

2018

Gender and Conflict in Long-Term Romantic Relationships

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GENDER AND CONFLICT IN LONG-TERM
ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Nicholson School of Communication
in the College of Sciences
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

Summer Term
2018

Major Professor: Jennifer Sandoval

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ABSTRACT

Conflict is inevitable, but not inherently negative. All relationships face conflict with some frequency and long-term romantic partnerships are no exception. This exploratory qualitative study investigated conflict types, approaches, and affective components using digital conflict journals. Participants logged their relational conflict for one month in order to gain insight into the communication practices and conflict perceptions of couples. A conflict cycle and sensemaking framework was applied to identify patterns and best practices. This study revealed various behaviors and emotions frequently exhibited by individuals in relationships as well as the effects of conflict cycles and serial arguing and the role they play in conflict escalation. Findings also include identifying how an individual's frame of reality or distinct identity alter their viewpoint during conflict, which affects the behaviors presented by both parties, reoccurring conflict patterns, and gender differences. Finally, this study serves as a basis for which researchers can expand upon regarding relational conflict, including gender differences.

This thesis is dedicated to my grandfather, Benjamin Belsham, who supported my dreams without question and reminded me, “there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.” I love and miss you, Grandpop.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, and foremost, I would like to thank my wonderful advisor, Jennifer Sandoval, for all that she has done and taught me. It is your guidance and knowledge that helped me grow these last few years and without your patience and understanding, this thesis would not have been possible. You have my extreme gratitude and respect for your continued efforts and valuable insight throughout this process. My graduate career, including pursuing a PhD, would not have been possible without your support from day one and your constant advice and expertise. Thank you for inspiring me to be more in this world through your continued compassion and honesty. Thank you for teaching me all that you have, both academically and personally, and for never doubting my abilities, even when I did.

Next, I would like to thank my committee for their continued patience, direction, and commitment towards helping me accomplish this thesis. Dr. Hastings, you have been a continuous source of support and I will forever value our conversations and your “always open” door. Dr. Parrish, you continuously offered an outside perspective that was invaluable to my thesis and I truly appreciate all of your encouragement and advice that I will take with me into my PhD. Thank you both for always pushing me to be better.

Third, I must thank my incredible husband for always believing in me and his selfless devotion in helping me achieve all that I have so far. Carter, I can’t thank you enough for the many study breaks, being the best partner of Team Hamlin, and listening when things got difficult. Your love and encouragement made this possible.

I owe a huge thank you to the most amazing family a girl could have. Thank you for the never-ending pep talks and your unwavering support. To my parents, Daddy, Mommy, Emily

and Tom, thank you from the bottom of my heart for your confidence in me and reassurance in everything I do and for helping me stay in school “forever.” To my siblings, Chelsea, Annie and Jasper, thank you for the many conversations over the years and accepting my constant need to talk about school. You have each taught me so much about this world and about the meaning of hard work and I will forever cherish the part you played in this process. And to my wonderful Grandmom, I thank you for lending an ear when I needed it and for offering me your endless love and support. You’ll never know how much I love and admire you and appreciate the comfort you’ve given me.

Finally, I would like to thank the many friends, both new and old, that have helped me over the years. Thank you to my soul friend, Katie Cronin, for her willingness to work with my crazy schedule and for her dedication to making every week one to remember. I am grateful you made me part of your family. Thank you to the friends I made in grad school and for teaching me more than academics. Each of you showed me the world in a new light, which I will forever hold dear to my heart. Thank you for making grad school enjoyable and for listening to my many grumbles and protests. You’ve given me even more reason to believe in the importance of loyalty, a good laugh, and always following your dreams.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

According to the PEW Research Center (Parker & Stepler, 2017), approximately half of all United States adults are currently married, which has decreased in recent years. However, this decline in marriage is not representative of a decrease in romantic relationships (Livingston & Caumont, 2017). Half of the United States population is married, and an additional 8% of all adults cohabit with a romantic partner while another 11% of the nation claim to be in a committed relationship (outside of those married and cohabitating). These statistics show that almost three-fourths of the United States population is involved in a romantic relationship.

Despite how common romantic relationships are among adults, the divorce rate for individuals 50 and over has roughly doubled in the past three decades (Stepler, 2017). Additionally, the rate of divorce for Americans under 50 is about twice that number. As a whole, scholars believe approximately 40% to 50% of all marriages end in divorce (Birditt, Brown, Orbuch & McIlvane, 2010). Scholars have revealed negative views surrounding divorce and describe how it often shows concern and fear between partners (Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Miller, Sassler & Kusi-Appouh, 2011; Reed, 2006). Edin and Kefalas (2005) conducted a study where individuals believed “divorce desecrates the institution of marriage” (p. 207). With the rise in divorce and fear surrounding divorce, it is imperative to continue to examine ways to lessen these numbers.

Not only is divorce seen as a negative outcome of relationships, the health of romantic relationships is important for an individual’s well-being. Merrill and Afifi (2017) argued this is true because of the way individuals develop a “sense of belonging to a relational unit” (p. 363). Additionally, Proulx, Helms, and Buehler (2007) discovered a connection between quality of

marriage and personal well-being. Donnellan, Larsen-Rife, and Conger (2005) described satisfactory relationships as promoting mental and physical health. Furthermore, researchers have revealed such satisfaction is often due to the communication type each partner uses in marriage when handling conflict (Canary, Cupach & Serpe, 2001; Cohan & Kleinbaum, 2002). Both interpersonal and intrapersonal ways of handling conflicts are predictive of the outcome of that relationship's success. Scholars hold the potential to positively impact conflict in romantic relationships by enhancing our understanding of conflict processes and outcomes.

Partners tend to hold more dissatisfaction in their romantic relationships when there is greater negative conflict (Cramer, 2000). Gottman, Coan, Carrere, and Swanson (1998) examined various processes of conflict that affect the outcome of marital success. Whether by examining frequency, style, or the management of it, researchers have looked into the effects of conflict on romantic relationships to determine the positive and negative elements it draws to each partner (Cramer, 2000; McGonagle, Kessler & Gotlib, 1993). Within conflict, issues exist of anger, power, sex differences, and many elements that are likely interconnected and potentially a hindrance to the success of the relationship (Gottman et al., 1998). McGonagle et al. (1993) explained the effects of disagreements in marriages, which lead to a decline in overall "relationship quality and stability" (p. 387). Additionally, they discussed how the perceptions of conflict have an effect on the success of the relationship as well. This leads to the notion that it is important to comparatively examine both partners separately to help lead towards greater understanding of conflict effects on romantic relationships.

Researchers have consistently argued for the importance of examining long-term romantic relationships. Acevedo and Aron (2009) went so far as to say, "romantic love and marriage have come to be viewed as a source of self-fulfillment and expression" (p. 59). Conflict

plays a significant part in the continuation of such relationships. Not only is conflict a factor in romantic relationships but the negative effects of conflict situations likely lessen the probability of continuation of romantic partnership (Chen et al., 2006) as well as affects children of those individuals well into adulthood (Caughlin, Vangelisti & Mikucki-Enyart, 2013). Parental conflict is a significant indicator of negative consequences for the children involved, more so than parental divorce.

Conflict is inevitable in interpersonal relationships (Aloia & Solomon, 2015; Canary et al., 2001; Kim & Leung, 2000; Roloff, 1987; Zacchilli, Hendrick & Hendrick, 2009; Zhang & Zhang, 2012) and is often depicted as a negative, but expected experience of all relationships (Aloia & Solomon, 2015; Argyle & Furnham, 1983; Cahn & Abigail, 2014; Kluwer, de Dreu & Buunk, 1998). The way partners conduct themselves during conflict often indicates the level of relational satisfaction each holds (Canary et al., 2001; Cramer, 2000). The negative connection to conflict may be associated with feelings of defeat and embarrassment, as well as increased levels of distrust and suspicion on the other party (Lay, 1989).

Due to its inevitability, conflict in relationships has been given extensive consideration in the field of communication research (Canary et al., 2001; Zhang & Zhang, 2012). Conflict often interferes with the effective communication needed for successful relationships (Zacchilli et al., 2009). Conflict management and resolution strategies have been a large focus of communication and conflict research as well as the sources and types of conflict present (Zhang & Zhang, 2012). The difficulties relationships face when confronted with conflict are many and can be severely detrimental to a relationship's success (Aloia & Solomon, 2015). However, that is not always the case (Canary, Cupach & Messman, 1995; Theiss & Solomon, 2006). Through positive conflict management, partners increase their ability to collaborate with one another, lessening the

likelihood of conflict intensification (Canary et al., 1995). Furthermore, conflict has the ability to expand how we view “others’ feelings and intentions,” (p. 1) the manner in which partners understand social situations and the role they play in communicative behaviors, how such situations translate into the communication behaviors of children, and in gaining greater depth of understanding within interpersonal relationships. Additionally, Theiss and Solomon (2006) described the conflict through communication and how, when conducted successfully, it “facilitates relationship development and provides interaction skills necessary for dealing with future encounters” (p. 392). Conflict is prominent within romantic relationships and is viewed as essential to interpersonal relationships (Canary et al., 1995). With greater research and understanding of the impact conflict and additional factors have on romantic relationships, we may begin to understand how they transform relationships as a whole.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This section reviews the literature presented on conflict exhibited in romantic relationships, the gender implications and characteristics of conflict, as well as a theoretical perspective utilizing the social-ecological model, conflict cycles, and sensemaking.

Relational Conflict

Researchers have long examined how relationships cause satisfaction but they also found such relationships are a source of significant and consistent conflict between partners (Argyle & Furnham, 1983; Domingue & Mollen, 2009; Johnson & Roloff, 1998; Kluwer et al., 1998; Lloyd, 1990; Malis & Roloff, 2006; Merrill & Afifi, 2017). In this review, long-term romantic relationships are considered to be two years or more where the individuals are either married or dating. Additionally, for the purpose of the current research, long-term relationships are defined as being within a committed and exclusive relationship and holding the potential of marriage at some point in the future (Stewart, Stinnett & Rosenfeld, 2000). Cahn and Abigail (2014) discussed how conflict is often incorrectly deemed an interaction that includes physical and verbal offenses, such as screaming, yelling, and pushing. They concluded that this definition excludes the nonverbal components present in conflict. Conflict has further been characterized as “incompatibilities, an expressed struggle, and interdependence among two or more parties” (Putnam, 2013, p. 8). Likewise, Cahn and Abigail (2014) defined conflict as inclusive of features such as interdependent conflicting parties and discordant goals or means to the same ends. They also discussed the urgency individuals feel when confronted with interpersonal conflict. Researchers have remained fairly consistent over time, of which, many perspectives were influenced by Hawes’ and Smith’s (1973) three dimensions approach.

Conflict and communication are interrelated across three primary dimensions: goal, strategy, and time (Hawes & Smith, 1973; Nicotera, 2009). Hawes and Smith (1973) further elaborated how each dimension is represented by a prospective and retrospective outlook. The first dimension, goal, is consistent with the previously mentioned divergence of goals, or incompatibility of goals (Cahn & Abigail, 2014). Within the prospective viewpoint, behaviors remain the direct reaction to defined goals (Hawes & Smith, 1973). Such goals gain meaning only once we assign such sense through the behaviors expressed (Nicotera, 2009), which illustrates the retrospective approach and is far less common than the prospective approach (Hawes & Smith, 1973). Strategy, the second dimension, is represented by the supposition that conflict falls within either a destructive or constructive category and works to determine either resolution or management within conflict (Nicotera, 2009). The third and final dimension, time, is determined by either continuous or single conflict patterns. The various combinations of each dimension create diverse conceptualizations of conflict. From such dimensions, additional conceptualizations were produced and thus led to a definition with consistent characteristics. In this study, we incorporate Nicotera's (2009) description of conflict as "the interaction of interdependent people who perceive the opposition of goals, aims, and/or values and who see the other party as potentially interfering with the realization of these goals" (p. 3). As relationships grow and individuals become closer over time, the likelihood of conflict increases (Cahn & Abigail, 2014), thus promoting the need for further discovery of relational conflict.

How individuals communicate is fundamental to successful relationships (Caughlin, 2010). According to Domingue and Mollen (2009), how partners communicate is closely related to the level of intimacy and trust. Similarly, Merrill and Afifi (2017) discussed how challenging and difficult effective communication can be in relationships, particularly when handling

conflict. For example, how married couples interact verbally, such as heavy complaining, has been known to predict the success or decline of marriage (Alberts, 1988).

Romantic relationships likely face conflict situations every day (Lloyd, 1990). Despite the negative outcomes that arise out of conflict, it is often described as a fundamental factor of romantic relationships. This is true despite the tendency for conflict to increase the longer two people are together (Canary et al., 2001; Pietromonaco, Greenwood, & Barrett, 2004).

Researchers have conducted studies where individuals report on their own experiences, which revealed conflict to be the most commonly recorded event in partners' daily lives (Lloyd, 1990). Self-reported data has the ability to offer researchers information pertaining to “(a) attitudes about conflict in general, (b) attributions and feelings about a particular episode of conflict, and (c) meanings and motives ascribed to conflict behavior (both self and other's behavior)” (Canary et al., 1995, p. 27).

Relational conflict can often be seen as a predictor of relationship satisfaction (Aloia & Solomon, 2015) as well as relational development and success (Siegert & Stamp, 1994). Argyle and Furnham (1983) suggested the overall satisfaction of partners in marriage positively associates with positive conflict relations and negatively associates with negative interactions. Scholars believe that as relationships evolve, the “relational uncertainty” (Theiss & Solomon, 2006, p. 391) increases when partners progress past the beginning stages of the relationship (Honeycutt & Cantrill, 2001) or “move beyond the scripts for relationship initiation” (Theiss & Solomon, 2006, p. 391). That being said, the magnitude of conflict is important when analyzing relationships, as some partners partially ignore issues that arise of a trivial nature (Cloven & Roloff, 1991), which in turn is seen as cause “for withholding complaints from dating partners” (Theiss & Solomon, 2006, p. 392; Roloff & Solomon, 2002). This idea associates with the notion

that labeling a problem as serious necessitates a greater response from either party (Cunningham, Shamblen, Barbee, & Ault, 2005; Fincham, Bradbury, & Grych, 1990; Newell & Stutman, 1988; Theiss & Solomon, 2006;). Seidman and Burke (2015) described conflict as “laden with emotion” (p. 307) and impactful to a partner’s attention on the relationship.

Self-reported conflict has led to both better understanding of conflict in relationships as well as increased belief in the biases present in this type of research (McGonagle et al., 1993). Through self-reporting, researchers have found the interconnectedness of frequency of conflict, conflict styles, as well as various outcomes caused by conflict. This has been found to relate to the presence of and increase in negativity in romantic relationships. Negative situations of conflict tend to be more impactful than those described as positive. It is because of this reason we examine multiple sources potentially responsible for more frequent conflicts in romantic relationships.

Sources of Conflict

Conflict arises in interpersonal relationships for many reasons. Researchers have studied the causes of conflict and determined various sources, including arguments over money, sex, communication, children, etc. (Lindahl, Clements & Markman, 1998). Tallman, Burke, and Gecas (1998) found each partner tended to list money as a primary disagreement with labor division and quality time together as additional factors of conflict. Burgoyne and Morison (1997) stated how money is the leading cause of stress within marriages. Another area of disagreement includes partner perceptions of feeling like a victim in any situation, while their partner is the offender (Kluwer et al., 1998). When one partner feels under-valued by the other, it can lead to increased relational conflict (Seidman & Burke, 2015).

Another cause is due to each individual concentrating primarily on their partner's negative behaviors and not enough on the positive information they find. Additionally, causes of conflict include partners perceiving their personal wrongdoings as less significant than that of their partners, which in turn leads to the belief that their individual view of the conflict situation is the accurate one (Kluwer et al., 1998). Kluwer et al. (1998) discussed how "individuals tend to perceive themselves as fairer, better and more cooperative than others" (p. 638), which significantly contributes to conflict arising in close relationships and persisting in future conflict as well. Incompatible goals are often cause for conflict due to individuals' primary goals differing (Gere & Impett, 2017). Gere and Impett (2017) examined how such goal discrepancies can lead to conflict and in turn affect the relational quality present. They, additionally, explained how this impacts the relational satisfaction because of resulting factors exhibited from goal divergence. The level of conflict that arises often depends upon the length of relationship. Thus, the type of conflict is often developed from those that are unresolved over time for partners in stable and established relationships (Gere & Impett, 2017).

Additionally, inaccurate perceptions of partners' identities can lead to a number of conflicts (Merrill & Afifi, 2017). Similar to an individual's identity of self, couples establish an identity together (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Giles & Fitzpatrick, 1984). This new relational identity, or dyadic identity, develops from the individual role each partner plays within the relationship as well as the connections created. Giles and Fitzpatrick (1984) also discussed how communication establishes such identities, which creates their combined reality. Due to such communication used in the relationship, couples risk handling conflicts in potentially negative ways. Merrill and Afifi (2017) considered poorly perceived identities as a cause for conflict.

Numerous relational behaviors have also been known to be a source of conflict. For example, infidelity within a relationship, or even the worry of infidelity, is often a significant cause for conflict (Denes, Lannutti & Bevan, 2015). Messman and Mikesell (2000) reviewed the connection of couples' competitive behaviors and an increase in interpersonal conflict, such as power imbalances, sports competitions, as well as competitive behaviors of physical (i.e. attractiveness) and cognitive (i.e. impressions) aspects between each other and to others outside of the relationship. They found when couples perceive their partner's behavior as positive, it improved the competitive behaviors and conflict strategies used.

In response to the many causes of conflict, researchers have examined the outcomes of conflict as well in order to understand the extent of the consequences of conflict. According to Pietromonaco, Greenwood, and Barrett (2004), various communicative patterns of behavior are indicative of greater conflict. Among these behavioral patterns are negative affect reciprocity, demand-withdraw patterns and many others that cause greater difficulty in resolving conflict. These, in turn, likely cause greater stress and alter the way partners respond to and handle conflict that arises. Canary et al. (1995) described three of the primary categories of conflict: (1) specific and concrete behaviors, (2) relational rules and norms, and (3) personality traits, and later describe a fourth, conflict about the process of conflict, including "nagging, withdrawing, sulking, temper tantrums" (p. 102).

Outcomes of Conflict

Various outcomes of relational conflict have been given considerable attention, where relational satisfaction and stability have been deemed the primary concerns (Caughlin et al., 2013). Roloff and Johnson (2002) described how conflict, specifically serial arguing, changes over the course of a romantic relationship but still exists over time.

Demand/withdraw patterns. One of the most significant patterns of communicative behaviors, which stems from conflict within relationships, includes demand/withdraw patterns of interaction between partners (Canary et al., 1995; Caughlin & Scott, 2010; Caughlin et al., 2013; Domingue & Mollen, 2009; Eldridge & Christensen, 2002; Schrodt, Witt & Shimkowski, 2013). Christensen and Heavey (1993) defined this behavioral pattern as occurring when “one partner pressures the other through emotional demands, criticism, and complaints, while the other retreats through withdrawal, defensiveness, and passive inaction” (as cited in Schrodt et al., 2013, p. 29). Either behavior can cause the other (i.e. demand can cause withdraw behavior and vice versa; Caughlin et al., 2013). Demand/withdraw patterns of behavior have been linked inversely with relationship satisfaction but the results have not been overly consistent across studies (Caughlin & Vangelisti, 2000; Caughlin et al., 2013). Researchers attribute individual differences in demand/withdraw patterns to personality differences (Caughlin & Vangelisti, 2000). Additionally, researchers found gender differences between typical demand/withdraw patterns, which are discussed further later in this review.

Biological and lasting effects. Another outcome that occurs as a result of frequent conflict in relationships includes damaging effects on biological stress responses (Merrill & Afifi, 2017). These responses lead to significant long-lasting health concerns to the body’s systems, such as the sympathetic nervous system and the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis. Scholars have found connections between conflict management and hormone levels leading to the understanding that conflict affects individuals’ physiological responses (Robles, Shaffer, Malarkey & Kiecolt-Glaser, 2006). Robles et al. (2006) believed “positive and negative aspects of relationship functioning and their influence on physiological function may have implications for relationship health and physical health” (p. 323). Along this path, the outcomes of conflict

have been seen in children of parents who partake in heavy conflict in their childhood, which can lead to “poor relational quality and insecure attachment in the children’s relationships as young adults” (Caughlin et al., 2013, p. 161).

Gender and Conflict

The current study defines sex and gender differently, as distinguished by Launius and Hassel (2015). Sex equates to “the biological, genetic, and physiological features of males and females” while gender refers to “the behavioral (and changeable/evolving) characteristics that we define as feminine and masculine” (p. 27), which is formed by the social and communicative behavioral components of an individual. This review examines gender differences in relational conflict depicted by social communicative behaviors.

Gender and Relational Conflict

Researchers consistently hold a connection between gender differences and relational conflict (Argyle & Furnham, 1983; Davis, Capobianco, & Kraus, 2010; Taylor & Segrin, 2010), specifically behavioral differences involved in managing conflict (Kluwer et al., 1998).

Researchers have tested the idea that “men and women display behaviors during conflict that are consistent with broad gender stereotypes” (Davis et al., 2010, p. 500) for decades and yet it continues to bemuse scholars in a sense about whether the differences truly exist and what those differences connect to. Researchers further examined how significant a role gender plays on conflict and its impact (Davis et al., 2010; Gayle, 1991; Taylor & Segrin, 2010; Wheeler, Updegraff & Thayer, 2010).

Gender roles that individuals portray are often indicative of corresponding styles of conflict. However, the research lacks consistency. Eagly (1987) posited this inconsistency partially to the context of a situation, which causes gendered social behaviors. Researchers pose

that varying genders respond to conflict according to their perceived gender role (Davis et al., 2010). There are various gender perspectives analyzed within conflict, one of which is known as the expectancy perspective. This standpoint asserts how the male and female connections to conflict are determined by the roles outlined by what society deems to be true (Gayle, 1991). Furthermore, researchers found individuals are likely to associate either a male or female correlation to each context (Gayle et al., 1998). This belief impacts the strategies used in managing conflict based on the stereotypical biases placed on each gender. This offers the consideration of gender biases within conflict communication. Some inconsistencies do exist when examining gender and conflict. Gayle et al. (1998) found stronger evidence to support how one's sex plays a larger role in conflict strategies, while Gayle (1991) found little indication of strong differences between male and female conflict styles, particularly in the workplace.

Gendered Speech Communities

A significant factor to discuss in relationships incorporates how a person's gender is partially responsible for the way we interact and communicate (Wood & Fixmer-Oraiz, 2015). Mulac (2009) described this notion in the form of what he deemed to be truths about men's and women's language use. He pronounced how although each gender speaks the same language, we often do so differently (see also Reid, Keerie & Palomares, 2003). This idea is often seen in speech communities. Speech communities refer to the common understanding of language that takes place in a group of people, where they share similar objectives, strategies, and understandings of the communication that exists within that group (Wood & Fixmer-Oraiz, 2015). Gendered speech communities have been examined for decades. The differences denoted across genders, in the past, were given attention as an assumed component of language differences (Rakow, 1986). Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992) examined gender from a

community perspective and explained how gender differs across communities. The meaning derived from such language also differs across groups. Gender speech communities can be considered in the following explanation: individuals “participate in a variety of communities of practice and [are] likely to have quite different forms of participation in each of them.

Individuals negotiate identity – a place in the world – by negotiating their participation in multiple communities of practice” (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1999, p. 188). Gendered identities are formed in part due to such communities of practice. Specifically, when discussing men and women and their communication patterns, gender plays an apparent role in the differences between each. This is sometimes referred to as the gender-linked language effect. This effect is distinguished by the “language differences between women and men [which] are influenced by a variety of factors including topics, speaker status, salience of gender in a communication situation, and other people present” (Wood & Fixmer-Oraiz, 2015, p. 116). This effect frequently exists in romantic relationships and often takes on a variety of contexts and dynamics.

Gender Differences

Communication patterns differ based on one’s gender (Mulac, Giles, Bradac & Palomares, 2013). Women are often seen as more indirect, while men are commonly considered more direct (Mulac et al., 2013). The differences between men and women seen specifically in conflict are frequently inconsistent across research, particularly when it comes to generalizability across the entire gender (Aloia & Solomon, 2017; Caughlin et al., 2013; Davis et al., 2010; Kluwer et al., 1998; Papa & Natalle, 1989). Archer (1992) examined how gender differences and roles differ beginning from childhood and are often enforced well into adulthood. Similarly, Eagly (1987) posited a connection between these sex differences and our social positions and

roles, which likely stem from childhood experiences. Furthermore, past experiences and roles may cause sex differences in nonverbal communication, which likely impacts conflict. Other researchers have attributed conflict to personality differences (Papa & Natale, 1989). While the cause of gender differences is wide-ranging, the specific behaviors associated with each gender hold more consistency.

Scholars have determined two significant types of differences when it comes to gender and conflict (Caughlin et al., 2013). The first difference is that each gender tends to offer various behaviors during conflict, consistent with their specific gender. When analyzing specific behaviors, researchers generally agree as to what can be associated with each sex. Men are often depicted as the more rational gender, as well as “objective, competitive, independent...ambitious” (Kluwer et al., 1998, p. 638), forceful, dominating (Davis et al., 2010; Papa & Natale, 1989), and are sometimes “socialized to behave aggressively when necessary” (Aloia & Solomon, 2017, p. 2; Archer, 1992). In contrast, women are portrayed as “emotional warm, dependent, cooperative...vulnerable” (Kluwer et al., 1998, p. 638) with conflict styles of compromising and avoidance (Papa & Natale, 1989), as well as more community-focused and relationship-oriented including behaviors associated with appeasing the other party (Canary, Cunningham & Cody, 1988; Davis et al., 2010). Specifically, women are seen as being more negative and men tend to avoid conflict altogether (Caughlin et al., 2013). Merrill and Afifi (2017) also found women are more likely to place greater emphasis on preserving harmony in relationships, while men are more likely to suppress the stress they experience during conflict or avoid it all together (see also, Caughlin et al., 2013).

Gender Differences in Demand/Withdraw Patterns

In connection with the information mentioned above regarding demand/withdraw patterns, researchers have found women are more likely to demand and men withdraw than the opposite scenario (Caughlin & Vangelisti, 2000; Canary et al, 1995; Caughlin et al., 2013). Canary et al. (1995) attribute this divergence in gendered behavior to the “relatively higher and sustained negative arousal to conflict” (p. 103) in men. However, due to exaggerated emphasis researchers place on stereotypical behaviors of gender and sex differences, analyses of demand/withdraw patterns are often skewed to portray a more common outcome of men demanding while women withdraw. These results are, however, related to negative results of relational satisfaction and violence (Caughlin et al., 2013). Gender differences in demand/withdraw patterns are often associated with an individual’s goal in conflict, which is usually credited to women desiring change while men hope to remain the same.

In addition to goal differences in demand/withdraw patterns, conflict is laden with these goal variances across genders as well (Caughlin et al., 2013; Klinetob & Smith, 1996). The primary goal in each conflict situation and the incompatibility between each party is prevalent in romantic relationships, which can also change during a conflict situation (Canary et al., 1988; Caughlin et al., 2013). Men are often attributed with more strategic concerns aimed at maximizing gains (Papa & Natalie, 1989) as well as “individually based instrumental goals” (Canary, Cunningham & Cody, 1988, p. 429), while women aim to attain a more agreeable social situation” (Papa & Natalie, 1989, p. 262), which leads to more accommodation on their part in order to avoid lack of social success. The tactics used to accomplish such goals also differ. Men often incorporate power into their strategies, while women employ communication to resolve conflicts (Papa & Natalie, 1989). Davis et al. (2010) explained how men tend to focus on a

specific task at hand, while women are connected to more propitiatory methods of conflict management that aim to protect the relationship. However, verbal aggressiveness was found to be an assertive strategy listed by women during conflicts (Roloff & Greenberg, 1979), which brings to light the inconsistencies exhibited in gender and conflict research.

Another area of gender discrepancy includes the perceptions that partners experience in relation to the identity gaps present in relationships (Merrill & Afifi, 2017). Merrill and Afifi found men and women differed in what they found concerning regarding “self-reported anxiety and stress” (p. 389), as well as the psychological responses experienced in such situations. Furthermore, the type of identity gap experienced also differs for men and women in their biological responses, which led to a belief that women value various communicative efforts and patterns more than men and, therefore, caused a certain level of relational dissatisfaction when they do not receive the expected standards of communication. The following research questions were posed to examine the above information:

There are multiple contexts from which one may examine relational and gender conflict. In the current review, multiple perspectives are examined to create an entirely new perspective in the field of communication. Nicotera (2009) reviewed various models of conflict from an interpersonal perspective including the social-ecological model from Ted Huston and its importance in relational conflict.

Social-Ecological Model

One perspective from which to examine relational conflict is through Huston’s social-ecological model, which was later adapted by Caughlin et al. (2013). This model recognizes the social implications of conflict in relationships (Caughlin et al., 2013) and incorporates the multiple layers at play in romantic relationships (Huston, 2000). While Huston’s model primarily

focuses on the examination of marriages, he believes it would easily be transferable to other relationships, which in this case, are still romantic. This model represents the complex nature of conflict in romantic relationships and aims to understand the many components involved in such conflict (Caughlin et al., 2013). Additionally, a small number of researchers applied this model to areas outside of relationships, such as public health (Paek & Hove, 2012). For example, Paek and Hove (2012) examined individual health through “a combination of personal behaviors and environmental conditions” (p. 660) and described how this model aids in the multi-layered components present in health. This is similar to relational conflict research in that the social-ecological model reduces the complexity of romantic relational conflict.

The current research incorporates both non-married couples as well as marital relationships. The model successfully benefits relational conflict from a variety of factors and aims to be effective between both men and women (Caughlin et al., 2013). Huston’s (2000) model incorporates three layers: the society (i.e. the environment), the individual partners, including the beliefs and perspective each partner maintains within the relationship, as well as the marriage relationship (i.e. relational processes), which Huston referred to as a larger system of behaviors incorporating the conflict behaviors and patterns present within relationships (Caughlin et al., 2013). Each layer holds the opportunity to overlap with the other (Huston, 2000) and, as described previously, is represented within gendered speech communities as well.

Aspects of the model center primarily on the behaviors individuals utilize in relationships and are frequently used in examining conflict, particularly regarding relational satisfaction (Caughlin et al., 2013). Also, Proulx et al. (2007) placed emphasis on the societal influences surrounding relationships, which can have a significant effect on the quality of that relationship. Caughlin et al. (2013) described how each of the three layers within this model can be studied

over an extended period of time or over various sequences of conflict. Within this study, the social-ecological model aims to examine how environment and relational processes contribute to conflict and how individuals' understanding of relational conflict alters the process as a whole.

Conflict Cycles and Serial Arguing

Conflict exists through various sequences of interactions between individuals (Folger, Poole & Stutman, 2013). Conflict has the tendency to take on what Folger et al. (2013) referred to as “self-reinforcing cycles” (p. 27). These cycles lead towards either escalation or resolution. The specific behaviors individuals conduct during conflict are often influenced by the perceived beliefs about their partner. These beliefs are not always correct and tend to direct the way the conflict progresses. Like all communication, the interactions that take place are indicated by the perceptions of how the message will be received by one's partner based on what they know about them, which leads to “predictable sequence[s] of act-response[s]” (p. 28). This may lead to reciprocity and in turn create cycles of conflict often detrimental to relationships.

A noteworthy element of conflict includes serial arguing, which refers to the reoccurring of conflict episodes on a specific topic without resolution (Bevan, 2010; Worley & Samp, 2016). As discussed, the frequency of conflict relates to the success and satisfaction of the relationship. Serial arguing is one component of conflict that risks the stability and satisfaction of romantic relationships (Worley & Samp, 2016). Roloff and Johnson (2002) described three components of serial arguing: “argumentative episodes, issue-focus, and reoccurrence” (p. 108), which we briefly mention here. The primary element of argumentative episodes is opposition, which is reciprocated by both parties. Issue-focus primarily emphasizes a disparity in each party attempting to maintain their behavior and viewpoint, which often describes broad areas of conflict in relationships. Finally, reoccurrence defends the patterns, form, and individual roles

pertaining to serial arguing, which in this case compares to reoccurring patterns of conflict. Worley and Samp (2016) discussed how romantic relationships frequently have approximately three to four serial arguments occurring at any moment. It is important to recognize serial arguing when discussing conflict due to the negative outcomes that occur in romantic relationships. A key factor in serial arguments, as well as relational conflict in general, includes divergent interpretations of behaviors.

Sensemaking

While frequently used in organizational communication (Einola, Kohtamäki, Parida & Wincent, 2017; Möller, 2010; Ness & Connelly, 2017; Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005), a sensemaking approach supports an examination of relational conflict in the relational communication field as well. Sensemaking, or in this case, “retrospective relational sensemaking” (Einola et al., 2017, p. 206), is described as “collective communications, interpretations and meaning-shaping interactions in the relationships among...partners in sequences that connect actions to outcomes” (p. 206). Weick et al. (2005) described sensemaking as a way to explain individuals’ own behaviors, where their identity is at the center of understanding. They further describe how sensemaking does not involve how individuals calculate choices. Instead, individuals “interpret or make sense of their episodic interactions in ways that may change their static relationship definition” (Owen, 1984, p. 285). Additionally, Möller (2010) explained sensemaking as a process by which individuals frame their specific reality, which significantly impacts the behaviors that occur, and in turn affects how such individuals “perceive, interpret and construct meaning” (p. 364). Through the sensemaking perspective, this study aims to understand the connection of how individuals make sense of conflict situations within romantic relationships.

Within conflict, sensemaking is prevalent in the perceptions individuals have, which are directly constructed from their own interactions and are not given meaning until such constructions are created through an active process (De Jaegher & Di Paolo, 2007). According to Ness and Connelly (2017), the process of sensemaking is determined by the way individuals manage difficult and complex situations. Sensemaking serves as the cognitive framework of an individual's understanding. By utilizing a retrospective approach to sensemaking (Ivanova-Gongne & Törnroos, 2017), reflections of conflict situations are capable of revealing information on relational development and success. Other scholars refer to sensemaking as part of the process of 'enaction' (De Jaegher & Di Paolo, 2007). De Jaegher and Di Paolo (2007) described sensemaking as the process of understanding and literally, making sense, of the innumerable experiences and interactions we encounter. Owen (1984) discussed the significance of sensemaking in relationships and found seven prevalent themes: "(1) commitment, (2) involvement, (3) work, (4) unique/special, (5) fragile, (6) consideration/respect, and (7) manipulation" (p. 277). Individuals incorporate these themes in order to make sense of their relationship and the various occurrences within it. Commitment refers to the level of devotedness to the relationship and is typically found in romantic relationships. Involvement includes the communicative nature of relationships and was found heavily in married couples regarding the level and amount of interaction. Work, or "relationships as work" (p. 280), refers to the level of effort required by the individuals to preserve the relationship and can be considered from a conflict communication standpoint within this study. Unique/special is the concept that relationships are different when they are able to withstand obstacles. This notion is perceived by the individuals within the relationship and is sometimes based upon the level of fragility, which can cause significant risk to the success of the relationship. Consideration/respect involves

feeling valued by one's partner and was given high regard by long-term romantic partners. The last theme presented by Owen, manipulation, was frequently conducted by women as a way to maintain their partner.

This research aims to understand relational conflict further and to gain greater understanding of the role gender plays in romantic relational conflict as well. By discussing the sources and outcomes of relational conflict, greater consideration is given to the ways individuals create as well as the resulting factors of conflict. Additionally, by combining relational conflict and gender differences, researchers can begin to recognize the various influences at play in varying conflict styles. This study employed the social-ecological model, conflict cycles and serial arguing, as well as sensemaking to delve further into each of these areas. This review resulted in the following research questions:

RQ1: How do participants' discourse describe their relational conflicts?

RQ1a: What gender differences are identifiable in the discourse of participants about their relational conflicts?

RQ2: How do individuals describe their partners' conflict management style?

RQ2a: How do descriptions of partner conflict management style vary by gender?

RQ3: How do partners describe serial arguments and reoccurring conflict patterns as influencing their relational satisfaction?

RQ3a: How do their descriptions of serial arguments and reoccurring conflict patterns vary by gender?

RQ4: How do participants "make sense" of the conflict that arises in their relationship?

RQ4a: How do their descriptions vary by gender?

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Researchers regard methodology as a style of thinking about research that allows us to examine the social experiences surrounding us (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Due to its “fluid, evolving, and dynamic nature,” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 12) this study used an exploratory qualitative research approach to examine the equally developing nature of relational conflict. The methodology consisted of an interpretive, arts-based, qualitative approach to research that incorporated digital journaling. The method was participant-constructed and aimed at revealing experiences individuals face in conflict situations of romantic relationships. Additionally, the structure of the study attempted to collect data in a natural environment to increase accuracy of responses.

Arts-Based Research

The current study incorporated an arts-based, qualitative research methodology in order to aid the understanding of the presence of conflict within a variety of contexts and situations, particularly within romantic relationships (Jiang & Buzzanell, 2013). In this study, arts-based research holds a significant place in the understanding of communicative behaviors of conflict and has gained significant growth in recent years (Wang, Coemans, Siegesmund & Hannes, 2017). Barone and Eisner (2012) elaborated on this notion by stating that “arts-based research emphasizes the generation of forms of feeling that have something to do with understanding some person, place, or situation...It is the conscious pursuit of expressive form in the service of understanding” (p. 7). Arts-based research allows for greater freedom from participants in their responses.

The primary idea behind one researcher of arts-based research is the notion of discovery (e.g. oppression) and creation of practice-based research (Finley, 2008). However, Leavy (2015) described arts-based research not as a discovery but as a way of developing the tools needed to conduct social scientific research. Leavy further suggested how arts-based research is capable of “advanc[ing] critical conversations about the nature of social scientific practice and expand[ing] the borders of our methods repository” (p. 11). Wang et al. (2017) described the goal of arts-based research as creating meaning through discovery and “mak[ing] sense of the world” (p. 11). Barone and Eisner (2012) described a criterion of arts-based research as it is “meant to enhance perspectives pertaining to certain human activities,” (p. 95) which in the current study concerns language as an art form. They further explained how language is highly contextualized and directly correlates with individuals’ lived experiences and when examined within an arts-based practice can expand to greater audiences than solely scholarship. Language, when examined from an arts perspective, expands the limitations seen in representing understanding of others (Jagodzinski & Wallin, 2013). Arts-based research has been somewhat influential in the social sciences but has not become a commonly used method. While researchers partake in a variety of methods to examine conflict (Putnam, 2013), arts-based research has not been expanded to look into interpersonal conflict.

Digital Journals/Diaries

The nature of conflict is complex and requires an equally complex approach to engage the various elements present. Qualitative researchers attempt to understand what occurs in “different venues when people ‘do,’ perform, and talk about or within conflict exchanges or contexts” (Jiang & Buzzanell, 2013, p. 68). In general, qualitative exploration allows researchers to highlight differences present as well as gain a broader spectrum of meanings and responses

from participants that provide richer feedback for analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Within qualitative research, digital journaling has grown in interest as a valuable research methodology.

As mentioned, the presence of conflict occurs in partners' everyday lives. Nezelek (2013) indicated, "diary studies tend to concern the natural ebb and flow of a person's life" (p. 3). Because of the prevalence of conflict experiences in the daily lives of partners, this study incorporated behavioral self-reported accounts of conflict that occur in romantic relationships between partners, which allows for a multi-dimensional analysis of conflict behaviors (Lloyd, 1990). Nezelek (2013) described various benefits of using what he referred to as diary research, which incorporates the repeated nature of collecting data from an individual. Canary et al. (1995) described self-reported data as a common form of analyzing conflict amongst researchers, which allows for researchers to examine private and unpredictable matters in a natural setting. Within such accounts, "social actors verbally indicate their experienced beliefs, feelings, attitudes, and perceptions of behavior" (Canary et al., 1995, p. 22), which are sometimes found utilizing diaries. Psychologists often label this type of self-reporting as thought-listing procedure (Cacioppo, Petty, Herbert, Hope & Bellack, 1992). Cacioppo et al. (1992) believed individuals improve a situation because of the beliefs they had about it and are more likely to reveal certain feelings because of the privacy of self-reporting.

Certain topics, such as conflict, are difficult to examine in a controlled environment and therefore would benefit from diary research in order to examine the individual reactions and influential aspects of relationships (Nezelek, 2013). Additionally, studies that aim to have individuals attempt to recall past events are indicative of memory biases and are not often seen as accurate (Nezelek, 2013). Through diary research, participants can provide a first-hand account of self-perceived behaviors, feelings, and beliefs as well such characteristics of their partner. When

conducted between two parties this method is testable for congruence between each. The current research information was gathered using a digital format and utilized a retrospective approach to data collection.

Due to technological progressions in the past decade, traditional methods of journaling can be expanded to fit a variety of contexts and styles (Miller, Kinnally, Montano & Robinson, 2017). Utilizing visual journaling sanctions participants to include written, video, audio, and imagery within the journals to accurately record feelings, thoughts, and emotions (Deaver & McAuliffe, 2009; Ellingson, 2017). Ellingson (2017) advocated for the use of such journaling because of their nature to “create visual connections between words and images and sounds that enhance attention to the voices of particular bodies” (p. 146). By analyzing the frequency, length, gendered comparison and partner accuracy, as well as the resolution of conflicts, it is possible to expand the current knowledge on conflict and the gendered differences that are represented in relational conflict.

Researchers integrate journals and diaries as a formative qualitative method, capable of investigating individual experiences within a natural setting, as opposed to a lab (Hayman, Wilkes & Jackson, 2012; Simmons-Mackie & Damico, 2001). Through journaling, participants gain the opportunity to self-reflect and contemplate on various conflicts that arise (Canada, Brinkley, Peters & Albright, 2015). Because of this, journal and diary research allows for a wide variety of emotions, moods, and reflections (Hayman et al., 2012). Within this context, writing is revealed in the form of art to examine the narratives provided.

Recently, journaling has been used in a variety of settings, including healthcare research (Hayman et al., 2012), as a form of therapy (Canada et al., 2015; Deaver & McAuliffe, 2009), and to examine media use in modern day technology (Greenberg et al., 2005; Miller et al., 2017).

It has yet to heavily expand to communication and conflict, particularly between partners in romantic relationships. Not only is journaling a way to collect data from participants, it also serves as a reflection tool and a way for participants to critically assess certain situations (Canada et al., 2015; Deaver & McAuliffe, 2009), which within the current study encompasses conflict situations.

Method

Participants and Procedures

Participants were recruited utilizing purposive, snowball sampling. All participants were required to be in a long-term, committed relationship and were thus initially asked various questions to determine eligibility including whether they were in a relationship, length of relationship, and type of relationship (i.e. married or not). In this study, a long-term relationship involves individuals in a romantic partnership together (i.e. either married or dating) for two years or more who self-describe themselves as being committed to the other person and their relationship as strictly dyadic and exclusive.

This study recruited 22 individuals who voluntarily contributed to the collection of data in this study. Of these individuals, 13 identified as female and 9 identified as being male. Additionally, 13.6% identified as African American/Black, 4.5% as Asian/Pacific Islander, 77.2% as Caucasian/White, and 4.5% as Native American/American Indian. Of these participants, 2 individuals identified themselves as Hispanic/Latino as well. All participants were over the age of 18, where the age of participants ranged from 19 to 64. All participants were in a current committed and exclusive relationship for a minimum of two years at the time of the study. Of these participants, 68% were married. Length of relationship of married individuals ranged from 2 to 25 years. This range referred to married years only, excluding years together

prior to marriage. The length of relationship for the 32% of non-married individuals, including those engaged, ranged from 2 to 4 years to 6 to 8 years with the majority falling within 2 to 4 years. Of the individuals who participated, there were 8 couples in this study.

The current study first received approval from the University of Central Florida Institutional Review Board prior to collecting data in order to protect human subjects (see Appendix A). Participants were initially requested to complete a brief demographic survey. Participants were then provided individual digital journals, one per individual, following a journal guide provided by the researcher. The journal guide consisted of open-ended guidelines for participants to follow when providing entries in their journal. Details of the guide are discussed in greater detail below (see Appendix C). Participants were instructed to complete a weekly review of conflict situations that occurred with their partner and were encouraged to provide open responses and include as much detail (both visual and written), as they felt was necessary to convey their responses. Participants were informed that they were able to withdraw from the study at any time should they choose to do so.

Data Collection

The data for this study were retrospectively collected from couples utilizing weekly digital journals/diaries where they recorded information from the guide provided. The journal guide served to assist the participants in responding to various questions and thoughts each week. The members participated in the recording of data separately for one month and recorded data in a digital journal without consulting with their partner. The researchers encouraged participants each week to complete the journal entries via email reminders. Once the recording of data was completed, participants separately sent the digital journals to the researchers for evaluation and

analysis. The entries were removed of all identifying information before being sent to the researcher for analysis to maintain confidentiality.

Journal guidelines. The journal guidelines were developed to assist participants in their responses when conducting weekly journals. Consistent with best practices (Simmons-Mackie & Damico, 2001), this study involved an open-ended guide for participants to understand and present the information needed in examining this field of research when filling out the digital journals each week. Due to the digital nature of the journals, participants were encouraged to provide any information and/or media (e.g. memes, images, videos, songs, etc.) to accurately represent their thoughts. However, the majority of participants chose text-based responses. See Appendix C for the comprehensive journal guidelines.

Data Reduction, Coding, & Analysis

An open-coding process was used to review the data in order to obtain greater understanding of potential themes, comparisons, and concepts present in the texts (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The journals responses ranged from one paragraph to multiple pages of information each week. Some entries included memes and images but most participants offered text-based written responses. One researcher analyzed all data to ensure accuracy and consistency. Close reading “allows us to recognize the continuities between predigital statistical readings of single texts” (Igarashi, 2015, p. 487) and is often referred to as “intensive reading” or “close criticism” of texts (Jin, 2017, p. 109). Thus, the data were analyzed engaging in close reading and the composition of themes through interpretation of frequency and intensity of lexical choices (Owen, 1984).

Additionally, the journals were comparatively analyzed with the journal of each partner for cross-case analysis and coinciding comparisons where possible. Each journal was closely

read and carefully evaluated for commonalities and comparisons amongst each partner's journal as well as to examine gender differences common among individuals' conflict styles. Notes were taken during the coding process to determine key themes and consistencies throughout the journals. The themes examined were emotion and evaluation, key quotes, and styles of conflicts. Within emotion and evaluation, the feelings and key factors relating to emotion were collected based on the entries and word-choice provided by the participants. When choosing key quotes from the entries, commonalities seen in genders as well as information regarding satisfactory/dissatisfactory behaviors were collected. The data were analyzed heavily for styles of conflict present among individuals and were separated into conflict style of oneself as well as of their partner. Any goals depicted in the journal entries were also recorded. Such common themes were then gathered and interpreted based on the above research questions.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Participants' Discourse in Relational Conflict

The first research question asked how the discourse that individuals delivered describes their relational conflict. To examine this component, participants were asked to provide individual entries of their personal conflict situations providing data for both their own perspective and how they viewed their partner during the conflict situation. Various topics of conflict were identified frequently each week. The primary topics include household tasks/responsibilities, finances, discomfort or jealousy regarding opposite-sex friendships, and an apparent lack of caring/interest.

Additionally, participants' discourse revealed multiple behavioral and emotional themes that were present in their conflict situations. Of these, the primary feelings that emerged were feelings of annoyance, irritation, and frustration. Every week many participants revealed these feelings regarding their conflict. Another theme that appeared was that of feelings of anger. Others identified feelings of powerlessness or helplessness, resentment, indifference, feeling flustered or confused, defensive or simply feeling emotional. In each of these situations, participants revealed their own feelings more often than how their partners appeared to be feeling during conflict situations. A few individuals described their partners as manipulative, childish, or as having a "blasé attitude." One, in particular, stated, "personally I think they were acting a little emotional because they seemed to come around after we got home and began acting loving."

Individuals also expressed certain behaviors of their own conflict styles. A frequently occurring pattern of behavior was that of avoiding the situation or conflict. Examples include, "most of the time I don't say anything because I don't want to get in an argument," "I do not

bring up conflict unless she repeatedly asks,” and “I pretended like I was listening to her talk about it.” Other behavior patterns involve changing their particular actions during the conflict. Examples of this include, “I initially fell under the avoidance category, which changed into distributive or competing. I feel like I ended up obliging and gave up once again on this topic as I seemingly can’t change much,” “I began with distributive communication in trying to get my point across (with numbers, statistics, etc.). I somehow always merge into a collaborating style of conflict once my point is known,” and “at first it was argumentative and then I changed it to be compromising.”

Additionally, participants often expressed their goal explicitly when discussing the conflict. These goals primarily pertained to the specific task at hand, while others expressed the desire for changed behaviors. For example, individuals articulated a desire for their partner to complete a task related to the conflict, such as “I wanted her to promise to stop going through my phone,” “for one of us to do the dishes, and hopefully not me” or “to develop a meal plan that we both could follow without restricting it so much that we end up falling off the wagon and going back to non-healthy eating habits.” Along this same line, individuals often discussed their aim to convince their partner of something pertaining to the conflict such as, “to convince her that it was not necessary and financially wise to go on vacation right now,” “I hoped to finally convince him that I wasn’t going to run away to be with my male friend,” “to convince her that it’s not a huge deal, it will be fine, and I will help fix it,” and “to convince him to use our credit cards for vacation.” Participants also conveyed the wish for their partners to alter certain behaviors or perspectives, such as “I just need to come to a point where he has to notice my frustration and I hope it gets to that point soon,” “that he would have taken my request more seriously. It would show me he cared and that I could trust him with simple tasks to better our family” and “I feel

like its so childish and he should grow up a little bit and do things when you have time not because it's fun, but because we are adults and they need to get done.”

Furthermore, apologies were offered only a few times in participants’ entries. This study did not organically present information to participants regarding apologies, which led to few entries including apologetic discussions. Only a few individuals discussed apologies as part of their conflicts; one of which stated how their partner, “said a lousy apology and wanted to move on.” Another expressed the desire to hear an apology; “I would say I fell into the ‘avoiding’ style, hoping he would care enough to ask why I was upset, or figure it out and apologize.” Other individuals described the use of apologies as a way to end the conflict. One participant wrote, “I apologized and tried to explain that it should be no worries,” while another explained how their conflicts often end due to “eventually giv[ing] up or an apology [is] issued.”

According to the social-ecological model, both society and the individual partners are a factor in relational conflict. Participants revealed several external or environmental factors that played a role in how their situations occurred. For example, being stressed, either from work or general relationship factors, was presented frequently. Jealousy and finances were also offered as possible facilitators for conflict. Other participants revealed how cultural difference played a part in their conflict while another discussed how the recurring nature of a particular conflict only contributed to its increased frequency.

This research question is further examined when participants revealed both satisfying as well as dissatisfying behaviors about their partners. Individuals frequently described their partner’s willingness, or lack thereof, to participate in the conversation pertaining to conflict. One individual expressed their appreciation for their partner’s “willingness to compromise,” while another described their situation as “I don’t enjoy when she flat out says no

to something I suggest.” Other examples include participants expressing satisfaction in their partners, “willingness, to listen to what I was saying rather than continuing to talk at each other,” “her willingness to listen to my concerns and take them seriously,” and “he is always willing to listen and talk about issues or concerns that I have,” while others discussed how their partner, “was unwilling to see another side in this argument.” Another interesting expression regarding the satisfaction and dissatisfaction of behaviors included participants directly stating they found nothing about their partner’s behavior satisfying. For example, participants answered what they found satisfying about their partner’s conflict style as, “nothin’! I was pretty upset and I think he thought he was being funny,” while another simply wrote, “no comment” to express their lack of answer in this area. Participants also offered expressions of what they felt about their partner’s behavior by stating, “...it feels like he doesn’t care” or “I feel like he says all the right things so I back off and he doesn't ever back up his promises.”

Furthermore, an important component of the journals included how individuals of the same relationship did not continuously include the same conflict episodes each week. In multiple entries within a week, participants of the same relationship offered different topics of conflict than their counterpart. In addition to the primary topics mentioned above, overall topics maintained a large variety throughout each week. These topics ranged from seemingly ordinary responsibilities, such as laundry, to more serious topics of conflict, such as losing trust and a lack of caring about their family. Others included household tasks and chores, which often resulted in several of the ongoing conflicts individuals mentioned in their entries. These topics included areas such as choosing a grocery store, cooking meals in the household, and cleaning dishes. Further topics involved finances, jealousy or actions towards an external person, not spending quality time with their partner (e.g. playing video games instead of interacting with partner), tone

of discussion (e.g. joking about a topic their partner did not find funny), as well as behaviors or actions when interacting with other family members, such as discussions about their partner’s mother-in-law or parenting styles of a child.

Table 1

Key Behavioral and Emotional Themes

Theme	Key Example
Annoyance, irritation, and frustration	“I get frustrated to a point where I don’t know what else to do but just ignore him for a few days and I know that isn’t healthy but I feel like when I do that, nine times out of ten, he actually takes my feelings seriously after that.”
Anger	“I was pissed. I called him rude and said he didn't care.” “[The conflict is] usually met with anger and frustration, just no changes.”
Powerlessness or helplessness	“I felt helpless and like he isn't listening to my pleas...”
Resentment	“Most of the time I don't say anything because I don't want to get in an argument but I still have annoyance and possibly resentment towards it.”
Indifference	“During the conflict I felt powerless and afterwards I felt indifferent.”
Confusion	“I was flustered because we had discussed this topic a few weeks ago.”
Defensive	“I was probably defensive of proving the point I had been trying to make over and over since this is not the first time we have had this argument.”
General, feeling emotional	“I became emotional and closed up.”

Describing Partners' Conflict Management Styles

The second research question explores partner conflict styles. Participants more often offered their own conflict styles before offering a description of their partners' styles of conflict. However, at times participants described their partner's behavior as confrontational, avoidant, and competing, while multiple individuals described their partner as compromising. In this regard, participants were able to recognize their partner's readiness to come to a resolution of the conflict at hand. One participant discussed how they disliked the way their partner handled the conflict, directly stating, "I do not think he handled this conflict very well." Individuals conveyed their understanding of their partner's interactions during the conflict as, "quick to upset, often reacts stronger," "unintentional condescension," or in the case of multiple entries, "us[ing] humor to avoid conflict." Another explained, "he was confrontational when he brought up the topic and did not want to hear my opinion."

Consistent with the social-ecological model, participants offered many layers to their conflict situations. As Paek and Hove (2012) discussed, these layers combined both the participants' personal behaviors and environmental factors to create the specific conflict situation. This was evident in examples such as, "for me, I know that when I have had a long day at work I tend to then focus on things that stress me out in my personal life when I get home." Other examples include, "I've been stressed about work a lot lately, so I may have overreacted today," "anxiety more than likely [is] always an environmental factor," and "the conflict was escalated because we had quarreled about this before, so it seemed kind of repetitive." The last example coincides with serial arguing as well, which is further discussed next.

Table 2

Descriptions of Partner's Conflict Styles

Theme	Key Example
Confrontational	“He was confrontational when he brought up the topic and did not want to hear my opinion.”
Avoidant	“Tends to be more avoidant too and ignore the existing conflict.”
Competing	“She has a competing style of communication and I rarely get my way.”
Compromising	“He usually tries to work out a compromise between any issue or conflict that arises between us.”

Influences of Serial Arguments and Reoccurring Conflict Patterns

Research question three attempts to understand the impact serial arguing and reoccurring conflict patterns have on the relationship satisfaction. While not all conflicts were reoccurring within this study, many participants described their situations as occurring quite often. In these instances, most participants appeared to have more feelings regarding conflicts of this nature as opposed to one-time or new conflict topics. In certain cases, participants felt the conflict was unnecessary due to the frequency at which it occurred. For example, one participant wrote, “I felt like we have talked about this too much already and it was a significant part of our relationship.” In another situation, an individual expressed, “the conflict was escalated because we had quarreled about this before, so it seemed kind of repetitive.” In these situations, participants appeared to have greater dissatisfaction due to the reoccurring patterns of behavior, which is consistent with Worley and Samp’s (2016) perspective on serial arguing.

Another component of serial arguing, presented by Roloff and Johnson (2002) was present in this study. When participants discussed reoccurring conflict episodes they often discussed how their partner lacked understanding of their own viewpoint. In one entry, a participant expressed, “it is frustrating when trying to make someone to see your point of view and they do not understand why you are making a big deal about it.” A more positive example was revealed when one participant stated the following:

I like that my wife explains why she does or does not like something. Some people might just say no to something they disagree with, but my wife is really good at stating why that is, so I understand her point of view.

Conflict often leads to greater dissatisfaction in relationships and the diverging interpretations of their partner’s behaviors as well as their own holds no exception. One participant offered an example stating, “it also hurts my feelings that he doesn't work harder at it just because it's something that is important to me, even if it isn't as important to him.” Folger et al. (2013) discussed the idea of predictable sequences regarding conflict, which participants showed during their entries as well. For example, participants discussed a lack of predictability and how it often escalated the conflict. One, in particular, stated, “...everything is a difficult topic to discuss with him [because] he doesn't talk when I want to ‘talk,’ he tries to listen and then says ‘I don't know what you want me to say’.” Another offered, “the crying part was surprising, and I hate that.” The lack of predictability appeared to be linked to more unresolved situations of conflict and greater dissatisfaction over the length of the conflict episodes. Another participant explained the benefit of being able to predict their partner’s behavior; “my partner is very open and direct, so I never need to guess what he is thinking or where he is going with his thought process.”

Furthermore, some evidence was found to support how individuals were able to recall serial arguments with more frequency. Participants offered more detailed information regarding ongoing conflict episodes or reoccurring conflict patterns than what the researchers deemed “one-off” conflicts or one-time events.

Table 3

Examples of Serial Arguments and Reoccurring Conflict Patterns

Theme	Key Example
Felt conflict was unnecessary	“I felt like we have talked about this too much already and it was a significant part of our relationship.”
Lack of understanding	“It is difficult for me to discuss because he does not understand how I feel about it.”
Seeking predictability	“My partner is very open and direct, so I never need to guess what he is thinking or where he is going with his thought process.”

“Making Sense” of Conflict

The fourth and final research question examines how individuals “make sense” of the conflict that occurs in their relationship. This question was addressed through obtaining multiple perspectives from couples. While not all participants had partners partake in the study, multiple couples were included in the study to address varying perspectives on relational conflict. It was clear participants began partaking in sensemaking by evaluating their own behaviors and feelings. Consistent with Möller (2010), participants’ frame of reality contributed to the approach and understanding of their own conflict. For example, one participant presented the following perspective regarding their conflict over finances:

During the conflict, I felt stressed. My partner makes a significant amount more money than I do, so I always feel as though I am not able to contribute to our family as much as he can. He has NEVER made me feel that way which is a stress reliever, but it is never fun to feel as though you aren't able to help as much as you would like to your family household.

In other situations, participants had difficulty recognizing the constructions their partner was making regarding the conflict at the time, which created more difficulty in resolving such conflicts and at times appeared to create a feeling of uncaring from their partner.

As Owen (1984) explained, there are various themes prevalent in sensemaking, one of which is the idea of commitment. This theme is present when individuals aim to make sense of their relationship, which may be hindered by certain conflict situations and topics. For example, multiple participants discussed feeling jealous of their partner spending time or speaking with another individual. One in particular specified, “my boyfriend would like me to cancel my plans all together because he cannot trust that I won’t see him. I think this is controlling bullshit.” Additionally, consideration/respect is another theme offered by Owen, which was present in multiple journal entries as well. Individuals discussed feeling like their partner did not care about a topic or even want to spend time with them. One participant offered, “we also don't have a lot of time together and it bothers me that he'd rather get lost alone with a game than hang out, talk or spend time together.” Others revealed feeling as if their partner maintained, “lack of affection and belittling of [their] feelings” as well as the following:

He barely said anything about the topic. He made it seem like it was not a big deal and that hurt my feelings. He said a lousy apology and wanted to move on. I was not ready to move on.

Due to this differing perspective, some evidence was seen that couples sometimes exhibited a ‘slippery slope’ effect meaning one conflict led to another and so on, which caused greater conflict. In one example, an individual was frustrated at their partner’s actions, which led to that partner seeking “make-up sex.” This event then caused an additional conflict including the discussion of relationship counseling, which then created another argument as well. The way individuals “make sense” of their relationship is often indicative of the conflict present in the relationship. This can lead to more conflict or lack of communication during the conflict.

Table 4

Examples of How Individuals “Make Sense” of Conflict

Theme	Key Example
Frame of reality	“We have differing personalities when it comes to interacting with people. I am not as comfortable in crowds and prefer my contacts to be one on one. She much prefers the multiple interaction of people, which is more of the family dynamic.”
Commitment	“My boyfriend would like me to cancel my plans all together because he cannot trust that I won’t see him. I think this is controlling bullshit.”
Consideration/respect	“We also don't have a lot of time together and it bothers me that he'd rather get lost alone with a game than hang out, talk or spend time together.”
Lack of caring	“He barely said anything about the topic. He made it seem like it was not a big deal and that hurt my feelings. He said a lousy apology and wanted to move on. I was not ready to move on.”

Gender Differences

While gender differences are not always exhibited clearly during conflict, a few factors were revealed that might lead to understanding possible gender variations. First, women participants offered more feelings and emotions to describe their conflict situations in general. They described their feelings of conflict different than men by having more feelings based on their partners' behaviors, such as feelings of disappointment or dissatisfaction as well as feeling that their partner did not care about the topic at hand. Men differed slightly by describing less conflict in terms of their feelings and more in terms of the task at hand and how to solve or move past the issue. Also, women more frequently than men described how their partners' behaviors were perceived, such as confrontational or defensive. Men offered opinions about how their partner was feeling less often and offered points such as, "she was jealous," or "I feel she manipulates things we talk about." Additionally, certain individuals expressed an understanding of gender roles specific to society and/or cultural differences, such as the woman is responsible for making breakfast in the morning.

The type of self-reporting used in this study allowed the researchers to identify style differences in how men and women handle conflict as well as the way they approach those events. For example, one female participant shared the following information:

I have attempted to communicate my concerns and feelings but I am not always successful at making my feelings known because when the discussion begins, I am usually told 'I don't want to do this right now' or 'Its too late for this.'

Separately, one male participant explained their perspective stating, "I apologized and tried to explain that it should be no worries." Generally speaking, these findings are consistent with work on gender socialization and gendered speech communities (Rakow, 1986).

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

This study aimed to explore the conflict types, approaches, and affective components using digital conflict journals from individuals in long-term romantic relationships. The journals were written directly by the participants in order to maintain their perspective in all responses. Conflict as a concept has a lot of baggage but research shows conflict is not inherently negative but rather affected by the way individuals handle conflict (Canary et al., 1995). Due to its inevitability, it is important to examine conflict on a greater scale in romantic relationships. This chapter summarizes the findings related to the research questions presented above and offers theoretical and practical implications, limitations and opportunities for future research in this area.

Summary of Findings and Implications

Participants' Discourse in Relational Conflict

Research question one discusses the written communication of the participants regarding their weekly conflict during the time of the study. A noteworthy finding of this area includes the expression of satisfying and dissatisfying behaviors during conflict. Each week, participants revealed their opinions regarding these behaviors. As mentioned above, the primary theme present included a willingness or lack of willingness involved in the conflict. Behaviors of this nature were often expressed in each category. Participants did not frequently express what their partners may have felt at the time but this section of reflection allowed individuals to express their perspective of their partner's behavior. Due to couples not often expressing the same conflict situations raises more questions regarding this area and the importance of examining conflict situations between individuals of the same relationship.

In early examination of the data, certain questions arose that were not considered prior to the study's data collection. While the journal guidelines did not include a specific section discussing apologies, they remain an important and frequently discussed component of interpersonal conflict (Benoit & Hample, 1997; Ebesu Hubbard, Hendrickson, Fehrenbach & Sur, 2013; Fatigante, Biassoni, Marazzini & Diadori, 2016). Due to its presence in this area, it is an interesting element that information regarding apologies was infrequently offered by participants each week or used as a tool to end the conversation surrounding the conflict. As Benoit and Hample (1997) discussed, apologies are often a method of closure during conflict and this finding revealed an importance for researchers to continue studying the effects of apologies during relational conflict.

Describing Partners' Conflict Management Styles

The second research question delves into how individuals describe their partner's style of conflict. An important element to note includes how more often participants offered negative styles before expressing positive conflict styles. Compromising held the only positive style expressed by their partner's conflict style. Both integrative and collaborating were offered only as an explanation of their own conflict style. In many other cases, participants expressed their partner's avoidance of the situation. However, both distributive and competing were expressed as well. These situations reveal how individuals expressly view their own behaviors somewhat differently than their partners' and calls for more research evaluating an individuals' perception of their partner.

Influences of Serial Arguments and Reoccurring Conflict Patterns

Third, this research aimed to understand how reoccurring patterns of conflict affect the specific conflict at hand. Various entries included information regarding reoccurring conflict

situations, which often escalated the conflict further. Similar to the findings presented in the previous research questions, the lack of understanding of one's particular viewpoint led to such reoccurring patterns. One participant expressed, "this is one of the things she usually wants me to do when she wants me to do them and not when I am ready to," while another directly stated, "I feel like we will never see eye-to-eye on this topic." This statement offers an example of how conflict situations can establish cycles that lead individuals to take their own viewpoint into consideration before their partner's. Based on this data, it is possible that individuals experience greater conflict when facing serial arguing and/or reoccurring conflict patterns. Due to individuals having the ability to express reoccurring conflict patterns more effectively, it is important that researchers grow in their development of such conflict. Some research exists regarding reoccurring conflict patterns but more could be done in this area, particularly in the field of communication.

"Making Sense" of Conflict

The fourth research question is discussed further within theoretical implications. However, this exploration allows researchers to recognize how one's specific frame of reality or their individual identity often leads to differing perspectives of conflict. How individuals "make sense" of their particular viewpoint is important in the interpretation of conflict episodes. This finding maintains consistency with the research presented by Owen (1984) in that romantic relationships are likely affected by the way individuals "make sense" of their partner's behaviors as well as the specific situations. As some evidence was presented regarding the sloping effect of conflict events, this area calls for more attention to determine how conflict continues, which potentially relates to reoccurring patterns of conflict and serial arguing as well.

Gender Differences

This study revealed information consistent with gender differences between men and women and presented gender differences regarding goals (Canary et al., 1988; Papa & Natalie, 1989). Men focused more on obtaining a specific goal about the precise conflict (e.g. “I wanted her to promise to stop going through my phone”), while women tended to focus on behaviors or desires outside of the specific disagreement (e.g. “[hoping] he would have taken my request more seriously. It would show me he cared and that I could trust him...”). Kluwer et al. (1998) found women to be more emotional, which was evident in this study as well. Women offered feelings more often than men as well as more relationship-focused behaviors and communication, such as requesting relationship counseling. However, men and women described both themselves and their partner as avoidant, which lacks consistency with past research (Caughlin et al., 2013) and supports the need for greater depth of understanding.

The possibility exists that we, as researchers, give more attention to gender differences than necessary. However, this study revealed how individuals differ in the way they talk about conflict, which directly relates to gendered speech communities and certain gender-directed styles of conflict. The data provided insight regarding internal processes present expressed in an external way, which allows researchers to gain more understanding of these differences. The variances in gender roles exhibited within this study were consistent with the expectancy perspective presented by Gayle (1991), which shows the importance of examining how large a role society and culture play in couples’ understanding of gender roles and biases (Gayle, 1998).

Past researchers (Davis et al., 2010; Gayle, 1991; Taylor & Segrin, 2010; Wheeler et al., 2010) were similar to this study regarding how the information presented here lends support to examining how significant a role gender plays in conflict situations. As previously mentioned,

the examination of gender differences in conflict lack consistency (Aloia & Solomon, 2017) and this study was no different, making generalizations about specific genders not possible. The gender differences are evident but not exhaustive and in many situations, the styles overlapped. Due to this overlapping nature of differences, the research still does not present distinct differences between men and women. However, one of the most important elements regarding gender includes the way each gender discussed conflict, which alters gender expectations as a whole. This notion maintains consistency with the idea of gender identities (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1999) and how one's gender causes differences in the specific language used during conflict.

Theoretical Implications

The social-ecological model examines conflict through the specific behaviors individuals use and how they pertain to relationship satisfaction. One participant expressed satisfaction in their partner's behavior stating, "I appreciated that he eventually told me why he was upset so that I sort of had a chance to attempt to deescalate him from being upset." Others discussed dissatisfaction in their partner's behavior such as, "not really listening the first time" or "he continually brought up past arguments and other unrelated things I have apparently done to upset him in the past. I hate when he does this, as I have no way to change the past." In this sense, the social-ecological model becomes useful to researchers by looking at specific behaviors and how this leads to greater conflict and/or greater dissatisfaction.

Furthermore, it is evident that not enough theories of communication consider gender socialization. As the social-ecological model presents (Caughlin et al., 2013), multiple factors contribute to relational success, including the social implications present in romantic relationships. This includes gender socialization, which directly applies to romantic

relationships. This model includes environment, as well as the individual beliefs people exhibit. For example, one participant revealed, “it is part of our culture that the woman makes breakfast.” Following this model, individuals often exhibit differing opinions and perspectives regarding gender and society. Additionally, conflict may easily ensue when these expectations are not always met as shown when the same individual also disclosed, “I asked him to go do it since he rarely does anyway. Then I ignored and avoided making a conversation while I got ready to leave the house.” This uncovers how conflict styles reveal certain biases towards specific conflict interactions, which directly implies the usefulness of incorporating the social-ecological model into relational conflict research. The many factors it encompasses help researchers examine the complexity of conflict from multiple perspectives.

The second framework present examines conflict cycles and serial arguing. Folger et al. (2013) point out the likelihood that conflict cycles affect how conflict proceeds in relationships. One individual discussed an ongoing issue of eating dinner too late, which partially ensued due to the “baggage” and the “resentment feelings regarding this issue.” This example reveals how the very pattern of conflict affects the satisfaction of the relationship. Another couple discussed a particular recurring conflict, which was present in multiple weeks of journal entries. The resulting responses included, “I hate it every time he ‘jokes’ about how dumb/annoying/poorly behaved my dog is. Jokes are supposed to be funny but I clearly don’t laugh at these” and “I made a joke...My significant other immediately got mad, started to cry.” This example, one of serial arguing (Bevan, 2010; Worley & Samp, 2016), shows how the messages each partner portrayed were not received effectively and, therefore, continued to be a recurring conflict in their relationship. The three components of serial arguing described by Roloff and Johnson (2002) can be seen in this example as well, including argumentative episodes, issue-focus, and

reoccurrence. As previously mentioned, serial arguing often occurs due to individuals having different interpretations of the other's behaviors. Another entry revealed frustration regarding ongoing conflict cycles about their partner's communication efforts. They perceived the response as being passive aggressive, while their partner simply offered "some type of excuse for not responding."

Relational sensemaking involves individuals connecting their partner's actions to the resulting behaviors of the conflict situation (Einola et al., 2017). Weick et al. (2005) offered the approach for how one's identity serves as an explanation for one's own behaviors. This was evident in one response regarding a family event, where the participant discussed the following:

We have differing personalities when it comes to interacting with people. I am not as comfortable in crowds and prefer my contacts to be one on one. She much prefers the multiple interaction of people, which is more of the family dynamic.

Additionally, Möller's (2010) belief regarding the framing of reality was represented in this study as well. For example, one individual discussed the following, which encompasses the frame of mind regarding conflict situations.

Sometimes we do debate certain topics and we don't get mad at each other because we agree to disagree and listen to the others point of view and opinions. I think this is very different from a conflict or argument because of the way we handle the conversation. We become very offended at the other persons opinion when we argue but when we debate a topic we are very respectful and interested in what the other person has to say.

This example shows how one's viewpoint of a topic or situation can cause conflict or not. This was also clearly seen when another participant expressed dissatisfaction with their partner, asserting, "she tries to 'mother' me. Telling me the benefits of going to bed early and what we

must accomplish the next day.” This divergence in the framing of the conflict affects the way individuals absorb the conflict situation as a whole.

Practical Implications

Throughout this study, multiple practical implications arose regarding individuals handling of conflict in romantic relationships. First, participants in this study at times had difficulty recalling past conflict events. While the journals reflected on the past week’s worth of conflict and solely with a romantic partner, individuals still regarded past conflict experiences with some difficulty. One participant went so far as to say, “in a few days we will completely forget what made us so angry a few days before. And to this day I can’t remember what we fought about last.” In these instances, these journals revealed the need for more experience and practice discussing, recalling, and communicating about relational conflict. Utilizing these journals allowed individuals to engage in meta-communication and reflect naturally on their own conflict to better understand its effects as well as their own styles present.

Another effect revealed by this study includes the act of requiring forced communication through journaling to an external party. Just as therapy holds benefits for individuals, these journals require participants to reflect individually on their thoughts and feelings to an outside party as well as the ways to move forward regarding a certain issue. While certain individuals do not often reveal relational acts that may create a poor image for them or their partner, these reflections allowed participants to understand those subjects in a different way, which can be a positive experience for individuals.

Additionally, the method chosen for this study has practical implications due to its more natural environment regarding a common and reoccurring experience in all romantic relationships. These journals allow researchers a closer, firsthand account of relational conflict in

a more natural environment. In the past, researchers employed laboratory settings (Papp, Kouros & Cummings, 2010; Stern, Sternthal & Craig, 1973), which holds certain benefits as well. However, since we cannot recreate and study conflict experiences with absolute accuracy, this method comes closer to studying those real experiences of individuals, reported in a natural field. Some artificial reporting likely occurred in this study as well due to the retrospective relational sensemaking that occurs (Einola et al., 2017). However, the topics revealed were real subjects and held genuine feelings by individuals regarding their personal experiences and perspectives of the events that occurred. The arts-based approach maintains effectiveness as well within this method as participants began to “make sense” of their situations and their relationship as a whole using the expressive form of open responses. Language maintains a level of artistic practice and relates specifically to an individual’s lived experiences, which offered greater freedom in their attempt to create meaning from the conflict.

Limitations and Future Research

While this research offered valuable insight into how couples handle and perceive conflict in romantic relationships, several learning opportunities were presented that need to be addressed. First, there was a relatively limited sample size of 22 participants. Also, of the participants in this study a significant number were white, heterosexual individuals. The limitation exists for a lack of cultural diversity as the majority fell within this category. Additionally, the method used led to difficulty in maintaining involvement of participants each week as well as keeping participants recruited at the beginning until the study was completed. This led to less time than anticipated for data collection. This also caused individuals to participate without their partner, which limited the data able to be collected in certain areas as well as utilizing comparable data analysis of specific conflicts each week. Since the majority of

participants were married, at 68%, the results may have been skewed because of this limitation. Finally, some participants lacked understanding of conflict as a whole despite providing a brief background at the start of the study. This led to participants not recognizing certain interactions as conflict and led to a lack of response for one week. For example, one participant felt their relationship did not come across conflict and therefore, decided to drop out of the study while their partner remained as a participant.

This study functions as an exploratory one and serves as a basis for future research to integrate into further study. Improving participant commitment as well as increasing the number of participants will alleviate some of the limitations presented. While not all participants were white, heterosexual couples, expanding further into non-white, non-heterosexual couples will grow our understanding of how couples handle conflict differently. Along with this, gender roles play a significant role in how couples interact (Davis et al., 2010; Eagly, 1987). Understanding each individual's view on gender roles would grow our understanding of perceptions and topics of relational conflict.

Another interesting component to improve future research includes examining how length of relationship impacts relational conflict and the type of conflict style exhibited in couples. While having participants complete weekly journal entries helped to understand both recurring and new conflict, no context exists for how these couples partake in conflict. Certain couples may be exhibiting higher levels of conflict at the time of the study or vice versa. In addition to relationship length, researchers could examine participants' religious and childhood backgrounds. This adds potential for greater understanding of the manner in which individuals handle certain conflicts. As the research shows, individuals' childhood experiences affect the way they handle conflict as adults (Caughlin et al., 2013). This is equally true of religiosity as

well. For example, what may seem sexist in one relationship may be perceived as the norm in another.

Furthermore, researchers could include apologies as a component of a similar study, particularly those that look at conflict resolution. This study revealed an interesting component of the lack of significant apologetic language when reflecting on one's relational conflict, which may change when prompted and given greater attention by the researcher. Today, we see the continued growth in public apology, both in society and research (Kampf, 2013; Towner, 2010), and protecting the image and reputation of individuals and organizations. However, this study reveals the possibility of less attention being given to interpersonal areas, especially by individuals themselves.

Conclusion

While conflict is inevitable in relationships, it need not be a negative factor for romantic relationships. As previously mentioned, almost three-fourths of all United States adults are involved in romantic relationships (Livingston & Caumont, 2017). Due to the importance of relational satisfaction to one's well-being and personal health, both mental and physical (Donnellan et al., 2005; Proulx et al., 2007), this research begins to improve that understanding and lead the way towards further expansion on relational conflict research as well as to gain more depth in the gender differences seen in relational conflict.

APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL



University of Central Florida Institutional Review Board
 Office of Research & Commercialization
 12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501
 Orlando, Florida 32826-3246
 Telephone: 407-823-2901 or 407-882-2276
www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html

Determination of Exempt Human Research

From: UCF Institutional Review Board #1
 FWA00000351, IRB00001138

To: Emily L Hamlin

Date: May 22, 2018

Dear Researcher:

On 05/22/2018, the IRB reviewed the following activity as human participant research that is exempt from regulation:

Type of Review: Exempt Determination – Exempt Category 2 – Adult
 Participants – n=40
 Project Title: Gender and Conflict in Long-Term Romantic
 Relationships
 Investigator: Emily L Hamlin
 IRB Number: SBE-18-13958
 Funding Agency:
 Grant Title:
 Research ID: N/A

This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these changes affect the exempt status of the human research, please contact the IRB. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request in iRIS so that IRB records will be accurate.

In the conduct of this research, you are responsible to follow the requirements of the [Investigator Manual](#).

This letter is signed by:

Signature applied by Jennifer Neal-Jimenez on 05/22/2018 01:35:34 PM EDT

Designated Reviewer

APPENDIX B: CONFLICT JOURNAL DEFINITIONS

Thank you for participating in this study. Each week you and your romantic partner will separately reflect on conflict situations that occurred within the last seven days.

You are encouraged to respond in open-ended, multi-modal ways including but not limited to, free writing, video or audio recordings, images, memes, quotes, etc. You are not required to use all of these methods and are open to use additional methods not mentioned. Your reflections are non-analytical and do not require editing, full sentences, proper grammar, etc. These reflections aim to learn about conflict situations in an honest and expressive way, so please be as authentic as possible. Below are a few descriptions that may help you as you begin thinking about your personal conflict situations.

Conflict

Conflict – “incompatibilities, an expressed struggle, and interdependence among two or more parties” (Putnam, 2013, p. 8) with incompatibilities referring to “oppos[ing] goals, values, or beliefs” (p. 11). Each party often views these goals as different from their own perspective. Interdependence refers to the assumption that each person involved needs the other person in order to accomplish their desired goals.

In other words, conflict is an expressed struggle between two or more people with differing viewpoints over a specific topic they consider significant.

Common Conflict Styles

Integrative communication –making an effort to negotiate during conflict with one’s partner and having significant concern for both parties involved (Bevan et al., 2007)

Distributive communication – attempting to assert one’s own desires and goals (Bevan et al., 2007)

Avoidant communication – “shifting topics of the argument, focusing on abstract terms, denying the disagreement, and simply attempting to avoid confrontation” (Bevan et al., 2007, p. 65)

Competing – similar to distributive communication, focusing on one’s personal goals and interests instead of the opposing party (Zhang & Andreychik, 2013)

Collaborating – attempting to create a win-win situation for both parties (Zhang & Andreychik, 2013)

Compromising – shared cooperation to meet at a middle ground where one or both parties have to give up and offer part of their interests and goals (Zhang & Andreychik, 2013)

Avoiding – both parties assert a no-action position (Zhang & Andreychik, 2013)

Obliging – focuses on satisfying another and surrendering personal interests and goals during conflict (Zhang & Andreychik, 2013)

APPENDIX C: CONFLICT JOURNAL GUIDELINES

The following questions are designed to help guide you in your responses each week regarding conflict in your romantic relationship. You are not required to answer all sub-questions, but rather are encouraged to respond openly as you feel best addresses the general question.

Please send all journal entries to Jennifer Sandoval at Jennifer.Sandoval@ucf.edu to be de-identified (i.e. names and identifiers not associated with entries).

Date :

Relational Processes

1. What was the topic of conflict (you can be as general or as specific as you need)?
 - a. Have you had conflict about it before? If so, how frequently (in general)?
 - b. Is it a difficult topic to discuss with your partner?
2. What did you find satisfying about your partner's conflict styles/communication?
 - a. What did you find dissatisfying about your partner's conflict styles/communication?

Individuals

3. What were you hoping to achieve during the conflict (i.e. did you have a specific goal)?
 - a. What was your initial approach to the conflict?
 - b. Did you change your approach during the conflict?
 - c. What was your own conflict style like throughout?
4. How did you engage in the conflict (e.g. discussion, persuasion, arguing, yelling, avoidance, ignoring, went to bed angry, etc.)?
 - a. How did you feel during and after the conflict?
5. What was the outcome (e.g. unresolved, compromise determined, sought outside perspective, etc.)?

Environment

6. What external factors (people, environment, location, current events/news, career/job, etc.) may have contributed to the conflict (e.g. "I had a very difficult day at work and therefore already felt tense when I got home")?
7. Additional thoughts not pertaining to the above questions:

APPENDIX D: DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

Please complete the following demographic survey before beginning your journal entries.

Age: _____

Sex: (a) Female; (b) Male; (c) Other (please specify) _____

Gender: (a) woman; (b) man; (c) other

Identity: (a) feminine; (b) masculine; (c) androgynous; (d) other

Race/Ethnicity, choose all that apply: (a) African American/Black; (b) Asian/Pacific Islander; (c) Caucasian/White; (d) Hispanic/Latino; (d) Native American/American Indian; (e)

Biracial/Multiracial; (f) Other (please specify) _____

Are you currently in a committed relationship (dedicated to maintaining success and continuation of that relationship): (a) Yes; (b) No

Are you currently in an exclusive (romantically involved with only one partner) relationship: (a) Yes; (b) No

Are you and your partner married: (a) Yes; (b) No; (c) Engaged

If you responded yes to the above question, please respond to the following questions.

How long have you and your partner been married: (a) Less than 2 years; (b) Between 2-5 years; (c) Between 5-10 years; (d) Between 10-15 years; (e) Between 15-20 years; (f) Between 20-25 years; (g) Greater than 25 years, please specify _____

How long were you and your partner dating before marriage? (a) Less than 1 year; (b) Between 1-2 years; (c) Between 2-4 years; (d) Greater than 4 years, please specify

If you responded no to the above question, please answer the following question.

How long have you and your partner been romantically together? (a) Less than 2 years; (b) Between 1-2 years; (c) Between 2-4 years; (d) Between 4-6 years; (e) Between 6-8 years; (f) Greater than 8 years, please specify _____

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