There are always things that we do not want to talk about with others. Sometimes these things may be happy occurrences (such as keeping anniversary plans secret from one’s romantic partner) or they may be more serious omissions (such as not telling a partner about an infidelity). But as individuals, there are always issues that we do not want to discuss. In some instances, issues may be avoided deliberately, while other times there may be a more subconscious avoidance at work. Topic avoidance is a concept that allows us to examine these omissions and discuss their occurrence and ramifications. This paper will discuss the way that topic avoidance impacts communication within families. We will consider what topic avoidance is, why it occurs, what topics we avoid, and how this influences family communication.

The concept of topic avoidance first came to light in a conference presentation by Afifi (1993). The roots of the theory lie in research about uncertainty reduction theory and self-disclosure (Afifi & Burgoon, 1998). While disclosure has long been an issue of interest, scholars eventually began to consider whether more was always better in terms of what individuals are communicating. Initially, topic avoidance was a loosely conceptualized and it was not until Afifi (1993) that topic avoidance as we know it because a clearly articulated concept. Eventually, researchers began to examine the way that avoidance and privacy operate in close relationships (Afifi, 1993; Baxter & Wilmot, 1985; Burgoon 1982). Scholars commonly rely on dialectical theory or privacy theory to explain topic avoidance phenomena (Dailey & Palomares, 2004).

Topic avoidance can be defined as the purposeful evasion of communication about a certain issue with a partner (Afifi & Burgoon, 1998; Afifi & Guerrero, 2000). One of the key aspects of this definition is the highlighting of the strategic nature of topic avoidance behavior. In their own research, Dailey and Palomares (2004) went as far as to define topic avoidance as “a
goal-oriented communicative behavior whereby individuals strategically try to keep a conversation away from certain foci” (p. 472). In relationship research, some work examines the way that avoidance plays a role in relationships (Dailey & Palomares, 2004). Others examine topic avoidance from the perspective of privacy management (Petronio, 1991). Topic avoidance has also been used to examine conflict management (Roloff & Ifert, 2000).

Individuals avoid topics for a variety of reasons. Afifi & Guerrero (1995) identify four general reasons for individuals to engage in topic avoidance. We may avoid topics for self-protection, which allows us to avoid criticism or vulnerability. One may not want to hear someone criticize a decision they have made, so they can choose not to bring it up. Individuals may also avoid for relationship protection, which allows us to avoid conflict or relational dissolution. If one is afraid that a partner will break up with them because of a shocking secret from their past, they may wish to keep that information hidden. Partner unresponsiveness may also cause us to avoid by allowing us to a situation in which a partner will be unable or unwilling to provide support for us. When we know that a person cannot deal with certain information, we may avoid even bringing up the topic. For example, when diagnosed with chronic illness some people may not tell friends because they know their friend will not be able to handle it. And finally, in situations where we feel that disclosure would not be socially acceptable, we may avoid due to social inappropriateness. For example, there are certain things that society may dictate that we “just don’t speak about” (Afifi & Guerrero, 2000).

Research has also focused on the topics that are commonly avoided. In close relationships, Baxter and Wilmot (1985) found that individuals tended to avoid discussions of the relationship’s status, extra-relationship activities, relationship norms, prior relationships, conflict-inducing topics, and negative information. Afifi and Guerrero (1995) found that couples
also avoided discussing relationship issues, negative life experiences, dating experiences, friendships, and sexual experiences. The issues individuals tend to avoid vary dependent upon the type of relationship. For example, children in stepfamilies avoided discussing financial issues (Golish & Caughlin, 2002).

Afifi and Guerrero (1998) examined topic avoidance among same-sex and cross-sex friendships. This study was an expansion of their 1995 study which examined similar topics in family relationships. In this study, the authors surveyed 177 undergraduate students about the topics they avoided, their reasons for avoiding, and the closeness of their relationship with their friend. They found that individuals avoided discussion of negative life experiences and relationship issues more often with males and that they also avoided the topics of dating and sexual experiences when talking with opposite-sex friends. While reasons for topic avoidance did vary, the most often expressed motive was self-protection. The authors assert that these results indicate “avoidance plays an integral part in shaping both same- and cross-sex friendships, and does so in unique ways” (p. 245). They also suggest further research to examine how topic avoidance limits closeness in friendships.

Additionally, topic avoidance has been examined in relation to other variables. Knobloch and Carpenter-Theune (2004) found that role relational uncertainty and topic avoidance shared a positive association, and that intimacy and topic avoidance were related, but relational uncertainty played a mediating role in that relationship. In romantic relationships, Roloff and Iffert (1998) also found that individuals were less satisfied with their relationship if they reported topic avoidance. Dailey and Palomares (2004) also found an interaction between overall topic avoidance frequency and topic avoidance strategy use.
References


