

## ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: THE INFLUENCE OF THE INTERACTION BETWEEN TRUST AND COGNITIONS ON AGGRESSIVE AND WITHDRAW COMMUNICATION BEHAVIOR BETWEEN MEMBERS OF CLINICAL COUPLES

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The purpose of this study was to examine the moderation effect of avoidance and aggressive cognitions on the relationship between levels of trust and levels of negative communication behavior, within a clinical sample of 60 heterosexual couples who had experienced mild-to-moderate conflict or abuse in the relationship. Results were found separately for males and females. For males, a non-significant positive trend was found suggesting avoidance cognitions have an effect on the relationship between trust and avoidance communication behavior. Females showed a significant association between avoidance cognitions and withdraw communication behaviors. The level of trust and the level of aggressive cognitions were significantly predictive of aggressive communication behavior in males. And the level of trust and the level of avoidance cognitions were significantly predictive of withdraw communication behavior in females. Implications for clinical interventions are discussed.

THE INFLUENCE OF THE INTERACTION BETWEEN TRUST AND COGNITIONS  
ON AGGRESSIVE AND WITHDRAW COMMUNICATION BEHAVIOR  
BETWEEN MEMBERS OF CLINICAL COUPLES

by

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# The Influence of the Interaction between Trust and Cognitions on Aggressive and Withdraw Communication Behavior between Members of Clinical Couples

## Chapter 1: Introduction

### Statement of the Problem

Although research has been conducted in exploring factors that influence communication behaviors in close relationships, there are still many gaps in current knowledge regarding communication behaviors and relationship factors that can influence the quality of couple communication. Communication skills and behaviors have been demonstrated to be statistically significantly associated with relationship satisfaction (Egeci & Gencoz, 2006). Thus, in treating distressed couples, the quality of communication and factors that affect it are important targets for assessment and intervention because couple communication has a major effect on relationship quality. By understanding the communication behaviors of partners, the couple's relationship can be better treated.

Research regarding intimate partner trust, cognitions, and communication behavior has been quite substantial at the level of studying each variable separately in regards to intimate relationships. A significant association has been found between distrust and dissatisfaction in intimate relationships (Beckenbach, Patrick, & Sells, 2010; Couch & Jones, 1997; Guerrero, 1998; Larzelere & Huston, 1980; Miller & Rempel, 2004; Vinkers, Finkenauer, & Hawk, 2011). Similarly, researchers studying avoidance and aggressive cognitions, particularly in regards to insecure attachments, have found significant associations with intimate relational quality; that is, the more avoidant or aggressive cognitions an individual experiences, the more dissatisfaction he or she has with the intimate relationship (Butner et al, 2007; Knoke, Burau, & Roehrle, 2010; Le

Poire et al., 2006; Locke, 2008). Also, researchers have found associations between avoidance of communication topics and relationship satisfaction; such that the more a partner avoids a communication topic, the more dissatisfaction there is with the relationship (Caughlin & Afifi, 2004; Caughlin & Golish, 2002). Additionally, withdrawal or aggressive behavior patterns by one or both partners have been found to be significantly predictive of relationship dissatisfaction (Burlison & Denton, 1997; Buunk, 1982; Gottman, 1994; Heavey, Christensen, & Malamuth, 1995; Millwood & Waltz, 2008). Given the significant relationships of cognitions, distrust, and communication behavior styles to marital and couple satisfaction that have been found in previous research, the variables of partner trust, cognitions, and communication behavior need to be studied further, particularly to explore how they interact with one another.

When a relationship is under any type of relational stress (e.g., dealing with infidelity, financial burdens, parenting practices) good communication is especially important so that partners can express their desires and be heard by one another. For instance, broken trust (e.g., through betrayal, infidelity, or domestic violence) is a major threat to the success of a relationship because trust is a critical element of any satisfying and stable couple relationship (Couch & Jones, 1997). Mikulincer (1998) states that a lack of trust may lead to distress and relationship dissolution for a couple. The outcome for couples with broken trust may vary according to how well they communicate and deal with issues that led to and result from the betrayal. For instance, the response to one's trusting or distrusting partner may be positive or negative depending on their attachment styles and cognitions (Mikulincer, 1998). Thus, broken trust can be a risk factor for partners who closely monitor each other's behavior and engage in varied behaviors to

cope with their distress. For instance, betrayed individuals may aggressively pursue their partners for information or the betrayed individuals may withdraw from their partners to avoid the problem. It is important to understand the factors that influence the likelihood that a lack of trust will be associated with a counterproductive or negative type of communication such as aggression or withdrawal. If the factors that lead to counterproductive communication behaviors are understood better, then they can help clinicians in planning appropriate interventions for couples' experiencing conflict and communication problems.

One factor that may be very relevant to influencing the type of counterproductive communication behavior patterns when there is a lack of trust in the relationship is the cognitions that the distrusting partner has about the problems in the couple's relationship. Some cognitions may lead to positive, engaging communication patterns that attempt to resolve the distrust, while other cognitions may be more likely to lead to counterproductive forms of communication such as withdraw or aggression. Mikulincer (1998) stated that the type of reaction or communication partners engage in during trust-related experiences, depends on the attachment working models and thought processes that they have about trust-related memories and coping strategies. Therefore, in order to predict how a person will communicate with a partner based on the level of distrust, one also should take into account the cognitions of each partner in the relationship.

Given that the types of cognitions an individual who distrusts his or her partner experiences may influence the couple's communication behavior, it is necessary to explore the types of cognitions that lead to specific communication behaviors. In a relationship in which a person distrusts the partner, the individual may communicate in

one of three ways in order to cope with the stress of the issue (Mikulincer, 1998). The distrusting partner can either pursue negative or positive direct communication with the partner as a way to cope with their lack of trust, or they may cope by avoiding their partner and the issue. The way in which the individual communicates may be due to the type of cognitions they have. For example, it seems likely that the more an individual who lacks trust for the partner and who is experiencing avoidance cognitions (e.g., “I want this all to go away,” “This cannot be happening to me,” “If I don’t talk about it, it is not real, and it will go away”), the more the individual may cope through avoidance communication behavior.

Conversely, it also seems likely that the more a distrusting individual experiences aggressive cognitions (e.g., “I hate you,” or “I’ll get you back”), the more the individual may cope through aggressive communication behavior. This association between the types of cognitions and communication style also seems likely to occur regardless of the reason for the distrust within a couple’s relationship as previous studies have looked at relational distrust as a collective process rather than due to specific incidences (Egeci & Gencoz, 2006; Locke, 2008; Le Poirre et al., 1997; Pearce & Halford, 2008). For example, if individuals have avoidance cognitions where they automatically have thought processes that steer them away from sources of discord or conflict, they are likely to engage in behaviors, namely communication behaviors, which avoid that discord with their partners instead of pursuing direct behaviors such as engaging in communication about it. The specific source of the discord (e.g., distrust, betrayal, infidelity, dishonesty, etc.) may not matter because the avoidance cognitions will steer the person away from the topic, resulting in avoidance communication behaviors. Consequently, the present

study will explore the degree to which the level of trust and the degree of cognitions combine to predict the style of communication behavior.

At present, little research has been conducted that looks at the associations among all three variables: partner trust, avoidance cognitions, and avoidance communication. Despite this gap in the research literature, researchers have found some significant relationships among the variables. Studies have found a significant relationship between intimate partner trust and both avoidant and aggressive cognitions (Guerrero, 1998; Mikulincer, 1998), as well as a significant relationship between cognitions and intimate partner communication (Egeci & Gencoz, 2006; Locke, 2008; Le Poirre et al., 1997; Pearce & Halford, 2008). However, the effects the variables have on one another remain unexplored.

The effects the variables have on one another are an important aspect that influences many couples' relationships, especially relationships where there is abuse or aggression. The current study used a sample population of couples that have experienced slight or moderate abuse within the relationship. Previous research has demonstrated that the role of distrust has been associated relationship dissatisfaction, particularly within abusive or aggressive relationship (Gobin, 2012). Gobin (2012) explored the impact of previous betrayal experiences on partner's preferences in romantic relationships. The premise of the study was that maladaptive beliefs may affect an abused individual's ability to make good decisions regarding risk. Gobin used 340 undergraduate students who completed a self-report questionnaire which found that victimization of betrayal traumatized partners was significantly associated with a lower trustworthiness preference. Gobin reported that a lack of attention to trustworthiness cues within intimate

relationships may increase vulnerability to further violations of trust and victimization of the abusive behavior. The cognitions a distrusting partner experiences may influence how they perceive the relationship and react during communication. The present study is looking at the role cognitions may have on the relationship between trust and negative communication behavior for aggressive and abusive couples.

Thus, there is substantial research supporting the importance that partner trust, cognitions, and communication behavior have on couple and marital satisfaction. A more detailed review of these three concepts is provided in the following sections to further address the associations among the variables and how they influence relationship quality.

### **Purpose**

Given the importance of the role that cognitions have in influencing how a person communicates to his/her partner when that person is experiencing a lack of trust in the relationship, the purpose of the current study was to investigate whether or not avoidant and aggressive cognitions affect the way in which a person copes with distrust through his or her communication behavior. As stated above, the person who is experiencing a lack of trust in the relationship could cope by avoiding communication or by addressing the problem through direct communication, which could be constructive or aggressive behavior. The reason for the distrust need not be a factor in determining the communication pattern, as the underlying assumption in this study is that across situations, avoidance cognitions are associated with avoidance behavior and aggressive cognitions are associated with aggressive behavior. Additionally, the current study did not look at the reasoning for distrust in the relationship because only the level of trust was reported, not the origins of the distrust. It was expected that the type of communication a

person chooses in response to his or her of a partner will be based on the person's cognitions. The more the person has avoidance cognitions, the more likely he or she is to engage in avoidance communication behavior. In contrast, the more the person has cognitions reflecting a desire or need to know about factors that led to the partner engaging in trust-breaking actions, the less the person may engage in avoidance communication behavior, but may engage in aggressive communication behavior. The results of this study have potential to increase our knowledge about the role of cognitions, specifically avoidance and aggressive cognitions, in relationship to the communication behavior of persons who distrust their partners.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

This review explores the research literature on trust, intimate couple communication behavior, and the relationship between these two concepts. Additionally, the review discusses current literature on the relationship between trust and cognitions, as well as the effect of cognitions, specifically avoidance and aggressive cognitions, on couple communication behavior. The review also discusses gender differences found in current research pertaining to the relationship between trust, cognitions, and communication behaviors.

### *Trust*

An important aspect of relationships is the degrees of trust that the partners have in each other. Beckenbach and colleagues (2010) have stated that relational trust is a quality within the relationship that makes it likely that the relationship will be positive, sustaining, or enhancing to the self. Beckenbach et al. emphasize that in a relationship where there is an absence of trustworthiness in both partners or an unequal distribution of trustworthiness, partners may develop a need for defensive protection of themselves. A growth of trust in the relationship reduces the defensiveness, increases the security in the relationship, and frees partners to share with each other (Beckenbach, Patrick, & Sells, 2010; Stinnett & Walters, 1977). The Huston (2000) study further suggests that relationship satisfaction is used as a representation for fundamental relational processes that include trust, thus supporting the idea that intimate partner trust is crucial in our understanding of the quality of relationships.



An important consideration for the present study is that research conducted prior to 1980 on trust failed to develop and share a single definition of trust. The early studies also failed to devise a mechanism to measure intimate partner trust (Driscoll, Davis, & Lipetz, 1972; Ellison & Firestone, 1974). In 1980 however, Larzelere and Huston developed and validated the Dyadic Trust Scale, so that interpersonal trust between intimate partners could be measured. This work conceptually defined and validated trust in close relationships as the extent to which a person believes the partner to be benevolent and honest. The present study utilized this definition, and measured trust with the Dyadic Trust Scale that Larzelere and Huston (1980) found to be reliable and valid.

A study by Couch and Jones (1997) explored differentiating types of trust between intimate partners and people in general (generalized trust) across 445 college students in romantic relationships who completed questionnaires on trust. Couch and Jones also examined the validity of another trust scale similar to the Dyadic Trust Scale, the Trust Inventory. The Trust Inventory assesses three types of trust: partner trust, network trust, and generalized trust. Couch and Jones also examined the comparability of the competing measures of trust, the convergence between trust in specific people and in human nature, and whether trust is related to one's personality, emotions, or the quality of a relationship. The results indicated that there was validity for the Trust Inventory and for the three types of trust. Additionally, the study found that there were significant distinctions between relational trust and global trust. Relational trust was found to be significantly associated with relationship quality and commitment, in contrast to global trust which was linked to indices of personality and emotion (Couch & Jones, 1997). Couch and Jones also noted that measures of relational trust seem to be interchangeable

and were strongly intercorrelated, which as they suggest, means that results from differing studies that use divergent measures of relational trust can be generalized from one study to another (Couch & Jones, 1997).

A study conducted by Miller and Rempel (2004) used a cross-lagged panel design that explored the association between trust and attributional processes in couple relationships. The study utilized 54 couples across a two year span. All participants completed an 18 item scale of marital trust at two points in the study, and 40 of the couples participated in a videotaped problem-solving conversation at the study onset and at follow-up. The authors suggest that the results from self-reported ratings of motives and behaviors indicated a reciprocal pattern where trust predicted changes in partner-enhancing attributions (e.g., thinking the partner had good intentions during the problem solving), and vice versa; meaning that the levels of trust could influence the partner-enhancing attributions, and the partner-enhancing attributions could influence subsequent trust levels. Furthermore, the results suggested that feelings of trust can change over time, and trust in one's partner can help sustain a relationship when conflict or negativity is encountered. Change in trust was found to be linked to how events or behaviors by a partner are interpreted and how actions are motivated, not based on the behavioral outcomes when conflict arises. Thus, there is research supporting the importance of the development of trust in a relationship, as it may determine whether a relationship is sustained or not when conflict emerges (Miller & Rempel, 2004).

### *Couple Communication Behaviors*

There is a substantial interest in research on the association between couple interactions, such as how couples communicate with each other, and relationship quality.

The strong interest is due to communication problems being one of the most commonly cited reasons for relationship difficulty (Burlison & Denton, 1997). There are different types of communication behaviors that couples with or without communication skills may elect to utilize. At a basic level, a partner may engage in either positive or negative communication patterns, where negative communication patterns involve either aggressively communicating with or withdrawing from one's partner. For the purposes of the present study, the focus was primarily on negative communication behaviors- withdraw and aggressive communication patterns.

Aggressive and withdrawing behaviors in intimate relationships have been shown to be predictors of intimate couple distress (Gottman, 1994). Gottman (1994) classifies four types of communication behavior that predicted relationship distress between intimate partners. Gottman calls these four classifications the "four horsemen of the apocalypse" because he has shown that they are predictors of divorce. They are criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling. Criticism is the attacking or blaming of a person's personal characteristics. Defensiveness is the deflection of perceived attacks from one's partner, while not taking on one's own responsibility. Contempt is the insulting or psychologically abusive behavior toward a partner. Stonewalling is the act of withdrawing from one's partner. Aggressive communication behaviors are similar to Gottman's contempt and criticism because they involve attacking and insulting one's partner which is hostile behavior. Similarly, withdraw communication behaviors are similar to defensiveness as one partner withdraws from the other. Gottman's (1994) longitudinal studies of married couples found that contempt and stonewalling were the

most predictive of divorce and thus important factors in relationship quality and satisfaction.

It is also essential to discuss the concept of complete avoidance of communication which is accomplished by avoiding certain topics altogether where the partner withdraws from communication before a problematic topic is brought up for discussion. One study that focused on avoidance of conversation in regard to specific topics is the Caughlin and Golish (2002) research that examined the relationship between topic avoidance and dissatisfaction. This study utilized 100 dating couples who completed a survey. The goal was to examine a hypothesis (and popularly held belief) that *discussing topics that are frequently avoided in the relationship will lead to dissatisfaction in the relationship*. Topic avoidance was considered to be either observable interaction behaviors such as changing topics or actively withdrawing from communication, or omission of observable behaviors such as avoiding a topic by not introducing it. The study results supported the belief that perceptions about topic avoidance were associated with dissatisfaction in the relationship, meaning that an individual's own report of their own topic avoidance was directly related to their own dissatisfaction. Interestingly, the results lend evidence that topic avoidance may be positive, especially if the potential cost or negative outcome of the topic discussion outweighs the dissatisfaction of not talking about the topic, and the partner does not detect the other's avoidance of a topic. However, the results did show an overall negative correlation between avoidance and partner satisfaction, suggesting that topic avoidance should only be used under particular conditions, though the authors do not clarify what those conditions may be that lead to positive results of topic avoidance. Thus, although there may be specific instances when topic avoidance is linked with

relationship satisfaction, overall avoidance of topics in conversation is associated with dissatisfaction in the relationship (Caughlin & Golish, 2002).

A study by Heavey and Malamuth (1995) explored active withdrawing and demanding in problem-solving interactions. Heavey and Malamuth utilized 48 couples who completed a video-taped problem solving communication sample, and then 2.5 years later 36 of the original couples participated in a follow-up communication sample. The study looked at the effects of demand-withdraw patterns on each of the partners, as well as the changes in relationship satisfaction. The results indicated that withdrawal by men (when the woman demands) and withdrawal by men (when the woman does not demand) during discussions of issues that were selected by their female partners reliably predicted an increase in the female partner's relationship dissatisfaction. When the female partner brought up an issue and the male partner withdrew from the conversation, the relationship satisfaction decreased for the female partner (Heavey & Malamuth, 1995). Thus, avoidance and demand communication are important factors in relationship quality and satisfaction.

#### *Relationship between Trust and Communication*

As stated above, Beckenbach et al. (2010) claimed that a person's lack of trust in his or her partner can contribute to the person feeling a need for defensive protection from the partner. Defensive protection can take many forms including constructing a barrier, actively withdrawing from the partner, or criticizing one's partner. Buunk (1982) described a coping pattern where there was a high degree of jealousy in a relationship over issues such as an extramarital affair, thus generating a lack of trust in the relationship. In these situations, the defensive individual tends to avoid the partner and

tries to deal with the issue(s) on his or her own. These individuals who avoid the situation or try to reappraise the situation do not communicate with their spouses.

Similarly, a study conducted by Vinkers, Finkenauer, and Hawk (2011) examined the relationship between intrusive behavior, trust, and perceived partner disclosure. The study looked at the intrusive behavior of snooping (i.e., checking a partner's text messages without permission) and its association with trust as a moderator. The participants were 188 married couples who completed a third round questionnaire as part of a longitudinal study. The results of the Vinkers et al. (2011) study found that perceived disclosure was negatively associated with intrusive behavior at low levels of trust, but not at high levels of trust in one's partner. Additionally, low levels of perceived partner disclosure were linked with higher levels of intrusive behaviors indicating that the less partners communicated about themselves and their activities, the more intrusive partners were in terms of their behavior. As the authors hypothesized, trust had a moderating effect between perceived low disclosure from a partner and intrusive behavior. The authors suggest that the finding indicates that trust may allow partners to feel more secure in their relationship despite a lack of disclosure or communication from the partner. Furthermore, people who believe their partner does not communicate and disclose information are more likely to perform intrusive behaviors, which increases conflict within the relationship (Vinkers et al., 2011).

Larzelere and Huston's (1980) study involved 195 dating and 127 married couples who completed the Dyadic Trust Scale. The study found that generalized trust was much less correlated with self-disclosure with one's partner than dyadic trust. Dyadic trust is the level of benevolence and honesty between intimate partners, whereas

generalized trust is the level of trust for individuals in the general, or aggregate, population. This suggests that high trust between partners yields more open communication than does high trust in the general, more public arena (Larzelere & Huston, 1980).

### *Relationship between Trust and Cognitions*

Another factor influencing how partners communicate with each other is the type of cognitions a person experiences. Cognitions are the thought processes that direct behavior and are formed by the attachment styles a partner develops (Knoke, Burau, & Roehrle, 2010). Avoidance and aggressive cognitions can be derived from insecure attachments that have been developed, specifically avoidant attachment and anxious attachment respectively. Knoke and colleagues (2010) suggest that individuals who hold an avoidant attachment style can be characterized by excessive self-reliance, a fear of intimacy and dependency, dissociation from his or her partner, and as having a negative working model of others (e.g., cognitive schemas regarding the degree of dependability in a relationship), especially intimate partners. By contrast, individuals who hold an anxious attachment style can be characterized by a fear of rejection and abandonment, and as having a negative working model of themselves (Knoke et al., 2010). In romantic relationships, the ability to trust others may be predictive of internal working models of attachment, thus an individual who develops an avoidant attachment style would be emotionally distant and unwilling to trust others, whereas an individual with an anxious attachment style would be emotionally clinging to their partner and react to a potential relationship loss by becoming angry or hostile (Creasey, Kershaw, & Boston, 1999).

Mikulincer (1998) investigated individuals' attachment styles and their levels of trust in their relationships; she found interpersonal trust was an integral part of attachment security. Mikulincer examined five different studies that looked at the links between attachment styles and trust in close relationships. The first study focused on trust-related memories, while the second through fifth studies focused on trust-related goals and coping strategies. Mikulincer found that individuals with secure attachments have more trust toward their partners, report more positive trust episodes over the course of a three-week period, and develop more constructive coping strategies when trust is violated than do individuals with insecure attachments. Mikulincer also found that avoidant attachment styles had a goal of control attainment, such that avoidant individuals had a negative sense of trust, thus making them defensive and searching for personal control.

Additionally, Mikulincer found that anxious-ambivalent attachment styles had a goal of security attainment, such that anxious individuals had a negative sense of trust, thus making them search for security in their partners. Therefore, trust can be seen as a fundamental part of secure attachments. A dependability component of trust exists where individuals have confidence that their romantic partner will be responsive to their needs. In a romantic relationship with partners who have insecure attachment styles in which avoidance of or aggressively pursuing one's partner are developed, trust may deteriorate over time as there is difficulty in depending on each other. Partners with insecure attachments may seek distance and withdraw as they compensate for the lack of dependability, or they may fight for security by clinging to a partner to the point of aggression. Thus, having an avoidant or anxious attachment style can create a lack of



trust in the relationship and result in one or both of the partners having negative cognitions about the relationship (Mikulincer, 1998).

### *Relationship between Cognitions and Communication Behaviors*

Within relationships and marriages, a very important aspect of marital and relational satisfaction is direct and open communication with one's partner (Buunk, 1982). Egeci and Gencoz (2006) found that by controlling for attachment styles, communication skills had a positive association with relationship satisfaction in a study that used 142 participants who completed four questionnaires about their current romantic relationship. They found that positive communication skills increase the likelihood of relationship satisfaction. However, attachment styles still affected relationship satisfaction because they influenced partner's expectations of how to behave (Egeci and Gencoz, 2010).

Pursuing evidence of the effect that avoidant attachment styles have on couple interactions, Locke (2008) examined the relationship between attachment styles and avoidance goals in everyday communication interactions of couples. Locke discussed how avoidance is a coping mechanism for insecurity due to a person feeling uncomfortable with closeness or dependability. Individuals with avoidant attachment styles have their cognitions focused on their own independence and not their partner's responsiveness. Locke (2008) utilized 60 undergraduate students who completed a self-report on attachment style and kept interaction records of approach and avoidance goals during 836 naturalistic interactions with their romantic partners. The results indicated that avoidant attachment styles were predictive of goals to avoid and a choice not to approach during interaction with a romantic partner. Given that the interactions were not

specific to any particular couple or situation but naturalistic in how they occurred, the study provides further evidence of how avoidant attachments are linked to cognitions of not wanting to open up to a romantic partner during conversations and interaction periods (Locke, 2008). Thus, there is an established association between a partner's avoidant cognitions and his or her avoidant communication styles in that avoidant attachment is linked to avoidant type cognitions which in turn leads to avoidant communication behavior.

Similarly, a partner's anxiety attachment dimension is linked to aggressive type cognitions which in turn leads to aggressive communication behavior. Fournier et al. (2011) conducted a study of 55 male participants who underwent therapy services for relationship aggression and completed questionnaires assessing for physical and psychological aggression, attachment insecurities, communication patterns, relationship satisfaction, and social desirability. Fournier et al. (2011) theorized that the anxiety attachment style indicates a fear of rejection and abandonment, and thus an anxious individual believes he or she will receive love or support only if he or she insists on a partner's attention and loyalty, even to the point of aggression. The results showed an association between attachment anxiety and both physical and psychological aggression with the men demanding and the women withdrawing in the reported communication patterns. Although the study was only conducted with males, it demonstrated that there is an association between the aggressive cognitions a partner has and the aggressive communication behavior he or she displays.

### *Cognitions as a Potential Moderator of Trust and Communication Behaviors*

Although there has been a substantial amount of research and literature on the separate associations between partner trust, avoidance and aggressive cognitions, and avoidance and aggressive communication (Fournier, Brassard, & Shaver, 2011; Guerrero, 1998; Knoke, Burau, & Roehrl, 2010; Larzelere & Huston, 1980; Locke, 2008; Mikulincer, 1998; Pearce & Halford, 2008; Vinkers, Finkenauer, & Hawk, 2011), there is still little known about the interaction of all the variables together. The majority of the research discussed in the above review indicates how intimate partner trust and avoidance cognitions are associated individually with avoidance communication, as well as how intimate partner trust and aggressive cognitions are associated individually with aggressive communication. Although the variables of trust and types of cognitions have been shown to have an effect on communication behaviors separately, there is a significant gap in how the variables may influence communication behavior together. The present study aimed to fill this gap by exploring avoidance cognitions as a moderator for the effect intimate partner trust has on avoidance communication, as well as exploring aggressive cognitions as a moderator for the effect intimate partner trust has on aggressive communication behavior.

### *Gender Differences*

While the principle aim of the current study was to explore the research gap in understanding the moderating effect that types of cognitions have on levels of trust and types of communication behaviors in intimate couples, there are also significant research questions in relation to how the variables in the study apply to gender differences. For instance, Metz (1993) discusses a common demand-withdraw communication pattern in

which the male in the relationship is overly withdrawn and the female is emotionally aggressive in her demand. In this instance the male partner is using the avoidant style of withdraw, while the female is verbally aggressive. Metz (1993) reports that male withdrawing has a particularly high association with relationship dissatisfaction. In contrast, the Fournier et al. (2011) study found high relationship dissatisfaction when the male partner aggressively demanded and the female partner withdrew from the communication. Given the opposite finding with gender, the current study also aimed to explore how gender effects the types of cognitions as a moderating variable for levels of trust and types of negative communication behavior.

### **A Stress and Coping Theoretical Framework for the Present Study**

A theory that conceptualizes the framework behind the present study of looking at the relationship between trust and types of cognitions, and how those variables effect communication behavior is stress and coping theory. Stress and coping theory conceptualizes the mental and behavioral processes that occur when individuals deal with stressful circumstances. As stressful circumstances will always be experienced, it is how individuals adjust to the experience, cope with the stressors, and reach a new level of organization where they can become stable and functioning again (Smith, Hamon, Ingoldsby, & Miller, 2009).

Hill (1949) developed the ABC-X model which is used as the framework for stress and coping theory. The ABC-X model conceptualizes four main components: the *A* stands for stressor events, the *B* stands for the resources or strengths available, the *C* stands for the perception of the event, and the *X* stands for the crisis or lack of functioning if the stressor cannot immediately be solved (Hill, 1949).

The first component of the ABC-X model, *A*, is the stressor event. Smith and colleagues (2010) state that the event is considered neither positive nor negative prior to the perception, or interpretation of the event, and that both positive and negative events can cause stress. Lipman-Bluman (1975) developed a set of ten criteria that affect the degree to which the stressor impacts an individual or family. These criterion include whether or not the stressor is internal or external to the family, focused on one member or multiple members, sudden or gradual in its onset, expected or not, or perceptions of whether or not they can solve the crisis. For example, within the context of the current study, a stressor event can be one where distrust arises (e.g., through infidelity, betrayal, or aggression) within an intimate couple relationship. The distress of the distrust will be impacted by the criteria Lipman-Bluman (1975) developed such as if the distrustful event was expected or not.

The second component of the ABC-X model, *B*, is the resources or strengths that are available to cope with the stressor event. Smith and colleagues (2009) discuss three categories that resources and strengths may fall under: individual, family, and community. Individual strengths and resources can include education level, job experience, perseverance, self-esteem, etc. (Smith et al., 2009). Hobfoll (1989) discusses that the determination of what coping mechanism is used for dealing with stress stems from the perceived resources that the distressed individual has at his or her disposal. The distressed individual evaluates the stressful circumstance and the surrounding environment to utilize possible resources in order to reestablish a more positive circumstance. The resources an individual could possibly draw on are social support or his/her own self-competence in dealing with the situation. When a person is limited to

his or her own self-competence, he generally acts in his own best interest (Hobfoll, 1989). A distrusting partner may react by using his or her strengths and resources of self-competence or perseverance by withdrawing from the stress or confronting it- either passively or aggressively- in order to reorganize his or her stability and functioning.

The third component of the ABC-X model, *C*, is the perception or interpretation of the stressor event. Within this component, individuals go through a cognitive appraisal and coping processes which influence the thoughts and behaviors used to deal, or cope, with the stressor events (Smith et al., 2009). The cognitions distrusting partners have about the distrustful event may influence how they react to the present event, as well as how they form thought processes for future distrustful events that cause stress in the relationship.

The fourth and last component of the ABC-X model, *X*, is the actual stress and crisis that evolves if a solution is not immediately developed and used. The crisis happens when the usual balance and stable functioning in the relationship are no longer maintained due to the stressor event (Smith et al., 2009). Following the ABC-X model, a crisis occurs when a stressor event happens, there are a limited amount of resources available or the strengths invoked are negative perseverance patterns, and negative interpretations about the stressor are formed. The current study explored the distress that may evolve after a distrusting stressor event occurs within an intimate couple relationship; namely, if a pattern of negative communication, either avoidant or aggressive, occurs due to the negative cognitions a partner may have about the stressor.

The present study will focus on the *C* and *X* components of the ABC-X model in Stress and Coping Theory. As discussed previously, the *A* component of the model

comprises the stressor event, which for the purposes of the current study is what caused the distrust in the relationship. The A component varies between the intimate couples in regards to the specific event; however, the result was the loss of the resource, B, which was the trust in the relationship. The current study aimed to explore the interpretation and cognitions, C, of the distrusting stressor event and the resulting level of functioning, X, as the partner tries to reach a new level of organization for the interaction within the relationship.

Within the context of the current study, a person with a lack of trust in their partner has lost a valued resource within their relationship. The lack of trust has been learned through infidelity, violence, dishonesty, etc. and has stimulated the distrusting individual to learn to manage this loss of resources by changing the behaviors and cognitions that allowed the individual to lose the resource of trust in the relationship. The distressed individual may have learned to cope with such stressful situations by developing cognitions that lead them to either withdraw or behave aggressively toward their partner who is causing the loss or harm. The present study explored the types of avoidance and aggressive cognitions that may exist for a distressed person, and how they influence the aggressive or withdraw communication behavior with one's partner.

### **Conceptual Definitions of Variables**

The independent variable was the individual's level of trust in his or her partner. It is an independent variable used as a predictor of communication behavior. Intimate partner trust was conceptually defined as having confidence in the reliability of a partner, with expectations that are reliably and consistently met (Beckenbach et al., 2010) where the person believes the partner to be honest and benevolent (Larzelere & Huston, 1980).

Avoidance cognitions were tested as a moderating variable. The avoidant cognitions are hypothesized to affect the degree of association between distrust and avoidant communication behavior. Avoidant cognitions were conceptually defined as thought processes that direct a person to have a tendency to move away from an undesired situation, place, or person.

Aggressive cognitions also were tested as a moderating variable. The aggressive cognitions were hypothesized to affect the degree of association between distrust and aggressive communication behavior. Aggressive cognitions were conceptually defined as negative thought processes that insult and criticize the personal characteristics of another person, instead of their behavior.

The first dependent variable was avoidance communication behavior. This variable addresses the degree to which individuals exhibit withdrawal or avoidant behaviors during communication with the partners (e.g., turning away from the partner or increasing distance from the partner).

The second dependent variable was aggressive communication behavior. This variable addresses the degree to which individuals portray conflict communication behaviors with the partners (e.g., giving negative commands, criticizing, or insulting).



Table 2.1

*Summary of Conceptual and Operational Definitions of Variables and Tools of Measurement*

| Variable                    | Conceptual Definition   | Operational Definition  | Tool of Measurement                               |
|-----------------------------|---|---|---|
| <b>Independent Variable</b> |   |   |   |
| 1) Intimate Partner Trust   | Confidence in the reliability of a partner                        | Levels of trust defined on the Dyadic Trust Scale   | Dyadic Trust Scale (DTS)                          |
| <b>Moderator Variables</b>  |   |   |   |
| 1) Avoidant Cognitions      | Thought processes that direct withdrawal from undesired factors   | A subset of items on the Styles of Conflict Inventory- #2, #4, #9, #13, #14, #17, #18, #20, #23, #24, & #28 | Styles of Conflict Inventory (SCI)                |
| 2) Aggressive Cognitions    | Thought processes that attack personal characteristics of another | A subset of items on the Styles of Conflict Inventory- #5, #7, #10, #15, & #25                              | Styles of Conflict Inventory (SCI)                |
| <b>Dependent Variables</b>  |   |   |   |
| 1) Avoidant Communication   | Withdrawal behaviors during communication                         | Withdraw behaviors measured by the MICS-G behavior coding system during a ten-minute communication sample   | Marital Interaction Coding System-Global (MICS-G) |
| 2) Aggressive Communication | Aggressive behaviors during communication                         | Conflict behaviors measured by the MICS-G behavior coding system during a ten-minute communication sample   | Marital Interaction Coding System-Global (MICS-G) |

Figure 2.1

*Diagram of the Association of the Variables*

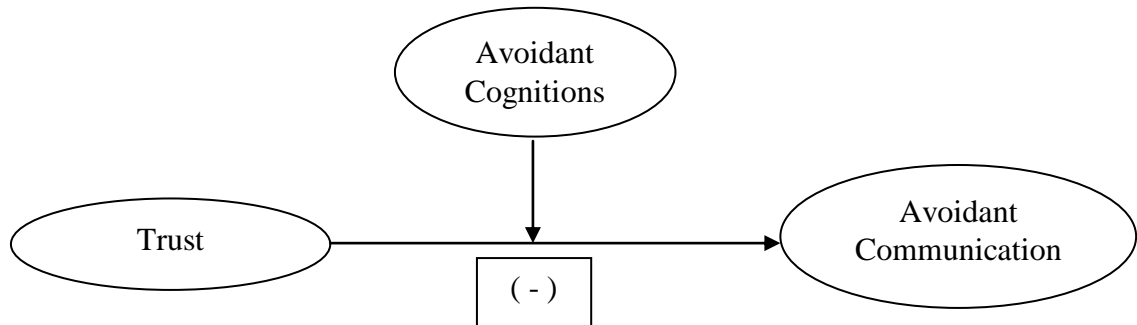
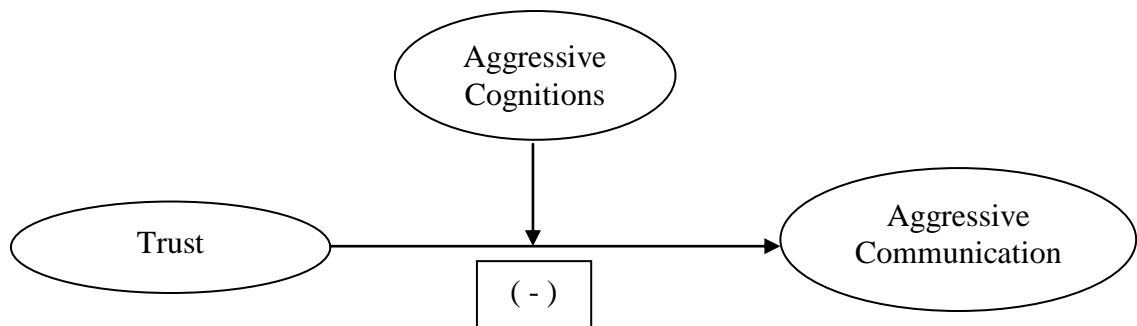


Figure 2.2

*Diagram of the Association of the Variables*



## **Hypotheses**

For the purposes of this study, because three independent variables (e.g., trust, avoidance cognitions, and aggressive cognitions) and two dependent variables (e.g., withdraw communication behavior and aggressive communication behavior) were used, three sets of hypotheses were utilized in order to address the main effect of each independent variable, as well as the interaction between the independent variables. The first set of hypotheses addresses the association between trust level and degree of communication behavior. It is hypothesized that: 1.) The lower an individual's level of

trust in the partner, the more the individual will engage avoidance communication behavior, instead of positive communication behavior. 2.) The lower an individual's level of trust in the partner, the more the individual will engage in aggressive communication behavior, instead of positive communication behavior.

The second set of hypotheses addresses the association between the degree of cognitions and communication behavior. It is hypothesized that: 3.) The higher the individual's degree of avoidance cognitions, the more the individual will engage in avoidance communication behavior. 4.) The higher the individual's degree of aggressive cognitions, the more the individual will engage in aggressive communication behavior.

The third set of hypotheses is about the moderating effect involving the combined influences of trust level and level of cognitions on the degree of types of communication behavior. It is hypothesized that: 5.) The level of avoidance cognitions acts as a moderator variable for the relationship between level of trust and the degree of avoidance communication behavior. Specifically, it is expected that when avoidance cognitions are higher, the association between trust and avoidance communication behavior will be more negative than when avoidance cognitions are lower. 6.) The level of aggressive cognitions acts as a moderator variable for the relationship between level of trust and the degree of aggressive communication behavior. Thus, it is predicted that when aggressive cognitions are higher, the association between trust and aggressive communication behavior will be more negative than when aggressive cognitions are lower.

## **Research Question**

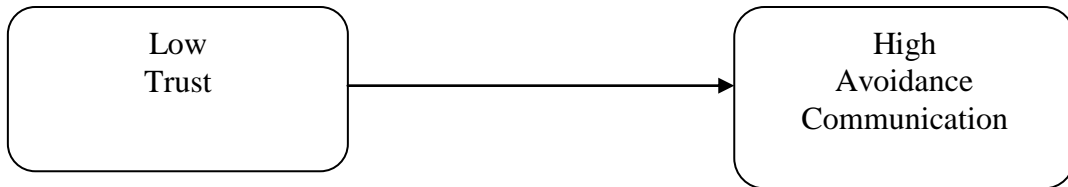
In addition to the above hypotheses, a research question was also explored.

1. Are there gender differences in the dyadic, intimate relationships between levels of trust, degree of cognitions, and degrees of communication behavior between male and female partners with regards to:
  - a. The association between levels of trust and avoidance communication behavior?
  - b. The association between levels of trust and aggressive communication behavior?
  - c. The association between the degree of avoidance cognitions and avoidance communication behavior?
  - d. The association between the degree of aggressive cognitions and aggressive communication behavior?
  - e. A moderation effect for the degree of cognitions on the relationship between the levels of trust and degree of communication behavior?

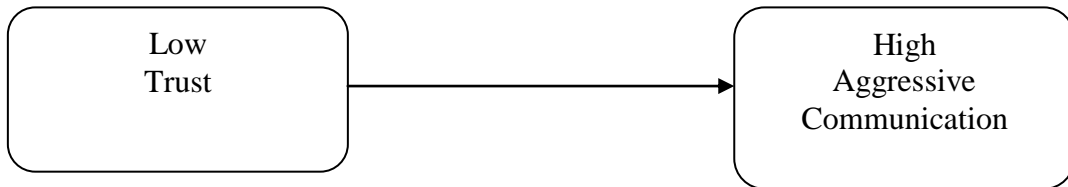
Figure 2.3

*Diagram of Hypotheses:*

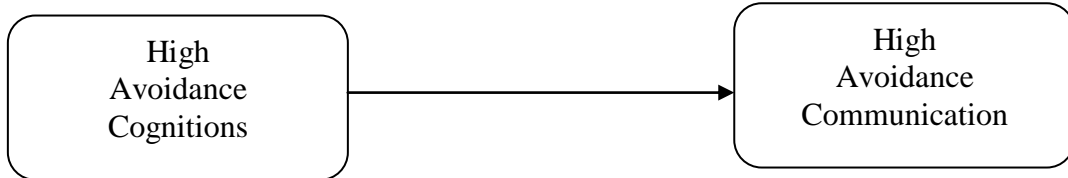
*Hypothesis One*



*Hypothesis Two*



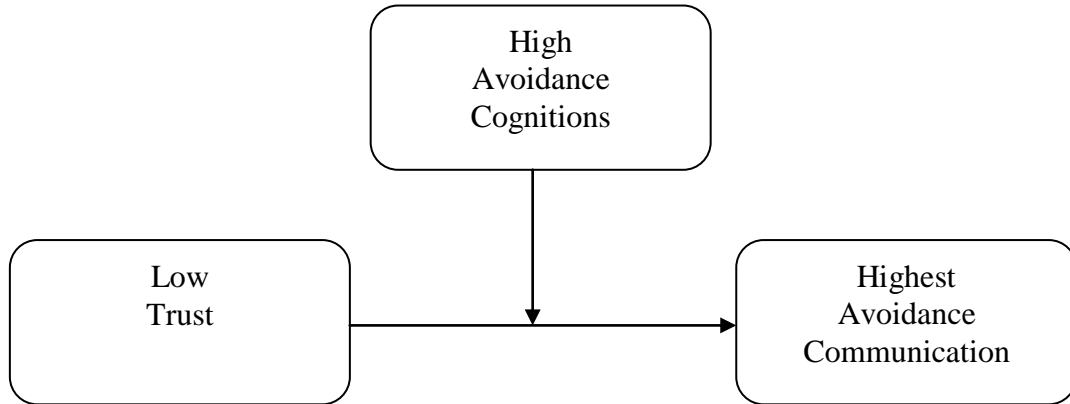
*Hypothesis Three*



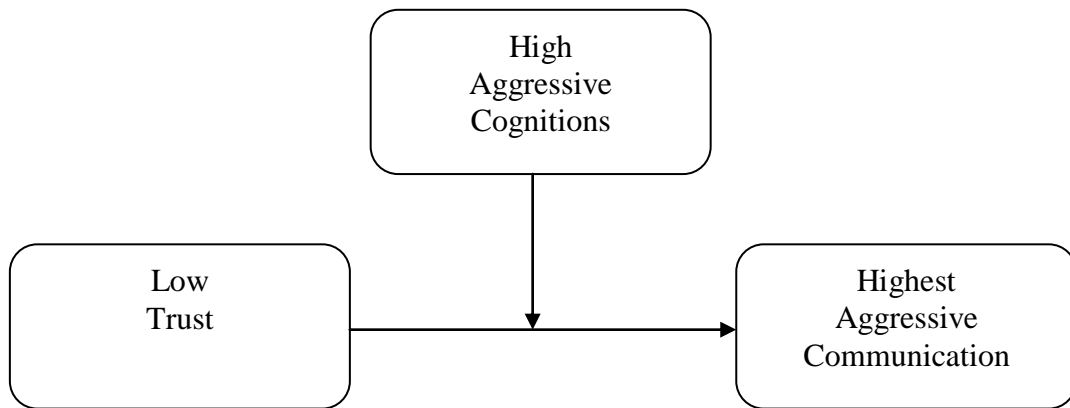
*Hypothesis Four*



*Hypothesis Five*



*Hypothesis Six*



## **Chapter 3: Method**

### **Sample**

The sample used in the current study was heterosexual couples who requested therapy at the Center for Healthy Families (CHF). The specific assessment data were gathered from 60 heterosexual couples who came to the CHF for couple therapy between November 2000 and December 2011. The Center for Healthy Families is located on the campus of the University of Maryland in the School of Public Health that is in the Department of Family Science. The population served is largely low-income individuals, couples, and families who request therapy for a wide range of issues and problems. Typical issues include domestic abuse, infidelity, parenting skills, communication skills, and many others. The clinic does not see clients who request help for severe physical aggression, untreated severe mental illness, or untreated substance abuse problems. Clients are referred through school counselors at all grade levels, the student counseling clinic at the University of Maryland, other counseling centers in the Washington, D.C. Metropolitan area, and through flyers, web searches, word of mouth, and those ordered by the local court system.

For the purposes of this study, only those clients who were seen at the Center for Health Families for couple therapy were included. In addition, the study used only those couples who qualified and consented to be a part of the Couples Abuse Prevention Program (CAPP), a project evaluating alternative models of couple therapy for the treatment of psychologically and mild to moderate physically abusive behavior. The criteria for CAPP are that both partners are at least 18 years of age, in an intimate relationship for at least 6 months, at least one of the partners has experienced problems

with aggressive behavior in the current relationship in the past 4 months (violence is limited to only mild or moderate physical aggression and/or psychological aggression), no abuse in the past 4 months that required a visit to the doctor's office or hospital, neither partner has an untreated alcohol or drug problem, the couple sees each other at least once a week, and both partners want to improve their relationship. Incentive for participation in the CAPP study is given by completing ten 90-minute sessions for the price of \$20 per therapy session, instead of paying the usual fee of \$20-\$60 per 45-minute session. All couples who meet these qualifications undergo two days of assessments, including questionnaires, interviews, and a ten-minute communication sample that is video-recorded for later coding of positive and negative forms of communication.

For the 60 couples in the present study, couples had been together for an average of 7.15 years ( $SD = 8.28$ ). Females reported an average age of 33.02 ( $SD = 10.28$ ) and males reported an average age of 34.62 ( $SD = 10.86$ ). Females reported an average annual income of over \$27,200 ( $SD = 26,702.19$ ) and males reported an average annual income of over \$48,700 ( $SD = 31,738.21$ ). Out of the 60 couples, over 56 percent reported being currently married and living together. Within the current study, 56.7% of males and 65% of females reported being White. And though the educational levels varied among the sample, the majority of the participants reported having at least an Associate's Degree, with 54.9% of the males and 58.4% of the females. More detailed information for females' and males' relationship status, race, and highest level of education completed can be found in Tables 3.1, 3.2, and 3.3, respectively.



Table 3.1

*Sample Relationship Status*

| Relationship Status                | Frequency | Percent |
|------------------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Currently married, living together | 34        | 56.7    |
| Currently married, separated       | 2         | 3.3     |
| Living together, not married       | 13        | 21.7    |
| Separated                          | 2         | 3.3     |
| Dating, not living together        | 9         | 15.0    |

Table 3.2

*Sample Race*

| Race             | Female Frequency | Female Percent | Male Frequency | Male Percent |
|------------------|------------------|----------------|----------------|--------------|
| Native American  | 0                | 0.0            | 1              | 1.7          |
| African American | 14               | 23.3           | 12             | 20.0         |
| Hispanic         | 9                | 15.0           | 4              | 6.7          |
| White            | 34               | 56.7           | 39             | 65.0         |
| Other            | 2                | 3.3            | 3              | 5.0          |
| Did not Specify  | 1                | 1.7            | 1              | 1.7          |

Table 3.3

*Sample Highest Level of Education Completed*

| Highest Level of Education Completed | Female Frequency | Female Percent | Male Frequency | Male Percent |
|--------------------------------------|------------------|----------------|----------------|--------------|
| Some high school                     | 2                | 3.3            | 3              | 5.0          |
| High school diploma                  | 5                | 8.3            | 12             | 20.0         |
| Some college                         | 18               | 30.0           | 11             | 18.3         |
| Associate degree                     | 2                | 3.3            | 3              | 5.0          |
| Bachelors degree                     | 7                | 11.7           | 8              | 13.3         |
| Some graduate education              | 10               | 16.7           | 5              | 8.3          |
| Masters degree                       | 7                | 11.7           | 11             | 18.3         |
| Doctoral degree                      | 5                | 8.3            | 3              | 5.0          |
| Trade school                         | 4                | 6.7            | 3              | 5.0          |
| Did not specify                      | 0                | 0.0            | 1              | 1.7          |

**Procedure**

The current study was a secondary analysis of the CAPP study's data set at the Center for Healthy Families (CHF) at the University of Maryland. All couples who contact the CHF to request couple therapy, who meet the qualifications for the CAPP study listed above and agree to be part of the study, are required to participate in two days of assessments, each completing a standard packet of questionnaires and surveys about themselves and their relationship status. These forms assess a multitude of issues including support systems, cognitions, depression and mental health status, attachment styles, and relational issues. The forms are coded and the data are entered into the Center's CAPP couples database. The current study utilized the data set of CAPP couples for its secondary analysis to determine the relationship among trust, avoidance

cognitions, and avoidance communication behavior. Thus, the present study did not involve any direct interaction with human subjects, as it only used assessment data that was previously collected in the CHF. A copy of the University of Maryland, College Park (UMCP) IRB approval can be found in Appendix F.

## **Measures**

### *Level of Dyadic Trust*

The independent variable of level of dyadic trust (i.e., trust in one's partner) was measured with the Dyadic Trust Scale (DTS: Larzelere & Huston, 1980) that is administered routinely on Day 2 assessments for couples in the CAPP study at the family therapy clinic. The DTS measures the degree to which an individual trusts his or her partner in the relationship. A copy of the DTS can be found in Appendix A. The validity and reliability of the Dyadic Trust Scale is demonstrated in the Larzelere & Huston (1980) study. Larzelere and Huston (1980) reported high face validity, construct validity, and reliability for associations with love, self-disclosure, and relationship status. They also reported high discriminant validity in regards to generalized trust and social desirability. The DTS includes eight statements that describe one's overall feeling of trust in the relationship (e.g., "I feel that I can trust my partner completely"). The respondent uses a five-point scale, ranging from 1 indicating "Disagree Strongly" to 5 indicating "Agree Strongly." The total of the ratings of the eight statements will be computed to assess each partner's overall trust rating. Statement scores for statements #1, #2, and #6 are reverse coded because the wording of those statements reflects lower trust. The range of possible scores is 8 to 40, with 40 being the highest level of trust and 8 being the lowest level of trust.

### *Level of Avoidant and Aggressive Cognitions*

The moderating variables of avoidant and aggressive cognitions were measured using two subsets of items from the Styles of Conflict Inventory (SCI: Metz, 1993; Metz, & Dwyer, 1993; Metz, Rosser, & Strapko, 1994) that is also administered routinely at the CHF. The SCI measures the degrees to which a variety of thoughts occur when the respondent experiences disagreement or conflict with his or her partner in the couple's relationship. A copy of the SCI can be found in Appendix B. The respondent uses a 5-point scale ranging from 1 indicating "Never" having this thought to 5 indicating "Very Often" having this thought. The first subset of the items used on the SCI include #2, #4, #9, #13, #14, #17, #18, #20, #23, #24, and #28 which indicate avoidance cognitions (e.g., "We'd better not get into this; avoid the subject."). The total score on the 11 items was used in the current study to determine the degree of avoidance cognitions for each partner in the relationship. The range of scores for the subset of items is 11 to 55, with 11 being the lowest level of avoidance cognitions and 55 being the highest level of avoidance cognitions. The second subset of items used on the SCI measures aggressive cognitions (e.g., "I hate you.") and include #5, #7, #10, #15, and #25. The total score on the five items is used in the current study to determine the degree of aggressive cognitions for each partner in the relationship. The range of scores for the aggressive subset of items is 5 to 25, with 5 being the lowest level of aggressive cognitions and 25 being the highest level of aggressive cognitions.

Table 3.4

*Subset of the Styles of Conflict Inventory (SCI)*

Withdraw and Avoidance Items

| Item Number | Cognition   |
|-------------|---|
| #2          | Go away; leave me alone                             |
| #4          | I'll deal with it later                             |
| #9          | We'd better not get into this;<br>avoid the subject |
| #13         | I want out  |
| #14         | I won't deal with this                              |
| #17         | I want to go away                                   |
| #18         | I want to ignore this                               |
| #20         | I wish I weren't here                               |
| #23         | How can I get out of this?                          |
| #24         | I'll withdraw                                       |
| #28         | I should avoid the issue                            |

Aggressive Items

| Item Number | Cognition                                |
|-------------|--|
| #5          | You've got no right to                   |
| #7          | I hate you                               |
| #10         | What the hell makes you<br>think you can |
| #15         | I'll get you back                        |
| #25         | You make me angry                        |

*Degree of Avoidance and Aggressive Communication*

The dependent variable in the current study was how the person communicates with the partner. Communication was measured directly through scores based on trained raters' observations of the partners' actual communication behaviors with each other.

During the assessments of couples who attend couple therapy, each couple is asked to

complete a ten-minute communication sample. During the second session of a couple's assessments, Day 2 of assessments, therapists notify the clients that they will be completing a set of written questionnaires that describe their relationship and then be participating in the communication sample.

The client's therapist(s) ask the couple to discuss a topic regarding a slight to moderate amount of conflict in the relationship. The topic of discussion is taken from a choice of common relational issues listed on the Relationship Issues Survey, or RIS (Boekhout, Hendrick & Hendrick, 2003). The RIS is provided to the clients separately on Day 1 of assessments and measures the degree to which a variety of issues are sources of disagreement or conflict in a couple's relationship (e.g., affairs, privacy, sexual relationship, finances, etc.). A copy of the RIS can be found in Appendix C. The respondent uses a four-point scale, ranging from 0 indicating "not at all a source of disagreement" to 3 indicating "very much a source of disagreement." The therapist(s) matches items between the couple's RIS measures that receive a 1 or 2 for slight to moderate disagreement or conflict. The therapist(s) then select 2 or 3 items on which the couple matches in response with either a 1 or 2. Based upon those selected matches of 1-'s and 2-'s on the RIS, the couple participating in the communication sample selects one item of the 3 from the RIS to discuss for ten minutes. The therapist(s) then tell the couple that they will be talking about the selected topic for ten minutes without an outsider's involvement. They are also told that the discussion will be taped. The couple is instructed to discuss the topic and try to come to a solution that is considered realistic by each partner. The therapist(s) informs the couple that they are not expected to completely resolve the selected issue in the allotted ten minutes, but they are asked to

work at the issue and see if some progress can be made. It is also important to note that the therapist(s) states that if the discussion becomes too upsetting, or if there is risk of abuse, then the conversation should discontinue and the therapist(s) will rejoin them in the room. The therapist(s) will then start the video recording, leave the room, and watch from behind a one-way mirror in a separate room to ensure the partner's safety.

The ten-minute communication sample is then coded using the Marital Interaction Coding System - Global, or MICS-G (Weiss & Tolman, 1990), behavior coding system for various factors. A copy of the Marital Interaction Coding System – Global can be found in Appendix D. Trained undergraduate student researchers review and code the tape using the MICS-G. The MICS-G behavior coding system compartmentalizes the video recording into Male and Female, as well as five two-minute segments. The video is then assessed in six domains: Conflict, Problem Solving, Validation, Invalidation, Facilitation, and Withdrawal. Each of these six domains is further broken down into four to six behaviors. These behaviors are assessed on a 6-point scale ranging from 0 to 5 which rate the frequency and intensity of each behavior for each of the five two-minute segments of the video recording. Each behavior per two-minute section is then averaged with the other scores, separately for both the Male and Female. This average is then recorded as the Category Rating for the Male and Female in each two-minute section. For the purposes of this study, the domain of Withdrawal was used to illustrate avoidance behavior. The behaviors of the Withdrawal domain were: Negation, No Response, Turn Away from Partner, Increasing Distance, Erects Barriers, and Non-contributive. Each behavior coding is conducted by two Coders and a consensus must be reached for each Category Rating average with a difference of no more than one point. The consensus is

recorded on the MICS-G Code Consensus sheet, a copy of which can be found in Appendix E. If the difference of the average is found to be more than one point, then the coders have to discuss their reasoning with the CAPP facilitator and come to a mutually agreed upon consensus of a score after watching the tape an additional time and discussing the behaviors. Based upon the coders' consensus for each Category Rating, overall averages are then assessed for the Male and Female for the entire ten-minute communication sample. For the purposes of this study, the avoidance behavior of the Male and Female for each ten-minute video recording were assessed using the average Withdrawal rating for each partner. The range of scores is 0 to 5, where a score of 0 indicates that the partner did not display any withdrawal behavior during the interaction, and a score of 5 indicates that the partner displayed an intense withdrawal behavior and the behavior characterized most or all of the interaction.



## Chapter 4: Results

### Overview of Analyses

The data analysis assessed the association between partners' levels of trust and their avoidance communication, and whether or not the level of avoidance cognitions moderates the relationship between levels of trust and the amount of avoidance communication. The analysis also explored the association between partners' levels of trust and their aggressive communication, and whether or not the level of aggressive cognitions moderates the relationship between levels of trust and the degree of aggressive communication. The study tested the hypotheses using multiple regression analyses that included the full range of subjects' scores on the respective assessments instruments (DTS and SCI) and the ten-minute communication sample; thus using continuous scores on the trust, avoidance cognitions, and aggressive cognitions independent variables as predictors of the partner's levels of avoidance and aggressive communication behaviors. The multiple regression analysis has the independent variables (level of trust and the moderator variables of level of avoidance cognitions and level of aggressive cognitions) as continuous variables.

Two interaction effect variables were created: the product of trust and avoidance scores and the product of trust and aggressive scores. The three variables (trust, cognitions, and the interaction effect of the two) were entered into the multiple regression equation predicting the avoidance or aggressive communication. The method was a hierarchical (stepwise) analysis in which the independent variables (trust and cognitions) were entered in the first step, followed by the interaction variable in the second step. The two steps created two models for the results. Model 1 contained the effect of the levels of

trust and the levels of cognitions on communication behavior, while model 2 contained the effect of levels of trust, levels of cognitions, and the interaction of the trust and cognitions on communication behavior. The regression analyses were run separately for male and female partners.

The following sections discuss the results of testing each hypothesis of the current study, as well as for the exploration of the research questions.

### **Analysis of Male Withdraw**

The current study used a linear regression analysis with a hierarchal (stepwise) analysis to test if there was a significant moderation effect for avoidance cognitions on the relationship between levels of trust and withdraw communication behavior for males. A summary of the results from the regression analysis for male withdraw can be found in Table 4.1. As part of the output from the regression analysis, pearson correlations were used to determine the direction and strength of the associations of trust and avoidance cognitions on communication behavior. The pearson correlation between male levels of trust and withdraw behavior was .090 ( $p = .247$ ), while the pearson correlation between female avoidance cognitions and withdraw communication behavior was .167 ( $p = .101$ ).

In the multiple regression analysis predicting males withdraw communication behavior, in Model 1, when trust and avoidance cognitions was entered simultaneously,  $R = .211$ ,  $R^2 = .044$ , and the model was not significant in predicting withdraw communication;  $F(2, 57) = 1.33$ ,  $p = .273$ . The standardized Beta for trust was .132,  $t = .994$ ,  $p = .324$ , and the standardized Beta for avoidance cognitions was .195,  $t = 1.47$ ,  $p = .146$ . Thus, males trust was not associated with withdraw communication behavior, which did not support Hypothesis 1. Additionally, avoidance cognitions were not

significantly associated with withdraw communication behavior, which did not support Hypothesis 3.

In Model 2, when the trust-by-avoidance cognitions interaction was entered,  $R = .323$ ,  $R^2 = .104$ , and change in  $R^2 = .060$ , which was not significant;  $F(1, 56) = 3.74$ ,  $p = .058$ . The standardized Beta for the interaction effect was  $-1.36$ ,  $t = -1.93$ ,  $p = .058$ . Thus, the interaction was not significant, indicating that avoidance cognitions did not moderate the relationship between male trust and their withdraw communication behavior, which does not support Hypothesis 5.

However, a trend was found for males with the interaction effect of trust and avoidance cognitions on avoidance communication behavior ( $p = .058$ ). Model 1 in the stepwise regression analysis for males withdraw communication indicated that the percentage of the variance in the communication behavior that the levels of trust accounted for was 4.4% when the interaction effect was not used. However, using an interaction variable (e.g., where avoidance cognitions moderate the relationship between trust and communication behavior) in Model 2 increased the percentage of variance in the communication behavior that the levels of trust account for by 6.0%.

In order to explore the interaction between trust and avoidance cognitions in predicting withdraw communication, a correlation analysis was completed to see the moderation pattern. A summary of the results of the correlation analysis can be found in Table 4.2. A median split of the distribution of avoidance cognition scores on the SCI was conducted to divide the sample into lower and higher avoidance cognition groups. The avoidance subset for the SCI scores at or below 26 reflected a lower level of avoidance cognitions (e.g., the bottom 50% of the distribution of avoidance cognition

scores) and the scores at or above 27 reflected a higher level of avoidance cognitions (e.g., the top 50% of the distribution of avoidance cognition scores). The correlation was completed separately for each of the two groups of lower and higher levels of avoidance cognitions. The correlation for the lower avoidance cognition group was .283 ( $p = .130$ ) and the correlation for the higher avoidance cognition group was .022 ( $p = .910$ ). Thus, the results indicate the trend is toward when avoidance cognitions are lower there tends to be more withdraw communication behavior when trust is high in males.

Table 4.1

*Summary of Regression Analysis of Male Withdraw*

| Model | R    | R <sup>2</sup> | R <sup>2</sup> Change | F Change | df1 | df2 | Sig.<br>F Change |
|-------|------|----------------|-----------------------|----------|-----|-----|------------------|
| 1     | .211 | .044           | .044                  | 1.32     | 2   | 57  | .273             |
| 2     | .323 | .104           | .060                  | 3.73     | 1   | 56  | .058             |

| Model  | Beta  | t     | Sig. |
|--|-------|-------|------|
| 1  |       |       |      |
| Trust  | .132  | .994  | .324 |
| Avoidance Cognitions                                 | .195  | 1.47  | .146 |
| 2  |       |       |      |
| Interaction Effect of Trust and Avoidance Cognitions | -1.36 | -1.93 | .058 |

*Note: Model 1: The effect of avoidance cognitions and trust on withdraw communication behaviors. Model 2: The effect of avoidance cognitions, trust, and the interaction effect of trust and avoidance cognitions on withdraw communication behaviors.*

Table 4.2

*Summary of Correlation between Trust and Withdraw Communication Behavior with the Moderation of High and Low Avoidance Cognitions*

| Moderating Variable       | Pearson Correlation | Sig. (2-tailed) |
|---------------------------|---------------------|-----------------|
| Low Avoidance Cognitions  | .283                | .130            |
| High Avoidance Cognitions | .022                | .910            |

### **Analysis of Female Withdraw**

The current study used a linear regression analysis with a hierarchal (stepwise) analysis to test if there was a significant moderation effect for avoidance cognitions on the relationship between levels of trust and withdraw communication behavior for females. A summary of the results from the regression analysis for female withdraw can be found in Table 4.3. As part of the output from the regression analysis, pearson correlations were used to determine the direction and strength of the associations of trust and avoidance cognitions on communication behavior. The pearson correlation between female levels of trust and withdraw behavior was .023 ( $p = .429$ ), while the pearson correlation between female avoidance cognitions and withdraw communication behavior was .336 ( $p = .004$ ).

In the multiple regression analysis predicting females withdraw communication behavior, in Model 1, when trust and avoidance cognitions was entered simultaneously,  $R = .343$ ,  $R^2 = .117$ , and the model was significant in predicting withdraw communication for females;  $F(2, 57) = 3.79$ ,  $p = .029$ . The standardized Beta for trust was .066,  $t = .527$ ,  $p = .600$ , and the standardized Beta for avoidance cognitions was .344,  $t = 2.75$ ,  $p = .008$ .

Thus, females trust was not associated with withdraw communication behavior, which did not support Hypothesis 1. However, avoidance cognitions were significantly associated with withdraw communication behavior, which did support Hypothesis 3. The results indicate the more avoidance cognitions a female partner has the more she will engage in withdraw communication behavior.

In Model 2, when the trust-by-avoidance cognitions interaction was entered,  $R = .346$ ,  $R^2 = .120$ , and change in  $R^2 = .002$ , which was not significant;  $F(1, 56) = .139$ ,  $p = .711$ . The standardized Beta for the interaction effect was  $-.302$ ,  $t = -.373$ ,  $p = .711$ . Thus, the interaction was not significant, indicating that avoidance cognitions did not moderate the relationship between female trust and their withdraw communication behavior, which does not support Hypothesis 5.

Table 4.3

*Summary of Regression Analysis of Female Withdraw*

| Model | R    | R <sup>2</sup> | R <sup>2</sup> Change | F Change | df1 | df2 | Sig. F Change |
|-------|------|----------------|-----------------------|----------|-----|-----|---------------|
| 1     | .343 | .117           | .117                  | 3.78     | 2   | 57  | .029*         |
| 2     | .346 | .120           | .002                  | .139     | 1   | 56  | .711          |

| Model  | Beta  | t     | Sig.  |
|--|-------|-------|-------|
| 1  |       |       |       |
| Trust  | .066  | .527  | .600  |
| Avoidance Cognitions                                 | .344  | 2.75  | .008* |
| 2  |       |       |       |
| Interaction Effect of Trust and Avoidance Cognitions | -.302 | -.373 | .711  |

*Note: Model 1: The effect of avoidance cognitions and trust on withdraw communication behaviors. Model 2: The effect of avoidance cognitions, trust, and the interaction effect of trust and avoidance cognitions on withdraw communication behaviors.*

*Note: A “\*” indicates the result is significant*

## Analysis of Male Aggression

The current study used a linear regression analysis with a hierarchical (stepwise) analysis to test if there was a significant moderation effect for aggressive cognitions on the relationship between levels of trust and aggressive communication behavior for males. A summary of the results from the regression analysis for male aggression can be found in Table 4.4. As part of the output from the regression analysis, Pearson correlations were used to determine the direction and strength of the associations of trust and aggressive cognitions on communication behavior. The Pearson correlation between male levels of trust and aggressive behavior was  $-.274$  ( $p = .017$ ), while the Pearson correlation between male aggressive cognitions and aggressive communication behavior was  $.269$  ( $p = .019$ ).

In the multiple regression analysis predicting males' aggressive communication behavior, in Model 1, when trust and aggressive cognitions were entered simultaneously,  $R = .339$ ,  $R^2 = .115$ , and the model was significant in predicting aggressive communication for males;  $F(2, 57) = 3.69$ ,  $p = .031$ . The standardized Beta for trust was  $-.215$ ,  $t = -1.65$ ,  $p = .104$ , and the standardized Beta for aggressive cognitions was  $.208$ ,  $t = 1.60$ ,  $p = .116$ . Thus, males' trust was not associated with aggressive communication behavior, which did not support Hypothesis 2. Also, aggressive cognitions were not significantly associated with aggressive communication behavior, which did support Hypothesis 4.

In Model 2, when the trust-by-aggressive cognitions interaction was entered,  $R = .341$ ,  $R^2 = .116$ , and change in  $R^2 = .001$ , which was not significant;  $F(1, 56) = .093$ ,  $p = .762$ . The standardized Beta for the interaction effect was  $-.173$ ,  $t = -.304$ ,  $p = .762$ .

Thus, the interaction was not significant, indicating that aggressive cognitions did not moderate the relationship between male trust and their aggressive communication behavior, which does not support Hypothesis 6.

Table 4.4

*Summary of Regression Analysis of Male Aggression*

| Model | R    | R <sup>2</sup> | R <sup>2</sup> Change | F Change | df1 | df2 | Sig.<br>F Change |
|-------|------|----------------|-----------------------|----------|-----|-----|------------------|
| 1     | .339 | .115           | .115                  | 3.69     | 2   | 57  | .031*            |
| 2     | .341 | .116           | .001                  | .093     | 1   | 56  | .762             |

| Model   | Beta  | t     | Sig. |
|---|-------|-------|------|
| 1   |       |       |      |
| Trust   | -.215 | -1.65 | .104 |
| Aggressive Cognitions                                 | .208  | 1.60  | .116 |
| 2   |       |       |      |
| Interaction Effect of Trust and Aggressive Cognitions | -.173 | -.304 | .762 |

*Note: Model 1: The effect of aggressive cognitions and trust on aggressive communication behaviors. Model 2: The effect of aggressive cognitions, trust, and the interaction effect of trust and aggressive cognitions on aggressive communication behaviors.*

*Note: A “\*” indicates the result is significant*

**Analysis of Female Aggression**

The current study used a linear regression analysis with a hierarchal (stepwise) analysis to test if there was a significant moderation effect for aggressive cognitions on the relationship between levels of trust and aggressive communication behavior for females. A summary of the results from the regression analysis for female aggression can be found in Table 4.5. As part of the output from the regression analysis, pearson correlations were used to determine the direction and strength of the associations of trust



and aggressive cognitions on communication behavior. The Pearson correlation between female levels of trust and aggressive behavior was  $-.203$  ( $p = .060$ ), while the Pearson correlation between female aggressive cognitions and aggressive communication behavior was  $.192$  ( $p = .071$ ).

In the multiple regression analysis predicting females' aggressive communication behavior, in Model 1, when trust and aggressive cognitions were entered simultaneously,  $R = .243$ ,  $R^2 = .059$ , and the model was not significant in predicting aggressive communication for females;  $F(2, 57) = 1.791$ ,  $p = .176$ . The standardized Beta for trust was  $-.158$ ,  $t = -1.16$ ,  $p = .249$ , and the standardized Beta for aggressive cognitions was  $.142$ ,  $t = 1.04$ ,  $p = .300$ . Thus, females' trust was not associated with aggressive communication behavior, which did not support Hypothesis 2. Also, aggressive cognitions were not significantly associated with aggressive communication behavior, which did support Hypothesis 4 for females.

In Model 2, when the trust-by-aggressive cognitions interaction was entered,  $R = .245$ ,  $R^2 = .060$ , and change in  $R^2 = .001$ , which was not significant;  $F(1, 56) = .041$ ,  $p = .841$ . The standardized Beta for the interaction effect was  $-.122$ ,  $t = -.202$ ,  $p = .841$ . Thus, the interaction was not significant, indicating that aggressive cognitions did not moderate the relationship between female trust and their aggressive communication behavior, which does not support Hypothesis 6.

Table 4.5

*Summary of Regression Analysis of Female Aggression*

| Model | R    | R <sup>2</sup> | R <sup>2</sup> Change | F Change | df1 | df2 | Sig.<br>F Change |
|-------|------|----------------|-----------------------|----------|-----|-----|------------------|
| 1     | .243 | .059           | .059                  | 1.79     | 2   | 57  | .176             |
| 2     | .245 | .060           | .001                  | .041     | 1   | 56  | .841             |

| Model   | Beta  | t     | Sig. |
|---|-------|-------|------|
| 1   |       |       |      |
| Trust   | -.158 | -1.16 | .249 |
| Aggressive Cognitions                                 | .142  | 1.04  | .300 |
| 2   |       |       |      |
| Interaction Effect of Trust and Aggressive Cognitions | -.122 | -.202 | .841 |

*Note: Model 1: The effect of aggressive cognitions and trust on aggressive communication behaviors. Model 2: The effect of aggressive cognitions, trust, and the interaction effect of trust and aggressive cognitions on aggressive communication behaviors.*

*Note: A “\*” indicates the result is significant*

Table 4.6

*Summary of Hypotheses*

| Hypothesis   | Male   | Female   |
|--|--|--|
| 1.) The lower an individual's level of trust, the more the individual will engage in withdraw communication behavior.  | Not Supported  | Not Supported  |
| 2.) The higher the individual's level of trust, the more the individual will engage in aggressive communication behavior.  | Not Supported  | Not Supported  |
| 3.) The higher the individual's degree of avoidance cognitions, the more the individual will engage in withdraw communication behavior.                              | Not Supported  | Supported  |
| 4.) The higher the individual's degree of aggressive cognitions, the more the individual will engage in aggressive communication behavior.                           | Not Supported  | Not Supported  |
| 5.) The level of avoidance cognitions acts as a moderator variable for the relationship between level of trust and the degree of withdraw communication behavior.    | Not Supported;<br>Though a trend was found in Model 2                | Not Supported;<br>Model 1 was predictive of withdraw communication |
| 6.) The level of aggressive cognitions acts as a moderator variable for the relationship between level of trust and the degree of aggressive communication behavior. | Not Supported;<br>Model 1 was predictive of aggressive communication | Not Supported  |

### **Analysis of Research Question A**

*Was there a gender difference in the association between levels of trust and avoidance communication behavior?*

Pearson correlations between trust and withdraw communication were calculated separately for males and females. Neither correlation was found to be significant for males or females between levels of trust and avoidance communication behavior. Males had a correlation of .090 ( $p = .247$ ) and females had a correlation of .023 ( $p = .429$ ) for trust and avoidance communication behavior. Comparisons of corresponding correlations for males and females were conducted by computing the test for the difference between two correlation coefficients using  $r$ -to- $z$  transformations. No significant gender difference was found in the correlation between trust and avoidance communication,  $z = .36$  ( $p = .72$ ). Consequently, there was no gender difference between males and females.

### **Analysis of Research Question B**

*Was there a gender difference in the association between levels of trust and aggressive communication behavior?*

Pearson correlations between trust and aggressive communication behavior were calculated separately for males and females. Only males' levels of trust were significantly correlated with aggressive communication behavior with a correlation of -.274 ( $p = .017$ ), whereas females were not significantly correlated with a correlation of -.203 ( $p = .060$ ). Comparisons of corresponding correlations for males and females were conducted by computing the test for the difference between two correlation coefficients using  $r$ -to- $z$  transformations. No significant gender difference was found in the

correlation between trust and aggressive communication,  $z = -0.4$  ( $p = .69$ ).

Consequently, there was no gender difference between males and females.

### **Analysis of Research Question C**

*Was there a gender difference in the association between the degree of avoidance cognitions and avoidance communication behavior?*

Pearson correlations between avoidance cognitions and withdraw communication behavior were calculated separately for males and females. Positive correlations were found to be significant for females with a correlation of  $.336$  ( $p = .004$ ), whereas males were not significantly correlated with a correlation of  $.167$  ( $p = .101$ ) between avoidance cognitions and avoidance communication behavior. Comparisons of corresponding correlations for males and females were conducted by computing the test for the difference between two correlation coefficients using  $r$ -to- $z$  transformations. No significant gender difference was found in the correlation between avoidance cognitions and withdraw communication,  $z = .97$  ( $p = .33$ ). Consequently, there was no gender difference between males and females.

### **Analysis of Research Question D**

*Was there a gender difference in the association between the degree of aggressive cognitions and aggressive communication behavior?*

Pearson correlations between aggressive cognitions and aggressive communication behavior were calculated separately for females and males. The results found that male aggressive cognitions were significantly correlated with aggressive communication behavior with a correlation of  $.269$  ( $p = .019$ ), while female aggressive

cognitions were not found to be significantly correlated with a correlation of .192 ( $p = .071$ ). Comparisons of corresponding correlations for males and females were conducted by computing the test for the difference between two correlation coefficients using  $r$ -to- $z$  transformations. No significant gender difference was found in the correlation between trust and aggressive communication,  $z = .43$  ( $p = .67$ ). Consequently, there was no gender difference between males and females.

### **Analysis of Research Question E**

*Was there a gender difference for a moderation effect for the degree of cognitions on the relationship between the levels of trust and degree of communication behavior?*

Analyses were calculated separately for females and males. As the results reported for Hypothesis 5 and 6 indicated, for both males and females, there was no significant moderation effect for either avoidant or aggressive cognitions on the relationship between trust and avoidant and aggressive communication behavior, respectively. Thus, there was no significant gender difference found for cognitions having a moderating effect on the relationship between trust and communication behavior for either males or females.

Additionally, for males, the level of trust and the level of aggressive cognitions were significantly predictive of aggressive communication behavior in Model 1 ( $p = .031$ ), whereas females did not yield significant predictive results for aggressive communication behavior ( $p = .176$ ). However, in the multiple regression analysis for aggressive behavior, none of the predictor variables was significant in predicting aggressive behavior, including the ones for the interaction. Consequently, there was no

gender difference between males and females for the interaction effect of aggressive cognitions and trust on aggressive communication.

In contrast, females' level of trust and the level of avoidance cognitions were significantly predictive of withdraw communication behavior in Model 1 ( $p = .029$ ), whereas males did not yield significant predictive results for withdraw communication behavior ( $p = .273$ ). However, in the multiple regression analysis for withdraw behavior, only avoidance cognitions were significant predicting withdraw behavior (as discussed above), the other predictor variables were not significant, including the ones for the interaction. Consequently, there was no gender difference between males and females for the interaction effect of avoidance cognitions and trust on withdraw communication.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

### Analysis of Results

The hypotheses that the negative cognitions of avoidance and aggression would have a significant moderating effect on the relationship between trust and communication behaviors (withdraw and aggressive, respectively), were not supported with the current study. Although no significant results were found for those hypotheses, a trend was found for males in regard to avoidance cognitions having an effect on the relationship between trust and avoidance communication behavior ( $p = .058$ ). There was not a trend for females. The results showed that the greater the trust, the more likely withdraw communication behavior would happen in males when there was low avoidance cognitions. These findings have important implications as they identify possible gender differences for the effect that avoidance cognitions have on communication behaviors. Additionally, this trend is not consistent with much of the literature that states that individuals with higher levels of trust are less likely to withdraw during communication (Beckenbach et al., 2010; Buunk, 1982). The reasoning for the trend to not be consistent with previous literature may be due to the current study's sample of abusive relationships. Males in the current sample may act less abusive when trust was high in the relationship, and thus withdraw from communication. It would seem likely that when there is a lack of trust, an abusive male would then become aggressive, but when there is high trust in the relationship, the abusive male may be more likely to avoid issues as he is not as concerned by them. Males also may believe that in order to not be abusive during the communication sample, they need to withdraw from communication.



Females showed a significant positive Pearson correlation ( $r = .336$  and  $p = .004$ ) between avoidance cognitions and withdraw communication behaviors. Furthermore, the standardized Beta for avoidance cognitions was  $.344$ ,  $t = 2.75$ ,  $p = .008$ . Thus, females' avoidance cognitions were significantly associated with withdraw communication behavior. The results of the current study support the research conducted by Locke (2008) which established a predictive association between avoidant cognitions and withdraw communication patterns of avoiding and choosing not to approach during interactions with intimate partners. However, the current study only found these results to be supportive for females and not male partners. These findings may be attributed to the sample of abusive or conflictual couples in the study. Abused women may have developed the defensive skills and thought processes to withdraw from their aggressive or abusive partners in order to escape the conflict.

Although no significant moderating effects were found for cognitions on the relationship between trust and communication behavior in the current study, the findings did add to the existing literature in that significant predictors were found for the association between the three variables, without an interaction effect. Within Model 1, the level of trust and the level of aggressive cognitions were significantly predictive of aggressive communication behavior in males ( $p = .031$ ). Additionally, within Model 1, the level of trust and the level of avoidance cognitions were significantly predictive of withdraw communication behavior in females ( $p = .029$ ). These findings may also be due to the sample of abusive couples, where males are more likely to act aggressively, while females tend to avoid the conflict or aggression.

## **Limitations of the Study**

There are various limitations to the current study. One of the limitations is that this study involved a secondary analysis of preexisting data on a clinical sample of couples who sought therapy at the Center for Healthy Families. Using preexisting data restricted the ability to explore other possible forms of trust, cognitions, and communication behavior. Another limitation of the study is that the regression analyses were run separately for male and female partners. Thus, these analyses did not take into account the interdependence of the two partners' levels of trust and their communication.

Additionally, the study utilized the MICS-G coding and was thus limited to only withdraw and conflict behaviors listed in the respective MICS-G coding category so it was not possible to study other types of negative communication behavior (such as throwing items or hitting the wall/table) within the clinical sample. Additionally, the MICS-G coding system only codes for the frequency of behaviors and not the degree of behaviors. For instance, a hostile communication behavior of slamming a fist on a table loudly only once during the ten-minute communication sample is reported as low conflict because it happened only once even though there was a high degree of hostility in the action.

Another limitation of the current study is the limited sample size (60 couples). If a larger sample size were available for the analyses, there would be greater statistical power for predicting trends and differences between the variables. Some of the findings for "trends" may have reached significance. The sample size was also limited in that the couple seeking therapy had to meet the restrictions of the CAPP protocol in order to participate which means both partners were at least 18 years of age, they were in an

intimate relationship for at least 6 months, at least one of the partners had experienced problems with aggressive behavior in the current relationship in the past 4 months (violence is limited to only mild or moderate physical aggression and/or psychological aggression), there had been no abuse in the past 4 months that required a visit to the doctor's office or hospital, neither partner had an untreated alcohol or drug problem, the couple saw each other at least once a week, and both partners wanted to improve their relationship. Given these restrictions, the current study may not be as generalizable to populations outside of those seeking therapy and having mild to moderate conflict within the relationship. Thus, the study did not explore relationships between the variables of trust, cognitions, and communication behaviors for couples with severe, slight, or no conflict in the relationship. Additionally, the study did not explore couples under the age of 18 or who were in a relationship for less than 6 months. Furthermore, the study did not include couples where one or both partners were experiencing severe psychopathological symptoms as they are outside the scope of provided services of the CHF clinic.

Additionally, the present study did not explore the influence of the factors or topics used for the communication sample from the RIS. For instance, the study did not explore differences between which partner selected the topic for discussion. The study also did not explore if the RIS topic chosen to be discussed was "Trust" and if that particular topic had an influence on the study's results since one of the variables was levels of trust in the relationship. In addition, the couples' communication sample was taped in a clinical setting where the couple was required to discuss a specific topic around which they had conflict, for a set amount of time, while attempting to come to a

resolution of that topic. Given the structured parameters of the communication sample, the couples participating may behave differently in a naturalistic setting, such as in the home, where the conflict topic is typically raised and discussed.

### **Application of Findings to Stress and Coping Theory**

The findings of the current study contribute to the theoretical framework of the ABC-X model of Stress and Coping Theory in a few ways. As mentioned, the current study focused on the cognitions or interpretations, C, of the distressing event and the reaction or new organization of functioning, X, of the clinical sample of couples requiring therapy for abuse or moderate conflict within the relationship. The present findings gave further support to the ABC-X model, in that one's cognitions may influence the functioning and patterns of interaction within the relationship because the results indicated that females' avoidance cognitions were significantly associated with withdraw communication behavior. Secondly, the trend for males avoidance cognitions having a moderating effect on trust and withdraw behavior also gave support to the ABC-X model of Stress and Coping Theory. The trend indicated that when trust is low and avoidance cognitions are high in an abusive relationship, males are less likely to engage in withdraw behavior. This finding supports the theory in that the male's interpretation of the stressing event may influence his behavior, where he is less likely to avoid the issue if there is a lack of trust in the relationship.

### **Research Implications**

Future research can be conducted using a more generalizable population which could include clinical and non-clinical populations. Additionally, the clinical population

typically seen at the Center for Healthy Families tends to be moderate-income, so future research could expand the clinical population to include couples of low and high income as well. Furthermore, the clinical population used in the current study reported slight to moderate levels of conflict and disagreement in their relationship. It would be interesting to study couples that report no conflict and disagreement, as well as severe conflict and disagreement in their relationship. Since the current study also utilized a small sample size of 60 couples, future research should include a greater sample size to make the results more generalizable and predictive.

Additionally, considering the limitations of the MICS-G in how it measures communication between intimate partners, mixed methods measures would be able to explore the communication patterns more effectively with the use of frequency and degree of negative behaviors, as well as using multiple communication samples in controlled and naturalistic environments. And lastly, future research should also incorporate positive cognitions and positive communication behaviors to see the associations with trust as well.

### **Clinical Implications**

This study offered beneficial information to therapists working in the clinical field with distressed couples who have the potential to experience negative patterns of communication. Given the results of the current study, clinicians working with couples who complete the DTS and SCI may be able to predict certain communication behaviors within the couple dynamic. For example, within Model 1 of the study, males' DTS and SCI scores were significantly predictive of aggressive communication behavior and females' DTS and SCI scores were significantly predictive of withdraw communication

behaviors. A therapist addressing problems with communication within the couple may look at these specific predictors for each gender to deal with how each partner may be behaving. Thus, interventions can address levels of trust and cognitions for males and females to promote more positive communication behavior. By addressing the negative cognitions and a lack of trust, the communication can become more positive between the partners which can lead to greater relationship satisfaction.

Although the results indicated only a trend for the moderation of avoidance cognitions on the association of levels of trust and degrees of avoidance behavior for males, there are clinical implications for therapists with this finding as well. The results are contrary to popular belief that suggests that there would be more avoidance behavior when trust is low for males. Based on this study's results and the abusive clinical sample used, the tendency may be that when there is a lack of trust, an abusive male would then become aggressive, but when there is high trust in the relationship, the abusive male may be more likely to avoid issues as he is not as concerned by them. Thus, clinical interventions may address this potential meaning for males withdrawing during communication.

## **Conclusion**

Previous research literature has found a relationship between trust and communication behavior, as well as cognitions and negative communication behavior. The current study examined the possibility of cognitions playing a moderating role in the relationship between trust levels and degrees of communication behavior for avoidance and aggression. The study explored the relationships for both male and female partners. This study found a few significant results between the variables; however, the current

study's results did not indicate a significant moderating effect of cognitions on the relationship between trust and communication behaviors. Additionally, males' level of trust and level of aggressive cognitions were significantly predictive of aggressive communication behaviors. Female avoidance cognitions and withdraw communication behaviors were found to be significant; females trust levels and avoidance cognition levels were significantly predictive of withdraw communication behavior. There is a recommendation for future research in the area of how trust, cognitions, and communication behaviors relate to one another.

## Appendices

### Appendix A: The Dyadic Trust Scale



## DTS (DAY 2)

Gender: \_\_\_\_\_ Date of Birth: \_\_\_\_\_ Therapist Code: \_\_\_\_\_ Family Code: \_\_\_\_\_


Directions: For each of the following statements, please answer each question according to the overall feeling you have of your relationship. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the statement by placing the appropriate number to the left of the statement.

- 1=Disagree Strongly
- 2=Disagree Moderately
- 3=Neither Agree nor Disagree
- 4=Agree Moderately
- 5=Agree Strongly

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. My partner is primarily interested in his or her own welfare.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. There are times when my partner cannot be trusted.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. My partner is perfectly honest and truthful with me.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. I feel that I can trust my partner completely.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. My partner is truly sincere in his or her promises.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. I feel that my partner does not show me enough consideration.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. My partner treats me fairly and justly.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. I feel that my partner can be counted on to help me.



## Appendix B: The Styles of Conflict Inventory



### SCI (DAY 2)

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Gender: \_\_\_\_\_ Date of Birth: \_\_\_\_\_ Therapist Code: \_\_\_\_\_ Family Code \_\_\_\_\_

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:*

|   | Never | Rarely | Occasionally | Often | Very often |
|---|-------|--------|--------------|-------|------------|
| 1. Let's work this out together .....                     | 1     | 2      | 3            | 4     | 5          |
| 2. Go away; leave me alone .....                          | 1     | 2      | 3            | 4     | 5          |
| 3. I give up; you win .....                               | 1     | 2      | 3            | 4     | 5          |
| 4. I'll deal with it later.....                           | 1     | 2      | 3            | 4     | 5          |
| 5. You've got no right to.....                            | 1     | 2      | 3            | 4     | 5          |
| 6. We really get along well .....                         | 1     | 2      | 3            | 4     | 5          |
| 7. I hate you.....  | 1     | 2      | 3            | 4     | 5          |
| 8. I'd better be quiet and go along .....                 | 1     | 2      | 3            | 4     | 5          |
| 9. We'd better not get into this; avoid the subject ..... | 1     | 2      | 3            | 4     | 5          |
| 10. What the hell makes you think you can .....           | 1     | 2      | 3            | 4     | 5          |
| 11. I want to respect your thoughts and feelings.....     | 1     | 2      | 3            | 4     | 5          |
| 12. To avoid an argument I'd better give in.....          | 1     | 2      | 3            | 4     | 5          |
| 13. I want out .....                                      | 1     | 2      | 3            | 4     | 5          |
| 14. I won't deal with this .....                          | 1     | 2      | 3            | 4     | 5          |
| 15. I'll get you back .....                               | 1     | 2      | 3            | 4     | 5          |
| 16. I want to cooperate with you.....                     | 1     | 2      | 3            | 4     | 5          |
| 17. I want to go away .....                               | 1     | 2      | 3            | 4     | 5          |
| 18. I want to ignore this .....                           | 1     | 2      | 3            | 4     | 5          |
| 19. I want to resolve our disagreement .....              | 1     | 2      | 3            | 4     | 5          |
| 20. I wish I weren't here .....                           | 1     | 2      | 3            | 4     | 5          |
| 21. We should not be disagreeing .....                    | 1     | 2      | 3            | 4     | 5          |
| 22. I want to do what I can to make this better .....     | 1     | 2      | 3            | 4     | 5          |
| 23. How can I get out of this? .....                      | 1     | 2      | 3            | 4     | 5          |
| 24. I'll withdraw.....                                    | 1     | 2      | 3            | 4     | 5          |
| 25. You make me angry .....                               | 1     | 2      | 3            | 4     | 5          |
| 26. I'll back off so it doesn't get worse.....            | 1     | 2      | 3            | 4     | 5          |
| 27. I should let you have your way .....                  | 1     | 2      | 3            | 4     | 5          |
| 28. I should avoid the issue.....                         | 1     | 2      | 3            | 4     | 5          |
| 29. I want to stop our disagreement .....                 | 1     | 2      | 3            | 4     | 5          |
| 30. I should be quiet.....                                | 1     | 2      | 3            | 4     | 5          |

SCI.Rev.07/11

## Appendix C: Relationship Issues Survey



### RIS (ASSESSMENT)

Gender: \_\_\_\_\_ Date of Birth: \_\_\_\_\_ Therapist Code: \_\_\_\_\_ Family Code: \_\_\_\_\_

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

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

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



### Appendix E: MICS-G Code Consensus Sheet

**MICS-G CODE CONSENSUS SHEET**      **FAMILY#** \_\_\_\_\_      **TAPE#** \_\_\_\_\_

CODER 1:

CODER 2:

|   | M1 | F1 | M2 | F2 | M3 | F3 | M4 | F4 | M5 | F5 | Avg.M | Avg.F |
|---|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|-------|-------|
| Conflict<br>Coder 1                       |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |       |       |
| Conflict<br>Coder 2                       |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |       |       |
| <b>CONFLICT<br/>CONSENSSES</b>            |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |       |       |
| Problem Solving<br>Coder 1                |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |       |       |
| Problem Solving<br>Coder 2                |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |       |       |
| <b>PROBLEM<br/>SOLVING<br/>CONSENSSES</b> |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |       |       |
| Validation<br>Coder 1                     |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |       |       |
| Validation<br>Coder 2                     |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |       |       |
| <b>VALIDATION<br/>CONSENSSES</b>          |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |       |       |
| Invalidation<br>Coder 1                   |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |       |       |
| Invalidation<br>Coder 2                   |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |       |       |
| <b>INVALIDATION<br/>CONSENSUS</b>         |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |       |       |
| Facilitation<br>Coder 1                   |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |       |       |
| Facilitation<br>Coder 2                   |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |       |       |
| <b>FACILITATION<br/>CONSENSUS</b>         |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |       |       |
| Withdrawal<br>Coder 1                     |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |       |       |
| Withdrawal<br>Coder 2                     |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |       |       |
| <b>WITHDRAWAL<br/>CONSESUS</b>            |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |       |       |

## Appendix F: Institutional Review Board Protocol Approval



UNIVERSITY OF  
MARYLAND

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

1204 Marie Mount Hall  
College Park, MD 20742-5125  
TEL: 301-405-4212  
FAX: 301-314-1475  
irb@umd.edu  
www.comresearch.umd.edu/IRB

DATE: February 27, 2012

TO: Donald Ross  
FROM: University of Maryland College Park (UMCP) IRB

PROJECT TITLE: [312821-1] The influence of the interaction between trust and cognitions on communication behavior between members of clinical couples

REFERENCE #:  
SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: DETERMINATION OF EXEMPT STATUS  
DECISION DATE: February 27, 2012

REVIEW CATEGORY: Exemption category # 4

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this project. The University of Maryland College Park (UMCP) IRB has determined this project is EXEMPT FROM IRB REVIEW according to federal regulations.

We will retain a copy of this correspondence within our records.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB Office at 301-405-4212 or [irb@umd.edu](mailto:irb@umd.edu). Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within University of Maryland College Park (UMCP) IRB's records.

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