According to a developmental perspective, people are motivated to form close relationships with romantic partners to fulfill social and attachment needs that parents and friends previously met (Collins & Sroufe, 1999). Earlier relationships with peers and parents provided the experience by which people learned about and developed expectations about relationships. They also learned behaviors and ways of interacting that they will use in later relationships (Furman & Wehner, 1997). Researchers of romantic relationships hypothesize that romantic relationships during adolescence form the foundation for romantic experiences across the lifetime (e.g., Collins, 2003; Furman & Wehner, 1994). For this reason, understanding behaviors in healthy and maladaptive romantic relationships in adolescence may have important implications for prevention and intervention initiatives with both adolescent and adult romantic couples. In this study, we examined the psychological and behavioral construct of self-silencing as an important correlate of global relationship functioning in adolescent couples.

Self-Silencing

Researchers interested in the experience of self-silencing have identified this construct as a relationship behavior with important implications for both individual and relationship functioning. Self-silencing describes a pattern of behavior in which individuals suppress their thoughts and opinions (Harper & Welsh, 2007) in order to preserve relationships or reduce friction within relationships. Self-silencing behaviors can be manifested with or without awareness, in that some people may intentionally choose to sacrifice their needs in order to prevent conflict or relationship distress. Others may engage in self-silencing behaviors without consciously being aware of the choice. Researchers have found links between self-silencing and depressive symptomatology (Harper & Welsh, 2007) and eating-disordered behaviors (Bucholz et al., 2007). Harper and Welsh (2007) found that adolescents with high self-silencing partners reported greater frustration and discomfort during a problem-solving interaction. They also found that girls who reported higher levels of self-silencing had lower relationship satisfaction. However, self-silencing was not related to boys’ relationship satisfaction. Harper and Welsh speculated that boys may use self-silencing as a relationship management tool. As marital literature shows (Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998), men may use self-silencing or withdrawing behaviors to exercise power and control.

Self-Silencing Attitudes and Behaviors in Adolescent Couples: Links With Relationship Satisfaction

This study examined self-silencing attitudes and self-silencing behaviors, as they related to relationship satisfaction in 74 adolescent female/male romantic couples. We assessed self-silencing attitudes and behaviors via self-report and in the context of a problem-solving activity. Results demonstrated moderate associations between global self-silencing attitudes and reports of self-silencing behaviors in videotaped problem-solving conversations for both boyfriends and girlfriends. Further, although there were no significant associations between self-silencing attitudes and relationship satisfaction for either boyfriends or girlfriends, there were several significant moderate correlations between self-silencing behaviors and relationship satisfaction.

Author note. Data for this project were collected as part of a larger study funded by a Utah State University New Faculty Grant and by R03 MH064689-01A1 from the National Institute of Mental Health, both awarded to Renee Galliher, PhD. Send correspondence concerning this article to Renee Galliher; e-mail: Renee.Galliher@usu.edu.

*Faculty mentor
in relationships, whereas women may use these behaviors to gain or maintain acceptance (Harper & Welsh). The pattern observed for girls in the Harper and Welsh study is more consistent with theoretical definitions of the self-silencing construct.

Self-silencing behaviors are particularly relevant as couples work to resolve conflicts and disagreements in their relationship. Researchers have found conflict-management behaviors, or the specific style with which a couple responds to conflict, in close relationships (Shantz, 1987) to be more relevant than the mere presence of conflict. This pattern has been shown in literature addressing both marriage (Gottman & Levenson, 2000) and adolescent relationships (Shulman, Tuval-Mashiach, Levran, & Anbar, 2006). Couples who use tactics such as compromising and negotiation to resolve disagreement and conflict tend to have longer lasting relationships (Gottman & Levenson, 2000; Shulman et al., 2006). In contrast, relationships in which individuals use conflictive or avoidant tactics do not last as long (Gottman & Levenson, 2000; Shulman et al., 2006). Researchers have also been interested in conflict tactics and how they relate to couples’ relationship satisfaction. Kurdek (1995) found that couples who used withdrawing and conflict engagement had lower relationship satisfaction. Self-silencing attitudes may manifest in conflict situations as withdrawn, avoidant, or restricted engagement in the interaction. They also may be observed as yielding, giving in, or submissive behaviors. Yielding or giving in is not always negative, but according to interdependence theory (Kelly & Thibaut, 1978), relationships in which both partners are negotiating and giving in are successful. Relationships in which only one partner has a pattern of continually yielding may create power imbalances. Also, some forms of submissive behaviors have been linked with sexual exploitation and victimization (Richards, Rollerson, & Phillips, 1991).

We assessed self-silencing attitudes via self-report in a sample of adolescent romantic couples. Additionally, we assessed couple members’ experiences of self-silencing behaviors in the context of a problem-solving interaction. Finally, we examined links between both attitudes and behavioral self-silencing and global relationship quality. We hypothesized that self-silencing attitudes would be manifested during the recorded conversations via more withdrawn and less connected behaviors and that both attitudinal and behavioral indices of self-silencing would be linked to lower relationship satisfaction for both boyfriends and girlfriends.

**Method**

**Participants**

Participants were 74 adolescent, heterosexual dating couples, recruited from two rural high schools in Utah and Arizona. We randomly selected students from high school directories and contacted them by telephone to see if they were eligible (i.e., involved in a romantic relationship of at least one month duration) and interested in participating in the study. The number of adolescents initially contacted by phone was not recorded. However, the available population of students was approximately 3,000 between the two high schools. The percentage of students contacted who were both interested and eligible was very small (perhaps 10%). We sent interested adolescents information about the study and parental consent forms for both partners through U.S. mail. After one week, we contacted the target adolescent (i.e., the student originally contacted from the school directory) by phone to schedule appointments at the university research laboratory for data collection. All communication with couples was through the target adolescent, who worked with his or her partner to arrange schedules and deliver parental consent forms to the partner. Each participant provided written consent, and participants under the age of 18 provided parental consent. Participants received compensation of $30 each ($60 per couple).

Length of dating relationship ranged from one month to 4.5 years with the average relationship being 47.8 weeks ($SD = 37.98$) and a median relationship length of 41 weeks. The participants were between 14 and 18 years of age (girlfriends $M = 16.48$, $SD = 1.07$; boyfriends $M = 17.1$, $SD = 0.99$). Because both couple members were between 14 and 18 years of age, no couples reported age differences greater than 3 years; 84% were the same age or within one year of each other. The girlfriends were 76.4% non-Hispanic White, 18.0% Latina, 2.8% Native American, 1.4% African American, and 1.4% Asian. The boyfriends were 69.9% non-Hispanic White, 26.0% Latino/Hispanic, and 1.4% African American; one boyfriend declined to answer and one boyfriend selected “other.” Because of the geographic location of data collection, approximately 70% of couple members were members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints.

Participants reported diverse family structure and educational backgrounds. Of girlfriends, 69.4% reported that their biological parents were married to each other; 80.6% of boyfriends reported that their parents were married. Fewer than 20% of adolescents reported that their parents had less than a high school degree. About 30% of both couple members’ parents had completed high school. Approximately 30% of parents had a college or graduate degree, and the remainder had completed some college or technical school.
Measures

Demographic information. Participants completed a form that assessed gender, race/ethnicity, religious affiliation, educational history, parents’ marital status, and parents’ education.

Self-silencing. We measured attitudes about self-silencing using the 9-item Silencing the Self Subscale (STSS; Jack & Dill, 1992), which measures the extent to which participants inhibit self-expression in order to avoid conflict or possible termination of the relationship. Participants rated how strongly they agreed with each statement on a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Higher scores indicate higher self-silencing. Reliability analyses generated an alpha of .77 for both girlfriends and boyfriends for the self-silencing subscale.

Relationship quality. Levesque (1993) developed the Levesque Romantic Experience Questionnaire (LREQ) to measure a number of qualities in romantic relationships. We used the Relationship Satisfaction subscale to ascertain the degree to which couple members perceived their relationships as satisfying. Sample items are “In general, I am satisfied with our relationship” and “I often wish I hadn’t gotten into this relationship” (reverse scored). We modified the original 6-point Likert scale to a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) to fit the computerized administration system used in the current study. Subscale scores were calculated as the mean across the five relationship satisfaction items. Levesque found the reliability of the instrument to be high (α = .88). The alpha calculated for the satisfaction subscale for this sample was .70 for girls and .79 for boys.

Problem-solving interaction. Couples were digitally recorded participating in three interactions drawn from previous research with adolescent romantic couples (Capaldi & Crosby, 1997; Galliher, Welsh, Rostosky, & Kawaguchi, 2004; Welsh, Galliher, Kawaguchi, & Rostosky, 1999). For the first warm-up conversation, we asked the couples to plan a party for 5 min. Then, in an effort to elicit problem-solving behaviors and conflict-management styles, for the remaining two 8-min conversations, they discussed relationship issues that they each selected from a list of common dating issues prior to video recording. Potential issues for discussion included choices such as “We don’t spend enough time together” and “My parents do not like that we spend so much time together.” Immediately after discussing their issues, couples completed a Global Interaction Scale adapted from Capaldi and Crosby (1997). Couple members globally rated themselves and their partners during the entire recorded interaction task on several behaviors, including “connection,” expressing true feelings,” “hiding something,” and “withdrawing.” Participants provided the ratings on a Likert scale (1 = Never and 5 = Very Often).

Procedures

This study used extant data from a larger study examining relationship processes in adolescent romantic relationships. Data collection took approximately 3 hr to complete, and couples participated in the university research lab of the principal investigator. We gave the couples snacks and beverages to maintain interest and attention. We digitally video recorded the couples having three conversations using a laptop computer in a room without research assistants present to provide privacy for the couples. Following recording, one couple member completed a set of questionnaire measures using a computer survey software program while the other completed a video recall procedure used for the larger study. During the final hour, couple members switched places, and each completed the remaining task. Order of survey completion (i.e., male completing video recall first or female completing video recall first) was counterbalanced to avoid order effects, and couple members completed the surveys and recall tasks in separate rooms.

Results

Preliminary and Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 displays means and standard deviations for boyfriends and girlfriends for all study variables. On average, scores for both boyfriends and girlfriends were just below the midpoint of the STSS, suggesting that couple members generally did not view themselves to be sacrificing their needs in their relationships to a great extent. There was a nonsignificant trend for a sex difference on self-silencing, with boyfriends reporting slightly higher levels than girlfriends t(68) = -1.97, p = .052, d = .28. Scores for relationship satisfaction were, on average, above the midpoint of the scale, and these distributions were negatively skewed. There was no sex difference in relationship satisfaction, t(67) = .97, p = .34, d = .11.

Means and standard deviations for boyfriends’ and girlfriends’ ratings of themselves for positive interaction variables (honesty, expressing true feelings, feeling connected) were, on average, above the midpoint of the scale. In contrast, scores for withdrawing and hiding something were, on average, below the midpoint of the scale. There were significant sex differences in ratings of honesty, t(71) = 2.07, p = .04, d = .22, with girlfriends reporting higher scores than their boyfriends. No significant sex differences were observed for feeling connected, t(58) = .27, p = .79, d = .13; expressing true feelings, t(71) = 1.59, p = .12, d = .21; withdrawing, t(71) = .34, p = .74, d = .09; or hiding something, t(57)
Means and standard deviations for partner ratings also appear in Table 1. On average, both boyfriends and girlfriends viewed their partners as open, honest, and connected, just as they viewed themselves. Scores for withdrawing and hiding something were, on average, below the midpoint of the scale. Dependent samples \( t \) tests demonstrated no significant sex differences in any of these variables (\( t \) values ranged from -1.13 to 0.93; \( p \) values ranged from .26 to .89; Cohen’s \( d \) ranged from .00 to .18).

### Associations Among Self-Silencing Attitudes and Self-Silencing Behaviors

Table 2 shows bivariate correlations examining the associations between boyfriends’ and girlfriends’ STSS scores and their ratings of self-silencing behaviors in the conversations. Boys who scored higher on the

---

**TABLE 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Measures</th>
<th>Boyfriends</th>
<th>Girls (SD)</th>
<th>Possible Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-Silencing</td>
<td>2.77 (.60)</td>
<td>2.54 (.64)</td>
<td>1-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship Satisfaction</td>
<td>3.61 (.74)</td>
<td>3.70 (.56)</td>
<td>1-5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ratings of Self</th>
<th>Boyfriends</th>
<th>Girls (SD)</th>
<th>Possible Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Honesty</td>
<td>4.64 (.74)</td>
<td>4.85 (.36)</td>
<td>1-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressing True Feelings</td>
<td>4.26 (.92)</td>
<td>4.47 (.65)</td>
<td>1-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling Connected</td>
<td>4.25 (.78)</td>
<td>4.42 (.81)</td>
<td>1-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hiding Something</td>
<td>1.37 (.78)</td>
<td>1.30 (.60)</td>
<td>1-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Withdrawing</td>
<td>1.61 (.93)</td>
<td>1.51 (.79)</td>
<td>1-5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ratings of Partners</th>
<th>Boyfriends</th>
<th>Girls (SD)</th>
<th>Possible Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Honesty</td>
<td>4.66 (.59)</td>
<td>4.67 (.63)</td>
<td>1-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressing True Feelings</td>
<td>4.22 (.83)</td>
<td>4.37 (.93)</td>
<td>1-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling Connected</td>
<td>4.29 (.67)</td>
<td>4.32 (.84)</td>
<td>1-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hiding Something</td>
<td>1.41 (.80)</td>
<td>1.28 (.57)</td>
<td>1-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Withdrawing</td>
<td>1.49 (.84)</td>
<td>1.53 (.90)</td>
<td>1-5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
STSS viewed themselves as more likely to be hiding something, with nonsignificant trends for relations with their ability to express their true feelings and withdrawal. Boys’ scores on the STSS were also linked to their perceptions of the girlfriends’ withdrawal during the conversation. Girls with higher scores on the STSS viewed themselves as less able to express their true feelings and less connected during their problem-solving conversations. They also rated their boyfriends as less connected. Thus, there were some modest connections between STSS scores and ratings of self-silencing behaviors during the conversation for both couple members, particularly for self-expression and feelings of connection.

**Links Between Self-Silencing and Relationship Satisfaction**

Table 2 also shows bivariate correlations that assessed
the links between self-silencing attitudes or behaviors and relationship satisfaction. Self-silencing attitudes measured via self-report were not significantly linked to relationship satisfaction for either boyfriends or girlfriends. However, we found links between self-silencing behaviors during the conversations and self-reported relationship satisfaction. Girlfriends’ perceptions of the conversation behaviors were consistently, significantly linked to their relationship satisfaction, with significant correlations observed between relationship satisfaction and girlfriends’ connection, partner honesty, partner feeling connected, partner hiding something, and partner expressing true feelings. Several significant correlations emerged for boyfriends’ relationship satisfaction as well, demonstrating significant relations with boyfriends’ rating of their own partner, their partners’ honesty, ratings of their friendships’ withdrawing, and their expression of their true feelings. Thus, for both girlfriends and boyfriends, experiences of self-silencing behaviors during the conversations were more closely linked to relationship satisfaction than to their STSS scores.

Discussion

We evaluated both attitudinal and behavioral expressions of self-silencing in adolescent couples, finding that self-silencing attitudes are manifested in predicted ways when couples engage in potentially conflictual interactions. Generally, couple members in this community sample reported high levels of relationship satisfaction, which is consistent with previous research and with expectations for a healthy community sample of young couples (e.g., Galliher et al., 2004). If adolescent couples are not happy in their relationships, they simply break up. Unlike married couples, there is no social structure or cultural expectation that they maintain their relationships over time.

Couple members also reported, on average, relatively low levels of both self-silencing behaviors and attitudes in their relationships, with few significant sex differences. The nonsignificant trend for the difference between boyfriends’ and girlfriends’ scores on the STSS provides weak support for previous research that has observed sex differences in self-silencing attitudes (Harper & Welsh, 2007). In addition, there was a significant sex difference in partners’ ratings of their own honesty, with girlfriends reporting more honesty than boyfriends. Harper and Welsh (2007) speculated that males in their study reported higher levels of self-silencing behaviors, but their reports of self-silencing may not have reflected the same kinds of submissive and self-sacrificing psychological processes proposed by Jack (1991). Although our results suggest that girlfriends’ and boyfriends’ levels of self-silencing attitudes and behaviors are generally quite similar, additional research is necessary to determine whether there are differences in the meaning of self-silencing behaviors.

We did not find links between self-silencing attitudes and relationship satisfaction for either boyfriends or girlfriends. This finding is not consistent with prior research with adolescent couples (Harper & Welsh, 2007). However, ratings of specific self-silencing behaviors were associated with relationship satisfaction. Girlfriends’ satisfaction was modestly related to their experiences in the conversations, but was even more consistently and strongly related to their evaluation of their boyfriends’ behaviors. In contrast, for boyfriends the strongest correlations were between their satisfaction and their ratings of their interaction behaviors. This pattern supports the notion that girls and boys are socialized to behave differently in relationships. Girls are socialized to be more relationally oriented and emotionally expressive, whereas boys are socialized to be more independent and less relationally oriented (Eagly, 1983). These findings also point to the relevance of specific interaction processes, rather than global attitudes, in developing interventions to address the potentially problematic consequences of a self-silencing relational style in adolescence.

Summary and Conclusions

There are some limitations in this study. The couple members were relatively homogenous geographically and religiously. The generalizability of the findings to couples from more diverse urban areas is questionable. Stamm (2003) argued that couples from rural areas adhere more strictly to traditional gender roles. Also, despite having a relatively substantial representation of Latino couple members in our sample, we did not have enough participants to analyze how ethnicity related to self-silencing behaviors and relationship satisfaction. Explicit examination of cultural and ethnic patterns in relationships would be an important area for future research. Finally, there is substantial debate in the literature regarding the definition and identification of adolescent romantic couples; couples in this study were required to be dating monogamously for at least one month. However, recent scholarship suggests that many important romantic experiences take place outside of the context of ongoing, committed relationships (Furman & Shaffer Hand, 2006). Allowing adolescents to define for themselves what constitutes a “romantic partner” in future research would provide a broader representation of relationships and experiences.

In summary, the results of this study support modest associations between global self-silencing attitudes and perceptions of self-silencing behaviors among adolescent romantic couple members. Further, self-
silencing behaviors, rather than global attitudes, demonstrated several significant associations with global relationship satisfaction. The developmental implications of these results for men’s and women’s romantic relationship functioning across the lifetime are important, as many of the patterns observed in the current study are reminiscent of findings in the adult literature. As future research yields a better understanding of self-silencing and the effects this behavior has on individuals and relationships, interventions can be designed and implemented to promote healthy functioning of adolescents and their relationships. These interventions may prevent unhealthy relationship patterns that have been found in the adult literature.

References


