# Balancing the Secrets of Private Disclosures

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# Motivations Underlying Topic Avoidance in Close Relationships

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> *A wonderful fact to reflect upon, that every human creature is constituted to be that profound secret and mystery to every other. A solemn consideration, when I enter a great city by night, that every one of those darkly clustered houses encloses its own secret; that every room in every one of them encloses its own secret; that every beating heart in hundreds of thousands of breasts there, is, in some of its imaginings, a secret to the heart nearest it!*
>
> —Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*

As Dickens wrote, humans can never know one another's thoughts and feelings completely. No matter how close two people are, they cannot get into one another's minds and hearts to achieve total understanding. Humans can empathize, but they can never really put themselves completely into their partners' minds. Unlike the fictional Vulcans in the popular *Star Trek* series, humans are unable to use a "mind meld" to fully understand what another person is experiencing.

Indeed, individuals struggle to maintain balance in their relationships. On the one hand, humans feel a powerful need to be connected to one another and to feel understood. Communication is used to bridge the gap between people. In particular, self-disclosure is a means by which people can share their innermost thoughts with one another and peek into one another's thoughts and feelings. On the other hand, there are times when people prefer to keep their thoughts and feelings private, to preserve the mystery about which Dickens so eloquently marvels. This chapter emphasizes an aspect of

this equilibrium between revelation and concealment that has been mostly ignored in the literature: topic avoidance.

Topic avoidance occurs when an individual strategically decides *not* to disclose information on a particular topic to another person. Some topics are avoided because they are considered "taboo" within a particular relationship or context. Baxter and Wilmot (1985) discussed several common taboo topics, including the state of the relationship, information about previous relationships, relational rules, negative self-disclosures (such as fears and embarrassing moments), and relational problems. Almost everyone in Baxter and Wilmot's (1985) study could identify at least one topic that they considered to be taboo in their relationship. Similarly, Guerrero and Afifi (1995b) found that teens saw sexual experiences and dangerous behavior as common "taboo topics" in their relationships with their parents. Secrets are another form of topic avoidance. For example, Sally may strategically avoid talking when her colleagues are discussing who will get the big promotion in her department because she knows that Mary will get the promotion, but she is supposed to keep it secret. Topic avoidance can also be part of the deception process. Buller and Burgoon (1996) discuss concealment as a form of deception that involves keeping relevant information private. People might conceal information to protect themselves (e.g., teens not telling their parents how badly they did on an exam) or others (e.g., not telling a friend that her new haircut is unattractive). Taboo topics, secrets, and deception are all related to topic avoidance, but topic avoidance is a broader construct than all three.

Research on general topic avoidance, taboo topics, secrets, and deception has established that individuals are sometimes motivated to avoid disclosure, even with their most intimate partners. Indeed, the need for equilibrium between revelation and concealment necessitates such avoidance. Unfortunately, little attention has been paid to the circumstances under which individuals are most likely to avoid disclosure. This chapter addresses this issue by presenting a motivational perspective for understanding the circumstances under which topic avoidance is most likely to occur. Our perspective is grounded in research in three theoretical areas: uncertainty reduction, social penetration, and dialectics. Thus, before discussing specific motivations underlying topic avoidance, we review relevant ideas from these three theoretical areas.

## THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

On the surface, the prevalence of topic avoidance in relationships appears to run counter to the implicit notions underlying several theories of relational behavior. For example, uncertainty reduction theory (URT; C. R. Berger &

Calabrese, 1975) advances the principle that people seek information to reduce uncertainty and advance relationships. Relatedly, social penetration theory (SPT; Altman & Taylor, 1973) is premised on the assumption that increasingly high levels of self-disclosure accompany relationship development. However, as is shown in the following sections, current research and theory illustrate that topic avoidance can be used strategically to lower uncertainty (e.g., avoiding disclosure as a "secret test") and enhance relational progress.

## URT

When articulating URT, C. R. Berger and Calabrese (1975) adopted the assumption that individuals are driven by a desire to reduce uncertainty in initial interaction. Research since the theory's inception has expanded its scope to the realm of close relationships (C. R. Berger, 1993; Planalp & Honeycutt, 1985; Planalp, Rutherford, & Honeycutt, 1988). As a result, many scholars now hold as axiomatic that individuals in relationships are motivated information seekers (for review, see Vorauer & Ross, 1996). In fact, C. R. Berger and Kellermann (1994), although recognizing that individuals pursue multiple goals, recently argued that "the acquisition of information is an important goal in almost every strategic communication episode" (p. 2).

However, information seeking occurs in many forms. Research has shown that individuals typically reduce uncertainty in one of three general ways (for review, see C. R. Berger & Bradac, 1982): (a) passively (i.e., through unobtrusive observation); (b) actively (i.e., by asking third parties or observing targets after subjecting them to a "test"); or (c) interactively (e.g., through direct interaction with the target). In one example of information-seeking research, Baxter and Wilmot (1984) investigated the techniques that people use in their attempts to discover their partners' true feelings about the relationships. These information-seeking techniques include: (a) *directness tests*, such as direct questioning; (b) *third party tests*, such as asking a friend to get information for you; (c) *public-presentation tests*, such as touching someone in public to see how he or she reacts; (d) *indirect-suggestion tests*, such as hinting and attention seeking; (e) *endurance tests*, such as seeing how many "costs" your partner will endure; (f) *separation tests*, such as seeing how your partner reacts to being separated from you; and (g) *triangle tests*, such as seeing if you can make your partner jealous. Because most of these tests involve indirectly acquiring information about a partner's level of commitment, Baxter and Wilmot (1984) referred to these techniques as "secret tests" (p. 171). The indirect nature of these tests illustrates that there are times when relational partners want information, but they refrain from direct self-disclosure and questioning. In particular, the secret test of sepa-

ration shows how avoidance of a person, not just a topic, can be utilized to acquire information.

## SPT

The premise underlying SPT and most research on self-disclosure is that individuals seek bondedness with others by becoming increasingly disclosive as relationships develop (e.g., Altman & Taylor, 1973; D. A. Taylor & Altman, 1987). Specifically, Altman and Taylor likened the process of developing an intimate relationship to the peeling of an onion. The outer skin of the onion represents superficial information, while the inner core of the onion represents the most intimate self-disclosure. Altman and Taylor believed that relationships are closest when communication between partners has high depth (i.e., intimate disclosure), breadth (i.e., discussion of different topical areas), and frequency (i.e., frequent dislosure). However, some scholars, such as Parks (1982), have cautioned against adopting the assumption that self-disclosure and complete openness are the pantheon of close relationships. Indeed, research on relational maintenance has shown that both openness and avoidance are key contributors to relational closeness. For example, Canary and Stafford (1994) discussed antisocial strategies (such as inducing jealousy) and avoidance (such as avoiding topics that led to disagreement) as strategies used to help maintain relationships under certain circumstances. Thus, it appears that SPT only explains part of the acquaintanceship process. Self-disclosure of private information is indeed important, but this disclosure must be balanced by discretion and privacy even in the closest relationships.

## Dialectics Theory

Dialectics theory recognizes that both disclosure and topic avoidance are important within close relationships. Baxter's (1988, 1990, 1991) work rests on the assumption that people have seemingly contradictory goals in their relationships. For example, Baxter (1988) contended that couples want to be open, yet they also want to keep some information private. This is the openness–closedness dialectic. Other primary dialectics include autonomy–connectedness and novelty–predictability. Baxter argued that dyadic partners must manage these dialectical tensions if they hope to maintain satisfying relationships. Rawlins' (1983a, 1983b, 1992) work on friendships also adopts a dialectical perspective. He labeled expressiveness–protectiveness as one of the primary dialectical tensions that characterize friendships. Expressiveness includes the desire to express one's feelings and innermost thoughts. Protectiveness includes the desire to avoid disclosure and protect oneself from vulnerability. Taken together, the work on dialectics suggests that both self-disclosure and topic avoidance are crucial components within different types

of close relationships. Indeed, dialectical theory captures the notion of balance very elegantly.

## MOTIVATIONS UNDERLYING TOPIC AVOIDANCE

As the brief theoretical review indicates, individuals are not constant disclosers. In fact, the evidence suggests that topic avoidance is a common relational event. Unfortunately, many scholars studying uncertainty and self-disclosure have failed to acknowledge the intricate structure of motivational forces shaping avoidant behavior in relationships. However, if one adopts the notion that revelation *must* be accompanied by some concealment to maintain individual and relational development, then self-disclosure and topic avoidance share equal billing as weights that balance relationships.

We offer a motivational, goal-oriented perspective to relational behavior as a way of understanding the seemingly contradictory behaviors that emerge in relational life. Underlying this perspective are certain axioms that frame its scope.

First, we assume that individuals have a relatively complex goal structure (although its complexity depends on several factors) and they seek multiple goals simultaneously (e.g., C. R. Berger & Kellermann, 1994). Behavior is typically not the result of a singular motivating force but, instead, the product of an amalgamation of goals that are working together.

Second, a variety of different strategies may be successful at attaining the same goal (e.g., Cappella & Street, 1985). Although one might find this axiom simplistic or obvious, the implications of recognizing this relationship between goals and behavior are far-reaching. For example, individuals may seek the same goal of bondedness through disclosure or, conversely, through avoidance.

Third, several different goals may be achieved by enacting the same behavior (e.g., Haslett, 1987). The behavior may affect multiple goals simultaneously or may be used to attain different goals at separate points in time. An example of the former would be avoidance of disclosure about an issue that is face threatening (thus often protecting both the self and the relationship—two separate goals); teens report that they sometimes avoid discussing dangerous behavior, such as trying drugs or alcohol, with their parents. They avoid such discussion to protect themselves from criticism and punishment, and also to protect the trusting relationship they have built with their parents. An example of using a behavior to attain two different goals at separate points in time is when avoidance is used to increase bondedness in the developing stages of relationship (by avoiding topics that could lead to relational problems) but to increase distance in its deteriorating stages.

Finally, we assume that goal structures are hierarchically organized and that the specifics of the hierarchy vary according to personal, relational, and

social contexts (e.g., Austin & Vancouver, 1996). The desire for greater certainty in a relationship (a typically salient goal) may be sacrificed at particular relational stages for the more immediate concern of protecting the relationship (e.g., Afifi & Burgoon, 1998). From within this framework of assumptions, the reasons underlying both the decision to disclose and the choice to avoid disclosure in relationships becomes more evident. Next, we briefly examine some of the more salient goals underlying relationship behavior and reflect on how they contribute to our understanding of topic avoidance patterns in close relationships.

## Relationship-Based Motivations

There is a long history of research establishing the importance that individuals place on connectedness (for review, see Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Although this desire has been variously labeled, individuals' needs for initiating, developing, and maintaining social ties, especially close ones, is reflected in a litany of studies and a host of theories. For example, available evidence shows that individuals are predisposed to seek social bonds (Bowlby, 1969) and that most people seem to form them rather easily and quickly (for review, see Deaux, 1996). Once formed, individuals are often reluctant to break these bonds, even when dissolution is inevitable (e.g., Lacoursiere, 1980). Moreover, cross-cultural research has revealed that the dissolution of close bonds is typically met with protest and can have severe negative impacts on an individual's mental and physiological health (Hazan & Shaver, 1994). In fact, research on physiological and emotional consequences of attachment, overall, has demonstrated that individuals with close social bonds are more emotionally and physiologically healthy (as operationalized in a variety of ways) than individuals without such ties (e.g., Albrecht & Adelman, 1987; Baumeister, 1991). For example, individuals without close bonds report more loneliness and depression (Segrin, 1998). This desire for belongingness also comes across in small group interaction, where individuals treat in-group members much more positively than out-group members, even when groups are created randomly (e.g., Tajfel & Billig, 1974).

Not surprisingly, this internal drive for connectedness is foundational to many theories of behavior. Attachment theory (for review, see Bartholomew, 1993) is based on the premise that a child's need for bondedness with a caregiver, and that caregiver's reaction to that need, helps shape relational behavior throughout our lives. In a similar vein, motivational theorists argue that inclusion is a basic human need (e.g., McAdams & Powers, 1981), and SPT (Altman & Taylor, 1973) assumes that individuals disclose in order to fulfill their basic need for belongingness. In this sense, it seems contradictory to suggest that this need to develop and protect social bonds serves as motivation to *avoid* disclosure. Yet, available research on topic avoidance implies exactly that.

*Relationship Protection and Topic Avoidance.* Although relatively few studies have examined the motivations underlying topic avoidance, those that have consistently find the desire for relationship protection (variously operationalized) to be a strong motivating factor encouraging topic avoidance. Baxter and Wilmot (1985), for example, found that fear regarding potential negative relational impact was the primary factor motivating topic avoidance in cross-sex relationships. Relatedly, Hatfield (1984) found that fear of abandonment (conceptualized as concern over relationship deescalation or termination) was a common concern underlying individuals' decisions to avoid certain topics in intimate relationships. Finally, our research program has shown relationship protection to be an important factor leading to topic avoidance in close relationships. Interestingly, however, the goal of relational protection motivated avoidance in certain relationships more than in others. Specifically, we have found children to be motivated by relationship protection in their decision to avoid disclosure with parents more than with siblings (Guerrero & Afifi, 1995a). Relatedly, in a study of friendships (Afifi & Guerrero, 1998), our results showed that the goal of relational protection encouraged avoidance for males more than females, and with male targets more than females targets. The diversity of these patterns across relationship types reflects the influence of personal, social, and relational factors in the salience of particular goals and emphasizes the complexity of goals as predictors of behavior.

Although the goal of bondedness clearly motivates disclosure and information searches, the aforementioned findings also unequivocally demonstrate that this goal sometimes underlies decisions to avoid these processes. A member of an opposite-sex friendship dyad interviewed in a recent study by Afifi and Burgoon (1998) articulated the logic behind avoidance as a relationship-protecting strategy. When asked what he avoids discussing in his relationship and why, he noted discussing the state of their relationship and explained that "If you bring that stuff back up [relationship state], you don't know what it's going to cause, you know . . . so it's safer to just avoid it . . . safer on the relationship" (p. 269). His answer reflects the perception that avoiding disclosure can sometimes protect relationships from the harm that might be brought by disclosure. In sum, individuals sometimes embrace blissful ignorance. When people are uncertain regarding the relational impact of self-disclosure, they are often willing to sacrifice the possible increased intimacy that disclosure may produce in favor of protecting their relationships from possible destruction.

*Relationship Destruction and Topic Avoidance.* Paradoxically, in addition to using topic avoidance to help protect or enhance relationships, individuals sometimes use topic avoidance to help destroy or deescalate relationships. Knapp's interactional stage model shows how avoidance is used to accom-

plish relational disengagement (Knapp & Vangelisti, 1992). In the *circumscribing* stage, individuals constrict communication, reducing the depth, breadth, and quantity of self-disclosure. In the next stage, *stagnating*, communication is at a standstill, with couples avoiding many conversational topics. Self-disclosure about the relationship itself is especially avoided during this stage. The *avoiding* stage is characterized by attempts to completely avoid interaction. When communication does occur, it is typically brief. Relatedly, Baxter's (1982) work on relationship disengagement strategies features avoidance or withdrawal as a common tactic.

In a similar vein, people may use topic avoidance as a way of preventing an existing relationship from escalating. For example, if you do not want someone to get too close to you, you might limit the conversation to superficial topics. In our qualitative data on topic avoidance between parents and children, one teen wrote the following:

> My mom remarried about a year ago. I don't like my stepdad at all. He is always trying to act like my real dad and boss me around. I resent this. He will *never* be my dad. I already have a dad. I really hate it when he tries to get all close to me by asking about my life. He'll try to cozy up to me and ask all about my friends and stuff like he's my buddy or something. I make sure I don't tell him *anything* but he never gets the hint.

This example illustrates how people can use topic avoidance to keep intimacy from developing. Some people may use this strategy routinely. The attachment theory literature, for example, describes two attachment styles that are based on intimacy avoidance. *Fearful avoidant* individuals avoid intimacy because they are afraid that if they allow themselves to get too close to others they may be rejected and/or get hurt. *Dismissive avoidant* individuals are fiercely independent and unmotivated to build close relationships (Bartholomew, 1990). Both fearful and dismissive avoidants are likely to avoid discussing relationally oriented issues that would enhance intimacy and closeness.

In sum, topic avoidance is used both when people want to protect their relationships (by avoiding disagreeable topics) and when people want to destroy their relationships (by avoiding topics that increase bondedness). Next, we explore how topic avoidance is used when people want to protect themselves as individuals.

## Individual-Based Motivations

Very few motivations have received greater scholarly attention than the desire to protect one's individual identity. Decades of research have been devoted to understanding the ways in which needs related to our identities shape our cognitions and behavior. The result is an impressive corpus of knowledge that

has served as the foundation for several theories of identity management (for a review, see Schlenker, 1980). Although scholars have argued about whether individuals prefer identity-enhancing or identity-verifying feedback (for discussion of this debate, see Swann, 1990), they almost unanimously agree that behavior is motivated by identity needs (for review, see Schlenker, 1985).

This interest in shaping our self-image, variously labeled impression management (Tracy, 1990), self-identification (Schlenker, Britt, & Pennington, 1996), or facework (Cupach & Metts, 1994), has been shown to directly impact behavioral choices in both routine and extraordinary circumstances. For example, Guerrero and Afifi (1998) found that jealous individuals who were motivated to maintain self-esteem tended to deny feeling jealousy and to avoid discussing their feelings with their partners. Albas and Albas (1988) succinctly explained college students' post-exam behaviors from an impression-management perspective. Evidence of the motivating nature of self-enhancement needs in more unexpected contexts is found in Afifi's (1999) examination of safe-sex behavior and Holtgraves' (1988) analysis of gambling activities. In these studies, and *many* others, the data show that behavior is directly influenced by concerns regarding impressions.

However, individuals do not only seek to present positive images of themselves; they also hope to disassociate themselves from undesirable identities (e.g., Schlenker, 1985). In fact, some have argued that this desire to distance ourselves from identity-threatening information is more motivational than is the desire to be linked with positive impressions (e.g., Leary & Kowalski, 1990). Consistent with this logic, Ogilvie (1987) found that behavior is influenced more by a desire to protect against a negative or undesirable identity than by a motivation to push toward a desirable one. For example, a child attempting to convince her parents that she is responsible may take pains to hide facts about her irresponsible behavior from her parents. These efforts may be as important to the success of her identity goals as her ability to perform responsible behavior. Further evidence for the importance of avoiding identity threats comes from research on the common use of disclaimers in everyday interaction (e.g., Hewitt & Stokes, 1975) and on the use of repair strategies following identity-threatening behaviors (Cupach & Metts, 1994). In sum, individuals avoid identity-threatening behavior and its associated negative arousal state, while also seeking to associate themselves with identity-bolstering information and its associated positive arousal state.

It is important to note that the *target* of this "identity work" has, thus far, been left unaddressed in our brief review of identity-management literature. Most of the reviewed literature adopts a conceptualization of impression management that involves an interest in studying individuals' desire to manage their impressions in the eyes of others (e.g., Baumeister, 1982). However, another conceptualization focuses on individuals' psychological needs to protect

their identity within themselves (e.g., to convince *themselves* that they are competent or to protect their beliefs about their own identity; e.g., Greenwald & Breckler, 1985). In the former conceptualization, individuals' private self-impressions are less important than the success of the impression that they are able to create for others. The opposite is true for the latter definition.

Besides attending to concerns with impression formation, another individually based motivation guiding avoidance behavior is the motivation to maintain private boundaries from within which we can develop our sense of autonomy. Research on privacy, dialectical processes, and the "separation–individuation" process has found that people need to maintain their own "space" in order to feel independent and competent. In fact, dyadic needs for connection and bondedness are often balanced with individual needs for autonomy and privacy. Petronio (1991), in her work on communication boundary management (CBM) theory, recognizes this need to balance connection and privacy. She argues that even married couples must maintain a sense of separateness if they are to be fully satisfied in their relationships. As she stated,

> Marital couples are expected to tell each other private thoughts and feelings to increase openness. At the same time, they are expected to maintain a sense of their own identity by protecting themselves through controlling the flow of private information to each other. (Petronio, 1991, p. 336)

This need for privacy is also prominent in many theories about relationships and social development. For example, Baxter's (1988, 1990, 1991) work on dialectics theory shows that people have needs for both autonomy and connection and for openness and closedness. If individuals sacrifice autonomy for connection, they will be engulfed by the relationship and could lose their own individual identities. In the social development literature, Blos (1962) discusses the separation-individuation process whereby children develop an individual identity apart from their parents (see also Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986). During this process, privacy becomes of paramount importance to the child.

It is clear from the extant literature that these diverse individual-based motivations, while separate processes, work together to shape behavioral decisions (e.g., Leary & Kowalski, 1990). People are likely to use topic avoidance to protect their public identities, their private identities, *and* their needs for autonomy and privacy. These motivations are discussed in more detail next.

*Identity Management and Topic Avoidance.* Just as research has shown that disclosure is often enacted strategically to bolster one's identity, so it is that disclosure is *avoided* to protect identity against harm. Consistent with the past motivations research, we have conceptualized self-protection as a

desire to manage both private and public identities, and operationalized it as "wanting to avoid judgment, embarrassment, and criticism, as well as wanting to avoid feeling vulnerable" (Guerrero & Afifi, 1995a, p. 280). Our research on topic avoidance has consistently found self-protection to be among the most salient motivations underlying decisions to avoid disclosure. For example, in our study of avoidance in families (Guerrero & Afifi, 1995a), we found the desire to protect the self to be the most consistent predictor of overall levels of topic avoidance across all family relationships except sisters. In fact, this motivation alone accounted for between 25% and 40% of the variance in topic avoidance across different family relationships, which provides strong evidence for its role as a motivator of behavior. In a similar vein, our analysis of topic avoidance in friendships (Afifi & Guerrero, 1998) showed self-protection to be the only motivation that predicted topic avoidance in all three relationship types: male same-sex friendships, female same-sex friendships, and cross-sex friendships. Children and teens (ranging from 10 to 18 years old) report engaging in topic avoidance with their parents to protect themselves from punishment, criticism, and embarrassment (Guerrero & Afifi, 1995b). Others studying topic avoidance have also confirmed the important role of self-protection. Hatfield (1984), for example, found fears regarding exposure and the loss of identity to be two primary reasons that individuals avoid disclosure.

Other reasons cited by participants of topic avoidance studies also fall under this motivation to manage impressions. We have found social inappropriateness (conceptualized as a perception that the disclosure would be socially unacceptable) to be a reason that is a particularly good predictor of avoiding certain topics (e.g., Afifi & Guerrero, 1998; Guerrero & Afifi, 1995a). Considerable evidence suggests that such fears about the social acceptability of a behavior are motivated by the need to protect the public identity from harm (for review, see Schlenker, 1985).

*Privacy and Topic Avoidance.* Research suggests that different people have different needs for privacy, and that privacy needs change over time. Petronio and Martin's (1986) research suggests that because men have stronger needs to control privacy than women do, they practice more topic avoidance and less self-disclosure. Burke, Weir, and Harrison (1976) found that husbands tend to "compartmentalize" home- and work-related environments more often than wives do. As a result, it seems that men see home and work as separate topics, with home being more appropriate to discuss with their wives than work. Women, on the other hands, tend not to distinguish between home- and work-related topics as much. This may be because women have less rigid privacy boundaries than men do (see Petronio & Martin, 1986).

Our research on topic avoidance in parent–child relationships also suggests that individual needs for privacy play a role in regulating topic avoidance and

self-disclosure. Specifically, we found a small but significant association between teenagers' needs for privacy (operationalized as how important privacy is to them) and their tendency to avoid discussing topics with their parents. In our qualitative data on children's topic avoidance in families, one of the respondents expressed her need for psychological privacy this way:

> It really pisses me off when my mom comes into my room without knocking or when she picks up the phone when I'm talking to someone. She acts like she owns me. My mom wants me to tell her everything. She thinks she has to know everything about me all the time. I get sick of it. Sometimes I want to tell her it's just not her business. I am almost an adult. I have my own life. I need my privacy.

Notice that the teen who wrote the above passage is concerned with being able to control the environment in a way that protects privacy. One way of protecting her privacy is to rebel against the mother when she wants to know "everything." Such rebellion surely involves topic avoidance.

Our research also suggests that teenagers, who have heightened needs for privacy and autonomy, practice more topic avoidance than preteens or young adults do. Specifically, we found that teens aged 15 to 18 reported more avoidance on a variety of topics (e.g., activities with friends, dangerous behaviors, failures) than did 10- to 12-year-olds or 22- to 25-year-olds. We interpreted this finding as reflecting the separation-individuation process that marks the teenage years.

In sum, the research just discussed suggests that people avoid discussing certain topics because they want to protect or enhance their self-images, or because they want to maintain autonomy and psychological privacy. A final motivation for topic avoidance revolves around the information-seeking function of communication.

### Information-Based Motivations

Although it has received less scholarly attention than the two previously discussed motivations, the desire to receive information that is interesting and of high quality likely regulates when and to whom we avoid discussing certain topics. For example, C. R. Berger's research on URT (for review, see C. R. Berger, 1988) has unequivocally established the need for individuals to have a sense of control over their environment. Although the theory began as an explanation of behavior in initial interaction, scholars quickly discovered that individuals' desire to reduce uncertainty (thereby increasing control over their environment) shapes behavior across contexts. One context in which this need for uncertainty reduction surfaces is supportive interactions. Studies of comfort and social support suggest that individuals typically seek

support in hopes of reducing uncertainty about an internal state, event, or person (e.g., Mishel, 1984). Ideally, in these circumstances, the support-giver will be able to offer information that will help reduce this uncertainty. Indeed, social support scholars have argued that the search for personal control—the companion goal to the desire to seek information and reduce uncertainty—is the primary factor motivating requests for support (for review, see Albrecht & Adelman, 1987). Recipients of poor support (i.e., individuals whose sense of personal control was not increased) often suffer severe circumstances, ranging from illness to depression and suicide (e.g., Rook, 1985; Seeman & Seeman, 1983). In contrast, supportive interactions that give information and reduce uncertainty have been shown to provide a host of psychological and physiological benefits (e.g., Hammer, 1983). Not surprisingly, individuals skilled at social support are highly prized, while those lacking such skills are less socially desirable (e.g., Samter, 1994).

*Quality of Expected Information and Topic Avoidance.* Because self-disclosure is often a risky venture that can leave a person vulnerable, people are likely to be "choosy" when deciding to whom they will self-disclose their innermost thoughts and feelings. Moreover, when people self-disclose for purposes of seeking information, they are only likely to disclose to those who they believe will be helpful and responsive to their needs. If a potential target is perceived as unhelpful and/or unresponsive, topic avoidance is likely to occur. In other words, this information-based motivation is apparent when individuals avoid disclosure due to a belief in *partner unresponsiveness* (Afifi & Guerrero, 1998; Guerrero & Afifi, 1995a, 1995b). We have operationalized this motivation as "avoiding topics because one feels the partner will be: (a) unresponsive, (b) think the issue is trivial, or (c) lack the knowledge to handle the problem" (Guerrero & Afifi, 1995a, p. 280). In our research, partner unresponsiveness has been a particularly good predictor of avoidance with male targets. Research shows males are poorer at providing the sense of control that ideally accompanies attempts at support (for review, see Cutrona, 1996). Consistent with this research, our studies of families and friends show avoidance with male targets to be, at least partially, motivated by a perception that they will be unable or unwilling to provide a quality response (Afifi & Guerrero, 1998; Guerrero & Afifi, 1995a, 1995b).

Research on topic avoidance in marriages has produced similar results for unresponsiveness. For example, Burke et al. (1976) noted that perceptions of target unresponsiveness are a common reason for topic avoidance in marriages for both husbands and wives, but particularly for wives. Specifically, 22.6% of wives and 9.8% of husbands reported avoiding disclosure because they expected their spouse to be unresponsive to their problems. Interestingly, however, 19.7% of the husbands reported that they avoided disclosure with their wives because they felt that their spouse lacked knowledge relevant to the problem at hand. None of the wives reported this

motivation. Therefore, women may be more likely to avoid disclosure because they expect their partners to be unresponsive, whereas men may be more likely to avoid disclosure because they expect their partners to be unhelpful. In both cases, the perception that the information gained will be of low quality (either in terms of responsiveness or helpfulness) appears to lead to topic avoidance.

*Futility of Discussion and Topic Avoidance.* Individuals may also avoid certain topics because they think that talking about a particular issue is futile or because they find the topic uninteresting. For example, you might be tired of hearing a friend complain about work. Therefore, you avoid asking questions about your friend's job and you try to change the subject if your friend starts to complain. At other times, people avoid communicating because they feel that they can't change anything or consider it useless to talk about a particular issue. Here is an example from our qualitative data on teens avoiding disclosure with their parents:

> It is a total waste of time to talk to my dad about my SAT scores. We have been over it a million times and no matter how much we talk about it, it doesn't change anything. My college applications are in and I'm going to have to live with my score.

Notice that the teen in this example sees no reason to seek information about this topic and is content to simply ignore it. Of all of the motivations we have discussed in this chapter, the "futility" motivation is the least studied. Yet we expect that people routinely avoid communication or change the subject because they find a particular topic unstimulating, uninteresting, or a "waste of their time."

## HIERARCHY OF GOALS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

What makes individuals willing to disclose risky information in certain circumstances and unwilling to do so in others? The answer lies in the relative importance given various goals in any particular context. Although relationship-, individual- and information-based motivations, among others, may be simultaneously operational, their relative salience shifts with the personal, relational, and social context. For example, Schlenker and colleagues (Schlenker et al., 1996; Schlenker, Britt, Pennington, Murphy, & Doherty, 1994) have outlined three antecedent conditions that influence the relative salience of impression management as a goal. The first factor is the extent to which the disclosure reflects onto highly valued and central components of the identity. For example, individuals whose identity is *centrally* tied (with a particular audience) to being "in control" will be very hesitant to disclose information about behaviors that reflected a loss of control. Second, the

goal of impression management varies in salience to the extent that failure to achieve success in the goal may result in potentially vital negative consequences. For example, Leary and Kowalski (1990) note that impression management increases in importance when the target is relied upon for valued outcomes. Third, the more that the self-disclosure relates to the violation of a highly valued rule of social appropriateness (e.g., being respectful), the more salient self-protection becomes. For example, if one believes that respecting elders is an important part of noble conduct, then he or she is unlikely to disclose information to elders that may imply disrespect.

Future research may uncover similar criteria for determining the goal salience of relationship- and information-based motivations for topic avoidance. Given that individuals shy away from behavior or disclosure that may threaten a *cherished* relationship (for review, see Baumeister & Leary, 1995), we might expect the goal of relationship protection to be particularly salient in satisfying relationships. Indeed, that is what we have found (e.g., Afifi & Guerrero, 1998; Guerrero & Afifi, 1995a). Future research on topic avoidance should examine the role that relational alternatives play in predicting the salience of the relationship-protection goal. This goal may also strongly motivate individuals whose relational alternatives are low to avoid potentially relationship-threatening disclosures, as evidenced in Cloven and Roloff's (1993b, 1994) research on conflict avoidance. The salience of information-based motivations may be closely tied to the nature of the topic being avoided. Individuals may be most likely to cite target unresponsiveness as a reason for topic avoidance in situations in which advice is the desired outcome of disclosure (e.g., disclosing about a recent failure). Again, our research on topic avoidance generally supports such a prediction (e.g., Guerrero & Afifi, 1995a). On the other hand, the salience of information-based motivations may also be partly a function of the extent to which an individual displays high or low need for closure, as some research by Webster and Kruglanski (1994) has shown.

In sum, further research needs to be conducted to help explain shifts in the salience of motivations or goals underlying topic avoidance in relationships. What is clear, however, is that (a) individuals often choose to avoid disclosure rather than risk the perceived personal or relational consequences of disclosure; (b) individuals report relatively consistent motivations for why they avoid disclosure; and (c) the salience of these motivations changes based on personal, social, and relational contexts. Future research on these and other issues related to topic avoidance will help scholars understand how people balance needs for revelation and concealment within their relationships. If communication is the bridge to understanding between two people, topic avoidance may be one barrier that helps people maintain mystery and protect their personal and relational identities, thereby keeping needs for expression and privacy in balance.