BOOMERANG COUPLING: THE ROLE OF DIFFERENTIATION, VIOLENCE, COMMITMENT, AND DECIDING IN ON-OFF RELATIONSHIP INSTABILITY

BY

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DISSERTATION

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Abstract

On-again/off-again relationships are associated with a number of poor relationship outcomes, including increased conflict, uncertainty about the future of the relationship, and diminished relationship satisfaction (e.g., Dailey, Pfiester, Jin, Beck, & Clark, 2009; Halpern-Meekin, Manning, Giordano, & Longmore, 2013a). Little insight exists, however, into the intrapersonal characteristics that may predispose individuals to cycle through relationship statuses with the same partner (i.e., on-off cycling; Dailey, 2016). According to Bowen family systems theory (Kerr & Bowen, 1988), differentiation, or the ability to disentangle emotions and thoughts and balance intimacy with autonomy, is considered one of the most important characteristics possessed in interpersonal interaction (Skowron & Friedlander, 1998). Therefore, differentiation may play an important role in relationship instability in the form of on-off cycling. Moreover, known correlates of cycling that are also theoretically linked to differentiation (i.e., relationship violence, dedication, felt constraint, and relationship deciding) are likely important mechanisms in this process.

To explore the role of these relational processes in cyclical and non-cyclical relationships, two studies were conducted. Study 1 consisted of 298 individuals in same (n = 148) and different-sex relationships (n = 150) over an 8-month period. Nearly one-third of the sample (32%) reported breaking-up and renewing with their current partner, and those who cycled reported less differentiation, less dedication, less deciding, more felt constraint, and more violence than those who did not break-up and renew their relationships. In the full structural model, differentiation was associated with a decreased likelihood of cycling; however, relationship violence fully mediated this association. In addition to the negative link with relationship violence, differentiation was also negatively associated with felt constraint and positively associated with dedication.

To account for the interconnection between partners that is a vital assumption to systems theory (Cox & Paley, 2003) and differentiation in relationships (Kerr & Bowen, 1988), 119 different-sex couples (N = 238 individuals) were recruited through an online panel for Study 2. Over one-third of couples (35%) reported cycling at least once in their relationships. Differentiation was positively associated with dedication for men and negatively associated with felt constraint for men and women. In Actor Partner Interdependence Models (APIMs), men's differentiation was positively associated with their own dedication, as well as their partners' dedication. Similarly, men's differentiation was not only negatively associated with their own felt constraint, but also their partners' felt constraint. Post-hoc analyses revealed that emotional cut-off (i.e., an indicator of poor differentiation) may play a particularly prominent role in this process. Due to limited variability in violence, negative interaction (i.e., communication danger signs) was also analyzed. Men's differentiation was not only associated with their own reports of negative interaction, but also their partners' reports. Similarly, women's differentiation was associated with their

own reports of negative interaction, but the partner effect predicting men's reports of poor communication was not significant. Cycling moderated several of these associations. Taken together, these studies provide further insight into the role differentiation plays in several relationship processes including on-off cycling. Past research supports that differentiation of self might be a valuable entry point for intervening in relationships (see Miller, Anderson, & Keala, 2004) to promote commitment and positive interaction.

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"If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants."

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Chapter One: Introduction

Relationship formation and progression have undergone significant change in the last century (see Ogolsky & Monk, in press). One salient indicator of this change is the recognition of alternative relationship trajectories to the traditional courtship-marriage pathway. In fact, many relationships do not follow the linear path to marriage (e.g., Ogolsky, Surra, & Monk, 2016) that has previously been depicted. Couples who break-up or separate and renew their relationships, termed "on-again/off-again relationships," "relationship churning," or "relationship cycling" are prominent examples of the non-linear, capricious, ebb and flow of contemporary coupling. Although "taking a break" from a relationship may at times be beneficial (e.g., giving partners the chance to mature and rededicate themselves to a relationship), doing so is often associated with significant intrapersonal distress and risk for added interpersonal turmoil.

Individuals in on-off relationships, for example, report more psychological distress (Monk, Ogolsky, & Oswald, 2017), conflict, and violence (Halpern-Meekin, Manning, Giordano, & Longmore, 2013a), compared to people without a history of cycling. These outcomes are particularly alarming when viewed in the context of the prevalence of this form of relationship instability. Among young adults, for example, 30-50% indicate they have broken-up and reunited with their current dating partner (Dailey, Hampel, & Roberts, 2010; Dailey, Pfiester, Jin, Beck & Clark, 2009; Halpern-Meekin et al., 2013a, 2013b; Monk, Vennum, Ogolsky, & Fincham, 2014). Given the fact that early relationship patterns can predict future relationship outcomes (e.g., Clements, Stanley, & Markman, 2004; Huston, Caughlin, Houts, Smith, & George, 2001) and cycling is associated with the increased risk for future instability (e.g., Dailey, Brody, LeFebvre, & Crook, 2013; Vennum, Lindstrom, Monk, & Adams, 2014), it is imperative to understand how to intervene to help stabilize or permanently end these unions early in relationship development.

In order to inform prevention and intervention efforts, however, there is a need to understand the processes that create this relationship pattern. Although scholars have identified factors that increase the odds of returning to a relationship that dissolved, like lingering feelings (e.g., Dailey, Jin, Pfiester, & Beck, 2011; Dailey, Rossetto, Pfiester, & Surra, 2009) or obligatory constraints (Vennum et al., 2014), there is no existing information on the intrapersonal characteristics that may predispose an individual to engage in this unstable relationship dynamic. In fact, Dailey (2016) calls for more research on the intrapersonal processes that facilitate relationship cycling. Therefore, I sought to understand how intrapersonal vulnerabilities impede relationship stability in the form of on-off cycling.

Differentiation of self, characterized by the ability to regulate strong emotions and balance autonomy and closeness in relationships, is argued to be especially salient in the etiology of a number of mental health and relational concerns and may hold the key to mitigating interpersonal distress (Kerr &

Bowen, 1988). In fact, differentiation of self, or the intrapersonal ability to self-regulate and the interpersonal ability to connect with others without losing a sense of self, is a mechanism that is associated with a number of relational and mental health processes and is the cornerstone of Bowen Family Systems Theory (Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Despite the theoretical importance and widespread use of Bowen's systems theory in the treatment of mental health and interpersonal concerns (e.g., Bartle-Haring, Glebova, & Meyer, 2007; Bartle-Haring & Lal, 2010), there is a dearth of knowledge about the specific correlates of differentiation. Empirical investigation into how differentiation influences others in the interpersonal system is salient in order to inform clinical practice and move research in this area forward because the theory and its tenets lack sufficient scientific scrutiny (see Miller, Anderson, & Keala, 2004; Skowron, Van Epps, & Cipriano-Essel, 2014). Compared to other intrapersonal processes in the relationship sciences (e.g., attachment, neuroticism), for example, there is little empirical attention on differentiation, especially studies assessing both dyad partners. Therefore, the primary goal of this study was to assess the influence of individuals' differentiation of self on relationship processes such as cycling.

Chapter Two: Literature Review and Rationale

On-Off Relationship Cycling

On-off relationship cycling is associated with a multitude of maladaptive outcomes for partners. Previously, scholars hypothesized that those who "survived" a break-up (i.e., breaking-up with a partner and subsequently renewing the relationship) would have greater relationship satisfaction than those who had not broken up (Grover, Russell, Schumm, & Paff-Bergen, 1985). Individuals would realize they could not be without their former partners, would return to the relationship, and their dedication to their union would be reinvigorated. This hypothesis was not supported, however, and more recent research has found that those in on-off relationships are prone to more relationship distress than those in stable relationships. In fact, those in on-off relationships report lower levels of commitment, satisfaction (Dailey, Pfiester, et al., 2009; Dailey et al., 2010), poorer communication (Dailey, Pfiester, et al., 2009), less relationship maintenance, and more relational uncertainty (Dailey et al., 2010; see also Dailey, Middleton, & Green, 2012) than those in relationships without a history of cycling. Similarly, relationship dissolution is associated with significant distress (e.g., Rhoades, Kamp Dush, Atkins, Stanley, & Markman, 2011). Although the deleterious effects of a breakup are normative and often fleeting (e.g., Sprecher, Felmlee, Metts, Fehr, & Vanni, 1998), a prolonged pattern of relationship deterioration in the form of on-off instability is associated with impairments in mental health (Monk et al., 2017).

In addition to the estimated 40% of dating young adults who have cycled, over 61% of young adults indicate that they have ever cycled in a current or previous union (Dailey, Pfiester, et al., 2009). Further, over one-third of cohabiting couples indicate that they have broken up and reconciled their current relationship (Vennum et al., 2014). Although these relationships often do not move to more serious forms of commitment (e.g., marriage; Vennum et al., 2014), it is estimated that one quarter of married young adults (Binstock & Thornton, 2003) and about 12% of the general married population (Tumin, Han, & Qian, 2015) have reconciled within three years of a separation or divorce (see also Vennum et al., 2014). Moreover, relationship length may influence cycling as those in relationships of longer duration have more time to cycle (Dailey, Pfiester, et al., 2009) and the time invested in a relationship may act as a constraint to permanently leaving.

Further, individuals report a variety of reasons for returning to relationships that previously dissolved. Lingering feelings or continued attachments, for example, are prominent reasons for renewing relationships in addition to being dissatisfied with the quality of alternative partners (Dailey, Rossetto, et al., 2009; see also Dailey et al., 2011). Similarly, some individuals report that they or their partners had changed for the better and that they felt "taking a break" improved the relationship (Dailey et al., 2011). Despite these reported reasons for returning to a dissolved union, there is a dearth of information on the intrapersonal factors that predispose individuals to cycle through relationship statuses with the same

partner (Dailey, 2016). Given the robust link between cycling and psychological and relational distress, more insight into the intrapersonal predictors of on-off relationship instability is warranted (see Monk et al., 2017).

Family Systems Theory and Differentiation of Self

Differentiation is argued to be the key to the attainment of positive psychological health and mature development (Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Skowron & Friedlander, 1998). Differentiation of self is defined as "the capacity for a family system and its members to manage emotional reactivity, act thoughtfully under stress, and allow for both intimacy and autonomy in relationships" (Skowron et al., 2014, p. 356). Differentiation is possessing a solid sense of self or an identity that is secure and not largely based on how others view the self. In other words, instead of possessing a reflected "pseudo-self" that is dependent on others' perceptions, having a solid sense of self allows individuals to not lose their own values while under pressure, to adapt to circumstances, and to accept influence from others when good judgment dictates (Schnarch & Regas, 2012).

Thus, differentiation provides the capacity to be intimately close to others without being emotionally, behaviorally, or cognitively governed by others (Friedman, 1991; Schnarch, 1997). Accordingly, well-differentiated individuals are able to maintain close interaction with family and romantic partners, without over-identifying and losing their sense of who they are as individuals (Bartle & Sabatelli, 1995; Schnarch, 1997). As intimacy increases in relationships, becoming "too close" (i.e., fusion) may trigger an individual's anxiety about losing his or her sense of self, leading to feeling trapped or suffocated in the relationship. This fusion is especially distressing if an individual is overly attuned to the needs of his or her partner at the expense of their own needs (Slater, 1995). Conversely, autonomy or a sense of individuality can also trigger anxieties when individuals feel too separate (i.e., cut-off) and fear becoming distant and alone; thus a homeostatic balance of togetherness and separateness is critical and this balance, as well as a tolerance of anxiety, is inhibited in poorly differentiated individuals (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). In fact, scholars argue that the ability to preserve a sense of individuality while staying intimately close to a partner and the ability to be separate, but still engaged in the relationship, is extremely vital in maintaining stable relationships (Klever, 1998).

Moreover, differentiation of self also deals with the ability to distinguish between feelings (i.e., emotional system) and thoughts (i.e., intellectual system), while being able to cope with stress and uncertainty (Skowron et al., 2014). Thus, low differentiation is characterized by difficulty balancing a sense of self in relationships and difficulty regulating emotions, which can create reactivity, cut-off, and fusion with others into a tumultuous pseudo-self (Kerr & Bowen, 1988) or reflected sense of self (Schnarch & Regas, 2012). These individuals also experience a lack of confidence in their ability to manage their lives and can become anxious or even reactive at the thought of separation and caring for

themselves. Conversely, high differentiation is characterized by maintaining composure and remaining objective in the face of tension, resulting in the ability to make insightful decisions because the intellectual and emotional systems are linked (see Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Compared to those who are more poorly differentiated, highly differentiated individuals experience the highest levels of relationship satisfaction (Skowron, 2000) given their ability to self-regulate and resiliently cope in the presence of upheaval. Therefore, differentiation of self as an intrapersonal characteristic likely acts to facilitate or inhibit a variety of interpersonal processes by enabling individuals to regulate and connect peacefully with others (Schnarch & Regas, 2012). According to the Bowen (1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988), individuals often pair with partners with similar levels of differentiation. However, little empirical support has been found for the marital similarity hypothesis (Miller et al., 2004); thus, it is important to note that an individual's level of differentiation is just one factor influencing the overall dynamics of a relationship and both partners' levels of differentiation should be considered.

Bowen's (1978) Family Systems Theory (see also Kerr & Bowen, 1988) offers a framework for understanding the intergenerational transmission process through which childhood family relationship patterns influence how people regulate their emotions and their connection to others (i.e., differentiation of self), as well as how these relationship patterns influence relationship functioning and mental health in adulthood (e.g., Priest, 2015; Rosen, Bartle-Haring, & Stith, 2001; Sabatelli & Bartle-Haring, 2003). Similarly, the enduring vulnerabilities component of the vulnerability-stress-adaptation model (Karney & Bradbury, 1995) supports this claim that developed intrapersonal characteristics can be carried into future relationships and affect interpersonal outcomes. Like attachment (Mikulincer, Florian, Cowan, & Cowan, 2002), differentiation of self is discussed as an individual attribute that both influences and is shaped by relationships. Thus, this intrapsychic factor is often considered dispositional instead of a relationship-specific characteristic even though partners can influence and test existing levels of differentiation. Kerr and Bowen (1988), for example, discuss how basic levels of differentiation are not dependent on relationship processes once established in the family of origin. However, how individuals' levels of differentiation function in reaction to other system members can provide different information. In other words, there may be aspects of an individual's level of differentiation that go unnoticed without interpersonal stimuli to prompt manifestation or development.

Scholars argue that differentiation of self has a profound influence on a variety of relationship functioning processes and outcomes such as quality and stability (see Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Klever, 1998; Skowron, 2000). In fact, poorly differentiated individuals are described as having great fluctuations in emotionality due to their reactivity and inhibited ability to regulate themselves and solve problems productively (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). These deficits in self-regulation and problem solving are likely to impair individuals' abilities to regulate their relationships and may facilitate relational turmoil. Therefore,

it is likely that *differentiation is associated with a decreased likelihood of cycling.* In addition to exploring the role of differentiation as an intrapersonal characteristic in relationship cycling, I also sought to test potential mediating mechanisms of this association.

Feminist critique and extension. Given the early focus on emotional control or suppression to stay "calm" and avoid "over-reacting," there has been a shift in the discussion and conceptualization of differentiation after important criticism. For example, Bowen's (1966) initial description of differentiation of self was described by feminist family therapists as a sex-stereotyped scale, with femininity being at the devalued end of the continuum (Hare-Mustin, 1978). Although many feminist scholars view Bowen family systems theory as a valuable framework, they recognize that early conceptualizations left out "the female experience in which women discover themselves through connection with others" (Knudson-Martin, 1994, p. 36). Hare-Mustin (1978), for example, states that "Bowen ignores the fact that women's socialization encourages them to be emotional and intuitive" (p. 182-183). Thus, for some, it may be more challenging to individuate, while maintaining connection simultaneously because of societal expectations (Knudson-Martin, 1994). Likewise, although there is some cross-cultural support (see Miller et al., 2004; Skowron, 2004; Skowron et al., 2014), the expression of individuality and connection is valued differently in more collectivist cultures, with unique norms that should be accounted for by therapists and researchers (McGoldrick & Carter, 2001). In discussing the blind spots of Bowen theory, McGoldrick and Carter (2001), students of Murray Bowen, expand the previous conceptualization by stating,

> *… Bowen theory… does not account for the fact that women and minorities have experienced a socialization that actually proscribes the assertive, self-directed thinking and behavior that are necessary for differentiation. Failure to acknowledge the disparities of opportunity and power that exist within our society mystifies those who are in an oppressive, inequitable situation and are not starting on an even playing field. Women have long been expected to put the needs of others before their own. Even to define their own values, wishes, or opinions has generally been seen as selfishness.… Gays and lesbians are told by official U.S. military policy and by social attitudes and laws, "Don't tell us who you are." A heterosexual white male who tries to differentiate will generally be responded to with respect; a woman, gay person, or person of color who tries to differentiate may be penalized, ostracized, or even harmed…. Thus, our assessment of a person's development must include assessment of social obstacles to accomplishing the tasks that lead to maturity* (p. 285).

Debates continue in the field between, for example, emotion-focused therapists (e.g., Johnson & Zuccarini, 2010) who emphasize the importance of emotional bonding between partners to enhance connection in couple therapy, and crucible-approach therapists (e.g., Schnarch & Regas, 2012) who indicate that many relational issues exist because partners are too fused (Schnarch, 1997). Despite this

debate, much of the focus of family therapy is on balance, with both enmeshment (i.e., fusion) and disconnection (i.e., cut-off) often being problematic extremes. Instead of the focus on pathologizing individuals who are "overly emotional," individuals who are cut-off and "overly rational" also characterize poor differentiation. For example, despite her vital critique of Bowen family systems, Knudson-Martin (1994) reports that she sees the theory as an important framework to understand the female experience. Knudson-Martin (1994) makes a few important revisions and clarifications to the model by including assumptions like "highly differentiated individuals recognize their needs for and responsibilities to one another at the same time that they have the capacity for autonomous functioning" (p. 41). Thus, interpretations of differentiation should be viewed in the context of these criticisms.

Marginalized couples. As noted by McGoldrick and Carter (2001), marginalized couples can experience stressors and opposition that make developing individuality (as it is determined by the dominant culture) complex. Given that the family-of-origin environment is vital to the development of differentiation and many sexual minorities experience hostility from families, especially after coming-out (e.g., Floyd, Stein, Harter, Allison, & Nye, 1999; Potoczniak, Crosbie-Burnett, & Saltzburg, 2009), it is important to acknowledge unique challenges to developing differentiation. There is a dearth of information, however, on differentiation of self in same-sex couples.

Despite the absence of information on differentiation specifically, there is clinical insight into the process of separation-individuation (e.g., Floyd et al., 1999; Heatherington & Lavner, 2008), as well as enmeshment or fusion (e.g., James & Murphy, 1998; Nichols, 1987; Slater, 1995; Vargo, 1987; Zitter, 1987) and attachment and autonomy (Peplau, Cochran, Rook, & Padesky, 1978) in same-sex couples. Scholars, for example, report that same-sex couples can become isolated because of the oppression experienced by the social systems in which they are embedded. Consequently, this oppression and isolation can lead to fusion as partners become more dependent on each other for support not received elsewhere (James & Murphy, 1998; Krestan & Bepko, 1980; Pearlman, 1987, 1989; see also Frost, 2011). In addition, living outside of social support can interfere with a sense of self, and therapists reported that problems managing closeness and distance were underlying many complaints of same-sex couples in therapy (see Slater, 1995). Although closeness often serves an important protective function, fusion can be distressing if, for example, being overly attuned to a partner's needs is at the expense of the individual's own needs. This "over-involvement" can make partners intolerant of minor disagreements and create additional anxiety for individuals (Slater, 1995). Thus, differential experiences in same and different-sex couples should be assessed despite the fact that numerous scholars indicate that they are more similar than different on a number of processes (e.g., Kurdek, 2005).

Relationship Violence and On-Off Instability

One prevalent reason for dramatic changes in commitment reported by individuals in unstable relationships is persistent interpersonal conflict (Ogolsky et al., 2016). Individuals in on-off relationships report more conflict and violence than individuals in stable relationships (Dailey, Pfiester, et al., 2009; Halpern-Meekin et al., 2013a), and partners in violent relationships report non-linear trajectories characterized by tumultuous movement in and out of the same relationship (Khaw & Hardesty, 2007). Thus, not only do individuals in on-off relationships report violence, but those in violent relationships report patterns of on-off cycling indicating a profound link in these processes.

Scholars (e.g., Campbell, Rose, Kub, & Nedd, 1998; Khaw & Hardesty, 2007) often discuss how leaving a violent relationship is typically not the end for victims because there are a variety of factors that force them back into unsafe interdependence. Some individuals, for example, may return to violent relationships because they feel that the abusive partner is remorseful and has changed for the better. In addition, some mothers report fearing for their child's safety if they permanently leave the relationship (Khaw & Hardesty, 2007). These reasons for not permanently leaving coincide with the constraints and attraction forces that facilitate the return to on-off relationships (e.g., Dailey et al., 2011) and also reinforce the important need to investigate the fluid nature of relationship status and transitions (Campbell et al., 1998). In fact, simplistic "in" (currently together) or "out" (currently dissolved) categories could misclassify many "in-out" relationships (see Dailey, Pfiester, et al., 2009), which can put victims at further risk for continued violence (Campbell et al., 1998). Although a history of cycling is not a definitive indicator that violence has occurred, it is a robust correlate of intimate partner violence, which should be considered in research and clinical practice (see Monk et al., 2017).

Differentiation and relationship violence. A salient predictor of relationship violence is differentiation of self (e.g., Rosen et al., 2001; see also Skowron & Platt, 2005). Experiencing violence in the family of origin, for example, can have a profound impact on the development of differentiation. Therefore, differentiation is often discussed as a potential mechanism in the intergenerational transmission of violence (Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988), although this transmission process is still largely untested (see Miller et al., 2004). Compared to those who are poorly differentiated, well-differentiated individuals allow others to be independent without becoming emotionally reactive and are able to self-soothe in the midst of conflict (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

In fact, individuals who are not well differentiated are more likely to be fused and volatile with others, which can manifest as increased anxiety, defensiveness (Bowen, 1978), desire to harm others (Murdock & Gore, 2004), and propensity to become enraged (see Bartle & Rosen, 1994). Poorly differentiated individuals are thought to use aggression as a means to calm themselves or manage reactivity when emotionally overwhelmed (Skowron & Platt, 2005). Those who lack differentiation may

feel under-responsible for their actions and/or over-responsible for the actions of others (Klever, 1998). Likewise, individuals with higher levels of differentiation report low levels of relationship conflict in their unions (Haber, 1984; see Miller et al., 2004), potentially due to the fact that well differentiated individuals are thought to be more flexible and adaptable (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). These reports, however, lack information from partners, which also influences the presence of conflict in the system. Nevertheless, compared to the well-differentiated, poorly differentiated individuals are said to be less adept at problem solving and less capable of tempering their emotional arousal during stressful circumstances like conflict (see Skowron & Platt, 2005; see also Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Thus, low differentiation and emotional fusion in particular, are discussed as creating intense communication patterns; whereas high differentiation is characterized by the ability to maintain composure and remain objective in the face of tension by balancing the intellectual and emotional systems (Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

Johnson (1995, 2008) provides a widely used typology for relationship violence that demarcates situational couple violence (formally "common couple violence") and coercive controlling violence (also called "intimate terrorism"). Situational couple violence (SCV) occurs in the context of conflict with one or both partners escalating to violent acts as a maladaptive conflict resolution strategy without the motive to wholly control the partner. In contrast, coercive controlling violence (CCV) is used to manipulate and exert power over a partner (Johnson, 2008). SCV parallels the processes discussed in the differentiation literature because violence is one attempted strategy used by poorly differentiated individuals to reduce anxiety created by emotional reactivity and trouble balancing autonomy and attachment (Bartle & Rosen, 1994). In fact, violence may be an attempt to regulate this balance as it can distance people who feel too close or constrain partners to focus on each other as a pursuit strategy if they do not feel close enough and fear separation (Allison, Bartholomew, Mayseless, & Dutton, 2008). Unlike CCV, SCV does not come from a pervasive intent to control a partner, and a persistent sense of fear is less likely to be present. Instead, SCV is motivated by an attempt to control a situation or the outcome of a particular conflict, likely due to poor emotion regulation and lack of communication skills that would allow for a healthier resolution (e.g., Johnson, 2008). SCV appears to be more common in the general population, with estimates suggesting it may be three times more prevalent than CCV although this can drastically vary by the type of population sampled (Johnson, 1995; see also Johnson, 2006, for a discussion on domestic violence shelter samples compared to the general population). Similarly, more couples report this SCV pattern when seeking conjoint therapy (Simpson, Doss, Wheeler, & Christensen, 2007). In addition to the fact that women who experience coercive control are less likely to participate in research, SCV is what is more commonly assessed in the family violence literature (Johnson, 2008). Nevertheless, few studies have addressed this form of violence in the context of relationship cycling and even fewer have discussed

the role of differentiation in the dynamic association between relationship violence and relationship instability.

Given that differentiation allows for emotion regulation and for an emotional balance without violence to be maintained in relationships (see Bartle & Rosen, 1994) and low differentiation is characterized by emotional reactivity and conflictual intensity (Skowron & Platt, 2005), it is likely that *differentiation of self is negatively associated with relationship violence (i.e., situational couple violence)*. In turn, *relationship violence is likely associated with an increased likelihood of relationship cycling*. Although the emotional reactivity assumption is driven by the characteristics of perpetrators, researchers also indicate that differentiation is associated with victimization due to repeated patterns of violence stemming from the family of origin (Rosen et al., 2001). Conflict and violence in the family of origin has a profound effect on the development of differentiation and future relationship violence (see Rosen et al., 2001; see also Smith-Marek et al., 2015; Stith et al., 2000; Stith, Smith, Penn, Ward, & Tritt, 2004). Poor differentiation may also interfere with a victim's ability to make decisions and to feel confident in permanently leaving a violent relationship.

Thus, insight about risks and vulnerabilities can provide clear areas for practitioners to intervene and promote safety. It is important to note that feminist critiques of the family systems perspective on violence assert that the literature previously fell short of addressing gender inequalities that disadvantage battered women (see Bartle & Rosen, 1994) and that systems approaches can blame the victim for the actions of perpetrators. Although this is often derived from a simplistic and outdated view of systems theory (see McCollum & Stith, 2008), and these critiques are often in reference to CCV, it is important to account for gender when assessing violence and to interpret results in the context of the patriarchal society in which the data are embedded.

Inertia Theory, Commitment, and Relationship Decision Making

Commitment is at the core of relationship persistence and sustainability (Kelley, 1983). Definitions of commitment typically consider it to be a long-term orientation (Rusbult, 1980) and an intention to continue the relationship (see Adams & Jones, 1997). According to inertia theory (Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2006), commitment is a multi-dimensional construct comprised of dedication (i.e., "want to continue the relationship") and constraint (i.e., "have to continue the relationship") components (see Stanley & Markman, 1992). Dedication commitment is characterized by the desire to maintain a relationship for the mutual benefit of partners whereas constraint commitment encompasses the factors that obligate individuals to remain in their unions (Stanley & Markman, 1992). These constraints can lead to relationship distress if intentions and expectations are not explicitly clarified and are subsequently not met. In fact, constraints and violated expectations may lead to feeling trapped, dissatisfied, and disappointed (e.g., Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2012; Stanley et al., 2006; Stanley, Rhoades, &

Whitton, 2010), which may be exacerbated if an individual is poorly differentiated, or reactive and fused with his or her partner (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Therefore, lack of explicit decision making (i.e., "sliding") during relationship transitions increases the risk for distress because obligations increase and make leaving relationships of low quality difficult.

Partners often accrue additional constraints (e.g., signing a lease or owning a home) as they move through relationship transitions (e.g., moving in together). Conscious, informed deliberation promotes stable progression because it helps ensure partners are dedicated to the future of the relationship. That is, individuals are able to move forward with determination before it gets progressively more difficult to leave with the increase of constraints (Stanley et al., 2006). Inertia theory posits that the proliferation of constraints that obligate partners to remain in relationships can create momentum that propels them to continue advancing the relationship (Stanley et al., 2006) or to return to a dissolved relationship (Vennum et al., 2014), which can have negative consequences without dedication (e.g., Rhoades et al., 2012). Thus, deciding is fundamental to commitment because committing to someone requires the decision to choose him or her over alternative options (Stanley & Rhoades, 2009).

Past work has shown that individuals who report dramatic fluctuations in their predicted future relationship-involvement also reported lower levels of conscientiousness than those in more stable relationships (Ogolsky et al., 2016); thus, this finding indicates that those with wavering commitment may be less deliberative than individuals in stable relationships. Although returning to a relationship is not always a "hasty decision," sliding (versus deciding) through relationship transitions is linked to relationship cycling (Vennum, Hardy, Sibley, & Fincham, 2015). Additionally, those with a history of cycling report greater constraints to permanently leaving (Vennum et al., 2014) and less personal commitment (Dailey, Pfiester, et al., 2009) or dedication (Vennum et al., 2015) than those who are stably together. Moreover, underlying patterns of commitment can also forecast potential on-off trajectories. Those who oscillate in commitment, for example, are likely to continue to cycle; whereas, those with steady high commitment are likely to achieve stability and those with consistently low commitment are more likely to permanently end (Dailey et al., 2013). Therefore, commitment and conscientious deciding may be mechanisms that facilitate stability by inhibiting on-off cycling.

Commitment, deciding, and differentiation. Commitment and deciding also likely have a robust link to low differentiation given the emotional reactivity and impulsiveness that can manifest from this attribute (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). In fact, individuals with higher levels of differentiation are more likely to make decisions based on carefully considered thoughts and principles than those whose low-levels of differentiation make them more rash, uninhibited, or prone to conforming to others expectations (Papero, 1990, 2000) or, conversely, prone to making decisions for others without consultation (see Frost, 2014). Consequently, how someone makes decisions is considered an individual characteristic because

people may have a general belief or propensity toward being decisive or indecisive. Decision-making is, however, also highly influenced by interpersonal contexts and the dynamics of specific relationships.

Although it has not been explicitly studied, differentiation is implicated as being particularly salient for decision making because higher levels of differentiation are associated with greater social problem solving (Knauth, Skowron, & Escobar, 2006; Skowron, 2004) in addition to greater autonomy and coping (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). At higher levels of differentiation, individuals are capable of thinking clearly in the midst of confrontation and stress, yet at lower levels individuals are influenced by opinions of others or their own impulses without contemplation (see Klever, 1998). Outside of the context of relationship violence, Kim-Appel and colleagues (2007) state, that differentiated individuals "tolerate differences in others without as intense reactive pressure, and thus, they can continue to make their decisions and accept responsibility for the outcomes without blaming others, seeing themselves as victims, or being controlled by others" (p. 225). Thus, it is likely that *differentiation is positively associated with deciding.* Further, as a mediating mechanism, *deciding is likely associated with a decrease in the likelihood of cycling.*

The influence of differentiation on relationship commitment has not been exclusively studied, yet numerous scholars have investigated the positive effect of differentiation on relationship satisfaction (e.g., Lal & Bartle-Haring, 2011; Skowron, 2000; Skowron & Friedlander, 1998). Given that satisfaction and commitment are closely entwined, with satisfaction being an important component of personal commitment (Cate, Levin, & Richmond, 2002; Rusbult, 1983), it is likely that *greater levels of differentiation are associated with more dedication commitment*. Conversely, *greater differentiation is also likely to be associated with less felt constraint or feeling trapped in a relationship*. This assumption is reinforced by the fact that those with low differentiation are often more prone to acting impulsively and regretting actions later (Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Kim-Appel, Appel, Newman, & Parr, 2007). Similarly, blaming self or others without justification (i.e., in the context of relationship violence) is a form of emotional reactivity, which is part of inhibited differentiation and may be common when poorly thought-out decisions or actions result in undesired outcomes (Titelman, 2014).

Study 1

The primary goal of the first study was to assess the role of differentiation of self in on-off relationship instability. I hypothesized that differentiation would decrease the likelihood of being in a relationship that had cycled (H1). Moreover, relationship violence, dedication commitment, felt constraint, and relationship deciding likely play an important role in the association between differentiation and on-off relationship status. Specifically, I hypothesized that:

H2: Differentiation would be negatively associated with relationship violence.

H3: Violence would increase the likelihood of relationship cycling.

H4: Differentiation would be positively associated with relationship deciding.

H5: Relationship deciding would decrease the likelihood of being in an on-off relationship.

H6: Differentiation would be positively associated with dedication.

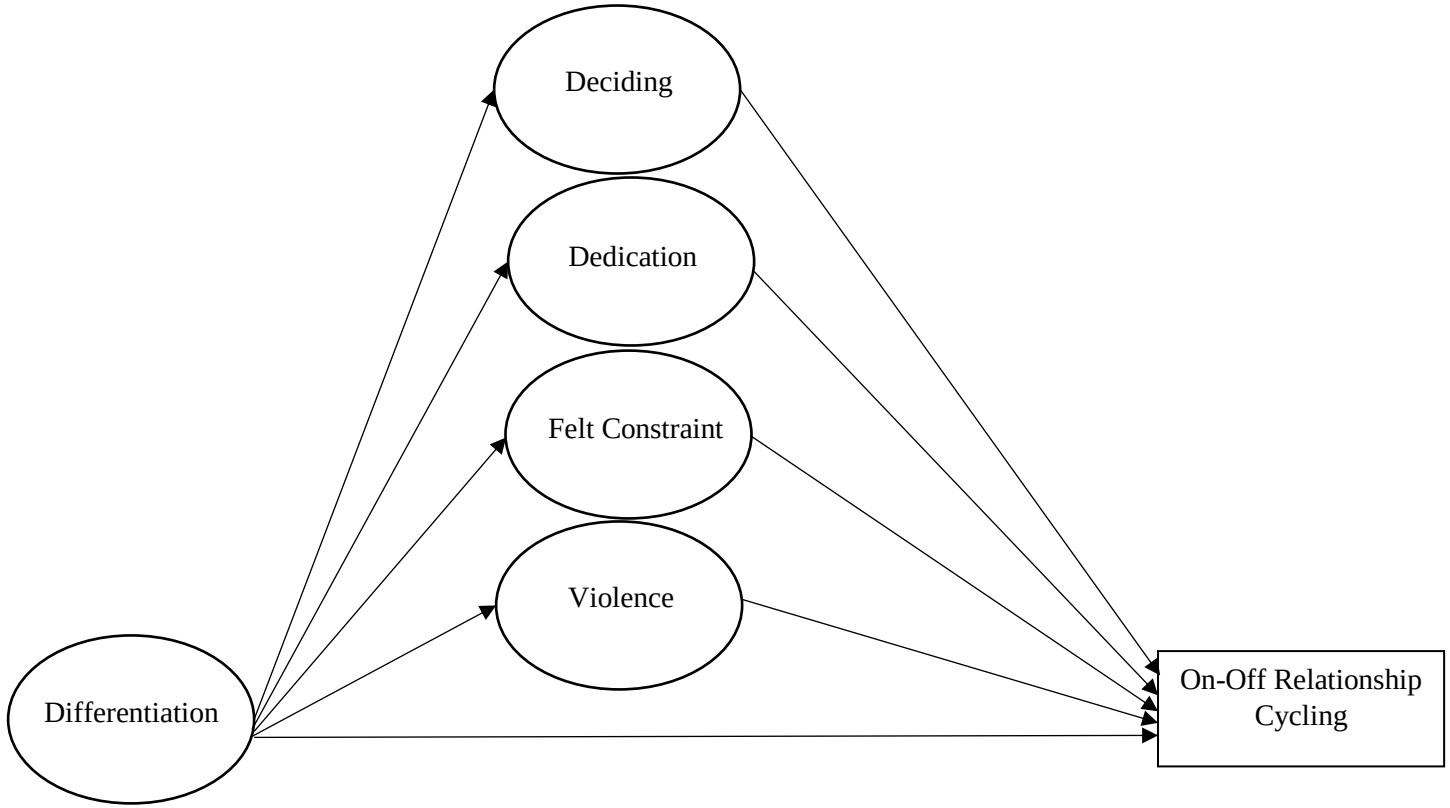
H7: Dedication would be associated with a decreased likelihood of being in an on-off relationship.

H8: Differentiation would be negatively associated with feeling trapped in the relationship (i.e., felt constraint).

H9: Felt constraint would be associated with an increased likelihood of reporting cycling.

See Figure 1 for the full conceptual and analytic model.

Figure 1. *Direct and indirect effects of differentiation of self on on-off relationship cycling.*



Study 2

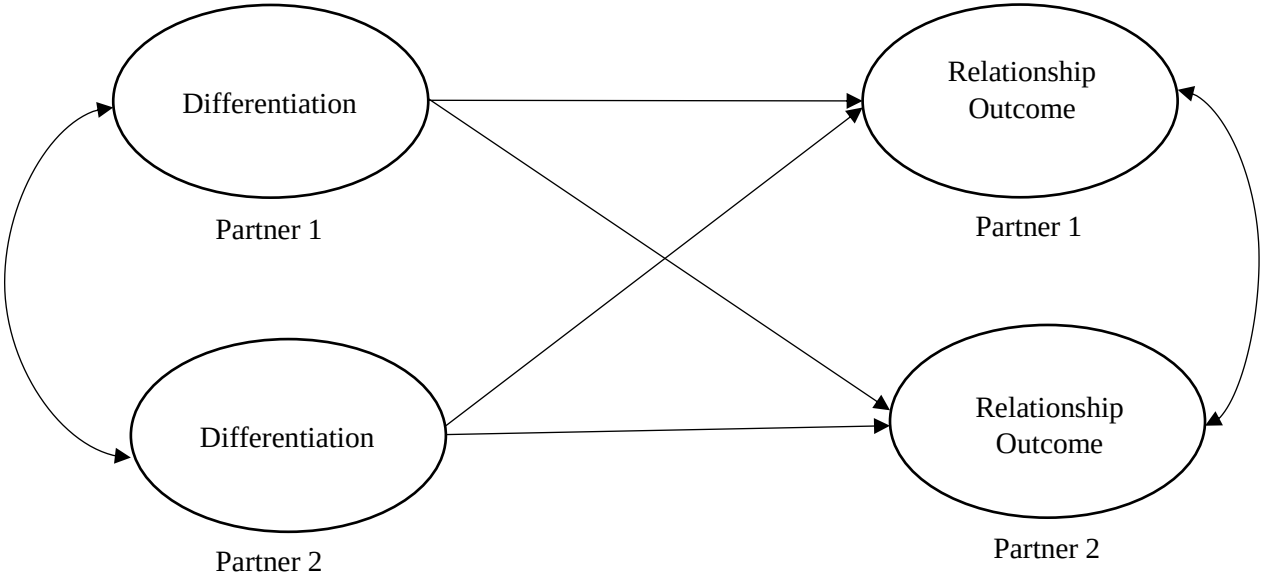
Although most concepts in Bowen's (1978) framework focus on characteristics of the family (e.g., multigenerational transmission process, family projection process, and triangulation), differentiation shifts the empirical focus to internal processes of the individuals within the system. As a result, many investigations of differentiation on mental health and relationship functioning have utilized individual samples and lack dyadic data (e.g., Drake, Murdock, Marszalek, & Barber, 2015; Jankowski & Hooper, 2012; Priest, 2015). Further, those limited studies that utilized couple data, often assess interpersonal effects in small samples with separate regression models for partners (e.g., Lal & Bartle-Haring, 2011; Skowron, 2000). Although extremely valuable and important in moving the field forward, previous studies often neglected the systemic processes inherent to the theory. Accounting for the dyadic process is vital because members of a couple interact in various exchanges and influence each other's behaviors, thoughts, and emotions, which is central to systems theory (Cox & Paley, 2003). Likewise, an individual's level of differentiation is theorized as having a direct influence on others in his or her system (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Understanding the systemic aspects inherent in these processes would help prevention and intervention efforts in targeting maladaptive patterns within couples. Moreover, numerous scholars call for more dyadic research (e.g., Fincham, 2012), especially in relationship research and systems theory. Therefore, I sought to assess the systemic effect of differentiation on each of the salient mechanisms addressed in Study 1 (i.e., violence, dedication, felt constraint, and deciding) in a separate sample of couples (see Figure 2).

Specifically, I hypothesized that:

1. Differentiation would be positively associated with relationship deciding for individuals (H10) and their partners (H11).
2. Differentiation would be positively associated with dedication commitment for individuals (H12) and their partners (H13).
3. Differentiation would be negatively associated with felt constraint for individuals (H14) and their partners (H15).
4. Differentiation would be negatively associated with an individual's own reports of violence in the relationship (H16), as well as his or her partner's reports of violence (H17).

Last, differences in these processes are of particular interest given that a multitude of relational experiences have been found to operate differently in on-off relationships compared to those who have not cycled (Dailey et al., 2010). Thus, I also sought to understand what differences, if any, there were between these two groups (RQ1).

Figure 2. *Conceptual Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM) for differentiation of self and relationship outcomes.*



Chapter Three: Study 1

Method

Participants and Procedure

Study 1 used existing data from a larger longitudinal study on the experiences and reactions to changing marriage laws of individuals in same and different-sex relationships (Ogolsky, Oswald, Monk, & Rice, 2016). Participants were recruited through a variety of means including Facebook advertisements targeted at individuals in romantic relationships in 2015. The study currently includes four waves of data (from 2015 to 2016), of which differentiation of self was assessed in Wave 3. Although M*plus* (Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2012) can handle missing data, it was unclear if those who did not complete Wave 4, for example, remained in the same relationship; thus, only participants who completed Waves 1 through 4 were retained (N = 333). At Wave 4, 35 individuals reported that they were single or had broken-up with their partner since Wave 3. Therefore, individuals from Wave 3 who were in the same romantic relationships at Wave 4 (N = 298) were used in the present study in order to use differentiation of self (at Wave 3) to predict relationship processes and reports of on-off cycling 8-months later (Wave 4). According to attrition analyses, few significant differences were found between those who dropped out and those who remained in the study. Based on demographics, those who were white (χ^2 [1, N = 546] = 6.07, $p < .05$) and more educated (t [374.15] = 5.46, $p < .001$) were more likely to remain in the study.

Over half of the final sample (56%) identified as female, approximately 41% identified as male, and eight individuals identified as trans* or other. The majority of participants were White (91.6%), followed by Black (3.4%), Asian (2%), and Native American (1%). Thirty individuals (13.1%) identified their ethnicity as Hispanic or Latino/a. The average age of the sample was 37 (M = 37.00, SD = 11.25) and median income was $40,000-49,000. The majority of participants indicated they had a college degree (44.1%), graduate or professional degree (29.3%) or some college (20.9%). Individuals were in same (n = 84, n = 64; for relationships comprised of two women and two men respectively) and different-sex relationships (n = 150). The majority of participants (44.6%) identified as heterosexual, 20.1% identified as lesbian, 20.1% identified as gay, 10.1% identified as bi-sexual, and 4.4% identified as queer. For marital status, 58.7% reported being married, 24.9% indicated they were engaged or had a civil union/registered domestic partnership; and 16.4% indicated they were dating. A majority of participants (88.9%) reported living with their partner. The average duration of relationships was over 8-years (M = 8.20, SD = 8.05) and 44% reported that they had children.

Measures

Relationship cycling. To assess relationship cycling, a dichotomous instance of break-up and renewal was assessed. Like in past studies (e.g., Dailey, Pfiester, et al., 2009; Vennum et al., 2014),

participants were asked if their current relationship was one in which they had broken-up and gotten back together at least once (1 = *yes*, 0 = *no*).

Differentiation of self. A brief, 20-item version of the Differentiation of Self Inventory-Revised (DSI-R), the Differentiation of Self-Inventory-Short Form (DSI-SF; Drake et al., 2015) was assessed to measure differentiation in Study 1. The DSI (Skowron & Friedlander, 1998; Skowron & Schmitt, 2003) is one of the most widely used and validated assessments of differentiation. In fact, the DSI-R is considered more comprehensive than Haber's (1993) Level of Differentiation of Self Scale (Drake, 2011; Licht & Chabot, 2006) and Chabot's Emotional Differentiation Scale (Licht & Chabot, 2006; see Schnarch & Regas, 2012). The DSI-R has been validated in a number of studies and has been found to be a reliable instrument (e.g., Skowron & Schmitt, 2003; see also Skowron et al., 2014); yet like any measure, this scale is not without criticism (see Schnarch & Regas, 2012), including its long format. Thus, a brief version was created, previously validated (Drake, 2011; Drake et al., 2015), and used in the present study.

Like the original DSI-R measure (Skowron & Schmitt, 2003), the short form also includes four subscales: Emotional Reactivity (ER), Emotional Cut-Off (EC), Fusion with Others (FO), and "I" Position (IP). The ER subscale assesses hypersensitivity, emotional flooding, and autonomic responses to stimuli, as well as the degree to which individuals can regulate affect (e.g., "At times, I feel as if I'm riding an emotional roller-coaster;" $\alpha = .74$). The EC assesses discomfort or anxiety regarding intimacy, as well as distancing and defensiveness to soothe anxiety in reaction to the fear of engulfment (e.g., "When one of my relationships becomes very intense, I feel the urge to run away from it;" $\alpha = .83$). The FO subscale consists of items reflecting over-identification and over-involvement with parents and significant others, including taking on their beliefs without question (e.g., "I usually need a lot of encouragement from others when starting a big job or task;" $\alpha = .78$). IP subscale assesses coherence in the sense of self, as well as the degree to which individuals can express their perspective and consciously adhere to their beliefs and convictions even when pressured by others (e.g., "My self-esteem really depends on how others think of me"; $\alpha = .75$; see Skowron & Platt, 2005; Skowron & Schmitt, 2003). Participants rate items on a 6-point Likert-type scale from 0 (*not at all characteristic of me*) to 5 (*very characteristic of me*). Items were scored so that higher values reflect greater differentiation (e.g., less reactivity, less cut-off, less fusion with others, and higher values on the "I" position subscale; $\alpha = .89$ for the full scale).

Relationship violence. To assess violence, 24-items from the physical assault subscale of the Revised Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, Sugarman, 1996) were administered as part of Study 1. Participants were asked to report violent incidents that had occurred in the past year from "*This has never happened*" (0) to "*More than 20 times*" (6). Example items included, "I slapped my partner," "My partner punched or hit me with something that could hurt," and "I pushed or shoved my

partner." Each item was summed together to form a frequency of violent incidents of perpetration (α = .97) and victimization (α = .97) in the past year. Coercive control was assessed using the Psychological Maltreatment of Women Inventory (PMWI; Tolman, 1999) in order to differentiate between situational couple violence (SCV) and coercive controlling violence (CCV) in the results. Participants responded to a 7-item measure asking about behaviors and attitudes of their partner that reflect control. Example items included, "My partner was jealous or suspicious of my friends," "My partner used our money or made important financial decisions without talking to me about it," and "My partner tried to keep me from doing things to help myself." Participants responded on a 0 (*never*) to 4 (*always*) point scale (α = .93). Items were averaged with higher scores indicating more coercive control.

Dedication commitment. Dedication was measured using 4-items from the Commitment Inventory (Stanley & Markman, 1992; Stanley, Whitton, & Markman, 2004). Participants reported their level of agreement on a 5-point scale, ranging from 0 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). Items included, "I like to think of my partner and me more in terms of 'us' and 'we' than 'me' and 'him/her'," and "I want this relationship to stay strong no matter what rough times we may encounter." Based on previous research, items were coded so that greater values represent more dedication to the relationship and total scores were analyzed (α = .81).

Felt constraint. Felt constraint was measured using 3-items that assess the degree to which individuals feel trapped in their current relationship (Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2010). Like prior research, participants responded on a 7-point scale from 0 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*) and a sum of the items was used. Example items included, "I feel trapped in this relationship but I stay because I have too much to lose if I leave" and "I would leave my partner if it was not so difficult to do" (α = .97).

Deciding (vs. sliding). Relationship decision making was assessed using the deciding subscale from the Relationship Deciding Scale (RDS; Vennum & Fincham, 2011). Participants were asked to report their level of agreement from 0 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) on 5-items assessing their thoughtfulness regarding the making of relationship decisions. Although this process can be heavily influenced by specific relationships, items reflect a general belief or propensity toward deciding or sliding in relationships. Example items included, "It is better to 'go with the flow' than think carefully about each major step in a romantic relationship," "Considering the pros and cons of each major step in a romantic relationship destroys its chemistry," "It is important to make conscious decisions about whether to take each major step in romantic relationships," and "With romantic partners I weigh the pros and cons before allowing myself to take the next step in the relationship (e.g., be physically intimate)." Based on previous research (Vennum & Fincham, 2011), items were summed and computed so that greater values indicate more thoughtful deciding (α = .68).

Controls. Variables associated with cycling, such as relationship length and constraints (e.g., dichotomous dummy codes of legal marital status, cohabitation, presence of children), were controlled to account for the unique influence of the main variables of interest. Demographics such as age, sex, education, and income were also used as controls in the present study. Although there are often few relational differences between those in same-sex and those in different-sex relationships (e.g., Kurdek, 2005) and negligible differences in relationship cycling between these two groups (Monk et al., 2017), relationship type (i.e., same-sex and different-sex) was also included as a control.

Analytic Strategy

Analyses were performed using a Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) framework within M*plus* 7.3 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2012). First, confirmatory factor analyses were constructed to determine the latent measurement models. The latent indicator approach was used to decrease measurement error (Kline, 2011). In addition to model fit, coefficients were assessed in order to ensure that all factor loadings were above the recommended .4 (e.g., Matsunaga, 2010). Given that the chi-square is biased by sample size, a variety of fit statistics were used to determine good fit. Nonsignificant χ^2, root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA) less than .10, comparative fit index (CFI) greater than .90, and a standardized root-mean-square residual (SRMR) less than 0.10 were used as determinants of adequate model fit (Browne & Cudeck, 1993; Byrne, 2012). After the measurement model was properly specified, direct and indirect effects of differentiation of self on relationship cycling were assessed to determine the roles of relationship violence, deciding, dedication, and felt constraint (see Figure 1). Bootstrapping with 2000 iterations was used to estimate more accurate coefficients for the indirect effects (Preacher & Hayes, 2008).

Results

I began by conducting preliminary analyses to provide descriptive information about the data. According to a missing value analysis (MVA) of all items of interest, less than 1.3% of the data were missing. Thus, missing data were handled using Full Information Maximum Likelihood (Allison, 2003). According to preliminary analyses, over 32% of participants reported breaking-up and getting back together with a partner. Prior studies indicate that relationship length is a factor in cycling (e.g., Dailey, Pfiester, et al., 2009), but there were no significant differences in relationship length ($p = .07$) between those who cycled and those who did not cycle. There were also no significant differences in rates of cycling between the different relationship types (i.e., lesbian relationships, different-sex relationships, and gay male relationships; $p = .77$; nor same and different-sex relationships; $p = .80$). To determine the basic associations between the constructs, I ran zero-order correlations on the main variables of interest. See Table 1 for additional descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations. Next, I ran *t*-tests to assess mean differences between those who cycled and those who did not cycle on the variables of interest (see Table 2). Overall, individuals who reported cycling in their relationships were less differentiated, less dedicated, less decisive, and reported more relationship violence and felt constraint than those who did not cycle. Women in this study reported being significantly more differentiated than men (t [295] = 2.44, $p < .05$). As expected, there was limited coercive control in this sample, with the average level of the PMWI near the "never" response option ($M = .41$, $SD = .65$).

Table 1. *Correlations and Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables (N = 298)*

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Differ. of Self	–									
2. IP	.77***	-								
3. FO	.86***	.54***	-							
4. EC	.66***	.30***	.55***	-						
5. ER	.86***	.55***	.64***	.42***	-					
6. Violence	-.40***	-.00	-.53***	-.52***	-.27***	-				
7. Dedication	.39***	.21***	.36***	.49***	.22***	-.54***	-			
8. Constraint	-.48***	-.17**	-.53***	-.57***	-.32***	.76***	-.73***	-		
9. Deciding	.21***	.12*	.28***	.24***	.08	-.32***	.26***	-.32***	-	
10. Cycling	-.28***	.01	-.34***	-.35***	-.22***	.57***	-.35***	.46***	-.24***	-
M	2.98	3.16	3.03	3.32	2.65	5.73	18.75	3.30	13.70	32%[a]
SD	.80	.87	1.09	1.27	.92	12.97	5.00	5.04	3.15	-

Note. IP = "I" Position, ER = Emotional Reactivity (reverse coded), EC = Emotional Cut-Off (reverse coded), FO = Fusion with Others (reverse coded); [a] = frequency for dichotomous variable; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, ***$p < .001$

Table 2. *Difference Tests for Cycling (N = 298)*

	Non-Cycling		*Cycling*				
Variables	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*t*	*df*	*p*
Differentiation	3.13	.74	2.66	.82	4.96	295	.001
IP	3.17	.86	3.16	.88	.10	295	.92
FO	3.28	.92	2.49	1.23	5.66	147.54	.001
EC	3.63	1.09	2.69	1.39	5.83	153.19	.001
ER	2.79	.94	2.35	.79	4.19	220.40	.001
Violence	.58	3.20	16.34	18.12	-8.46	97.89	.001
Victimization	.32	1.97	8.13	8.95	-8.44	99.47	.001
Perpetration	.25	1.31	8.22	9.41	-8.25	96.79	.001
Dedication	19.96	4.33	16.23	5.36	5.95	156.47	.001
Constraint	1.69	3.43	6.67	6.11	-7.44	124.54	.001
Deciding	14.21	3.02	12.62	3.16	4.18	294	.001

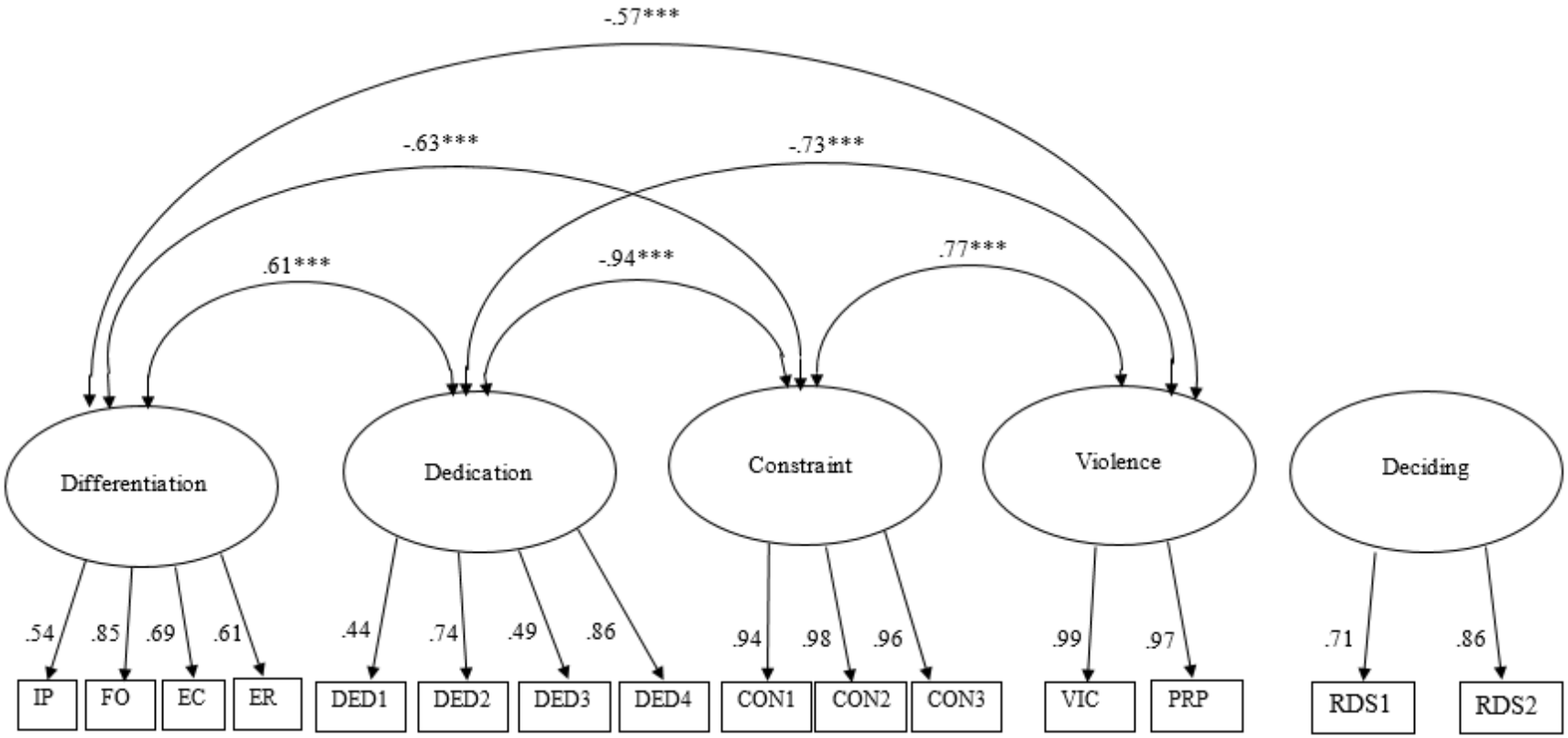
Note. IP = "I" Position, ER = Emotional Reactivity (reverse coded), EC = Emotional Cut-Off (reverse coded), FO = Fusion with Others (reverse coded).

Measurement Model

First, Confirmatory Factor Analyses (CFAs) were run for each of the multi-item measures of interest to verify their factor structure and assess their dimensionality. Items or subscales were loaded onto their respective latent construct and fit was assessed using recommended criteria (Browne & Cudeck, 1993; Byrne, 2012). Next, external consistency was determined by assessing the factor structure of two parallel latent constructs in one model (Hunter & Gerbing, 1982). When the latent constructs of victimization and perpetration were correlated to assess external consistency (i.e., parallelism) there were numerous cross-loadings and a high correlation between latent constructs ($r = .98$, $p < .001$). Thus, victimization and perpetration were collapsed into two indicators for the latent construct of violence in order to address issues of multi-collinearity ($\alpha = .98$). Although dedication and felt constraint were highly correlated, they did not properly load on a single factor when external consistency was assessed with differentiation of self. Thus, dedication and felt constraint were kept as separate, but correlated factors. Similarly, items on relationship deciding did not properly load when assessing external consistency as evidenced by factor loadings under .3 and a poor model fit (χ^2 [25] = 198.94, $p > .001$, CFI = .81, TLI = .72, RMSEA = .15, SRMR = .12). After examining the measure, three items were removed that loaded poorly or did not fit with the other items conceptually ($\alpha = .75$, for revised scale). After external consistency was assessed, the final CFAs demonstrated good model fit and factor loadings were above .4.

With these adjustments, the final measurement model was an adequate fit to the data (χ^2 [76] = 304.25, $p > .001$, CFI = .94, TLI = .92, RMSEA = .10, SRMR = .07) and all indicators loaded above .4 on their respective latent constructs. See Figure 3, for the full measurement model. Next, models were run separately for those in same-sex and different-sex relationships; however, due to complexity of the model and the small sample size when groups were separated, models assessing measurement invariance failed to converge. Nevertheless, there were no mean differences between groups on the measures of interest after applying Bonferroni's adjustment for multiple comparison (see Table 3). Similarly, no differences emerged with the Bonferroni correction when analyses were further distinguished by investigating differences in the variables of interest by sex composition of the relationship (i.e., different sex, both men, and both women). This lack of difference supports common theorizing about same and different-sex couples being more similar than different in a multitude of relationship processes (e.g., Kurdek, 2005).

Figure 3. *Full measurement model.*



There were no significant correlations with relationship deciding. χ^2 (76) = 304.25, p > .001, CFI = .94, TLI = .92, RMSEA = .10 (90% CI = .09 to .11), SRMR = .07. All factor loadings were significant at the p < .001 level. ***p< .001

Table 3. *Difference Tests for those in Same and Different-Sex Relationships (N = 298)*

	Same-Sex Relationship		*Different-sex Relationship*				
Variables	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	t/χ^2	*df*	*p*
Differentiation	2.95	.82	.301	.77	.72	295	.47
IP	3.17	.94	3.16	.78	-.08	283.51	.94
FO	3.08	1.12	2.97	1.07	-.92	295	.36
EC	3.28	1.32	3.36	1.23	.56	295	.57
ER	2.52	.87	2.77	.95	2.33	295	.02[a]
Violence	5.70	12.78	5.75	13.19	.03	292	.97
Victimization	2.97	6.67	2.77	6.31	-.27	292	.79
Perpetration	2.72	6.33	2.98	6.92	.33	292	.74
Dedication	19.10	5.08	18.41	4.91	-1.18	294	.24
Constraint	3.19	4.92	3.41	5.17	.38	294	.71
Deciding	13.40	3.44	13.97	2.83	1.54	280.38	.13
Cycling	.33	.47	.31	.47	.11	1	.80

Note: [a] = Difference was not significant when Bonferroni's adjustment was applied. IP = "I" Position, ER = Emotional Reactivity (reverse coded), EC = Emotional Cut-Off (reverse coded), FO = Fusion with Others (reverse coded).

Full Model

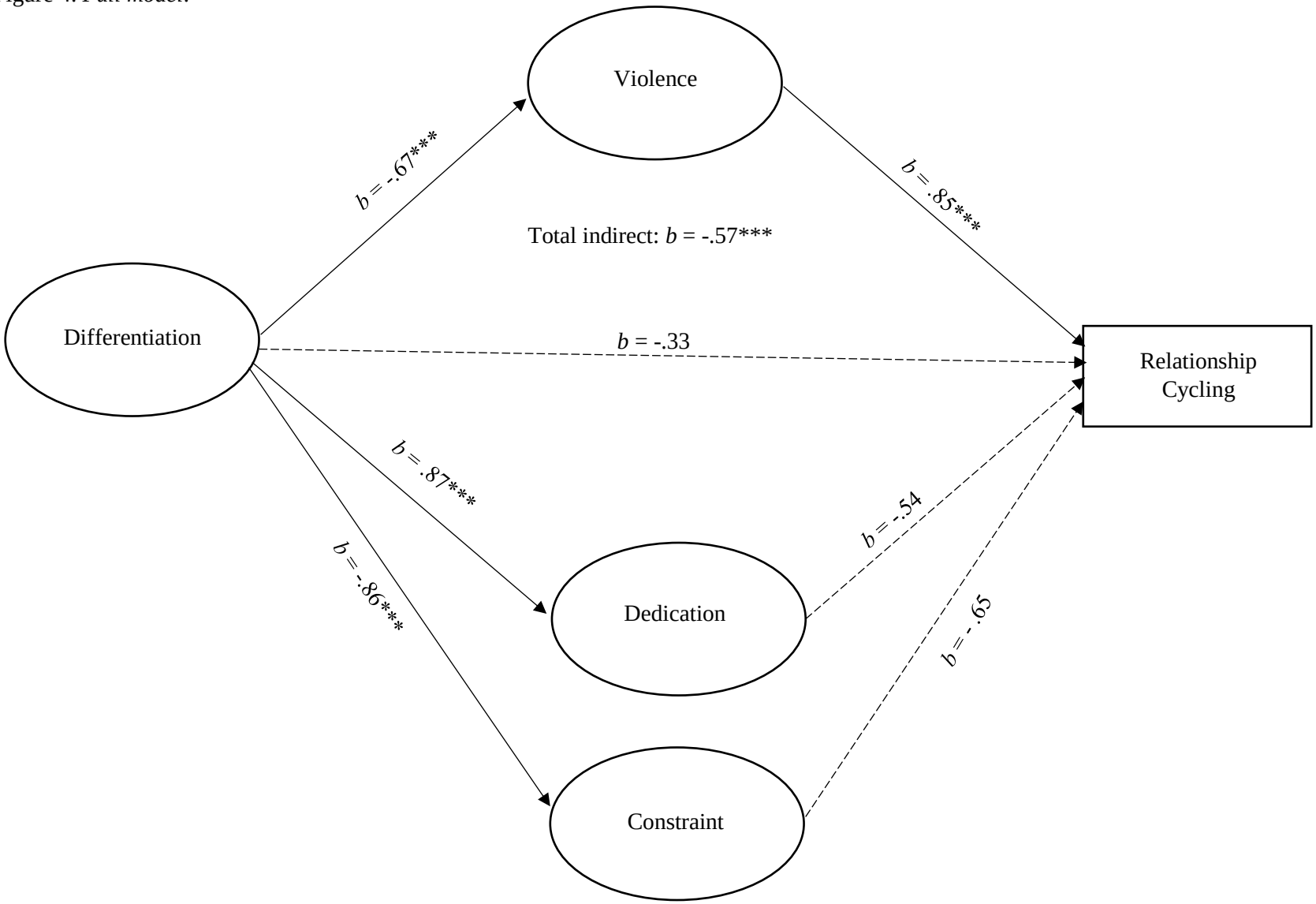
Relationship deciding was not significantly associated with any of the other variables in the model (see Figure 3); thus, it was omitted from subsequent analysis to improve fit, increase power and degrees of freedom. Given that cycling was a dichotomous outcome, the weighted least square parameter estimate (WLSMV) is recommended (Yu, 2002). Although slightly different fit statistics were provided and probit regressions were estimated, WLSMV allowed for more robust estimates and for fit statistics

that were otherwise not available for categorical outcomes. Estimates were converted from probit to logit estimations using the transformation recommended by Amemiya (1981) and Maddala (1983) in order to report meaningful odds ratios when cycling was the outcome. Odds ratios (*OR*) can be interpreted as the odds of cycling (compared to not cycling) for every one-unit change in the independent variable.

A variety of controls were assessed (e.g., marital status, presence of children, sex, relationship length, relationship type), but the only significant control was cohabitation status (b = - 1.05, SE = .23, p < .01); thus, the other controls were removed from the final model for parsimony (see Figure 4). Accounting for felt constraint and the other variables of interest, those who were cohabiting were nearly three times less likely (*OR* = .35) to report having cycled than those who were not living together. The full model was a good fit to the data (χ^2 [91] = 112.32, p = .06, CFI = .97, TLI = .96, RMSEA = .03). Differentiation was positively associated with dedication (b = .87, SE = .13, p < .001) and negatively associated with violence (b = - .67, SE = .13, p <.001) and felt constraint (b = -.86, SE = .12, p < .001). Although differentiation was negatively associated with cycling (b = - .37, SE = .11, p < .05; *OR* = .69) accounting for commitment, when frequency of violence was included in the model it accounted for all the variability in cycling. In fact, frequency of violence (b = .85, SE = .15, p < .001) emerged as the only significant predictor of on-off relationship cycling. Thus, each unit increase in the frequency of violence more than doubled (*OR* = 2.33) the likelihood of having cycled. The estimate for felt constraint (p = .07) approached, but failed to reach significance in the final model. Dedication was negatively correlated with felt constraint (r = -86, p < .001) and violence (r = -50, p > .001); whereas, felt constraint was positively correlated with frequency of violence (r = .65, p < .001).

The final model accounted for over 50% of the variance in cycling. Next, the indirect paths were assessed using the bootstrapping method with 2000 iterations (Kline, 2011; Preacher & Hayes, 2008). The only significant, specific indirect path was from differentiation to cycling through violence (b = -.57, SE = .15, p < .05), indicating an approximate 75% (*OR* = .57) decrease in the odds of having cycled. The indirect path from differentiation to cycling through felt constraint was approaching, but failed to reach significance (p = .08).

Figure 4. *Full model*.

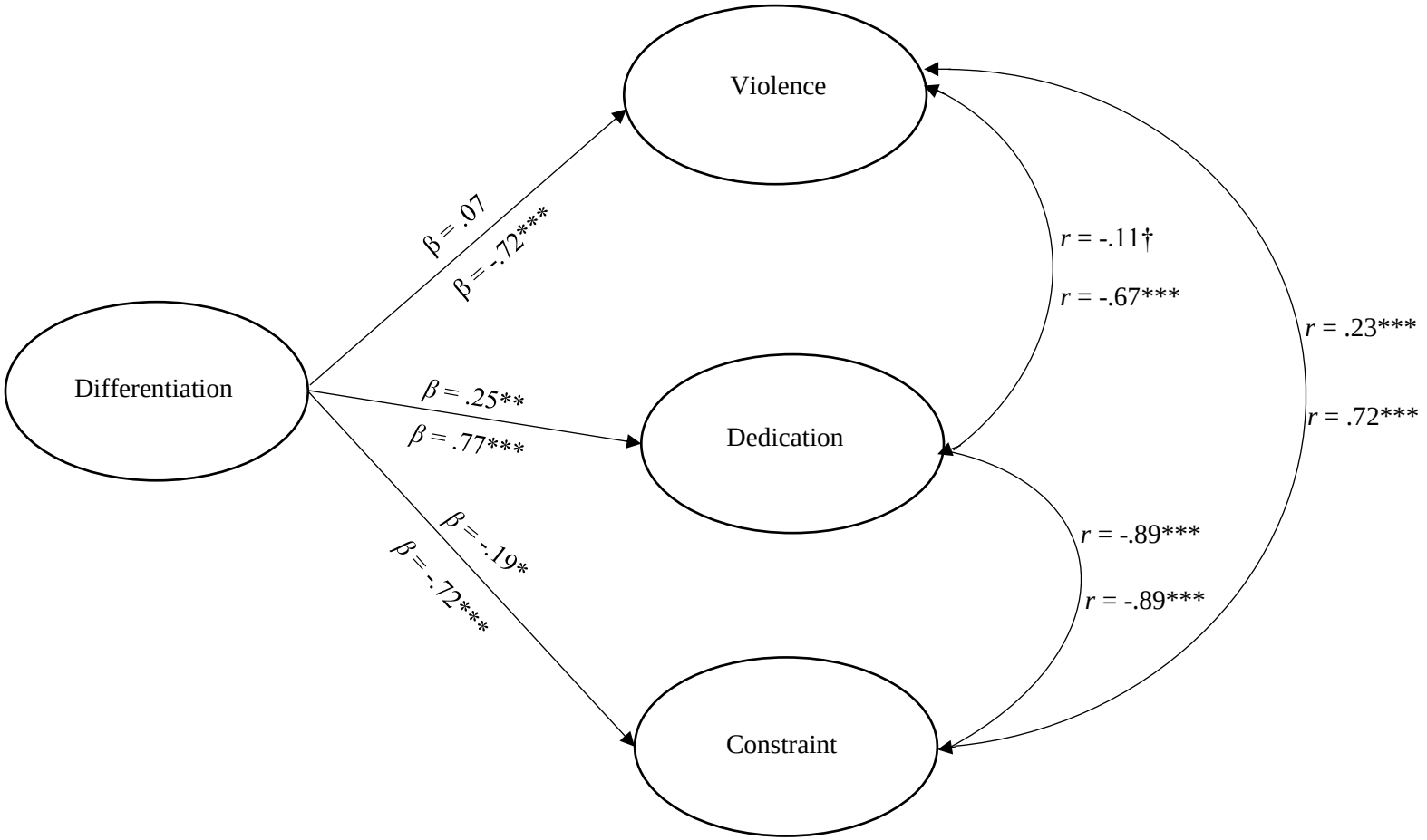


Model fit: χ^2 (91) = 112.32, p = .06, CFI = .97, TLI = .96, RMSEA = .03 (90% CI = .00 to .04). Pathways predicting cycling were converted from pobit to logit estimates. ***p< .001

Post-hoc analyses. To account for the effect of severity of violence, I ran a post-hoc analysis using separate perpetration (seven items) and victimization (seven items) variables. Similar to past research (e.g., Hardesty, Crossman, Haselschwerdt, Raffaelli, Ogolsky, & Johnson, 2015), severity was computed using the severe items from the physical assault subscale of the CTS (Straus et al., 1996). The severe items (e.g., "my partner used a knife or gun on me"; "I choked my partner") were coded as "0" (*never occurred*) or "1" (*has occurred*) and then summed to represent whether or not the specific acts had ever occurred in their relationship. The inclusion of these variables, however, decreased the overall fit of the model ($\chi^2\Delta$= 64.01; RMSEA = .05, CFI = .91, TLI = .87) and severity was not associated with cycling; thus it was removed from the final model.

Although cycling was assessed at the latest time-point, because it was retrospective, it is uncertain at which point in the process partners broke-up and renewed. Therefore, I also assessed cycling as a multiple group structural model with differentiation predicting the three mediators of interest (i.e., violence, dedication, and felt constraint) to determine if there were differences in the processes between cyclical and non-cyclical relationships. First, a fully unconstrained model was compared to each constrained loading to assess measurement invariance between groups. Any constraint that resulted in a worse fitting model (as evidenced by a significant increase in χ^2) was removed from the final model (Byrne, 2012). Each construct, with the exception of violence, resulted in partial measurement invariance between groups. Next, each pathway was constrained and resulted in worse fitting models, indicating that the groups differ in the associations between differentiation of self and the mechanisms of interest. The multiple group model was an adequate fit to the data (χ^2 [113] = 243.822, $p < .001$, CFI = .96, TLI = .94, RMSEA = .09 [90% CI = .07 -.10], SRMR = .07) and a similar pattern emerged in that differentiation was negatively associated with violence, but only in those who had cycled (see Figure 5). Differentiation was negatively associated with felt constraint and positively associated with dedication commitment in both cyclical and non-cyclical relationships.

Figure 5. *Post-hoc multi-group model.*



Coefficients above the regression lines for the non-cycling group and below the regression lines for the cycling group. † $p < .09$; *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$;***$p < .001$

Discussion

As predicted, differentiation of self was negatively associated with violence and felt constraint, and positively associated with dedication in (a) the bivariate correlations, (b) the correlations between latent constructs in the measurement model, and (c) the full structural equation model. According to past research and Bowen's family systems theory (e.g., Rosen et al., 2001), differentiation is likely to influence conflict and violence in relationships due to individuals' abilities to regulate their emotions and interact with others in non-destructive ways. Although negative emotions are valid in relationships when hurt by partners, the ability to self-regulate and not react with violence is incredibly important in relationships. Individuals who are poorly differentiated are more likely to become enraged and defensive due to emotional reactivity (see Bartle & Rosen, 1994) and may use aggression as a means to cope (Skowron & Platt, 2005). Being well differentiated, however, can aid individuals in being adaptable and to productively handle conflict, which is more likely to meet the needs of both partners (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

According to Johnson (2008), it is considered situational couple violence when conflict escalates to the point of violence due to poor conflict resolution skills rather than the intent to control a partner or create a persistent sense of fear. With high correlations between reports of perpetration and victimization, and with limited presence of severity and coercive control, it is likely this study is assessing situational couple violence. Thus, it is important to acknowledge interpretations are in reference to situational couple violence and conclusions about coercive control cannot be made. Based on previous research, situational violence is more common in the general population (e.g., Johnson, 1995; Simpson et al., 2007), but few studies have assessed situational violence in the context of differentiation or cycling. Although differentiation was negatively associated with on-off cycling, the frequency of violence fully mediated this association when included in the model. Thus, in this sample it seems that violence accounts for much of the variability in relationship cycling. Past research corroborates that violence and fluctuations in relationship status are highly intertwined (e.g., Halpern-Meekin et al., 2013a; Monk et al., 2017). In other words, an ability to regulate self and relationships (i.e., differentiation) is likely to play a role in relationship status fluctuations and how conflict is handled (e.g., with violence) may be one important pathway through which this occurs.

Similarly, differentiation is also likely to influence commitment or the long-term orientation to continue a relationship. Differentiation has been found to be important for satisfying relationships (e.g., Lal & Bartle-Haring, 2011; Skowron, 2000; Skowron & Friedlander, 1998) and relationship satisfaction is closely intertwined with commitment (e.g., Cate et al., 2002; Rusbult, 1983). An individual's cohesive sense of self and ability to regulate closeness with a respect for the autonomy of others is vital for creating

lasting, committed unions (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Accordingly, differentiation was associated with two dimensions of commitment, dedication to the relationship and feeling constrained to continue the relationship. Although both dedication commitment and constraint commitment are known to be associated with relationship cycling in prior studies, these processes were not associated with cycling in the full structural model. According to mean difference tests, however, those who cycled had significantly more felt constraint and less dedication than those who had not cycled. Similarly, the effects of differentiation on the two commitment dimensions were more pronounced for those who had cycled (vs. those who had not cycled) in the post-hoc multi-group structural model. Thus, commitment seems to play a role in cycling and is associated with differentiation, but this role in the overall process is likely complex and should be explored in future studies given that commitment is an important feature of relationships (e.g., Le, Dove, Agnew, Korn, & Mutso, 2010).

Differentiation is also implicated in influencing the ability to make decisions with those more poorly differentiated being prone to conforming to others or making rash decisions due to thought interference and trouble regulating impulsivity (Papero, 1990, 2000). In the current studies, however, the measure of decision making in relationships failed to reach significance when assessing associations with other variables of interest in a full structural model.

Limitations. As with any study, the results of this investigation should be viewed in the context of the limitations. Namely, there were a number of drawbacks to using an existing dataset. First, the variables of interest were not in every wave and I was constrained as to when certain variables could be examined (e.g., differentiation and cycling). Theoretically it makes sense that a number of processes would occur before cycling (e.g., violence is experienced so an individual breaks-up with his or her partner and then subsequently renews), but it is also important to note that these processes could also occur after cycling. In fact, it is likely that these relational processes are occurring simultaneously (see Khaw & Hardesty, 2007). Although past behavior is considered the best predictor of future behavior (e.g., Ajzen, 2002; Albarracin & Wyer, 2000; Ouellette & Wood, 1998) with, for example, a history of violence predicting future violence (Exner-Cortens, Eckenrode, Bunge, & Rothman, 2017) and past cycling predicting future instability (e.g., Dailey et al., 2013; Vennum et al., 2014), this is an important limitation to note considering we cannot be sure when the reported cycling or violence occurred in these relationships.

Nevertheless, the post-hoc multi-group model and basic mean difference tests between those with and without a history of cycling revealed a similar pattern of results that support differentiation, commitment, and violence playing salient roles in on-off cycling. Based on Bowen's family systems theory, differentiation is often described as a dispositional characteristic of an individual developed from their family of origin (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Therefore, individuals are likely to maintain consistent

levels of differentiation without intense intervention. However, it is possible that variations in this level of differentiation could occur at certain times in specific relationships. Future studies should investigate these variables across longer periods of time in order to determine the sequence of events, but also to gain more insight into the causal role these mechanisms play in relationship instability. A number of participants dropped-out of the study or were removed due to relationship dissolution. It is possible that those who ended their relationships would provide additional insight into how differentiation affects relationships. Similarly, those who ended their relationships may reconcile with their partners in the future or may permanently separate, which could provide additional information to the current study. Nevertheless, the goal of the current study was to assess the process and role of the variables of interest in the same relationship. Future research should expand this investigation to incorporate other forms of relationship instability including fluctuations in commitment and regression in stage of involvement, in addition to permanent dissolution and on-off cycling.

Future research should also investigate multiple measures of differentiation in order to gain more nuanced insight into the role differentiation of self plays in relationships. In fact, scholars have criticized a number of existing differentiation measures (e.g., Miller et al., 2004; Schnarch & Regas, 2012). Having more precise measurement of this construct is vital in order to move the field forward. Similarly, the measure of relationship deciding also suffered from low internal consistency and did not maintain its structure when assessing external consistency in the measurement model. Having additional assessments of decision making would be beneficial in future research to understand the role of differentiation in making relational transition decisions.

Scholars advocate for distinguishing same-sex relationships by the sex composition of the dyad (e.g., Umberson, Thomeer, Kroeger, Lodge, & Xu, 2015). Due to gender socialization and the development of differentiation, lesbian couples, for example, are considered more likely to develop fusion than gay men (see Slater, 1995). Due to sample size, further segmentation of the data was untenable in the current study, although there were few differences in the samples regardless of how these relationships were compared. Multi-group models assessing measurement invariance between those in same and different-sex relationships in the full model failed to converge. However, there were no mean differences between these groups. This lack of difference supports the common discussion that same and different-sex couples are more alike than different when it comes to a multitude of relationship processes (e.g., Kurdek, 2005). Moreover, this is one of the first studies to assess differentiation in individuals in same and different-sex relationships. Relationship type and participant sex were also assessed as controls, but did not appear to influence the process. More intricate assessments and in-depth interviews could provide additional insight into how marginalized individuals are able to develop differentiation despite the numerous social obstacles discussed by McGoldrick and Carter (2001).

Chapter Four: Study 2

Method

Procedure

Sampling parameters were submitted to Qualtrics and included recruitment of respondents over the age of 18 who were currently in a romantic relationship, with partners who were willing to participate. Sample quotas for demographics such as race and education were also applied in an attempt to secure data that were more representative of the population. Despite evidence that differentiation scores are similar among ethnic minority students and European American samples (Skowron, 2004), increased diversity is important for not only external validity in general, but also to extend findings beyond small clinical samples and white university student samples, which have dominated research on Bowen Theory (see Jankowski & Hooper, 2012). Although attempts were made to recruit diversity in sexual orientation, Qualtrics panel members did not report on sexuality demographics to be a part of the existing panel, which would allow them to be directly sought for enrollment in the study. As a result, I was only able to request messages encouraging sexual minorities to complete the survey, which were included in correspondence with panel members. After IRB approval, recruited participants completed a 35-45 minute survey online with a battery of measures. Reminders were sent to prompt both partners to complete the survey; at which time they received compensation through Qualtrics. Each participant received approximately $12[1] for completing the survey.

Sample

As part of the current study, 119 couples (*N* = 238 individuals) were surveyed from a panel collected through Qualtrics, Inc. Although modest in size compared to more representative studies, the number of couples is an advancement in this area as previous studies of differentiation in couples have largely been conducted on small samples (e.g., 39 couples; Skowron, 2000). The vast majority of the sample reported being married (92%), followed by dating (4%) or engaged to be married (3%). The average relationship length was about 24 years (*M* = 23.69, *SD* = 13.87) and the majority of the sample reported living with their partner (97%) and having children (84%). Although the survey was open to individual panel members of all sexual orientations in various relationship forms, all individuals were in different-sex relationships and only one individual identified as non-heterosexual (i.e., bi-sexual female). Similarly, no one identified as trans* or gender non-conforming. Therefore, demographics are reported as distinguishable by partner sex.

On average, women were 50 years old (*M* = 50.28, *SD* = 12.74) and men were 52 years old (*M* = 52.19, *SD* = 13.24). For female partners, the majority identified as White (71%), followed by Hispanic or

[1] Each complete dyad costed $33 and according to Qualtrics representatives, couples receive 75% of that cost as compensation and the remaining balance goes toward recruitment expenses.

Latina (11%), Black (10%), Multi-racial (4%), or Asian (3%). The majority of male partners were also White (72%), followed by Black (13%), Hispanic or Latino (8%), and Multi-racial (6%). Only 10% of women reported completing a 4-year university or college degree, whereas 29% reported completing some college, an associate's degree, or a trade school, 32% reported completing high school, and about 27% reported only partially completing high school (10^{th} or 11^{th} grade). For men, 19% completed a 4-year university or college degree, 23% reported completing some college, an associates, or trade school, 29% held a high school diploma or equivalent, and about 24% only partially completed high school. The median individual yearly income for men and women was $30,000-$39,999.

Measures

Relationship cycling. Similar to Study 1, a single item assessing on-off relationship cycling was used as the moderating variable in Study 2. Participants were grouped based on the presence of cycling, which was labeled as *cyclical* (1), compared to *non-cyclical* (0) couples who had not experienced on-off instability (see Monk et al., 2014).

Differentiation of self. Similar to the brief measure used in Study 1, differentiation was measured using the full 46-item Differentiation of Self Inventory-Revised (DSI-R; Skowron & Schmitt, 2003). The Differentiation of Self Inventory is the most widely used measure of Bowen's differentiation concept and has been validated in previous studies (see Drake et al., 2015; Skowron et al., 2014). The full assessment includes four subscales: Emotional Reactivity (ER; e.g., "People have remarked that I'm overly emotional;" "If I have an argument with my spouse/partner, I tend to think about it all day;" α = .88, .91, for men and women respectively), Emotional Cut-Off (EC; e.g., "I tend to distance myself when people get too close to me;" "I have difficulty expressing my feelings to people I care for;" α = .87, .87, for men and women respectively), "I" Position (IP; e.g., "I tend to remain pretty calm even under stress;" "When I am having an argument with someone, I can separate my thoughts about the issue from my feelings about the person;" α = .81, .81, for men and women respectively), and Fusion with Others (FO; e.g., "When making decisions, I seldom worry about what others will think;" "Sometimes I feel sick after arguing with my spouse/partner;" α = .74, .75, for men and women respectively). Participants rate items on a 6-point Likert-type scale from 0 (*not at all true of me*) to 5 (*very true of me*). Items were scored so that higher values reflect more differentiation (e.g., less reactivity, less cut-off, less fusion with others, and higher values on the "I" position subscale). Internal consistency for the full DSI-R scale in past studies (e.g., α = .92; Skowron & Schmitt, 2003) and the current study (α = .92, .88, for men and women respectively) were strong.

Relationship outcomes. The same measure of *relationship violence* from Study 1 (Straus et al., 1996) was used for Study 2 to assess frequency of violence. Items were summed to get a frequency of violent incidents (α = .91, .96, for men and women respectively). Likewise, the same Study 1 measures of

dedication (Stanley et al., 2004; α = .71, .84, for men and women respectively), *felt constraint* (Rhoades et al., 2010; α = .96, .97, for men and women respectively), and *deciding* (Vennum & Fincham, 2011; α = .60, .65, for men and women respectively) were used for Study 2.

Controls. A variety of demographic and relationship variables were used as controls in the present study. I controlled for relationship length, marital status (1 = *married*; 0 = *non-married*), cohabitation status (1 = *cohabiting*; 0 = *non-cohabiting*), and having children (1 = *children*; 0 = *no children*). Additional demographic controls include age, race (1 = *white*; 0 = *marginalized racial identities*), level of education, and individual income.

Analytic Strategy

Final models were run using Hierarchical Linear Modeling (HLM 7; Raudenbush, Bryk, & Congdon, 2010) to account for the non-independence between partners using a Multi-Level Modeling (MLM) approach (see Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). According to Ledermann and Kenny (2017), MLM has several distinct advantages over SEM (Structural Equation Modeling) when conducting Actor-Partner Interdependence Models (APIMs). Namely, MLM is better equipped to assess APIMs in smaller samples than SEM requires. Moreover, the advantage of goodness-of-fit tests in SEM frameworks is not relevant for most APIM analyses, which are often saturated models, and the use of Restricted Maximum Likelihood in MLM is regarded as less biased than Maximum Likelihood (ML) estimation in SEM (which is considered downwardly biased; Ledermann & Kenny, 2017).

A two-intercept model approach was used to estimate unique parameters for both partners simultaneously (see Ledermann & Kenny, 2017; Raudenbush, Brennan, & Barnett, 1995). Separate APIMs were assessed for each of the key relational processes identified in Study 1 (deciding, dedication, constraint, and violence). An actor effect is the influence individuals have on their own outcomes, whereas a partner effect is the influence individuals have on their partners' outcomes (Ledermann & Kenny, 2017). Models were first run with all controls and actor and partner effects. Differences in cyclical and non-cyclical relationships were assessed by including on-off cycling as a dyad-level variable and decomposing interaction effects. Thus, for each interaction, I plotted values of the predictor at one standard deviation above and one standard deviation below the mean as high and low values (Aiken & West, 1991). Although all controls (i.e., marital status, cohabitation status, relationship length, presence of children, age, race, education, and income) were included for both women and men, controls that were not significant for both partners were removed when reporting the final models for parsimony. Cycling as a moderator was included on both intercepts to model main effects and then was included with each variable of interest to model interaction effects.

An example equation for all initial two-intercept models is as follows:

Level-1 Model:

Relationship Outcome = β_1 (Male Intercept) + β_2 (Female Intercept) + β_3 (Men's Age) + β_4 (Men's Race) + β_5 (Men's Education) + β_6 (Men's Income) + β_7 (Men's Differentiation) + β_8 (Men's Partners' Differentiation) + β_9 (Women's Age) + β_{10} (Women's Race) + β_{11} (Women's Education) + β_{12} (Women's Income) + β_{13} (Women's Differentiation) + β_{14} (Women's Partners' Differentiation) + r

Level-2 Model:

$\beta_1 = \gamma_{10} + \gamma_{11}$ (Marital Status) + γ_{12} (Cohabitation) + γ_{13} (Cycling) + γ_{14} (Relationship Length) + γ_{15} (Children) + u_1
$\beta_2 = \gamma_{20} + \gamma_{21}$ (Marital Status) + γ_{22} (Cohabitation) + γ_{23} (Cycling) + γ_{24} (Relationship Length) + γ_{25} (Children) + u_2
$\beta_3 = \gamma_{30}$
$\beta_4 = \gamma_{40}$
$\beta_5 = \gamma_{50}$
$\beta_6 = \gamma_{60}$
$\beta_7 = \gamma_{70} + \gamma_{71}$ (Cycling)
$\beta_8 = \gamma_{80} + \gamma_{81}$ (Cycling)
$\beta_9 = \gamma_{90}$
$\beta_{10} = \gamma_{100}$
$\beta_{11} = \gamma_{110}$
$\beta_{12} = \gamma_{120}$
$\beta_{13} = \gamma_{130} + \gamma_{131}$ (Cycling)
$\beta_{14} = \gamma_{140} + \gamma_{141}$ (Cycling)

Results

According to missing values analyses (MVAs) there was less than 2% missing data on any of the variables of interest. Missing values were handled using Restricted Maximum Likelihood. Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations between the variables of interest are presented in Table 4. Given the non-independence inherent in these data, bivariate correlations are presented for descriptive purposes only because they include multiple sources of variance.

Approximately one-third of couples (35%) reported that they had broken up and gotten back together at least once in their current relationship. Among those who cycled, the number of times they broke-up and renewed ranged from 1 to 5 (M = 1.61, SD = .90). Prior studies indicate that relationship duration is a factor in cycling (Dailey, Pfiester, et al., 2009), but there were no significant differences in relationship length (p = .96) between those who cycled and those who did not cycle. Next, difference tests were run to assess mean level differences in cycling on the variables of interest. The only significant differences were on women's EC (emotional cut-off [reverse coded]; t [117] = 1.98, $p < .05$) and felt constraint (t [56.35] = -2.00, $p < .05$), with those who cycled reporting more emotional cut-off and more felt constraint. Point bi-serial correlations were also run between cycling and the variables of interest. For female partners (but not men), cycling was associated with the frequency of violence in the past year (r_{pb} = .19, $p < .05$), felt constraint (r_{pb} = .21, $p >.05$), and EC (r_{pb} = -.18, $p <.05$). Acronyms of EC, ER, and FO are used to denote the reverse coded subscales of differentiation to explain the valence of effects, which is standard in the differentiation literature (see Skowron, Webster, & Azen, 2004, for example). Men in this study reported being more differentiated than women (t [236] = -2.96, $p < .05$).

Table 4. *Descriptive Statistics and Bivariate Correlations for Study Variables (N = 238)*

	Descriptive Statistics				Bivariate Correlations								
	Male Partners (n = 119)		*Female Partners* (n = 119)										
Variable	Mean	*SD*	Mean	*SD*	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.
1. Differentiation	3.39	.68	3.13	.67	**.32*** **	.62***	.79***	.69***	.90***	-.14	.14	-.30***	.05
2. IP	3.36	.88	3.32	.78	.63***	**.13**	.32***	.24**	.43***	-.10	.16	-.15	.24**
3. FO	2.99	.78	2.70	.77	.74***	.20*	**.33*** **	.32***	.74***	-.14	-.13	.03	-.09
4. EC	3.82	.86	3.81	.89	.80***	.39***	.40***	**.35*** **	.47***	-.04	.32***	-.45***	.09
5. ER	3.36	1.01	2.67	1.10	.90***	.37***	.69***	.64***	**.27** **	-.15	.06	-.23**	.07
6. Violence	3.76	12.38	3.75	15.38	-.12	-.03	-.07	-.12	-.15	**.20***	-.16	.22*	.04
7. Dedication	21.05	3.59	20.48	4.49	.25**	.27**	.06	.28**	.15	.00	**.62*** **	-.79***	.27**
8. Felt Constraint	1.68	3.67	2.04	4.14	-.41**	-.33***	-.20*	-.44***	-.30***	.18*	-.52***	**.60*** **	-.10
9. Deciding	11.67	3.09	12.57	3.08	.14	.21*	-.07	.22*	.06	.01	.29***	-.13	**.45*** **

Note. Bolded diagonal values are correlations between partners within the same couple. Correlation values below the diagonal are for men and values above are for women. IP = "I" Position, ER = Emotional Reactivity (reverse coded), EC = Emotional Cut-Off (reverse coded), FO = Fusion with Others (reverse coded); * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, ***$p < .001$

Relationship Deciding Model

Similar to Study 1, relationship deciding failed to reach significance in its association with the variables of interest in the final model. In other words, differentiation and cycling were not associated with deciding in the final model (see Table 5). Although the interaction between cycling and male partners' differentiation predicting women's deciding was approaching significance (γ_{81} = -1.59, p = .06), the main effects and simple slopes were also not significant. Men's level of education was positively associated with relationship deciding.

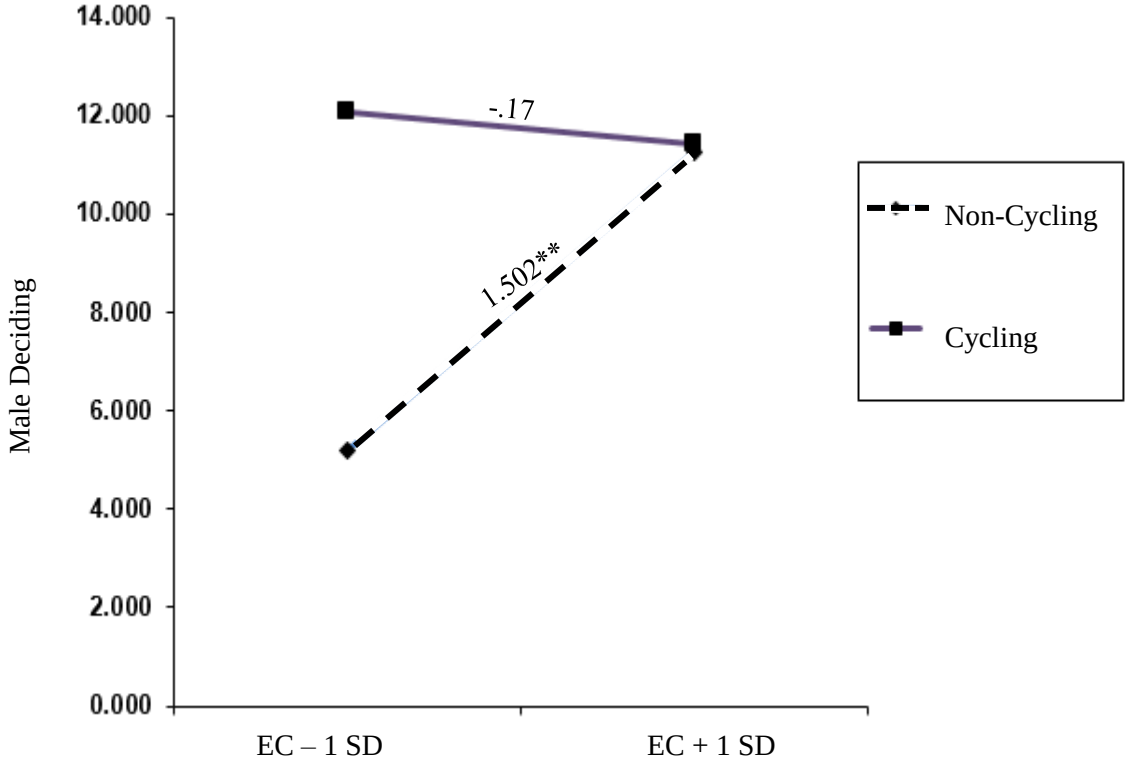
Table 5. *Multilevel Model for Differentiation and Relationship Deciding (N = 119 dyads)*

Deciding	*Unstandardized Coefficient*	*SE*	*df*	*t*-ratio
Male Intercept γ_{10}	8.55	2.16	117	3.96***
Cycling, γ_{11}	2.11	3.27	117	.65
Female Intercept, γ_{20}	9.50	2.52	117	3.77***
Cycling, γ_{21}	4.04	3.27	117	1.24
Men's Education, γ_{30}	.46	.23	228	2.05*
Men's Differentiation, γ_{40}	.79	.61	228	1.31
Cycling, γ_{41}	-.26	.93	228	-.28
Men's Partners' Differentiation, γ_{50}	-.37	.55	228	-.66
Cycling, γ_{51}	-.34	.97	228	-.35
Women's Education, γ_{60}	-.01	.25	228	-.04
Women's Differentiation, γ_{70}	.01	.56	228	.02
Cycling, γ_{71}	.67	.75	228	.90
Women's Partners' Differentiation, γ_{80}	.82	.66	228	1.25
Cycling, γ_{81}	-1.59	.86	228	-1.85†

Note. Non-significant controls were removed for parsimony.
$^{\dagger}p < .07$. *** $p < .001$.

Nevertheless, post-hoc models were run taking a more nuanced look at each subscale of differentiation as separate predictors. In this model with EC reverse coded[2] so that lower values reflect more emotional cut-off (i.e., poorer differentiation; see Skowron et al., 2004), for men, EC was associated with deciding ($\gamma = 1.50$, $p < .01$). In other words, greater emotional cut-off (i.e., lower values of EC) was associated with less relationship deciding. This effect was moderated by cycling ($\gamma = -1.67$, $p < .05$), such that under conditions of greater emotional cut-off (i.e., lower values of EC), men who did not cycle endorsed less relationship deciding than when under conditions of lesser emotional cut-off (i.e., higher EC). The slope was not significant for cyclers (see Figure 6). Although the interaction between fusion and cycling predicting women's own deciding was significant ($\gamma = 2.41$, $p < .05$), the main effect of cycling ($p = .66$), women's fusion ($p = .26$), and the simple slopes were not significant.

Figure 6. *Interaction of cycling and emotional cut-off on deciding for men.*



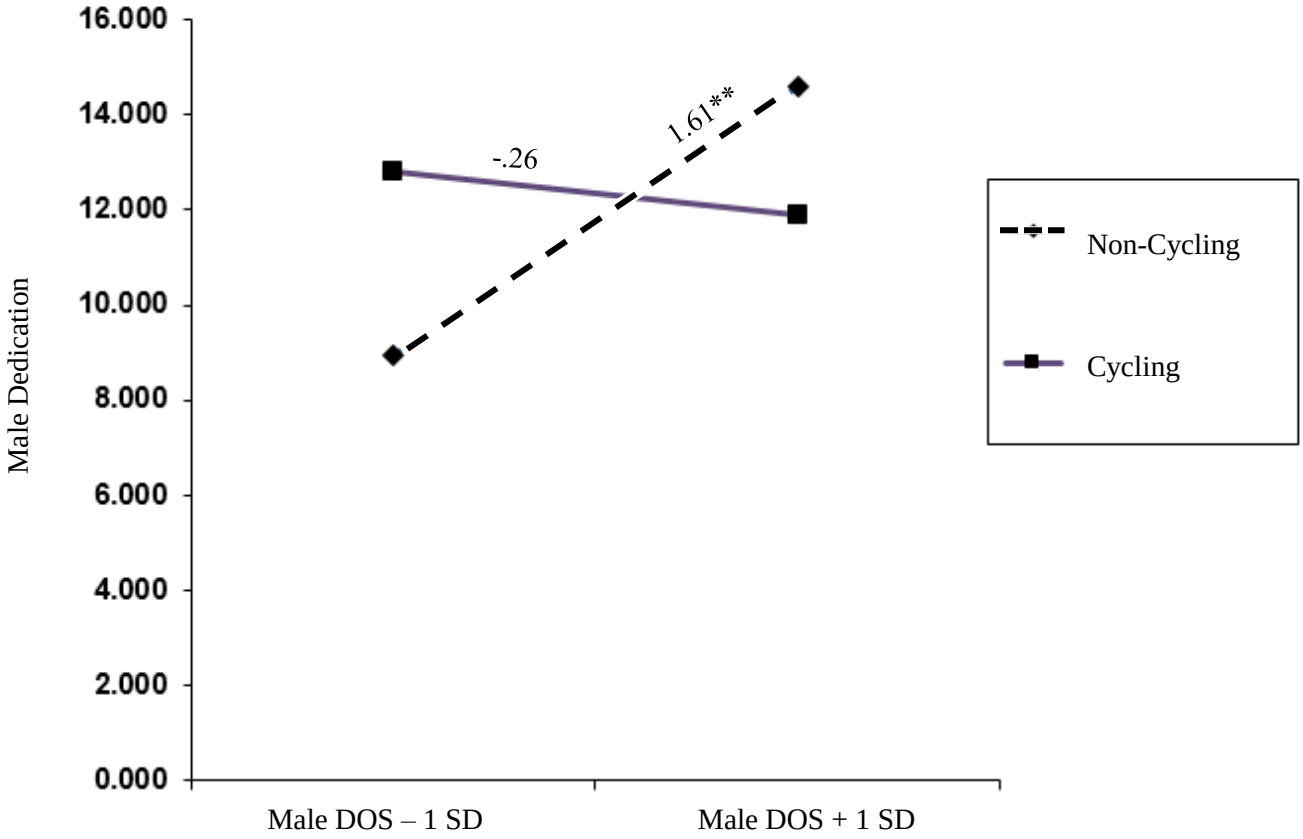
EC = Emotional Cut-Off (reverse coded). ** $p < .01$.

[2] Acronyms of EC, ER, and FO are used to denote the reverse coded variables, which is standard in the differentiation literature (see Skowron et al., 2004, for example).

Dedication Model

Men's level of differentiation was positively associated with their own dedication ($\gamma_{40} = 1.61$, $p < .01$). The moderation of this actor effect by cycling was approaching significance ($\gamma_{41} = -1.87$, $p = .07$), potentially indicating that under conditions of high differentiation, men who had not cycled reported more dedication, whereas they reported less dedication under conditions of lower differentiation (see Figure 7). Men's level of differentiation was also positively associated with their partners' dedication ($\gamma_{80} = 1.64$, $p < .05$).

Figure 7. *Interaction of cycling and differentiation on men's own dedication*.

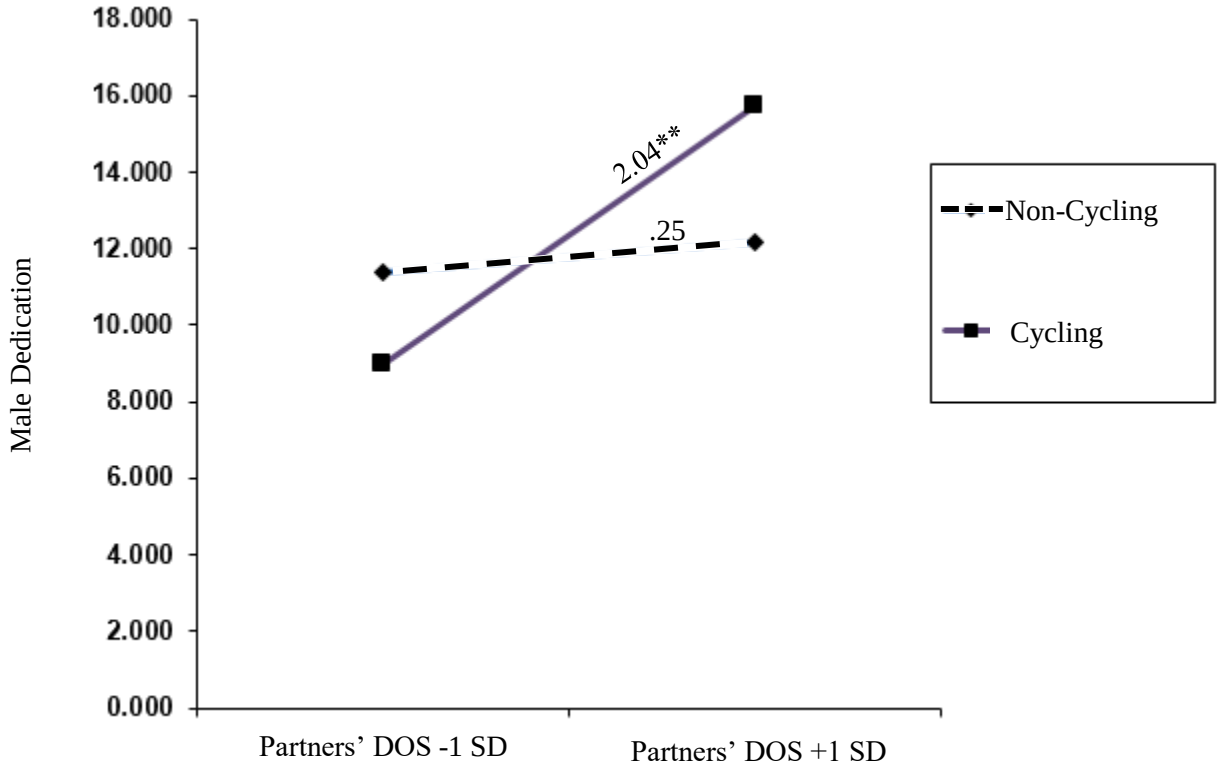


** $p < .01$.

Although there was no main effect of cycling ($p = .87$; $p = .94$, for men and women respectively) and there was no main partner effect of women's differentiation predicting men's dedication ($p = .69$), the interaction of cycling and this partner effect was approaching significance ($\gamma_{51} = 1.80$, $p = .07$). The decomposition of this potential interaction effect indicates that under conditions of female partners' higher differentiation, men in relationships that had cycled reported more dedication than under conditions of lower differentiation for women (see Figure 8). This effect was not true of those who had not cycled. Marital

status was positively associated with dedication for men and women, and age was negatively associated with dedication for women, but not for men. See Table 6 for the full model.

Figure 8. *Interaction of cycling and female partners' differentiation on men's dedication.*



** $p < .01$.

Table 6. *Multilevel Model for Differentiation and Dedication (N = 119 dyads)*

Dedication	*Unstandardized Coefficient*	*SE*	*df*	*t*-ratio
Male Intercept γ_{10}	11.85	3.06	116	3.87***
Marital Status, γ_{11}	3.42	1.34	116	2.54*
Cycling, γ_{12}	.59	3.48	116	.17
Female Intercept, γ_{20}	10.24	4.35	116	2.35*

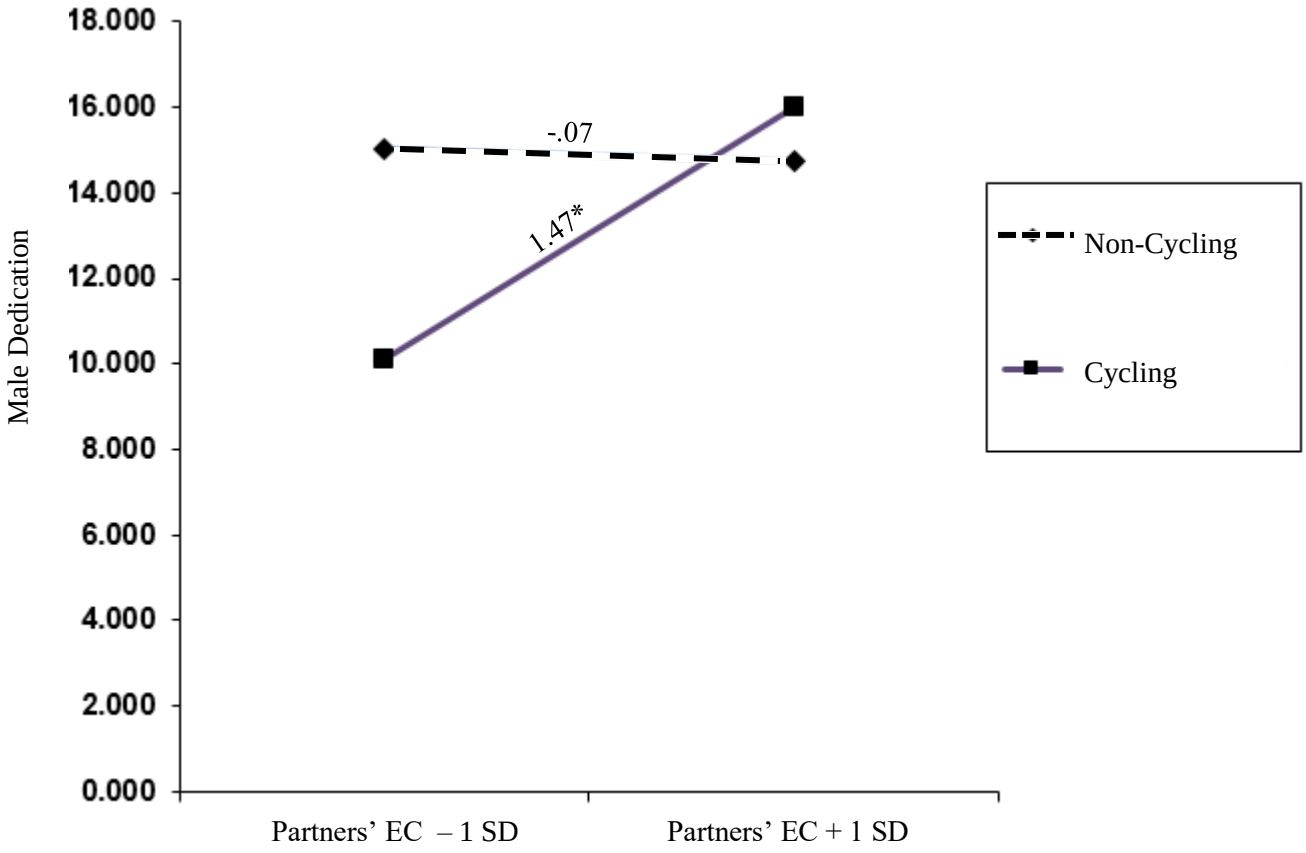
Table 6. (cont.)

Dedication	*Unstandardized Coefficient*	*SE*	*df*	*t*-ratio
Marital Status, γ_{21}	6.29	2.35	116	2.68**
Cycling, γ_{22}	.37	4.85	116	.08
Men's Age, γ_{30}	-.00	.02	228	-.19
Men's Differentiation, γ_{40}	1.61	.61	228	2.64**
Cycling, γ_{41}	-1.87	1.03	228	-1.81†
Men's Partners' Differentiation, γ_{50}	.25	.63	228	.40
Cycling, γ_{51}	1.80	1.00	228	1.80†
Women's Age, γ_{60}	-.06	.02	228	-2.55*
Women's Differentiation, γ_{70}	.62	.76	228	.82
Cycling, γ_{71}	.15	1.29	228	.12
Women's Partners' Differentiation, γ_{80}	1.64	.75	228	2.19*
Cycling, γ_{81}	-.37	1.32	228	-.28

Note. Non-significant controls were removed for parsimony.
$^{\dagger}p < .08$. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

To understand the particular differentiation mechanisms that may be playing a distinct role, post-hoc analyses were run with each subscale of differentiation included in the model with cycling. In this model, men's EC was associated with their own dedication ($\gamma = 1.15$, $p < .05$), such that greater emotional cut-off (i.e., lower EC) was associated with less dedication. The moderation of the partner effect from women's EC to men's dedication by cycling was approaching significance ($\gamma = 1.54$, $p = .06$). The decomposition of this interaction indicates that when their partners had greater emotional cut-off (i.e., lower EC), male cyclers reported less dedication than when their partners were lower in emotional cut-off (see Figure 9). This effect was not true of those who had not cycled.

Figure 9. Interaction of cycling and partners' emotional cut-off on dedication for men.



EC = Emotional Cut-Off (reverse coded). *$p < .05$.

Felt Constraint Model

According to the APIM for felt constraint, men's level of differentiation was negatively associated with their own felt constraint ($\gamma_{30} = -2.59$, $p < .001$), as well as their partners' felt constraint ($\gamma_{60} = -1.97$, $p < .001$). Marital status was negatively associated and cohabitation was positively associated with feeling constrained for women, but not for men (see Table 7).

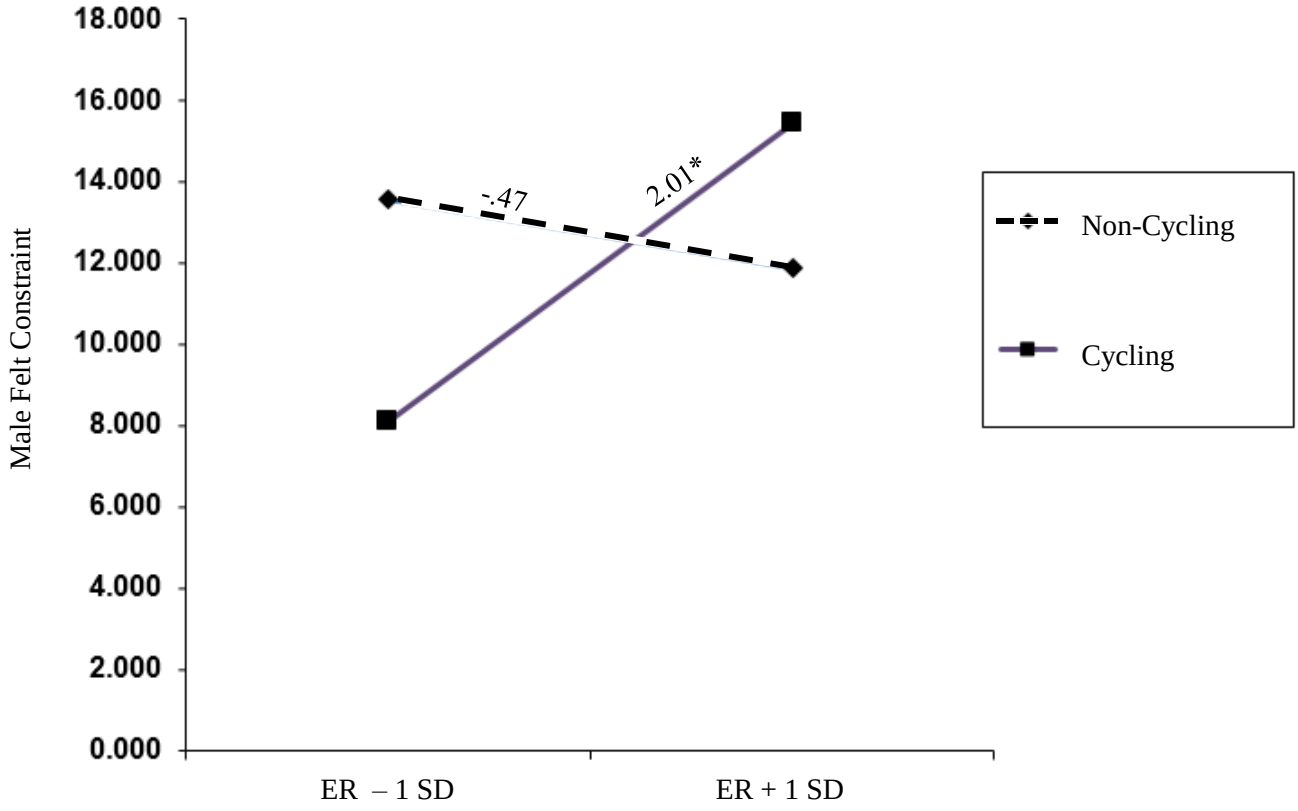
Table 7. *Multilevel Model for Differentiation and Felt Constraint (N = 119 dyads)*

Constraint	*Unstandardized Coefficient*	*SE*	*df*	*t*-ratio
Male Intercept, γ_{10}	12.69	4.13	115	3.08**
Marital Status, γ_{11}	-1.12	1.55	115	-.73
Cohabitation, γ_{12}	.92	1.15	115	.79
Cycling, γ_{13}	-4.52	4.67	115	-.97
Female Intercept, γ_{20}	11.28	2.87	115	3.93***
Marital Status, γ_{21}	-5.72	1.93	115	-2.96**
Cohabitation, γ_{22}	4.48	1.51	115	2.97**
Cycling, γ_{23}	2.36	4.69	115	.62
Men's Differentiation, γ_{30}	-2.59	.72	230	-3.59***
Cycling, γ_{31}	1.78	1.70	230	1.05
Men's Partners' Differentiation, γ_{40}	-.68	.67	230	-1.01
Cycling, γ_{41}	-.44	1.41	230	-.31
Women's Differentiation, γ_{50}	-.67	.44	230	-1.52
Cycling, γ_{51}	-1.51	1.28	230	-1.18
Women's Partners' Differentiation, γ_{60}	-1.97	.58	230	-3.39***
Cycling, γ_{61}	1.00	1.64	230	.61

Note. Non-significant controls for both partners were removed for parsimony.
**$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

For a more nuanced look at the association between differentiation of self and felt constraint, post-hoc models were run assessing each subscale of differentiation in one model. The interaction between cycling and men's emotional reactivity predicting their own felt constraint was significant (γ = 2.48, $p < .05$; see Figure 10), although there were no main effects of the moderator or predictor. Accordingly, under conditions of lower ER (i.e., more emotional reactivity), male cyclers reported less felt constraint in their relationships than under conditions of higher ER (i.e., less emotional reactivity).

Figure 10. *Interaction of cycling and emotional reactivity on constraint for men.*



ER = Emotional Reactivity (reverse coded). * $p < .05$.

Similarly, the interaction between cycling and men's ability to take an "I" position predicting their own felt constraint was approaching significance (γ = -1.84, p = .05); however, the simple slopes and main effects were not significant. Men's EC was associated with their own felt constraint (γ = -1.68, $p <$ .001), such that greater emotional cut-off (i.e., low EC) was associated with more felt constraint. Women's EC predicting their partner's felt constraint was approaching significance (γ = -.83, p = .08) as was men's ability to take an "I" position predicting their partners' felt constraint (γ = -1.10, $p < .07$). In other words, although this was not statistically significant, when women reported greater emotional cut-

off (i.e., less EC), their male partners reported more felt constraint and when men were more able to adhere to their own convictions under pressure, their partners reported less felt constraint. Men's EC was associated with their partner's felt constraint (γ = -1.00, p < .05), such that when men reported less emotional cut-off (i.e., greater values of EC), their female partners reported less felt constraint.

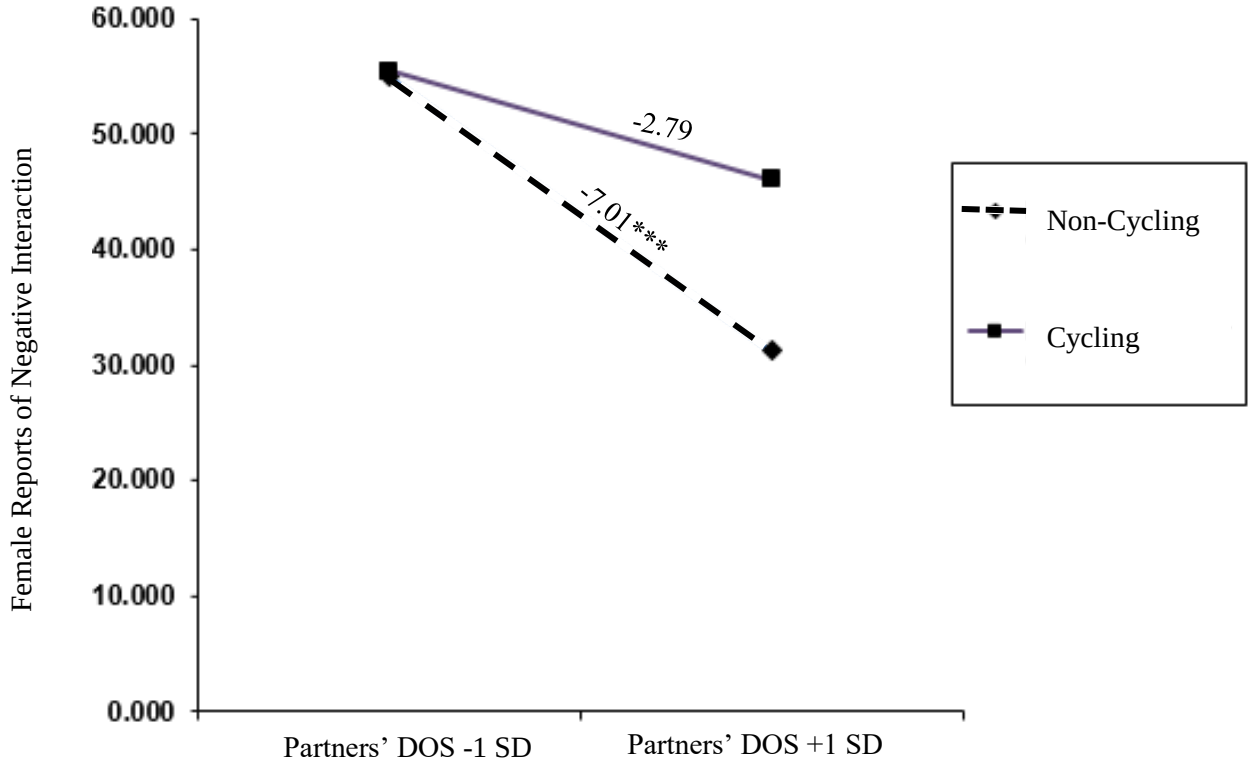
Physical Violence and Negative Interaction Models

With very little variability in physical violence in this sample, there was no significance in the model assessing differentiation and frequency of violence. Therefore, as a post-hoc analysis, the 9-item version of the communication danger signs questionnaire (Owen, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2011: Stanley et al., 2005) was used as a proxy for hostile or contentious interaction. This scale included items such as "Little arguments escalate into ugly fights with accusations, criticisms, name-calling, or bringing up past hurts" and "My partner criticizes or belittles my opinions, feelings, or desires." Response options ranged from 0 (*never*) to 5 (*all of the time*) and as with past studies (e.g., Stanley et al., 2005) a total score was used in the current study (M = 12.97, SD = 9.11; M = 12.33, SD = 7.78, for women and men respectively). This measure has also demonstrated convergence with other related constructs in addition to demonstrating good internal consistency in past studies (Stanley et al., 2005) and the current study (α = .83, .88; for men and women respectively).

According to bivariate correlations, negative interaction was associated with differentiation (r = -.40, p < .001; r = - .58, p < .001, for women and men respectively), emotional cut-off (reverse coded; r = -57, p < .001; r = - .55, p < .001, for women and men respectively), and emotional reactivity (reverse coded; r = -.35, p < .001; r = -.47, p < .001, for women and men respectively). For men, negative interaction was also associated with fusion (reverse coded; r = -.28, p < .01) and ability to take an "I" position (r = -.47, p < .001). Additionally, reports of negative interaction were highly correlated between partners (r = .68, p < .001).

Men's differentiation was negatively associated with their own reports of negative interaction (γ_{30} = -6.10, p < .001) and women's differentiation was also negatively associated with their own reports of negative interaction in the relationship (γ_{50} = -2.26, p < .05). Similarly, men's level of differentiation was negatively associated with their partners' reports of negative interaction in the relationship (γ_{60} = -7.01, p < .001). This effect was moderated by cycling (γ_{61} = 4.23, p > .05), such that, for non-cyclers, under conditions of men's lower differentiation, their female partners reported more negative interaction in the relationship than when men were more well differentiated (see Figure 11). The partner effect from women's level of differentiation to their male partners' reports of negative interaction, however, failed to reach significance (γ_{40} = -.94, p = .46; see Table 8).

Figure 11. *Interaction of cycling and male partners' differentiation on women's reports of negative interaction.*



DOS = Differentiation of Self. ***p< .001.

Table 8. *Multilevel Model for Differentiation and Negative Interaction (N = 119 dyads)*

Negative Interaction	*Unstandardized Coefficient*	*SE*	*df*	*t*-ratio
Male Intercept γ_{10}	40.83	4.58	115	8.92***
Marital Status, γ_{11}	-5.49	1.85	115	-2.97**
Cohabitation, γ_{12}	.11	1.83	115	.06
Cycling, γ_{13}	2.94	7.08	115	.68
Female Intercept, γ_{20}	43.13	5.54	115	7.79***
Marital Status, γ_{21}	-8.38	3.31	115	-2.53*
Cohabitation, γ_{22}	7.59	3.09	115	2.46*

Table 8. (cont.)

Negative Interaction	*Unstandardized Coefficient*	*SE*	*df*	*t*-ratio
Cycling, γ_{23}	-1.80	7.88	115	-.23
Men's Differentiation, γ_{30}	-6.10	1.12	229	-5.47***
Cycling, γ_{31}	.12	2.61	229	.04
Men's Partners' Differentiation, γ_{40}	-.94	1.27	229	-.74
Cycling, γ_{41}	-1.13	2.31	229	-.49
Women's Differentiation, γ_{50}	-2.26	1.07	229	-2.11*
Cycling, γ_{51}	-3.15	2.02	229	-1.56
Women's Partners' Differentiation, γ_{60}	-7.01	1.24	229	-5.65***
Cycling, γ_{61}	4.23	2.09	229	2.03*

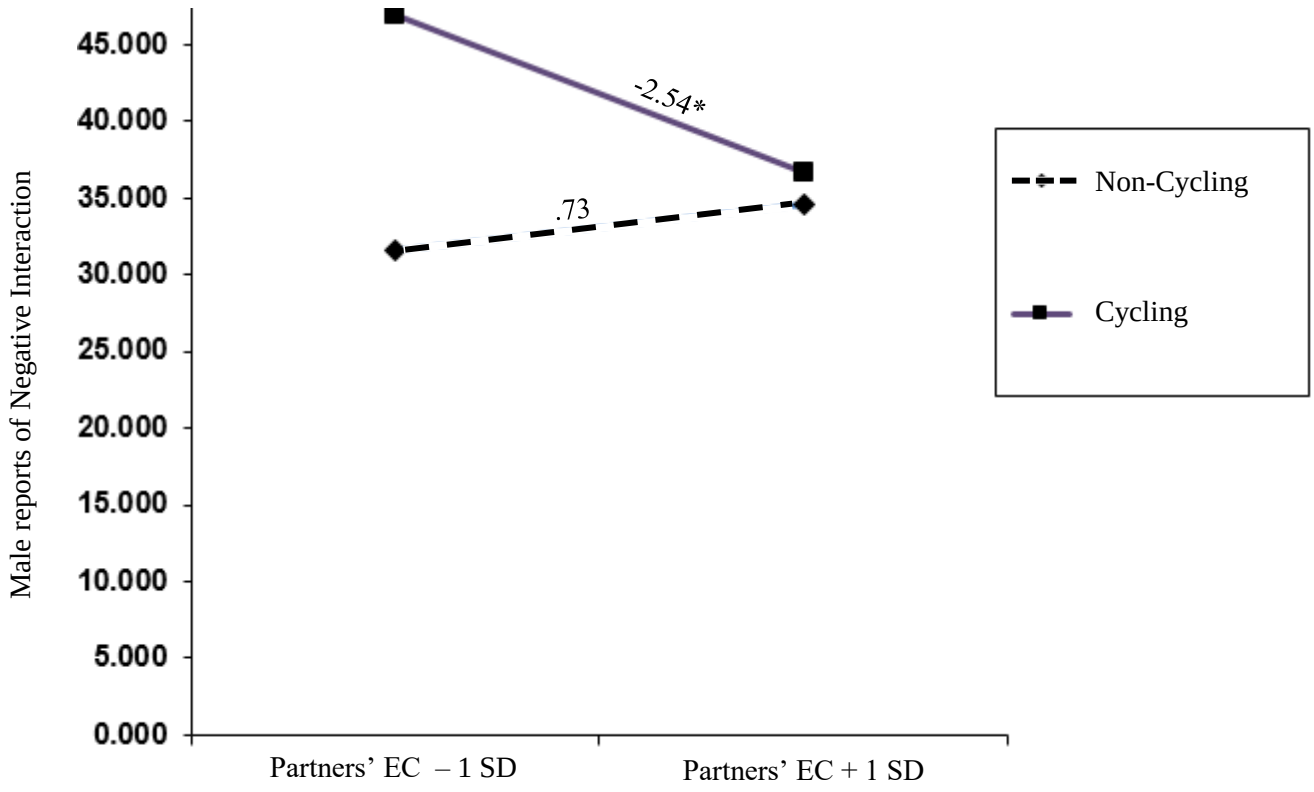
Note. Non-significant controls for both partners were removed for parsimony.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

To understand the particular differentiation mechanisms that may be playing a distinct role, post-hoc analyses were run with the separate subscales of differentiation in one model. Similar to the other models (i.e., deciding, dedication, and felt constraint), emotional cut-off emerged as a salient predictor. In fact, men's EC was associated with not only their own reports of negative interaction ($\gamma = -3.29$, $p < .01$), but also their partners' reports of negative interaction ($\gamma = -3.38$, $p < .05$). Thus, more emotional cut-off reported by men was associated with more reports of negative interaction from themselves and their partners. Although there was no significant main effect, the partner effect of women's EC predicting men's reports of negative interaction was moderated by cycling ($\gamma_{91} = -3.27$, $p < .05$), indicating a potential conditional effect. Under conditions of female partners' lower levels of emotional cut-off (i.e., greater values of EC), male cyclers reported less negative interaction than when their partners' reported higher emotional cut-off (i.e., lesser values of EC; see Figure 12).

The interaction between men's ability to take an "I" position and cycling was approaching significance ($\gamma = -2.63$, $p = .06$). Under conditions of higher levels of IP, men who cycled reported less

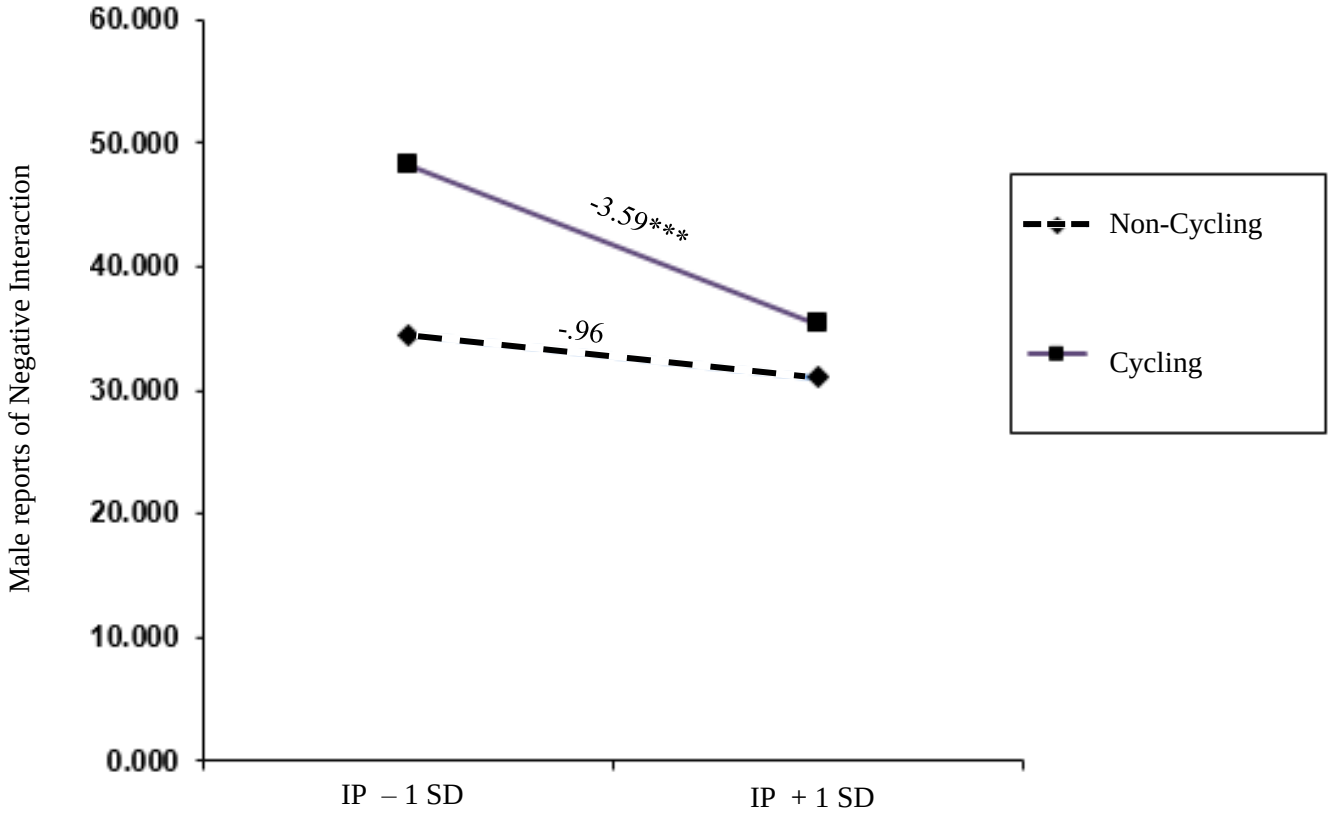
negative interaction than at lower levels of IP (see Figure 13). This effect was not true of those without a history of cycling. Men's ability to take an "I" position was negatively associated with their female partners' reports of negative interaction ($\gamma = -2.50$, $p < .05$).

Figure 12. *Interaction of cycling and female partners' emotional cut-off on negative interaction for men.*



EC = Emotional Cut-Off (reverse coded). * $p < .05$.

Figure 13. *Interaction of cycling and the ability to take an "I" position on negative interaction for men.*



IP = "I" Position. ***$p < .001$.

Discussion

Differentiation was positively correlated with dedication for men and negatively correlated with felt constraint for men and women. According to actor partner interdependence models (APIMs), men's level of differentiation was positively associated with their own dedication, as well as their partners' dedication to the relationship. Similarly, men's level of differentiation was negatively associated with their own felt constraint, as well as their partners' felt constraint. In other words, it appears that differentiation of self is connected with commitment to the relationship in that more well-differentiated individuals report more dedication and feeling less trapped in their relationships compared to those who are less differentiated. When accounting for both actor and partner effects, however, this association was only found for men, although women's reports of commitment appear to be influenced by their partners' level of differentiation. Past research illustrates the fact that women are often more affected by and in tune to their long-term relationships than men (e.g., Acitelli, 1992, 2001), which would make it probable that women, more than men, would be affected by their partners. However, the lack of findings of actor effects in women and partner effects predicting men's outcomes could also be a function of the small sample size or other potential processes that may be more influential for dedication and felt constraint.

Few associations were found for relationship deciding and relationship violence. Like Study 1, the measure of deciding suffered from poor internal consistency and was not correlated with many of the variables of interest. For violence, however, the lack of findings is likely due to the low frequency of physical assault in this sample. Accordingly, poor or aggressive communication was assessed as a post-hoc analysis using the communication danger signs questionnaire. In this communication model, men's and women's own levels of differentiation were negatively associated with their own reports of negative interaction. Thus, individuals' ability to regulate their emotions and balance closeness with individuality was associated with reports of more effective communication patterns in their partners. This supports research indicating that differentiation is associated with less relationship conflict (e.g., Miller et al., 2004). Similarly, there was a significant association between men's level of differentiation and their partners' reports of negative interaction. This association indicates that for men who are more poorly differentiated, their partners' reported more tense communication above and beyond their own level of differentiation. Taken together, differentiation of self seems to play a role in a variety of relational processes; namely communication and commitment.

According to systems theory, partners are interconnected with each other in that one's actions impact his or her partner's outcomes (Cox & Paley, 2003). Bowen's theory in particular discusses how the ability to connect with others, while also maintaining a secure sense of who one is as an autonomous individual, has a direct effect on the way that individuals react and interact with their partners. As a result, this interconnection and balance affects the way individuals and their partners perceive their relationships

(Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Thus, individuals' inability to regulate their emotions (or their lack of emotions) and their inability to balance attachment and autonomy can directly affect their partners' experience of the relationship. Based on prior concerns about family systems and victim blaming (see McCollum & Stith, 2008), it is important to acknowledge that individuals may be affected and upset by a partner, but that does not justify violence in the relationship. Differentiation allows for the expression of emotionality and hurt in safe ways without reactivity that could include physical assault as a form of coping (see Bartle & Rosen, 1994; Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Rosen et al., 2001). It is also important to note that some violent acts from perpetrators, such as in the context of coercive controlling violence, can occur regardless of victims' actions in these systems (see Johnson, 2008). It is also important to state that no interpretations about coercive controlling violence can be gleaned from these data, and in this sample in particular, a limited presence of situational violence limits the ability to make claims beyond general relationship conflict (i.e., negative interaction).

With advancement in the theory through feminist critique, supporting the regulation of emotion and closeness is now understood to not be synonymous with advocating for distance in relationships or the suppression of emotionality, which can disadvantage women and hurt both partners (Hare-Mustin, 1978; Knudson-Martin, 1994; McGoldrick & Carter, 2001). Instead, the ability to maintain closeness and interact with partners without either individual feeling like they are losing themselves as autonomous, intellectual beings, also allows for individuals to avoid feeling distant or cut-off. According to post-hoc assessments and bivariate correlations, individuals' propensity for emotional cut-off was the most consistent predictor of the relational variables of interest. Women and men who reported more emotional cut-off, for example, also reported more felt constraint and negative interaction and less dedication, than those who reported lower levels of emotional cut-off. This supports past critiques by feminist family therapists (e.g., Knudson-Martin, 1994) who advocate moving past a narrow focus on being fused and overly emotional, by also considering the deleterious effects of emotional cut-off and withdrawal due to an inability to balance these systems.

Compared to Study 1, there were less robust differences in the variables of interest by cycling in this sample. Although there were a number of significant moderations, there were few basic mean differences on the variables of interest between those with and without a history of cycling. Men's differentiation predicting their own dedication was moderated by cycling in that men who did not cycle were more dedicated under conditions of high differentiation than when they reported lower levels of differentiation. Similarly, under conditions of women's greater differentiation, their male partners in cyclical relationships reported more dedication than when women were more poorly differentiated. For negative interaction, when men reported lower levels of differentiation, their female partners in non-

cyclical relationships reported more negative interactions than when men reported higher levels of differentiation. This effect was not significant for cyclers.

One potential explanation for the limited differences between cyclers and non-cyclers is that due to an intention to recruit a sample beyond white college students, the sample in the current study is much older with relationships of longer duration than most studies of differentiation and cycling. Therefore, those who have a history of cycling have had the opportunity to work past prior issues that resulted in relationship status fluctuations. In fact, prior research indicates that those who cycle are more likely to experience future instability and later dissolution, but some of these relationships eventually become stable (e.g., e.g., Dailey et al., 2013; Vennum et al., 2014). Thus, cyclers who are unable to work out their relationship issues, are more likely to eventually dissolve permanently, whereas cyclers who have remained in their unions over a long period of time have likely stabilized. Although prior research indicates that relationship length is positively associated with cycling due to the increase in opportunities to cycle (e.g., Dailey, Pfiester, et al., 2009; Monk et al., 2014), this effect was found in younger samples. Scholars indicate that a number of relational processes may function differently depending on relationship duration (e.g., Ogolsky, 2009) and age (e.g., Jensen & Rauer, 2015).

Limitations. Compared to the number of analyses that were run, few associations were found in a variety of relationship outcomes (e.g., relationship deciding and violence). A variety of factors likely played a role including small sample size and issues with measurement. In fact, assessment of relationship deciding and violence suffered from important limitations including the inability to consider different types of intimate partner violence. Decision making, for example, had poor internal consistency, particularly for men and frequency of violence had very little variability due to a low occurrence of violence in this sample. Although this study had more diversity than past research in a variety of characteristics (e.g., race and education), the questions asked of individuals before inclusion as panel members limited my ability to target and recruit same-sex couples and individuals who identify as sexual minorities. There were virtually no differences in the variables of interest between those in same and those in different-sex relationships in Study 1, but scholars should expand this research by incorporating multiple dimensions of diversity, especially when refining measurement.

Moreover, this cross-sectional assessment of couples offers only a snap-shot into these processes. Following couples over-time would allow for more insight into how these processes might change over the course of a relationship. Similarly, incorporating other forms of assessment would be beneficial including observation of couple interaction, formal diagnoses of differentiation, and in-depth qualitative interviews to gain more knowledge about the experience and processes that unfold in relation to differentiation. Skowron (2004), for example, argues that qualitative methods would be particularly amenable to determining the meanings of differentiation (and specific items from the DSI) held for

members of diverse groups. Incorporation of multiple methods can also help researchers move past mono-method limitations that currently exist in the social and relationship sciences (Fincham, 2012).

Chapter Five: Integrative Discussion

In both studies, approximately one-third of participants reported cycling in their relationships (32% - 35%). These results mirror rates of cycling in past research in younger dating (Dailey, Pfiester, et al., 2009) and married (Binstock & Thornton, 2003) samples. The present studies are among the first to investigate cycling in samples that are not largely comprised of young adults, which provides new insight to this area. In both studies there was evidence of the associations between differentiation and many of the relationship variables of interest (i.e., dedication, felt constraint, and situational violence or negative interaction). The association between differentiation and cycling, however, was more complex. In fact, the relationship between differentiation and cycling was more robust in Study 1, but was less clear in Study 2.

In Study 1, for example, not only was differentiation associated with cycling (although situational violence largely accounted for this association as one of many possible mediating mechanisms), there were also significant differences in the variables of interest based on the occurrence of cycling. Those who cycled reported more felt constraint and a greater frequency of violence and less dedication than those who did not cycle in their relationships. A post-hoc multi-group model also revealed robust differences in the process, with those who cycled having more pronounced effects. These results indicate that differentiation of self may be an important intrapersonal factor influencing relationship instability in the form of on-off cycling. In Study 2, however, cycling only moderated a small number of the paths in the Actor Partner Interdependence Models (APIMs) and there were few bivariate associations between cycling and the relationship variables of interest. These differences between studies may be a function of the samples that comprise them. For example, those who were in their relationships longer may have more opportunities to work through challenges that contribute to cycling and they have had more opportunities to permanently dissolve. Those in Study 2 had been in their relationships for approximately 24 years, compared to the 8 year average duration of Study 1. Nevertheless, relationship length did not seem to be a factor within either study itself. Future research should explore the long-term effects, if any, of cycling on individuals and couples. Past research indicates that cycling is predictive of future instability over short periods or using retrospective accounts (e.g., Dailey et al., 2013; Vennum et al., 2014; see also Vennum & Johnson, 2014), but little is known about what occurs beyond this period for those who remain in their unions. Given that some cyclical relationships are likely to eventually stabilize (Dailey et al., 2013), it is important to follow these relationships over time to determine the mechanisms that facilitate this stabilization.

Based within Bowen family systems theory (Kerr & Bowen, 1988), having a solid sense of self and well-defined personal convictions (i.e., differentiation) likely contribute to relationship stability due to individuals' ability to regulate their reactions in close relationships. In fact, poor differentiation is

associated with aggressive conflict (e.g., Bartle & Rosen, 1994; Rosen et al., 2001) as well as diminished relationship quality (e.g., Lal & Bartle-Haring, 2011; Skowron, 2000; Skowron & Friedlander, 1998). Being interdependent and closely connected with partners is obviously vital for relationships (e.g., Agnew, Van Lange, Rusbult, & Langston, 1998); however, being comfortable with one's own emotions, behaviors, and thoughts without overwhelming anxiety that others may be different (i.e., individuality) is also important (Bowen, 1978). Couples in relationships characterized as cut-off or fused, for example, are less able to tolerate disagreements or differences in opinion than those better able to balance individuality with close togetherness (i.e., maintaining a sense of self and respecting the individuality of others, while also engaging in close intimacy). Individuals may become emotionally reactive and volatile, especially if they assume they need to change who they are simply due to a disagreement with close others. Individuals who struggle with this balance may also become overly focused on changing or controlling their partners, which does not allow for or value individual expression (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Thus, in line with the findings from the current studies, differentiation as an intrapsychic characteristic is likely an important component of a variety of relationship processes, including how partners interact and react to each other. A variety of limitations, however, stifle researchers' abilities to comprehensively assess this phenomenon. Namely, the operationalization of differentiation in Bowen family systems theory has met considerable criticism (see Miller et al., 2004) and scholars indicate more advanced measures are needed to capture the complex multi-dimensionality of differentiation (e.g., Schnarch & Regas, 2012).

Further, past conceptualizations of differentiation that focus on individuality and suppressing emotional reactions disadvantaged female partners due to the socialized attributes often instilled in women (e.g., Knudson-Martin, 1994). Although the conceptualization of differentiation has advanced in the last several decades with the help of feminist theory, there is still much work to be done in this area. In line with past research, the present studies found contradictory results when assessing descriptive sex differences in differentiation of self. In Study 1, women were more differentiated than men, but in Study 2, men were more differentiated than women. Despite some sample differences (e.g., age, length of the relationship) and study differences (e.g., full measure vs. short-form) that likely play a role, these results could also be a function of the current limitations in measuring differentiation (e.g., Holowacz, 2016; see also Schnarch & Regas, 2012). Past research often finds mixed results or no differences between men and women in levels of differentiation using a variety of measures (Miller et al., 2004). Thus, men and women may be more alike than different when it comes to balancing closeness and individuality forces despite social obstacles that present more challenges for women (McGoldrick & Carter, 2001; see also Slater, 1995).

Implications and Future Directions

Despite the limitations of these investigations, the current studies have several important implications for research and clinical work. Namely, numerous limitations have existed in the understanding of differentiation due to a dearth of empirical research in this area. For example, Bowen family systems is an effective and widely used form of psychotherapy (see Larner, 2004; Miller et al., 2004; Murdock, 2006), but there is little insight into the mechanisms that make it effective. Scholars call for more multivariate models assessing differentiation (Miller et al., 2004) and more research in diverse samples (Miller et al., 2004; see also Jankowski & Hooper, 2012). Not only do these current studies move the field beyond models accounting for few processes in bivariate investigations, but these analyses are run incorporating data from sexual minorities, for example, as well as data from both partners simultaneously. Although past research alludes to potential differences in the development of differentiation due to marginalized statuses (e.g., McGoldrick & Carter, 2001), no notable differences were found between those in same-sex relationships and those in different-sex relationships on the variables of interest. The field could benefit from insight into how marginalized individuals (and women) are able to develop differentiation despite numerous social obstacles (see McGoldrick & Carter, 2001).

The limited research on differentiation has predominantly focused on mental health outcomes (Miller et al., 2004). Although this research is sorely needed, understanding how differentiation can affect relationship experiences is vital given the intertwined nature of close relationships and mental health (e.g., Proulx, Helms, & Buehler, 2007). According to the current studies, differentiation may be an important point of intervention for improving connection with others and relationship well-being, given that it is associated with processes like commitment and interaction. Likewise, dyadic research is important in order to capture more comprehensive information by incorporating perspectives from both couple members (see Fincham, 2012). Few studies of differentiation, to date, have incorporated data from two couple members into one multivariate analysis. This information is vital, however, given the assumptions of systems theory (i.e., the interconnectedness inherent in systems; Cox & Paley, 2003). Knowledge of the interpersonal effects of differentiation of self, for example, is pivotal in order to understand how Bowen's concepts operate within systems, which is central to the theory (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Therefore, even the limited results of Study 2 (e.g., providing evidence of some cross-partner influence), advance the current understanding of differentiation, which is in its infancy. Although also central to the theory, past research has found limited evidence that individuals select partners who have similar levels of differentiation to their own (Miller et al., 2004). Results of Study 2 demonstrate that partners have similar levels of differentiation, but subtle variability in levels of differentiation need to be accounted for by assessing both couple members' differentiation of self through dyadic research.

Although there was only limited support in the current studies, the ability to regulate self and relationships is implicated in playing a crucial role in the lives of individuals, couples, and families (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). For example, being reactively hostile toward or harshly critical of a partner in stressful situations (i.e., a disagreement), which is characteristic of individuals with poor differentiation, likely contributes to negative relationship outcomes like instability. More attention to the role of intrapersonal characteristics or dispositional factors that facilitate on-off instability in the context of couple systems is needed. Given the rate and maladaptive outcomes associated with instability for some individuals, insight into what predicts this dynamic is crucial to moving the field forward and for providing insight for clinical intervention. Thus, additional knowledge into how some cyclical relationships stabilize over time is needed in order for clinicians (a) to help improve relationships or (b) to help partners safely terminate their unions.

When using a systems orientation it is especially important for therapists to take an overt and firm stand against hostile interaction and violence in relationships. This is especially salient for this framework, due to the focus on emotionality and interconnected patterns of interaction that could be misinterpreted by clients who could feel a sense of responsibility for victimization (see McCollum & Stith, 2008). For example, promoting safety for victims of violence and holding the perpetrators accountable for violent actions is vital (Bartle & Rosen, 1994). Although the goal of a differentiation-oriented treatment plan is not to eliminate emotional reactions (e.g., feeling hurt or angry in reaction to a partner), it is critical that partners or clients are able to regulate these emotions in order to react in healthy or non-violent ways.

One of the most prominent ways to move the field forward is to work toward conceptual clarity in differentiation research. In fact, clarity is needed in the conceptual and operational definitions of differentiation of self. Differentiation is often defined by the factors it influences (e.g., emotional reactivity and the regulation of closeness), however, the actual description of this construct is considerably more complex. Scholars primarily describe differentiation as being rooted in identity and having a solid sense of self in contrast to having a pseudo or reflected sense of self that is largely determined by others like the family of origin (Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Schnarch & Regas, 2012). Thus, poorly differentiated individuals do not have a secure sense of who they are (i.e., their thoughts, opinions, and beliefs) and are overly reliant on the views of others to define who they are and to provide validation. As a result, poorly differentiated individuals may become reactive when others' views do not fit with their own because they could perceive this difference as invalidation and this experience could create intense anxiety (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Closeness often serves an important protective function, but fusion can be distressing if, for example, being overly attuned to a partner's needs is at the expense of the individual's own needs. This fusion can make partners intolerant of minor disagreements and create additional anxiety

(Slater, 1995). More discussion on this complex balance and the parameters of the construct are needed in order to understand any thresholds that may exist for individuals.

Due to limitations in current measures and conceptual definitions, achieving individuality and being "rational" is often privileged over intimate togetherness and emotion, even though being autonomous while being emotionally connected to others is more accurate of differentiation (Holowacz, 2016; Kerr & Bowen, 1988). In post-hoc assessments in Study 2, distance through emotional cut-off was the most robust predictor of negative relationship outcomes compared to the other differentiation subscales. Therefore, a broad classification may mask important nuance in regard to how differentiation of self operates in relationships. In line with more comprehensive definitions, complete emotional detachment is actually an important indicator of poor differentiation that is sometimes overlooked in the literature (Schnarch, 1997).

In fact, current operationalization and measures of differentiation are criticized for not adequately capturing the complexity in balancing the life forces of closeness and individuality, as well as emotion and intellect (Miller et al., 2004; Schnarch & Regas, 2012). Bowen (1978) argued that a psychometrically sound measure of differentiation could not be developed due to the need for a balance in life forces and the multi-dimensional nature of the construct. Similar to other clinical and systems-oriented concepts (e.g., boundary ambiguity; Boss, 2007), Bowen (1978) indicates that a diagnostic interview (or in-depth qualitative assessments) may be the best way to capture the intricacy inherent in differentiation of self (see also Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Schnarch & Regas, 2012; Skowron, 2004). Scholars, however, are currently working on the development of multi-dimensional assessments that have the potential to advance the field (e.g., Holowacz, 2016; Schnarch & Regas, 2012).

Similarly, because differentiation is often described as a dispositional characteristic of an individual developed from their family of origin (Kerr & Bowen, 1988), it is assumed that differentiation should be a fairly consistent trait over-time without intense intervention. However, with current measures, it is probable that levels of differentiation could change under certain conditions. Therefore, there can be conceptual confusion in regards to differentiation being either (a) a relationship specific process dependent on situational factors, (b) a dispositional trait, with individuals' differentiation levels only slightly fluctuating around their mean over-time, or (c) some combination of the two classifications. Future studies should investigate differentiation across time in order to gain more insight about the dispositional nature of differentiation, the parameters of this construct, and under what conditions it changes.

Conclusion

Differentiation of self is associated with a variety of important individual and relational well-being outcomes (see Miller et al., 2004; Skowron et al., 2014, for a review). In the current studies, differentiation was positively associated with relationship dedication and negatively associated with felt constraint and negative interaction experiences (i.e., violence and poor communication patterns). Thus, seeing oneself as a distinct individual while also maintaining closeness to a partner is important for commitment to the relationship as well as positive relationship interactions. These findings are supported by Bowen family systems theory, which posits that differentiation is vital to maintaining and progressing healthy relationships within systems (e.g., Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Although these studies provide initial evidence that differentiation plays a role in on-off relationship instability, further research is needed to disentangle the conditions in which this association exists. Fluctuations in relationship status are likely tied intimately to fluctuations in emotional experiences, as well as trouble balancing individuality and attachment with others. Helping partners find balance in emotional experiences and closeness without losing a sense of self may facilitate more relationship stability or encourage safe, permanent dissolution under certain conditions. Relationship violence, however, may complicate this process; thus, future research on differentiation and on-off cycling needs to account for hostility and aggression in order to advance current research and practice.

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Appendix A: IRB Approval Letter

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS
AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

Office of the Vice Chancellor for Research

Office for the Protection of Research Subjects
528 East Green Street
Suite 203
Champaign, IL 61820

December 14, 2016

Brian Ogolsky
Human & Community Development
Human Development & Family Studies
2007 Christopher Hall
904 West Nevada Street
Urbana, IL 61801

RE: *Differentiation in On-Off Relationships (DOORS) Project*
IRB Protocol Number: 17365

Dear Dr. Ogolsky:

This letter authorizes the use of human subjects in your project entitled *Differentiation in On-Off Relationships (DOORS) Project.* The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved, by expedited review, the protocol as described in your IRB application. The expiration date for this protocol, IRB number 17365, is 12/13/2017. The risk designation applied to your project is *no more than minimal risk.*

Copies of the attached date-stamped consent form(s) must be used in obtaining informed consent. If there is a need to revise or alter the consent form(s), please submit the revised form(s) for IRB review, approval, and date-stamping prior to use.

Under applicable regulations, no changes to procedures involving human subjects may be made without prior IRB review and approval. The regulations also require that you promptly notify the IRB of any problems involving human subjects, including unanticipated side effects, adverse reactions, and any injuries or complications that arise during the project.

If you have any questions about the IRB process, or if you need assistance at any time, please feel free to contact me at the OPRS office, or visit our website at https://www.oprs.research.illinois.edu.

Sincerely,

Ronald A Banks

Ron Banks, MS, CIP
Human Subjects Research Coordinator, Office for the Protection of Research Subjects

Attachment(s): 1 Online Consent Form, 1 Waiver of Documentation of Informed Consent

c: James Monk

Appendix B: Study 2 Informed Consent

Differentiation in On-Off Relationships (DOORs) Project

Researchers at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign want to learn about the lives of couples. By participating in this study you will report on your relationship and well-being by answering an online survey. The survey will take approximately 35-45 minutes.

- To take part, you must be married to or dating a romantic partner.
- BOTH you and your partner must participate.
- You must be 18 or older.

Your participation is voluntary and you will be able to skip questions that you prefer not to answer or withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. No identifying information will be collected, and your surveys will receive a unique ID number so that survey answers will not ever be linked to your name. Your responses will be confidential. You will be thinking about your well-being and mental health (e.g., stress, satisfaction with life) as well as qualities of your romantic relationship (e.g., relationship satisfaction, how you make decisions in your relationship), but we do not foresee any significant risks to participation beyond those risks that exist in daily life. Questions about relationship challenges and mental health might be emotionally upsetting for some (e.g., those who have been hurt by their partner or have experienced conflict). Thus, participants are welcome to skip a question they feel uncomfortable answering or end at any time without penalty beyond loss of payment. You may benefit from this research by reflecting upon your relationship and you will receive compensation through Qualtrics upon you and your partner's completion of this survey.

When this research is discussed or published, no one will know that you were in the study. However, laws and university rules might require us to disclose information about your responses. For example, if required by laws or University Policy, study information you supply may be seen or copied by the following people or groups: a) The university committee and office that reviews and approves research studies, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and Office for Protection of Research Subjects; and b) University and state auditors, and Departments of the university responsible for oversight of research

If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or if you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, including questions, concerns, complaints, or to offer input, you may call the Office for the Protection of Research Subjects (OPRS) at 217-333-2670 or e-mail OPRS at irb@illinois.edu. Additional information about the study can be obtained from principal investigator Dr. Brian Ogolsky (217-244-1199 or bogolsky@illinois.edu).

If you decide to participate, clicking "yes" below will direct you to the first survey.

- ❍ Yes, I agree to participate in this study, understanding that my participation is entirely voluntary and that I can withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.
- ❍ No, I do NOT agree to participate in this study.