

# Strategic Topic Avoidance: An Investigation of Topic Avoidance Frequency, Strategies Used, and Relational Correlates

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*This research stresses the need to examine the relationship between topic avoidance and relational correlates (e.g., satisfaction and emotional closeness) from a message production theoretical perspective. Our approach—strategic topic avoidance—offers additional explanatory capabilities as the strategies with which interactants in close relationships avoid topics may be associated with perceptions of the relationship (after accounting for topic avoidance frequency). Moreover, relational correlates may also vary by the combination of overall topic avoidance frequency and certain topic avoidance strategies. The current research, therefore, assessed individuals' topic avoidance frequency levels and the frequency of using topic avoidance strategies in relation to satisfaction and closeness across three different relational types (i.e., significant others, mother–young-adult, and father–young-adult relationships). Results suggested that avoiding certain topics, such as current relational concerns, predicted levels of satisfaction and closeness across relationship types; however, cross-relational differences also emerged. Strategies employed to avoid topics accounted for additional variance in satisfaction and closeness for relationships with significant others and mothers but not fathers. Analyses also demonstrated that overall topic avoidance frequency interacted with topic avoidance strategy use.*

*Keywords: Topic Avoidance; Message Production; Strategies; Social Interaction; Goals; Relationships; Satisfaction; Closeness; Significant Other; Mother; Father*

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Relationships rely heavily on communication in terms of their initiation, escalation, maintenance, and de-escalation. One communicative factor in relational development is topic avoidance. Topic avoidance is the idea that individuals steer clear of certain topics in conversations with their relational partners and that this avoidance plays a role in their relationships. Scholars predominantly rely on two theoretical perspectives to explain topic avoidance phenomena. Dialectical theory (Baxter, 1988; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996) argues that relational partners have simultaneous concerns of openness and closedness; people desire intimacy and closeness, yet they also desire autonomy and protection. Communication privacy management (Petronio, 1991, 2000, 2002) similarly argues that relational partners continuously balance privacy and disclosure concerns. More specifically, people own private information and weigh contextual as well as relational factors, based on a complex set of boundary structures and rules, to decide when to reveal or conceal. A proposed mechanism by which these tensions (i. e., concerns) are resolved is topic avoidance. Through topic avoidance, relational partners protect themselves or their partners as well as maintain their privacy, thus maintaining a satisfying relationship (e.g., Golish, 2000; Guerrero & Afifi, 1995a; Sargent, 2002). Additionally, topic avoidance may prevent irreconcilable conflicts that are potentially damaging to a relationship (Roloff & Ifert, 2000). Topic avoidance, therefore, manages these opposing tensions, and thus relational development.

Recognizing the benefits of these frameworks, we argue the need to examine the role of topic avoidance in relationships from an additional theoretical perspective—message production (Daly & Wiemann, 1994; Greene, 1997). Message production theory and research focus on the interaction goals individuals pursue in their conversations with others, the strategies used and messages produced to achieve these goals, and other dynamics of goal pursuit. An application of this perspective to topic avoidance phenomena offers additional explanatory capabilities regarding the relationship between topic avoidance and relational correlates (e.g., satisfaction) as the strategies relational partners use to avoid topics could be associated with how they perceive the relationship. Thus, building on previous topic avoidance research, the present study offers research on what we refer to as strategic topic avoidance.

### *Topic Avoidance*

We define topic avoidance as a goal-oriented communicative behavior whereby individuals strategically try to keep a conversation away from certain foci. A topic is an object of focus in a conversation, which can be influenced by one's goals (for an explication of conversational topic, see Palomares, Bradac, & Kellermann, 2004). Interactants' goals influence the extent to which they avoid topics (Afifi & Guerrero, 2000). Individuals avoid topics for relationship-based reasons (e.g., relational maintenance), individual-based reasons (e.g., such as self-protection), and information-based reasons (e.g., a topic is uninteresting or not newsworthy). Topic avoidance, thus, occurs when interactants (because of their interaction goals)

strategically try not to talk about something or disclose information on a particular topic, or it occurs when individuals try to not let another person talk about something or disclose information on a particular topic.

Individuals actively avoid (or at least try to avoid) a variety of “taboo” topics. Baxter and Wilmot (1985) demonstrated that the vast majority of individuals in close relationships tried to avoid at least one of the following topics: the relationship’s current/future status, extra-relationship activities, relationship norms, prior relationships, conflict-inducing topics, and negative information. Further, Guerrero and Afifi (1995a, 1995b) delineated five additional topics frequently avoided across relationships: relationship issues, negative life experiences, dating experiences, friendships, and sexual experiences. Research on topic avoidance typically focuses on a small set of topics—usually five or six topics—and examines overall topic avoidance frequency by averaging avoidance levels across all topics. While it is important to understand the relational impacts of *overall* topic avoidance frequency, the correlation between relational correlates and topic avoidance may depend on the specific topic that is avoided. For example, avoiding the topic of personal failures may have a positive relationship with satisfaction, whereas avoiding the topic of state of the relationship may have a negative relationship. Our first objective, therefore, is to assess a greater amount of topics and to examine how these specific topics are associated with perceptions of the relationship relative to each other.

Topic avoidance has been found in a variety of relationship types. For example, individuals avoid topics in cross-sex friendships (Afifi & Burgoon, 1998), parent-child relations (Guerrero & Afifi, 1995a, 1995b), stepfamilies (Golish & Caughlin, 2002), dating relationships (Afifi & Burgoon, 1998; Sargent, 2002), and other types of relationships (e.g., Afifi & Guerrero, 1998; Guerrero & Afifi, 1995a). Research even suggests that the specific type of relationship plays an important role in topic avoidance, as the specific topics that are avoided differ across relational types. Adolescents and young adults avoided discussing dating experiences with parents more so than with siblings (Guerrero & Afifi, 1995a). Children in stepfamilies avoided talking about money, such as child support payments (Golish & Caughlin, 2002). Additionally, friends avoided different topics such as negative life experiences (Afifi & Guerrero, 1998). Research, for the most part, however, has not focused on cross-relational comparisons (for exceptions, see Afifi & Burgoon, 1998; Caughlin & Golish, 2002; Guerrero & Afifi, 1995a). In other words, studies on topic avoidance typically examine one relational type regarding a small set of topics, making cross-relational comparisons difficult. Our second object of this study, then, is to make parallel assessments of topic avoidance across relationships; specifically, this research examines topic avoidance in young-adult dating (i.e., significant other), mother-young-adult, and father-young-adult relationships.

Much research on topic avoidance focuses on which topics are avoided (e.g., Guerrero & Afifi, 1995a) and the motivations for such avoidance (e.g., Afifi & Burgoon, 1998). Less is known about the association between topic avoidance and one’s perceptions of a relationship. A few studies, however, have examined the relationship between topic avoidance and satisfaction. For example, Roloff and Iffert

(1998) and Sargent (2002) found that the more individuals reported avoiding topics overall, the less satisfied they were with their romantically involved dating relationships. Golish (2000) also found a negative relationship between topic avoidance and satisfaction within families. One general argument for finding a negative relationship between topic avoidance and satisfaction is that people try to avoid topics because they are unsatisfied with their relationship. In other words, being satisfied in a relationship leads one to discuss things freely. An alternative explanation is that trying to avoid topics in a relationship fosters dissatisfaction with the relationship. As we previously suggested, however, the relationship between topic avoidance and satisfaction may (1) vary cross-relationally and (2) be contingent upon the specific topic that is avoided. To address these issues, we ask the following research question:

RQ<sub>1a-c</sub>: What is the relationship between the frequency level of avoiding certain topics and relational satisfaction relative to other topics in (a) significant other relationships, (b) mother–young-adult relationships, and (c) father–young-adult relationships?

An assessment of the relationship between topic avoidance and other relational correlates besides satisfaction could prove meaningful in achieving a better understanding of topic avoidance, especially considering that no research has directly examined the relationship between topic avoidance and other relational perceptions. One possibility is to examine closeness (i.e., psychological intimacy) and its relationship to topic avoidance. Theoretically, one could argue that the more one avoids topics (i.e., the less open one is), the less intimate the relationship. Indirect support for this was exhibited in Vangelisti and Caughlin's (1997) examination of a similar, but not synonymous, concept—revealing secrets. They found that psychological closeness was positively related to the likelihood of revealing secrets. Hence, examining the relationship between topic avoidance and closeness across relationships could be insightful. As such, our next research question is posed:

RQ<sub>2a-c</sub>: What is the relationship between the frequency level of avoiding certain topics and emotional closeness relative to other topics in (a) significant other relationships, (b) mother–young-adult relationships, and (c) father–young-adult relationships?

### *Strategic Topic Avoidance*

As previously mentioned, topic avoidance is a goal-oriented communicative behavior such that individuals try to keep conversations away from certain foci. Though Guerrero and Afifi (1995b) note that “an important next step in this line of research would be to explore *how* potentially sensitive topics ... are discussed or successfully avoided” (p. 245), the extant topic avoidance research has not yet assessed the strategies with which people try to avoid topics. Most message production research (see Daly & Wiemann, 1994; Greene, 1997) examines the ways in which individuals achieve their goals. In other words, the conversational goals research determines the message strategies used to achieve particular goals (e.g., Wilson, 2002). Applying this framework to topic avoidance would result in an assessment of the specific strategies

people use to avoid topics, thereby offering additional explanatory capabilities of topic avoidance and related phenomena.

An initial application of this perspective requires determining how people try to avoid topics. Although not directly related to topic avoidance, many scholars have examined the ways topics are changed (for a review, see Palomares et al., 2004), which also could be used to avoid topics. Individuals use repetitions and laughter (Howe, 1991); intonation or vocalic markers (Brown & Yule, 1983; Holdgrafer & Campbell, 1986; Schaffer, 1984); figures of speech (Drew & Holt, 1995, 1998); shared historical life-events, time periods, and social experiences (Boden & Bielby, 1986); emotions (de Beaugrande, 1992); and other communicative behaviors (e.g., Maynard, 1980) to change topics. Despite these investigations about the various ways in which individuals *change* topics, no research examines the ways in which individuals *avoid* topics. Thus, using the topic changing literature as a basis, another purpose of the current study is to compile a list of strategies individuals use to try to avoid topics.

The various topic *changing* devices listed above suggest differences and similarities regarding the outcomes associated with their use, and we assume that *topic avoidance* strategies are analogous. But how are topic avoidance strategies characterized? Politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1978) offers an answer to the question of how to describe and distinguish topic avoidance strategies. According to the theory, individuals attempt to maintain positive and negative face when communicating with others, and therefore, they are concerned with politeness. Politeness concerns, in turn, are related to the extent to which a speaker is direct in conversations; the more direct speakers are, the more rude they will be. While we are not in complete agreement with some of the assumptions and proposed relationships of politeness theory (for criticisms, see Craig, Tracy, & Spisak, 1986; Kellermann & Park, 2001; Kellermann & Shea, 1996), the theory offers insight into potential outcomes that could distinguish topic avoidance strategies from each other. The current research, therefore, attempts to determine how topic avoidance strategies differ in terms of directness and rudeness.

By characterizing topic avoidance strategies in terms of directness and rudeness, we can see how topic avoidance strategies play a role in the topic avoidance process. Topic avoidance strategies may be negatively or positively related to satisfaction and closeness depending on the characteristics associated with the strategies. This reasoning suggests that topic avoidance is not inherently a negative aspect in relationships. Examples from other research support this idea. Using verbal aggressiveness—an adverse communicative behavior—in dating relationships was negatively related to satisfaction, whereas using a less harmful communicative behavior (i.e., argumentativeness) was unrelated to satisfaction (Venable & Martin, 1997). Conceivably, topic avoidance strategies could have either a positive or negative relationship with satisfaction and closeness, depending on the specific nature of the strategies used when avoiding topics. Perhaps the more indirect and polite strategies predict high levels of satisfaction in relationships, whereas rude and direct strategies predict low levels. After accounting for the relationship between topic avoidance frequencies and

relational correlates (i.e., satisfaction and emotional closeness), the frequency of using certain topic avoidance strategies may offer additional abilities for predicting the relational correlates. Thus, the following research questions are posed:

RQ<sub>3a-c</sub>: After accounting for topic avoidance frequency levels, what is the relationship between individuals' use of topic avoidance strategies and relational satisfaction for (a) significant other relationships, (b) mother–young-adult relationships, and (c) father–young-adult relationships?

RQ<sub>4a-c</sub>: After accounting for topic avoidance frequency levels, what is the relationship between individuals' use of topic avoidance strategies and emotional closeness for (a) significant other relationships, (b) mother–young-adult relationships, and (c) father–young-adult relationships?

Perceptions of the relationship may also vary in terms of an interaction between one's overall topic avoidance level and strategies used, such that relational correlates may vary by the combination of overall level of topic avoidance frequency and the use of certain topic avoidance strategies. For example, at low levels of topic avoidance, certain strategies may be positively related with satisfaction, whereas at high levels of topic avoidance, the same strategies may be negatively related to satisfaction. Thus, building on the previous research questions, we ask the following:

RQ<sub>5a-c</sub>: Does the use of certain topic avoidance strategies interact with overall level of topic avoidance frequency to predict relational satisfaction in (a) significant other relationships, (b) mother–young-adult relationships, and (c) father–young-adult relationships?

RQ<sub>6a-c</sub>: Does the use of certain topic avoidance strategies interact with overall level of topic avoidance frequency to predict emotional closeness in (a) significant other relationships, (b) mother–young-adult relationships, and (c) father–young-adult relationships?

In our discussion of topic avoidance, we do not intend to suggest directions of causality. Based on previous research, one cannot conclude that topic avoidance causes relational satisfaction or closeness; the reverse could be also true. Most likely, a reciprocal relationship between satisfaction and topic avoidance exists. If relational partners avoid certain topics often, they are likely less satisfied with the relationship; and if they are less satisfied, then they also are likely to continue to avoid the topics. Additionally, we do not assume that the specific topic avoidance strategies employed cause satisfaction or closeness. Again, perceptions of the relationship could influence the strategies one chooses. The purpose of the present investigation, thus, is to assess the associations between topic avoidance frequencies, the strategies used, and relational correlates.

## Method

### *Participants and Procedures*

Three-hundred and forty-six participants completed a questionnaire for research practicum credit in lower division communication courses at a Western university.

Age ranged from 17 to 26 years ( $M = 19.21$ ;  $SD = 1.35$ ). Three different versions of the questionnaire were randomly distributed and identical, with the exception of (1) the target relationship—significant other, mother, or father—and (2) the questionnaire regarding significant others asked if participants currently were involved in a significant other relationship, for the relationship's length, and for their sexuality. Relationship length for significant others ranged from 1 to 74 months, averaging 16.12 months ( $SD = 15.04$ ). Participants were instructed to complete a survey regarding a different relationship if they received a survey regarding a significant other, and they were not currently in a relationship with a significant other, or if they received a survey regarding their mother or father and had not had an extended conversation with their mother or father in the last 3 months. Despite the above instructions for those who completed the significant other survey, 17 (12.14%) participants indicated that they were not currently in a significant other relationship and were, therefore, dropped from analyses. Further, those who completed the significant other survey and did not specify their sexuality as heterosexual (4 or 2.86%) were excluded from analyses. Overall, 119 surveys were completed for significant other, 110 for mother, and 96 for father. Questionnaires required approximately 20 minutes to complete.

#### *Topic Avoidance Frequency*

Topic avoidance frequencies were assessed using topics drawn from previous measures (Golish & Caughlin, 2002; Guerrero & Afifi, 1995b). Table 1 lists all 14 topics and their specific operationalizations. Participants indicated how often they avoided each topic on 7-point scales (1 = "never avoid" 7 = "always avoid"). As we were interested in preserving the dynamics of topics and their unique levels of avoidance, we chose not to collapse across all topics. Rather, seven topics were made by collapsing subsets of related topics (see Table 1). First, the frequencies of avoiding the following topics were averaged to create a *current relationship's concerns* topic: rules about the relationship, state of the relationship, negative relational behavior, conflict-inducing topics, and relationship problems. Next, the topics of past negative life experiences and failures were averaged creating a *life experiences* topic. A *social relations* topic was made using the topic of friendships, whereas a *past relationship experiences* topic was made using the dating experiences topic. The sexual experiences and drinking/drugs/smoking topics were averaged, resulting in a topic of *lifestyle*. The money/financial issues topic made a sixth *money* topic. Finally, the topics *politics and religion* were added based on our assumption, as well as others' (e.g., Waldron, 1990), that religion and politics are sensitive topics, which when averaged provided the final topic.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to measuring these 14 topics, which yielded seven topics upon averaging, an overall topic avoidance frequency level item was included, asking:

**Table 1** Topics and operationalizations

Topics	Definitions
(1) <i>Current relationship's concerns</i>	
Rules about the relationship	Time spent with one another, expectations, relationship roles, acceptable behavior
State of the relationship	Feelings toward one another, current climate of the relationship
Negative relational behavior	Past behavior that caused strain on the relationship
Conflict-inducing topics	Things that highlight potential differences between you two
Relationship problems	Difficulties, issues of concern
(2) <i>Life experiences</i>	
Failures	Being fired from a job, getting bad grades
Past negative life experiences	Emotionally traumatic events, face-threatening behaviors
(3) <i>Social relations</i>	
Friendships	Current friends, attitudes or feelings about friends
(4) <i>Past relationship experiences</i>	
Dating experiences	Past/present romantic relationships
(5) <i>Lifestyle</i>	
Sexual experiences	Past/present sexual behavior, preferences, sexually related issues
Drinking/Drugs/Smoking	Usage, frequency, preferences
(6) <i>Money</i>	
Money/Financial Issues	Bills, financial state, spending too much
(7) <i>Politics/religion</i>	
Politics	Political views, candidates/politicians, policies, social issues
Religion	Church attendance, denomination, beliefs and views

“Overall, how often do you avoid topics in conversations with your significant other/mother/father?” (1 = “never avoid”; 7 = “always avoid”). This measure was added to assess research questions five and six, whereas the seven specific topics outlined in the previous paragraph addressed the other research questions.

### *Topic Avoidance Strategies*

#### *Preliminary studies*

Measures of individuals' use of topic avoidance strategies were developed, as none exists in the literature. Communicative strategies are composed of specific tactics or behaviors used to achieve a goal (Berger, 1997). Topic avoidance strategies, therefore, are composed of specific topic avoidance tactics. Our topic avoidance strategy use measure was developed in a three-stage process: (1) we determined which tactics individuals use to try to avoid topics; (2) we measured the directness and rudeness

of these tactics; and (3) we determined how the tactics cohere in terms of directness and rudeness to form strategies. For the first step, we reviewed the topic changing literature to determine the tactics individuals use to change topics, as these are likely to be tactics used for trying to avoid topics as well (Palomares et al., 2004). This review revealed 25 different tactics (see Table 2 for a complete list of the topic avoidance tactics). A small pilot study was then conducted which asked 94 participants to list the ways in which they try to avoid topics in intimate relationships. These data were reviewed and added 17 more tactics individuals use when trying to avoid a topic, yielding 42 tactics in total.

The second step involved measuring the tactics in terms of their directness and rudeness. A total of 312 additional individuals participated in a second preliminary study (similar in demographics to those participating in the main study) by rating the 42 tactics in terms of directness and rudeness. Participants assessed how *direct* (i.e., obvious or apparent) it is to the receiver that the speaker wants to avoid a topic when using a specific tactic (1 = “indirect” 7 = “direct”) and how *rude or disrespectful* (i.e., impolite) the speaker is to the receiver when using a specific tactic (1 = “polite”; 7 = “rude”). Three different versions of the questionnaire were randomly distributed and identical, with the exception of the target relationship—significant other, mother–young adult, or father–young adult. All individuals were asked to rate, in general, each tactic’s directness and rudeness when trying to avoid a topic in a conversation within one of the specific relational types.

The third step in developing our measure of individuals’ use of topic avoidance strategies included compiling the tactics into a manageable number of strategies in terms of the tactics’ similarities regarding the directness and rudeness ratings across the three relational types (similar to Kellermann & Park, 2001). As we were interested in developing one frequency measure of topic avoidance strategies regardless of relational type (as opposed to a different measure for each relational type), we used two multiple analyses of variance (MANOVAs) to determine if ignoring relational type is appropriate for the directness assessment and the rudeness assessment, respectively. The first MANOVA used relational type as the between-subjects independent variable (significant other, mother, father) and the 42 directness rating of the tactics as dependent variables and found that, across the 42 tactics, directness does not differ by relational type,  $F(84, 512) = 1.14, ns$ . The second MANOVA revealed similar results, indicating that, across the 42 tactics, rudeness does not vary by relational type,  $F(84, 494) = 1.21, ns$ . Therefore, a reduction of the 42 tactics into a smaller set of strategies across the three relational types can be based on directness and rudeness.<sup>2</sup>

Knowing that the tactics did not differ in terms of directness and rudeness across the three relational types, we used cluster analysis to determine which tactics are simultaneously similar regarding these two ratings across the three relational types. Specifically, we used the tactics’ overall ratings of directness and rudeness in a hierarchical cluster analysis with average linkage between groups as the clustering criterion. Jumps and flattenings in fusion coefficients (Aldenderfer & Blashfield,

**Table 2** Topic Avoidance Tactics and Strategy Memberships

Topic Avoidance Tactic (definition/example)
<i>Strategy 1</i>
Laughter (Laugh to avoid a topic)
Sayings/Idioms (Use a saying or idiom to avoid a topic; "That's the way the balls bounces"; "Take it with a grain of salt"; "You killed two birds with one stone"; "It's your lucky day")
Historical Life Event Talk (Talk about a previous event or story that happened in your life in the past to avoid a topic; "I remember when ..."; "Remember that time when ...")
Current Setting Talk (Talk about the current situation or present environment to avoid a topic, e.g., talk about things or people nearby)
Emotion Talk (Talk about your or the other person's emotions to avoid a topic)
Summary Assessment (Say a brief summary or general conclusion of the previous topic to avoid a topic; "You like that a lot"; "That was interesting"; "You have really strong feelings about this")
Related Question (Ask a question somewhat related to the current topic to avoid a topic)
<i>Strategy 2</i>
Pauses, Silences, and Hesitations (Say nothing; remain silent; and/or be hesitant in what you say to avoid a topic)
Delay Topic (Say/ask to talk about it later to avoid a topic; put it off)
Side Statement (Say a side statement about something else to avoid a topic; "By the way ..."; "Not to change the subject but ..."; "This is a little off topic ...")
Taboo Topic Suggestion/Question (Suggest/ask to not talk about something to avoid a topic; "Can we not talk about that?"; "We should not talk about ..."; "Perhaps we should not talk about that anymore")
Topic Change Excuse (Apologize or excuse self to avoid a topic; "Sorry but ..."; "I apologize but ...")
<i>Strategy 3</i>
Change in Voice (Raise or lower the tone/pitch/amplitude of your voice to avoid a topic)
Response Words ("Anyway"; "Oh"; "Yeah"; "So"; "Well"; "Uh?huh"; "Umm")
Crying (Cry to avoid a topic)
Pretend Not To Know (Act as if you do not know what you and the other person are talking about to avoid a topic)
Distraction (Create a distraction to avoid a topic)
Introduce Third Party (Bring a third person into the conversation to avoid a topic)
Use Nonverbal Behaviors (Avoid eye contact, roll eyes, smile, frown to avoid a topic)
Past Topic (Bring up or reintroduce a previous topic in the same conversation to avoid a topic; "Like I said earlier ..."; "Like we talked about before ...")
Ask To Go Somewhere or Do Something ("Let's go to ..."; "Do you want to go to ..."; "We should ...")
Abrupt Unrelated Statement (Say something completely unrelated to the previous topic, without any notification, to avoid a topic)
Abrupt Related Statement (Say something somewhat related to the previous topic, without any notification, to avoid a topic)
Unrelated Question (Ask a question unrelated to the current topic to avoid a topic)
News Statement/Question (Make a statement or ask a question about an interesting piece of information to avoid a topic; "I heard about ..."; "I just remembered ..."; "Listen to this ..."; "What's new?" "Guess what happened?")
<i>Strategy 4</i>
Lie (Tell lies or give false information to avoid a topic)
Be Offensive (Make rude comments or behave inappropriately to avoid a topic)
Don't Let Other Person Talk (Control the conversation so that the other person cannot get a word in, as a way to avoid a topic)

**Table 2** (continued)

Topic Avoidance Tactic (definition/example)
<i>Strategy 5</i>
Become Defensive or Aggressive (Be defensive or aggressive; cause a disagreement to avoid a topic)
Interruption (Interrupt the other person to avoid a topic)
Guilt Trip (Lay a guilt trip on the other to avoid a topic)
Do Something Else (Do something that takes your attention away from the conversation to avoid a topic, e.g., read, pretend to sleep, clean, watch TV, etc.)
Bring Up Other's Past Wrongdoings/Misbehaviors (Talk about something bad that the other person did in the past to avoid a topic)
<i>Strategy 6</i>
Physical Affection (Hug, kiss, touch to avoid a topic)
Complimenting (Say something nice to or compliment the other person to avoid a topic)
Agreeing (Agree with the other person to avoid a topic; "You are right")
<i>Strategy 7</i>
Ending Conversation (End the conversation to avoid a topic)
Taboo Topic Declaration (State explicitly that you do not want to talk about something to avoid a topic; "I don't want to talk about that"; "Let's not talk about ...")
<i>Strategy 8</i>
Leave Current Situation (Get up and leave the room or location to avoid a topic)
Tell Other to Leave (Tell the other person to leave the room/location to avoid a topic; "You should go")
Hand Over Other Person's Mouth (Put your hand(s) over the other person's mouth to avoid a topic)
Threats (Make a threat to the other person to avoid a topic; "I am going to ..."; "If we talk about this, then I will ...")

1984) revealed 11, 8, and 6 cluster solutions. The 8-cluster solution is best because it optimally maintains the uniqueness of the tactic clusters, yet still significantly reduces the 42 tactics into a manageable number of strategies. Table 2 contains the strategy membership of the 42 tactics according to the 8-cluster solution. Table 3

**Table 3** Strategy Ratings

Strategies	Directness	Rudeness
1	3.61 (0.84)	3.17 (0.76)
2	5.43 (0.86)	3.46 (0.94)
3	4.50 (0.73)	4.03 (0.67)
4	4.19 (1.09)	6.33 (0.65)
5	4.73 (0.86)	5.54 (0.66)
6	3.59 (1.24)	2.11 (0.94)
7	6.09 (1.11)	4.53 (1.21)
8	6.06 (1.27)	6.43 (0.60)

*Note.* Tactics clustered into the strategies can be determined via Table 2. All dimensions were measured on a 7-point scale with seven indicating the highest level of the dimension. Numbers in parentheses are standard deviations.

contains the descriptive statistics for each strategy's directness and rudeness ratings across the three relational types. As can be seen in Table 3, the 8 strategies differ in terms of directness and rudeness. These analyses provided a list of the 42 topic avoidance tactics grouped into eight strategies based on their directness and rudeness similarities when used across the three relational types.

### *Main study*

The classification of the topic avoidance tactics into strategies allowed us to assess individuals' frequency of using the eight topic avoidance strategies in the main study. Participants in the main study rated their frequency of using each of the 42 topic avoidance tactics on 7-point scales (1 = "never"; 7 = "always") for their specific relational type. Tactics contained the definitions as seen in Table 2 and were randomly ordered. We created frequency-of-use measures for each of the eight topic avoidance strategies by averaging each participant's reported frequency of use for the unique set of tactics within each strategy. For example, each participant's frequencies of using the tactics lie, be offensive and don't let other person talk were averaged to yield each participant's average frequency of using the topic avoidance strategy 4. This process created participants' frequency of using each the topic avoidance strategies specific to the relational type on which participants reported.<sup>3</sup>

### *Perceptions of the Relationship*

Two outcome measures were of interest in the present study: relational satisfaction and emotional closeness. Similar to previous studies examining satisfaction and topic avoidance (e.g., Golish, 2000; Sargent, 2002), satisfaction was assessed using Huston, McHale, and Crouter's (1996) modification of Campbell, Converse, and Rodgers' (1976) life satisfaction questionnaire; 2 of the 11 items were excluded, with the remaining 9 measured on a 7-point semantic differential. Reliabilities were acceptable for all relational types ( $\alpha = .85, .93, \text{ and } .95$  for significant other, mother, and father respectively). Closeness was measured using the psychological closeness items in Vangelisti and Caughlin's (1997) relational closeness survey. The target name (i.e., significant other, mother, or father) was changed for each type of questionnaire. The 7 items were measured on a 7-point scale (1 = "not at all;" 7 = "very"). Reliabilities exceeded .90 for all relational types ( $\alpha = .90, .94, \text{ and } .94$  for significant other, mother, and father, respectively).

## **Results**

### *Specific Topics and Strategies*

To address research questions 1 through 4, hierarchical regressions were performed to predict levels of relational satisfaction and emotional closeness using the frequencies of avoiding the seven topics and the frequencies of using the eight strategies. Preliminary analyses showed that gender was not related to reports of relational

**Table 4** Summary of Hierarchical Regressions Predicting Relational Satisfaction

Predictors	$\beta$	$F$	$df$	Adj. $R^2$	$R^2\Delta$
Significant Other					
Frequency of Avoiding Topic 1	-.182*	3.85***	(15, 103)	.267	.154***
Frequency of Avoiding Topic 7	-.160†				
Frequency of Using Strategy 5	-.322**				
Frequency of Using Strategy 6	.253**				
Mother-Young Adult					
Frequency of Avoiding Topic 1	-.231*	5.710***	(15, 92)	.398	.055*
Frequency of Avoiding Topic 2	-.213*				
Frequency of Using Strategy 3	-.257†				
Frequency of Using Strategy 6	.224*				
Father-Young Adult					
Frequency of Avoiding Topic 1	-.389**	3.424***	(15, 80)	.277	.038
Frequency of Avoiding Topic 6	-.190†				
Frequency of Using Strategy 4	-.239†				

Note. Adj.  $R^2$  refers to the overall variance explained in the model;  $R^2\Delta$  refers to the variance explained by the addition of the strategies.

†  $p < .10$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

satisfaction or emotional closeness in any of the relationship types and, thus, was excluded from analyses. For each hierarchical regression, avoidance frequencies of the seven specific topics were entered in the first step (to address research questions 1 and 2), and frequencies of using the eight strategies were entered in the second step to determine if strategy use offered an additional explanation after accounting for topic avoidance (to address research questions 3 and 4). Separate analyses were conducted for each relational type.

### Satisfaction

Results regarding relational satisfaction for all relationship types are summarized in Table 4. In general, avoidance of certain topics was negatively related to satisfaction across relational types ( $RQ_1$ ). Also, the addition of the strategies in the second step showed significant increases in variance explained for relationships with significant others ( $R^2$  change = 15.4%) and mothers ( $R^2$  change = 5.5%) but not fathers ( $R^2$  change = 3.8%;  $RQ_3$ ). This suggests that satisfaction levels with fathers do not vary by strategy use frequency.

For significant other relationships, the frequency of avoiding current relational concerns (topic 1) as well as politics and religion (topic 7; although marginally) was negatively related to relational satisfaction ( $RQ_{1a}$ ). In addition to avoidance of these topics, use of the moderately rude and moderately direct strategy (strategy 5; e.g., becoming defensive or aggressive, using guilt trips, etc.) was negatively related to relational satisfaction, whereas highly indirect and highly polite strategy use (strategy 6; e.g., using physical affection, complimenting, and agreeing) was positively related to relational satisfaction ( $RQ_{3a}$ ). In relationships with mothers, young adults reported that greater avoidance of current relational concerns (topic 1) and negative life experiences (topic 2) were negatively related to relational satisfaction ( $RQ_{1b}$ ). Certain strategies account for additional variation in relational satisfaction after

**Table 5** Summary of Hierarchical Regressions Predicting Emotional Closeness

Predictors	$\beta$	$F$	$df$	Adj. $R^2$	$R^2\Delta$
Significant Other					
Frequency of Avoiding Topic 2	-.233*	3.155***	(15, 103)	.215	.081*
Frequency of Using Strategy 1	-.241*				
Frequency of Using Strategy 6	.236*				
Frequency of Using Strategy 7	.240*				
Mother-Young Adult					
Frequency of Avoiding Topic 1	-.288**	6.781***	(15, 92)	.448	.051*
Frequency of Avoiding Topic 3	-.167†				
Frequency of Using Strategy 5	-.212**				
Frequency of Using Strategy 6	.173†				
Father-Young Adult					
Frequency of Avoiding Topic 1	-.349**	3.670***	(15, 80)	.297	.048
Frequency of Avoiding Topic 2	-.222†				
Frequency of Avoiding Topic 6	-.242*				
Frequency of Using Strategy 4	-.215†				

Note. Adj.  $R^2$  refers to the overall variance explained in the model;  $R^2\Delta$  refers to the variance explained by the addition of the strategies.

†  $p < .10$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

accounting for topic avoidance in mother-young-adult relationships (RQ<sub>3b</sub>). The moderately direct yet highly polite strategy (strategy 3; e.g., general response words, creating distractions, introducing a third party, asking unrelated questions, etc.) was negatively related to satisfaction, although this relationship approached significance. Similar to significant others, frequent use of the highly indirect and highly polite strategy (strategy 6; e.g., physical affection, complimenting, and agreeing) was linked with greater relational satisfaction. In relationships with fathers, young-adults reported lower satisfaction with more frequent avoidance of current relational concerns (topic 1) and money issues (topic 6; marginally significant; RQ<sub>1c</sub>). As suggested by the lack of significant increase in variance explained with the addition of strategies, only the indirect and highly rude strategy (strategy 4; e.g., lying, being offensive, and not letting the other speak) was marginally related to relational satisfaction (RQ<sub>3c</sub>).

#### *Emotional closeness*

Results for emotional closeness are summarized in Table 5. Again, the overall avoidance of certain topics was negatively related to emotional closeness across relational types (RQ<sub>2</sub>). The addition of strategies explained additional variance in relationships with significant others ( $R^2$  change = 8.1%) and mothers ( $R^2$  change = 5.1%) but not with fathers ( $R^2$  change = 4.8%; RQ<sub>4</sub>). Similar to results for satisfaction, this suggests that emotional closeness levels with fathers do not vary by strategy use frequency.

For significant others, only avoidance of negative life experiences (topic 2) was related to emotional closeness (RQ<sub>2a</sub>); greater avoidance of this topic was related to less closeness. Three strategies also were related to emotional closeness (RQ<sub>4a</sub>).

Common use of the moderately indirect and moderately polite strategy (strategy 1; e.g., laughter, summary statements, using idioms, asking related questions, etc.) was related to less emotional closeness. In contrast, frequent use of the moderately indirect and highly polite strategy (strategy 6; e.g., physical affection, complimenting, and agreeing) was related to high levels of closeness. The highly direct and moderately rude strategy (strategy 7; e.g., ending the conversation or declaring the topic taboo) also was positively related to emotional closeness. In relationships with mothers, avoidance of current relational concerns (topic 1) was negatively related to emotional closeness, as was social relations (topic 3), although only approaching significance (RQ<sub>2b</sub>). Frequent use of the moderately direct and rude strategy (strategy 5; e.g., becoming defensive or aggressive, interrupting the other, using guilt trips, etc.) was negatively related to closeness, whereas the highly indirect and polite strategy (strategy 6; e.g., using physical affection, complimenting, and agreeing) was positively related to closeness (although marginally; RQ<sub>4b</sub>). For fathers, high avoidance of current relational concerns (topic 1), money issues (topic 6), and negative life experiences (topic 2) was related to less closeness (the latter of these topics was marginally related; RQ<sub>2c</sub>). Use of the highly indirect but highly rude strategy (strategy 4; e.g., lying, being offensive, or not letting other speak) was negatively, yet marginally, related to emotional closeness (RQ<sub>4c</sub>).

#### *Interactions Between Overall Topic Avoidance Frequency and Strategy Use*

A second set of hierarchical regressions predicting relational correlates was conducted to determine if interactions existed between overall topic avoidance frequency and the frequency of using the eight strategies (to address research questions 5 and 6). Two separate analyses—one for satisfaction and another for emotional closeness—were performed for each of the three relational types (six regressions in total). All predictor variables were centered to avoid multicollinearity among interaction terms (see Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001). For all regressions, the *overall* level of topic avoidance frequency was entered in the first step, the eight strategies were entered in the second, and the eight interactions terms were entered in the third. The results of the third step (with the interaction terms) are only reported, as that is the focus of the current research questions (5 and 6). To reveal the nature of the significant interactions, scores of topic avoidance frequency one standard deviation above and below the mean were selected, and regression equations were recalculated (see Aiken & West, 1991) allowing for plots of the significant interactions. Results for relational satisfaction are summarized in Tables 6–8, and results for emotional closeness are summarized in Tables 9–11.

#### *Satisfaction*

As denoted by the incremental increases in variance explained, the interaction terms explained additional variance in satisfaction for relationships with significant others ( $R^2$  change = 6.9%; RQ<sub>5a</sub>), but not with mothers ( $R^2$  change = 2.2%; RQ<sub>5b</sub>) or fathers

**Table 6** Hierarchical Regression Predicting Relational Satisfaction: Significant Other

Predictors	$\beta$	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	Adj. <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> $\Delta$
Step 1		17.686***	(1, 117)	.125	.125***
Step 2		5.879***	(9, 109)	.273	.148***
Step 3		4.574***	(17, 101)	.342	.069*
Overall Topic Avoidance	-.342**				
Frequency of Using Strategy 5	-.241*				
Frequency of Using Strategy 6	.351**				
Interaction of TA and Strategy 3	.628***				
Interaction of TA and Strategy 5	-.234†				

Note. TA = Overall Topic Avoidance.

†  $p < .10$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

**Table 7** Hierarchical Regression Predicting Relational Satisfaction: Mother

Predictors	$\beta$	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	Adj. <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> $\Delta$
Step 1		56.592***	(1, 106)	.338	.338***
Step 2		10.282***	(9, 98)	.434	.096**
Step 3		6.370***	(17, 92)	.456	.022
Overall Topic Avoidance	-.422***				
Frequency of Using Strategy 3	-.244†				
Frequency of Using Strategy 6	.209*				
Interaction of TA and Strategy 2	-.283†				

Note. TA = Overall Topic Avoidance.

†  $p < .10$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

**Table 8** Hierarchical Regression Predicting Relational Satisfaction: Father

Predictors	$\beta$	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	Adj. <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> $\Delta$
Step 1		99.282***	(1, 94)	.508	.508***
Step 2		11.896***	(9, 86)	.508	.000
Step 3		6.891***	(17, 78)	.513	.005
Overall Topic Avoidance	-.636***				
Frequency of Using Strategy 1	-.188†				
Interaction of TA and Strategy 3	-.407*				
Interaction of TA and Strategy 6	.237*				

(*R*<sup>2</sup> change = .05%; *RQ*<sub>5c</sub>). Thus, only the significant interaction terms predicting satisfaction in significant other relationship will be discussed.<sup>4</sup>

Overall topic avoidance and use of strategy 3 (e.g., general response words, creating distractions, introducing a third party, etc.) interacted to predict satisfaction in significant other relationships (see Figure 1). At low levels of topic avoidance, use of the moderately direct and highly polite strategy was negatively related to satisfaction. At the mean level of topic avoidance, satisfaction varies minimally in terms of using strategy 3. At high levels of topic avoidance, on the other hand, the relationship between frequency of strategy 3 and relational satisfaction was slightly positive.

**Table 9** Hierarchical Regression Predicting Emotional Closeness: Significant Other

Predictors	$\beta$	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	Adj. <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> $\Delta$
Step 1		27.404***	(1, 116)	.184	.184***
Step 2		5.536***	(9, 108)	.259	.075*
Step 3		3.827***	(17, 100)	.291	.032
Overall Topic Avoidance	-.385***				
Frequency of Using Strategy 3	-.320†				
Frequency of Using Strategy 4	-.271*				
Frequency of Using Strategy 6	.260**				
Frequency of Using Strategy 7	.232†				
Interaction of TA and Strategy 1	-.465**				
Interaction of TA and Strategy 3	.432**				

Note. TA: Overall Topic Avoidance.

†  $p < .10$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

**Table 10** Hierarchical Regression Predicting Emotional Closeness: Mother

Predictors	$\beta$	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	Adj. <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> $\Delta$
Step 1		74.663***	(1, 106)	.403	.403***
Step 2		13.597***	(9, 98)	.510	.107***
Step 3		9.548***	(17, 92)	.571	.059**
Overall Topic Avoidance	-.475***				
Frequency of Using Strategy 4	-.193*				
Frequency of Using Strategy 8	-.171†				
Interaction of TA and Strategy 1	-.341*				
Interaction of TA and Strategy 7	.247†				
Interaction of TA and Strategy 8	-.247*				

Note. TA = Overall Topic Avoidance.

†  $p < .10$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

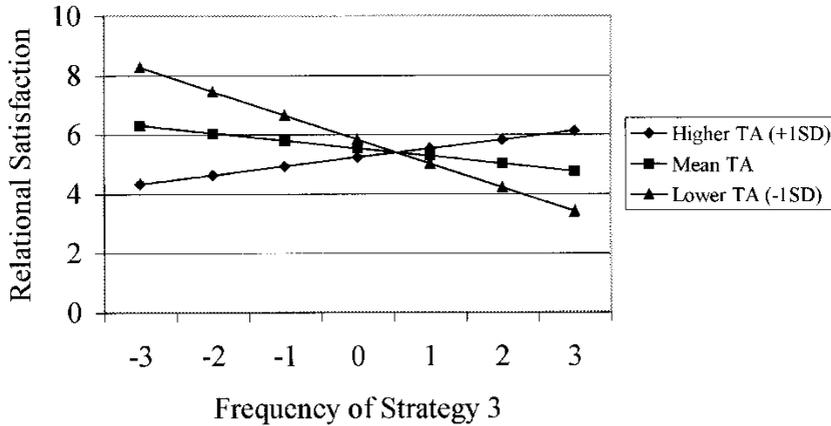
**Table 11** Hierarchical Regression Predicting Emotional Closeness: Father

Predictors	$\beta$	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	Adj. <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> $\Delta$
Step 1		95.186***	†(1, 94)	.498	.498***
Step 2		11.355***	†(9, 86)	.495	.000
Step 3		6.221***	(17, 78)	.483	.000
Overall Topic Avoidance	-.595***				
Frequency of Using Strategy 6	.189†				
Interaction of TA and Strategy 3	-.329†				

Note. TA = Overall Topic Avoidance.

†  $p < .10$ ; \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

Overall topic avoidance and use of the moderately direct and moderately rude strategy (strategy 5; e.g., becoming defensive or aggressive, using guilt trips, bringing up the other's wrongdoings, etc.) also interacted to predict relational satisfaction in significant other relationships (see Figure 2). At lower levels of topic avoidance, frequency of strategy 5 was unrelated to satisfaction. However, at mean and higher

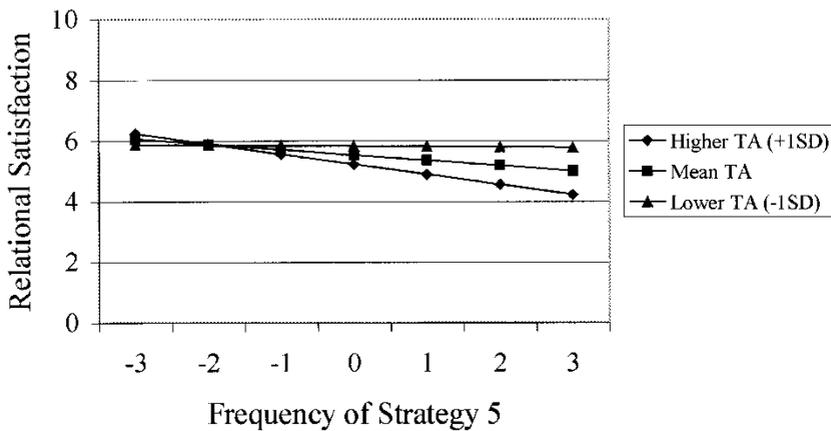


**Figure 1** Interaction of Topic Avoidance Frequency and Frequency of Strategy 3: Significant Other.

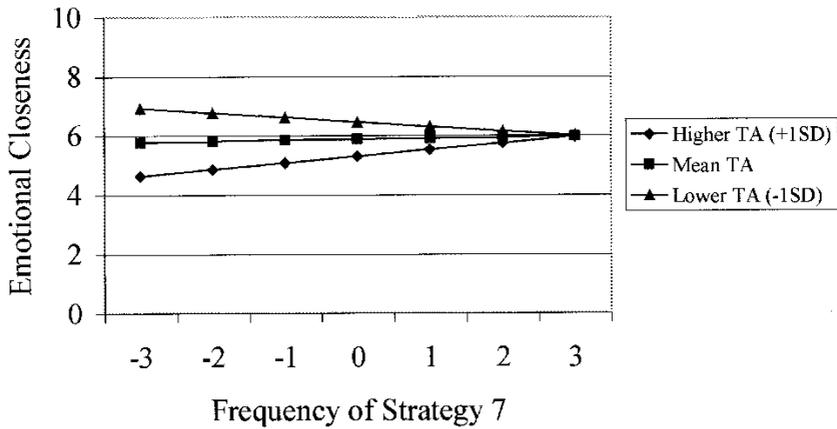
levels of topic avoidance, frequency of this strategy was negatively related to satisfaction. Thus, when young adults are less open in their relationships, increases in the use of strategy 5 are linked with decreases in satisfaction.

*Emotional closeness*

The addition of the interaction terms in models predicting emotional closeness showed increases in variance explained in relationships with mothers ( $R^2$  change = 5.9%;  $RQ_{6b}$ ), but not with significant others ( $R^2$  change = 3.2%;  $RQ_{6a}$ ) or fathers ( $R^2$  change = .00%;  $RQ_{6c}$ ). Again, only the significant interaction terms predicting emotional closeness in mother–young-adult relationships will be discussed.<sup>5</sup>

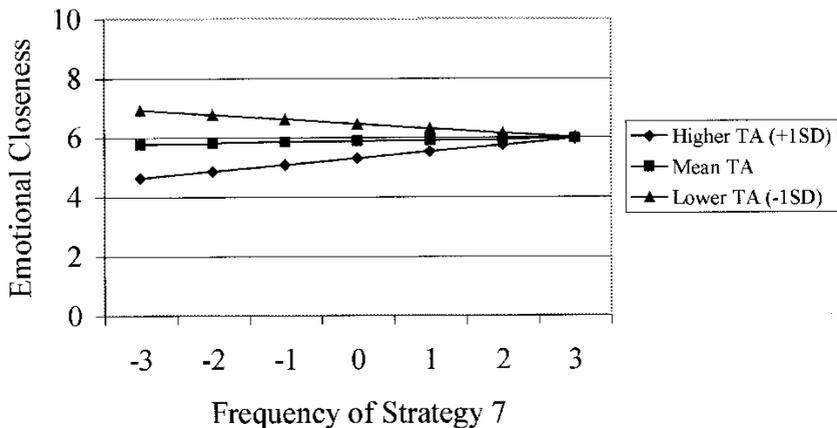


**Figure 2** Interaction of Topic Avoidance Frequency and Frequency of Strategy 5: Significant Other.

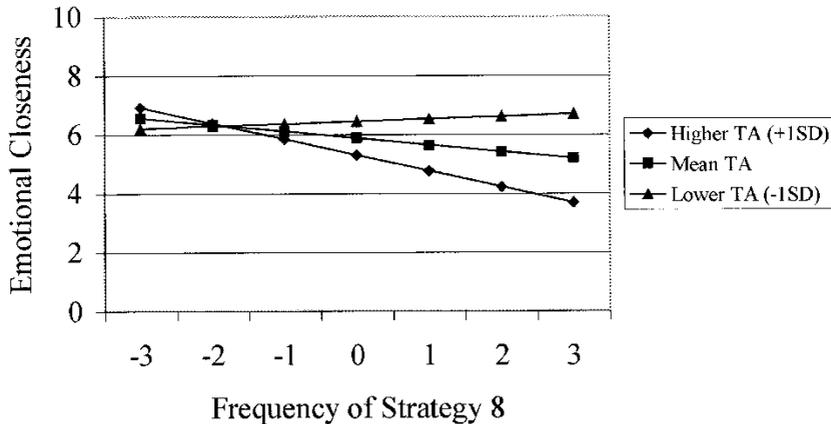


**Figure 3** Interaction of Topic Avoidance Frequency and Frequency of Strategy 1: Mother.

The significant interaction between overall topic avoidance and the moderately indirect and moderately polite strategy (strategy 1; e.g., laughter, summary statements, using idioms, asking related questions, etc.) reveals that at lower levels of topic avoidance, using this strategy was negatively related to emotional closeness (see Figure 3). In contrast, at higher levels of topic avoidance, frequency of strategy 1 was positively related to emotional closeness. A significant interaction between overall topic avoidance and the highly direct and moderately rude strategy 7 (e.g., ending conversation and declaring the topic taboo) also emerged (see Figure 4). Despite the differences in the directness and rudeness of strategy 7 compared to strategy 1, the nature of this interaction is similar to the previous interaction. Finally, the interaction between overall topic avoidance frequency and the highly direct and highly rude strategy 8 (e.g., leaving the current situation, telling the other to leave, making threats, etc.) was significant (see Figure 5). This interaction reveals that at high levels



**Figure 4** Interaction of Topic Avoidance Frequency and Frequency of Strategy 7: Mother.



**Figure 5** Interaction of Topic Avoidance Frequency and Frequency of Strategy 8: Mother.

of topic avoidance with mothers, frequency of this strategy was negatively related to emotional closeness. In contrast, at low levels of topic avoidance, frequency of using this strategy is unrelated to closeness in mother–young-adult relationships.

Overall, these results suggest that frequency of using certain topic avoidance strategies and overall level of topic avoidance frequency interact to predict relational satisfaction in young-adults' relationships with significant others (but not with mothers or fathers; RQ<sub>5</sub>). Also, the frequency of using certain topic avoidance strategies interacts with overall level of topic avoidance frequency to predict emotional closeness in young-adults' relationships with mothers (but not with significant others or fathers; RQ<sub>6</sub>). In other words, the combination avoiding topics (overall) and using certain strategies are important to consider in relationships with significant others and mothers (but perhaps not fathers). Thus, these combinations may either exacerbate or ameliorate young adults' levels of satisfaction and emotional closeness in some relationships but not others.

## Discussion

The current research sought to examine the relationship between avoiding certain topics and two relational correlates (i.e., satisfaction and emotional closeness) across three relational types (i.e., significant other, mother–young-adult, and father–young-adult). The nature of the relationships between topic avoidance and relational correlates revealed cross-relational similarities, as well as differences. High levels of avoiding the current relationship's concerns (topic 1) predicted low levels of satisfaction across all relational types. Perhaps talk on this topic may be important for these relationships because of the topic's relational focus. Avoiding the life experiences topic (2; e.g., failures), on the other hand, was negatively related to satisfaction in mother–young-adult relationship but not in significant other or father–young-adult relationships. Also, certain topics were unrelated to satisfaction or emotional closeness across all relational types (i.e., past relationship experiences

and lifestyle). When topic avoidance was linked with relational perceptions, the relationship was always inverse, such that low levels of topic avoidance were associated with the high levels of satisfaction or closeness. Thus, individuals appear to favor openness, suggesting that extreme topic avoidance is more likely found in distressed relationships (Roloff & Iffert, 1998; Sargent, 2002).

As the relationship between topic avoidance and relational correlates varies across topics, future research should take this into consideration when possible. Specifically, topic avoidance should be assessed by maintaining the uniqueness of specific topics in addition to a more holistic account of topic avoidance. Further, explanations are needed for why avoiding some topics is related to satisfaction and closeness, whereas avoiding others is not. Perhaps young adults are managing the tensions of openness and privacy (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Petronio, 2002) through the use of different topics. Talk on certain topics may reveal more private information relative to talk on other topics; thus, privacy issues are more or less pronounced depending on the topic. The rules for each relational type (Petronio, 2002) also may play a role. For example, the current findings suggest that the rules of managing relational issues (topic 1) are similar across the relational types, whereas the rules for managing talk on money (topic 6) are unique for father–young-adult relationships.

The message production theoretical perspective (Greene, 1997) also may offer explanations regarding why avoiding certain topics, but not others, is related to relational correlates. Relational types differ regarding the extent to which talk on certain topics occurs, and research suggests that individuals engage in relational maintenance, escalation, and de-escalation via strategic talk on specific topics (Kellermann & Palomares, 2004). Therefore, avoiding certain topics and not others could reflect individuals' goals to manage or change their relationships. For example, other research demonstrates that the topic of money is commonly talked about in parent–young-adult relationships compared to other relational types (Kellermann & Palomares, 2004). Thus, avoiding discussions about money may serve an interaction goal of reducing intimacy in parent–young-adult relationships due to the topic's high frequency of occurrence. In other words, avoiding a topic that is common in a certain relational type can reduce intimacy in that relational type. The current data partially support this contention; avoiding the topic of money was negatively related to satisfaction and emotional closeness only in father–young-adult relationships. Determining the goals individuals have for specific relational types may help explain why certain topics are avoided and the associations between avoiding certain topics and relational correlates.

Because previous research, as well as the present study, has demonstrated a negative relationship between topic avoidance frequency and relational correlates, topic avoidance might be dubbed with a negative label. However, the results of the present study showed certain positive aspects of topic avoidance as well. Though highly direct and rude strategies (e.g., strategy 5, which includes becoming defensive or aggressive, using guilt trips, etc.) were *negatively* related to satisfaction and closeness, highly polite and moderately direct strategies (e.g., strategy 6 including using physical affection, complimenting, and agreeing) were *positively* related to

satisfaction and closeness. The relationship between strategy use and the relational correlates, however, only accounted for variance (in addition to that accounted for by topic avoidance) in significant other and mother–young-adult relationships. Possibly, young adults may be limited in the topic avoidance strategies that are acceptable to use with mothers and significant others but not with fathers. The acceptability of strategies may be a result of socialization such that individuals attend to the ways in which topics are avoided in certain relational types but not others. Thus, most strategies used to avoid topics may be acceptable with fathers.

Another important finding was that using certain topic avoidance strategies moderated the relationship between overall topic avoidance frequency and satisfaction (in significant other relationships) and emotional closeness (in mother–young-adult relationships). For example, at low levels of using the rude and moderately direct strategy 5, satisfaction does not vary as a function of topic avoidance in significant other relationships. However, at high levels of using strategy 5, satisfaction decreases as topic avoidance increases. Also, when the moderately direct and moderately rude strategy 3 is used frequently in significant other relationships, increases in topic avoidance predict increases in satisfaction, whereas at low levels of using the strategy, increases in topic avoidance predict decreases in satisfaction. Similar results emerged for emotional closeness in mother–young-child relationships. These findings suggest that there is no inherent inverse relationship between overall topic avoidance and relational correlates. At certain times, depending on the strategies one employs, topic avoidance can demonstrate a positive or negative association with relational correlates. This suggests that topic avoidance could have a negative relational impact when one uses rude strategies, whereas topic avoidance could have a positive relational impact if one uses polite strategies.

### **Limitations and Extensions**

While the previous research findings pose many interesting points, they nevertheless are subject to certain limitations. A few of these limitations are discussed henceforth. First, topic avoidance research, thus far, has relied solely on correlational methods and results. Such methodological limitations are expected given the pragmatic difficulties inherently associated with investigations of topic avoidance phenomena. Causal assertions regarding the topic avoidance processes, nonetheless, are unwarranted and in need of supportive data. The current research is no exception, as we merely examined associations among the variables. The hierarchical regressions we used imply a causal path, but these paths need empirical confirmation. Future investigations, therefore, could determine the causal structure of topic avoidance and related phenomena. For example, relational dyads, such as significant others or friends, can be brought into a controlled environment with both partners asked to talk about a (previously assessed) “taboo” topic. Then, for half of the dyads, one of the relational partners (unbeknownst to the other) could be instructed to try and avoid the topic, whereas for the other half of the dyads, one of the relational partners could be instructed to not avoid. This research paradigm is

reminiscent of experimental research on information seeking (e.g., Berger & Kellermann, 1983) and could be altered to test other effects. For example, the ways in which topics are avoided could be manipulated by directing some partners to avoid a topic using certain strategies (e.g., rude or direct) and other partners to avoid using qualitatively different strategies (e.g., polite). This method might be able to tap into the effects of certain avoidance strategies on the relational correlates. However, this method only addresses one half of the causal process, as we suggest a reciprocal relationship between topic avoidance as well as the strategies used to avoid topics and relational correlates.

Another limitation of the current research is that we did not assess interactants' goals for topic avoidance. The relationship between topic avoidance, strategies used, and relational correlates might fluctuate depending on one's goals for avoiding specific topics. As Afifi and Guerrero (2000) contend, topic avoidance is heavily dependent on one's motivations. Therefore, future topic avoidance research could account for an individual's goals for avoiding topics. Further, the current research did not assess one's success at topic avoidance; topic avoidance may have different relational impacts depending on one's success of not talking on a topic. For example, one who tries, yet fails, to avoid a certain topic may be less satisfied in the relationship compared to one who succeeds at avoiding the topic. Success at avoiding topics also may influence individuals' success at achieving their goals that initiated the topic avoidance in the first place. For example, one who achieves topic avoidance successfully may achieve a relational disengagement goal that initially activated topic avoidance.

A final limitation of the current research is that we only assessed one side of the significant other, mother–young-adult, and father–young-adult relationships. Topic avoidance is an interactive behavior, and the communicative patterns of both sides of the relationship matter. Recent research found that individuals' level of topic avoidance was related not only to their own satisfaction, but also (indirectly) to their partner's satisfaction (Caughlin & Golish, 2002). Similarly, individuals' perceptions of their partners' topic avoidance were negatively related to their own satisfaction. Our research neglected these dynamics of topic avoidance. Nevertheless, extensions of the current project could incorporate these factors. Perhaps perceptions of a partner's topic avoidance depends on the strategies the partner uses. For example, relational partners' use of highly direct and highly rude strategies could be positively related to individuals' perceptions of their partner's topic avoidance, which in turn could be negatively related to individuals' satisfaction. However, individuals' perceptions of their partner using direct and rude strategies could have different effects compared to perceptions of their partner using indirect and polite strategies, such that individuals' perceptions of their partner's topic avoidance (when polite strategies are used) could be positively related to individuals' satisfaction, whereas individuals' perceptions of their partner's topic avoidance (when rude strategies are used) could be negatively related to individuals' satisfaction. Future research on these and other dynamics awaits.

## Conclusion

The previous research demonstrates the utility of adopting a message production theoretical perspective for topic avoidance research. Overall, our application of the message production perspective to topic avoidance phenomena introduced a new component to the topic avoidance literature—topic avoidance strategies—and, as a result, affords many explanatory benefits. The strategies individuals employed to avoid topics accounted for additional variance in satisfaction and emotional closeness for relationships with significant others and mothers but not fathers. Moreover, young adults' use of certain topic avoidance strategies moderated the relationship between their overall topic avoidance frequency and relational correlates (with significant others and mothers). These findings suggest the need for further theory and research on the mechanisms of strategic topic avoidance.

## Notes

- [1] Statistics traditionally used for construct measurement, such as alpha reliabilities and factor analysis, are appropriate for effects indicator measures (i.e., a measure for which the underlying construct is a latent variable which influences responses to the items corresponding to the measure). These statistics, however, are not appropriate for causal indicator measures (i.e., a measure for which the underlying construct is composed of specific behaviors), as there is no theoretical reason for items of causal indicator measures to be highly intercorrelated (Bollen & Lennox, 1991). Alpha reliabilities and a factor analysis need not be conducted on the topic avoidance frequency items, as they are causal indicator measures of specific behaviors of avoiding topics. Other topic avoidance research (e.g., Caughlin & Gollish, 2002) treats these measures similarly.
- [2] To further support this claim, we converted the unit of analysis from the individual to the tactic and ran correlations based on the tactical ratings of directness and rudeness. First, the mean ratings of directness and rudeness for significant other, mother, and father were determined. We expected that if relational type did not matter for these two ratings, then the correlations would be extremely high for the tactics' characteristics across relational types. Correlations between the three different relational types using the tactics' directness ratings resulted in extremely high numbers, all of which were significant and above .97. Correlations between the three different relational types using the tactics' rudeness ratings also resulted in extremely high numbers, all of which were significant and above .98. Thus, much support exists for using tactics' directness and rudeness ratings across the three relational types, as relational type does not influence the directness or rudeness ratings of the tactics.
- [3] Similar to the topic avoidance frequency measures, alpha reliabilities and a factor analysis do not need to be conducted on the topic avoidance tactic frequency items, as they are causal indicator measures of specific behaviors used to avoid topics (Bollen & Lennox, 1991).
- [4] For the interaction of overall topic avoidance and strategy 3, the slope for lower levels of topic avoidance was significant ( $\beta = -.801$ ,  $t = -3.142$ ,  $p = .002$ ). For the interaction of overall topic avoidance and strategy 5, the two slopes for the mean level and higher levels of topic avoidance were significant ( $\beta = -.174$ ,  $t = -2.086$ ,  $p = .040$ ; and  $\beta = -.335$ ,  $t = -2.935$ ,  $p = .004$ , respectively). All other slopes were not significantly different than zero.
- [5] For the interaction of overall topic avoidance and strategy 8, the two slopes for the mean and higher levels of topic avoidance were significant ( $\beta = -.229$ ,  $t = -1.952$ ,  $p = .054$ ; and  $\beta = -.541$ ,  $t = -.2733$ ,  $p = .008$ , respectively). All other slopes were not significantly different than zero.

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