

## ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: PARTNERS' ATTRIBUTIONS AND LEVEL OF COMMITMENT AS PREDICTORS OF CONSTRUCTIVE AND DESTRUCTIVE BEHAVIOR IN DISCUSSIONS OF RELATIONSHIP CONFLICTS

Ashley N. Larsen, M.S., 2004

Thesis Directed By: Professor N.B. Epstein, Department of Family Studies

This study investigated whether clinical couples' levels of commitment to their relationship and their tendencies to make negative attributions about their partner are related to their use of constructive and destructive behavior during couple conflict. Secondary analyses were conducted on assessment data from 52 couples who sought couple therapy at a university-based clinic. Based on self-report data and coded observations from a 10-minute communication sample completed by the couple, the results support the hypotheses that greater use of negative attributions is correlated with greater use of destructive behaviors, and increased levels of commitment are related to greater use of constructive behaviors. Contrary to expectations, commitment was not a significant moderator of the relationship between negative attributions and destructive behavior during conflict. The results, including specific gender differences, have important implications for effective couple therapy and future research on couple conflict.

PARTNERS' ATTRIBUTIONS AND LEVEL OF COMMITMENT AS  
PREDICTORS OF CONSTRUCTIVE AND DESTRUCTIVE BEHAVIOR IN  
DISCUSSIONS OF RELATIONSHIP CONFLICTS

By

Ashley N. Larsen

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Advisory Committee:  
Professor Norman B. Epstein, Chair  
Instructor Carol A. Werlinich  
Associate Professor Roger H. Rubin

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The purpose of this study was to explore the ways in which partners' tendencies to make negative attributions about each other's behavior and their levels of commitment to their couple relationships may influence the degrees to which they use constructive or destructive forms of behavior when engaged in conflict. Researchers have investigated couples' behaviors, cognitions, and emotions in an effort to better understand how partners relate during times of distressing conflict and have created a variety of definitions for "conflict." For example, Fincham, Bradbury, and Grych (1990) define conflict as an incongruity between one partner's behaviors and the other partner's expectations of the partner and relationship. Similarly, Doherty (1981) suggests that conflict is a situation in which partners have incompatible goals, often leading to interactions in which the two individuals attempt to resolve these differences. Birchler and Webb (1977), however, refer to conflict as the actual events that take place when partners enact discordant behaviors in an effort to create a match between partners' behaviors and expectations. Thus, conflict can be conceptualized as the partners' cognitive mismatches (e.g., perceived inconsistencies in their goals) and/or the behaviors that the partners exhibit in response to the differences that they perceive. For the purposes of the present project, conflict will be defined as an inevitable event that takes place when there is a discrepancy in partners' perceived expectations or goals, which results in tension between partners during this time of distress (Koren, Carlton, & Shaw, 1980; Markman & Notarius, 1987; Tolman



& Weiss, 1990). The ways that partners behave when they are experiencing conflict, and factors that may influence those forms of behavior, were the foci of this study.

The two variables that were studied in relation to couple conflict are partners' negative attributions about each other and their levels of commitment to their relationship. Attributions are defined as normally occurring inferences involving explanations that partners make to assign responsibility for an event that took place within their relationship (Doherty, 1981; Epstein & Baucom, 2002). They often derive from an accumulation of subjective experiences in people's interpersonal relationships (previous relationships as well as the current one), which then help the partner to make sense of future behaviors that are consistent with that attribution (Bradbury & Fincham, 1992). For example, if a person prefers to take "time-outs" during periods of intense conflict and then is able to return to the issues and effectively resolve them, the person's partner is more likely to attribute future time-outs to the individual's need to gather his or her thoughts, rather than attributing this behavior to the person lacking interest in resolving the problem and strengthening the relationship.

To date, much of the research on attributions within couple relationships has focused on the correlation between attributions that partners make about each other and their reported levels of distress in the relationship. For example, in non-distressed relationships, partners are more likely to make what Holtzworth-Munroe and Jacobson (1985) define as "relationship-enhancing" attributions, crediting positive events to characteristics of the partner or the relationship and negative events to external factors separate from the relationship. In contrast, partners in distressed

relationships are more likely to make attributions that denigrate the relationship, attributing negative events to characteristics of the partner or the relationship and positive events to external factors that are separate from the relationship (Baucom, Sayers, & Duhe, 1989; Bradbury & Fincham, 1990; Davey, Fincham, Beach, & Brody; 2001; Gottman, 1994).

However, in spite of the plentiful research depicting the relationship between attributions and distress, few studies have examined the degree to which attributions can predict partners' use of constructive and destructive behaviors during conflict. Thus far, only a handful of studies have identified behaviors used during conflict in relation to partners' attributions about each other and the relationship (Bauserman, Arias, & Craighead, 1995; Bradbury & Fincham, 1990; Bradbury & Fincham, 1992; Davey et al., 2001), and only one of these studies, conducted by Bradbury and Fincham (1992), has actually distinguished the ways in which particular attributions influence partners' choices to engage in specific types of constructive and destructive behaviors. In general, the results suggest that individuals who make more negative attributions about their partners subsequently behave more negatively toward the partner, and the use of positive attributions is more likely to result in greater use of constructive behaviors during conflict.

In conjunction with individuals' use of attributions about the other partner and the relationship, this study also focused on partners' commitment to their relationships as a factor influencing their behavior during conflict. Much of the literature defines commitment as a psychological and emotional state that represents one's attachment to another person, as well as a moral obligation one feels to

continue the relationship (Billingham, 1987; Cate & Lloyd, 1992; Rusbult & Buunk, 1993). Other researchers have defined commitment with respect to relationship status, evaluating the differences in commitment among dating, cohabiting, and married couples. However, for the purposes of the present study, the predominant definition of commitment as an emotional attachment and decision to maintain the relationship (Cahn, 1992; Sprecher, 1988; Swensen & Trahaug, 1985; Thomson & Colella, 1992) was used.

One important relationship that is often overlooked in the literature is the difference between satisfaction and commitment. Even though individuals' levels of satisfaction with their couple relationships are likely to be correlated with their levels of commitment to the relationships, the two subjective experiences are not equivalent (Rusbult, 1983; Rusbult & Buunk, 1993; Sprecher, Metts, Burleson, Hatfield, & Thompson, 1995). For example, an individual may be dissatisfied with his or her relationship, yet feel emotionally attached to the partner and/or believe that it is important to continue the relationship for various reasons such as religious beliefs or concerns about negative effects of divorce on their children. Consequently, understanding individuals' subjective experiences of their relationships requires assessing both their overall satisfaction and their levels of commitment (Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Schlee, Monson, Ehrensaft, & Heyman, 1998; Rusbult, 1983; Sprecher, 1988; Sprecher, 2001).

To better understand the relationship between partners' commitment and behaviors elicited during conflict, several researchers have referred to Social Exchange Theory, which proposes that partners' commitment to a relationship is

higher when the rewards outweigh the costs, there are few or no desirable alternatives, and investments are plentiful (Donovan & Jackson, 1990; Floyd & Wasner, 1994; Klein & White, 1996; Rusbult, 1983; Rusbult & Buunk, 1993; Sprecher, 1988; Sprecher 2001). Thus, one would speculate that when these conditions exist, couples confronted with conflict would be more likely to choose to use constructive rather than destructive behavior, in order to maintain the desirable status quo. In contrast, this reasoning would suggest that when partners have lower commitment, they derive fewer rewards from the relationship, and their expectations go unmet, which leads the partners to be less likely to engage in relationship-enhancing behaviors and more likely to behave in destructive ways that may jeopardize the relationship.

The combination of attributions about sources of problems in the relationship, levels of commitment, and choices of constructive versus destructive behaviors during conflict are likely to create a cycle of interaction in which each of these components affects the others. As a result, couples are often swept into a cycle of interaction that may or may not be helpful to their relationship, depending upon the various ways in which each factor can influence the cycle. For example, a partner who reports a lower level of commitment to the relationship combined with a greater use of negative attributions about the partner may consequently engage in destructive forms of interaction during conflict (Epstein & Baucom, 2002; Fitzpatrick & Winke, 1979). In contrast, partners who make positive attributions about their partners and their relationships are more likely to report less distress when conflicts arise, and consequently may use more constructive behaviors during conflict (Bradbury &

Fincham, 1992). In turn partners' negative behaviors may strengthen each other's negative attributions and reduce commitment.

Despite the theory proposing this cyclical interaction among partners' thoughts, behaviors, and emotions in conflict (Epstein & Baucom, 2002), and empirical studies providing evidence to support some aspects of the model, very little is known about the degree to which attributions and commitment can predict partners' use of specific constructive and destructive behaviors during conflict. Currently, very few studies have been conducted on attributions and couples' conflict behavior. In a major study conducted by Bradbury and Fincham (1992), the relationship between positive and negative attributions and conflict behavior was investigated, and it was found that the more individuals made positive attributions about their partner, the more they used constructive behaviors, whereas the occurrence of negative attributions led to greater use of destructive behaviors. However, only one study (Fitzpatrick & Winke, 1979) seems to suggest a specific set of behaviors that individuals enact during conflict based on their level of relationship commitment; couples' use of specific types of destructive behaviors differed based on their levels of commitment to the relationship. Thus, current research on how partners' negative attributions and their levels of commitment to their relationships are related to their use of constructive and/or destructive behaviors during conflict is very limited. Further research clearly is needed to understand which positive and negative behaviors are most likely to be used in conjunction with certain types of attributions and particular levels of commitment.

## PURPOSE

The purpose of this study was to expand current knowledge and gain a more specific understanding of how partners' use of attributions and their reported levels of commitment to the relationship can influence their choices of constructive and destructive forms of interaction during discussions of conflict in their relationship. There were five primary objectives of this study: (1) to identify the specific behaviors used during conflict discussion with relation to partners' use of negative attributions about the other person and the relationship; (2) to identify the specific constructive and destructive forms of behavior that partners use during conflict, with relation to their reports of their levels of commitment to their relationship; (3) to identify the combined ability of commitment level and attributions in predicting partners' use of constructive or destructive conflict behaviors; (4) to determine whether commitment and attributions account for variance in conflict behavior above and beyond that accounted for by the individuals' overall levels of relationship satisfaction; (5) to explore any gender differences that may exist in the use of constructive and destructive behaviors during conflict with relation to use of attributions and levels of commitment.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### Conflict in Couple Relationships

Among the plethora of research studies that have focused on intimate conflict, a variety of definitions have surfaced, many of which emphasize three main characteristics that best define all couple conflict: (1) inevitableness, (2) incompatible needs and goals, and (3) strategies of change. As Epstein and Baucom (2002) cite, some degree of conflict is inevitable in all relationships, and all couples will experience periods of tension, anger, and anxiety within their relationship, regardless of their overall levels of compatibility and skillfulness within the relationship. However, as Fitzpatrick and Winke (1979) note, the inevitability of conflict is not a determining factor in couples' distress levels; rather, partners' choices and skills for engaging in constructive versus destructive behaviors when conflicts arise ultimately dictate their levels of distress about their relationship. Thus, as Yovetich and Rusbult (1994) argue, all couples will be confronted with conflict, but their choice in handling the differences will ultimately affect their level of relationship functioning.

The second component of conflict involves the existence of incompatible needs and goals between the members of a relationship. Fincham et al. (1990) define conflict as incongruities that exist between Partner A's behavior and Partner B's expectations of the ways that Partner A should behave. This definition of conflict emphasizes its cognitive component, in which individuals become upset when their personal standards within the relationship are not met by their partners' actions. When partners are dissatisfied with this incongruence, they are likely to evaluate their partner's behaviors to determine whether they are based on a stable trait of the

partner, or a fleeting, external influence that is separate from the partner and the relationship. Theorists and researchers who have studied couple relationships have noted this cognitive evaluation process, identifying how partners make attributions or inferences about the causes of conflict in their relationship, based on their previous experiences within the relationship, as well as on their overall assumptions about intimate relationships (Doherty, 1981; Epstein & Baucom, 2002). For example, if a husband returns home from work and immediately turns on the television without greeting his wife, she is likely to notice the discrepancy between his behavior and her expectation or standard that spouses should seek intimacy with each other whenever possible, rather than behaving independently. Subsequently, she may either attribute his actions to a stable trait, in which he is not a loving man or he only takes care of himself, or she may interpret his behavior as determined by factors that are external to the relationship, in which he may have had a bad day at the office and is not in the mood to talk. On one level, there is conflict between the wife's standards and the husband's behavior, but on another level, based upon her attributions, she also may conclude that this discrepancy is due to outside factors (i.e., a bad day at the office), or to the two of them having different and conflicting needs or desires within their relationship (i.e., he is not a loving man). The wife's attribution about her husband's behavior will influence her emotional response to the conflict between her desires for the relationship and her husband's actions, as well as how she chooses to behave toward her husband in response to this area of conflict.

Once individuals attribute conflicts between each other's desires and behavior to external events or to stable traits, such as incompatible needs, the third component



of intimate conflict centers on the actual behaviors in which partners may choose to engage. As this study explored, partners have a wide variety of behaviors from which to choose, including constructive, neutral, and destructive behaviors. However, as studies suggest, partners do not simply choose these behaviors at random, but select them based on a variety of factors, including their distress level and commitment to the relationship. For example, numerous studies suggest that non-distressed couples are much more likely to exhibit more positive behaviors during conflict, including confronting and resolving the conflict. In contrast, distressed couples are more likely to engage in lengthy negative cycles of interaction, which involve high rates of punishing exchanges that rarely lead to resolution (Billings, 1979; Epstein & Baucom, 2002; Gottman, 1979; Jacobson, Follette, & McDonald, 1982; Koren et al., 1980; Margolin & Wampold, 1981; Raush, Barry, & Hertel, 1974; Weiss & Heyman, 1997). Furthermore, couples reporting low levels of commitment to their relationships tend to avoid conflict and use more destructive forms of interaction when they do face conflict, whereas more committed couples are more willing to confront the conflict and work to resolve it effectively (Epstein & Baucom, 2002; Fitzpatrick & Winke, 1979). Thus, the pathway from incompatible needs to behaviors used during conflict is influenced by a variety of factors, including attributions that partners make about the causes of conflict and each person's level of commitment to the relationship.

In sum, all couples are likely to experience periods of some degree of tension and anxiety in which needs go unmet and partners make attempts to utilize strategies to effect change in the relationship and/or each other. Each partner has a choice to engage in constructive behaviors that enhance the relationship, neutral behaviors that

neither help nor hurt the partnership, or destructive behaviors that can exacerbate existing conflict and deteriorate the relationship. The next section will review the literature on constructive and destructive types of behavior most often used during couple conflict, addressing various behaviors that are often associated with these two categories of behaviors. Finally, the various short- and long term effects of these behaviors on an intimate relationship will be examined.

### *Constructive Behaviors*

Positive behaviors used during conflict are comprised of a variety of tactics designed to facilitate the conversation, concentrate on the issue at hand, and revive or maintain the relationship (Raush et al., 1974; Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991). Among the extensive studies on couple conflict, specific forms of constructive behavior have been identified. After compiling the research, three broad categories of constructive behaviors emerged: (1) engagement; (2) empathic support; and (3) problem solving. Each of these forms of constructive behaviors serves as a positive method by which partners are able to connect and collaborate as a unified team. However, each method uniquely contributes to this collaboration, such that engagement allows both partners to be actively involved in the process, empathic support places the other person's needs before one's own, and problem solving is a joint effort displayed by a cooperative team, rather than by two competing individuals. Thus, as each partner engages in these positive behaviors during conflict, a positive cycle of interaction is reciprocated, such that one positive behavior leads to another positive behavior. This next section will explore specific examples of verbal

and non-verbal forms of constructive behaviors within each broad category, and address how these behaviors lead to interactions that create a cycle of positive reciprocity.

### *Engagement*

One constructive behavior category observed in couples during conflict is engagement, in which one or both partners are actively participating and attempting to further the conversation in a positive direction. Also referred to as “voice,” active verbal engagement consists of discussions about the problem, suggestion of solutions, and willingness to change oneself for the improvement of the relationship (Rusbult, Johnson, & Morrow, 1986). For example, a study conducted by Gottman (1994) on couple conflict found that partners who constructively engage in conflict express more emotion and have a more stimulating exchange of ideas, as compared to partners who withdraw from the conflict. Similarly, other studies have found that couples who confront their conflictual issues are much more likely than withdrawn partners to accept responsibility for their roles in the disagreement and resolve the conflict (Epstein & Baucom, 2002; Margolin & Wampold, 1981; Noller, Feeney, Bonnell, & Callan, 1994; Raush et al., 1974; Schaap, 1984; Weiss & Heyman, 1997). In conjunction with the verbal forms of engagement, partners may also utilize non-verbal behaviors to express their levels of engagement in the conflict. For example, an engaged partner may lean forward when listening to and speaking with the other partner, nod his or her head while the other partner is speaking, or maintain eye contact throughout the interaction (Gottman, 1979). These behaviors, just to name a

few, are helpful signals that one is engaged in the conflict discussion and is working to effectively address the conflict. Thus, positive engagement, verbal and non-verbal, have been shown to serve as a healthy process through which discrepancies and conflict in an intimate relationship can be effectively resolved.

### *Empathic support*

Empathic support, involving partners' respectful validation of each other's preferences and feelings when they are dealing with areas of conflict, is a second constructive behavior often cited in the research on couple conflict. Similar to engagement, behaviors that suggest empathic support can be both verbal and non-verbal ways that partners express their support with encouraging words or empathic body movements. For example, a partner working to express empathic support may comment to the other partner, "I can understand how your method of handling finances may be very effective, even though it is different from how I choose to handle mine." Despite their differences, one partner is able to validate the other's efforts or beliefs. Furthermore, non-verbal behaviors that signal empathic support include a warm and soft voice, sitting with open arms (as opposed to crossed arms that close oneself from the other partner), smiling, laughing, and engaging in positive physical touch (e.g., holding hands, patting one's back, hugging) (Epstein & Baucom, 2002; Gottman, 1979; Krokoff, Gottman, & Haas, 1989; Margolin & Wampold, 1981; Raush et al., 1974; Schaap, 1984). Much like the verbal validation of one's thoughts and feelings, these non-verbal cues expressed by a partner can warmly invite the other partner to engage in the conversation and feel as though expressions of

thoughts and emotions are accepted and validated. Furthermore, research suggests that forms of non-verbal affect are greater indicators of marital distress than are aspects of the partners' verbal content, thus suggesting the importance of partners' use of non-verbal cues to express how they each feel toward each other (Gottman, Markman, & Notarius, 1977).

Many researchers have referred to verbal and non-verbal forms of empathic support as "validation," "agreement," or "loyalty," indicating the acceptance and support of each other's views. Partners tend to consider empathy, validation, and agreement as one in the same; they may assume that in order to support a partner they must agree with that partner. However, as research suggests, empathic support is a helpful way that partners can express acknowledgement and acceptance of the differences in the relationship, without having to agree and come to a consensus on various issues (Epstein & Baucom, 2002; Julien, Markman, & Lindahl, 1989; Margolin & Wampold, 1981; Rusbult et al., 1986; Schaap, 1984). When both partners are able to calmly discuss the reasons why they may not agree on an issue and can demonstrate respect for each other's different points of view and feelings, their chances for compromise and effective resolution are much greater than if they had disqualified and rejected their partner's viewpoints (Epstein & Baucom, 2002; Fitzpatrick & Winke, 1979; Gottman, 1979; Noller et al., 1994; Raush et al., 1974). Thus, empathic support is one way in which partners can provide support and validation during times of conflict.

### *Problem solving*

The act of reasoning, collaborating, and seeking solutions is often referred to as problem solving, which is the third category of constructive skills used during couple conflict (Billingham, 1987; Epstein & Baucom, 2002; Julien et al., 1989; Margolin & Wampold, 1981; Noller et al., 1994; Raush et al., 1974). Overt problem solving behaviors cited in many research studies include proposing solutions, using reason and logic to evaluate all of the possible solutions, and eventually reaching agreement on a solution (Billingham, 1987; Noller et al., 1984). Researchers have found that couples' levels of distress are related to their problem solving skills, such that non-distressed couples are much more likely than distressed couples to reach a compromise, in which both partners feel satisfied with the solution (Cahn, 1992; Koren et al., 1980; Margolin & Wampold, 1981; Raush et al., 1974; Schaap, 1984). However, Margolin and Wampold's (1981) study also showed that distressed and non-distressed couples made similar attempts at proposing solutions, but only the non-distressed couples were actually able to agree on one of the solutions, thus suggesting a significant relationship between couples' distress levels and their abilities to effectively problem solve in times of conflict.

### *Positive Reciprocity*

Theorists and researchers have noted that these various forms of constructive behaviors often occur reciprocally between members of a couple, such that positive behaviors exhibited by one partner are thought to evoke positive behaviors from the other partner. At times, positive reciprocity has been considered a form of

constructive behavior in itself, but it is actually the result of both partners exchanging the forms of constructive behavior described above during an interaction. As noted in the research, positive reciprocity refers to the probability of a couple engaging in a constructive cycle of interactions, such that one partner displays a positive act, and there is a fairly high probability that the other partner will respond with a positive act (Baucom & Epstein, 2000).

When confronted with conflict, partners have several choices regarding how they respond to their partners' behaviors: they may reciprocate a positive response (not necessarily the same type, but positive nevertheless), behave in a neutral and/or destructive manner, or completely withdraw from the situation (Epstein & Baucom, 2002). Several studies have analyzed the process of positive reciprocity, finding that partners, in general, often respond to each other during conflict in a much more constructive and mild manner than how they *considered* behaving (which was reported to be more negative and destructive) when their partners also engage in the conflict with constructive, positive behaviors (Hojjat, 2000; Margolin & Wampold, 1981; Rusbult & Buunk, 1993; Yovetich & Rusbult, 1994). Furthermore, studies have indicated that relatively satisfied couples are more likely than distressed couples to initially engage in and reciprocate constructive behaviors during discussions of conflict, while choosing to use fewer destructive acts that may foster future conflict. As a result, these happier couples choose to create a mutually satisfying cycle of interaction, thus promoting a greater sense of satisfaction and solace within the relationship (Hahlweg, Revenstorf, & Schindler, 1984; Krokoff et al., 1989; Margolin & Wampold, 1981; Noller et al., 1994; Weiss & Heyman, 1997). Thus, a key quality

of positive reciprocity is that one person's positive act elicits a reinforcing positive act by the other person, contributing to an atmosphere of safety and cooperation, in which partners are able to effectively utilize acts of engagement, empathic support, and problem solving.

### *Gender Differences*

Among the variety of constructive behaviors that partners may employ during conflict, several studies cite differences in the specific types of constructive behaviors preferred by men and women. For example, some studies report that women are more likely than men to initiate discussions surrounding topics of conflict, provide empathic support while working through the conflictual situation, and display more positive non-verbal affect cues (Margolin & Wampold, 1981; Rusbult et al., 1986). Men, however, were found to show greater cooperation during conflict, which was indicated by their heightened levels of expression of concern for their partner and the relationship, reasoning tactics when seeking solutions, and verbal expression of emotions (Cupach & Canary, 1995).

In sum, regardless of gender, studies have shown that the use of various constructive behaviors in response to conflict is often associated with lower levels of relationship distress and more effective resolution of conflict (Cahn, 1992; Epstein & Baucom, 2002; Fitzpatrick & Winke, 1979; Hahlweg et al., 1984; Gottman, 1979; Gottman et al., 1977; Koren et al., 1980; Krokoff et al., 1989; Margolin & Wampold, 1981; Noller et al., 1994; Raush et al., 1974; Schaap, 1984; Weiss & Heyman, 1997). However, despite the positive effects that constructive behaviors can have on an



intimate relationship, studies have shown that these influences are minimal compared to the damaging effects that destructive behaviors can have on a relationship. Partners who expect each other to behave well often take constructive behaviors for granted, such that positive acts have relatively little effect on increasing relationship satisfaction. Thus, when one member of a couple exhibits a positive behavior during conflict, the other partner may conclude, “It is not a big deal; he or she *should* behave that way.” In contrast, reactions to destructive behaviors are much more likely to negatively influence the relationship, as opposed to constructive behaviors positively affecting the relationship, because negative behaviors violate partners’ standards for appropriate conduct, interfere with the fulfillment of each person’s needs, and thus are emotionally distressing. Therefore, even though constructive behaviors have been found to promote conflict engagement, resolution, and long-term satisfaction, destructive behaviors are more likely to influence the functioning of the couple (Rusbult et al., 1986; Rusbult et al., 1991).

### *Destructive Behaviors*

Negative behaviors used during conflict are comprised of a variety of destructive efforts that often aim to intimidate and control one’s partner, insult or shame one’s partner, avoid the conflict, or communicate one’s contempt and dissatisfaction with the other partner (Epstein & Baucom, 2002; Raush et al, 1974). Studies have found that destructive communication patterns are often created early on in a couple’s relationship, because the partners find them to be effective strategies for promoting behavior change in each other. For example, because an individual’s

criticisms result in a partner's compliance, the aversive control strategy of criticizing is reinforced and likely to be used more in the future. However, these aversive control strategies are likely to create problems in the relationship, such as reciprocal negative behavior and alienation from the partner, if not identified and ameliorated (Noller et al., 1994). From research focusing on destructive behaviors in couple conflict, three broad categories of interactions have emerged: (1) hostile withdrawal; (2) hostile engagement; and (3) denigration. These categories encompass a wide range of behaviors observed in couples' interactions during times of conflict. Similar to the various forms of constructive behaviors, destructive forms of behaviors may also be communicated through verbal and non-verbal cues and may eventually lead the couple into a reciprocal pattern of negative interactions. The next section will explore the various types of verbal and non-verbal forms of destructive behaviors and address how these interactions connect to create a cycle of negative reciprocity.

### *Hostile withdrawal*

Stonewalling, emotional withdrawal, and neglect characterize the first category of destructive behaviors known as hostile withdrawal (Gottman, 1994; Julien et al., 1989; Margolin & Wampold, 1981; Rusbult et al., 1986; Rusbult et al., 1991; Schaap, 1984). Often considered one half of the familiar demand-withdraw and mutual avoidance/withdrawal patterns, hostile withdrawal occurs when one partner sees nothing to gain by engaging in conflict, and so he or she chooses to avoid it by withholding emotions and/or denying contact with the partner in a cold and punishing manner (Julien et al., 1989). When coding couples' interactions, researchers often

observe withdrawn behavior in the form of non-verbal acts, simply due to the fact that withdrawn partners tend to act this out, rather than boldly state, “From this point on, I am not going to speak to you about this issue.” Thus, a variety of non-verbal acts characterize withdrawn partners, including: ignoring a partner and refusing to discuss the problem at hand, turning one’s face and/or body away from the partner, plugging one’s ears while partner is talking, erecting a barrier between self and partner (e.g., reading a newspaper), or physically leaving the room in which the conversation is taking place (Rusbult et al., 1986; Rusbult et al., 1991). As Epstein and Baucom (2002) note, however, simply focusing on the withdrawal behavior as an isolated incident related to one partner may inaccurately represent the intent of the interaction, since often partners withdraw to either escape from an aversive interaction with the other partner, or to vengefully pull out of the conflict and upset the other partner. Nevertheless, this form of behavior has been found to be one of the most detrimental forms of behavior in which partners can engage. In fact, Gottman (1994) identifies stonewalling, the act of remaining detached while still harboring anger towards the partner, as one of the “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse,” or one of the most destructive behaviors that may ultimately lead to the dissolution of an intimate relationship (Margolin & Wampold, 1981; Schaap, 1984). Similarly, other researchers consider hostile withdrawal behaviors to be very damaging in a relationship, citing that this form of interaction often results in a lose-lose situation for both partners; as the withdrawn partner chooses to behaviorally disengage from the conflict, the engaged partner unsuccessfully struggles to extract a response from the partner, or simply gives up and withdraws from the relationship as well, and so

both partners eventually lose out on a possible resolution (Cahn, 1992; Murphy & Hoover, 2001; Noller et al., 1994; Raush et al., 1974).

### *Hostile engagement*

A second type of destructive behavior present in couple conflict is hostile engagement, which may be considered the opposite behavior of the aforementioned hostile withdrawal. In this set of behaviors, rather than partners disengaging from the conflict, they become actively involved in the conflict, to the degree that they utilize destructive, coercive tactics in an attempt to gain an advantage over their partner and approach the conflict as a competition (Murphy & Hoover, 2001). Intimidation and control, one of the tactics utilized as a strategy of hostile engagement, also referred to as restrictive engulfment, involves the tracking, monitoring, and controlling of another person's activities (Cahn, 1992; Julien et al., 1989; Murphy & Hoover, 2001). These behaviors may be characterized by a husband's persistently complaining about his wife not informing him when she goes out with her friends, or a wife's attempts to make her husband feel guilty for not having spent the day together as a couple. Another form of intimidation and control includes verbal and nonverbal threats of physical aggression, as well as actual physical violence, which are generally considered by clinicians and researchers to be abusive forms of engagement. Examples of these behaviors include threats (either verbal statements or nonverbal acts) of hitting one's partner with or without an object; actually throwing something at a partner; and pushing, grabbing, or shoving a partner (Billingham, 1987; Epstein & Baucom, 2002; Murphy & Hoover, 2001; Rusbult et al., 1986; Rusbult et al.,

1991). Attempts to gain compliance from one's partner through intimidation and control tactics also can include forms of manipulation and non-negotiation such as providing misleading information, attempting to make one's partner feel guilty, and arguing until the other person gives in. Manipulative tactics are often identified by overly sweet gestures on the hostile engager's part (e.g., delivering floral bouquets, reminding one's partner of fond relationship memories, disingenuously accepting blame for problems in the relationship), which aim at making the coerced partner feel guilty for not yielding to the engaged partner's demands (Cahn, 1992; Fitzpatrick & Winke, 1979; Noller et al., 1994; Raush et al., 1974).

In conjunction with intimidation and control tactics, heightened levels of defensiveness have also been identified as characteristics of hostile engaged partners. Defined as an attempt to protect one's self from an expected attack and giving rationales for one's own behaviors, defensiveness is often a hostile reaction that is in response to other destructive behaviors (e.g., insults, physical withdrawal, false accusations), such that both partners are engaging in a mutual cycle of negative interactions. Yet despite the reciprocal nature of this behavior, defensiveness as an isolated behavior is considered by many researchers to be a key contributor to relationship dissolution (Krokoff et al., 1989; Margolin & Wampold, 1981; Schaap, 1984). In fact, similar to the power of stonewalling, Gottman (1994) considers defensiveness to be another one of the "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse," suggesting a particular level of potency that this destructive behavior may possess when utilized during conflict in intimate relationships.

### *Denigration*

The third component of destructive behaviors often employed during couple conflict is denigration, in which one partner uses insults and ridicule, invalidates the other's point of view, and/or acts in a vindictive manner in an effort to weaken the other partner's sense of self-worth and value (Epstein & Baucom, 2002). Although particular acts, such as psychological and physical abuse, may be considered forms of both hostile engagement and denigration, several researchers identify the insulting and shaming components of conflict as separate, yet equally harmful, behaviors, as compared to coercive forms of attack (Epstein & Baucom, 2002; Krokoff et al., 1989; Margolin & Wampold, 1981; Murphy & Hoover, 2001). Some specific denigrating behaviors that have been identified in past studies on couple conflict include: telling a partner that he or she is crazy, pretending to lose interest in one's partner in an attempt to elicit insecurity, expressing interest in other potential partners in order to make the partner feel jealous, shaming the partner in front of others, and purposely doing or saying something to upset the partner. Furthermore, Gottman's (1994) research indicates criticism and contempt, two of the other "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse," directed at a partner are strong predictors of future relationship dissolution. Gottman defines criticism as a negative response to specific qualities about one's partner, whereas contempt is an intense overall disapproval and rejection of one's partner, and a global attack on the partner's worth (Epstein & Baucom, 2002; Krokoff et al., 1989; Margolin & Wampold, 1981; Murphy & Hoover, 2001).

In addition to the varied ways partners may verbally disparage one another, non-verbal behaviors may be just as present and just as powerful. For example,

particular acts of denigration include a cold and sarcastic voice quality, pointing at or making jabbing gestures toward the other person, and facial expressions such as sneering or smirking (Gottman, 1979). Similar to non-verbal forms of engagement, these behaviors convey the message that the other partner's contributions are invalid, weak, and shameful, and therefore, are worthy of disrespect and criticism.

### *Negative Reciprocity*

Among many of the aforementioned destructive behaviors, a variety of specific acts are best understood within the context of a reciprocal interaction between two partners (e.g., defensiveness, withdrawal). Similar to positive reciprocity, negative reciprocity refers to a harmful cycle of interactions, in which one partner's negative behavior toward the other is likely to result in the other partner responding with a destructive behavior, either immediately following the destructive behavior or after time has passed between interactions (Baucom & Epstein, 1990; Epstein & Baucom, 2002; Hahlweg et al., 1984; Margolin & Wampold, 1981). As Yovetich and Rusbult (1994) note, people are fundamentally inclined to reciprocate a destructive behavior with an equally negative behavior, thus leading to an ineffective cycle of escalation and destruction surrounding the conflict (Hojjat, 2000). Results of numerous studies indicate that this cycle of escalation and destruction is more evident and is maintained for longer periods of time in distressed couples than nondistressed couples (Baucom & Epstein, 1999; Billings, 1979; Epstein & Baucom, 2002; Gottman, 1979; Koren et al., 1980; Margolin & Wampold, 1981). In fact, extensive research suggests that the observation of greater amounts of punishing, destructive

exchanges, and lesser amounts of rewarding, constructive exchanges enable researchers to predict couples' levels of subjective distress about their relationships with a high level of accuracy (Gottman, 1979; Jacobson et al., 1982; Rusbult et al., 1986).

In the research on negative reciprocity in couple conflict, a variety of patterns have emerged that often typify couples' destructive cycles of interactions. The most common patterns addressed in the literature are: (1) demand-withdrawal; (2) mutual-attack; and (3) mutual-withdrawal (Epstein & Baucom, 2002; Noller et al., 1994). Each of these patterns can be considered the products of negative reciprocity, because they involve a cycle of destructive behaviors exhibited by each person in response to the other person's destructive behaviors. Demand-withdrawal, one of the most common patterns identified in dysfunctional couple relationships, is characterized by Partner A aggressively pursuing Partner B in an effort to gain his or her attention and compliance, while Partner B emotionally and/or physically withdraws from the confrontation. Thus, as one partner presses for engagement, the other partner actively resists interacting, which in turn leads the pursuer to intensify the pressure and the withdrawer to intensify the withdrawal. As a result, the two partners become locked in a battle over engagement, and the area of conflict between partners that the pursuer wanted to address (for example, differences in their approaches to spending money) is left unresolved. In fact, the two individuals' incompatible strategies (pursuit/demand versus withdrawal) for coping with areas of conflict in the couple's relationship themselves become a source of conflict in the relationship.



A second common pattern involves mutual-attack, in which both partners reciprocate forms of aggressive behavior such as criticism, threats, and physical abuse. Research studies have revealed that distressed couples engage in cycles of negative interactions more frequently and for longer periods of time than non-distressed couples (Epstein & Baucom, 2002). As with the demand-withdrawal pattern, the adversity of such negative reciprocity commonly distracts the partners from constructive efforts to resolve the areas of conflict that elicited their mutual attacks, and it contributes to deterioration in satisfaction within the relationship.

Finally, mutual-withdrawal, the third pattern of negative reciprocity in couple conflict, occurs when both partners actively distance themselves from each other so as to avoid any aversive interactions that may take place if the conflict is confronted (Epstein & Baucom, 2002). Although this pattern may serve to “keep the peace”, it fails to resolve the couple’s areas of conflict, and thus it has great potential to erode the partners’ satisfaction with their relationship. As in the other two negative patterns, both partners are engaging in destructive behaviors that maintain, or even exacerbate, the couple’s conflict, as well as increase the couple’s level of distress and dissatisfaction with their relationship.

Use of various destructive behaviors in intimate relationships can have dramatic effects on each partner’s reported levels of distress and dissatisfaction. Numerous studies have identified an association between the use of destructive behaviors during conflict and self-reported levels of distress, suggesting that distress peaks when partners engage in negative cycles of interaction and use destructive behaviors: hostile withdrawal, hostile engagement, and denigration (Baucom &

Epstein, 1990; Billings, 1979; Donovan & Jackson, 1990; Epstein & Baucom, 2002; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Raush et al., 1974; Rusbult et al., 1986; Rusbult et al., 1991; Schaap, 1984). Destructive behaviors have been shown to have short-term effects on the relationship, including little or no conflict resolution, feelings of inadequacy and humiliation, and/or emotional withdrawal from the partner and the relationship (Billings, 1979; Koren et al., 1980; Rusbult et al., 1986). In fact, Gottman et al. (1977) found that negative nonverbal affect cues often outweigh verbal exchanges in the degree to which they inhibit or destroy the likelihood that a couple will effectively resolve the conflict.

In conjunction with these short-term effects, research also suggests that destructive conflict behaviors can have negative long-term effects, including relationship distress and dissolution (Billings, 1979; Donovan & Jackson, 1990; Gottman, 1974; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Raush et al., 1974; Rusbult et al., 1986; Rusbult et al., 1991; Schaap, 1984). For example, Markman (1981) conducted a longitudinal study to examine the predictive power of destructive behaviors in relation to marital distress 5 ½ years after the initial study. Similar to previously reported findings, these results indicate that couples who rated their interactions more positively at the beginning of the 5 ½ years reported greater satisfaction and less distress in their relationship after 5 ½ years. Similarly, partners who reported more negative interactions at the beginning of the study were more likely to experience greater levels of distress and dissatisfaction in the relationship at the later time.

### *Gender Differences*

Among the research studies that have focused on how destructive behaviors can affect a relationship, some studies have also identified differences between men and women in the use of destructive behaviors. For example, Gottman (1979) reports that in general, women are more likely than men to behave negatively during conflict. Other studies highlight specific behaviors more likely to be observed in women, which include hostile engagement and denigration tactics, such as insults, threats, criticism, and intimidation (Cupach & Canary, 1995). Men, however, are much more likely to utilize hostile withdrawal tactics, such that they behaviorally withdraw from the conflict and neglect the interpersonal matters at hand, while still experiencing unpleasant arousal throughout the interaction (Levenson & Gottman, 1985; Rusbult et al., 1986). Longitudinally, results vary on which behaviors are most detrimental to the long-term maintenance of intimate relationships. Although one study found that women's use of destructive behaviors has a more negative effect on the relationship, another study's results suggest that men's withdrawal from conflict may be the most harmful behavior with respect to long-term relationship satisfaction (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Rusbult et al., 1986). Finally, other researchers have been unable to find significant gender differences in partners' use of destructive behaviors during conflict, thus leaving the current research sparse and inconclusive (Cupach & Canary, 1995; Fitzpatrick & Winke, 1979; Noller et al., 1994).

In sum, it is virtually inevitable that all couples are confronted with some degree of conflict during the course of their relationships, either as a result of incompatible needs or unmet expectations. To address this conflict, each partner has

the choice to either utilize constructive, relationship-enhancing behaviors, or to engage in destructive, harmful behaviors. As research has shown, constructive behaviors often lead to conflict resolution, lowered distress levels, and increased levels of satisfaction. In contrast, the choice to use destructive behaviors often results in the escalation of negative interactions, minimal conflict resolution, heightened distress levels, and decreased levels of satisfaction with the relationship. This raises the question: What factors influence partners' use of constructive versus destructive behaviors when confronted with conflict? In an effort to explore and address this question, the following review will explore two variables that may be associated with partners' actions in response to couple conflict: (1) the negative attributions that partners make about each other and conflicts in the relationship, and (2) partners' commitment to the relationship.

#### Attributions and Partners' Behavior Concerning Areas of Conflict

Attributions are normally occurring inferences involving explanations that individuals make to assign responsibility for events that occur in their lives, including events within their couple relationships (Doherty, 1981; Epstein & Baucom, 2002). Attributions often derive from an accumulation of subjective experiences, which then help the partner to make sense of future behaviors that are consistent with that attribution (Bradbury & Fincham, 1992). For example, if over time an individual has observed on a number of occasions that his or her partner goes to great efforts to constantly keep their house perfectly clean, the individual may make an inference that the partner's cleaning is due to an underlying trait of being "neat" and "orderly."

Subsequently, if in the future the partner pressures the individual to clean the house, the individual may attribute the request in this particular situation to the partner's need to have everything clean at all times, rather than to the individual's own failure to clean up messes that he or she has made. However, even though attributions can help partners try to understand causes of each other's actions and predict each other's behavior to some extent, research indicates that the inferences involved in attributions are susceptible to distortion that is often extreme and inaccurate. Erroneous attributions, such as attributing a partner's negative actions to unchangeable negative traits when in fact the actions have been influenced by situational factors, can contribute to an individual's sense of hopelessness about positive change ever occurring within the relationship (Epstein & Baucom, 2002; Harvey, 1987).

Research exploring attributions in couple relationships developed out of theory and research in the areas of social psychology and personality regarding individuals' explanations for events in their lives. Cunningham and Kelley (1975), pioneers in the field of attribution research, sought to understand the ways individuals interpret their interactions with other people. To assess attributions, the researchers developed a sequence of 12 sentences that described one person acting on a second person, with items varying in degree of extremity, such that some sentences were moderate, while others were more severe. For example, a mild statement read, "Hal slightly hurts Jerry," followed by a more extreme item such as, "Fred completely dominates Bill." The participants were asked to judge each statement and select one of three choices that most appropriately represents the event: (1) the event is attributable to the actor (e.g., Hal is a mean person); (2) the event is attributable to the

target (e.g., Jerry is a weak person); or (3) both 1 and 2 must be true (e.g., this event is caused by Hal being a mean person and Jerry being a weak person). Results from the study indicated that the severity of the events was strongly related to the types of attributions made about the actors and the targets. The moderate events, such as “Clark slightly likes Ed,” more often resulted in the participants attributing an effect to the actor (e.g., Clark), suggesting that they are more likely to believe that the actor will behave in a similar manner with other targets (e.g., Ed), than to believe that characteristics of the target were responsible for eliciting that response from the actor. Thus, in this case, individuals are likely to attribute Clark’s behavior to his having a tendency to dislike people, rather than attributing this event to a personal characteristic about Ed.

Studies of this type indicate variations in types of attributions, and researchers have identified three primary dimensions of attributions that people make about the causes of events that they observe: (1) the *source* of the causal factor; (2) its *stability*; and (3) its *globality* (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990; Doherty, 1981; Gottman, 1994; Vangelisti, 1992). The source dimension of an attribution identifies who or what is responsible for the event, indicating one’s self, partner, the relationship, or the external environment. The stability dimension involves the degree to which characteristics of an attributed source are viewed as permanent and stable, or as transitory and unstable. Finally, the globality dimension involves the degree to which the characteristics of the attributed source are viewed as a general characteristic of the source that span across a variety of situations, or as one specific aspect of this source that affects one specific situation.

In conjunction with these dimensions, researchers have also identified three main functions that attributions serve in all types of relationships, including professional and personal partnerships. First, it is believed that people assign responsibility to others for events in an effort to understand the person and the event, and possibly to establish a connection with the person. When developing new relationships and continuing existing relationships, it is important for people to feel as though they can anticipate others' behaviors in new and recurrent situations, ultimately strengthening the bond that people may share with each other (Baucom, 1987).

A second reason why people make attributions about each other is to establish and maintain control over one another's behavior. When one person behaves in a particular manner, the other person is naturally inclined to seek an understanding of the event, and then develop a strategy to change negative behavior and maintain positive behavior. Thus, positive attributions are designed to control the other person's positive behavior, while negative attributions attempt to manipulate the negative behavior into a more constructive process (Baucom, 1987).

The third reason why attributions are used in relationships is to protect and enhance one's image. Assigning negative attributes to the other person often relinquishes one of the responsibilities for the negative event, and instead places the blame on the other person. In contrast, the use of positive attributions, such as attributing a person's positive actions to stable desirable traits, can enhance the self-esteem of both people in the relationship (Baucom, 1987).

In sum, all people make attributions that may possess more than one dimension and/or serve more than one purpose. Whether it is an employee attributing a boss' behavior to a stable, personality trait, or a parent attributing a child's misbehavior to fatigue, all people work to understand others' behavior, such that they are better able to predict future behavior and maintain a satisfying relationship. This next section will explore the ways in which individuals use attributions in couple relationships, and how these attributions may influence partners' behaviors.

### *Attributions and Couple Relationships*

Attribution theory, originated by Fritz Heider, Edward Jones, Keith Davis, and Harold Kelley, guides much of the research in couple relationships, and seeks to understand the process of explaining events and the consequences that come about as a result of these explanations. Attribution theory incorporates a three-stage process of cognition, in which (1) the person perceives a behavior; (2) the person believes that the behavior was deliberately performed by some person for some reason; and (3) the person must determine if the actor intentionally acted the behavior (event attributed to an internal, stable trait of the actor) or if the actor was forced to perform the behavior (event attributed to an external factor separate from the actor) (Kelley, 1973).

Using the constructs of attribution theory, Doherty (1981) linked attributions to relationship quality in terms of four dimensions of attributions traditionally cited in social psychology research. Based upon partners' answers to attributional (e.g., "Who or what is causing the problem?") and efficacy questions (e.g., "Are we able to resolve this problem?"), Doherty explored the ways in which source, stability,



globality, and voluntariness (deliberateness or purposefulness of a person's behavior) attributions influenced the quality of interactions between members. First, he suggested that the use of stable and global attributions within a relationship were likely to decrease members' sense of efficacy to resolve the conflict, resulting in less satisfaction within the relationship. For example, if Partner A attributed Partner B's depressed mood to a stable quality (e.g., depression), rather than a temporary mood that would change, then Partner B's sense of self-efficacy would decrease, such that he or she would feel ineffective in his or her abilities to efficaciously resolve issues surrounding the depressed mood. Furthermore, if Partner A made a global attribution that Partner B is *always* lazy and *never* contributes to household chores, rather than focusing on one event in which Partner B did not assist with chores, then Partner B may have felt less effective in finding a solution and resolving the issue when confronted with conflict surrounding household tasks.

Second, in conjunction with the negative effects stable and global attributions may have on partners' sense of efficacy in resolving the conflict, Doherty (1981) also suggested that attributions to one's level of voluntariness may increase partners' sense of efficacy. For example, if Partner A attributed Partner B's depressed mood to an involuntary state of mind, such that a chemical imbalance exists and medication is necessary, then Partner B may have felt less able to resolve this issue on his or her own. However, if Partner A attributed the depressed mood to a voluntary state, in which the mood was caused by some troublesome event (e.g., death in the family, anxiety about job, conflictual relationship with family member), then Partner B would

be more likely to feel as though he or she is able to manipulate and change the mood, thus successfully resolving conflict that may surround a partner's mood.

In sum, Doherty (1981) noted that specific types of attributions about one's self and/or partner evoked particular thoughts and behaviors. Attributions to self often created self-blame, higher efficacy expectations, and the belief that change is voluntary and possible. Attributions to other members in the family, however, were more likely to result in blaming attitudes and behaviors towards each other, such that partners expressed resentful thoughts and feelings while engaging in negative, punitive actions.

In conjunction with Doherty's (1981) work on attributions in couple relationships, Pretzer, Epstein, and Fleming (1991) addressed the role of attributions in couple relationships based upon a set of attribution dimensions presented in their Marital Attitude Survey (MAS). The MAS is an assessment tool designed to assess partners' use of dysfunctional attributions and expectancies within the couple relationship. Apart from the traditional attribution dimensions (source, stability, globality), this measure includes four dimensions of attributions that seek to identify partners' views of themselves and their partners in the relationship, which include: (1) attribution of causality to behavior (self or partner); (2) attribution of causality to personality (self or partner); (3) attribution of malicious intent to spouse; and (4) attribution of lack of love to spouse. Consistent with Doherty's (1981) findings, which suggest that negative attributions may lead to low levels of efficacy and lack of conflict resolution, results from the MAS also suggest that partners' perceptions of and expectations that they can produce change in relationship problems are correlated

with levels of relationship dissatisfaction. Attributions directed toward the other partner, in which causality for relationship problems is attributed to the other partner's behavior, personality, malicious intent, and/or lack of love, correlated with couples' inability to resolve conflict and effectively engage in conflict. Thus, these four dimensions of attributions, in conjunction with source, stability, and globality, provide a more comprehensive understanding of the ways in which attributions in couple relationships can work to enhance and/or hinder partners' abilities to effectively resolve conflict.

In accordance with the research on various dimensions of attributions and their roles in relationships, several studies have also analyzed the relationship between partners' use of attributions about the relationship and each other and their reported levels of relationship distress (Fincham, Bradbury, Arias, Byrne, & Karney, 1997; Fincham, Harold, & Gano-Phillips, 2000; Pretzer et al., 1991; Vangelisti, 1992). Results suggest that non-distressed couples' attributions often promote and enhance their relationships because the couples are more likely to view positive events as internal and stable to both partners, and negative events as external and unstable to their relationships. Members of satisfied couples will often experience negative events as due to unique and fleeting causes, and they are less likely than distressed couples to believe that the events will affect their relationships. For example, if one partner returns home from work late one evening, the other partner may attribute the tardiness to an external event, such as a meeting that ran late or heavy traffic. In contrast, if one partner unexpectedly cooks a romantic dinner for the other partner, the other person's tendency to attribute this positive behavior to a

stable, internal characteristic, such as “He loves me,” or “She enjoys surprising me after a long week at work” is also associated with greater relationship satisfaction (Baucom et al., 1989; Bradbury & Fincham, 1990; Davey et al., 2001; Gottman, 1994; Rusbult et al., 1986).

Distressed couples, however, often emphasize negative aspects of their relationships and minimize their positive experiences with each other by viewing negative events as the products of internal, stable, and global characteristics of their partners, whereas they experience positive events as due to factors that are unstable and external to their relationship. Dissatisfied partners tend to blame each other and assume that their partner intended to cause the negative event out of selfish motivation. For example, a distressed partner is likely to attribute the other person’s tardiness to a global trait that affects the relationship, such as “He doesn’t care about our evenings together,” or “She cares more about her job than about me.” Furthermore, a positive event, such as a surprise, romantic dinner, may be attributed to an external, unstable characteristic of the partner, such as “He’s just cooking me dinner so he won’t have to do the laundry,” or “She’s just trying to cover up an affair by preparing a nice dinner” (Baucom, 1987; Baucom et al., 1989; Bauserman et al., 1995; Bradbury & Fincham, 1990; Davey et al., 2001; Epstein & Baucom, 2002; Gottman, 1994; Sillars, Roberts, Leonard, & Dun, 2000).

#### *Attributions and Behavior in Response to Conflict*

Minimal research has measured the degree to which partners’ attributions can predict their behavior during conflict. Results thus far suggest that attributions are

reliable predictors of partners' choices of behaviors during couple interactions focused on areas of conflict (Bauserman et al., 1995; Bradbury & Fincham, 1992; Cahn, 1992; Davey et al., 2001). Among the results, the most replicated finding indicates that positive attributions lead to the use of constructive behaviors during conflict, and negative attributions result in the use of destructive behaviors during conflict (Bauserman et al, 1995; Bradbury & Fincham, 1990; Bradbury & Fincham, 1992; Davey et al., 2001). One of these studies, conducted by Bradbury and Fincham (1992), closely resembles the current study with respect to sample, design, and methodology; 47 mildly dissatisfied to mildly satisfied married couples completed a variety of self-report measures and a 15-minute communication sample, in which their use of causal and responsibility attributions were assessed. First, they were asked to rate the degree to which they experienced particular marital problems, and then they were instructed to make attribution ratings for the most conflictual topics. The causal attributions were related to the factors that produce an event, while the responsibility attributions were defined as one's accountability or answerability for producing some event. The partners then completed a 15-minute communication sample, in which they were asked to "try to work toward a mutually agreeable solution" for the problem that they both had rated as the most difficult in the relationship. Each sample was coded using a system designed to assess the quality of each spouse's approach to problem solving, which included five dimensions, each rated on a 5-point scale: (1) partner's denial of own role in the problem; (2) partner's destructive focus on the history of the problem; (3) partner's abandonment of solutions; (4) partner's nonnegotiative approach to problem solving; and (5) partner's

failure to consider the other partner's views and opinions. As previously noted, the data revealed that adaptive attributions, in which positive events are attributed to the relationship and negative events are considered external and situational, often give rise to problem solving behaviors, such that both partners were working to promote the relationship and constructively resolve the difficulty. Maladaptive attributions, however, explain positive events as external and negative events as internal to the relationship, which contributes to inhibiting the partners from constructively resolving conflictual issues in an effective and helpful manner.

Among the positive and negative attributions partners may use to explain events, particular types of attributions have been found to be more influential than others in predicting how partners will behave during times of relationship conflict. Within the traditional three types of causal attributions (source, stability, and globality), the source dimension has been found to be the most influential in determining whether a partner will utilize constructive or destructive behaviors during conflict. If partners blame each other for a negative event, or see each other as not responsible for a positive event, they are much more likely to engage in a cycle of negative conflict behavior and report an increased level of dissatisfaction within the relationship. However, if an individual attributes positive relationship events to his or her partner, or views a negative event as situational, then the individual is more likely to engage in constructive problem solving in an effort to resolve relationship difficulties, and they are more likely to report relationship satisfaction (Bradbury & Fincham, 1992; Cahn, 1992; Davey et al., 2001; Doherty, 1981; Fincham et al., 2000).

Stability attributions, though not as strong as source attributions, for predictability, have also been found to influence partners' choices of behaviors. When a negative event is explained as the result of a stable characteristic about a person or the relationship, then that person is less likely to feel confident about resolving the problem and is more likely to engage in destructive conflict behaviors and reciprocate negative, stable attributions. Alternatively, if a positive partner behavior is attributed to the partner's stable characteristics, then the attributor's efforts to problem solve are greatly enhanced (Davey et al., 2001; Doherty, 1981; Fincham et al., 2000; Harvey, 1987).

Finally, global attributions, which involve negative explanations that pervade across a variety of events, have not been identified as strong predictors of partners' behaviors during conflict. Although studies suggest that negative global attributions involve a broad negative belief about one's partner, no research has identified whether or not global attributions directly influence partners' negative behaviors and interactions across a variety of situations, including conflict (Doherty, 1981; McClintock, 1983).

Thus, only a few studies have identified the ways in which attributions affect partners' behaviors during times of conflict. Currently, it is understood that the use of particular types of attributions, such as source and stability attributions, may influence partners to engage in more constructive or destructive forms of behavior. However, specific types of positive and negative behaviors have yet to be identified in relation to attributions and their effects on conflict. Thus, this study investigated the relationship between partners' use of different types of positive and negative

attributions and the partners' use of specific constructive and destructive behaviors during conflict.

#### Commitment and Partners' Behavior Concerning Areas of Conflict

Similar to the lack of consensus on the definition of conflict, there have been a variety of definitions offered for the concept of commitment within an intimate relationship. Primarily, much of the literature refers to commitment as an emotional and psychological state that represents one's choice to form a long-term attachment to, and dependence upon, another person (Floyd & Wasner, 1994; Rusbult & Buunk, 1993; Stanley, Markman, & Whitton, 2002). Emotionally, people commit to relationships in which they are satisfactorily attached to a person to whom they are attracted (Cate & Lloyd, 1992; Rusbult & Buunk, 1993; Sprecher et al., 1995).

Psychologically, people choose to commit to relationships in which they are heavily invested, and in which they are dissatisfied with available alternative partners (Cate & Lloyd, 1992; Sprecher et al., 1995). To assess partners' long-term orientation within their relationships, a variety of researchers have developed questionnaires that are validated measures of commitment within an intimate relationship (Sprecher, 1988; Stanley et al., 2002). Typical items used to assess commitment include:

- How often have you seriously considered ending your relationship with your partner? (1 = never; to 9 = several times).
- How likely is it that you will try to end the relationship with your partner during the next year? (1 = extremely unlikely; to 9 = extremely likely).



- My relationship with my partner is more important to me than almost anything else in my life (1 = strongly disagree; to 5 = strongly agree).
- I may not want to be with my partner a few years from now (1 = strongly disagree; to 5 = strongly agree).
- I want this relationship to stay strong no matter what rough times we may encounter (1 = strongly disagree; to 5 = strongly agree).

Items such as these are used to estimate the degree to which partners are emotionally attached to their mates and psychologically invested in maintaining their relationships into the future.

In addition to considering partners' reports of the emotional and cognitive aspects of their commitment to their relationship, researchers also use couples' relationship status as a factor in defining partners' levels of commitment. Prior to the 1990s, much of the research involving relationship status as an index of commitment focused on dating versus married couples, only distinguishing couples based upon their legal commitment to each other and often excluding unmarried couples who were living together and/or raising children together. However, as cohabitation has become a more socially acceptable form of living, and nearly 10% of all couples in the United States are now cohabiting, the research on relationship status and commitment has since broadened to include dating, cohabiting, and married couples (Floyd & Wasner, 1994; Thomson & Colella, 1992; United States Census Bureau, 2000). As a result, studies now include degrees of relationship status, such as casually dating, exclusively dating, cohabiting with the intent to marry, and cohabiting as an alternative to marriage (Billingham, 1987; Cate & Lloyd, 1992; Kiernan, 2002; Prinz,

1995; South & Tolnay, 1992). However, despite this more inclusive use of relationship status with respect to commitment, the use of relationship status as equivalent to commitment seems to have limited utility. For example, South and Tolnay (1992) note that newly cohabiting couples are much more likely than married couples to report a lack of commitment to permanency, similar to casually dating couples. However, as the cohabiting relationship progresses, the partners are eventually more likely to report a permanent level of commitment, similar to the degree reported by many married couples. In addition, as evidenced by the high divorce rate in countries such as the U.S., members of many married couples experience limited commitment to their relationships and eventually dissolve them. Thus, this study suggested that couples' relationship status may not coincide with a progression of commitment from dating to cohabitation to marriage. Yet, regardless of this erroneous assumption of equivalence between relationship status and commitment level, a variety of studies have used couples' relationship status as an index of commitment, assuming that casually dating couples have the least amount of emotional commitment, cohabitators' commitment is midway between dating and married couples, and married couples have high emotional commitment (Billingham, 1987; Thomson & Colella, 1992). Rather, evidence suggests that relationship status and emotional commitment to the relationship should be evaluated as two related, but separate, factors that may differentially reflect individuals' overall levels of commitment to their relationships. Therefore, for the purposes of the present study, partners' commitment to the relationship was defined in terms of partners' reported

emotional and cognitive commitment to the relationship, and not by the couples' relationship status.

Another important distinction that is often blurred in family research is the difference between individuals' commitment to their relationship and their *satisfaction* within the relationship. Many studies have found a strong correlation between these two variables, which has prompted a variety of researchers to use the two terms interchangeably (Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 1998; Rusbult et al., 1983; Sprecher, 1988; Sprecher, 2001). However, as Rusbult (1983) notes, partners may feel strongly committed to a relationship simply due to poor alternatives or large investments, but they may still be very dissatisfied with the relationship to which they are committed. Thus, this study explored commitment and satisfaction as two separate factors that can influence partners' experiences within a relationship.

#### *Commitment in the Context of Social Exchange Theory*

Within the construct of commitment, social exchange theory is often used to understand how and why people choose to stay in or leave a relationship. This economic-based theory postulates that individuals' levels of commitment to a relationship are based upon three major types of factors: (1) the weighing of rewards and costs of being in the relationship; (2) the desirability of alternative relationships, and (3) the amount of resources that the individual has invested in the relationship (Donovan & Jackson, 1990; Floyd & Wasner, 1994; Klein & White, 1996; Rusbult, 1983; Rusbult & Buunk, 1993; Sprecher, 1988; Sprecher, 2001). The first element of social exchange theory is the weighing of rewards and costs, in which it is believed that commitment is strengthened when partners' expectations of the relationship are

satisfied by the received rewards outweighing the costs. Relationships in which the costs are greater than the rewards will often lead partners to report a lower level of commitment to the relationship, and they are also more likely to report less satisfaction within the relationship (Floyd & Wasner, 1994; Rusbult, 1983; Sprecher, 1988). As noted earlier, an individual may be dissatisfied with a relationship based on an undesirable ratio of costs to rewards, but still may be committed to remaining in the relationship.

The second component, desirability of alternative relationships, refers to the degree to which partners perceive quality relations with other people as more or less rewarding than the current relationship. According to this model, partners feel more committed to the relationship when they perceive their relationship to be more attractive and of richer quality than alternative relationships, or when they do not perceive alternatives to be available to them at all (Donovan & Jackson, 1990; Floyd & Wasner, 1994; Rusbult, 1983; Rusbult & Buunk, 1993; Sprecher, 1988).

Finally, the third component of social exchange theory emphasizes the investment of numerous and important resources as a contributing factor to one's emotional and psychological commitment to the relationship, regardless of one's level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction within the relationship (Rusbult, 1983; Rusbult & Buunk, 1993; Sprecher, 1988). Therefore, partners who have contributed a significant amount of resources to the relationship (i.e. money, time, children, etc.) may report higher levels of commitment because it seems too costly to leave the relationship and lose the investments. Thus, as this theory asserts, partners' decisions

to commit to a relationship are determined by a variety of economic factors, including rewards, alternatives, and investments (Rusbult, 1983).

### *Commitment and Behavior in Response to Conflict*

Research focusing on relationship commitment and conflict has been minimal. To date, only a handful of studies have actually examined the correlation between partners' reported levels of commitment to the relationship and their behavior during conflict. More specifically, only one study done 25 years ago, conducted by Fitzpatrick and Winke (1979), thoroughly investigated different types of behaviors that partners employ during conflict interactions based upon their commitment to their relationships. Four levels of commitment were defined, including: (1) casually involved with partner (dating); (2) exclusively involved with partner (dating); (3) engaged; and (4) married. In this study, partners who were casually involved with each other reported frequent use of manipulative tactics (e.g., be overly sweet and helpful before approaching a conflictual topic, making the other partner believe that he or she is doing a favor by giving in) and nonnegotiation tactics (e.g., refusal to discuss a subject unless the other partner gives in, arguing until the other partner changes his or her mind). Furthermore, casually involved couples were much less likely to use emotional appeals (e.g., appeal to a partner's love and affection, promise to be more loving in future, get angry and demand cooperation) and empathic understanding (e.g., discuss possible acceptance of each other's views, talk about disagreement without arguing). In comparison, married partners were most likely to use strategies of emotional appeal and personal rejection, which included withholding

affection, ignoring the other person, and making the other person feel jealous by showing disinterest. Similar to the casually involved couples, married partners were also less likely to use empathic understanding tactics during times of conflict. Thus, in sum, this study suggests that individuals involved in relationship statuses considered to be lower in commitment are likely to employ methods of control and demand, whereas individuals in relationships with higher commitment status are likely to appeal to their partners' feelings through affection and rejection.

In conjunction with Fitzpatrick and Winke's (1979) study, three other studies have touched on commitment and its effects on partners' choices of behaviors during couple conflict. Roloff and Solomon (2002) examined the conditions under which commitment may lead a partner to express or withhold complaints about the relationship. Results suggested that partners with greater commitment to their relationships were more likely to confront their partners with complaints in an effort to effect change; less committed partners perceived the risk of confrontation as outweighing the benefits of avoiding the conflict, and so they were more likely to evade the subject and withhold complaints. These results do point to a relationship between commitment and engagement/withdrawal behaviors during conflict; however, the specific ways in which partners engage or withdraw were not addressed in the study.

Sprecher et al. (1995) sought to examine the degree to which expressive interaction (companionship, sexual expression, and supportive communication) could predict partners' satisfaction and commitment within their relationships. Supportive communication was measured using eight items, including "My partner helps me

clarify my thoughts,” and “My partner and I understand each other completely.” The results of this study suggest that all three components of expressive interaction are significantly related to satisfaction within, and commitment to, the relationship, with supportive communication having the strongest association. However, despite the strong correlation between positive expressive communication and commitment, the items used to measure communication assessed partners’ perceptions of each other during conflict, rather than the actual behaviors in which they engage during instances of conflict. Thus, the Sprecher et al. (1995) study is unable to identify the overt behaviors that may be associated with their definition of “supportive communication” and commitment.

Similarly, a study conducted by Swensen and Trahaug (1985) analyzed the relationships among marital commitment, issues of conflict, and expression of love. Two forms of commitment were differentiated: (1) commitment to the institution of marriage, in terms of a preference for getting married and staying married as opposed to being single or getting a divorce; or (2) valuing one’s partner as a unique individual and committing to a long-term relationship with that person. Areas of conflict analyzed in this study included problem solving, childrearing, relatives and in-laws, personal care and health, money management, and expression of affection. Expression of love was coded based on six areas, including: (1) verbal expression of affection; (2) disclosure of personal facts about oneself; (3) tolerance for the less liked characteristics of the other person; (4) concern and moral support for the spouse; (5) unexpressed feelings for the spouse; and (6) financial and material support. Based on a small sample (N=36) of Norwegian couples, the results suggested

that partners who were committed to each other as people, rather than to the institution of marriage, reported fewer issues of conflict, better conflict resolution skills, and more expression of love. Yet, despite the investigators' coding of six forms of positive expressive behavior, they failed to report a specific breakdown of which behaviors were most often used by more committed couples and which behaviors were most often used by less committed couples.

Thus, these four studies suggest that there is a positive correlation between partners' commitment to their relationships and their tendencies to communicate effectively with each other. Whereas some researchers propose that positive communication leads to greater commitment, others theorize that partners' increased commitment levels subsequently influence the ways in which they choose to behave during conflict. Yet, regardless of the direction of this relationship, little information is known about which types of behavior correlate with varying levels of commitment. As this review demonstrates, several studies have analyzed the relationship between commitment and couple conflict, yet only one has successfully identified positive and negative behaviors that couples of varying commitment levels employ during periods of conflict. This gap in the literature served as a focal point for the current study.



## DEFINITIONS OF VARIABLES

### Independent Variables

Attributions: Explanations or inferences that partners make about factors that have caused an event that takes place within the relationship; attributions are classified as either positive or negative.

- Relationship enhancing attributions include:
  - Causality/Source: attributing the cause of a negative event to one's own behavior and/or personality.
  - Stability: positive events attributed to stable trait about self, partner, and/or relationship; negative events attributed to a highly transitory or unstable trait about self, partner, and/or relationship.
  - Globality: positive events attributed to global trait of self, partner, and/or relationship; negative events attributed to a separate, narrow aspect of self, partner, and/or relationship.
- Relationship demoting attributions include:
  - Causality/Source: attributing the cause of a negative event to partner's behavior, personality, malicious intent, and/or lack of love.
  - Stability: negative events attributed to stable trait about self, partner, and/or relationship; positive events attributed to a highly transitory or unstable trait about self, partner, and/or relationship.

- Globality: negative events attributed to global trait of self, partner, and/or relationship; positive events attributed to a separate, narrow aspect of self, partner, and/or relationship.

Relationship Commitment: A psychological and emotional state that represents one's choice to develop and maintain a long-term attachment to another person, as well as a moral obligation to continue the relationship.

### Dependent Variables

Constructive Behaviors: Positive behaviors used during conflict that are comprised of a variety of tactics designed to facilitate the conversation, concentrate on the issue at hand, and revive or maintain the relationship. Constructive behaviors include engagement, empathic listening, and problem solving, and often result in a positive cycle of interaction known as positive reciprocity.

Destructive Behaviors: Negative behaviors used during conflict that are comprised of a variety of destructive efforts that often result in intimidating and controlling one's partner, insulting or shaming one's partner, avoiding the conflict, or communicating one's contempt and dissatisfaction with the other partner. Destructive behaviors include hostile withdrawal, hostile engagement, and denigration, and often result in a negative cycle of interaction known as negative reciprocity.

## HYPOTHESES

Based upon the cited research, this study had three hypotheses and three research questions.

- 1) Individuals' greater tendencies to make negative attributions about causes of problems in their relationship will be associated with greater use of destructive behaviors and less use of constructive behaviors during couple discussions of relationship conflict topics/issues.
- 2) Lower levels of individuals' commitment to their relationships will be associated with greater use of destructive behaviors and less use of constructive behaviors during couple discussions of relationship conflict topics/issues.
- 3) Commitment levels would moderate the relationship between individuals' use of negative attributions for relationship problems and their tendencies to exhibit forms of constructive and destructive behaviors during couple discussions of relationship conflict topics/issues. Specifically,
  - a) Under conditions of higher commitment, differences in levels of constructive and destructive behaviors during conflict discussions would be relatively small between individuals who make more versus less negative attributions about relationship problems, whereas,
  - b) Under conditions of lower commitment, individuals who make more negative attributions about relationship problems would exhibit less constructive behaviors and more destructive behaviors during conflict discussions than individuals who make less negative attributions for relationship problems.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- 1) Is there a difference in males' and females' use of constructive and destructive behaviors based upon their use of negative attributions?
- 2) Is there a difference in males' and females' use of constructive and destructive behaviors based upon their levels of commitment to the relationship?
- 3) Is there a gender difference in how commitment moderates the relationship between males' and females' use of negative attributions about relationship problems and their tendencies to exhibit forms of constructive and destructive behaviors during couple discussions of relationship conflict?

## Chapter 2: Methodology

### SAMPLE

The sample used in this study was comprised of 52 heterosexual couples who presented on their own for couple therapy at a university-based clinic and voluntarily opted to participate in an ongoing study focusing on treatment of psychologically and physically abusive behavior in couple relationships. The average age of males was 33 and the average age of females was 31. Of these couples, 51% were currently married and living together, 24% were living together and not married, 19% were dating and not living together, and 5% were currently married and not living together. The average length of relationship was 7 years, and ranged between 1 and 37 years. Regarding ethnicity, 55% of the participants were Caucasian, 32% were African American, 7% were Hispanic, and 4% classified themselves as other (see Table 1).

Table 1  
*Demographics by Gender*

Variable	Gender	Males <i>n</i> =52	Females <i>n</i> =52
Mean age of partner (in years)		33.3	31.0
Mean length of relationship (in years)		6.8	7.1
Relationship Status			
Married, living together		29	29
Married, not living together		3	3
Living together, not married		10	10
Dating, not living together		8	8
Race			
Caucasian		28	26
African-American		15	19
Hispanic		4	4
Native American		1	0
Other		4	3

All of the couples who sought therapy qualified for the larger treatment study because both partners met all of the following criteria: (1) 18 years or older; (2) reported commitment to the relationship; (3) reported mild to moderate levels of physical and/or psychological abuse; (4) reported no fear of living with and participating in couple therapy with partner; (5) reported no untreated substance abuse.

## INSTRUMENTS

Data for this study were extracted from questionnaire and behavioral assessment information, which was collected from all of the couples during a two-day assessment. Day 1 forms are given to all couples seeking therapy services at the clinic, regardless of their eligibility or interest in the abuse treatment study, and this packet includes the Marital Status Inventory – Revised and Multidimensional Emotional Abuse Scale to be used in the present study (see descriptions below). Upon completion of the Day 1 questionnaires and separate clinical interviews with the partners, the couple's eligibility for the treatment study was determined, and they were invited to participate when they met all of the criteria. If the couple voluntarily chose to be a part of the treatment study, they were given a Day 2 assessment packet of questionnaires to complete, which contained the Marital Attitude Survey to be used in the present study (see description below). Furthermore, on Day 2 the couple completed a communication sample, which was a 10-minute videotaped sample of the couple discussing a topic that they both rated on a Relationship Issues Survey as a source of moderate disagreement in their relationship (e.g., finances, trust, standards of neatness). The following are descriptions of the instruments that were used to measure the variables examined in this study.

*Commitment*, an independent variable, was measured using the Marital Status Inventory-Revised (MSI-R). The original Marital Status Inventory (Weiss & Cerreto, 1980) is a 14-item self-report measure that identifies the thoughts and actions that an individual has experienced regarding taking steps toward ending the couple's relationship (ranging from occasional vague thoughts of leaving to initiating legal

action). The instrument has been used widely in marital research. Because the couples in the larger research in the outpatient university clinic are not all married, the investigators revised some of the MSI items and added some additional items, to make the scale applicable to any couple who have been in a committed relationship, marital or otherwise. The Marital Status Inventory - Revised (MSI-R; Epstein & Werlinich, 2001) used for this study has 18 items (see copy in Appendix A). For the purposes of this study, partners' commitment to the relationship was measured by the composite score of all 18 items on the MSI-R. Every question is answered as either "Yes" or "No," which are numerically coded as 1 or 0, respectively. Scores can range from 0-18, and higher scores indicate less commitment to the relationship.

*Attributions for relationship problems*, the second independent variable, was measured using the Marital Attitude Scale (MAS; Pretzer et al., 1991). The MAS is a self-report scale measuring partners' dysfunctional attributions and expectancies concerning problems in their couple relationship (Pretzer et al., 1991). The total instrument contains 74 items and has six subscales that measure attribution of causality for relationship problems to one's own behavior and personality, the partner's behavior and personality, the partner's malicious intent, and the partner's lack of love, as well as two subscales that assess expectancies that the couple has the ability to improve their relationship, and that they actually will improve it. In the present study, the subscales assessing attributions that involve blaming the partner for relationship problems (attribution of causality to partner's behavior, attribution of causality to partner's personality, attribution to partner's malicious intent, and attribution to partner's lack of love) were used (see Appendix B). All items are



answered on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from “Strongly agree” to “Strongly disagree.” Questions 1, 4, 6, 7, 8, 14, 15, 16, 18, 21, 24, 26, and 27 measure negative attributions and were coded such that 1 = Strongly agree and 5 = Strongly disagree. Questions 2, 5, 12, 17, 20, 25, 28, 29, 30, and 31 measure positive attributions and were coded such that 1 = Strongly disagree and 5 = Strongly agree. Higher composite scores indicate greater use of positive attributions (i.e., attributing relationship problems to the partners behavior, personality, malicious intent, and lack of love) and lesser use of negative attributions. Each of the four negative attribution scores, as well as a total score for the four subscales, were used to predict partners’ degrees of destructive and constructive behaviors during the discussion of relationship conflict.

*Constructive and destructive behaviors* used during the couple’s discussion of a conflictual relationship topic, the two dependent variables, were measured using two data sources, (1) the Multidimensional Emotional Abuse Scale (MDEAS) and (2) ratings of forms of negative communication previously coded from the 10-minute communication sample provided by the couple during the Day 2 assessment. The MDEAS (Murphy & Hoover, 2001) is a 28-item scale designed to measure psychologically abusive behaviors that partners use during conflict (see Appendix C). The scale is divided into four subscales: hostile withdrawal (e.g., “Refused to have any discussion of the problem.”), restrictive engulfment (e.g., “Checked up on the other person by asking friends where he or she was or who he or she was with.”), domination/intimidation (e.g., “Threatened to throw something at the other person.”), and denigration (e.g., “Called the other person ugly.”). Each question asks how many times in the last four months the destructive behavior has occurred, in which the

partners completing the form are asked to identify how many times they have committed the behavior, as well as how many times their partner has performed this behavior. For the purposes of this study, only partners' self-report of their own behaviors were used. Answers were coded as follows: 1 = Once, 2 = Twice, 3 = 3-5 times, 4 = 6-10 times, 5 = 11-20 times, 6 = 20+ times, 0 = Never in past 4 months, and 0 = Never in relationship. The total MDEAS score is the sum of each individual's answers, which may range from 0 to 168, in which lower scores indicate lesser use of psychologically abusive behaviors within the past four months.

The second tool used to measure couples' use of destructive behaviors during conflict is a 10-minute communication sample recorded during the assessment session prior to beginning therapy. During the Day 1 assessment, partners complete a Relationship Issues Survey (RIS), which is a 28-item measure designed to identify sources of disagreement in a relationship (see Appendix D). Items include topics such as finances, personal manners, privacy, and the sexual relationship. Partners rate these items from 0 = Not at all a source of disagreement or conflict, to 3 = Very much a source of disagreement or conflict. For the purposes of the communication sample, a topic in which both partners rate the item as a 1 or 2 (slightly or moderately a source of disagreement or conflict, respectively) is selected by the assessor as the topic of discussion for the 10-minute sample. Couples are instructed to discuss the item as they would at home, in which the goal is not to resolve the conflict, but simply to discuss the topic. The sample is videotaped and later coded using the Marital Interaction Coding System – Global (MICS-G; Weiss & Tolman, 1990). Partners' behaviors are categorized into constructive and destructive behaviors (see Appendix

E). Specifically, the MICS-G considers problem solving, validation, and facilitation as constructive behaviors.

- Problem solving
  - Content cues: problem description, proposing a positive and/or negative solution, compromising with the partner.
  - Affect cues: relaxed and open body position, willingness to listen and be attentive to the other partner.
- Validation
  - Content cues: expressing agreement with the partner's opinion or behavior, expressing approval of something the partner has said or done, accepting responsibility for a past or present problem behavior.
  - Affect cues: expressions indicating agreement (e.g., head nod, "Mm-hmm"), receptivity (e.g., good eye contact), encouragement of the other partner (e.g., warm voice tone, patience to allow other partner to complete statements).
- Facilitation
  - Content cues: positive mindreading (statements that make inferences or assumptions about the other partner), paraphrasing (statements that mirror or reflect back what the other partner just said), using humor (humorous and light-hearted statements that often evoke laughter from the other partner).

- Affect cues: positive physical contact (e.g., hugging, kissing, holding hands), friendly smiles and laughter, open body posture (e.g., relaxed body, head oriented toward other partner, arms and feet not blocking body from other partner), warm/affectionate tone of voice.

Destructive behaviors identified on the MICS-G (Weiss & Tolman, 1990) include conflict, invalidation, and withdrawal.

- Conflict
  - Content cues: complaining (expressions of feeling deprived, wronged, or inconvenienced as a result of the other partner's actions), criticizing (expressions of dislike or disapproval of a partner's behavior), negative mindreading (statements inferring or assuming a negative attitude or emotion of the other partner), put downs and insults (statements intended to hurt, demean, or embarrass the other partner), negative commands (angry or hostile demands toward other partner).
  - Affect cues: hostility (e.g., obscene or threatening gestures, shouting), voice tones that are sarcastic, whining, angry, and/or bitter.
- Invalidation
  - Content cues: disagreement (statements of disagreements with other partner's opinion or behavior), denial of personal

responsibility (refuting any responsibility for a problem addressed by the other partner), changing the subject of the discussion (purposely altering the topic of conversation away from the original problem), excuses (illegitimate statements that avoid responding to the other partner).

- Affect cues: interruption of the other partner (deliberate attempts to ‘get the floor’), turn-off behaviors (expressions indicating displeasure, disgust, disapproval, or disagreement with the other partner), inconsiderate or rude behaviors (gestures indicating that the listener does not care what the other partner is saying), domineering behaviors (e.g., refusing to allow the other partner to speak).

- Withdrawal

- Content cues: negation (statements indicating that the speaker does not want to partake in the conversation), not voluntarily contributing to the discussion (responding only when an answer is demanded).
- Affect cues: no response (silence after the other partner speaks), turning away (moving head and/or body away from other partner), increasing physical distance (e.g., moving chair away from other partner), erecting physical barriers (e.g., raising hand between self and partner).

For the larger study, each 10-minute communication sample was broken up into five two-minute segments. In each segment, both partners were individually rated on a 6-point scale for each of the six behavior categories, in which 0 = no use of behavior, and 5 = very high use of behavior. The individual's score for each behavioral category was calculated as the total of the ratings of the five 2-minute segments. To determine each partner's use of constructive and destructive behaviors, scores from the three constructive behavior categories were summed to create a composite constructive score, and scores from the three destructive behavior categories were summed to create a composite destructive score.

## PROCEDURE

As previously noted, this study was part of a larger, ongoing study conducted at the University of Maryland, College Park, and entitled Couples Abuse Prevention Program (CAPP). All couples participating in the CAPP program presented on their own for couple therapy at the university-based clinic. During the Day 1 assessment for the larger study, each partner is placed in a separate room to complete the questionnaire packet, which consists of 11 assessment tools designed to measure various facets of a couple relationship, including issues of conflict, degree of commitment, conflict styles and behaviors, relationship style, level of social support, roles in the relationship, trauma symptoms, and level of depression. While the partners complete the packet, the therapists interrupt to conduct a confidential interview with each partner individually, which asks about both partners' use of drugs and alcohol, and includes details of physical violence in the relationship, and feelings of safety both in couple therapy and in living together. Upon completion of the packet, the two therapists assigned to the case determine whether or not the couple is eligible for the study, using a set of inclusion and exclusion criteria, involving self-reports of at least minimal occurrences of physical or psychological abuse during the past four months. Couples are excluded from the larger study if severe physical violence resulting in medical treatment in the past four months was reported on the questionnaires or in a partner's individual interview. If an untreated substance abuse problem is reported, and/or one or more of the partners reports in the individual interview that he or she does not feel safe in therapy or living at home with their partner, couples are also not eligible for the study.

Upon fulfilling the inclusion and exclusion criteria, couples are invited to participate in the treatment study. If a couple opts to participate, they complete the Day 2 assessment packet and communication sample. During the Day 2 assessment, which is completed approximately one week after the Day 1 assessment, each partner is placed in a separate room to complete the first half of the questionnaire packet, which consists of several instruments, all measuring partners' behaviors, cognitions, and emotions during conflict in the relationship. Once both partners complete the first half of the packets, they are reunited to complete the 10-minute communication sample, as previously described. Once they complete the sample, they each return to their room to complete the remaining half of the questionnaire packet. Upon completion of the Day 2 assessment, the couple and therapists schedule subsequent appointments to begin therapy.



## Chapter 3: Results

### DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS ON MEASURES OF THE VARIABLES

The potential score ranges, means, standard deviations, and alpha coefficients for the instruments used to measure the variables in this study are presented separately for males and females in Table 2. These include the Marital Status Inventory – Revised (MSI-R) for commitment, subscales of the Marital Attitude Survey (MAS) for negative attributions, the Multidimensional Emotional Abuse Scale (MDEAS) for self-reported negative behaviors, and the Marital Interaction Coding System – Global (MICS G) for observed constructive and destructive behaviors rated by trained coders.

To determine if males' and females' scores differed significantly on the various measures, independent samples t-tests were conducted for each of the above variables (see Table 3). Because multiple tests were conducted on a relatively small sample, only differences at the  $p < .01$  level were considered significant. Of the 19 variables tested, only two of the differences between males' and females' means were statistically significant. Among the four types of negative attributions that partners may make about each other, males scored higher than females only on making attributions for problems in their relationship to their partner's behavior,  $t(102) = 3.28, p < .01$ . With respect to partners' reported commitment levels, the females were significantly more committed to their relationships than the males,  $t(102) = 3.08, p < .01$ .

Table 2  
*Descriptive Statistics on MAS, MSI-R, MDEAS, and MICS-G*

	Male Partners			Female Partners		
	Mean	SD	Cronbach's Alpha	Mean	SD	Cronbach's Alpha
Negative Attributions (MAS) (Total Score Range 23-115)	76.17	16.88	.87	71.5	15.81	.86
Lack of Love (Range 7 – 35)	24.06	7.44	.89	22.37	7.45	.88
Malicious Intent (Range 8 – 40)	30.08	8.10	.89	29.13	8.49	.90
Partner's Personality (Range 4 – 20)	10.79	2.97	.48	10.73	3.00	.53
Partner's Behavior (Range 4 – 20)	11.25	3.33	.66	9.27	2.81	.60
Commitment (MSI-R) (Range 0 – 18)	4.62	3.78	.85	7.02	4.18	.87
Reported behaviors (MDEAS) (Total Scale Range 0 – 168)	24.42	15.16	.83	31.12	18.71	.85
Restrictive Engulfment (Range 0 – 42)	4.73	5.26	.73	6.81	7.37	.76
Denigration (Range 0 – 42)	2.96	4.13	.66	5.15	5.46	.69
Hostile Withdrawal (Range 0 – 42)	13.04	7.97	.78	15.44	8.51	.82
Domination/Intimidation (Range 0 – 42)	3.69	4.18	.70	3.71	6.05	.83
Observed Behaviors (MICS-G)						
Positive Behavior (Range 0 – 15)	3.23	.97	.75	2.98	.96	.76
Problem-Solving (Range 0 – 5)	1.31	.41		1.32	.33	
Validation (Range 0 – 5)	1.21	.43		1.04	.45	
Facilitation (Range 0 – 5)	.70	.33		.63	.38	
Negative Behaviors (Range 0 – 15)	1.33	.94	.69	1.53	.97	.63
Conflict (Range 0 – 5)	.63	.47		.85	.55	
Invalidation (Range 0 – 5)	.56	.45		.58	.47	
Withdrawal (Range 0 – 5)	.15	.24		.10	.18	

*Note.* MAS = Marital Attitude Survey; MSI-R = Marital Status Inventory – Revised; MDEAS = Multidimensional Emotional Abuse Scale; MICS-G = Marital Interaction Coding System – Global.

Table 3  
*Independent Samples t-test for Equality of Means*

Measures	<i>t</i>	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
Negative Attributions	1.457	.148	-4.673
Lack of Love	1.159	.249	-1.692
Malicious Intent	.579	.564	-.942
Partner's Personality	.099	.922	-.058
Partner's Behavior	3.279*	.001	-1.981
Commitment	3.076*	.003	2.404
Reported Destructive Behaviors	2.004	.048	6.692
Restrictive Engulfment	1.654	.101	2.077
Denigration	2.308	.023	2.192
Hostile Withdrawal	1.487	.140	2.404
Domination/Intimidation	.019	.985	.019
Observed Destructive Behaviors	1.012	.314	.190
Conflict	2.252	.026	.224
Invalidation	.181	.857	.016
Withdrawal	1.147	.254	-.049
Observed Constructive Behaviors	1.333	.185	-.252
Problem-Solving	.046	.963	.003
Validation	2.012	.047	-.175
Facilitation	1.101	.274	-.077

*Note.* *df* = 102. Means with negative signs indicate that males scored higher than females.

\* To account for the multiple tests using a smaller sample size, only differences at the  $p < .01$  level were considered significant.

### Analyses for Hypothesis 1

To determine the relationship between negative attributions and behaviors that partners exhibit during conflict, correlations were calculated separately for males and females between individuals' negative attribution scores and their scores on observed and reported behaviors during conflict (see Table 4). For males, there was a significant relationship between their negative attributions and their reports of their own use of psychologically destructive behavior, which included restrictive engulfment ( $r = .33, p < .01$ ), denigration ( $r = .35, p < .01$ ), and domination/intimidation ( $r = .28, p < .05$ ). Furthermore, males' observed use of destructive behaviors (composite MICS-G negative behavior) during a discussion of a conflict topic was significantly related to their level of negative attributions about

their partner ( $r = .49, p < .01$ ), with significant correlations for the negative behavior categories of conflict ( $r = .52, p < .01$ ) and invalidation ( $r = .45, p < .01$ ). However, males' negative attributions did not correlate significantly with their use of any of their observed positive behaviors during the conflict discussion.

Similar to the males' scores, females' negative attributions about their partners were also significantly related to the behavior they used during conflict. Specifically, there was a significant relationship between their negative attributions and their reports about their own behavior, including restrictive engulfment ( $r = .23, p < .05$ ) and domination/intimidation ( $r = .27, p < .05$ ). With respect to observed destructive behaviors, females' negative attributions about their partners were significantly correlated with all three forms of destructive behavior and the negative behavior composite identified with the MICS-G: composite ( $r = .41, p < .01$ ), conflict ( $r = .37, p < .01$ ), invalidation ( $r = .30, p < .05$ ), and withdrawal ( $r = .34, p < .01$ ). Furthermore, unlike the male partners, female partners' negative attributions were also significantly related to their use of constructive behaviors during discussions of conflict. The negative correlation with the MICS-G composite score of observed constructive behaviors was significant ( $r = -.28, p < .05$ ), and two of the three forms of constructive behavior were significantly negatively correlated with negative attributions: validation ( $r = -.37, p < .01$ ) and facilitation ( $r = -.26, p < .05$ ).

In summary, males' negative attributions about their partners were most strongly correlated with their reported and observed use of destructive behaviors during conflict, whereas their negative attributions were unrelated to their observed use of constructive behaviors. Females' negative attributions also were correlated

with their use of destructive behaviors, as well as with their overt display of constructive behaviors during conflict. It was hypothesized that there would be a significant relationship between negative attributions and behavior, specifically that partners' negative attributions would be associated with greater use of destructive behaviors and less use of constructive behaviors during conflict. Overall, the results were consistent with this prediction for both males and females; however, it seems that females' negative attributions were associated with a greater range of behaviors, both constructive and destructive, in comparison to their male partners.

Table 4  
*Pearson Correlations Between Negative Attributions and Behaviors Used During Conflict*

		Males	Females
Self-Reported	Restrictive Engulfment	.33**	.23*
Destructive	Denigration	.35**	.18
Behaviors	Hostile Withdrawal	.20	.15
(MDEAS)	Domination / Intimidation	.28*	.27*
Observed	Composite	.49**	.41**
Destructive	Conflict	.52**	.37**
Behaviors	Invalidation	.45**	.30*
(MICS-G)	Withdrawal	.06	.34**
Observed	Composite	.03	-.28*
Constructive	Problem-Solving	.18	-.01
Behaviors	Validation	-.16	-.37**
(MICS-G)	Facilitation	-.11	-.26*

Note. MDEAS = Multidimensional Emotional Abuse Scale; MICS-G – Marital Interaction Coding System; \*  $p < .05$  \*\*  $p < .01$

#### Analyses for Hypothesis 2

To test the association between partners' commitment to the relationship and their use of behaviors during conflict, Pearson correlations were calculated separately for males and females, between MSI-R commitment scores and individuals' scores on observed and reported behaviors during conflict (see Table 5). Male partners' levels of commitment were only significantly related to the self-reported destructive

behavior of hostile withdrawal ( $r = -.30, p < .05$ ) and the observed negative behavior of conflict ( $r = -.32, p < .01$ ). Furthermore, for males there was a positive correlation between commitment and observed positive behaviors, including the composite MICS-G ( $r = .34, p < .01$ ) and the individual positive behavior categories of validation ( $r = .31, p < .05$ ) and facilitation ( $r = .41, p < .01$ ).

Females' commitment levels were less consistently associated with their use of constructive and destructive behaviors. For the female partners, commitment was only significantly associated with self-reported destructive hostile withdrawal ( $r = -.36, p < .01$ ) and the constructive observed behavior of facilitation ( $r = .36, p < .01$ ). None of the other self-reported and observed behaviors, including the composite scores, were significantly related to the women's reported commitment levels.

Thus, there was mixed support for the hypothesis that lower commitment would be associated with greater use of destructive behaviors and less use of constructive behaviors during conflict. Only the male partners' commitment was significantly related to the composite constructive behaviors, and neither partner's commitment correlated with a broad range of destructive behaviors.

Finally, it is important to note that the correlational tests performed to test hypotheses 1 and 2 only indicate associations and do not specify in which direction the causation is occurring. Thus, these tests do not determine if attributions and/or commitment can predict particular behaviors, or if particular behaviors can predict attributions and/or commitment. However, because the couples completed the self-report attribution and commitment scales before they took part in the conversations

about conflictual topics in their relationships, the results provide some evidence that pre-existing relationship characteristics may be predictive of subsequent communication behavior.

Table 5  
*Pearson Correlations of Commitment with Behavior During Conflict*

		Males	Females
Reported	Restrictive Engulfment	-.10	-.06
Destructive	Denigration	-.02	-.17
Behaviors	Hostile Withdrawal	-.30*	-.36**
(MDEAS)	Domination / Intimidation	.07	-.15
Observed	Composite	-.20	-.16
Destructive	Conflict	-.32**	-.20
Behaviors	Invalidation	-.06	-.10
(MICS-G)	Withdrawal	-.06	-.00
Observed	Composite	.34**	.21
Constructive	Problem-Solving	.14	.04
Behaviors	Validation	.31*	.17
(MICS-G)	Facilitation	.41**	.36**

Note. MDEAS = Multidimensional Emotional Abuse Scale; MICS-G – Marital Interaction Coding System; \*  $p < .05$  \*\*  $p < .01$

### Analyses for Hypothesis 3

To test hypothesis 3, partners' total negative attribution scores from the MAS and commitment scores from the MSI-R were dichotomized into higher and lower categories based upon median splits, using the frequency distributions and cumulative percentages for each variables, computed separately for males and females. For males, negative attribution scores between 43 and 76 were placed into the "higher" category, and scores between 77 and 109 were placed into the "lower" category, because the MAS is scored such that lower scores indicate more negative attributions. For females, negative attribution scores between 34 and 72 were considered "higher" and scores between 73 and 99 were considered "lower." Therefore, individuals placed into the "higher" category reported a greater tendency to make negative attributions

about their partners and their relationship, whereas those placed into the “lower” category reported less negative attributions. Similarly, males’ commitment scores between 0 and 3 were placed into the “higher” category, and scores between 4 and 13 were placed into the “lower” group, with lower MSI-R scores indicating fewer thoughts and actions regarding leaving the relationship. For females, commitment scores between 0 and 7 were considered “higher” and scores between 8 and 15 were placed into the “lower” group. In sum, partners placed into the “higher” category reported a greater level of commitment to the relationship, and partners placed into the “lower” group reported a lesser amount of commitment to their partnership.

After dichotomizing the variables, univariate and multivariate analyses of variance (ANOVAs and MANOVAs) were conducted to test hypothesis 3, which proposed that commitment levels would moderate the relationship between partners’ negative attributions and their tendencies to exhibit forms of destructive and constructive behaviors during discussions of relationship conflict. First, for each sex, two 2 x 2 ANOVAs were run to determine if observed behaviors varied across higher versus lower negative attributions and commitment levels. The first of the two tests included MICS-G composite destructive behaviors as the dependent variable (see Table 6). For males, the 2 x 2 ANOVA for observed destructive behaviors revealed that the main effect for negative attributions was significant,  $F(1, 48) = 12.06, p < .01$ , but the main effect for commitment was not significant,  $F(1, 48) = .60, p = .44$ . Specific to the hypothesis, the interaction effect of negative attributions by commitment level was significant, such that when commitment levels were higher, there were small differences in the males’ choices to engage in more constructive



( $M = 1.09$ ) or more destructive behaviors ( $M = 1.35$ ) as a function of their use of negative attributions. Similarly, when commitment levels were lower, attributions were more powerful influences upon the males' choices to either use more constructive ( $M = .73$ ) or more destructive behaviors ( $M = 2.06$ ) during conflict,  $F(1, 48) = 5.58, p < .02$ . Similarly, for females the ANOVA revealed that the main effect of negative attributions was significant,  $F(1, 48) = 8.49, p < .01$  and the main effect for commitment was not significant,  $F(1, 48) = .09, p = .76$ . However, unlike the male partners, the interaction effect of females' negative attributions by commitment was not significant,  $F(1, 48) = .72, p = .40$ . The means for the main effects and interaction effect for destructive behavior are presented in Table 7.

Table 6  
*Analysis of Variance for Destructive Behavior: Negative Attributions by Commitment*

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Neg. Attrib.					
Males	8.040	1	8.040	12.060	.001
Females	7.154	1	7.154	8.487	.005
Commitment					
Males	.400	1	.400	.600	.442
Females	7.738E-02	1	7.738E-02	.092	.763
Neg. Attrib. X Commitment					
Males	3.718	1	3.718	5.577	.022
Females	.607	1	.607	.720	.400
Error					
Males	32.000	48	.667		
Females	40.461	48	.843		
Total					
Males	138.020	52			
Females	169.390	52			

Table 7  
*Means for Observed Destructive Behavior as a Function of Negative Attributions and Commitment*

Negative Attributions	Commitment					
	Higher	Males		Higher	Females	
		Lower	Total		Lower	Total
Higher	1.35 (n=11)	2.06 (n=15)	1.76 (n=26)	1.98 (n=12)	1.84 (n=14)	1.90 (n=26)
Lower	1.09 (n=13)	0.73 (n=13)	0.91 (n=26)	1.01 (n=14)	1.31 (n=12)	1.15 (n=26)
Total	1.21 (n=24)	1.44 (n=28)		1.46 (n=26)	1.59 (n=26)	

The second 2 x 2 ANOVA for each sex was run to determine if observed constructive behaviors varied across higher versus lower negative attributions and commitment levels (see Table 8). For males, neither the main effect for negative attributions nor the main effect for commitment was significant,  $F(1, 48) = 1.29, p = .26$ , and  $F(1, 48) = 3.35, p = .07$ , respectively. The interaction between negative attributions and commitment also was not significant for constructive behaviors,  $F(1, 48) = .25, p = .62$ . Similarly, there were no main effects for females' negative attributions and for their commitment levels,  $F(1, 48) = 1.61, p = .21$ , and  $F(1, 48) = .63, p = .43$ , respectively. There also was no interaction effect between negative attributions and commitment,  $F(1, 48) = 2.24, p = .14$ . The group means for constructive behavior are presented in Table 9.

Thus, the results of these 2 x 2 ANOVAs generally do not support the hypothesis that commitment moderates the relationship between negative attributions and observed behaviors exhibited during conflict. There was a significant interaction effect for males' observed destructive behaviors, however this hypothesis was not supported by any other significant interactions, including observations of males' use of constructive behaviors and females' use of constructive or destructive behaviors.

Table 8  
*Analysis of Variance for Constructive Behavior: Negative Attributions by Commitment*

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Neg. Attrib.					
Males	1.167	1	1.167	1.287	.262
Females	1.441	1	1.441	1.612	.210
Commitment					
Males	3.034	1	3.034	3.346	.074
Females	.564	1	.564	.631	.431
Neg. Attrib. X Commitment					
Males	.224	1	.224	.247	.621
Females	2.001	1	2.001	2.237	.141
Error					
Males	43.521	48	.907		
Females	42.917	48	.894		
Total					
Males	591.660	52			
Females	509.690	52			

Table 9  
*Means for Observed Constructive Behavior as a Function of Negative Attributions and Commitment*

Negative Attributions	Commitment						
	Higher	Males		Total	Females		
		Higher	Lower		Higher	Lower	Total
Higher	3.72	3.10	3.10	3.36	2.71	2.89	2.81
	n=11	n=15	n=15	n=26	n=12	n=14	n=26
Lower	3.28	2.93	2.93	3.11	3.44	2.83	3.16
	n=13	n=13	n=13	n=26	n=14	n=12	n=26
Total	3.48	2.93	2.93	3.10	3.10	2.87	3.00
	n=24	n=13	n=13	n=26	n=26	n=26	n=52

To determine if self-reported destructive behaviors varied across higher versus lower negative attributions and commitment levels, a MANOVA was computed for each sex, using the independent variables of partners' higher or lower negative attributions and higher or lower level of commitment to the couple relationship. The dependent measures in each MANOVA were the four subscales on the self-report MDEAS scale (restrictive engulfment, denigration, hostile withdrawal, and domination/intimidation).

Among the male partners, the MANOVA was not significant for the main effect of negative attributions,  $F(4, 45) = 1.16, p = .34$ , the main effect of commitment,  $F(4, 45) = 1.31, p = .28$ , or the interaction effect between negative attributions and commitment,  $F(4, 45) = 1.01, p = .42$ . Similarly, for the female partners, the MANOVA was not significant for the main effect of negative attributions,  $F(1, 48) = 1.61, p = .21$ , the main effect of commitment,  $F(1, 48) = .56, p = .63$ , or the interaction effect of negative attributions and commitment,  $F(1, 48) = 2.24, p = .14$ . Thus, the results of the MANOVAs did not support the hypothesis that commitment would moderate the effects of negative attributions on partners' self-reports of using destructive behaviors during past conflict.

The general lack of significant interactions between negative attributions and commitment levels on reported and observed behaviors may be accounted for by the somewhat small sample size. The samples of 52 male and 52 female partners, when each split into four subgroups based upon their reported negative attributions and levels of commitment, produced limited statistical power and sensitivity for the analyses in detecting effects of the independent variables.

To provide a potentially more sensitive test for differences that may not have been detected during the MANOVA analyses that were based on dichotomized independent variables, the interaction effect also was examined with multiple regression analyses performed separately for males and females for each of the MDEAS subscales (hostile withdrawal, domination/intimidation, restrictive engulfment, denigration) as dependent variables. These multiple regression analyses utilized the full ranges of MAS subscale scores and MSI-R scores rather than

dichotomous attribution and commitment indices derived from median splits on the score distributions of the two measures. The results of the regression analyses produced the same findings as those from the MANOVAs, such that there were no significant interactions between negative attributions and commitment levels on reported and observed behaviors for either gender.

### Analyses for Research Question 1

The first research question was whether there was a difference in males' and females' use of constructive and destructive behaviors based on their use of negative attributions. This question was addressed by testing the differences between males' and females' Pearson correlations between MAS negative attributions and observed and reported types of constructive and destructive behaviors used during conflict (see Table 10). There were no significant gender differences between partners' use of negative attributions and their choices of behavior, both observed and reported.

Table 10

*Comparison of Males' and Females' Correlations Between Negative Attributions and Behavior Used During Conflict*

Type of Behavior Used During Conflict		<i>r</i> to <i>z</i> scores		<i>Z</i> *	<i>p</i> (2-tailed)
		Males	Females		
Reported	Restrictive Engulfment	.34	.23	.54	.59
Destructive Behaviors (MDEAS)	Denigration	.37	.18	.91	.36
	Domination/Intimidation	.29	.28	.05	.96
Observed Destructive Behaviors (MICS-G)	Composite	.54	.44	.50	.62
	Conflict	.58	.39	.93	.35
	Invalidation	.49	.31	.87	.39
	Withdrawal	.06	.35	1.46	.14
Observed Constructive Behaviors (MICS-G)	Composite	.03	-.29	1.57	.12
	Validation	-.16	-.39	1.12	.26
	Facilitation	-.11	-.27	.77	.44

\* *Z* = *z* value computed for the difference between two independent correlations, using *r*-to-*z* transformations.

### Analyses for Research Question 2

The second research question asked whether there was a difference in males' and females' use of constructive and destructive behaviors based upon their levels of commitment to the relationship. This question was addressed by testing the differences between males' and females' Pearson correlations between MSI-R commitment scores and observed and reported types of constructive and destructive behaviors used during conflict (see Table 11). Again, there were no significant gender differences between partners' levels of commitment and their choices of behavior, both observed and reported.

Table 11  
*Comparison of Males' and Females' Correlations Between Commitment and Behavior Used During Conflict*

Type of Behavior Used During Conflict		<i>r</i> to <i>z</i> scores			<i>p</i> (2-tailed)
		Males	Females	<i>Z</i> *	
Reported					
Destructive Behaviors (MDEAS)	Hostile Withdrawal	-.31	-.38	.33	.74
Observed					
Destructive Behaviors (MICS-G)	Conflict	-.33	-.20	-.64	.52
Observed					
Constructive Behaviors (MICS-G)	Composite	.35	.21	.70	.49
	Validation	.32	.17	.74	.46
	Facilitation	.44	.38	.29	.77

\* *Z* = *z* value computed for the difference between two independent correlations, using *r*-to-*z* transformations.

### Analyses for Research Question 3

The third research question asked whether there was a gender difference in the degree to which commitment moderates the relationship between males' and females'

negative attributions about relationship problems and their tendencies to exhibit forms of constructive and destructive behaviors during couple discussions of relationship conflict. Because the negative attribution by commitment interaction effect tests for each sex conducted for Hypothesis 3 were not significant for either males or females, there was no need to conduct a test for this research question concerning a gender difference.

## Chapter 4: Discussion

### GENDER DIFFERENCES IN CONSTRUCTIVE AND DESTRUCTIVE BEHAVIORS

Analyses of gender differences in use of constructive and destructive behaviors revealed that only two out of 19 tests were found to have significant gender differences. These findings are consistent with previous research, which has reported sparse and inconclusive results about the different constructive and destructive behaviors that men and women may employ when engaging in conflict (Cupach & Canary, 1995; Fitzpatrick & Winke, 1979; Noller et al., 1994). Furthermore, of the two differences, in which men reported making more negative attributions about their partners' behaviors and women reported greater levels of commitment to the relationship, neither of these findings was supported by previous research. In fact, gender differences were not a focal point in any of the reported studies on use of attributions and commitment levels in couple relationships.

One pattern that has been reported throughout the literature but was not observed consistently in this study is men's tendency to engage in more withdrawal tactics than women during conflict. The findings from this study were mixed, in that women tended to self-report greater use of hostile withdrawal tactics than men did, but men tended to be observed to engage in more withdrawal tactics during the communication sample. However, these mean differences between genders were not significant. One explanation for why withdrawal tactics may not have been employed as expected in this study is that these data were collected from couples who voluntarily sought treatment in an effort to address issues of conflict in their



relationship. As a result, the clinical couples used in this study may have been more likely than non-clinical couples to actively address issues during the assessment phase of treatment, rather than both partners avoiding the subject or one partner pursuing the discussion and the other partner withdrawing from the discussion. Furthermore, it is possible that one partner in the couple sought therapy with the expectation of addressing issues, and the other partner reluctantly participated in response to pressure from the partner and/or the therapists' expectations that both partners would actively participate in a 10-minute communication sample as one component of the assessment process. Thus, these results may be the product of a sample that was drawn from a population of partners who are less likely to engage in withdrawal tactics, in conjunction with the expectation that both partners would participate in a brief communication sample for research and clinical purposes.

#### THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN NEGATIVE ATTRIBUTIONS AND CONFLICT BEHAVIOR

The hypothesis predicting that partners' negative attributions about their partner would be associated with their levels of constructive and destructive forms of behaviors during conflict received a moderate level of support in this study. Overall, as hypothesized, individuals' negative attributions about the other partner were associated with their choices to engage in constructive and destructive behaviors during couple conflict. As males' use of negative attributions increased, their reports of engaging in restrictive engulfment, denigration, and domination behaviors also increased, yet their tendency to make negative attributions had no significant

influence over their choices to engage in constructive behaviors. Women's greater tendency to make negative attributions, however, was significantly associated with their use of restrictive engulfment, domination/intimidation, conflict, invalidation, and withdrawal behaviors, while also decreasing the chances that they would use any constructive behaviors, including validation and facilitation, during observed discussions of conflict topics. These results are consistent with previous research (Bauserman et al, 1995; Bradbury & Fincham, 1990; Bradbury & Fincham, 1992; Davey et al., 2001), which suggested that a greater tendency to make negative attributions is more likely to be followed by a greater use of destructive behaviors and lesser use of constructive behaviors. Furthermore, as previous researchers found, attributions focused on other family members were more likely to result in blaming attitudes and behaviors towards each other, such that partners expressed resentful thoughts and feelings, engaged in negative, punitive actions, and were less able to effectively resolve the conflict (Doherty, 1981; Pretzer et al, 1991).

However, despite these consistent findings, little is known about the gender differences that may or may not exist in how men's and women's tendencies to make negative attributions influence their behaviors during conflict. This study's findings suggest that negative attributions are more influential on women's overall behaviors during conflict, in which significant relationships were found between both constructive and destructive behaviors. For the men, however, greater negative attributions only increased their use of destructive behaviors, but did not necessarily decrease their use of constructive behaviors. This gender disparity may be due to a concept embedded in Doherty's (1981) application of attribution theory to couple

conflict, in which he suggests that the use of negative attributions within a relationship are likely to decrease members' sense of efficacy to resolve the conflict, resulting in less satisfaction within the relationship. As previously mentioned, women are more likely than men to seek a conversation about a conflictual topic, in which they expect to discuss the issue and eventually reach some type of resolution (Margolin & Wampold, 1981; Rusbult et al., 1986). Thus, if women's expectations to confront and resolve the conflict are not satisfied, they may be more likely to make negative attributions about their partner, which then, according to Doherty's model, results in decreased levels of satisfaction and abilities to resolve the conflict (which is accomplished using constructive behaviors). In turn, their negative attributions may increase their likelihood of approaching discussions of conflict topics in a more adversarial manner, based on their expectation that their male partners will not cooperate. In contrast, men seem to be less likely to confront and resolve conflicts, so their tendency to make negative attributions about their partners does not necessarily influence their abilities to engage in constructive, problem-solving behaviors.

### COMMITMENT AND CONFLICT BEHAVIOR

This study also tested the relationship between partners' commitment to their couple relationship and their choices of behaviors during conflict. As hypothesized, commitment levels were related to less use of destructive behaviors and more use of constructive behaviors, but the relationship was not as pervasive as expected. For males, increased commitment levels were significantly related to a decrease in hostile withdrawal behaviors, and an increase in conflict tactics. Furthermore, higher levels

of commitment were also related to greater use of constructive behaviors, specifically including facilitation and problem-solving strategies. For females, increased levels of commitment were also associated with decreased use of hostile withdrawal behaviors and increased use of facilitation tactics. The results suggesting that males and females with greater levels of commitment are more likely to use constructive behaviors and less likely to engage in destructive behaviors mirror a previous study conducted by Roloff and Solomon (2002), in which higher commitment was found to be associated with increased levels of confrontation (constructive) and decreased levels of withdrawal (destructive). Furthermore, this trend also supports similar findings by Swensen and Trahaug (1985), in which greater levels of commitment to a relationship were associated with partners' improved conflict resolution skills (constructive). Thus, the current findings continue to support the notion that greater levels of commitment are more likely to be related to greater use of constructive behaviors and less use of destructive behaviors.

In sum, the general trend of increased commitment correlating with more positive behaviors and less negative behaviors may be partially explained using social exchange theory, which asserts that partners' levels of commitment are influenced by the balance of rewards and costs, the desirability of alternative relationships, and the amount of invested resources in the relationship (Donovan & Jackson, 1990; Floyd & Wasner, 1994; Klein & White, 1996; Rusbult, 1983; Rusbult & Buunk, 1993; Sprecher, 1988; Sprecher, 2001). According to this theory, commitment is strengthened when partners' expectations of the relationship are satisfied and the rewards outweigh the costs, which can be achieved when partners engage in more

constructive behaviors and less destructive behaviors during times of conflict. Furthermore, if constructive behaviors are used more frequently than destructive behaviors, the partner's needs are more likely to be met and alternatives are less likely to be perceived as desirable. As a result, social exchange theory supports these general findings that increased use of constructive behaviors and decreased use of destructive behaviors may lead to greater levels of commitment.

Furthermore, because these results are correlational, it is also possible that partners' levels of commitment may influence their choice of behaviors during conflict. Thus, partners who are more committed to their relationship may opt to engage in more effective, constructive behaviors for the sake of resolving issues and enhancing the relationship. Similarly, partners who are less committed to the relationship may be more inclined to engage in destructive behaviors at the expense of their partner and the relationship. As a result, the direction in which these factors influence each other is more likely a reciprocal process rather than a unidirectional effect, such that greater commitment leads to more constructive behaviors, which in turn lead to strengthened commitment levels, and so forth.

One aspect of this relationship that has not been fully explored in previous research is the difference in behaviors in relation to males' and females' commitment levels. As these data unexpectedly suggest, males with higher commitment levels were more likely to engage in destructive conflict behavior during observed discussions while also engaging in less hostile withdrawal tactics and more constructive behaviors, such as problem-solving and facilitation. The female partners with higher levels of commitment, however, were only found to have decreased use

of hostile withdrawal tactics and increased use of facilitation behaviors. Thus, it appears that higher commitment is more likely to influence male partners' behaviors, both constructive and destructive, than those of the female partners. One possible reason for this variation may be due to the disproportionate percentage of females (80%) in this sample who were the partner calling to seek therapy services; perhaps the women were already more committed than the men to improving the relationship, and so commitment levels were less influential in their choices of behaviors than were other factors such as negative attributions. The men, however, may have been more likely to be attending therapy to appease their partners' needs to confront relationship issues, which could account for the variation in effect of commitment on choice of behaviors during conflict for males versus females.

#### COMMITMENT AS A MODERATOR OF THE RELATION BETWEEN NEGATIVE ATTRIBUTIONS AND CONFLICT BEHAVIOR

Finally, the third hypothesis postulated that partners' commitment would moderate the relationship between their negative attributions and their use of destructive and constructive behaviors during conflict. Of the six tests conducted for both males and females, the only significant finding suggested that commitment moderated the relationship between males' tendencies to make negative attributions and their choices to engage in destructive behaviors observed in the communication sample. Commitment did not moderate males' use of constructive behaviors, and did not affect the relationship between women's tendencies to make negative attributions and the behaviors in which they engage during conflict. Rather, as results from

hypotheses 1 and 2 also suggest, it seems as though partners' use of negative attributions may be a stronger predictor of whether or not partners engage in constructive and destructive behaviors; negative attributions were significantly correlated with twice as many behaviors than was commitment level, whereas commitment levels only moderated one of six relationships between negative attributions and behavior.

One factor that may account for the lack of moderation by commitment levels is the clinical sample, in which both members expressed interest in participating in a treatment intended to help them resolve conflict more constructively. Most likely, a large percentage of partners who are seeking therapy, report relationship distress, and are interested in participating in a conflict resolution program, may have a commitment level that is higher than that of couples who have not committed themselves to a skills-building program designed to enhance their relationship. However, couples who have sought assistance due to their inability to change negative interaction patterns on their own may continue to engage in those destructive interactions when they make negative attributions about each other, in spite of being committed to each other in general. This clinical sample may be more handicapped in their abilities to decrease their negative attributions without therapeutic intervention, resulting in the strong associations between negative attributions and behavior that were found in the study whether or not partners were committed to the relationship.

In sum, results from this study about the roles of negative attributions and levels of commitment in couple relationships support the current theories about couple

conflict, in that more use of negative attributions and less commitment to the relationship can lead to more negative and less positive interactions between partners. However, as these results indicate, the two factors are not equally influential, and in fact, negative attributions may be more significant than commitment levels in helping partners determine whether to engage in constructive or destructive behaviors during conflict. As a result, social exchange theory, in which commitment to, and satisfaction within, a relationship is determined by the balance of costs and rewards, may not provide a solid foundation on which these results can be explained. Rather, research supporting the notion that greater use of negative attributions is a strong predictor of ineffective conflict resolution and increased relationship distress may be a more appropriate model from which these data are understood.

#### LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Interpretation of this study's findings is qualified by a variety of factors. First, the results should only be generalized to a clinical population of couples seeking therapy who are experiencing mild to moderate levels of psychological and/or physical abuse. The data for this study were collected from couples who voluntarily opted to participate in a couple therapy treatment program focused on conflict management, and so they may not accurately represent couples who have not sought couple therapy. Furthermore, the communication sample, from which the observed constructive and destructive behaviors were recorded, was performed in a clinical setting, and the couple was given a limited number of topics from which to choose for their discussion. As a result, partners were encouraged to participate in a conversation



in which they were talking into lapel microphones, and so their discussions of a conflictual topic may be limited in the extent to which they accurately represent the ways in which they engage in conflict outside of a clinical setting. Thus, although use of a clinical sample provides some specific understanding of couples who are in distress and are seeking therapy, further research is needed to gain a broader appreciation of how attributions and commitment may affect conflict within various types of couple relationships.

Second, this study's results are correlational results, so they should be interpreted with caution regarding causal direction. Although significant relationships were found between negative attributions and behaviors, and commitment and behaviors, these tests do not determine if one variable causes the other. For example, a significant relationship existed between partners' levels of commitment and their use of constructive behaviors, such that higher commitment levels were associated with greater use of positive behaviors. As previously noted, the direction of this relationship is unknown, and so it is possible that the use of constructive behaviors increased partners' commitment to the relationships, and/or their commitment influenced their choices to engage in more constructive behaviors during conflict. Furthermore, the relationship between commitment and behavior may have also been influenced by a third factor, such as one partner's financial dependence on the other, or children living with the couple. As a result, interpretation of these correlations should be conservative with respect to causality, taking into account the various explanations from which these results can be understood.

Third, there may be a variety of influences on commitment levels for which this study is unable to account. For example, insecurely attached partners may report a higher commitment to the relationship, and also report an increased use of destructive behaviors, such as conflict and invalidation, as a result of their increased levels of anxiety within the relationship. Similarly, partners engaged in a psychologically abusive relationship may report higher levels of commitment for fear that they could not survive alone without their partner, and yet they may also engage in more destructive behaviors, such as conflict and withdrawal, as a result of their dissatisfaction with the relationship. Therefore, higher commitment levels do not necessarily lead a partner to engage in relationship-enhancing behaviors (i.e., constructive behaviors during conflict), which may account for the limited association between commitment and constructive communication in this study. Future studies should consider partners' reasons for higher or lower commitment, so as to control for the various reasons why one may stay in a relationship.

Finally, the four measures used in this study (MAS, MSI R, MDEAS, and MICS-G) were distributed to a racially and culturally diverse sample of couples, and the results may have been influenced by a variety of partners' beliefs about constructive and destructive forms of interaction. For example, the observed behaviors were coded using the MICS-G, which determines whether or not a behavior is considered helpful or hurtful. While this instrument is designed to accurately classify specific behaviors, what may be defined as constructive or destructive by this scale may be defined differently by couples from different cultural backgrounds. For example, a couple raised in a relatively patriarchal culture may engage in

disagreement and domineering behaviors, which are coded as forms of invalidation with the MICS-G and scored as destructive behavior on the MDEAS, but the members of the couple may not consider these acts negative if it is understood and agreed upon between them that the male is allowed to preside over the relationship in this way. Despite the couple's belief system about how the relationship should be organized and managed, these behaviors would be classified as destructive according to assessment methods that define a positive relationship in terms of equality. Therefore, the results of this study may not be sensitive to the cultural and racial differences that could have influenced the data. Future studies may benefit from adding a measure of the partners' cultural beliefs about positive and negative relationship characteristics.

## IMPLICATIONS OF THE RESULTS

### Implications for Clinical Applications

Results from this study provide clear evidence that an increased tendency to make negative attributions about one's partner is likely to lead to greater use of destructive behaviors and lesser use of constructive behaviors during couple interactions. Therefore, it seems important for couple therapists to assess partners' tendencies to make negative attributions about sources of problems in their relationships. If negative attributions about each other appear to be an integral part of the conflictual relationship, which is often the case among distressed couples, it may be advisable to educate the couple about negative attributions and how these assumptions are significantly related to a greater tendency to use destructive

behaviors during conflict. As a result, couples may become more aware of the destructive behaviors in which they may engage, while also understanding the negative cognitions that may fuel these behaviors. This in turn can lead to the learning and acquiring of new skills, such as effective communication and problem-solving skills, in which the partners are able to practice new forms of interaction and further their abilities to diffuse future conflict in a more constructive form.

A second important implication of this research is related to partners' commitment to their relationship. As these results suggest, higher commitment levels were associated with less use of hostile withdrawal and greater use of facilitation; however, commitment was only found to moderate the relationship between males' use of negative attributions and their destructive behaviors displayed during discussions of conflict. Thus, when working with couples, it is important to consider the strong effect that negative attributions can have on behavior, even when partners are highly committed to the relationship. Therefore, while commitment may have a positive effect on the relationship, partners' tendencies to make negative attributions about the other person can lessen the effect of commitment, leading them to doubt the other person's commitment to the relationship and influencing them to use more negative behaviors when engaged in relationship conflict.

Finally, this research speaks to the importance of assessing and focusing on partners' thoughts about the relationship, their behaviors within the relationship, and their feelings of satisfaction and fulfillment with their partner. Each of these components is related to the others, as these data have shown with negative attributions, commitment levels, and behaviors used during conflict. Selecting a

holistic model of therapy that integrates the cognitive, behavioral, and emotional elements of a relationship is critical to helping couples restore intimacy, focus on the positive aspects of the relationship, and reciprocate higher quality constructive gestures.

### Implications for Future Research

Future studies using larger, ethnically diverse, non-clinical samples may yield important information about how negative attributions and commitment interact within couples who are not necessarily distressed and/or seeking therapy for issues of relationship conflict. Similarly, further research is needed to better understand the ways in which males and females differ in their use of specific behaviors during conflict. As previously discussed, results from various studies are inconclusive about men's and women's use of constructive and destructive behaviors, so future studies accounting for partners' age, life stage, and relationship stage, may be able to provide a more comprehensive summary of possible gender differences amongst these variables.

It would also be interesting to investigate the differences that may exist among partners' use of constructive and destructive behaviors based upon various reasons for being committed to a relationship. For example, do partners' behaviors in the face of conflict differ when they are committed to the relationship for financial dependence versus romantic love? Similarly, are there significant gender differences in why partners are committed, and do these differences influence their choices of behaviors during conflict?

Finally, future studies may include both self-report scales and behavioral observation to assess partners' tendencies to engage in both constructive and destructive forms of behaviors. This study only assessed destructive forms of behavior by self-report while it assessed both destructive and constructive forms of behavior from coding of communication samples. A more balanced study using self-report and observed measures for both types of behavior may find stronger relationships among attributions, commitment, and conflict behaviors. Furthermore, this study only assessed behavioral manifestations of commitment to one's relationship; thus future studies may benefit from assessing the behavioral *and* the emotional/psychological components of partners' commitment to the relationship.

Understanding how couples think, behave, and feel in a romantic relationship is an intricate process that requires numerous quality investigations in a variety of circumstances. This study, combined with previous research on intimate relationships, brings couple researchers and therapists one step closer to understanding how members of intimate relationships can better serve each other's needs and how therapy can be an efficacious process for couples. Further investigations of clinical and non-clinical couple relationships will continue to provide information that can enhance our knowledge of relationship dynamics and how inevitable experiences in close relationships can be managed in constructive ways that contribute to growth and satisfaction of intimate bonds.

## Appendix A

### Marital Status Inventory – Revised (MSI-R)

We would like to get an idea of how your relationship stands right now. Within the past four months have you...

- Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_ 1. Had frequent thoughts about separating from your partner, as much as once a week or so.
- Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_ 2. Occasionally thought about separation or divorce, usually after an argument.
- Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_ 3. Thought specifically about separation, for example for to divide belongings, where to live, or who would get the children.
- Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_ 4. Seriously thought about the costs and benefits of ending the relationship.
- Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_ 5. Considered a divorce or separation a few times other than during or shortly after a fight but only in general terms.
- Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_ 6. Made specific plans to discuss separation with your partner, for example what you would say.
- Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_ 7. Discussed separation (or divorce) with someone other than your partner (trusted friend, minister, counselor, relative).
- Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_ 8. Discussed plans for moving out with friends or relatives.
- Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_ 9. As a preparation for living on your own, set up an independent bank account in your own name to protect your interest.
- Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_ 10. Suggested to your partner that you wish to have a separation.
- Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_ 11. Discussed separation (or divorce) seriously with your partner.
- Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_ 12. Your partner moved furniture or belongings to another residence.
- Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_ 13. Consulted an attorney about legal separation, a stay away order, or divorce.
- Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_ 14. Separated from your partner with plans to end the relationship.
- Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_ 15. Separated from your partner, but with plans to get back together.
- Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_ 16. File for a legal separation.
- Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_ 17. Reached final decision on child custody, visitation, and division of property.
- Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_ 18. Filed for divorce or ended the relationship.

#### Coding Key

- Yes = 1; No = 0
- Higher scores = lesser commitment

## Appendix B

### Marital Attitude Survey (MAS)

Please circle the number which indicates how much you agree or disagree with each statement this week, using the rating scale below.

*Rating Scale:*

1 = Strongly agree                      3 = Neutral                      5 = Strongly disagree  
2 = Agree somewhat                      4 = Disagree somewhat

- |   |           |
|---|-----------|
| 1. When we aren't getting along I wonder if my partner loves me.                                  | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 2. My partner doesn't seem to do things just to bother me .                                       | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 3. My personality would have to change for our relationship to improve.                           | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 4. My partner intentionally does things to irritate me.   | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 5. Even if my partner's personality changed we still wouldn't get along any better.               | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 6. It seems as though my partner deliberately provokes me.  | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 7. If my partner did things differently we'd get along better.                                    | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 8. My partner's personality would have to change for us to get along better.                      | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 9. Any trouble we have getting along with each other is because of the type of person I am.       | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 10. I don't think that the things I say and do make things worse between us.                      | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 11. Any problems we have are caused by the things I say and do.                                   | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 12. I don't think our marriage would be better if my partner was a different type of person.      | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 13. Even if my personality changed, my partner and I still wouldn't get along any better.         | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 14. The way my partner treats me determines how well we get along.                                | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 15. Whatever problems we have are caused by the things my partner says and does.                  | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 16. My partner and I would get along better if it weren't for the type of person s/he is.         | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 17. My partner doesn't intentionally try to upset me.   | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 18. When things aren't going well between us, I feel like my partner doesn't love me.             | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 19. Whatever difficulties we have are not because of the type of person I am.                     | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 20. What difficulties we have don't lead me to doubt my partner's love for me.                    | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 21. When things are rough between us it shows that my partner doesn't love me.                    | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 22. If I did things differently my partner and I wouldn't have the conflicts we have.             | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 23. My changing how I act wouldn't change how our marriage goes.                                  | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 24. I'm sure that my partner sometimes does things just to bother me.                             | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 25. Even when we aren't getting along, I don't question whether my partner loves me.              | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 26. I think my partner upsets me on purpose.  | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 27. When my partner isn't nice to me I feel like s/he doesn't love me.                            | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 28. I'm certain that my partner doesn't provoke me on purpose.                                    | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 29. Even when we have problems I don't doubt my partner's love for me.                            | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 30. The things my partner says and does aren't the cause of whatever problems come up between us. | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 31. I doubt that my partner deliberately does thing to irritate me.                               | 1 2 3 4 5 |

**Coding Key:**

- Negative attributions (items 1, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 14, 15, 16, 18, 21, 22, 24, 26, 27) = code as is (1=1, 2=2, 3=3, 4=4, 5=5)
- Positive attributions (items 2, 5, 10, 12, 13, 17, 19, 20, 23, 25, 28, 29, 30, 31) = reverse coding (1=5, 2=4, 3=3, 4=2, 5=1)
- Subscales of Attribution Types
  - Lack of Love = items 1, 18, 20, 21, 25, 27, 29
  - Malicious Intent = items 2, 4, 6, 17, 24, 26, 28, 31
  - Partner's Personality = items 5, 8, 12, 16
  - Partner's Behavior = items 7, 14, 15, 30
  - Own Personality = items 3, 9, 13, 19,
  - Own Behavior = items 10, 11, 22, 23



## Appendix C

### Multidimensional Emotional Abuse Scale (MDEAS)

No matter how well a couple gets along, there are times when they disagree, get annoyed with the other person, want different things from each other, or just have spats or fights because they are in a bad mood, are tired, or for some other reason. Couples also have many different ways of trying to settle their differences. This is a list of things that might happen when you have differences. Please circle how many times you did each of these things **IN THE PAST 4 MONTHS**, and how many times your partner did them **IN THE PAST 4 MONTHS**. If you or your partner did not do one of these things in the past 4 months, but it happened before that, circle 7.

- (1) Once      (4) 6-10 times      (7) Not in the past four months, but it did happen before  
 (2) Twice      (5) 11-20 times      (0) This has never happened  
 (3) 3-5 times      (6) More than 20 times

#### How often in the last four months?

1. Asked the other person where s/he had been or who s/he was with in a suspicious manner.	You: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 0 Your partner: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 0
1. Secretly searched through the other person's belongings.	You: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 0 Your partner: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 0
2. Tried to stop the other person from seeing certain friends or family members.	You: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 0 Your partner: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 0
4. Complained that the other person spends too much time with friends.	You: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 0 Your partner: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 0
5. Got angry because the other person went somewhere without telling him/her.	You: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 0 Your partner: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 0
6. Tried to make the other person feel guilty for not spending enough time together.	You: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 0 Your partner: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 0
7. Checked up on the other person by asking friends where s/he was or who s/he was with.	You: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 0 Your partner: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 0
8. Said or implied that that other person was stupid.	You: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 0 Your partner: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 0
9. Called the other person worthless.	You: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 0 Your partner: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 0
10. Called the other person ugly.	You: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 0 Your partner: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 0
11. Criticized the other person's appearance.	You: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 0 Your partner: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 0
12. Called the other person a loser, failure, or similar term.	You: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 0 Your partner: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 0
13. Belittled the other person in front of other people.	You: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 0 Your partner: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 0
14. Said that someone else would be a better girlfriend or boyfriend.	You: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 0 Your partner: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 0

- (1) Once            (4) 6-10 times            (7) Not in the past four months, but it did happen before  
 (2) Twice            (5) 11-20 times            (0) This has never happened  
 (3) 3-5 times            (6) More than 20 times

**How often in the last four months?**

15. Became so angry that s/he was unstable or unwilling to talk.	You: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 0 Your partner: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 0
16. Acted cold or distant when angry.	You: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 0 Your partner: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 0
17. Refused to have any discussion of a problem.	You: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 0 Your partner: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 0
18. Changed the subject on purpose when the other person was trying to discuss a problem.	You: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 0 Your partner: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 0
19. Refused to acknowledge a problem that the other felt was important.	You: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 0 Your partner: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 0
20. Sulked or refused to talk about an issue.	You: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 0 Your partner: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 0
21. Intentionally avoided the other person during a conflict or disagreement.	You: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 0 Your partner: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 0
22. Became angry enough to frighten the other person.	You: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 0 Your partner: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 0
23. Put her/his face right in front of the other person's face to make a point more forcefully.	You: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 0 Your partner: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 0
24. Threatened to hit the other person.	You: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 0 Your partner: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 0
25. Threatened to throw something at the other person.	You: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 0 Your partner: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 0
26. Threw, smashed, hit, or kicked something in front of the other person.	You: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 0 Your partner: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 0
27. Drove recklessly to frighten the other person.	You: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 0 Your partner: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 0
28. Stood or hovered over the other person during a conflict or disagreement.	You: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 0 Your partner: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 0

**Coding Key**

- 1 (once) = coded as '1'
- 2 (twice) = coded as '2'
- 3 (3-5) = coded as '3'
- 4 (6-10) = coded as '4'
- Subscales
  - Restrictive Engulfment = items 1-7
  - Denigration = items 8-14
  - Hostile Withdrawal = items 15-21
  - Domination/Intimidation = items 22-28
- 5 (11-20) = coded as '5'
- 6 (20+) = coded as '6'
- 7 (Never in past 4 months) = coded as '0'
- 0 (Never in relationship) = coded as '0'

## Appendix D

### Relationship Issues Survey (RIS)

There are a variety of areas in a couple's relationship that can become sources of disagreement and conflict. Please indicate how much each of the areas is **presently** a source of disagreement and conflict in your relationship with your partner. Select the number on the scale which indicates how much the area is an issue in your relationship.

- 0 = Not at all a source of disagreement or conflict  
1 = Slightly a source of disagreement or conflict  
2 = Moderately a source of disagreement or conflict  
3 = Very much a source of disagreement or conflict

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| _____ 1. Relationships with friends                             | _____ 16. Leisure activities and interests |
| _____ 2. Career and job issues                                  | _____ 17. Household tasks                  |
| _____ 3. Religion or personal philosophy of life                | _____ 18. Amount of time spent together    |
| _____ 4. Finances (income, how money is spent, etc.)            | _____ 19. Affairs                          |
| _____ 5. Goals and things believed important in life            | _____ 20. Privacy                          |
| _____ 6. Relationship with family of origin (parents, siblings) | _____ 21. Honesty                          |
| _____ 7. Sexual relationship                                    | _____ 22. Expressions of affection         |
| _____ 8. Child rearing/parenting approaches                     | _____ 23. Trustworthiness                  |
| _____ 9. Personal habits  | _____ 24. Alcohol and drugs                |
| _____ 10. Amount of commitment to the relationship              | _____ 25. Taking care of possessions       |
| _____ 11. Understanding of each other's stresses or problems    | _____ 26. Personal standard for neatness   |
| _____ 12. Daily life schedules and routines                     | _____ 27. How decisions are made           |
| _____ 13. Personal manners                                      | _____ 28. Personal grooming                |
| _____ 14. How negative thoughts and emotions are communicated   |  |
| _____ 15. How positive thoughts and emotions are communicated   |  |

#### Coding Key

- Any issue in which both partners rated as '1' or '2' were considered for the communication sample.

## Appendix E

### Marital Interaction Coding System – Global (MICS-G)

#### SPOUSE SCORING SHEET

Rater \_\_\_\_\_ Couple # \_\_\_\_\_ H/W \_\_\_\_\_

	Low 0	1	Moderate 2	3	4	High 5	
	Cue Impression						Category Rating
<i>CONFLICT</i>							
1. Complain							_____
2. Criticize							
3. Negative mindreading							
4. Put downs/insults							
5. Negative commands							
6. Hostility							
7. Sarcasm							
8. Angry/bitter voice							
<i>PROBLEM SOLVING</i>							
1. Problem description							_____
2. Proposing solution (+/-)							
3. Compromise							
4. Reasonableness							
<i>VALIDATION</i>							
1. Agreement							_____
2. Approval							
3. Accept responsibility							
4. Assent							
5. Receptivity							
6. Encouragement							
<i>INVALIDATION</i>							
1. Disagreement							_____
2. Denial of responsibility							
3. Changing the subject							
4. Consistent interruption							
5. Turn-off behaviors							
6. Domineering behaviors							
<i>FACILITATION</i>							
1. Positive mindreading							_____
2. Paraphrasing							
3. Humor							
4. Positive physical contact							
5. Smile/laugh							
6. Open posture							
<i>WITHDRAWAL</i>							
1. Negation							_____
2. No response							
3. Turn away from the partner							
4. Increasing distance							
5. Erects barriers							
6. Noncontributive							

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