suggests that older adulthood represents a unique window of time in which common assumptions about marital communication may not hold true. Despite previous MW studies contending that openly working through romantic problems with a spouse is beneficial for the relationship (Jensen & Rauer, in press; Proulx et al., 2004), we found that older adults

who engage in more frequent MW with spouse reported lower marital satisfaction one year later. Further illustrating older spouses' reluctance to engage one another about marital concerns was our finding that when experiencing lower marital satisfaction, they actively turned to friends and not toward one another. When attempting to explain the findings of our study, it may be important to examine what constitutes successful aging. Scholars suggest that successful aging occurs when individuals prioritize emotionally-rewarding social interactions and allow less important social goals to go unmet (Carstensen et al., 1999; Baltes & Baltes, 1990). Given that older adults have been found to value emotional intimacy with those closest to them, it would appear that an integral part of successful aging may be learning to ignore potentially conflictual situations in favor of accentuating moments that are enjoyable. In conclusion, our study expands current understanding of how older adults handle marital challenges and underscores the importance of examining marital and social communication across the lifespan.

Table 1.

*Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations for study variables (N = 106).*

Variables	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.	13.	14.	15.
1. Wife Age	-														
2. Husband Age	.91**	-													
3. Marital Duration (Years)	.47**	.44**	-												
4. T1 Wife MW with Spouse	-.07	-.13	.02	-											
5. T1 Husband MW with Spouse	.04	.03	.05	.11	-										
6. T1 Wife MW with Friend	-.03	-.02	-.09	.42**	.09	-									
7. T1 Husband MW with Friend	-.02	-.07	-.14	.10	.35**	.34**	-								
8. T1 Wife Mar. Satisfaction	.08	.02	-.02	.12	.05	.35**	.00	-							
9. T1 Husband Mar. Satisfaction	-.12	-.17	-.11	.06	.09	.03	.10	.57**	-						
10. T2 Wife MW with Spouse	-.05	-.10	-.05	.43**	.24†	.21	.27†	-.00	.18	-					
11. T2 Husband MW with Spouse	.11	.10	.00	.31*	.60**	.21	.45**	-.19	-.09	.32*	-				
12. T2 Wife MW with Friend	-.15	-.10	-.12	.11	.30*	.38**	.30*	.12	.26†	.51**	.23	-			
13. T2 Husband MW with Friend	-.09	-.03	.04	.20	.29*	.26†	.54**	-.37**	-.42**	.08	.51**	.06	-		
14. T2 Wife Mar. Satisfaction	.02	-.01	.00	-.13	.12	.18	.12	.58**	.61**	.15	.03	.25†	-.27†	-	
15. T2 Husband Mar. Satisfaction	.14	.03	-.06	.16	-.14	.29*	.04	.87**	.45**	.02	-.11	.09	-.26†	.62**	-
<i>M</i>	69.45	71.42	42.40	6.07	6.36	3.29	2.76	117.55	116.36	5.55	5.89	2.91	2.48	114.29	113.37
<i>SD</i>	7.00	7.41	14.97	1.57	1.98	1.37	1.62	14.57	18.07	1.83	2.07	1.20	1.29	17.72	15.41

Note. T1 = Time 1; T2 = Time 2; MW = Marriage Work; Mar. = Marital

† $p < .10$ .

\* $p < .05$ .

\*\* $p < .01$ .

Table 2.

*Fixed effects of predictors on marital satisfaction at T2 for retired, married couples for multiple multilevel models (N=106).*

	<b>Model 1</b>	<b>Model 2</b>	<b>Model 3</b>
<b>Fixed effects</b>			
<i>Final status</i>	113.83**	78.90**	50.81*
T1 Marital Satisfaction		.36**	.42**
T1 MW with Spouse		-2.26*	-2.14*
T1 MW with Friend		.15	.39
T2 MW with Spouse		.55	.36
T2 MW with Friend		1.39	1.55
Female			.15
Age			.33
Marital Duration			-.08
<b>Model fit statistics</b>			
-2LL (df)	869.65(3)	793.28(8)	791.82(11)
$\Delta$ LL (df)	--	76.37**(5)	1.46(3)
Comp Model	--	Model 1	Model 2
AIC	875.65	809.28	813.82
BIC	883.64	830.04	842.37

Note: \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*  $p < .05$

Note: T1 = Time 1; T2 = Time 2; MW = Marriage Work,  $N = 53$  couples

Model 1: Unconditional Means Model; Model 2: One-way ANCOVA with no controls; Model 3: One-way ANCOVA with Level-1 and Level-2 Predictors and Control



#### IV. General Discussion

All relationships, like lives, have beginnings, all have ends, if only through death, and many have substantial middles as well. Existing research has emphasized the relatively more salient and dramatic fare of beginnings and endings rather than the complex dynamics by which relationships are maintained, are renewed, or deteriorate over time. To understand the influence of relationships on the individual's behavior and development, it is necessary to view relationships themselves in a developmental context, both in their progression from one level of interdependence to another and as a function of the partner's maturation. (Reis, Collins, & Berscheid, 2000, p. 860).

Our examination of individuals' discussions of their romantic problems with both partners and friends over time and at various stages of the lifespan has underscored the importance of taking a developmental approach both at the individual and couple levels. At the individual level, we have observed that the specific life cycle stage (e.g., young adult, older adult) of an individual likely impacts how that person both engages in and is affected by the discussion of romantic problems with others. Our studies suggest that what may be beneficial for the romantic relationship at certain stages may actually be detrimental at others. At the couple level, examining these processes concurrently versus over time appears to play a significant role in the effects of disclosing romantic problems to partners and friends. Given that romantic disclosures and the impact of those disclosures on the relationship change over time, it is critical to treat relationship dynamics *dynamically*. Therefore, researchers examining romantic and social

dynamics are strongly encouraged to consider developmental antecedents of these processes as well as how the processes themselves develop over time.

Looking first at the individual level, our studies highlight the need to account for individual development across the lifespan. Underscoring the importance of considering when in the life cycle stage these processes are occurring, we discovered that in young adulthood, romantic partners significantly increased their RW with their partners over time, whereas in older adulthood, spouses decreased their discussions of romantic problems. Moreover, although young adult relationships appeared to benefit from frequent discussions of romantic problems (i.e., greater romantic stability), older adults' marriages appeared to be negatively impacted (i.e., less marital satisfaction). Furthermore, not only did RW with partner and its effects differ by life cycle stage, so too did RW with a friend. For young adults, discussing romantic challenges frequently with a friend was linked with an increased chance of romantic relationship dissolution, whereas for older adults, RW with friend was not predictive of later marital satisfaction. In fact, older adults who experienced less marital satisfaction later turned more frequently to friends, perhaps in an attempt to avoid such discussions with the spouse and prevent further decreases in marital satisfaction. Given that the tenets of SST suggest that social priorities shift over time, it comes as little surprise that the effects of including members of the social network in romantic problems also depend largely on an individual's developmental stage.

Beyond individual development, development of the relationship itself also appears to importantly influence the link between RW and couple dynamics, as the association between RW and romantic functioning cannot be assumed to remain static as a relationship progresses. For example, previous work suggests that engaging in high levels of RW with both partner and friend in young adulthood was concurrently linked with positive indicators of romantic functioning

(e.g., greater romantic happiness; Jensen & Rauer, in press). We found here, however, that engaging in high levels of RW with both partner and friend in young adulthood was linked with greater conflict later in the relationship. Furthermore, among young adults, we found that although greater RW with partner was concurrently linked with greater love across two waves, there were no longitudinal links between RW with partner and love. It seems that although discussing romantic challenges with a partner appears to immediately impact (or is impacted by) the love one feels in that relationship, these links diminish over time. Our findings suggest that researchers should use caution when extrapolating concurrent findings as romantic dynamics pertaining to romantic problem disclosures clearly change as the relationship progresses.

Despite these studies enhancing our knowledge of how romantic partners communicate with one another and with friends about their relationship problems at various points in the lifespan, much remains to be understood regarding how people talk to others about their romantic problems. Researchers should include observational assessments of discussions of romantic problems with both partners and friends in future work on this topic. Although self-report measures utilized in previous work informed researchers about the frequency of such discussions, observational assessment would more comprehensively capture interactional dynamics (Melby, Ge, Conger & Warner, 1995). For example, observational tasks would allow for the examination of the intent (i.e., seeking advice, seeking validation, venting) with which partners appear to discuss the issue. Furthermore, this approach would permit researchers to consider the accompanying affect (i.e., positive, negative) with which individuals disclose problems to partners and friends. The content and method of delivery have proven to be critical factors for understanding interactional dynamics (Verhofstadt, Buysse, & Ickes, 2007). Additionally, this type of assessment would permit researchers to study both the type of feedback

(i.e., supportive of the partner, critical of the partner, neutral) as well as the communicative dynamics (i.e., sensitivity, engagement) of the partner and friend as he or she listens to the romantic problem.

Researchers should also consider expanding this research to a clinical setting, as the venue is conducive to romantic partners disclosing relationship problems to one another and to someone else. Social scientists may expand their understanding of romantic disclosure processes by identifying personal, romantic, and therapeutic antecedents that accompany the decision to disclose couple challenges to a therapist. For example, capturing the therapeutic alliance in such cases may prove beneficial, as this alliance has been critically linked with partners successfully working through challenges in therapy (Garfield, 2004). Exploring RW in a clinical setting would also allow researchers to compare and contrast the effects of discussing romantic problems with a clinician versus with a friend, thus enabling us to better determine whether it is the act of going outside the relationship to discuss romantic problems that is consequential or if these effects are not uniform across different audiences.

In conclusion, all couples experience some kind of romantic challenge and it seems innately human that people share these challenges with others. The findings of these studies underscore the importance of more carefully considering with whom and how often one should discuss romantic relationship problems. Perhaps individuals ought to think about not only the immediate relief of unburdening themselves but also the long-term ramifications of doing so, and how this may be shaped by current life and romantic relationship stage.

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Appendix A

Study 1 – Modified Marriage Work Scale

Partners often vary in how much they talk to their [partner/close friends] about concerns they have about their relationship. Please circle the number that best describes how often you bring up a concern and talk it through with your partner and with your best friend, when problems or concerns arise in the following areas of your relationship.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
	Never			Sometimes			Always		
1. How often do you bring up how well you and your partner talk over important and unimportant issues?									
<b>With Your Partner</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
<b>With Your Friend</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
2. How often do you bring up the way decisions about your relationship get made and the level of influence you have in those decisions?									
<b>With Your Partner</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
<b>With Your Friend</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
3. How often do you bring up your financial situation?									
<b>With Your Partner</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
<b>With Your Friend</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
4. How often do you bring up how well you and your partner get along with one another's families and how much and how often you see them?									
<b>With Your Partner</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
<b>With Your Friend</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
5. How often do you bring up the way that you and your partner spend free time (e.g. the activities you do, and/or the people you socialize with)?									
<b>With Your Partner</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
<b>With Your Friend</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9

## Appendix B

### Study 1 – Braiker and Kelly’s Intimate Relations Questionnaire

**The following questions ask about certain aspects of your romantic relationship. Please answer these questions for the present time in your relationship by **CIRCLING** the number that best characterizes your relationship.**

1. To what extent do you have a sense of "belonging" to your partner?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
	Not at all							Very much	
2. To what extent do you reveal or disclose very intimate facts about yourself to your partner?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
	Not at all							Very much	
3. How often do you argue with one another?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
	Very infrequently							Very frequently	
4. How much do you feel you "give" to the relationship?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
	Very little							Very much	
5. To what extent do you try to change things about your partner that bother you (e.g., behaviors, attitudes, etc.)?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
	Not at all							Very much	
6. How confused are you about your feelings toward your partner?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
	Not at all							Extremely	
7. To what extent do you love your partner at this stage?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
	Not at all							Very much	
8. How much time do you and your partner spend discussing and trying to work out problems between you?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
	No time at all							A great deal of time	
9. How much do you think about or worry about losing some of your independence by being involved with your partner?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
	Not at all							Very much	
10. To what extent do you feel that the things that happen to your partner also affect or are important to you?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
	Not at all							Very much	
11. How much do you and your partner talk about the quality of your relationship (e.g., how "good" it is, how satisfying how to improve it, etc.)?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
	Never							Very often	



12. How often do you feel angry or resentful toward your partner?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
	Never							Very often	
13. To what extent do you feel that your relationship is somewhat unique compared to the others you've been in?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
	Not at all							Very much	
14. To what extent do you try to change your behavior to help solve certain problems between you and your partner?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
	Not at all							Very much	
15. How ambivalent or unsure are you about continuing in the relationship with your partner?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
	Very unsure							Very sure	
16. How committed do you feel toward your partner?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
	Not at all							Extremely	
17. How close do you feel toward your partner?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
	Not close at all							Extremely close	
18. To what extent do you feel that your partner demands or requires too much of your attention?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
	Not at all							Very much	
19. How much do you need your partner at this stage?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
	Not at all							Very much	
20. To what extent do you feel "trapped" or pressured to continue in this relationship?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
	Not at all							Very much	
21. How sexually intimate are you with your partner?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
	Not at all							Very much	
22. How much do you tell your partner what you want or what you need from the relationship?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
	Not at all							Very much	
23. How attached do you feel to your partner?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
	Not at all							Very much	
24. When you and your partner argue, how serious are the problems or arguments?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
	Not serious at all							Very serious	
25. To what extent do you communicate negative feelings toward your partner (e.g., anger, frustration, etc.)?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
	Not at all							Very much	

Note: Love was assessed using the following items: 1, 4, 7, 10, 13, 16, 17, 19, 21, 23.  
Conflict was assessed using the following items: 3, 5, 12, 24, 25.

## Appendix C

### Study 2 – Modified Marriage Work Scale

**Spouses often vary in how much they talk to their [spouse/close friends] about concerns they have about their marriage. Please circle the number that best describes how often you bring up a concern and talk it through with your spouse and with a close friend, when problems or concerns arise in the following areas of you marriage.**

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
<b>Never</b>	<b>Sometimes</b>							<b>Always</b>	
1. How often do you bring up how well you and your spouse talk over important and unimportant issues?									
<b>With Your Spouse</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
<b>With Your Friend</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
2. How often do you bring up how you and your spouse divide housework such as cooking, cleaning, yard work, etc.?									
<b>With Your Spouse</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
<b>With Your Friend</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
3. How often do you bring up the extent to which your spouse makes you feel good about the kind of parent you are (e.g., supports your decisions about rules and discipline, etc.)?									
<b>With Your Spouse</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
<b>With Your Friend</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
4. How often do you bring up the way decisions in your family get made and the level of influence you have in those decisions?									
<b>With Your Spouse</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
<b>With Your Friend</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
5. How often do you bring up your family's total financial situation?									
<b>With Your Spouse</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
<b>With Your Friend</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
6. How often do you bring up how well you and your spouse get along with one another's families and how much and how often you see them?									
<b>With Your Spouse</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
<b>With Your Friend</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9

7. How often do you bring up the way that you and your spouse spend free time (e.g. the activities you do, and/or the people you socialize with)?

<b>With Your Spouse</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
<b>With Your Friend</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9

## Appendix D

### Study 2 – Marital Satisfaction Questionnaire for Older Persons

**Please answer the following questions as carefully as possible. You may choose not to answer specific questions, but you are encouraged to answer as many as possible. Please indicate your current level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction for each of the items listed below.**

	1	2	3	4	5	6			
	Very dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Somewhat dissatisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Satisfied	Very satisfied			
1.	The amount of time my spouse and I spend in shared recreational activities.			1	2	3	4	5	6
2.	The degree to which my spouse and I share common interests.			1	2	3	4	5	6
3.	The day-to-day support and encouragement provided by my spouse.			1	2	3	4	5	6
4.	My spouse's physical health.			1	2	3	4	5	6
5.	The degree to which my spouse motivates me.			1	2	3	4	5	6
6.	My spouse's overall personality.			1	2	3	4	5	6
7.	The amount of consideration shown by my spouse.			1	2	3	4	5	6
8.	The manner in which affection is expressed between my spouse and me.			1	2	3	4	5	6
9.	How my spouse reacts when I share feelings.			1	2	3	4	5	6
10.	The way disagreements are settled.			1	2	3	4	5	6
11.	The number of disagreements between my spouse and me.			1	2	3	4	5	6
12.	My spouse's philosophy of life.			1	2	3	4	5	6
13.	My spouse's values.			1	2	3	4	5	6
14.	My spouse's emotional health.			1	2	3	4	5	6

15.	The frequency of sexual or other physically intimate relationships with my spouse.	1	2	3	4	5	6
16.	The quality of sexual or other physically intimate relations with my spouse.	1	2	3	4	5	6
17.	The frequency with which my spouse and I have pleasant conversations.	1	2	3	4	5	6
18.	My overall compatibility with my spouse.	1	2	3	4	5	6
19.	How decisions are made in my marriage.	1	2	3	4	5	6
20.	How well my spouse listens to me.	1	2	3	4	5	6
21.	Of all the attention you receive from your spouse, what percent is pleasant or positive?	1 0-25%	2 26-50%	3 51-75%	4 76-100%		
22.	Overall, how satisfied are you with your marriage right now?	1 Very dissatisfied	2 Much less satisfied	3 Less satisfied	4 Satisfied	5 More satisfied	6 Very satisfied
23.	In the past year, how often have you had significant problems in your marriage?	1 Very often	2 Often	3 Seldom	4 Never		
24.	Compared to five years ago, how satisfied are you with your marriage?	1 much less satisfied	2 less satisfied	3 equally satisfied	4 more satisfied	5 much more satisfied	