Confiding about Problems in Marriage and Long-term Committed Relationships: A National Study

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Dedication

For my mother.

Abstract

This study examined confiding patterns among the adult population of the U.S. about problems in marriages and long-term committed relationships. Specific areas of interest were the prevalence, nature of the relationships, types of problems confided about and most and least helpful confidant responses. An Internet panel was used to collect data from a nationally representative sample of 1000 U.S. adults aged 25-70. Results showed that 73.3% of U.S. adults reported ever having been a confidant to someone with a couple relationship problem, while 62.6% had themselves confided in someone about a relationship problem. Women were more likely to be confidants than men, as were individuals with more education. The most common confiding relationship was between friends, followed by siblings. Confidants had a wide range of marital problems brought them, including common issues such as disagreements over money along with serious issues such as infidelity and divorce. The most helpful confidant responses were reported to be listening and giving emotional support; least helpful responses were talking too much about him or herself and being critical and judgmental. Professionals who work with families and couples can use this information to better understand their client's support networks and the potential influence of confiding relationships within a couple's social network.

Keywords: Confiding relationships, confidants, social network support, marital distress, couple relationships

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The interface between social networks and marriage can be located squarely within the confiding relationship. When problems arise in a marriage or long-term committed relationship, people often first turn to a confidant within their social network (Oliker, 1989) and this confiding can take place well before the couple seeks professional help (Crane, Newfield & Armstrong, 1984). Having someone else to turn to outside of the marriage in times of distress can strengthen the stability of the couple relationship (Felmlee, 2001; Milardo & Lewis, 1985). However, little is known about the confidants within these important confiding relationships; who serves as confidant, what is the nature of these relationships and which characteristics are most important?

This study is the first national survey of confiding patterns in U.S. adults about problems in their marriages and long-term committed relationships. This research study, which focuses on the confidant, examines the frequency of confiding about problems in marriages and long-term committed relationships, the types of problems that are confided about, as well as the specific nature of these confiding relationships. The findings from this study will better inform how to best strengthen the support capacity of natural confidants within a social network community, which has great potential to help couple relationships, adults, and children.

Background

There is a broad literature on confiding across relationship domains. The relevance of these supportive relationships has been shown in fields as diverse as psychiatry (Wildes, Harkness & Simon, 2002), social network analysis (Stein, Bush, Ross & Ward, 1992), cultural studies (Hendrickson, 2012) and gerontology (Schnittker, 2011).

Clinical studies have found confiding relationships to be protective factors in depression (Osborn, et al., 2003), and to aid in recovery from illnesses such as colorectal cancer (Sapp et al., 2003). Thus significant evidence indicates the importance of confiding in others for support along a continuum of physical and mental health problems and concerns.

In terms of marital relationships, the 1980s and 1990s saw a fair degree of research interest in outsider confiding relationships mostly focused on the confider and the social network. Rubin (1985) conducted in-depth interviews of 300 men and women about the role of friendship in their lives. She found that, for women, "Friends outside the marriage facilitate the acceptance of the limits inside it" (p. 141) and that they consider these relationships to be an important source of support for the marriage. Julien and Markman (1991) used a questionnaire and a 45-minute interview to study 87 white couples in order to examine the differential effects of spousal and social support on individual and marital adjustment. Their findings suggest that outsider support is mobilized by greater marital distress, particularly among wives, and that marital distress in general is associated with less spousal support; in other words, when there are problems in a marriage, both spouses tend to turn towards their support networks for help.

There do appear to be gender differences in how men and women create and maintain social networks, in which the confiding relationship is embedded. Women have more dense networks which suggests closer ties with possible confidants (Lin & Westcott, 1991) who serve a buffering role for women more often than for men (Walen &

Lachman, 2000). Women also tend to seek support in different ways than men; they are more likely to discuss their feelings with others and tend to seek affiliative support more often (e.g., Belle, 1987).

Some researchers on confiding relationships have used the frame of "marriage work." Oliker (1989), building on Hochschild's (1979) concept of "emotion work," defined marriage work as "reflection and action to achieve and sustain the stability of a marriage or a sense of its adequacy" (p. 123). She used qualitative methods to study the relationship between friendship and marriage with a sample of 17 women. All of the women, whether married or divorced, had confided about marital concerns with their friends; three quarters had brought a marital disagreement to a friend first before bringing it to their husband, and over half reported that friends had helped them keep their marriages together, mainly by using strategies such as listening and perspective giving.

The results of studies that focused mainly on marriage work also show some gender differences. Helms and McCrouter (2004), who conducted in-home interviews with 142 predominantly White married couples, found that though women and men were both likely to engage in marriage work with friends as well as their spouses, women were more likely to do so; marriage work was operationalized here as discussing marital and family concerns. These findings are consistent with Proulx and colleagues (2004), who examined the links between marriage work and marital quality using a smaller subsample of 52 wives and mothers from the same data set; women tended to confide in friends more often than men did about specific marital problems, such as in-laws or financial issues.

The evidence also suggests that for women, particularly, outsider confiding relationships hold significant power in married and long-term committed relationships, affecting the couple relationship in both positive and negative ways (Bryant & Conger, 1999; Lewis, 1973; Milardo & Lewis, 1985). In a study of 241 couples that examined the reliability and validity of the Marital Status Inventory, Crane and colleagues concluded that it was the confiding interactions of wives about their marital dissatisfaction that tended to have an influence on the decision to eventually divorce (Crane, Newfield & Armstrong, 1984). For wives, it was the "specific thoughts and actions toward divorce [that] are more important in eventual divorce than marital dissatisfaction" (p. 310). Couples can be dissatisfied for years, but when wives begin to talk to their confidants about divorce, it appears to be a warning sign that the relationship is in serious jeopardy. However, other scholars have found that when women talk about their marital problems it appears to strengthen their marriage (Rubin, 1985; Helms, Crouter & McHale, 2003), though these studies did not specifically examine divorce talk with confidants. Either way, it seems that, for women, confiding in others about relationship or marital concerns can have a strong influence on the couple relationship.

The behavior of confidants, when being confided in, is one mechanism by which this influence occurs. Milardo (1985) notes that interference with a relationship "may lead to its deterioration" (p. 13), particularly early in a relationship or marriage, for instance, when the negative opinions of parents can have a strong effect. Or, a friend may contribute to a confider's marital dissatisfaction by sharing negative views of the confider's spouse or by suggesting that separation or withdrawal is the best option.

Widmer, Kellerhals and Levy (2004) found that a third party could interfere by buttressing the spouse's complaints, thus legitimizing the complainant's view, which can have the effect of continuing the marital conflict.

Conversely, when confidants are supportive of the relationship they can help a marriage succeed. Julien et al. (2000) assessed a sample of 88 spouses (33 husbands and 55 wives, independent of one another) and their respective best friends. These researchers videorecorded the interactions between the spouses and friends and used their previously developed *Système de Codifications d'Interactions de Soutien pour Problèmes de Couples* (SCIS-PC) (1990), which has 17 codes based on both verbal and non-verbal cues that assess supportive and interfering behaviors of best friends when spouses were confiding about marital concerns. They found that the friends "were helpful in assisting the spouses in rebuilding or maintaining a sense of good marriage in times of marital conflict" (p. 301).

In an earlier study, Julien, Markman, Leviellé, Chartrand and Begin (1994) examined a small sample of wives ($N = 28$) to assess outsiders' support and interference with regards to wives' marriages. Wives were asked to bring a confidant to the lab for a study that involved coding observed confiding interactions. The researchers found that maritally adjusted wives tended to have confidants with happy marriages, while maritally unadjusted wives tended to confide in those who were single, divorced, or maritally unadjusted. These researchers surmised that "wives and confidants' common experience of satisfying relationships with husbands enables them to anchor the conversations in positive ground and provides the elements for framing and reframing views that promote

marital harmony" (Julien et al., p. 25). In addition, confidants' interference, as measured by the SCIS-PC (1990), predicted wives' further marital distress and feelings of distance from husband post-interaction, regardless of wives' adjustment status.

There has been little research on the influence of other confidant characteristics such as age, race, relationship status, and type of connection to the confider (for example, friend versus family member). Milardo (1982) hypothesized that both intimate and non-intimate associates, meaning close friends and family members as well as co-workers, neighbors and acquaintances, are important to the development and maintenance of said relationships, but did not otherwise examine the relationship status of the confidant. Age and race have not been examined as being factors associated with being a confidant.

In sum, there is evidence that outside confiding relationships can be helpful or unhelpful to individuals who are struggling with problems in their marriages or long-term committed relationships. Previous research on outsider confiding relationships is, for the most part, several decades old, with much of it based on small samples and not generalizable to the population at large. Little is known about the prevalence of confiding within the adult population of the U.S. or about who is confiding and how often, characteristics of confidants, which marital or relationship problems are most commonly brought to confidants, and which confidant responses are more or less helpful to the confider. These issues are addressed in the present study.

Theoretical Background

Although this study was not designed to test theory, two theoretical frameworks are useful for understanding confiding relationships outside of marriage or long-term

relationships: Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Theory of Human Development PPCT model (2005) and Milardo and Lewis' Support vs. Interference models (1985). Similarly to Bronfenbrenner's original theory of human ecology (1977, 1986), the Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) model (2005) deals with the interrelatedness of the developing processes of the person within the context of the social environment. Bronfenbrenner posits that it is the enduring Process of interactions between the Person and the immediate environment that is most foundational to positive development. Relevant concepts are Process, Person and Context; in this study the confiding interaction between confider and confidant is the Process of interest. Person characteristics, such as Demand (those characteristics which draw people together such as age or gender), Force (the desire a person has to have an effect on the social environment, for example, by being a confidant) and Resources (those characteristics which are developed over time such as sensitivity and emotional skill) are germane to the present study, while Context refers to those characteristics that create the social environment (nature of the relationships, for example). The interweaving of these three concepts forms the overarching theoretical framework for this study.

At the heart of Milardo and Lewis's (1985) Support and Interference model is the hypothesis that a couple's social network can, and often does, have a significant effect on the stability of the relationship. Members of either partner's social network can provide help in keeping the relationship together (the support model) or else they can have a hand in destroying the relationship (the interference model). Thus, a confidant to a spouse dealing with marital problems, who is outside the marriage, can have a strong impact on

whether the couple stays together or splits up. Confidant responses and behaviors can be supportive or interfering, but either way, they are in the conceptual mix when looking at how couple relationships and marriages maintain stability, grow and thrive over time.

Purpose of the Study

The goal of this study is to better understand the patterns of confiding relationships among U.S. adults, determine who are currently confidants and confiders, who are most likely to be confidants, and the nature of these relationships. Five research questions direct this study. There are no hypotheses for the first three research questions, which are exploratory in nature, due to the stage of the research on confiding about problems in marital or long-term relationships.

Research Question 1: What proportion of U.S. adults have been confidants and confiders about problems in marriages or long-term committed relationships, and what is the nature of these relationships?

The first part of this question focuses on the prevalence of being a confidant and a confider. The second part will examine the kinds of relationships in which confiding occurs, and the frequency of confiding relationships.

Research Question 2: Which relationship problems are most commonly confided about?

Research Question 3: Which confidant responses are considered by confiders to be the most helpful and which ones the least helpful?

Research Question 4: Which demographic factors (gender, age, race, educational level) are associated with being a confidant about problems in marriages and long-term committed relationships?

For this research question I hypothesized that women will be more likely to be confidants, consistent with previously cited literature (Oliker, 1989; Rubin, 1985; Helms, Crouter & McHale, 2003). I further hypothesized that age will be a predictor of being a case in the group of confidants; respondents who are older will be more likely to be confidants because they have been in various relationships longer and because age has been traditionally associated with wisdom. For race and education, there were no directional hypotheses.

Research Question 5: Is there an association between being a confidant and current marital and relationship status and happiness?

For this research question I hypothesized that those who were not currently in a relationship (marriage or long term commitment) will be more likely to be confidants. I further hypothesized those who were less happy with their current relationship will be more likely to be confidants. Although the research literature is mixed on these two issues, it is plausible that confiders with complaints about their relationship will look for people who are not in a relationship or who are unhappy in their relationship (Julien & Markman, 1991).

The results of this study will add to knowledge about confiding relationships. Gaining a clearer understanding of the processes of confiding among a nationally representative sample will add to the literature on this important social process. This further knowledge will add to clinician's ability to understand the processes that couples go through before they arrive at a marriage counselor's office.

Methods

Data Set and Participants

The sample consisted of 1,000 adults ages 25-70 who responded to an internet-based survey. The lower end of the age range was chosen because there is a greater probability of a respondent having had a long-term relationship after the age of 25. The higher end of age 70, instead of the more typical age 65 in national surveys, was chosen in order to include those older adults who continue to be in long-term relationships. However, relationship status was not an eligibility criterion for inclusion in the sample. It is important to note that an individual can be both a confider and a confidant at different times within their social network. For these analyses, for clarity's sake, the confidant is defined as the person being confided in, while the confider is defined as the person who is doing the confiding. The particular role differs by the survey questions asked.

YouGov, an international Internet-based survey research, collected the data by obtaining responses from a large panel of invited Internet users, and then weighting the responses in line with demographic information. This type of survey can be considered as legitimate a sampling procedure for representativeness as random digit dialing (RDD) (Gotway Crawford, 2013). One study (Yeager et al., 2011) comparing the representativeness of Internet probability and volunteer surveys to telephone surveys showed that Internet surveys have more demonstrated concurrent and predictive validity than telephone surveys. Different methods of data collection affect how respondents answer questions; greater privacy generally leads to more accurate responses to survey items, particularly regarding less socially desirable responses (Fricker, Galesic, Tourangeau & Yan, 2005). In 2009, Chang and Krosnick concluded that Internet survey

methods offer a viable method of survey data collection with advantages over telephone methods, especially in terms of response quality. And, as far as representativeness is concerned, the weighted non-probability samples were as representative on primary demographics as the probability sample; these researchers found that weighting considerably lessened the deviations from the demographic. Given these realities, an opt-in Internet panel with proper matching and weighting can be a useful and legitimate alternative to RDD.

To obtain the final data set, 1200 respondents were interviewed between July 19 and August 7, 2013. They were then matched to a sampling frame based on gender, age, race, education, party identification, ideology, and political interest to represent the general population of the U.S. This matched final set of survey respondents ($N = 1000$) was then weighted to known marginals for the general population of the United States (American Community Survey, 2007). Those marginals for age, gender, race and education are shown in Table 1.

Measures

The questionnaire used in the survey was constructed with items developed for this study as well as a one-item measure of relationship happiness from the Fragile Families study (Reichman, Teitling, Garfinkel & McLanahan, 2001) and a study of marital problems people cite as reasons for divorce (de Graaf & Kalmijn, 2006). Items pertaining to the specific aims are listed in order below. The full set of questions utilized in this study is presented in Appendix A.

Prevalence of being a confidant. In order to determine the prevalence of confiding about problems in marriage or long-term relationships and the nature of those relationships, participants answered the following question: "Has anyone ever confided in you about a problem in their marriage or long term committed relationship? By confiding we mean talking openly about their relationship concern. These conversations might have been brief or lengthy, just one time or repeated over time." Responses categories were *yes* or *no*.

Prevalence of being a confider. Later in the survey participants were asked: "Now we would like to ask about times you may have confided in someone else. Thinking about your whole adult life, have you ever confided in someone (other than a professional) about a problem in a marriage/long-term committed relationship?" *(Yes, no, can't remember)*

Nature of the confiding relationships. Those who had ever been a confidant were asked the following question: "Thinking about just the past year, about how many people have confided in you about a problem in a marriage/long-term committed relationship?" They were given a range from 0-12; for each choice they were asked to list the kind of relationship they had to the confiders. There was a wide range of relationship types, including parents, siblings, friends, co-workers, and acquaintances.

Relationship problems. Participants who had ever been a confidant were asked the following question: "Thinking of all the times in your life that someone has confided in you about a marriage/long-term committed relationship, which problems do you remember them telling you about? Check all that apply." There were 27 choices in the

checklist (de Graaf & Kalmijn, 2006; Hawkins et al., 2012) and possible answers included *How their spouse/partner handled money; Growing apart; Not enough attention* to *Their own infidelity* to *Their partner's use of physical violence; and Severe emotional abuse.* Participants were given the option of a textbox in which to enter their responses if those problems were not listed in the choice options for the item.

Perceptions of support or interference. In order to gauge which confidant responses were considered most and least helpful (most supportive or most interfering), participants who had ever confided in someone were asked: *"*From the list below, please check anything that the person you confided in did that was helpful*."* The participant was asked to check all that apply from the following list*: Examples of possible answers include: The person listened to me; The person gave me emotional support; The person gave me a helpful perspective on the problem; The person offered ideas for helpful resources (books, counseling, websites, etc.).* The participant was also asked the following question: "From the list below, please check anything that the person you confided in did that was NOT helpful. (Check all that apply)." Examples of answers included: *The person gave too much advice; The person was too critical of my spouse/partner; The person bothered me by suggesting that I break up with my spouse/partner.*

The choices in this list of supportive or interfering behaviors was developed by the principal investigator and several collaborating marriage and family therapists and doctoral students in marriage and family therapy. The response items are also consistent with the SCIS-PC (Julien, et al., 2000).

Demographic information. Participants were asked the following demographic questions: "In what year were you born?" "Are you male or female?" "What ethnic group best describes you?" *White; Black or African-American; Hispanic or Latino; Asian or Asian-American; Native American; Middle Eastern; Mixed Race; Other (Open textbox).* "What is the highest level of education you have completed?" *Did not graduate from high school; High school graduate; Some college, but no degree (yet); 2-year college degree; 4-year college degree; Postgraduate degree.*

Relationship status. Participants answered the following items: **"**Are you currently married?" *(Yes/No) (If answer is yes)* "How many years have you been married?" *(If answer is no)* "Are you currently in a long-term committed relationship?" *(If answer is yes)* "How many years have you been in this relationship?"

Relationship or marital happiness. Participants answered the following item: "The numbers below represent different degrees of happiness in your relationship. The middle point, "happy," represents the degree of happiness of most relationships. Please check the number that best describes the degree of happiness, all things considered, of your relationship": *(0) Extremely unhappy; (1) Fairly unhappy; (2) A little unhappy; (3) Happy; (4) Very happy; (5) Extremely happy; (6) Perfect.* This item was used in the Fragile Families study (Reichman et al., 2001) as a one-item measure of marital or relationship happiness.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were run in order to determine the prevalence of confiding in the population, the nature of those relationships, the problems talked about, and the

confidant responses that were most and least helpful. Chi-square tests were performed to determine the bivariate associations between the dependent variable of being a confidant and the independent demographic variables of gender, age, race and educational level, as well as the association between being a confidant and relationship status (married, long-term committed relationship, not in a relationship) and relationship happiness. Analyses were run using both rounded and non-adjusted cell counts; significance levels were similar so the rounded counts are reported. For these bivariate analyses, education was collapsed into four categories: *High school, 2-year or some college, 4-year college, Post-graduate* in order to have the minimum cell counts required (Morgan, Leech, Gloeckner & Barrett, 2011). For the same reason, relationship happiness was also collapsed into four categories: *perfectly happy, extremely happy, happy, unhappy*. Because age is a continuous variable, a Pearson's correlation was run for this variable only.

A binary hierarchical logistic regression model was run using all the variables of interest. Because using the relationship happiness variable resulted in a truncating of the sample to those in a relationship (n = 733), a second logistic regression was conducted without this last variable (N = 1000). Because results of both regressions were similar, only results for the full model using relationship happiness (n = 733) are reported. In order to maintain representativeness, probability weights were used for the descriptive statistics and the chi-square tests. Because the variables used to weight the independent variables were not related to the dependent variable, unweighted data were used in the logistic regression analysis (Winship & Radbill, 1994).

Results

The results are presented in the order of the research questions.

Research Question 1: What is the proportion of U.S. adults who have been confidants and confiders about problems in marital or long-term committed relationships, and what is the nature of these relationships? Tables 2 and 3 present the findings. The proportion of those who report ever having been a confidant was 73.3%. The proportion of those who report ever having confided in someone was 62.6%. The proportion of confidants who have had someone confide in them within the last year was 65.7%. The most common types of confiding relationships that these confidants reported were with female friends (33%), male friends (17%), siblings (8%) and coworkers (7.9%).

Research Question 2: Which relationship problems are most commonly confided about? Table 4 presents the findings. The top problems that people confided about were: *Growing apart(*67.%), *Not able to talk together* (66.3%), *Not enough attention* (63.0%), *How their spouse or partner handles money* (60.0%) and *Personal habits of their spouse or partner* (58.8%). *They or their spouse were considering divorce* was next (57.9%). This last response consisted of two categories (*They were considering divorce* and *Their spouse was considering divorce*), which were collapsed in order to understand how much confiding is going on regarding divorce.

Research Question 3*:* Which confidant responses are considered by confiders to be the most helpful and which ones the least helpful? Table 5 presents the findings. The following were considered the top five most helpful confidant responses: *Listened to me* (88.7%), *Gave emotional support* (61.4%), *Gave a helpful perspective* (54.0%), *Shared a personal experience* (34.8%) and *Helped understand own contributions to the problem*

(33.5%). The following responses were considered the top five least helpful confidant responses: *Talked too much about him or herself* (21.8%), *Too critical of spouse/partner* (20.1%), *Gave advice that was not useful* (19.7%), *Was judgmental or critical* (16.5%) and *Gave too much advice* (13.9%).

Research Question 4: Which demographic factors (gender, age, race, educational level) are associated with being a confidant on marital and intimate partner concerns? Results of the bivariate analyses showed that the hypothesis of gender being associated with being a confidant was supported, $X^2(1) = 9.68$, $p < .01$; more women than men were confidants. The hypothesis for age was not supported; the correlation was not significant, $r\ (998) = -0.024$, $p = .45$; age was not related to confidant status. As expected, race was not significantly related to the likelihood of being a confidant, $X^2\ (3) = 4.74$, $p = .19$. Although not hypothesized, education was significantly associated with being a confidant, $X^2(3) = 16.12$, $N = 1000$, $p < .001$. People with more education were more likely to be confidants.

Research Question 5: Is there an association between being a confidant and current marital and relationship status and happiness with the confidant's current relationship? Results of the bivariate analyses showed that both relationship status and relationship happiness were significantly associated with being a confidant. A 2X3 crosstab was run for relationship status (*married, committed, not in relationship*) and being a confidant. The results showed a significant relationship, $X2(2) = 6.16$, $N = 733$, $p < .05$. Being in a committed relationship was associated with a greater likelihood of

being a confidant in comparison to those who were married or not in a relationship. *Cramer's V* = .08 indicated a small effect size (Cohen, 1992).

For relationship happiness, the hypothesis was partly supported. Results of a 2X4 crosstab showed a significant relationship between relationship happiness and being a confidant, $X^2(3) = 23.58$, $N = 703$, $p < .001$. *Eta* = .19 indicated a small to medium effect size. Examination of the cells indicated that there was a non-linear relationship. As expected, those respondents in unhappy relationships were more likely to be confidants, while those in happy relationships were less likely to be confidants. However, those who reported being extremely happy or perfect in their relationships were more likely to be confidants. This was a somewhat confusing and ambiguous finding.

In order to further examine this finding, separate crosstab analyses were run for men and for women; in other words, gender was used as a layering variable (Morgan & Leech, 2011). For women, there was the expected linear relationship between relationship happiness and being a confidant; those in unhappy relationships were more likely to be confidants, but as people reported more happiness they were less and less likely to be confidants. For men, there was the non-linear relationship noted above. The bivariate relationship remained statistically significant for both genders. For women, $X^2(2)=10.82$, $n = 381$, $p < .05$, and for men, $X^2(2)= 20.16$, $n = 322$, $p < .001$; the effect size for women and men was *Cramer's V* = .25, and *Cramer's V* = .18, respectively.

Logistic regression model

A stepwise binary hierarchical logistic regression was conducted to predict the likelihood of being a case in the group of confidants using demographic factors (race, age, gender, education) and relationship factors (relationship status and relationship happiness) as predictors. Table 6 presents the findings. Race was collapsed into four categories (White, Black, Hispanic and Other) in order to have sufficient cases per predictor to conduct the logistic regression (Peng, Lee & Ingersoll, 2003). Gender was dummy coded (*female* = 1; *male* = 0), and the dependent variable was dummy coded (*confidant* = 1; *not a confidant* = 0). Assumptions of independence and multicollinearity were checked and met. There were no missing data.

The demographic variables were entered in the first step. Relationship status (*married, committed, not in a relationship*) was entered in the second step, and relationship happiness entered in the third. The addition of relationship happiness in the third step eliminated all those respondents who were not in a relationship (n = 267), leaving only those who were in a marriage or relationship in this analysis (n = 733). A bootstrap resampling technique of drawing 1000 samples with replacement from the original data set was used in order to ensure internal validity of the regression (Bleecker,et al., 2003). Bootstrapping replicates the sampling from a population by drawing resamples of the observed data with replacement from the original full data set. This is important because the "performance of a predictive model is overestimated when determined on the sample of subjects that was used to construct the model" (Steyerberg et al., 2001, p. 774). The bootstrapped and non-bootstrapped models showed similar findings and significance levels, and so the non-bootstrapped odds ratios are reported

here. A test of the full model against a constant model was statistically significant, indicating that the predictors as a set reliably distinguished between confidants and non-confidants, X^2 (8) = 31.31, $p < .001$.

Two findings were statistically significant: gender and education. Women were 1.85 times more likely to be a confidant than men were; for every level of education a respondent reported, the odds of being a confidant increased by 22%. Though both relationship status and relationship happiness had been significant predictors at the bivariate level, this influence disappeared completely in the regression analysis; neither variable reached statistical significance ($p = 0.43$ and $p = 0.14$, respectively).

As for the whole logistic regression model, the Hosmer-Lemeshow goodness of fit test was X^2 (8) = 5.149 and not significant ($p = .742$), suggesting that the model was fit to the data well. Nagelkerke pseudo-R^2 statistic increased with each additional step from 0.055 for Model 1, to 0.057 for Model 2 and to 0.061 in Model 3. Although this coefficient of determination is not a definitive measure of effect size, because it becomes larger as the model goes from first step through the third step, this increase in pseudo-R^2 indicates that the predictive power of the model increases slightly from Step 1 to Step 3.

Discussion

The goal of this study was to better understand the patterns of confiding relationships among U.S. adults. Findings showed that a substantial proportion of the population of U.S. adults have been either a confidant or a confider about problems in a marriage or long term committed relationship. Almost three quarters (73.3%) of U.S. adults report having been a confidant, while three fifths (62.6%) report having confided

in someone. This finding fits with prior research that suggests the importance of confiding about marriage and long-term committed relationships. Past studies have been limited by the use of small samples (e.g., Julien & Markman, 1991; Oliker, 1989). This study, by examining a nationally representative sample of US adults, extends the research in this area by showing the prevalence of this phenomenon.

In terms of the kinds of relationships where confiding most often occurs, female friends were the most frequent confiders. Next most frequent were male friends, siblings, and co-workers, respectively. Far fewer people confided in their other family members. This finding underscores the power of the peer relationship. "Horizontal" connections with confiders were most often reported. The more "vertical" relationships with other family members were less often reported, although adult children confided in their parents more often than their parents confided in them, thus proving the strength of the parental role even into adulthood regarding confiding.

In terms of which confidant responses were the most and least helpful, by far the most helpful response confiders reported was that their confidant "listened to me." The second and third most helpful responses were "gave emotional support" and "gave a helpful perspective." This is congruent with what is found in the counseling and therapy literature; empathetic listening and emotional support are the basis for all helping behaviors (Martin, 2011). Furthermore, gaining a different perspective on one's problems was reported as helpful, which is a somewhat less obvious finding. The least helpful responses were that the confidants "talked too much about him or herself" and that they were "too critical of spouse/partner." This is an interesting finding that seems to

underscore the notion that "I can complain about my partner, but you better not say anything bad about him or her".

It appears from these findings that non-judgmental, emotionally supportive listening and perspective giving are all hallmarks of helpful behaviors by a confidant. Similarly, too much talking about oneself and criticism of spouse/partner seem to be the least helpful responses. This latter finding is interesting because it points to the fact that when someone is complaining about their spouse or partner, they wish to be the ones to speak ill and are unhappy when their confidant joins in the "spouse-bashing." This finding also seems to suggest that when people complain to their confidants they do not necessarily want their confidants to agree.

In terms of theory, these findings are congruent with the Support and Interference models of couple stability (Milardo & Lewis, 1985). The hypothesis for these models indicates that a couple's psychological network can and often does have a significant effect on the stability of the relationship. We can see from the "most helpful" responses that these are consistent with the Support model, in which members of the couple's network provide support and further stability for the couple; lending a sympathetic ear to a friend or family member struggling with relationship problems may be just the thing that is needed to soothe hurt feelings and provide an outlet for strong feelings. Similarly, but in the opposite way, the Interference model can be found well represented in the "least helpful" response categories. If, when an angry individual comes to complain to a confidant about a spouse, the confidant also criticizes the spouse, the original complainant appears to be quite unhappy. This behavior on the part of the confidant can

be seen as more interfering than supportive. Further, having a confidant who "talks too much about themselves" when we have come to them for support is also not very helpful, in large part perhaps because their focus is no longer on the original complainant/situation. Thus the Support and Interference models of couple stability appear to be theoretically congruent underpinnings of confidant responses.

These findings indicate that a wide range of problems are brought to confidants, including what Hawkins et al. (2012) characterized as "hard problems" and "soft problems." Hard problems are abuse, addictions, and infidelity. Soft problems are all other problems, many of which can be difficult and even lead to divorce (Hawkins et al., 2012), but are not at the same level of relationship crisis or emergency as the three hard problems. The most reported soft problems in this study were *Growing apart, Not enough attention* and *Not able to talk together*.

In the current study, there were high percentages of the hard problems brought to confidants: infidelity (50.8%), alcohol or substance use (37.9%), and physical violence (27.0%). It is notable that there were substantial concerns about infidelity. Half of confidants reported confiders bringing this problem to them; however, the numbers are lower for confiders' reporting of infidelity compared to their concerns about their partners' infidelity. Over a third of confidants reported hearing about problems of alcohol and substance use. This is congruent with what is known about the harm alcohol or substance use, either concordant or discrepant, can bring to relationships (Leadley, Clark & Caetano, 2000). And as far as violence within relationships is concerned, over a quarter of confidants reported being confided in about the use of physical violence in the

relationship, whether by the confiders or by their partners. This split between either the confider's use of violence (11.3%) and their partners' (23.9%) suggests that people are less likely to confide about their own use of physical violence. In any case, this issue is a difficult problem that confiders are clearly sharing with their confidants, which further points to the relevant nature of these relationships.

Last is the reporting of *They or their spouse were considering divorce.* Almost three fifths (57.9%) of confidants heard about the issue of divorce from their confider; either the confider was considering divorce (52.8%) or their spouse was considering divorce (36.1%). This discrepancy in proportion makes sense because if someone confides in a good friend that they are thinking about divorce, it does not necessarily mean that this person has shared that with their spouse. In fact, it seems more likely (Oliker, 1989; Vaughn, 1986) that an individual would first share this rather important concern with a friend before actually talking to their spouse about it. Conversely, it seems quite likely that if their spouse has mentioned divorce, this might signify a more profound possible rupture in the marriage. This finding is also consistent with the sparse literature, which suggests that, for women, confiding about divorce was more likely to lead to eventual divorce (Crane, Newfield & Armstrong, 1984).

Depending on the volatility of the relationship, the threat of divorce can have greater or lesser meaning, but either way, once an individual's spouse has uttered this word the other spouse may feel a different tone in the marriage and seek out a confidant. Over half of all confidants have had people bring concerns about the possibility of divorce; either the confider is thinking about divorce, or their spouse has brought up the

subject, or both. The fact that the majority of confidants have had the divorce problem brought to them underscores the profound impact of the confiding relationship within an individual's social network.

Findings of this study show that confidants are more likely to be female and have higher levels of education. Women were almost twice as likely as men to be confidants. This is not to say that men are not confidants (the majority were), only that women are more likely to be confidants. This difference makes sense in terms of prior research that indicates women have higher levels of self-disclosure as well as the tendency to prioritize their relationships within their social circles (Oliker, 1989; Rubin, 1985). The finding for education is harder to interpret. Perhaps those with more education might be seen within their social networks as being more knowledgeable. More education translates to more knowledge, and thus people with more education might be thought of as having a greater ability to be a good confidant. This is only speculation, however, and more research would need to be done to tease out exactly how and why education is associated with being a confidant.

Race was not associated with being a confidant. This is consistent with the prediction that race would not be a factor in being a confidant within the population of U.S. adults, although it is possible that low statistical power for sub-group analyses obscured racial differences in this sample. Age was also not associated with being a confidant. This is contrary to the prediction. Perhaps confiding begins early in adulthood when people get into longer-term relationships, and thus the lifetime prevalence of being a confidant would not subsequently increase.

Relationship status and relationship happiness were both associated with being a confidant in bivariate analyses, but neither had a predictive influence in the multivariate analysis. In the bivariate analysis, those in long-term committed relationships were found more likely to be confidants than married people or those not in a relationship. This is difficult to interpret; no extant literature suggests this type of association. At the bivariate level, the predicted association of relationship happiness with being a confidant was consistent for women; women were more likely to be confidants if they were unhappy in their relationships, and less likely to be confidants as they reported more happiness. This association held true for men in that they also were more likely to be a confidant when they were unhappy, and less likely when they were happy. However, men were more likely to be confidants when they reported being very or extremely happy in their relationships, which is a very inconsistent pattern. More research needs to be done to see if this finding replicates.

The findings, when taken as a whole, are theoretically consistent with specific parts of Bronfenbrenner's Process-Person-Context-Time model (2005), particularly the concepts of Process, Person and Context. At the foundation of this model lies the proximal Process, which is the development of the Person through the bidirectional interaction between Person and Context; in the present study this process takes place in the confiding relationship. These daily processes of interactions between the individual and their social environment are the ways in which individuals make sense of their world and where they fit (Tudge, Mokrova, Hatfield & Karnick, 2009). Given that almost three-fourths of respondents reported having been a confidant, it is clear that the

confiding relationship is one important way individuals can play their part in the existing order, while also striving to make changes in it. The confidant and confider are both firmly embedded in the proximal Processes of development that individuals go through while navigating problems and concerns within the relationship. Confiding helps those with concerns to have a safe place to air these concerns, which underscores the importance of this kind of relationship to couple stability.

Salient themes within the Person include Demand, Resource and Force characteristics. Demand refers to those characteristics that draw people to one another, such as gender or age. The findings indicate that the Person Demand characteristics of gender and education appear to predict whether someone might be a confidant; women and those with higher education are more likely to be confidant within their social networks. Resource characteristics refer to those characteristics that are developed over time, such as emotional skills and intelligence, sensitivity, and thoughtfulness and past experience. These are important characteristics in a confidant, which can be seen in the kind of responses that confidants provided to their confiders. The last subtheme within the Person is Force, which is defined as "the extent to which a Person changes her environment is linked, in part, to the desire or drive to do so, or Force characteristics" (Tudge, et al., 2009, p. 201). For example, by supporting a friend in need with marital troubles, a Person within this conceptual framework, can choose to support her environment and community by helping her friend stay married, thus stabilizing a couple relationship that may be central to the Person's social network, whether this involves family or friends.

Finally, Context refers, in this case, to particular aspects of the complex environment within which an individual operates; the microsystem of the dyadic relationship, the meso-system of the context within which these two know one another (school, work, family), the exo-system that may affect the confidant but not the confider directly, and the macro-system of the culture at large, all of which can have a deep effect on the confidant's ability to be empathetic, for instance. The macro-system that will have the most effect at this point in time is the current cultural situation in the U.S., which will, by definition, be different for different parts of the population. Because the data were collected in 2013, this will be germane to the theory in terms of how things are in this country; same sex marriage, for example, will be part of the mix in a way that it would not have been even ten years ago. Also, it is possible that in today's American society (nationally represented here) confiding may be more socially acceptable than at another point in time or in another country with differing cultural and societal norms.

Limitations

There are several limitations associated with this study, one of which is the use of an opt-in Internet survey that does not access people without access to the Internet. In reality, the goal of obtaining a true random sample has always been difficult. Since at this point in time the percentage of U.S. adults with Internet access and those with landline phones is almost equal (79% and 80% respectively), the use of the Internet does not necessarily preclude access. Therefore opt-in Internet panels such as the one used for the data collection here are worthy alternatives as long as they use proper statistical

techniques such as propensity scores to arrive at demographic representativeness (Schonlau, et al., 2004).

A further limitation of this study is that the data were derived from self-reports, with respondents interpreting for themselves the meaning of language related to being a confidant and provider, and using long-term recall about problems brought to them and how many confiders opened up to them. The retrospective nature of this study can also be considered a limitation, because it is not possible to ascertain whether memory issues have affected the participants' reporting. Future research should incorporate more observational measures as to the nature of the confider-confidant interaction within the confiding relationship, as well as gather longitudinal data to examine the long-range effects on the stability of confiding relationships over time.

Implications

It is clear that the confiding relationship has great potential to be the first level of help, given that most people go first to their friends and family to help with relationship problems (Crane, Newfield & Armstrong, 1984). This phenomenon is important for clinicians and social scientists because it implies that the most important relationship for supporting a marriage in distress may be at the level of the confidant, and this could be accessed well before the couple turns to professional help. Clinicians and those who work with families and couples can use this information to better understand the context of their client's support networks and the strength that these outside confiding relationships carry within a couple's social network. Asking about or even including some of these

outside confidants can help strengthen the support network of a couple who are struggling with marital or relationship problems.

Conclusion

This study underscores the importance and ubiquitous nature of the confiding relationship; the majority of U.S. adults report confiding or having been confided in about relationship or marital problems. . It is also clear that people confide in one another about very serious problems such as abuse, addictions or affairs, as well as other problems such as not being listened to, not getting enough attention, or growing apart. This study extends previous research by adding to our knowledge of specific confidant behaviors and responses, which can help support marital or couple relationship within social networks. Adding to the supportive capacity of the social network is an important social good, and an innovative way to strengthen and stabilize couples and families within communities.

Table 1.

Sample and Marginals/Percentage of U.S. population

	Sample $N = 1000$		Marginals	
	n	%	If different	%
Age:				
25-29	108	10.8	18-29	22.14
30-44	326	32.6		28.69
45-64	485	48.5		33.20
65-70	81	8.1		16.55
Gender:				
Female	509	50.9		51.40
Male	491	49.1		48.60
Race:				
White	656	65.6	White/Other	75.66
Asian	10	1.0		
Native American	9	.9		
Mixed	23	2.3		
Other	16	1.6		
Black	133	13.3		11.41
Hispanic	152	15.2		12.93
Education:				
HS or less	389	38.9		46.68
Some college	192	19.2		28.69
College graduate	272	27.2		16.92
Post-graduate	119	11.9		8.71

Table 2.
Confidant and non-confidant characteristics (N = 1000)

	Confidant (*n* = 733)		Not a Confidant (*n* = 267)	
Characteristic	*n*	%	*n*	%
Gender				
Female	395	53.8	114	42.8
Male	339	46.2	153	57.2
Age				
25-29	86	11.7	22	8.3
30-44	232	31.7	94	35.1
45-64	351	47.9	134	50.2
65-70	64	8.7	17	6.4
Race				
White	486	66.3	170	63.7
Black	103	14.1	30	11.2
Hispanic	106	14.4	46	17.2
Asian	3	0.5	7	2.6
Native American	7	0.9	3	1.0
Mixed race	19	2.6	4	1.6
Other	9	1.2	7	2.7
Education				
No high school	21	2.8	7	2.8
High school graduate	268	36.5	121	45.5
Some college	133	18.2	59	22.0
2-year college	68	9.3	25	9.4
4-year college	143	19.5	36	13.4
Post-graduate	101	13.7	19	7.0
Relationship status				
Married	402	54.9	149	55.9
Long-term committed	123	16.8	29	10.9
Not in a relationship	208	28.4	89	33.2

Table 3.
Confiding interactions by confider relationship to confidant

Relationship type	*N* = 657	
	n	%
Family members	383	25.5
Siblings	121	8.0
Parents	46	3.1
Others	132	8.7
Adult child	84	5.5
Friends	745	49.5
Female	495	32.9
Male	250	16.6
Coworkers	119	7.9
Others[a]	92	6.1

[a] Acquaintances, fellow faith community members, other.

Table 4.
Relationship problems most often confided about (N = 657)

	Those answering "yes"	
Problem	*n*	%
1.Growing apart	493	67.5
2.Not able to talk together	431	66.3
3.Not enough attention	460	63.0
4.How their spouse/partner handled money	438	60.0
5.Their spouse's/partner's personal habits	429	58.8
6.They or their spouse were considering divorce[a]	422	57.9
They were considering divorce	385	52.8
Their spouse was considering divorce	263	36.1
7.Personal problems of the spouse	355	48.8
8.In-law or relative problems	339	46.6
9.Infidelity[a]	369	50.8
Their own infidelity	221	30.4
Their partner's infidelity	315	43.3
10.How they divided household responsibilities	299	41.1
11.Their spouse's/partner's leisure activities	296	40.6
12.Being controlled by the spouse/partner	292	40.1
13.Alcohol or drug problems	277	37.9
14.Sexual problems	275	37.7
15.Differences in taste and preferences	269	36.8
16.Their spouse's/partner's friends	246	33.7
17.Severe emotional abuse	231	31.5
18.Conflicts over raising children	220	30.1
19.Other job-related tensions	203	27.8
20.Use of physical violence[a]	256	27.0
Their own use of physical violence	82	11.3
Their partner's use of physical violence	174	23.9
21.The spouse/partner worked too many hours	172	23.6
22.How they divided child-care responsibilities	160	21.9
23.Religious differences	102	14.0
24. Other (trust, abandonment, fighting, military spouses with long deployments, partner addicted to porn, etc.)	160	22.2

[a] Total *n* does not add up as respondents could have more than one response each.

Table 5.
Confidant responses that were most and least helpful (N = 626)

	n	%
Confidant was helpful because he or she…		
Listened to me	555	88.7
Gave emotional support	384	61.4
Gave a helpful perspective	338	54.0
Shared a personal experience	218	34.8
Helped understand own contributions to the problem	210	33.5
Helped understand where partner was coming from	208	33.3
Encouraged to be more constructive	186	29.6
Offered ideas for helpful resources	99	15.8
Other	15	2.4
Confidant was NOT helpful because he or she…		
Talked too much about him or herself	137	21.8
Was too critical of spouse/partner	126	20.1
Gave advice that was not useful	123	19.7
Was judgmental or critical	103	16.5
Gave too much advice	87	13.9
Bothered me by suggesting I break up with spouse/partner	78	12.4
Other (no open textbox so there were no responses listed)	193	30.8

Table 6.
Summary of binary hierarchical logistic regression analysis on variables predicting being a confidant.

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
Predictor	*B*	*SE*	*OR*	*B*	*SE*	*OR*	*B*	*SE*	*OR*
Gender	.60*	.18	1.8	.61*	.18	1.82	.61*	.18	1.85
Age	-.00[b]	.00[c]	.54	-.01	.01	1.00	-.01	.01	1.00
Race[a]									
Black	.59	.38	1.80	.57	.38	1.78	.55	.38	1.77
Hispanic	.18	.29	1.20	.17	.29	1.19	.16	.29	1.18
Other	-.47	.33	.63	-.45	.33	.64	-.44	.33	.64
Education	.19*	.06	1.20	.19*	.06	1.21	.19*	.06	1.21
Relationship status				-.20	.25	.82	-.18	.25	.83
Relationship happiness							.10	.07	1.11

Note: * $p < .01$, ** $p < .001$
[a] White as comparison group; [b] < -.001; [c] < .001

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Appendix A
(Selected questions for relevant research questions)

This survey is about people confiding in one another about problems in their marriage or long-term committed relationship. By confiding we mean talking openly about a relationship concern with someone else. These conversations may be brief or lengthy, just one time or repeated over time. Don't include professional counseling relationships in your answers.

1. Has anyone ever confided in you about a problem in their marriage or long term committed relationship? By confiding we mean talking openly about their relationship concern. These conversations might have been brief or lengthy, just one time or repeated over time.
   Yes/No.

2. Thinking about just the past year, about how many people have confided in you about a problem in a marriage/long-term committed relationship and what was their relationship to you? (12 option boxes available)
   - Family member
     - Parent
     - Adult child
     - Sibling
     - Parent-in-lawn-law
     - Brother/ Sister-in-law
     - Cousin
     - Aunt/uncle
     - Other family member
   - Friend
   - Coworker
   - Church/faith community acquaintance
   - Someone you just met or barely know
   - Other

3. Thinking of all the times in your life that someone has confided in you about a marriage/long-term committed relationship, which problems do you remember them telling you about? Check all that apply.

   ( ) How their spouse/partner handled money
   ( ) Growing apart
   ( ) Not enough attention
   ( ) Not able to talk together
   ( ) Their spouse's/partner's friends
   ( ) Their spouse's/partner's leisure activities
   ( ) In-law or relative problems

( ) Their spouse's/partner's personal habits
( ) How they divided household responsibilities
( ) They were considering divorce
( ) The spouse/partner was considering divorce
( ) Religious differences
( ) Alcohol or drug problems
( ) Personal problems of the spouse
( ) Their own infidelity
( ) Their partner's infidelity
( ) The spouse/partner worked too many hours
( ) Other job-related tensions
( ) Sexual problems
( ) Being controlled by the spouse/partner
( ) How they divided child care responsibilities
( ) Conflicts over raising children
( ) Their own use of physical violence
( ) Their partner's use of physical violence
( ) Severe emotional abuse
( ) Differences in tastes and preferences
( ) Other: _____

4. Are you currently married? (Yes/No)
   (If yes) How many years have you been married? _____

5. (If answer is no) Are you currently in a long-term committed relationship? (Yes/No)
   (If yes) how many years have you been in this relationship? _____

6. (If yes on #5 or #6) The numbers below represent different degrees of happiness in your relationship. The middle point, "happy," represents the degree of happiness of most relationships. Please check the number that best describes the degree of happiness, all things considered, of your relationship.

0	1	2	3	4	5	6
Extremely Unhappy	Fairly Unhappy	A Little Unhappy	Happy	Very Happy	Extremely Happy	Perfect

7. Now we would like to ask about times you may have confided in someone else. Thinking about your whole adult life, have you ever confided in someone (other than

a professional) about a problem in a marriage/long-term committed relationship? (Yes, no, can't remember)

8. (If yes on above) From the list below, please check anything that the person you confided in did that was helpful. (Check all that apply.)

( ) The person listened to me
( ) The person gave me emotional support
( ) The person gave me a helpful perspective on the problem
( ) The person shared a personal experience that helped me
( ) The person helped me understand my own contributions to the problem
( ) The person helped me better understand where my spouse/partner was coming from
( ) The person encouraged me to more constructive in handling the problem
( ) The person offered ideas for helpful resources (books, counseling, websites, etc.)

9. (If yes on above) From the list below, please check anything that the person you confided in did that was NOT helpful. (Check all that apply.)

( ) The person gave too much advice
( ) The person's advice was not useful
( ) The person was judgmental or critical towards me
( ) The person talked too much about himself or herself
( ) The person was too critical of my spouse/partner
( ) The person bothered me by suggesting that I break up with my spouse/partner