

ABSTRACT

Title of Document: THE INFLUENCE OF INHIBITED EXPRESSION OF ANGER, PERCEIVED CONTROL BY PARTNER, AND WITHDRAWAL COGNITIONS ON THE ASSOCIATION BETWEEN CONFLICT AND RELATIONSHIP DISSOLUTION

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Although there has been a large amount of attention on partners' behavior during conflict and its connection with relationship dissolution, little is known about the individuals' internal experiences during conflict that are associated with relationship instability. The current study investigated whether three internal experiences, the suppression of anger, perceived control by partner, and thoughts about withdrawal, play roles in the relation between conflict and dissolution of couple relationships. The study used assessment data from 69 couples who sought therapy at an outpatient therapy clinic, serving an ethnically and socio-economically diverse population. Analyses tested the main effects of the internal experience variables and their interactions with level of relationship conflict as predictors of steps taken toward relationship dissolution. Findings indicated that the internal experience variables did not play the anticipated moderating role, but they were found to be partial mediators in the relation between conflict and relationship dissolution.

THE INFLUENCE OF INHIBITED EXPRESSION OF ANGER, PERCEIVED
CONTROL BY PARTNER, AND WITHDRAWAL COGNITIONS ON THE
ASSOCIATION BETWEEN CONFLICT AND RELATIONSHIP DISSOLUTION

By

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Chapter I

Introduction

Statement of the Problem

Some degree of conflict is present in all couple relationships, and it is not inherently a sign of dysfunction or demise for the partners' bond. Conflict alone is not predictive of relationship dissolution; rather the importance lies in the way in which the couple handles conflict (Gottman, 1994).

Conflict can be defined in different ways in the context of interpersonal relationships. It can signify the mere existence of differences between the individuals' needs, values, preferences, or standards for their relationship. Those differences may be sources of distress to the members of a couple, but the partners also may accept the differences and feel comfortable with them. Conflict also can refer to negative actions occurring between members of a couple in response to their differences. In common usage, the term conflict often is used to denote negative, adversarial interactions or battles between the involved parties, but that usage tends to confound the existence of an issue and how the partners interact about it. Consequently, for the purpose of the current study, the term conflict is used to refer to partners' perceptions of incompatibility in their needs, values, or standards, which has the potential to interfere with each achieving their personal goals (Hocker & Wilmot, 1991). The existence of conflict can be a risk factor for dissolution of a relationship, but it may not be, depending on the way that the partners handle it.

For the purpose of this study, relationship dissolution refers to the severing of intimate ties between two individuals, or an end to the intimate relationship. Research has

shown that there are many factors that can lead to dissolution of a couple relationship. Research on interfaith couples has shown that the degree of agreement on religious issues predicts level of conflict and stability in a relationship (Chinitz & Brown, 2001). Another study found that risk factors for divorce include marrying at an early age, cohabiting with other partners prior to marriage, having divorced parents, and believing in the acceptability of divorce (Amato & Hohmann-Marriott, 2007). There have been numerous studies on factors leading to divorce; however, the range of potential factors has not been exhausted, and there is a need for further research. For instance, in the studies focusing on aspects of conflict that are associated with relationship dissolution, the partners' communication behaviors have been the central focus of the research, and other variables have received much less attention.

For example, Gottman (1994) demonstrated that during couple conflict, communication behaviors were important in predicting the stability or volatility of a relationship. Gottman's research has focused on the overt behaviors of the members of the couple, specifically demonstrating that there were four types of observable behaviors occurring during couples' communication about topics of conflict in their relationships that are predictive of subsequent divorce: complain/criticize, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling (Gottman, 1994). Such findings support the idea that it is the manner in which partners interact that influences whether or not the presence of conflict is harmful to a relationship. However, with this emphasis on behavioral observation of couple communication, research has been lacking regarding partners' internal subjective experiences that occur as they discuss conflictual topics. There has been much less research examining how individuals' internal thoughts and emotions during a time of

conflict may influence the stability of their relationship than there has been studies focusing on partners' overt behavior. One area of research that indicates the importance of examining individuals' subjective thoughts and emotions has involved studies of partners' attributions about causes of each other's behavior, with findings showing that relationships in which partners attribute each other's negative actions to negative traits or intent are most distressed and at risk of dissolution (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990; Epstein & Baucom, 2002). There is a clear need for further research on other aspects of partners' internal thoughts and emotions that may be risks for relationship dissolution.

Because separation and divorce have negative emotional and physical effects on the involved parties, research identifying risk factors for relationship dissolution are important due to their implications for the prevention and treatment of distressed couples. The present study is intended to address aspects of this gap in knowledge about partners' internal experiences during conflict that are associated with steps toward dissolution of their relationships.

Purpose

There is substantial evidence that the types of behavioral interactions that occur between members of a couple when they are dealing with conflicts between them influence the quality of their relationship and its stability. Partners' tendencies to escalate aggressive exchanges between them or to engage in patterns of demand-withdraw behavior or mutual withdrawal have been found to be associated with relationship distress and dissolution (Gottman, 1994; Noller, Feeney, Roberts, & Christensen, 2005; Roberts, 2000). However, much less is known about partners' internal experiences that may influence the degree to which level of conflict is associated with risk for separation

or divorce. The purpose of this study is to determine whether or not internal emotional and cognitive factors have influences on the relationship between conflict and degrees to which individuals take steps toward dissolving their couple relationship.

Although a variety of emotional and cognitive factors may play such moderating roles on the association between degree of conflict and steps taken toward dissolution, this study focuses on individuals' internalized feelings of anger, perceptions that their partner is attempting to control them, and thoughts about withdrawing from conflict with the partner. The variables were chosen because research has demonstrated the importance of the impact of the behavioral counterpart of each of the variables; however research on the internal experience of these variables is lacking. Research has shown that expressing anger in an aggressive way is not conducive to effective problem solving and can have an impact on relationship functioning and stability (Geist & Gilbert, 1996; Greenberg & Goldman, 2008). Researchers have paid less attention to the impact of suppression of anger and whether or not suppression of anger also has an impact on relationship stability. Research on the demand/withdraw communication pattern suggests that the individual who demands may be trying to control their partner. Individuals who feel pressure from their partner tend to withdraw (Eldridge, Sevier, Jones, Atkins, & Christensen, 2007; McGinn, McFarland, & Christensen, 2009). The individuals who withdraw may feel as if their partner is trying to control them through their demands. Research on the demand/withdrawal pattern is extensive; however research has not focused on the internal experience of individuals who are engaging in demand/withdraw behavior. Therefore, it seems important to examine the degree to which individuals perceive that their partner is attempting to exert control of their relationship, as another

factor that may affect the link between relationship conflict and risk of relationship dissolution. Finally, research has demonstrated that behavioral withdrawal is deleterious for intimate relationships (Gottman, 1994; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Noller et al, 2005; Roberts, 2000). However, research has not investigated the impact of *thoughts* of withdrawing from conflict discussions. It is possible that thoughts about withdrawing from conflict may also have a negative impact on the stability of the relationship. Thus, the focus of previous research has been on partners' overt behaviors during conflict communication. The current investigation examines whether or not internal experiences also have negative effects on couples' relationships.

Prior research has indicated that the presence of incompatibilities between partners (degree of conflict) and the way in which the couple handles the incompatibilities both predict the dissolution of the relationship, and there may be internal factors that moderate this relationship, exacerbating the degree to which conflict and relationship dissolution are related (Gottman, 1994). The aim of the present study is to test whether or not the factors of internalized (versus vented) anger, perceived control by partner, and cognitions regarding a desire to withdraw from distressing conflict each moderate the relation between level of relationship conflict and degree to which partners take steps toward dissolving the relationship.

Chapter II

Literature Review

Prevalence of Conflict in Couple Relationships

Conflict refers to the expressed tension between individuals who perceive their needs, values, or standards as incompatible and feel as if the other is interfering in their achievement of goals (Hocker & Wilmot, 1991). Conflict is common in all interpersonal relationships. Research has shown that the frequency of conflict is less important in relationship functioning than is the management of conflict (Canary & Messman, 2000; Gottman, 1994; Straus, 1979; White & Klein, 2008). Because conflict is inevitable, couples must be able to problem solve and work through their differences in order to remain satisfied in the relationship.

Conflict is caused by many factors involving incompatibilities between members of a relationship. For example, conflict between members of a couple can arise from their having differing standards for the characteristics that they believe their relationship should have. Research has shown that couples are happier in their relationship when partners believe that each member “should have a great deal of closeness and sharing, should solve problems in an egalitarian manner, and should be highly invested in giving to the relationship (Epstein & Baucom, 2002, p. 72). Baucom and Ragland (1998) demonstrated that when partners’ standards differ or are not being met, negative interactions and relationship distress are more evident. Therapists working with couples should understand each partner’s beliefs and standards in order to evaluate whether or not the relationship is meeting the partners’ desired standards.

Partners' different needs or motives also can be a cause of conflict. For instance, if two partners have different levels of need for autonomy, this incompatibility can create relationship dissatisfaction and conflictual interactions (e.g., the person desiring less autonomy pursuing the one who desires more autonomy, and the latter individual withdrawing). Partners' levels of power motivation also may contribute to conflict, as research has shown that shared control between partners is associated with greater mutual satisfaction and less aggressive behavior than when control is not shared (Epstein & Baucom, 2002; Gray-Little, Baucom, & Hamby, 1996). Similarly, differing levels of need for achievement can be a source of conflict in couples, as they are associated with the partners having incompatible priorities for use of their time. Thus, helping distressed couples to understand the differences in their motives and needs is important in assisting them in finding new ways to fulfill each partner's needs, rather than moving toward dissolving their relationship.

Although conflict does not necessarily lead to relationship dissolution, unresolved conflict can be detrimental to a couple relationship, especially when there is evidence of defensiveness, hostility, and withdrawal (Gottman, 1994). Research on the sources of conflict in couple relationships assists in the prevention and treatment of relationship distress and possible dissolution. Based on research on the varied sources of conflict that can arise in any couple's relationship and the negative effects that can occur when partners do not cope effectively with their conflicts, couple therapists commonly devote considerable attention to helping couples reduce conflict and improve their communication so they will have the tools to effectively handle conflict in the future. Forms of couple therapy have been developed to assist couples in effectively dealing with

conflict (Beckerman & Sarracco, 2002; Butler & Wampler, 1999; Hogan, Hunt, Emerson, Hayes, & Ketterer, 1996). In fact, programs that have been developed to prevent the development of relationship distress typically have a major component that consists of teaching couple communication and conflict resolution skills (Cummings, Faircloth, Mitchell, Cummings, & Schermerhorn, 2008; Miller & Sherrard, 1999; Stanley, Markman, Peters, & Leber, 1995).

Overt Couple Communication and Conflict Resolution

The current study's focus is on individuals' internal experience during conflict; however, a review of the existing body of research on overt behavior during conflict communication will be examined, as this area has been studied extensively and points to particular areas of internal experience that may be important as well.

Previous research has shown that distressed and non-distressed couples differ in the way in which they handle conflict (Birchler, Weiss, & Vincent, 1975; Gottman, 1994; Rusbult, Johnson, & Morrow, 1986). Birchler and colleagues (1975) found that distressed couples were significantly more negative and less positive in their behavioral interactions during conflict discussion than nondistressed couples in a laboratory setting as well as in self reports of their behaviors at home. Later research showed that distressed couples utilize fewer problem solving behaviors and higher levels of negative verbal and nonverbal behaviors when compared to nondistressed couples (Margolin & Wampold, 1981). Distressed couples also interpreted their partners' actions differently than nondistressed couples. Research found that distressed and nondistressed couples did not differ in the way they intended their partner to receive their messages; however, distressed couples were more likely to interpret the actions of their partner as negative

and less likely to interpret the actions as positive (Gottman, Notarius, Markman, Bank, Yoppi, & Ruben, 1976).

Research has examined destructive ways of handling conflict. Some examples of forms of communication that have been shown to lead to increased distress and relationship dissolution include tactics of psychological aggression, negative reciprocity and the demand/withdrawal pattern. Psychological aggression is a major category for classifying strategies of negative influence in couple relationships. Psychological aggression is defined as “[involving] trauma to the victim caused by acts, threats of acts, or coercive tactics” (U. S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2008), where the “acts” do not involve physical contact with the victim. Examples of this behavior include “humiliating the victim, controlling what the victim can and cannot do, withholding information from the victim, deliberately doing something to make the victim feel diminished or embarrassed, isolating the victim from friends and family, and denying the victim access to money or other basic resources” (CDC, 2008). Lawrence, Ro, Barry, and Bunde (2006) report on studies demonstrating that psychological aggression is highly prevalent in intimate relationships. Evidence has shown that psychological aggression has a detrimental impact on individual and dyadic adjustment (Straight, Harper, & Arias, 2003), suggesting that psychological aggression in response to conflict may be a major contributor to the decrease in relationship satisfaction and stability and a contributor to relationship dissolution.

Another form of communication that is destructive to couple relationships is negative reciprocity. Negative reciprocity refers to the likelihood that a negative stimulus will be followed by a negative response (Cordova, Jacobson, Gottman, & Cox, 1993;

Margolin & Wampold, 1981). For instance, when one member of the couple acts in a negative way toward their partner, there is a greater probability that the partner will respond in a negative way than if the first negative action had not occurred. Research has been conducted on the sequential interactions between members of distressed and nondistressed couples in order to measure negative reciprocity, and it has been found that negative reciprocity was more likely in distressed couples' conflict communication when compared to nondistressed couples (Cordova et al., 1993; Margolin & Wampold, 1981). Gottman (1994) reports that in his observational research distressed couples had greater negative affect during interactions, had greater negative affect reciprocity during interactions, and had a difficult time returning to positive or neutral interactions when compared to nondistressed couples. Distressed couples are rarely successful in escaping the negative reciprocity cycle, and without the ability to get out of the cycle of negative reciprocity, couples are unable to communicate and problem solve effectively. These distressed couples continue to be dissatisfied and may disengage from the relationship.

Another area of research regarding destructive communication has been on the demand/withdraw pattern. This pattern refers to one partner's attempt to discuss a conflictual issue, expressed through criticism and demands for change, while the other partner withdraws by being silent, defensive, or refusing to discuss the issue (Eldridge, Sevier, Jones, Atkins, & Christensen, 2007; McGinn, McFarland, & Christensen, 2009). McGinn et al. (2009) conducted research involving the demand/withdraw pattern, finding that couples display more self-demand/partner-withdraw when discussing their own issue during conflict communication and more partner-demand/self-withdraw while discussing their partner's issue (McGinn et al., 2009). However, the relationship between gender and

the demand/withdraw pattern is controversial, as studies have found differing results (Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Gottman, 1994; McGinn et al., 2009; Noller et al., 2005).

Research on gender and the demand/withdrawal pattern. Research on gender indicates that overall there are minimal differences in communication between genders except for demand/withdrawal behavior. There are common stereotypes about gender differences in how members of couples handle interpersonal conflicts, centered on the belief that men are more likely than women to engage in more competitive or avoidant behaviors, and women are more likely to seek engagement with others in discussing areas of conflict and more likely to behave cooperatively (Cupach & Canary, 1995). Research has produced some findings that are consistent with those views of gender differences, as well as contradictory findings. Research conducted by Kelley and colleagues (1978) investigating sex differences in conflict behavior found results reflecting gender-stereotypical responses. Findings indicated that females and males had different techniques for handling conflict; the men were problem-avoidant and the females desired a discussion and consideration of their feelings from their partner. In contrast, Cupach and Canary (1995) report on an unpublished meta-analysis conducted by Gayle-Hackett (1986) examining gendered communication. Findings showed that the effect size for sex differences was small across the studies, and the effect decreased as age increased. Further research showed that during conflict communication, there were no significant difference in the roles (demand vs. withdrawal) taken on by males and females during discussion of a problem that had been identified by the male. However, when discussing issues raised by females, females were more likely than males to be demanding and males were more likely than females to withdraw (Eldridge et al., 2007; Heavey, Layne,

& Christensen, 1993). However, the researchers found that couples with higher levels of distress were more likely to exhibit the wife-demand/husband-withdrawal roles, and they were less affected by the change in topic discussion. Cupach and Canary's (1995) review of research on gendered communication concludes that men and women may exhibit some differences in conflict management behaviors, but differences have not been found consistently.

The findings discussed above are important for the current study, as the role of gender in partners' internal responses to conflict is explored. Specifically, gender differences in the degrees to which internalized anger, perceived control by one's partner, and the individual's thoughts about withdrawal during conflict moderate the relation between amount of conflict and the extent to which the individual has taken steps to dissolve the couple relationship is investigated. In contrast to most prior studies that focused on gender differences in overt communication behavior, the present study explores gender differences in partners' internal experiences during conflict.

A considerable amount of research has focused on the demand/withdraw pattern and relationship satisfaction and dissolution, generally finding that relationship satisfaction is significantly correlated with the demand/withdraw pattern. A study by Heavey and colleagues (1995) demonstrated that during discussions of issues identified by women, the degree of the female-demand/male-withdraw pattern predicted significant declines in the females' satisfaction. Additional research on demand/withdraw and satisfaction showed that individuals' relationship satisfaction scores were negatively correlated with self-demand/partner-withdraw. In addition, the researchers showed that higher levels of demand/withdraw behavior predicted lower levels of satisfaction with the

outcome of the couple's conflict (McGinn et al., 2009). Further research concluded that couples engaging in demand/withdraw communication were likely to develop polarization in their relationship (Eldridge et al., 2007). Thus the demand/withdraw pattern is not a helpful process for couples to engage in. Gottman (1994) concluded from his research on relationship dissolution that the demand/withdraw pattern can turn into a vicious cycle in which the more one partner complains and criticizes, the more the other partner withdraws, and the more one partner withdraws, the more the other partner complains and criticizes. The research suggests that breaking out of the cycle is essential for couples to avoid relationship dissolution.

In contrast to those negative patterns, constructive ways to manage conflict can include behaviors involving validation of one's partner's ideas and preferences and negotiation. Another strategy that has been shown to be helpful in managing conflict is "repair" behavior (Gottman, 1994). A repair can involve two ways of changing communication. First, a repair can refer to an indirect and neutral strategy of communicating about feelings in order to discuss an important issue for one member of the couple, followed by agreement and elaboration by the partner (feeling probe). For instance, a wife may tell her husband that she sees that he seems tense when they are at her mother's house, and he could tell her that she is correct. He could then explain why he feels tense. Second, a repair refers to discussions about communication as a way to change the couple interaction (metacommunication). For instance, a wife may tell her husband that he is interrupting her, and he could respond by telling her that he is sorry and asking her to continue what she was saying. Research on validation found that nondistressed couples used validation techniques while discussing a conflictual issue by

sending signals that suggested agreement or understanding of the feelings being expressed by their partner. Research on negotiation found that nondistressed couples were more likely to engage in negotiation communication rather than the adversarial counterproposals that were characteristic of distressed couples' communication. Research on repair attempts showed that nondistressed couples used feeling probes to discuss feelings indirectly and in a neutral way rather than a negative way. The neutral way of discussing feelings helped the partner to feel less defensive about the conflictual issue. In addition, research found that nondistressed couples' use of metacommunication repairs ended in agreement, whereas distressed couples' conversations involving the use of metacommunication frequently ended in disagreement. The nondistressed couples used the repair as a way to discuss important issues without breaking out in an argument (Gottman, 1994).

Further research on constructive and destructive communication behavior can provide helpful suggestions for relationship improvement for couples seeking counseling. Research has demonstrated the importance of communication behaviors during conflict and their impact on conflict resolution and relationship stability. However, the purpose of the current study is to investigate another area of experience within close relationships that can affect the outcome of conflict. Internal emotions and cognitions affect the way an individual reacts to and behaves toward a stimulus. The current study investigates partners' internal cognitions and emotions as variables that may be just as important as behavioral interactions in influencing the relation between conflict and relationship dissolution. To the extent that these internal experiences do moderate the relation between conflict and relationship dissolution, it will be important for couple therapists to

assess them and intervene with them. The aspects of internal experience that are the foci of the current study are the lack of expression of internally felt anger, the perception that one's partner is controlling, and thoughts about withdrawing from conflict.

Expression of Anger in Relationship Conflict

The current study examines internal aspects of partners' experiences of conflict, and how they are associated with steps toward relationship dissolution. One of the internal experiences chosen was the way in which partners cope with anger during conflict. There are different ways to cope with anger, including venting it, suppressing expression, and moderating it. It seems likely that individuals who suppress their anger may take steps to disengage from the relationship, because such suppression is unlikely to resolve the conflict but may result in persistent distress about the issue.

Many emotions arise during conflict, and anger is one that is prominent and pervasive (Allred, 1999). Anger commonly arises during conflict discussions between members of a couple (Greenberg & Goldman, 2008). Anger is an adaptive response to threats and can be generated by many different sources. This emotion refers to “an emotional state that consists of feelings that vary in intensity, from mild irritation to annoyance to intense fury and rage” (Speilberger, Reheiser, & Sydeman, 1995, p. 52). Ways of dealing with angry feelings vary. One way to cope with anger is to vent the angry feelings, and this venting can occur in an aggressive verbal or physical way that is directed toward other people or objects (Greenberg & Goldman, 2008; Speilberger et al., 1995). Physical acts can include “slamming doors or assaulting other persons,” and verbal acts can include “criticisms, threats, insults, or extreme use of profanity”

(Speilberger et al., 1995, p. 57). The physical and verbal acts can be expressed directly toward the provoking source, or indirectly toward individuals associated with the event.

Anger has a profound impact on relationships, and the way that it is handled is important in determining the effects that will occur when partners feel anger toward each other. The overt behavior of venting anger can have a negative impact on couple relationships because the expression of anger in an aggressive way can quickly escalate. In response to one person's expression of anger, their partner may become defensive and angry themselves, reciprocating the venting. Escalation can occur, in which each partner responds to the other's anger expression by taking a more extreme position, frequently introducing "past scenes from the current relationship in which they felt wronged, misunderstood, neglected, or used (Greenberg & Goldman, 2008, p. 229). This process is captured by the concept of negative reciprocity, described in the section on couple communication. It is apparent that aggressively expressing anger limits the couple's ability to problem solve. The current study focuses on the internal experiences, rather than overt behaviors; therefore, it did not include venting anger as a variable.

Another way to cope with anger is to suppress the outward expression of feelings and holding them in. Research distinguishing between expression and suppression of anger has revealed that these modes of coping with anger have different effects on the cardiovascular system. Research conducted by Funkenstein, King, and Drolette (1954) found that when healthy college students were exposed to anger-inducing stimuli, the students who suppressed their anger had an increased pulse rate that was three times greater than the students that expressed their anger. Further research supported the finding that individuals who suppress their anger have higher systolic blood pressure and

diastolic blood pressure, suggesting higher levels of stress. Further research on the effects of suppression of anger on mental health showed that for both men and women anger suppression was positively correlated with depression, dependency, guilt, and conflict avoidance (Kopper & Epperson, 1996). It seems likely that suppression of anger results in chronic distress, as the individual “stews” about issues that remain unresolved, and that one way that people who suppress anger cope with their subjective distress is to withdraw from the situation that upsets them.

Suppressing anger can affect a couple’s relationship in negative ways. On the one hand, anger that has been suppressed can build up within the individual over time and explode when the person finally expresses his or her anger in an aggressive way. This expression can include passive-aggressive behavior (Greenberg & Goldman, 2008), in which the angry individual blocks or punishes the partner through indirect means, such as saying that he or she will comply with the partner’s request but fails to do so. Anger that is withheld regarding one area of conflict can lower the individual’s threshold for getting angry about other events that occur within the couple relationship. On the other hand, anger that has been suppressed can increase the person’s internal resentment toward the partner, as well as their potential for depression and apathy. Holding anger in also contributes to avoidance of telling one’s partner what one needs, wants, and thinks. In withholding this information from the partner, the person prevents or decreases intimacy in the couple’s relationship (Greenberg & Goldman, 2008). Therefore, suppression of anger is not a healthy or effective way of improving a relationship and can frequently add to distress in the relationship. The present study examines whether or not suppression of

anger increases the association between presence of relationship conflict and the individual's tendency to take steps toward ending the relationship.

Another way of dealing with angry feelings is controlling and moderating it. Controlling anger refers to monitoring and reducing the frequency and intensity of one's experience of angry feelings (Speilberger et al., 1995). An individual can prevent anger through forms of self-talk (e.g., "Just stay relaxed. You don't need to be upset by what he's saying to you."), self-soothing (e.g., slow, deep breathing, muscle relaxation), or distraction (focusing one's attention on other thoughts or events) (Deffenbacher, 1996; Meichenbaum, 1985). Calming down inside and using self soothing techniques lowers one's heart rate and allows the feelings to subside (Greenberg & Goldman, 2008). Controlling (moderating or reducing) anger is generally seen as a positive quality; however, excessive control might result in passivity (Greenberg & Goldman, 2008; Speilberger et al., 1995).

Controlling anger tends to be an effective way of dealing with it (Greenberg & Goldman, 2008; Speilberger et al., 1995), and Greenberg and Goldman (2008) describe this method as having positive effects on the couple relationship. Using this method, individuals are better able to express themselves and balance expressions about issues that anger them with expressions of compassion for the partner (Greenberg & Goldman, 2008). In therapy, clinicians can assist couples in controlling their level of anger so that they express themselves in a constructive way and have a good chance of arriving at compromised solutions in which both members of the couple gain something instead of competing to win.

Based on their review of research on the everyday experience of anger, Cupach and Canary (1995) concluded that there are minimal sex differences in the experience, expression, or suppression of anger; men and women became “equally angry, exhibited parallel elevation in physiological arousal, and showed equal amounts of aggressive behavior” (p. 240). Research by Thomas (2003) also showed no difference in the degrees to which men and women experience anger. Results showed that men were often as uncomfortable and conflicted about anger as women, and guilt feelings regarding anger reactions were common among both men and women. However, there also have been studies showing sex differences in manifestations of anger (Cupach & Canary, 1995). For instance, research has found women’s anger to be more likely than men’s to be manifested through tears. Females were found to cry, sulk, and criticize males for their insensitivity, and males showed their anger and called for a less emotional approach to solving the problem (Kelley, Cunningham, Grisham, Lefebvre, Sink, & Yablon, 1978). Generally, research on expression of anger during conflict discussions has not found consistent gender differences.

Clinicians commonly attempt to help couples to improve their ability to resolve conflict by improving the behavioral aspects of their anger expression, such as substituting assertive for aggressive communication (Greenberg & Goldman, 2008). However, if partners continue to internalize or hold in their anger, without attempting to reduce it, it seems likely that their coping with their conflicts will be limited in effectiveness, and they may be motivated to disengage from their chronically distressing relationship. To the extent that internalized anger has this negative impact on the relation between conflict and steps that partners take to end their relationship, interventions to

reduce this form of experiencing anger could be incorporated more into couple therapy. Partners could be assisted in learning how to better reduce their anger as well as express it behaviorally in a direct but more compassionate way.

Research has shown that the ways in which partners cope with anger is important in contributing to the level of distress in a relationship (Geist & Gilbert, 1996; Greenberg & Goldman, 2008; Spielberger et al., 1995). One focus of the current study is on the covert internalization of anger, as an internal experience that interferes with partners' constructive resolution of conflict.

Perceived Control in Relationship Conflict

Another internal experience investigated in this study as a potential contributor to partners' steps toward dissolution as a response to relationship conflict is individuals' perceptions that their partner is attempting to control them. Individuals who perceive that their partner is attempting to control them in the course of dealing with their conflicts may be more likely to take steps to disengage from the relationship in order to regain their sense of control.

Research on psychological aggression in couple relationships has demonstrated the relation between psychological aggression and relationship dissolution (Laurent, Kim, & Capaldi, 2007; Lawrence et al., 2006). One of the major forms of psychological aggression that has been of interest to clinicians and researchers involves one person's efforts to control another's freedom and access to resources (O'Leary, 2001). Such forms of controlling behavior can include interfering with a partner's opportunities to interact with friends and family, withholding access to money, and intruding into the partner's privacy (e.g., searching through his or her belongings, phone messages, etc.). The

perception of control by one's partner is defined as "feeling influenced and reacting with negative affect to that influence" (Ehrensaft, Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Heyman, O'Leary, & Lawrence, 1999, p. 28). Research has found that, similar to other forms of psychological aggression, individuals' perception that their partner is controlling tends to be associated with lower relationship satisfaction, as well as with risk of forms of individual emotional distress such as depression (O'Leary, 2001).

Some individuals may be more sensitive to perceiving that their partner is trying to control them, or more distressed by that perception, based on their worldview schemas or family of origin experiences, such as a history of growing up with a highly intrusive, controlling parent. One's perception of another's controlling behavior may be accurate; however, it is a subjective experience. Perceiving controlling behaviors from a partner may be partly based on the partner's actions and partly based on the internal experience of the individual due to schemas and previous experience.

In a study on perceptions of partner control, Ehrensaft and colleagues (1999) focused on reports of spousal controlling behavior rather than reports of participants' own behavior. Results indicated that individuals from distressed and nondistressed couples both felt some degree of influence from their partner; however, nondistressed couples were more likely to perceive the influence from their partner in a neutral or positive way. Distressed couples were more likely to perceive the influence as negative (Ehrensaft et al., 1999). The study aimed to convey that the perception of control is distinct from the intent to control, and this is important for the current study. The current study assesses partners' internal experience of feeling controlled, examining the effect of these negative perceptions on the relation between couple conflict and stability of the couple

relationship, assessed in terms of steps that the individual has taken toward leaving the relationship.

In terms of gender differences, Ehrensaft et al. (1999) found that, overall, husbands and wives feel equally controlled in the areas of decision making, relationships with others, activities, and self image. However, one gender difference was found: wives in the distressed and aggressive marriages were more likely than husbands in these marriages to perceive their spouse's aggression as motivated by a wish for control. For husbands, this perception was reported significantly less often. The current study explores whether or not there is a gender difference in the degree to which perceived control by partner moderates the relation between couple conflict and steps taken toward relationship dissolution.

Perceived control may have important clinical significance. Individuals who are more sensitive to influences by their partner and who experience the influence in a negative way may be more likely to disengage from the relationship based on their perception rather than the actual intent of their partner. The person's perception of control may not stop with the dissolution of that relationship, and could follow the individual into other relationships. It is important for research in this area to be conducted in order to assist couples who may be dealing with control issues, as they may be experiencing increased levels of distress as a result of the perception of control.

Research in the arena of perceived control is limited. Results suggest that for distressed couples the individual's perception that the partner is controlling is experienced negatively (Ehrensaft et al., 1999). Therefore, in the current study it is hypothesized that the perception that a partner is controlling would exacerbate the

association between level of couple conflict and the person's steps taken toward leaving the couple relationship. This study tests this moderating relationship of perceived control on the link between conflict and relationship dissolution, as this has not been previously investigated.

Cognitive Withdrawal in Relationship Conflict

The third internal aspect of partners' experiences of conflict investigated in this study is cognitive withdrawal. Individuals experience many cognitions during conflict, and those who think more about withdrawing from or avoiding conflict may be more likely to disengage from the relationship.

There has been extensive research on behavioral withdrawal in relationships (Gottman, 1994; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Laurents et al., 2007; Noller et al., 2005; Roberts, 2000). Withdrawal in couple interactions involves “an absence of nonverbal immediacy or involvement cues” (Noller et al., 2005, p. 198). Behavioral withdrawal can include becoming silent, looking away, changing the topic, storming out of the room, or refusing to talk, and it is generally seen as negative behavior. Research shows that the presence of such cues creates psychological distance between partners (Noller et al., 2005). In addition, research has shown that insecure and distressed couples were more likely to act in ways that increase distance between them; for example, withdrawing from communication instead of acting in ways to increase intimacy and understanding (Gottman, 1994; Noller et al., 2005).

Although there has been much research on behavioral withdrawal, there has been little prior research on partners' thoughts of withdrawal during conflict and its relation to the individual's broader withdrawal from their couple relationship. Thoughts about

withdrawal from conflict are distinct from withdrawal behavior, and cannot be observed directly; they must be assessed through self-reports.

Cognitive withdrawal, or cognitive avoidance, is one reflection of the common human tendency to cope with distressing situations, including couple conflict, by avoiding them (Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, & Gruen, 1986). The motivational force of avoidance refers to “avoidance of outcomes, such as emotional pain” (Epstein & Baucom, 2002, p. 112). This motive serves a self-protective purpose. Research on coping methods, including cognitive avoidance, has shown that individuals faced with situations in which they feel they have no influence in the outcome are likely to use the cognitive avoidance coping style, and this allows the individual the freedom to ignore the problem situation (Folkman et al., 1986; Roth & Cohen, 1986). The avoidance coping style has been shown to have only short-term effectiveness (Roth & Cohen, 1986). Members of distressed couples may feel as if they have no control during conflict communication and in determining the outcome, so they may cognitively distance themselves from the conflict at hand. This process may assist the individual in the short-term; however, continued use of this technique can undermine couple intimacy.

In a study focusing on anxiety and coping strategies, Heckman and colleagues (2004) found that the coping strategy of cognitive avoidance was related to improved emotional well-being. The study showed that cognitive avoidance played a similarly important role when compared to behavioral avoidance in alleviating distress. In the case of couple relationships, alleviating the distress of a conflict discussion may provide relief for the individual in the short term; however, this strategy may be detrimental to the relationship in the long term. Research on trauma victims suggests that cognitive

withdrawal leads to emotional numbness and disruptive avoidance behaviors (Roth & Cohen, 1986). This principle may also apply to couple relationships and suggests that cognitive withdrawal from conflict situations could lead to feelings of alienation and lack of caring for the partner. Further, cognitive withdrawal from conflict situations could lead to a desire and steps taken to end the relationship.

Research on a possible gender difference in the use of cognitive withdrawal has been lacking. The current study aims to explore whether or not there is a gender difference in the degree to which cognitive withdrawal moderates the relation between level of couple conflict and steps taken toward relationship dissolution.

Research conducted on marital quality and attitudes toward divorce by Amato and Rogers (1999) showed that spouses' adoption of favorable attitudes toward divorce undermined marital quality. It could be argued that partners with higher acceptance of divorce tend to think about withdrawing from conflict discussions more often and eventually from the relationship altogether. Thoughts about withdrawal may play a similarly important role as behavioral withdrawal in relationship dissolution. Challenging partners' cognitive responses to conflict may be as important as helping them to change their behavioral interactions during conflict. Therefore, the present study investigates the degree to which partners' withdrawal cognitions during conflict are associated with their overall tendency to take steps to withdraw from their relationship and the degree to which the cognitions moderate the association between degree of couple conflict and steps taken towards leaving the relationship.

Conflict Theory

The design of this study is guided by conflict theory. Conflict theory attests that conflict is present in all social relationships (White & Klein, 2008). Conflict arises because humans are motivated by self-interest to operate in the world, and the characteristics and needs of members of a relationship inevitably are incompatible at times. For example, individuals are confronted by the constant need to balance differences in autonomy and relatedness in the relationships that they have with others. The process of balancing is especially characteristic in smaller intimate groups, such as couples and families. Couples and families are faced with frequent conflict. Conflict theory suggests that when forming a dyad, for example in marriage, couples should expect that their relationship is prone to conflict (White & Klein, 2008). Therefore, importance lies in the ways that couples manage conflict.

Power is an important concept in conflict theory because of the focus of the theory on resources. Power refers to a person's ability to be in control over another person or things. Power is measured by control, the outcome of power. A core assumption of conflict theory focuses on the limited availability of resources and the consequent competition for resources among the participants in a relationship (White & Klein, 2008). Members of a couple have resources available to them, but the partner with more control over resources in the relationship holds more power than the partner with less control over resources. Negotiation is another key concept in conflict theory. Negotiation is one of the possible strategies for managing conflict, involving a process in which the individuals who are involved state their goals and use resources to persuade or encourage the other to move closer to the goal. Consensus is the desired outcome of

negotiation, and this is achieved when the parties agree on an outcome. Power, negotiation, and consensus are important components of conflict theory and are relevant for the present study (White & Klein, 2008).

Based on conflict theory, individuals who suppress their anger may be less committed to their partner. During the process of conflict, these individuals fail to express themselves regarding their desired goals. The suppressed feelings of anger may lead to further arguing or increased levels of resentment, but not resolution of the conflict, as no negotiation occurs. These individuals may feel as if there is less intimacy between them and their partner, and they may feel as if they are not heard or understood by their partner. Individuals who suppress their anger may feel as if their partner has more power in the relationship. Based on their perception that their partner has more power, and that conflicts are not being resolved, these individuals may be less committed to the relationship. These individuals may desire to find another relationship that does not involve such conflict. Based on conflict theory, in the present study it was expected that individuals who suppress open expression of their anger will be more inclined to leave their relationship, especially when a greater degree of conflict is occurring.

Similarly, based on conflict theory, it was expected that individuals who perceive that their partner is controlling (refuses to negotiate) are more likely to withdraw from the relationship. They may feel as if their partner is using power to coerce them to moving closer to their own goal, rather than moving toward a shared goal. Individuals who perceive their partner as controlling may be more open to leaving the relationship in order to restore a sense of balance of autonomy and relatedness in their life and to find someone else with whom to reach this goal of shared resources and decision making.

Also based on conflict theory, individuals who have a tendency to experience thoughts of withdrawal from conflict situations may be less committed to their couple relationship. These individuals are not motivated to negotiate; they are uninterested in conversing about the disagreement altogether. These individuals are using their power to attempt to avoid the conflict. Conflict theory suggests that individuals who have thoughts about withdrawing from conflict conversations will be less committed to their relationships. It is possible that these individuals are intimidated by conflict or do not feel as if they possess the skills to effectively solve problems. They may experience the short-term relief of avoiding conflictual interactions rewarding enough to maintain this coping strategy.

Conflict theory seems to have direct implications for the topic of intimate couple conflict that is the focus of this study. Conflict theory serves as a guide to predicting whether or not suppressed anger, perceived partner control, and thoughts about withdrawal from conflict are associated with the steps that partners take to disengage from the relationship. The current study examines whether or not there is any evidence to substantiate the application of conflict theory to the situations described above.

Conceptual Definitions of Variables

The independent variables in this study are the degree of conflict between the partners across a range of areas within their relationship, as well as three internal processes that may serve as moderators of the association between conflict and dissolution of the relationship. In this study, conflict level is defined as the amount of disagreement or incompatibility that an individual perceives existing between partners in their couple relationship. Given that the focus of this study is on individuals' subjective

experiences of their intimate relationships, conflict is measured by participants' ratings of the amount of disagreement and conflict between them and their partner on various topics within their relationship, such as relationships with friends, leisure activities, career and job issues, finances, sexual relationship, honesty, personal habits, alcohol and drugs, and how decisions are made.

Internal processes refer to emotions and cognitions that an individual may experience during conflict, as opposed to his or her overt behavioral response to the conflict. The emotion that is the focus in this study is anger, given its central role in relationship distress (Geist & Gilbert, 1996; Greenberg & Goldman, 2008). When individuals experience anger regarding life experiences, they may cope with the strong negative feelings in a number of ways – venting them externally, experiencing them internally while controlling external expression of their feelings, or moderating/controlling their internal experience of emotional arousal.

When individuals hold their anger inside, they “stew” with their feelings, with no attempt to reduce or resolve the intense emotion through behavior intended to cope with the conflictual situation in which it is elicited. Internalizing anger is not an effective way to cope with either the life situation that has elicited it or with the emotional arousal itself. Internalizing anger that has been experienced due to relationship conflicts fails to resolve the relationship issues through overt problem solving. Therefore, in the present study, it was expected that individuals' tendency to internalize their anger would prove to have a negative impact on the relationship. It was expected that individuals who hold their anger in more feel distressed and will disengage more from the relationship due to the distress that they experience from unresolved conflict.

Perceived partner control refers to the individual's perception that their partner is acting to control the individual's thoughts or behavior. This represents one type of internal cognition that an individual may experience during conflicts with a partner. Individuals' perceptions that their partner is trying to control their behavior seem likely to affect the way that they will react to conflict with their partner. For example, perceived partner control may cause the individual to grow resentful of their partner, and it would interfere with the individual engaging in problem-solving behavior. For this study, it was expected that the degree to which an individual perceives a partner as controlling would increase the likelihood that the person will disengage from the relationship in response to conflict.

Withdrawal cognitions refer to the internal thoughts about removing oneself from conflict situations or to avoid topics when experiencing conflict or disagreement with one's partner. Thoughts about removing oneself from conflict do not facilitate effective communication and problem solving, and are not an effective way of coping with arguments within a couple relationship. Consequently, in this study it was expected that the more an individual experienced withdrawal cognitions when in conflict with his or her partner, the more he or she would take steps to disengage from the relationship.

The dependent variable in this study was steps that an individual has taken toward dissolving the couple dissolution, ranging from thoughts about ending the relationship to specific actions taken to leave the partner. The operational definitions of all of these variables are described in the Method section.

Hypotheses

Prior research has shown that behavioral patterns of handling conflict are predictive of relationship dissolution (Gottman, 1994). Based on prior research, four hypotheses were tested regarding ways in which internal experiences of conflict influence the association between level of relationship conflict and steps that partners take toward disengaging from their relationship.

The first hypothesis was that there is a main effect between degree of relationship conflict and the degree to which partners have taken steps to dissolve their relationship. As overall degree of relationship conflict is greater, the individual's steps taken to disengage from the relationship will be greater.

The second hypothesis was that the relation between the amount of conflict and relationship dissolution will be moderated by the degree to which the individual keeps anger inside. When internalized anger is lower, the relationship between conflict and relationship dissolution will have a weaker, positive relationship when compared to when internalized anger is higher.

The third hypothesis was that the relation between the amount of conflict and relationship dissolution is moderated by the degree to which the individual perceives that his or her partner is acting to control his or her thoughts or behavior. When perceived partner control is lower, the relationship between conflict and relationship dissolution will have a weaker, positive relationship compared to when perceived partner control is higher.

The fourth hypothesis was that the relation between the amount of conflict and relationship dissolution is moderated by the degree to which the individual has thoughts

about removing oneself from an argument with the partner. When withdrawal cognitions are lower, the relationship between conflict and relationship dissolution will be less correlated than when withdrawal cognitions are higher.

Research question. In addition to the four hypotheses, there was a question regarding gender differences that was explored in this study. The literature does not consistently point to one direction in which gender influences the relation between conflict level and relationship dissolution, or the relations of internalized anger, perceived control, and withdrawal cognitions with steps taken to dissolve the relationship. Consequently, the impact of gender was investigated.

Chapter III

Method

Participants

This study used previously collected data from a larger study on abuse treatment and prevention in couple relationships. In the original study, data were collected from an ethnically diverse sample of heterosexual couples. Data were collected from 69 couples seeking therapy from an outpatient couple and family therapy clinic located at the University of Maryland, College Park. The majority of females in the sample were in their late twenties or early thirties ($M = 31.0$, $SD = 8.12$), and males reported a similar age range ($M = 32.9$, $SD = 8.59$). Females' mean yearly gross income was \$ 24,182 ($SD = 21,480$), while males reported an average of \$ 38,709 yearly ($SD = 32,704.17$). Clients seeking help at the clinic were from an ethnically diverse community consisting of large numbers of African Americans, Caucasians, and Latinos. The majority of the female participants were Caucasian (45%), followed by African American (40%), Latino (9%), Other (5%), and Asian/Pacific Islander (1%). The majority of males were Caucasian (51%), followed by African American (34%), Latino (9%), Other, (4%), and Native American (2%). Both female and male members of the couples reported being in their current relationship for an average of 6 years. The majority of the couples were cohabiting or married. The majority of both females and males reported being currently married and living with their partner (females = 58%; males = 55%). Participants also reported living with their partner but not being married to them (females = 20%; males = 23%), dating their partner but not living with them (females = 18%; 16%), being

currently married and separated from their partner (females and males = 4%), and 2% of males reported being separated from their partner.

The couples volunteered to be part of the research project, the Couples' Abuse Prevention Program (CAPP), after they qualified to be part of the study. The couples were selected after meeting criteria for experiencing psychological and mild to moderate physical abuse in their relationships; therefore, their characteristics are somewhat different from a general community sample or the broader population of couples seeking couple therapy. The degree to which the participants comprise a select sample is taken into account when interpreting the findings. Further information on the qualification process through which couples were included in the original study is provided in the procedure section.

Procedure

Couples called the clinic to inquire about therapy, and they were assigned therapists. During the couple's first standard assessment session at the clinic, the partners read and signed a consent form describing the assessment and therapy procedures used at the clinic. They were informed that their responses would remain confidential, as the questionnaires would not have their names on them. The present study used some of the data collected from that first clinic assessment, in terms of demographic information, a Relationship Issues Survey assessing amount of conflict within 28 areas of the couple's relationship, and partners' scores on the measure of steps taken to leave the couple relationship.

Based on participants' responses to measures in the initial assessment battery that measured abusive behaviors occurring within the last four months, whether verbal,

psychological, or physical, the couple qualified to be in the larger treatment study.

Responses on these measures indicated both higher and lower levels of abusive behavior; however, couples with high levels of physical abuse that resulted in injury were excluded from participating because conjoint treatment was considered to be a potential risk for eliciting violence. Couples were included in the treatment study when they met inclusion criteria regarding presence of psychological and mild to moderate physical aggression, based on items from the Revised Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS-2; Straus, 1979) and the Multi-dimensional Measure of Emotional Abuse (MMEA; Murphy & Hoover, 2001). The items included instances of physical or psychological abuse (e.g., I threw something at my partner that could hurt him/her; I made my partner have sex without a condom; I destroyed something that belonged to my partner; I kicked my partner; threatened to hit the other person; drove recklessly to frighten the other person; became angry enough to frighten the other person). Exclusion criteria included items in which a partner used a weapon, a partner received an injury that required medical treatment, or a partner should have received such treatment (e.g., I used a knife or gun on my partner; I needed to see a doctor because of a fight with my partner, but I didn't; I went to a doctor because of a fight with my partner; I burned or scalded my partner on purpose).

When a couple qualified for the larger treatment study, the therapist described the study to them, and the couple then made the decision to participate or not. Participation involved taking part in a study evaluating alternative forms of couple therapy for reducing aggressive behavior. These couples signed an additional IRB-approved consent form for participating in the treatment outcome study (the Couples Abuse Prevention

Program). If the couple chose not to participate they were still able to see the therapist for treatment at the clinic.

The couples who volunteered to be in the CAPP study participated in a second assessment session. First, they filled out additional questionnaires, including the measure of perceived control by partner (Autonomy – Relatedness Inventory) that was used in the present study; then they were asked to engage in a discussion with each other for ten minutes, regarding a topic of moderate conflict in their relationship. The topic was chosen from one of the measures they had filled out during the first assessment session that measured the conflict areas in the couple relationship, the Relationship Issues Survey. This measure is described in detail below. Following the communication sample, which was video-recorded for later behavioral coding, the couple completed more questionnaires, including the measures of internalized anger and withdrawal cognitions that were used in the present study.

Measures

The following are operational definitions of the variables that were described conceptually in prior sections of the literature review.

Relationship Issues Survey (RIS). The RIS is a 28-item self report scale, measuring areas of relationship functioning that are potential sources of disagreement or conflict between the members of the couple (Epstein, 1999). Participants rate the amount of disagreement between themselves and their partner in each area (e.g., career and job issues, affairs, expressions of caring and affection, relationships with friends, understanding of each other's stresses or problems, how negative thoughts and emotions are communicated, honesty, how decisions are made) on a 4-point scale, ranging from not

at all a source of disagreement (0) to very much a source of disagreement (3). A higher total score on this measure indicates higher levels of conflict.

Spielberger Anger Inventory (SAI). This 24-item scale measures individual differences in how often anger is held in or expressed. The questionnaire consists of the Anger Expression (AX) subscale from the larger State-Trait Anger Expression Inventory (STAXI), and will be referred to as the SAI in this paper. Before the STAXI, the SAI subscale was its own measure (Spielberger, 1988), and it was later combined with the State-Trait Anger Scale (STAS) to create the STAXI (Spielberger & Sydeman, 1994). The SAI subscale was created to measure the experience of angry feelings and how the feelings were handled by “measuring the intensity of state anger and individual differences in the frequency that state anger is expressed in behavior (anger out), suppressed (anger in), or otherwise controlled” (Spielberger & Sydeman, 1994, p. 306). Research on the SAI has shown the instrument’s subscales to have good concurrent and discriminant validity through their correlations with other anger and personality measures (Spielberger, 1988).

The three subscales of the SAI include, “anger in,” “anger out,” and “anger control.” The “anger in” subscale of the SAI was used for the current study. Because the focus of the current study is on the influence of internal factors on conflict and relationship dissolution, rather than expressed behaviors, only the “anger in” subscale was employed. “Anger out” refers to overt behavioral expressions of anger, and although “anger control” includes some internal processes, this method of coping with anger has been shown to be effective (Greenberg & Goldman, 2008; Spielberger et al., 1995). The eight “anger in” items measure the extent to which individuals hold their feelings of

anger inside and let the angry feelings stew instead of expressing or trying to control these feelings (e.g., “I boil inside, but I don’t show it”). The anger in subscale has a Cronbach alpha of .64 for males and .80 for females. The subscale also shows good face validity. Participants rate their responses to the items on a 4-point scale, ranging from almost never (1) to almost always (4). A higher score on the “anger in” subscale indicates higher levels of anger suppression during conflict.

Autonomy – Relatedness Inventory (ARI). The ARI is a revised version of the Marital Autonomy and Relatedness Inventory (MARI; Schaefer & Edgerton, 1979). The revision was based on a factor analysis of the MARI. The ARI used for the current study is a 19-item scale measuring the levels of autonomy and relatedness that individuals feel that their partner provides within their relationship, in terms of the behavior that their partner exhibits toward them. The perceived control subscale was created for the current study by conducting a principal component analysis of 14 control-oriented ARI items, with an oblique rotation. Other items not dealing with control were not included (e.g., talks over his/her problems with me). The analysis showed three factors that had eigenvalues greater than 1.0, but based on the scree plot a two-factor solution was indicated as the better fit. The first factor had an eigenvalue of 6.22 and accounted for 44.44 percent of the variance in participants’ responses to the set of items. The content of its items suggests that it assesses the perception of freedom and respect from the partner. The second factor had an eigenvalue of 1.20 and accounted for 8.57 percent of the variance. The content of its items suggested that it assesses the perception of the attempt of control from the partner. Even though the third factor had an eigenvalue of 1.04, there was only one item that loaded on it in the structure matrix, and as noted earlier, the scree

plot indicated that a two-factor solution was appropriate; therefore, the two items (tries to control how I spend money; lets me do anything I want to do) comprising the third factor were not used. Factors one and two were fairly highly correlated at $r = -.54$, so they were combined into one control subscale (see Table 1). Participants' scores on positively worded items were reverse coded, so that higher scores on the subscale indicated higher levels of perceived control.

Table 1.

Factor Loadings of the Perceived Control Items for the Autonomy-Relatedness

Inventory

Item	Factor loadings	
	Factor 1	Factor 2
Is always trying to change me	-.47	.75
Won't take no for an answer when he/she wants something	-.37	.62
Gives me as much freedom as I want	.82	-.49
Knows when to back off and let me be	.69	-.57
Argues back no matter what I say	-.31	.69
Encourages me to follow my own interests	.59	-.46
Lets me make up my own mind	.61	-.65
Respects my need to be alone at times	.83	-.49
Wants to control everything I do	-.49	.72
Thinks it's okay if I disagree with him/her	.47	-.74
Gives me as much privacy as I want	.84	-.48
Respects my need for time for myself	.87	-.50

The perceived control scale consists of 12 items, with a Cronbach alpha of .91 for males and .90 for females within this study's sample, indicating high internal consistency. The subscale also shows good face validity (e.g., "won't take no for an answer when he/she wants something;" "wants to control everything I do;" "tries to control how I spend money"). Responses to items are reported on a 5-point scale, indicating how much the respondent believes that items describe their partner's behavior. The ratings range from not at all like (1) to very much like (5). Higher scores on this

scale indicate higher levels of perceived control, with the highest possible total score being 60. The set of 12 items with their scoring key appears in Appendix A.

Styles of Conflict Inventory (SCI). The SCI is a broad measure of partners' cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses during relationship conflict, and it includes a 30-item cognitions scale that measures the individual's experience of certain thoughts during conflict with their partner (Metz, 1993). The cognitions scale contains seven subscales, only one of which was used for this study: withdrawal cognitions. The items of the withdrawal subscale measure the individual's thoughts dealing with the evasion of conflict (e.g., "I want to go away;" "How can I get out of this?"). Participants rate their responses on a 5-point scale, ranging from never (1) to very often (5). Higher withdrawal scores indicate higher frequencies of thoughts of withdrawal during couple conflict.

Withdrawal was the only SCI subscale used in this study because withdrawal corresponds to the criterion variable measured by the MSI-R, relationship dissolution, and this subscale measures internal cognitions that arise during conflict. The withdrawal tactic during conflict is not a constructive way to solve problems (Metz, 1993). Research on the SCI demonstrated that its subscales had good internal consistency reliability, possessed appropriate face validity, had strong content validity, and had convergent and discriminant validity (Metz, 1993). The internal consistency of the withdrawal cognitions subscale in the present sample was good, with the Cronbach alphas being .86 for females and .88 for males, respectively.

Marital Status Inventory – Revised (MSI-R). The MSI-R was used in this study in order to assess the steps that individuals have taken to disengage from their relationship. The original Marital Status Inventory measures relationship distress through

individuals' thoughts and actions regarding their potential to leave their relationship with their partner (MSI; Weiss & Cerreto, 1980). Individuals rate their level of disengagement from the relationship through 14 true/false items, ranging from occasional thoughts about leaving the relationship to actually moving out of the home. Previous research has shown the MSI to be valid and reliable; specifically, this measure has high discriminant and concurrent validity (Whiting, 2003).

The MSI-R is an 18-item revision of the original MSI that assesses the various steps that the individual has taken to leave the couple relationship. The MSI-R (Epstein & Werlinich, 2001) was created in order to include appropriate responses for non-married as well as married couples, as there was no requirement in the larger research study for couples to be married, and couples in the study are dating, cohabiting, or married. For example, one item on the MSI reads, "I have occasionally thought of divorce," whereas a similar item on the MSI-R reads, "Had frequent thoughts about separating from your partner." The MSI-R also includes items that are not on the MSI (e.g., moved furniture or belongings to another residence). Participants indicate their responses by marking "Yes" or "No" to each of the items. A summary score is created by adding up the number of "Yes" responses, giving one point to each answer marked as "Yes." Total scores range from 0-18, with higher scores indicating further steps taken to leave the relationship. This scale had a Cronbach alpha of .88 for males, and .86 for females in the present study.

Chapter IV

Results

Correlational Analyses

First, Pearson correlations were computed among participants' scores on the RIS (amount of conflict), SAI (anger in), SCI (withdrawal cognitions), ARI (perceived control), and MSI-R (steps taken to leave relationship). The results can be found in Table 2. For females, the variables that were found to be significantly correlated with relationship dissolution were the level of conflict, withdrawal cognitions, and perceived control by partner. For males, relationship dissolution was significantly correlated with the level of conflict, withdrawal cognitions, and perceived control. The correlations among scales are generally low to moderate for both males and females.

Table 2

Correlations Among the Variables

	RIS	SAI	SCI	ARI	MSI-R
RIS	--	.14	.41**	.50**	.52**
SAI	.44**	--	.34**	.25*	.11
SCI	.47**	.50**	--	.47**	.37**
ARI	.53**	.35**	.66**	--	.33**
MSI-R	.44**	.17	.44**	.39**	--

Note. * $p \leq .05$, ** $p \leq .001$; female coefficients are above the diagonal and male coefficients below it. RIS = Relationship Issues Survey, SAI = Spielberger Anger Inventory, SCI = Styles of Conflict Inventory, ARI = Autonomy-Relatedness Inventory, MSI-R = Marital Status Inventory – Revised.

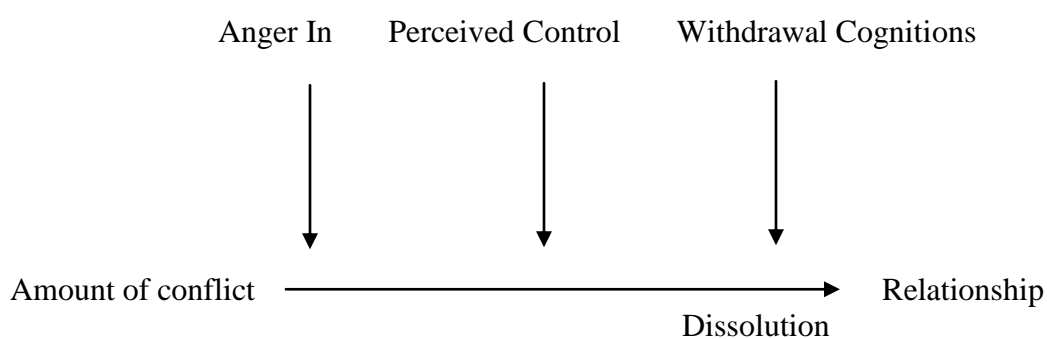
Testing for Moderation

Centering to adjust for multicollinearity. Before conducting the multiple regression analyses to test for moderation by the internal experience variables, the centering procedure was used to adjust for multicollinearity. Multicollinearity occurs when two or more predictor variables are highly correlated and thus have substantially

overlapping variance in common with a criterion variable. For the centering procedure, the mean for each variable was calculated, and the mean from that variable was subtracted from each participant's individual score on the variable. For instance, the mean conflict score for all females was calculated, and then the mean was subtracted from each female's level of conflict score. This procedure was conducted for the degree of conflict, perceived control, withdrawal cognitions, and anger in scores for females and for males. The interaction terms to be used in the multiple regression analyses for testing moderation were created by multiplying the centered conflict variable by the centered moderator variables (e.g., centered conflict by centered perceived control, centered conflict by centered withdrawal cognitions).

To test moderation, separate multiple regression analyses were conducted for females and males for each potential moderator variable (perceived control, withdrawal cognitions, anger in; see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Model for Anger In, Perceived Control, and Withdrawal Cognitions as Moderators of the Relation between Conflict and Relationship Dissolution



Stepwise multiple regression analysis predicting females' MSI-R scores. The first multiple regression tested moderation by the perceived control variable for females. In the first step of the analysis, the females' centered conflict scores and centered

perceived control scores were entered as predictor variables for females' scores on the MSI-R, measuring relationship dissolution. The multiple correlation (R) was .45 ($p < .001$). In the second step, the conflict by perceived control interaction term was entered, and the multiple correlation (R) increased to .47, but the change in R^2 was only .01, which was not significant ($p = .33$). A summary of this analysis is presented in Table 3. In the final model, only the amount of conflict was a significant predictor of steps taken to leave the couple relationship, $\beta = .36$, $p = .006$.

Table 3

Multiple Regression Results for Conflict (RIS) and Perceived Control (ARI) for Females

Model	R	R^2	R^2 change	F change	$df1$	$df2$	Sig. F change
ARI centered RIS centered	.45	.21	.21	8.9	2	69	.001
ARI centered RIS centered RIS x ARI	.47	.22	.01	.96	1	68	.33

Note. RIS = Relationship Issues Survey, ARI = Autonomy-Relatedness Inventory

The second multiple regression was conducted testing moderation by the anger in variable for females. For the first step of the analysis, the females' centered conflict scores and centered anger in scores were entered as predictor variables for their scores on the MSI-R. The multiple correlation (R) was .45 ($p < .001$). The conflict by anger in interaction term was entered in the second step, and the multiple correlation (R) increased to .49. The change in R^2 was .04, and this increase showed a trend toward significance ($p = .07$). A summary of the analysis is presented in Table 4.

Table 4

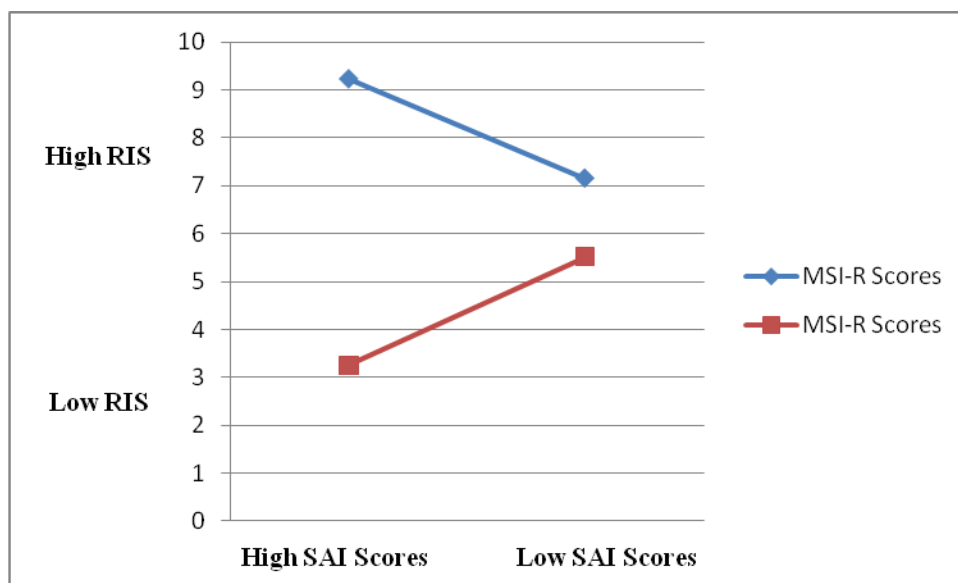
Multiple Regression Results for Conflict (RIS) and Anger In (SAI) for Females

Model	<i>R</i>	<i>R</i> ²	<i>R</i> ² change	<i>F</i> change	<i>df</i> 1	<i>df</i> 2	Sig. <i>F</i> change
SAI centered RIS centered	.45	.20	.20	8.6	2	69	.001
SAI centered RIS centered RIS x SAI	.49	.24	.04	3.3	1	68	.07

Note. RIS = Relationship Issues Survey, SAI = Spielberger Anger Inventory

In the final model, only the amount of conflict was a significant predictor of relationship dissolution (MSI-R) scores, $\beta = .34$, $p = .001$. However, because the conflict by anger in interaction term showed a trend toward significance, $\beta = .02$, $p = .07$, post hoc analyses were conducted to investigate this trend. Using a median split, lower and higher scores were created for females' conflict and anger in scores. Next, mean relationship dissolution scores were computed for each category: high anger in by high conflict, high anger in by low conflict, low anger in by high conflict, and low anger in by low conflict. Post hoc results showed that when females' anger in scores were higher, the difference between the mean relationship dissolution score for higher levels of conflict and the mean relationship dissolution score for lower levels of conflict was greater when compared to when females' anger in scores were lower (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Post Hoc Analysis Investigating the Trend for Significance of the Moderation of Females' SAI Scores



Note. RIS = Relationship Issues Survey, SAI = Spielberger Anger Inventory, MSI-R = Marital Status Inventory – Revised.

The final multiple regression testing for moderation for females examined withdrawal cognition scores. In the first step of the analysis, the females' centered conflict scores and centered withdrawal cognition scores were entered as predictor variables for their scores on the MSI-R, indicating steps the females had taken to leave their couple relationship. The multiple correlation (R) was .47 ($p < .001$). In the second step, the conflict by withdrawal cognitions interaction term was entered and the multiple correlation (R) increased to .49, but the change in R^2 was .01, which was not significant ($p = .36$). A summary of this analysis is presented in Table 5. In the final model, only the amount of conflict was a significant predictor of relationship dissolution, $\beta = .35$, $p = .005$.

Table 5

Multiple Regression Results for Conflict (RIS) and Withdrawal Cognitions (SCI) for Females

Model	<i>R</i>	<i>R</i> ²	<i>R</i> ² change	<i>F</i> change	<i>df</i> ₁	<i>df</i> ₂	Sig. <i>F</i> change
SCI centered RIS centered	.47	.22	.22	9.2	2	66	.001
SCI centered RIS centered RIS x SCI	.48	.23	.01	.86	1	65	.36

Note. RIS = Relationship Issues Survey, SCI = Styles of Conflict Inventory

Stepwise multiple regression analysis predicting males' MSI-R scores. A

second set of multiple regression analyses were used to test for moderation by the internal experience variables for males. The first analysis tested moderation by perceived control (ARI scores). The first step of the regression consisted of the males' centered conflict scores and centered perceived control scores entered as predictor variables for scores on the MSI-R, indicating steps taken to leave the relationship. The multiple correlation (*R*) was .46 ($p < .001$). In the second step, the conflict by perceived control interaction term was entered, and the multiple correlation (*R*) increased to .47, but the change in *R*² was only .004, which was not significant ($p = .58$). A summary of this analysis is presented in Table 6. In the final model, results showed a main effect for degree of conflict ($\beta = .32, p = .024$) and a trend for degree to which the males saw their partner as trying to control them ($\beta = .24, p = .068$). The interaction effect was not significant ($\beta = -.07, p = .58$), so there was no evidence of a moderation effect.

Table 6

Multiple Regression Results for Conflict (RIS) and Perceived Control (ARI) for Males

Model	<i>R</i>	<i>R</i> ²	<i>R</i> ² change	<i>F</i> change	<i>df</i> 1	<i>df</i> 2	Sig. <i>F</i> change
ARI centered RIS centered	.46	.22	.22	9.5	2	69	.001
ARI centered RIS centered RIS x ARI	.47	.22	.004	.31	1	68	.58

Note. RIS = Relationship Issues Survey, ARI = Autonomy-Relatedness Inventory

The second multiple regression testing moderation for males included anger in scores. In the first step, males' centered conflict scores and centered anger in scores were entered as predictor variables for relationship dissolution. The multiple correlation (*R*) was .42 ($p < .001$). In the second step, the conflict by anger in interaction term was entered and the multiple correlation (*R*) increased to .43, but the change in *R*² was .003, and this change was not significant ($p = .62$). The summary of this analysis is presented in Table 7. In the final model, only the amount of conflict was a significant predictor of relationship dissolution, $\beta = .43$, $p = .001$.

Table 7

Multiple Regression Results for Conflict (RIS) and Anger In (SAI) for Males

Model	<i>R</i>	<i>R</i> ²	<i>R</i> ² change	<i>F</i> change	<i>df</i> 1	<i>df</i> 2	Sig. <i>F</i> change
SAI centered RIS centered	.42	.18	.18	7.6	2	70	.001
SAI centered RIS centered RIS x SAI	.43	.18	.003	.25	1	69	.62

Note. RIS = Relationship Issues Survey, SAI = Spielberger Anger Inventory

The final multiple regression for males tested moderation by withdrawal cognitions (SCI scores). The first step included the males' centered conflict scores and centered withdrawal cognition scores as the predictor variables for relationship

dissolution (MSI-R scores). The multiple correlation (R) was .50 ($p < .001$). In the second step, the conflict by withdrawal cognitions interaction term was entered, and the multiple correlation (R) increased to .51, but the change in R^2 was only .006, which was not significant ($p = .47$). A summary of this analysis is presented in Table 8. In the final model, there was a main effect for degree of conflict ($\beta = .30, p = .01$) and for thoughts of withdrawal ($\beta = .32, p = .013$). The interaction term was not significant ($\beta = -.08, p = .47$), so there was no evidence of a moderation effect.

Table 8

Multiple Regression Results for Conflict (RIS) and Withdrawal Cognitions (SCI) for Males

Model	R	R^2	R^2 change	F change	$df1$	$df2$	Sig. F change
SCI centered RIS centered	.50	.25	.25	11.6	2	69	.001
SCI centered RIS centered RIS x SCI	.51	.26	.006	.53	1	68	.47

Note. RIS = Relationship Issues Survey, SCI = Styles of Conflict Inventory

Thus, the results of the multiple regression analyses indicated that the three internal experience variables (perceived control, anger in, withdrawal cognitions) did not moderate the relation between conflict and relationship dissolution. Therefore, it was decided that post hoc analyses would be conducted to explore whether the internal experience variables might mediate the relationship between degree of conflict and degrees to which partners had taken steps toward dissolving their relationships.

Testing for Mediation

Stepwise multiple regression analysis predicting females' MSI-R scores. The Pearson correlation between females' conflict and relationship dissolution scores was .43

($p < .001$), indicating that 18.8% of variance in females' relationship dissolution scores was accounted for by their conflict scores. A stepwise multiple regression analysis predicting relationship dissolution scores was conducted. Entered in step 1 were the internal experience variables. The multiple correlation (R) was .37, $p = .02$, and the R^2 was .14. In the second step, the conflict variable was entered, and the multiple correlation (R) increased to .47. The change in R^2 was .09, which was significant; $F(1, 64) = 7.17$, $p = .009$.

The results indicated that the three internal experience variables were significantly related to the relationship dissolution scores but that when controlling for them, there was still a significant relationship between conflict and relationship dissolution scores. When controlling for the internal experience variables, the amount of variance in relationship dissolution scores accounted for by the level of conflict (8.7%) was lower than the amount in their zero-order relationship indicated by their Pearson correlation (18.8%). Therefore, the internal experience variables partially mediated the relation between conflict and steps taken to leave the relationship.

Stepwise multiple regression analysis predicting males' MSI-R scores. The Pearson correlation between males' scores on conflict and steps they had taken to leave the relationship was .42 ($p < .001$), indicating that 17.8% of variance in males' relationship dissolution scores was accounted for by their conflict scores. A stepwise multiple regression analysis was conducted predicting males' relationship dissolution scores. In step 1 the set of three internal experience variables (perceived control, anger in, withdrawal cognitions) were entered. The multiple correlation (R) was .45, $p = .002$, and the R^2 was .20. In step 2 the conflict variable was entered, and the multiple correlation

increased to $R = .52$, with an R^2 of $.27$. The change in R^2 was $.07$, which was significant; $F(1, 66) = 6.00, p = .017$. Further, within this model, cognitive withdrawal was a significant predictor of relationship dissolution scores, $\beta = .32, p = .047$.

These results indicated that the set of three internal experience variables was significantly related to scores on the MSI-R, measuring steps taken to dissolve the couple relationship, but that after controlling for them, there was still a significant relationship between the degree of conflict and MSI-R scores. When controlling for the internal experience variables, the amount of variance in relationship dissolution scores accounted for by conflict scores (6.7%) was a significant increment, but it also was lower than the amount in their zero-order relation indicated by their Pearson correlation (17.8%). Therefore, the internal experience variables partially mediated the relation between conflict and steps taken to leave the relationship.

Chapter V

Discussion

Findings

The results of this study provided support for the first hypothesis; as expected, the relationship between the level of conflict and steps taken to leave the relationship was significant. The correlational findings for both females and males showed that the higher the level of conflict the more steps individuals had been taken to end their relationship.

The main purpose of this study was to examine the role of three internal experiences that may occur for an individual, suppression of anger, perceiving that a partner is controlling, and thoughts of withdrawal, during conflict communication. It was hypothesized that the variables would play a moderating role in the relation between the degree of conflict in a couple's relationship and steps that partners had taken toward dissolving their relationship.

To test the second, third, and fourth hypotheses, regarding the moderating roles of the three types of internal experience, multiple regression analyses were run. Results from the multiple regression analyses examining the internal experience variables showed that for females, feeling as if the partner is controlling and thoughts of withdrawal during conflict discussion did not play a moderating role in the relationship between conflict and steps taken to leave the relationship. However, results demonstrated that suppression of anger for females showed a trend for significance. The finding showed that for females, when they showed higher levels of anger suppression and higher levels of conflict, the steps taken toward ending their relationship was higher as well. When suppression of anger was higher and the level of relationship conflict was lower, steps taken to dissolve

the relationship was lower. When suppression of anger was lower and conflict was higher, steps toward leaving were moderately high. Finally, when suppressed anger was lower and conflict was lower, steps toward leaving was moderately low. The trend toward significance showed that suppression of anger had a tendency toward playing a moderating role in the relation between conflict and steps taken to leave the relationship. Results from the multiple regression analyses testing hypotheses 2, 3, and 4 for males showed that suppression of anger, perceiving that a partner is controlling, and cognitive withdrawal during conflict did not play moderating roles in the relation between conflict and steps toward leaving the relationship.

Thus, overall the results from the study indicated that the internal experience variables did not play the anticipated moderating role. Post hoc analyses then were conducted to further explore whether the internal experience variables might have a different type of impact on the relation between conflict and steps taken toward relationship dissolution. Stepwise multiple regression analyses were employed to test for the possible *mediation* by the suppression of anger, perception that a partner is controlling, and cognitive withdrawal of the relation between conflict and steps taken to dissolve the relationship. The results showed that for both females and males, the internal experience variables partially mediated the relation between conflict and steps taken to leave the relationship. In addition, the results showed that for males, cognitive withdrawal was a significant mediator within the model. The findings regarding mediation indicate that the presence of conflict in a close relationship tends to elicit a number of internal experiences that influence partners' ways of coping with the conflict. Among the possible responses that partners may have to higher levels of conflict, the

present results indicate that greater conflict is associated with greater suppression of anger, greater perceptions that one's partner is controlling, and/or more thoughts about withdrawing from the conflictual interactions, and higher levels of these internal experiences then leads to more steps taken toward relationship dissolution.

The findings suggest that overall, the suppression of anger, perceiving that a partner is controlling, and thoughts about withdrawing during conflict play a role in how much the members of couples respond to conflict in their relationship by taking steps toward leaving the relationship, but that level of conflict also predicts steps toward relationship dissolution above and beyond the influences of the partners' internal experiences.

Gender differences. In the analyses testing for moderation of the internal experience variables for females, a trend toward significance was found, showing that the suppression of anger tended to play a role in the relation between conflict and females' steps taken to leave the relationship. The findings of a trend for moderation, rather than mediation, by suppressed anger demonstrates that suppressing anger is an individual difference characteristic that interacts with level of conflict to influence steps that individuals take toward dissolving a relationship. To the degree that females suppress their anger in response to conflict with their partner, when relationship conflict is higher, the females will be more likely to take steps toward leaving their couple relationship.

For males, there was no indication that the internal experience variables moderated the relation between degree of conflict and steps taken to leave the relationship. Overall, there was a lack of moderation effects for males. For females, the

findings suggest a possible moderation effect for suppressed anger in the relation between level of conflict and steps taken to dissolve the couple relationship.

The post hoc analyses examining mediation by the three internal experience variables demonstrated that overall, the three internal experience variables demonstrated partial mediation for both females and males, in the same direction. For instance, greater conflict is associated in part with a higher level of suppressing anger, which in turn is associated with taking more steps to dissolve the relationship. The same relationship was found for both genders with each internal experience variable, with the exception of cognitive withdrawal for males. Cognitive withdrawal was found to be a mediator in the relation between conflict and males' steps taken to leave their relationship; as males' level of conflict were greater, their thoughts of withdrawing from the conflict discussion were greater, and their greater thoughts of withdrawal were associated with more steps they had taken to leave their relationship. The mediation of withdrawal cognitions on the relation between conflict and relationship dissolution demonstrates that thoughts about withdrawing during conflict with a partner may be a coping style commonly exhibited by males. When dealing with a high conflict relationship, males tend to think about withdrawing from the apparently aversive interactions with their partner, and this tendency is associated with a greater tendency to withdraw in a broader way from the relationship altogether.

Suppression of Anger

The suppression of anger has been shown to affect a couple relationship in a negative way. Greenberg and Goldman (2008) suggest that suppressed anger can be expressed through passive aggressive means. Further research on anger has shown that

when suppressing anger, the partner is not expressing their thoughts or feelings (Greenberg & Goldman, 2008). This act prevents the building or maintaining of intimacy in the couple relationship. The current study supports previous investigations of anger, suggesting that for females and males, the experience of holding anger inside may play a role in relationship instability.

Specifically, the findings suggest that females' suppression of anger may play an important role in their coping with relationship conflict. Findings showed a trend for significance of the moderation by the suppression of anger in the relation between conflict and relationship dissolution. The finding has not been demonstrated in previous research, nor have there been findings suggesting a gender difference in the effects of anger (Thomas, 2003). The findings indicate that as females' suppression of anger in response to conflict increases, the steps they take toward dissolving their relationship will increase, whereas males' tendency to suppress anger does not have the same effect.

Perception that a Partner is Controlling

Previous research on couples' controlling behaviors has shown that individuals negatively experience the perception that their partner is controlling (Ehrensaft et al., 1999). The findings from the current study support this finding, as the perception that a partner is controlling played a partial mediating role in the relation between conflict and relationship dissolution. The findings suggest that greater conflict is associated in part with a greater perception that one's partner is controlling, which in turn is associated with taking more steps to dissolve the relationship.

Cognitive Withdrawal

Research on cognitive withdrawal has shown that an avoidant coping style has short term effectiveness by reducing an individual's exposure to distressing experiences (Roth & Cohen, 1986). However, because avoidance fails to resolve problems such as relationship conflict, it is likely to have a long-term negative impact. In support of previous research, the current study showed that for both genders cognitive withdrawal was associated with relationship dissolution and partially mediated the relation between amount of conflict and steps taken to end the couple relationship. For males, cognitive withdrawal was especially important. This finding is consistent with previous research showing that males often feel overwhelmed by conflict with their female partners and are more likely than females to want to escape conflict (Carstensen, Gottman, & Levenson, 1995; Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Gottman, & Krokoff, 1989).

Conclusion

Previous research has indicated the importance of conflict communication and its impact on relationship stability (Gottman, 1994). Overall, the findings from the current study are consistent with this prior research. The present findings indicate that internal experiences, such as suppression of anger, perceiving that a partner is controlling, and cognitive withdrawal during conflict play a partial mediating role in the relation between conflict and steps take toward leaving the relationship. Therefore, it is important to reduce these internal experiences in order to improve the stability of relationships in which partners are in conflict. However, the *partial* mediation findings also indicate that higher levels of conflict in an intimate relationship may play a direct role in relationship instability, beyond the effects that partners' negative internal experiences have mediating

their responses to their conflict. If couples lack constructive skills for resolving conflicts, they will be at risk for dissolving their relationship.

Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations to consider. First, the sample was limited to a clinical population of couples seeking therapeutic services, and the results can only be applied to individuals voluntarily seeking therapy. Couples seeking therapy voluntarily may be motivated to stay in their relationships. This factor may contribute to lower scores on the MSI-R, indicating steps taken to dissolve the relationship. Further, a difference may exist between the couples that volunteered to participate in the research study and those that declined to participate. These differences, which might include a greater tendency to engage in avoidance among couples who declined participation in a structured study that had been described as focusing on constructive resolution of conflict, were not explored.

A second limitation was that the sample consisted of couples presenting with mild to moderate levels of psychological and/or physical abuse, so the findings cannot be generalized either to couples with severe psychological and/or physical abuse or to those with an absence of these forms of abuse. It is possible that the internal factors selected for this study do not apply to couples with an absence of abuse. Couples that are not dealing with abusive behaviors may have found constructive strategies for dealing with conflict. For instance, they may be better able to communicate their internal experiences with each other and work through the conflict with their partner. Communicating with their partner about their thoughts and feelings may be one of the constructive strategies for dealing with conflict that takes the place of abusive actions.

Another disadvantage of the sample was the relatively small sample size. This may influence the external validity of the findings, as the findings may be relevant only to individuals with similar personal and demographic characteristics as those in the study. The small sample size also contributed to lower statistical power, limiting the ability to detect possible relations among variables in the study. It is possible that the non-significant findings for both females and males regarding the possible moderating role of the internal experience variables in the relation between conflict and steps taken to leave the relationship were due to the small sample and insufficient power.

Aside from the limitations derived from the sample, other limitations involve the measurement tools used in the study. First, the current study only utilized self-report measures, and these measures are subject to social desirability response bias. The exclusion or inclusion of couples from the larger study on abusive behaviors in intimate relationships was based on subjective accounts made by these individuals. It is possible that couples were excluded from the study when they would have otherwise been candidates. In addition, participants' self-report of internal experiences may be biased or inaccurate, as they were asked to report on their general thoughts or feelings during arguments. Participants may have unintentionally given inaccurate responses based on feeling as if they do not always act a certain way during conflict discussions. It is also possible that they lack introspective abilities or have a hard time retrospectively deciding on the thoughts and feelings they have had during conflicts with their partner. Participants may have also intentionally reported inaccurately due to social desirability bias.

In addition, it is possible that the order of the presentation of the assessment measures influenced participants' reporting of their cognitions and emotions. During the communication portion of the assessment, the couples were asked to discuss a specific topic that was of moderate conflict for them and to work toward resolving the conflict. The couples' conflict discussion that took place for research purposes may not be representative of their conflict discussions that occur outside of the research setting. Two of the instruments used in the present study measuring internal experiences, the Spielberger Anger Inventory, measuring suppressed anger, and the Styles of Conflict Inventory, which measures withdrawal cognitions, were given after the communication sample. It is possible that the participants thought of their most recent conflict discussion while filling out the assessment forms. Therefore, it is possible that the responses for suppressed anger and withdrawal cognitions do not fully report the internal experiences that partners have overall within their relationship, as they may have been reporting on an experience that is not as natural or spontaneous as the discussions that occur regularly for the couples. For example, females' reports of their suppression of anger and males' reports of their withdrawal cognitions may have been skewed to reflect their experiences within the research setting. The females who reported suppressing anger and the males who reported cognitively withdrawing during conflict may have responded differently to the assessments had they not been completed after the communication sample. Consequently, it is possible that the resulting scores on the measures of suppressed anger for females and withdrawal cognitions for males were limited indices of their internal experiences, and therefore the tests of the moderating and mediating effects of the

internal experiences in partners' responses to overall relationship conflict may have been limited or inaccurate.

Another limitation results from multicollinearity among the independent variables in the study. As reported in the results, multicollinearity occurs when two or more predictor variables are highly correlated and thus have substantially overlapping variance in common with a criterion variable. To reduce multicollinearity, precautions were taken by using the centering procedure. However, this procedure is controversial, and it may not result in reducing multicollinearity, potentially resulting in insignificant findings when correlated variables are used simultaneously to predict a criterion variable such as steps taken to leave a relationship. Considering the aforementioned limitations is important when one interprets the results of the study.

Implications

Implications for theory. Conflict theory postulates that conflict is present in all relationships, and partners' attempts to achieve a balance between autonomy and relatedness in intimate relationships can bring about frequent conflict. Conflict is not meant to be avoided, and couples must learn to manage conflict effectively. Findings from the current study suggest that reducing conflict is essential for the stability of couple relationships. Furthermore, the findings suggest that coaching couples in controlling their anger and expressing anger in a constructive way, helping couples to reduce their feelings of being controlled by their partner, and assisting couples in communication and problem solving skills to effectively work through conflict discussions instead of avoiding the discussions are important for the management of conflict.

In the context of interpersonal relationships, conflict can have different definitions. For the current study, conflict was defined as partners' perceptions of incompatibility in their needs, values, or standards, which has the potential to interfere with each partner's achievement of their personal goals (Hocker & Wilmot, 1991). The internal experience variables used in this study can contribute to understanding how conflict is perceived and handled. Partners may feel as if their needs, values, or standards are incompatible because it can be uncomfortable for couples to discuss these perceived differences. Suppressing anger and thoughts about withdrawal during a conflict discussion are methods of managing conflict internally, and perceiving that a partner is controlling can be a result of conflict discussions that did not result in negotiation. These methods of handling conflict discussions are not constructive, as they do not lead to problem resolution. Conflict discussions between members of a couple who are better able to communicate their thoughts and feelings could result in the realization that the perceived differences are not distinct or that this communication could lead to a better understanding of how to incorporate the differences into the relationship so that each individual can achieve personal goals.

Implications for research. The current study provides support for the importance of internal experiences that may occur for individuals during conflict communication with their partner. Previous research has focused on the behavioral aspects of conflict communication that affect relationship stability (Geist & Gilbert, 1996; Gottman, 1994; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Greenberg & Goldman, 2008; Noller et al., 2005; Roberts, 2000). However, the current study suggests that there is a need for greater attention to the individuals' internal experiences as well.

Consideration of the limitations of this study should direct future research on the impact of internal experiences during conflict on intimate relationship stability. To improve on the current research project, future studies could include larger sample sizes in order to increase the possibility and confidence that relationships between conflict, the internal experience variables, and relationship dissolution are found. In addition, studies could focus on couples experiencing forms of abuse as well as couples that are not dealing with abuse, to determine whether or not there is a difference between these populations. It is possible that members of couples dealing with mild to moderate levels of abuse may respond to conflict situations with their partner differently than individuals who are not in a relationship in which psychological and physical abuse occurs. For instance, in an abusive relationship female partners may make an effort not to express their anger during conflict discussions. They may be fearful of their safety. Suppressing anger may be a safer way to cope with the conflict, rather than expressing themselves and increasing the possibility of getting physically hurt by their partner. It may be that for males in an abusive relationship thoughts about withdrawing from a conflict discussion may be a way of coping with the harsh demands of a partner, or, alternatively, it may be a way that some aggressive males at least initially reduce the risk that they will lash out at a partner. Cognitive withdrawal could also be a way of exercising power in the relationship. Refusing to discuss the topic or refusing to negotiate could be a male partner's method of controlling his partner. In relationships consisting of severe forms of abuse, these patterns may be even more apparent as the risk of harm may increase. Future research could investigate such possibilities.

Although self-reported data have their limitations, this form of collection of data on internal experiences may be well suited for its purpose. Internal experiences cannot always be accurately assessed by another individual. The individual having the internal experience can be asked to verbalize their experience; however, information about internal experiences cannot be assessed through observation. Therefore, self-report data may be essential for this type of data collection. For instance, without self-report data, assessing for internal experiences in research could be difficult. Participants asked to divulge intimate experiences in front of the researcher, an individual that does not have an ongoing relationship with the participant, could prove unreliable. Without a relationship with the researcher the participant may feel that it is not safe to express their thoughts and feelings. Expressing internal experiences in front of a partner may also feel unsafe to the research participant, especially if the participants do not have effective communication skills and are dealing with a high level of conflict. Using self-report data is a way of accessing the internal experience for the individual, while creating a sense of anonymity. The use of self-report data may increase the probability that the data on internal experiences are accurate.

It may also be important for future research to consider the order of the assessments given to the participants. The order of assessments could have an impact on the findings. In the present study, the communication sample preceded two of the measures. It may be important to place any observation of interaction between members of a couple, like the communication sample, at the end of the assessment. This way, couples' interaction in the research setting has no impact on their responses to items on questionnaires referring to their interactions.

Future research could also explore other internal experience variables that may play a role in relationship instability. For instance, overt behavioral variables, such as defensiveness, have been found to be important in relationship stability and instability (Gottman 1994). However, this research has not examined the corresponding internal experience. For instance, in the examination of the overt defensiveness during communication through the coding of behavior, researchers could simultaneously examine whether or not the partner is actually feeling defensive through self-report measurement. This research would show whether or not defensive behavior always corresponds with the internal experience of defensiveness. The research could also examine whether or not there are times when partners feel defensive during conflict discussions but do not act in a way that shows their feelings. The research would be able to show whether or not the internal feeling of defensiveness, without the expression of this feeling, has a similar effect on relationship stability as observed defensiveness. Further investigation could expand this area of research and bring insight helpful for couples when dealing with conflict.

Implications for clinical practice. The findings from this study are clinically useful for several reasons. First, findings suggest that reducing conflict is important for couples. For couples seeking therapy, assessing their level of conflict is essential, and determining their current skills for dealing with conflict is important. It would be important for clinicians to assist couples in reducing conflict by improving their conflict resolution skills, including communication and problem solving skills. In addition, this study suggests that internal factors may also play an important role in couple relationships. It may also be important for clinicians to gather further information on

suppression of anger, perceptions that a partner is controlling, and thoughts of withdrawing from conflict. The findings from the present study indicate that higher conflict is associated with greater presence of these internal experience variables, and these experiences in turn are associated with greater risk of relationship dissolution. Assessing these types of internal experiences may assist the clinician in deciding how to help the couple in managing conflict. By gaining a better understanding of the internal experiences of each member of the couple, the clinician can assist the couple in better communicating their thoughts and feelings. When dealing with a partner who suppresses their anger instead of controlling it through anger management techniques, the clinician can help the partner to express their thoughts and feelings and help the other partner to listen in a receptive manner to this information. This way, the couple is taking a step to increase their intimacy. For individuals who feel as if their partner is controlling, the clinician could facilitate a discussion about where these feelings come from and how to discuss these feelings with their partner. The other partner would be given the responsibility of listening to the partner expressing their feelings, and the couple would decide how to cope with these feelings together. When confronted with a couple in which one person has thoughts about withdrawing from their partner, the clinician could help the couple to explore the ways in which the partner could feel better able to contribute to the conflict discussion and share their point of view. By improving the couple's ability to cope with these internal experiences during conflict and in general improve the intimacy between partners, the members of couples may be less likely to take steps to dissolve their relationship.

Implications regarding gender differences. Findings from the current study suggest that there is a possible difference between females and males that may be important to assess in couple therapy. For females, suppression of anger may be especially important to assess. Suppressing anger may moderate the relation between conflict and relationship dissolution. Based on the findings, the females experiencing higher levels of suppressed anger coupled with higher levels of conflict in their couple relationship may be likely to have taken steps towards ending their couple relationship. Clinicians may want to assess for the suppression of anger for female partners when working with couples dealing with high levels of conflict in order to determine whether or not anger management would be an important intervention to implement with the female partner. Anger management techniques may be useful for females in order to manage their anger in a more effective way. For example, to reduce the feelings of anger, the clinician could coach the female to take deep breaths to slow her heart rate or to take a “time out” to manage the anger. After the female has successfully managed her anger, the clinician could assist the female in expressing herself in a way that will increase the likelihood that her partner will be receptive to her thoughts and feelings. For instance, the clinician could coach the female partner in using “I statements.” The clinician could then work with the male partner in being receptive to the female’s self expression.

On the other hand, for males, the findings of the current study suggest that cognitive withdrawal is an especially important variable to assess in therapeutic treatment. Thoughts of withdrawing during conflict discussions may mediate the relation between conflict and relationship dissolution. The findings indicate that higher levels of conflict will lead to thoughts about withdrawal for male partners, and in turn, the

thoughts about withdrawing from conflict will lead to males' steps taken to leave the relationship. The findings suggest that it may be helpful for clinicians to work with the male partner to reduce the thoughts about withdrawing from conflict. For instance, clinicians can work with the male partner to help them feel like they can engage in effective conflict discussions. One way to do this would be for the clinician to help each partner identify the ways in which they contribute to the exacerbation of their conflicts, so that neither partner feels attacked by the other person. Male members' contributions to conflict may involve cognitive avoidance. Clinicians can assist males in verbalizing their thoughts and feelings and have the females show their partner that they are listening attentively. Helping couples to discuss conflict in the therapy room and improve the process through which they communicate, for example not avoiding conflict and listening to each other, can help each member of the couple feel more confident in their conflict resolution skills. In this way, partners can become better skilled at resolving problem areas, and therefore, reduce their general level of conflict. Through examination of internal experience variables for females and males, clinicians can feel better equipped to help couples in resolving conflict and improving relationship stability.

Appendix A

SAI – Anger-In Subscale Items

Everyone feels angry or furious from time to time, but people differ in the ways that they react when they are angry. A number of statements are listed below which people use to describe their reactions when they feel **angry or furious**. Using the key below, read each statement and then circle the number which indicates **how often you generally react of behave** in the manner described when you are feeling angry or furious. Remember that there are no right or wrong answers. Do not spend too much time on any one statement.

When Angry or Furious

1. I keep things in
 2. I pout or sulk
 3. I withdraw from people
 4. I boil inside, but I don't show it
 5. I tend to harbor grudges that I don't tell anyone about
 6. I am secretly quite critical of others
 7. I am angrier than I'm willing to admit
 8. I'm irritated a great deal more than people are aware of
-

Appendix B

ARI – Perceived Control Subscale Items

Each of the following statements might describe your partner. Please circle the number that indicates how well each statement describes your partner's behavior with you. Rate each statement on a scale from 1 (= Not at All like Him/Her) to 5 (=Very Much like Him/Her).

1. Is always trying to change me
 2. Won't take no for an answer when he/she wants something
 3. (-) Gives me as much freedom as I want
 4. (-) Knows when to back off and let me be
 5. Argues back no matter what I say
 6. (-) Encourages me to follow my own interests
 7. (-) Lets me make up my own mind
 8. (-) Respects my need to be alone at times
 9. Wants to control everything I do
 10. (-) Thinks it's okay if I disagree with him/her
 11. (-) Gives me as much privacy as I want
 12. (-) Respects my need for time for myself
-

For scoring, the items listed above that are marked with (-) are reverse coded.

Appendix C

SCI – Withdrawal Cognitions Subscale Items

In general, when you experience disagreement or conflict in your relationship, or when you experience events that might lead to a disagreement, how do you typically react?
Please circle the number that indicates how often YOU have the following thoughts:

1. Go away; leave me alone
 2. I'll deal with it later
 3. We'd better not get into this; avoid the subject
 4. I want out
 5. I won't deal with this
 6. I want to go away
 7. I want to ignore this
 8. I wish I weren't here
 9. How can I get out of this?
 10. I'll withdraw
 11. I should avoid the issue
-

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