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Testing the Theory of Resilience and Relational Load in the Context of Empty Nesters

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Testing the Theory of Resilience and Relational Load in the Context of Empty Nesters

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**Dissertation submitted
to the Eberly College of Arts and Sciences
at West Virginia University**

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

**Doctor of Philosophy in
Communication Studies**

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**Keywords: resilience, relational load, active-empathic listening, communal orientation,
conflict, empty nesters**

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ABSTRACT

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Lauren E. Fellers

In examining the marital communication of recent empty nesters, the aim of this study was to test the theory of resilience and relational load (TRRL) (Afifi et al., 2016). The postparental period that follows directly after children leave their parents' places of residence may present unique challenges for married individuals to navigate together. The TRRL offers a potential explanation as to why some married couples demonstrate resilience and flourish through a stressful season while others do not. To test the TRRL in this context, 113 married persons who became empty nesters within the previous 18 months filled out an online survey. Two covariates (i.e., time elapsed since the last child left their home and closeness with the last of their children (or child) to leave during the month prior to the last child leaving their home) were identified in the preliminary analyses and were used in all subsequent analyses. Results of a second-order partial correlation indicated that empty nesters' communal orientation and received active-empathic listening were both negatively associated with relational load, but not associated with resilience. In addition, the results of the second-order partial correlation revealed that empty nesters' communal orientation and received active-empathic listening were both negatively associated with marital conflict, but only communal orientation was negatively associated with stress (i.e., received active-empathic listening was not associated with stress). Finally, the results of the second-order partial correlation indicated that empty nesters' stress and marital conflict were both positively associated with relational load, but only stress was negatively associated with resilience (i.e., marital conflict was not associated with resilience). Next, four parallel multiple mediation models were run, still controlling for the two formerly identified covariates. Empty nesters' communal orientation indirectly decreased relational load through stress and marital conflict, controlling for each other as mediators; however, communal orientation still emerged as a direct predictor of reduced relational load in the model. Empty nesters' received active-empathic listening indirectly decreased relational load through marital conflict, but not through stress, controlling for each other as mediators. Received active-empathic listening did not emerge as a direct predictor of relational load in the model. Interestingly, empty nesters' communal orientation indirectly increased resilience through stress, but also indirectly decreased resilience through marital conflict, controlling for each other as mediators. Communal orientation did not emerge as a direct predictor of resilience in the model. Lastly, empty nesters' received active-empathic listening did not indirectly predict resilience through stress or through marital conflict, controlling for each other as mediators; yet, received active-empathic listening did emerge as a direct predictor of resilience in the model. The discussion points to and underscores the importance of having a communal orientation for married, recent empty nesters, as well as the possible individual benefits of having a spouse who displays wonderful listening skills in this season, such as empathically sensing, processing, and responding (Bodie, 2011). Considering what was gleaned in conducting this study, theoretical and methodological future directions are advanced.

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Chapter One

Introduction

Individuals transitioning into the empty-nest phase of their marriage may enjoy a newfound freedom, intimacy, and sense of connection with their spouse as less time needs to be devoted to keeping their children alive and well as their children no longer live with them (Bouchard, 2014; Harkins, 1978; Nagy & Theiss, 2013). At the same time, navigating new roles during that adjustment might prompt stress and/or conflict (King & Theiss, 2016). Some empty nesters may experience depression, stress, and/or loneliness related to experiences of empty nest syndrome, especially if they have not cultivated aspects of their identities other than those which are constituted by their role as parents (Bouchard, 2014; Kahana & Kahana, 1982; Raup & Myers, 1989).

Couples who experience this transition as a difficult one may do so because the transition itself is inherently conflict-inducing, or it is also possible that the individuals have not been doing the work to maintain their relationship prior to their children leaving the house in preparation for such a transition, consistent with the theory of resilience and relational load (TRRL) (Afifi et al., 2020a; Afifi et al., 2016; King & Theiss, 2016). Because most couples can anticipate the approximate date that they will become empty nesters (Crowley et al., 2003), it might be particularly helpful for couples to build more relational maintenance into their routines in the months prior to when their last child leaves the nest, in line with several of the propositions of the TRRL (Afifi et al., 2016). The TRRL (Afifi et al., 2016) applies to couples and/or families traversing adversity and is intended to illuminate communication pathways (e.g., in the form of relational maintenance) leading to resilience in the face of stressful circumstances.

Therefore, the TRRL has the potential to shed light on why some individuals flourish in this transition to the empty-nest phase of their marriage and others do not.

Specifically, empty nesters may experience positive health and wellbeing outcomes when spouses invest resources (e.g., time, energy) into their marriages, filling emotional reserves that the couples can then pull from as they walk through a stressful season together. Pertinent to this population is investing in the relationship via showing empathy to one's spouse and seeking to understand what they are going through via engaging in active listening (Bodie, 2011). Parents may be facing a variety of problems or stressors (e.g., rediscovering who they are, who their partner is, and who they are as a couple) that come along with an increased amount of time to talk to one another following their last child moving out of the house, but if they approach those problems as a team, according to the TRRL, they may be more apt to pull their weight for the team by engaging in various forms of relational maintenance, adding to the emotional reserves they have at their disposal (Afifi et al., 2016). When parents have emotional reserves to pull from during challenging seasons, they may appraise the problems that do arise as less stressful to begin with and communicate through that stress in ways that are healthier for their marriages (e.g., elevating goals related to protecting the relationship as opposed to just protecting the self during marital conflicts) (Afifi et al., 2016). Therefore, a goal of this study is to test the TRRL in the context of empty nesters, but another major aim of this study is to investigate the role of active-empathic listening in promoting resilience for couples.

Throughout the remainder of Chapter 1, I will thoroughly review the literature related to the TRRL by detailing the theoretical roots of the TRRL, key terms of the TRRL, assumptions of the TRRL, propositions of the TRRL, and scope conditions of the TRRL. In doing so, I will weave in a review of available studies testing the TRRL. Before advancing hypotheses related to

conducting a test of the TRRL in the context of empty nesters, I will expand on the literature related to the empty-nest phase of marriage to further evidence why conducting such a study would be meaningful both theoretically and practically.

The Theory of Resilience and Relational Load (TRRL)

Theoretical Roots of the TRRL

The goal in crafting the TRRL was to offer a more holistic understanding of the associations among risk, resilience, and positive outcomes in close relationships (Afifi et al., 2016). To assist those walking through stressful seasons of life with close others, the TRRL provides useful tools for enacting resilience (Afifi et al., 2016). In developing the TRRL, Afifi and colleagues (2016) were inspired by a multitude of related theories, findings from previous studies, and even personal experiences, as evidenced in the TRRL's key terms, assumptions, propositions, and scope conditions (Afifi et al., 2016). Specifically, the TRRL is informed by a variety of theories such as broaden and build theory (Fredrickson, 1998; Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004), family systems theory (von Bertalanffy, 1950), the adaptive calibration model (De Giudice et al., 2011), the investment model (Rusbult, 1980), the theory of emotional capital (Feeney & Lemay, 2012), allostatic load (McEwen & Stellar, 1993), attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980), equity theory (Walster & Walster, 1975), and affection exchange theory (Floyd, 2001).

In the years leading up to the debut of the TRRL, Afifi witnessed many families talk about conflict-inducing topics in the laboratory (Afifi et al., 2022). At some point, she began to wonder what preceded the interactions she was privileged to witness in the laboratory (Afifi et al., 2022). In line with systems theory, it is difficult to parse out the effects of one communicative act on another communicative act in the laboratory as it is likely that numerous

communicative acts preceded the ones displayed under such controlled conditions given the complex relational histories associated with every unique, close relationship (Yoshimura & Galvin, 2018). System theory's concept of interactive complexity centers around the idea that communication that occurs between people in close relationships is not going to be *unidirectional* (e.g., my partner did not say thank you for the Valentine's Day gift I got her), or *bidirectional* (e.g., my partner did not say thank you for the Valentine's Day gift I got her, so I did not give her a Valentine's Day gift the next year) (Yoshimura & Galvin, 2018). Instead, these close relationships are *transactional* in that the effects of not saying thank you for a Valentine's Day gift one year cannot be determined easily because it is embedded in the relational context of what happened on the preceding Valentine's Days, for example (Yoshimura & Galvin, 2018). Circling back, Afifi acknowledged the importance of interactive complexity as she developed the TRRL (Afifi et al., 2022; Yoshimura & Galvin, 2018). Families who come to the laboratory to have a conversation about a conflict-inducing topic likely enact behaviors prior to that snapshot in time that researchers are privy to that inform their interactions in the laboratory (Afifi et al., 2022). In her own words, she started to ask herself questions such as: "What history of behaviors, perceptions, and experiences predated that one conversation in the laboratory or in their home?" (Afifi et al., 2022, p. 342).

In answering this question, Afifi turned to her experience conducting a previous study focused on the ways in which Latinx and white couples demonstrated resilience throughout the Great Recession (Afifi et al., 2015; Afifi et al., 2022). In that study, Afifi and colleagues (2015) watched and coded interactions between romantic partners who were talking about stress related to stewarding family finances. In doing so, four couple types emerged: unified, thriving, at-risk, and pragmatic (Afifi et al., 2015). *Unified* partners encouraged one another (i.e., relational

maintenance), endorsed a team-mentality when trudging through recession-related stress (i.e., communal orientation), and made external attributions for financial problems (e.g., blaming banks and government officials for their financial problems instead of blaming each other) (Afifi et al., 2015). *Thriving* partners overlapped with unified partners as they displayed many of the same constructive behaviors as they; however, thriving partners also communicatively reframed what “good stuff” was coming out of the dark season they were traversing together (Afifi et al., 2015). In other words, they identified the specific lessons they were learning because of the difficult season of life they were in the thick of (Afifi et al., 2015). The unified and thriving couples exhibited superior mental health (Afifi et al., 2015) and were less likely to divorce and experience stress (Afifi et al., 2015; Afifi et al., 2022), showcasing that there may be times when fruit grows out of what might appear at first glance to be a desolate season of life. Therefore, experiences in conducting research on couples’ communication regarding conflicts and knowledge that surfaced from this study informed the original articulation of the TRRL (Afifi et al., 2022).

Finally, in addition to her experience watching couples engage in conflict-inducing conversations in the laboratory, Afifi acknowledged that her own life experiences informed the development of the TRRL (Afifi et al., 2022). Specifically, she enacted all the following relational roles during a season of life that was particularly demanding: spouse, mom, and caretaker of her mother-in-law who had been diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease (Afifi et al., 2022). As someone watching over multiple close family members, Afifi pondered the ways in which she and her family could enact resilience during that challenging season of life (Afifi et al., 2022). Informed by her work in previous studies (e.g., Afifi et al., 2015), Afifi contemplated the importance of operating out of a strong communal orientation and maintaining the

relationships in her family to manage stress (Afifi et al., 2022). Doing so, she thought, might help their family navigate any conflicts that arose in a healthier fashion (Afifi et al., 2022).

Key Terms of the TRRL

In defining *resilience*, Afifi et al. (2016) acknowledged various ways in which resilience has been conceptualized and operationalized. Specifically, some might conceptualize resilience as a learned process rather than a fixed trait (Afifi et al., 2016). Furthermore, some might situate resilience as a predictor of how individuals traverse stressful situations, whereas others might imagine it to be an outcome that can be measured on the other side of a stormy season of life (Afifi, 2018; Afifi et al., 2016). Having reviewed various perspectives regarding the conceptualization and operationalization of resilience, Afifi and colleagues (2016) argued for the merit of multiple perspectives, while ultimately emphasizing the process perspective within TRRL. Scholars tend to position resilience (or proxies for it, such as relational satisfaction) as an outcome variable when using the TRRL (as is the case in this study); however, the measures that are typically used to operationalize resilience in those studies seem to assess resiliency more than resilience (Afifi et al., 2019; LaFreniere & Shannon, 2021).

It is important to note that resiliency (i.e., a trait) is distinct from resilience (i.e., a process). Resiliency is a trait that people either possess or do not possess, whereas resilience is an ongoing, teachable process (Afifi et al., 2016). People can learn how to enact a process, but people cannot learn how to acquire a trait they do not already have. In this way, resilience is socially constructed (Afifi et al., 2022), and in the TRRL, is “primarily a process of calibration in relationships” (p. 664). As such, resilience in the TRRL is conceptualized as a process that unfolds within the context of close relationships. In other words, it is a dyadic phenomenon.

From this viewpoint, resilience, as conceptualized by the TRRL, cannot be understood outside of the context of close relationships. In the same way the body recalibrates to threats in its environment physiologically, romantic partners and family members must recalibrate to the needs of their close others communicatively (Afifi et al., 2016). When families communicate with one another to assess how they are all adapting to the stressors in their environments, they can learn more about the needs of their family members, equipping them with information necessary to support one another more effectively throughout adverse seasons of life (Afifi et al., 2016). Underscoring this conceptualization of resilience is the idea that relationships with close others are interdependent (Afifi et al., 2016).

According to the TRRL, having a *communal orientation* is “the ability to think of one’s relationship(s) as a cohesive unit when managing stress and approaching life” (Afifi et al., 2016, p. 669). When couples adopt communal orientations, they are likely to view themselves as a united front when it comes to challenges that they face (Afifi et al., 2016). Likewise, when families operate with communal orientations, the individual family members are likely to see themselves as a part of a team when it comes to traversing the inevitable storms of life (Afifi et al., 2016).

Afifi et al. (2016) articulated that *emotional reserves* can be accrued as family members or close others validate one another. One way that individuals validate one another to store up emotional reserves is through engaging in relational maintenance. *Relational maintenance* is conceptualized broadly in the TRRL as “prosocial, daily verbal and nonverbal behaviors, perceptions, and actions that allow relational partners and family members to become resilient and thrive” (Afifi et al., 2016, p. 664). This conceptualization is distinct from the ways in which other scholars have theorized about relational maintenance.

Historically, relational maintenance has been defined in one of the following ways: (a) as a *state* (i.e., meaning that it is evidenced by the existence of a relationship), (b) as a *stage* (i.e., meaning that it is the part of the relationship that occurs after the beginning of the relationship, but before the end of the relationship), and (c) as a *process* (i.e., meaning that maintenance represents the means through which people ensure that their relationships are kept in desired states of repair) (Dainton & Myers, 2020). According to the theory of relational entropy (TRE; Ledbetter & Fellers, 2022), relational maintenance can be thought of as the energy people dispense in their attempts to counteract the force that entropy exerts on their relationships. According to TRE, *relational entropy* represents “the tendency of interpersonal relationships to shift from a state of order to one of disorder over time” (like all other systems in the physical universe; Hawking, 1996) (Ledbetter & Fellers, 2022, p. 591). Therefore, the function of relational maintenance—from the perspective of TRE—is to counteract the disrepair interpersonal relationships fall into if left to their own devices (Fellers & Ledbetter, 2022).

In contrast, according to the TRRL, the function of relational maintenance is to build emotional reserves useful for demonstrations of resilience in close relationships (Afifi et al., 2016). Yet, like the TRE (Ledbetter & Fellers, 2022), in conceptualizing relational maintenance as “investments,” many behaviors can “count” as relational maintenance in the TRRL’s framework (Afifi et al., 2022, p. 345). Scholars testing the TRRL have operationalized these deposits in one’s relationship as affectionate communication (e.g., Afifi et al., 2019; Afifi et al., 2021; Afifi et al., 2020b) and relational maintenance strategies or behaviors such as positivity, assurances, openness, sharing tasks, and shared networks (e.g., Haas & Lannutti, 2022; LaFreniere & Shannon, 2021; Rubinsky, 2019). The TRRL is unique in that, traditionally-speaking, scholars have typically employed the latter of the two operationalizations of

maintenance (i.e., measures of relational maintenance strategies; Canary & Stafford, 1992; Stafford & Canary, 1991) in their work. However, the TRRL is quite broad in terms of its conceptualization of relational maintenance (Afifi et al., 2022), allowing researchers to explore a variety of prosocial behaviors that may help individuals accrue emotional reserves in their close relationships, such as affectionate communication (Afifi et al., 2019; Afifi et al., 2021; Afifi et al., 2020b). The current investigation will spotlight one such prosocial behavior that has yet to be investigated using the TRRL's framework as a form of relational maintenance: active-empathic listening. Although the act of listening itself has not yet been investigated as a means by which people might invest in their close relationships in studies testing the TRRL, Floyd (2014) argued that active-empathic listening might reasonably be considered a form of affectionate communication, which is itself a proxy for relational maintenance.

Active-empathic listening unfolds over the course of three stages including sensing, processing, and responding (Bodie et al., 2013). First, *sensing* refers to the stage wherein the listener is actively tuning into the emotional needs of their interaction partner as that other person is talking (Bodie et al., 2013). Individuals who perform this stage of the listening process well typically understand which emotions their interaction partner is experiencing (Bodie et al., 2013). This involves a sensitivity towards the parts of the speaker's message that are explicitly communicated, but also those parts of the message that are more implicit in nature (Bodie et al., 2013). In close relationships, messages exchanged communicate information about the relationship between interactants in addition to the actual content that is communicated (Guerrero et al., 2021). Therefore, spouses who engage in this stage of listening may be able to pick up on what their husband or wife is communicating that goes beyond just what words their

husband or wife is saying, which may be especially important during conflicts and, more generally, during seasons of life that have the propensity to be more stressful than others.

Second, *processing* refers to the stage wherein the listener comprehends and retains information that they are hearing their interaction partner say (Bodie et al., 2013). This stage moves beyond retaining information to understanding messages in a deep way that provides listeners the opportunity to verbally assure their interaction partners that the two of them are on the same page (Bodie et al., 2013). One might demonstrate this understanding by summarizing what their interaction partner has communicated to them partway through a conversation. Spouses who can reassure one another that they are listening well enough to recap what has been said in a conflict or otherwise stress-inducing conversation may help their spouse see that they are on the same team in all things; working together to understand one another and move forward hand-in-hand.

Third, *responding* refers to the stage wherein the listener employs both verbal and nonverbal communication tactics to illustrate that they are actively listening to their interaction partner (Bodie et al., 2013). Verbally, this could look like muttering words that do not interrupt the speaker's train of thought, but still indicate agreement with and/or interest in what the speaker is saying. Alternatively, this might include asking the speaker to expand on their thoughts via asking the speaker thoughtful questions that demonstrate that one is following along with what they are saying, but want to know more (Bodie et al., 2013). Nonverbally, this could look like nodding one's head to indicate that one is actively listening to their interaction partner. Spouses who respond to one another verbally and nonverbally may demonstrate quite overtly that they are actively paying attention to one another, which may be encouraging for spouses to know as it may demonstrate care and respect for not just one another, but also their marriage as a

whole. Responding illustrates a way that people might be able to make each other “feel validated, respected, and secure” daily (Afifi et al., 2016, p. 667), which is encompassed in what the TRRL says constitutes relational maintenance.

According to the TRRL, constructive maintenance behaviors such as active-empathic listening, if enacted on a regular basis by close others such as family members, lead to resilience and overall wellbeing. In this way, maintenance seems to be at the heart of the TRRL (Afifi et al., 2016). Investing in one’s relationship through these prosocial behaviors explains why and how some couples and/or families flourish in stressful situations (Afifi et al., 2016). Emotional reserves can be pulled from during times of adversity to buffer against the harmful effects of stress on relationships (Afifi et al., 2016). Along these lines, Afifi et al. (2016) stated that interventions can be implemented to help individuals learn “how to maintain their relationship on a regular basis in ways that express appreciation, love, empathy, and gratitude” (p. 676). As illustrated above, one specific way to do this might be to engage in active-empathic listening (Bodie, 2011).

Within the TRRL, *stress* can be conceptualized and operationalized in a variety of ways (Afifi et al., 2016). Scholars can investigate chronic stress that persists over long periods of time. Alternatively, scholars may investigate acute stress that is short-lived and may have a relatively sudden onset (Afifi et al., 2016). It is worth noting that stress can be external or internal to the relationship(s) under scrutiny. This means that the TRRL allows scholars to examine instances when the relationship itself is the stressor (e.g., the positive rhythms of the relationship have been interrupted) (Afifi et al., 2016).

According to Afifi et al. (2016), *relational load* is created when emotional, psychological, and relational resources are hit multiple times within a short span of time.

Individuals encounter relational load when they are experiencing chronic stress and fatigue. The concept of relational load originated from the idea of allostatic load (Afifi et al., 2016). Allostatic load is the deterioration of the body's systems that are designed to react to the physiological stress that humans experience (Afifi et al., 2021). When the body is experiencing chronic stress and fatigue, the biological systems that are tasked with responding to said stress stop working as well as they are supposed to (Afifi et al., 2016; McEwan & Stellar, 1993). Following the same line of reasoning, when relational resources diminish over time, it makes individuals more vulnerable to experiencing poor physical, relational, and mental health outcomes in times of stress (Afifi et al., 2016).

Assumptions of the TRRL

With the key theoretical terms defined, the three assumptions underlying the TRRL can be unpacked. The first is that human beings want to feel validated in their close relationships, as well as experience security in their close relationships (Afifi et al., 2016). These are innate desires of the human heart. Pulling from evolutionary perspectives such as affection exchange theory (Floyd, 2001), intergroup perspectives such as social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), and finally attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980), humans want to feel like they are fully known and fully loved by close others in their lives. They want to feel as though people see them and affirm who they are as individuals (Afifi et al., 2016). Furthermore, people want to feel as though they are important parts of families so that they can feel a sense of belonging in this world (Afifi et al., 2016; Guerrero et al., 2011). They want to know that there is available support from those close others, should stressful circumstance arise (Afifi et al., 2016; Komproe et al., 1997). Evaluations of effective support (i.e., in terms of which type of support is deemed most helpful, as well as how much support is considered adequate) can vary from person to

person based on their unique preferences for receiving support (Afifi et al., 2016). From an affection exchange theory standpoint, individuals vary in terms of their preferences for both giving and receiving affectionate communication (Floyd, 2001). When those preferences are not satisfied, the violation of those preferences may prove to be physiologically aversive for humans who need affectionate communication in the same way that they require other necessities (e.g., water, shelter) (Floyd, 2001). In other words, there is not a golden standard by which scholars can judge how much or what type of social support people need to feel safe and secure (Floyd, 2001). So, too, are people likely to have different preferences in terms of which forms of relationship maintenance from close others they prefer to receive to build up their emotional reserves (Afifi et al., 2016).

The second assumption of the TRRL is that stress is a normal human experience (Afifi et al., 2016). There are different types of stress (i.e., good and bad) and those different types of stress manifest in the body in unique ways. If appraised as a something with the propensity to be good, stress can be seen as a helpful reaction of the body that propels us forward to increase our ability to perform in certain taxing circumstances (Afifi et al., 2016). It can help us improve our affective state (e.g., feel hopeful). This good type of stress is called eustress (Afifi et al., 2016). When we perceive that the stress is negative in valence, on the other hand, that is called distress (Afifi et al., 2016). People usually see stress as negative when they believe the resources at their disposal to manage the stress are insufficient to successfully cope with a stressor or a threat in their environment (Afifi et al., 2016). In tests of the TRRL, stress is usually accompanied by a negative connotation (i.e., distress) and assessed as such (Afifi et al., 2019; Afifi et al., 2020a; Haughton & Afifi, 2022). Eustress and distress are not mutually exclusive (Afifi et al., 2016). You can experience one without the other, but you can also experience them simultaneously

(Afifi et al., 2016). Important to the TRRL, people construct stress communicatively with other people (Afifi et al., 2016). When stress is communicated to/with close others, humans' cognitions will reflect it.

Cognitions are connected to the body's biological systems when it comes to stress responses (Afifi et al., 2016). When the mind is stressed, the body tries to bring itself back into a stable place and make the necessary adaptations in response to the stress it is experiencing, which is called allostasis (Afifi et al., 2016; McEwen & Stellar, 1993). Two systems in the body work in tandem in response to stress: (a) the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenocortical (HPA) axis and (b) the locus coeruleus-norepinephrine/sympathetic nervous system (LC-NE/SNS) (Afifi et al., 2016). When a person appraises something as a threat in the environment, the hypothalamus will announce the presence of a stressor in the environment to the rest of the body through the release of hormones such as the corticotropin-releasing hormone (CRH) (Afifi et al., 2016). When this happens, the pituitary gland and adrenal glands are activated and the adrenal glands release the stress hormone cortisol (Afifi et al., 2016).

The sympathetic nervous system constitutes the body's reaction to stress (e.g., humans' fight or flight response) (Afifi et al., 2016). When the body's sympathetic nervous system is stimulated, the body sends out many hormones such as epinephrine, norepinephrine, and catecholamines in addition to the stress hormone cortisol and other hormones that will help the body attack the threat in their environment and eventually help the body stabilize so that it is back to operating from a state of reduced stress (Afifi et al., 2016; Floyd & Afifi, 2011). It is also true that the body has what is called a natural diurnal rhythm (Afifi et al., 2016; Floyd & Afifi, 2011). About 30 minutes before a person wakes up, their cortisol is likely to be at its highest levels (Afifi et al., 2016; Floyd & Afifi, 2011). It will likely decrease throughout the day and hit

its lowest levels around midnight (Afifi et al., 2016; Floyd & Afifi, 2011). It is likely that the body may be preparing to adapt to potential threats in the environment at the beginning of the day (Afifi et al., 2016; Floyd & Afifi, 2011).

When a body is not working this way (i.e., when a person's cortisol level is not going down slowly throughout the span of a day, the cortisol level is not at its lowest around midnight), the HPA axis is thought to not be properly regulating itself (Afifi et al., 2016; Floyd & Afifi, 2011). With that said, the hormone cortisol is just one of many markers of the body's response to stress (Afifi et al., 2016; Floyd & Afifi, 2011). If the HPA axis and the SNS kick in every now and then, it is nothing to be concerned about (i.e., as it is to be expected from time to time); however, when it happens repeatedly, that is not good for one's health (Afifi et al., 2016; Floyd & Afifi, 2011). Such patterns have been linked to physical health deterioration (e.g., abdominal obesity, coronary heart disease, hypertension, and poor immune system functioning) (Afifi et al., 2016). When the body's stress response systems are repeatedly aroused, such as in cases of chronic stress, allostatic load can occur, which makes people more vulnerable to getting sick (Afifi et al., 2016; Floyd & Afifi, 2011).

The third assumption of the TRRL is that each relationship will have its own unique homeostasis, which can change in response to experienced stress and communication related to experienced stress (Afifi et al., 2016). From a systems theory perspective (von Bertalanffy, 1950; Yoshimura & Galvin, 2018), all families have a unique homeostasis and the individual family members are pulled towards it (Afifi et al., 2016). Homeostasis is not to be considered synonymous with stability (Afifi et al., 2016). If it were, it might give the impression that things are not always changing or being recalibrated in families, which is not what the TRRL asserts (Afifi et al., 2016). Yet at the same time, the TRRL acknowledges that families might behave in

patterned ways with one another. This is not to say that those patterns of interaction are necessarily healthy (Afifi et al., 2016). They may, in fact, be unhealthy patterns of interaction (Afifi et al., 2016). If families change the ways in which they communicate with each other and the ways in which they make relational investments or deposits in the form of maintenance, the homeostasis can and will change, possibly for the better (Afifi et al., 2016).

Propositions of the TRRL

Relational Maintenance and Emotional Reserves. Building on the theoretical groundwork established by the three assumptions of the TRRL, Afifi et al. (2016) detailed 10 propositions of the TRRL. The first proposition of the TRRL is that through the enactment of relational maintenance, people can create emotional reserves, which is a byproduct of enacted relational maintenance yet still represents enacted relational maintenance (Afifi et al., 2016). In other words, these emotional reserves, or lack thereof, serve as indications of whether individuals are using their communication to lift up close others (Afifi et al., 2016).

The TRRL is similar to, yet distinct from the theory of emotional capital (Driver & Gottman, 2004; Feeney & Lemay, 2012). The two theories are similar in the sense that Afifi et al. (2016) borrowed the definition of *emotional capital* from the theory of emotional capital (Driver & Gottman, 2004; Feeney & Lemay, 2012), relying on it to inform the definition of *emotional reserves* in the TRRL. They are also alike in that both theories predict that individuals will be able to pull from the emotional capital/reserves in the future (Afifi et al., 2016; Driver & Gottman, 2004; Feeney & Lemay, 2012).

With that said, the TRRL is different from the theory of emotional capital (Driver & Gottman, 2004; Feeney & Lemay, 2012) for several reasons. To begin, the focal point of the TRRL is stress (as opposed to relational threats within the theory of emotional capital) (Afifi et

al., 2016; Driver & Gottman, 2004; Feeney & Lemay, 2012). In addition, within the TRRL, unlike the theory of emotional capital (Driver & Gottman, 2004; Feeney & Lemay, 2012), relational maintenance is what produces emotional reserves. What constitutes relational maintenance, as illustrated earlier, is quite broad in the parlance of the TRRL. For example, strategic relational maintenance as well as routine relational maintenance can give rise to emotional reserves (Canary & Stafford, 1992; Canary et al., 1993; Dainton & Stafford, 1993; Stafford & Canary, 1991). Afifi et al. (2016) theorized that it will often be the “little things” that couples or families do every day, such as everyday talk (Schrodt et al., 2007), that are likely to accrue over time, creating a surplus of emotional reserves constituted by these prosocial behaviors. In this way, any communication that makes someone feel as though they are treasured can do wonders in families (Afifi et al., 2016). This goal can be accomplished through simple acts of service such as cleaning the kitchen or baking dessert for a spouse, for example. Even so, the grandiose investments (i.e., that likely happen less frequently) in close relationships can still “count” as relational maintenance in the TRRL, which means that the once-every-ten-years anniversary trips and extravagant holiday gifts that make all the neighbors envious could still give way to emotional reserves for families (Afifi et al., 2016). Regardless of the size of the gesture, expressing gratefulness and appreciation for acts of service like these might prompt increased satisfaction and connectedness with one’s partner the following day (Algoe et al., 2010).

Because families communicatively construct relational maintenance within the context of interdependent, close relationships (Kelley et al., 1983), Afifi et al. (2016) notes that it is likely a combination of giving and receiving relational maintenance that gives rise to families’ emotional reserves. Even so, studies testing the TRRL tend to conceptualize and operationalize emotional

capital as that which is accrued by receiving relational maintenance from close others. For example, LaFreniere and Ledbetter (2021) examined young adults' perceptions of their parents' confirmation (or lack of confirmation) when conceptualizing and operationalizing what builds emotional capital in parent-child relationships. Offering support for this approach to operationalizing relational maintenance and emotional reserves, Afifi et al. (2016) asserted that it is likely that received investments will be predictive of emotional reserves to a greater extent than will enacted investments for couples and families, especially when operationalizing relational maintenance as a form of affectionate communication (based on work testing affection exchange theory; see Floyd & Riforgiate, 2008).

Relevant to the discussion of relational maintenance producing emotional reserves is yet another theory that informs the TRRL: equity theory (Rolloff, 1981; Sprecher, 2001). Although seemingly scant attention is paid to the TRRL's reference to equity theory in the studies which have tested it, Afifi et al. (2016) adopted this particular social exchange perspective when presenting the first proposition of the TRRL. Drawing from equity theory, Afifi et al. (2016) hypothesized that relationships will function optimally (i.e., will accrue the most emotional reserves) when both partners are cheerfully contributing to their partner's wellbeing by enacting the prosocial behaviors that they expect to receive from one another (Caughlin, 2003). Furthermore, when this is not happening (e.g., one partner is not receiving as much as they are giving), these unmet desires and violated expectations might prompt dissatisfaction and conflict within the relationship (Afifi et al., 2012; Caughlin, 2003). This assumption serves to set the TRRL apart from the theory of emotional capital in yet another important way (Afifi et al., 2016).

Afifi et al. (2016) qualifies the endorsement of equity theory by acknowledging that a variety of differences in close relationships (e.g., personality differences, power differences, cultural differences) might influence the effects of investment sizes. For example, a parent-child relationship is a unique interpersonal relationship wherein parents usually steward more power than their children (Yoshimura & Galvin, 2018). A discrepancy in terms of investment between a parent and their child is not predicted to prompt dissatisfaction as it is normative in the United States for parents to do more for their young children (Afifi et al., 2016). Likewise, when testing the TRRL in the context of relationships wherein one partner cannot feasibly maintain the relationship to the same extent as their partner can (e.g., someone is sick), a discrepancy in terms of investment size may or may not be perceived by one or both parties (Afifi et al., 2016; Rusbult, 1980).

Assuming individuals are enacting many prosocial behaviors (i.e., stocking up on emotional reserves), the TRRL would predict that those individuals would experience less stress than they would have had they not stocked up on emotional reserves (Afifi et al., 2016). Because these individuals might appraise their stress differently, they will likely communicate in more productive ways than they would have if they had appraised the stress as being more extreme (Afifi et al., 2016). For example, Guntzviller and Wang (2019) conducted a study aimed at testing the TRRL with a sample of Latinx mothers and their adolescent children. The adolescent children would often translate for their family members for whom English was a second language (i.e., language brokering). Guntzviller and Wang (2019) traveled to these families' homes to give them surveys to fill out on their own. If necessary, the researchers could read the surveys aloud to the participants in Spanish or English. Adolescent children in this study who perceived that their mothers desired to support them when enacting prosocial relational

maintenance behaviors reported experiencing less depression (Guntzviller & Wang, 2019).

Therefore, it is important to not only enact prosocial relational maintenance behaviors to accrue emotional reserves to pull from in times of adversity, but it is also helpful to communicate the “why” behind why those behaviors (i.e., verbalize one’s goals) from time to time (Guntzviller & Wang, 2019).

Communal Orientation, Emotional Reserves, and Stress. The second proposition of the TRRL is that individuals may or may not operate from a communal orientation with their partner and/or family (Afifi et al., 2016). Whether or not they operate from a communal orientation with their partner and/or family will determine the number of investments they deposit in their relationship(s) (Afifi et al., 2016). As detailed in the first proposition of the TRRL, the number of relational investments individuals deposit in the form of relational maintenance will predict the emotional reserves they have to draw from in times of stress (Afifi et al., 2016).

In other words, the TRRL provides predictions regarding who is most likely to maintain their relationships and accrue emotional reserves (Afifi et al., 2016). Specifically, individuals who operate from a communal orientation are those who, in accordance with the second proposition of the TRRL, will be most likely to make frequent investments in their relationships in the form of relational maintenance (Afifi et al., 2016). They will then reap the rewards of accrued emotional reserves, according to the TRRL (Afifi et al., 2016). Coping alongside other humans might mitigate the detrimental effects of stress on the minds and bodies of humans (Afifi et al., 2016). More specifically, when individuals feel as though they can face stressors with others, they might report feeling more efficacious when thinking about dealing with said

stressors (Afifi et al., 2016). Therefore, they might not perceive as much stress as they would have had they not been able to cope communally (Afifi et al., 2016).

Therefore, building on scholarship about communal coping (Lyons et al., 1998), Afifi et al. (2016) argued that when individuals are high in communal orientation (e.g., my partner and I will be there for one another in times of need, my partner and I want to protect each other and our relationship), they will likely feel as though they want to invest in their relationship; whereas when individuals are low in communal orientation (e.g., my partner will not be there for me when I need them, my partner does not want to protect me and our relationship), they will not be as motivated to invest in their relationship. In investing less in the relationship, those with a low communal orientation reinforce their low communal orientation via their low relational maintenance (Afifi et al., 2016). In the same way, when a partner with a high communal orientation invests in the relationship, they are reinforcing their high communal orientation via their high relational maintenance (Afifi et al., 2016). In this way, the gap between those individuals with high communal orientations and those individuals with low communal orientations widens (Afifi et al., 2016).

With the understanding that it may be in individuals' best interest to adopt a communal orientation, the question then becomes: How do the individuals who report having a communal orientation come to adopt it in the first place? Individuals likely come to adopt a communal orientation in romantic relationships, for example, because they have established trust with their partner, fostered intimacy with their partner, and/or demonstrated their commitment to the romantic relationship over the course of time (Afifi et al., 2016). As that commitment to the romantic relationship strengthens, individuals increasingly see their identity as being tied to their romantic relationship (Aron et al., 2004). As their identity becomes more and more connected to

their romantic relationship, their communal orientation may be strengthened, and the individual may then be quite motivated to enact prosocial relational maintenance, reflecting their heightened sense of interdependence and, in turn, communal orientation (Afifi et al., 2016; Aron et al., 2004). In other words, individuals may come to adopt a communal orientation as they experience increased cognitive interdependence leading to a more intertwined couple identity (Afifi et al., 2016).

Put differently, positive associations may exist among interdependence, commitment, trust, and sacrificial behaviors in romantic relationships (Afifi et al., 2016; Whitton et al., 2007). Therefore, the TRRL asserts that when individuals are high in these things, it will be beneficial for close relationships; however, the TRRL is not intended to only apply to relationships wherein individuals are already flourishing in times of adversity (Afifi et al., 2016). The TRRL aims to offer insights to help individuals learn to rebuild trust between romantic partners, for example, or facilitate increased interdependence between parents and adult children, as another example (Afifi et al., 2016). In other words, it is true that when people adopt a communal orientation, they will do more to maintain their relationship (Afifi et al., 2016). Yet, there is still hope for those who do not have communal orientation, as they may adopt one in the future. When people do not yet endorse a communal orientation, they can still put intentional and effortful focus into maintaining their relationships more, which should help them start to operate out of a communal orientation in their close relationships (Afifi et al., 2016). Yet, it is important to note that adopting a communal orientation is just one way in which individuals in relationships with one another might be able to enact better stress management, which leads nicely into the next proposition of the TRRL.

Specifically, the third proposition of the TRRL is that whether someone has emotional

reserves to pull from during times of stress and/or whether someone has a communal perspective toward their partner and/or family will impact their perceptions regarding what events they consider to be stressful (Afifi et al., 2016). Perceptions regarding what events someone considers to be stressful will also impact the number of investments they deposit into their close relationships (i.e., to generate emotional reserves), as well as whether they operate from a communal perspective with their partner and/or family (Afifi et al., 2016). In this way, the relationship between stress and relational maintenance/communal orientation is reciprocal.

Afifi et al. (2016) posited that communal orientation might impact how partners and families navigate stress in two ways. First, families with a higher communal orientation might perceive less stress in the first place because they communicate in ways that are healthy and supportive of one another (Afifi et al., 2016). When couples who are high in communal orientation do face stress together, they may communicate about that stress in a way that is encouraging, confirming, and kind, which may then alter their perceptions as to how insurmountable the stress appears to be (Afifi et al., 2016). Furthermore, couples who are high in communal orientation might also see the best in their partner and/or family members (Afifi et al., 2016; Le et al., 2010). In other words, when experiencing conflict with their loved ones, they might see the idealized version of their partners and/or family members and give them the benefit of the doubt when making attributions in stressful situations (Afifi et al., 2016; Le et al., 2010). In this way, individuals with a high communal orientation might make attributions for the stress that they are experiencing that are external to the relationship as opposed to blaming each other for the stress they are experiencing (Afifi et al., 2015; Afifi et al., 2016). That is, partners in healthy romantic relationships might make more generous attributions regarding the perceived causes of stressors – and be able to separate negative experiences they have with their partner, in

their mind, from their global evaluations of the health of the relationship overall (Afifi et al., 2015; Afifi et al., 2016).

Second, families with a higher communal orientation might be able to use the emotional reserves they have stored for stressful times (Afifi et al., 2016). In doing so, they might be able to give their family members and/or partners the benefit of the doubt (Afifi et al., 2016). This may manifest in verbal and nonverbal communication about the stressor that demonstrates respect, dignity, and love for the other person (Afifi et al., 2016). If they had not been maintaining their relationships prior to experiencing a stressful situation, they might go into that conversation with a negative view of their family members and/or partner, which might prompt verbal and nonverbal conflict communication that is not productive or that is even perhaps destructive (Afifi et al., 2016; Durtschi et al., 2011). It is important to note that these instances of communication during seasons of adversity can occur as one-time interactions regarding a stressor or a series of interactions unfolding over time regarding a stressor (Afifi et al., 2016).

The fourth proposition of the TRRL states that whether someone has emotional reserves to pull from during times of stress and/or whether someone has a communal perspective with their partner and/or family will influence their communication during seasons of adversity, specifically evidenced through security-based appraisals and/or threat-based appraisals (Afifi et al., 2016). Building from ideas presented in the theory of emotional capital (Feeney & Lemay, 2012), Afifi et al. (2016) argued that when couples regularly maintain their relationships, they likely will operate with a goal of protecting the relationship they have worked hard to maintain, establish trust within, etc. For example, in testing the theory of emotional capital, Feeney and Lemay (2012) discovered that when people had just recently gotten married, those who invested in their romantic relationships on a regular basis were better equipped to ward off potential

threats to their romantic relationships. In addition, Drive and Gottman's (2004) work demonstrates that partners who maintain their romantic relationships communicate more competently when discussing conflict-inducing topics.

When these people do not maintain their relationships and do not have emotional reserves stored up, they may feel as if they are alone or even at odds with their partner when stressful seasons arise (Afifi et al., 2016). When people feel alone during stress, a typical response from an evolutionary perspective would be to protect oneself or engage in self-preservation even at the expense of one's partner or one's relationship (Afifi et al., 2016). This could play out in an individual blaming a partner or attacking them through critical remarks, contemptuous verbal and/or nonverbal communication, as well as either demanding or withdrawing from conflict (Afifi et al., 2016; Gottman et al., 1998; Gottman & Levenson, 2000). Individuals who have a high communal orientation might comfort one another and collaborate when trying to solve problems (i.e., positive conflict behaviors) instead of criticizing or nagging one another (i.e., negative conflict behaviors) (Afifi et al., 2016). This is important as much research demonstrates associations among negative conflict behaviors, poor health, and diminished relational satisfaction (Gottman & Levenson, 2000; Robles & Kiecolt-Glaser, 2003).

The broaden and build theory of positive emotions (Fredrickson, 1998, 2001; Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004) also supports this idea in that it posits that when people are experiencing positive emotions in stressful situations, they are likely to be able to broaden their thinking to generate more creative solutions as opposed to when people are experiencing negative emotions in stressful situations (Afifi et al., 2016). When people are experiencing negative emotions in stressful situations, they are likely to narrow their thinking, unable to generate more complex and innovative coping strategies (Afifi et al., 2016; Fredrickson, 1998, 2001; Tugade & Fredrickson,

2004). Within the TRRL, negative behaviors and positive behaviors are separated from one another because security-based appraisals and threat-based appraisals do predict different outcomes regarding how people deal with or manage their stress (Afifi et al., 2016). Yet at the same time, it is an important clarification that security-based appraisals and threat-based appraisals are more than simply diametrical opposites of each other (Afifi et al., 2016).

Security-Based and Threat-Based Appraisals. The fifth proposition of the TRRL is that communicating security-based appraisals makes humans feel validated (Afifi et al., 2016). When people feel as though they are validated, it acts as a protective buffer against the depletion of their resources (Afifi et al., 2016; Braithwaite & Holt-Lunstad, 2017). When individuals feel as though they have a plethora of psychological, cognitive, emotional, and relational resources, they are more apt to engage in healthy stress management (Afifi et al., 2016). On the other hand, the communication of threat-based appraisals prompts responses of self-protection and self-regulation, both of which require high energy expenditure (Afifi et al., 2016). Because these processes are strenuous, threat-based appraisals are those that leave individuals feeling drained of their psychological, cognitive, and emotional resources, making the stress feel more intense (Afifi et al., 2016).

When individuals do not impulsively act on what they are feeling, it may be quite taxing (Afifi et al., 2016). Therefore, despite there being numerous benefits of displays of self-control, resisting urges to act on one's feelings is likely to deplete one's energy, especially when self-control is enacted repeatedly (Afifi et al., 2016). When individuals exert self-control repeatedly, their ability to complete tasks effectively and efficiently may suffer (Afifi et al., 2016). Individuals may become aware of this depletion of energy tied to their use of self-control (Afifi et al., 2016). When this happens, people may make conscious efforts to safeguard their

remaining energy reserves (Afifi et al., 2016). From an evolutionary standpoint, ego depletion is disadvantageous in the sense that people who conserve their energy—upon noticing its rapid depletion—will have some back-up resources to pull from should an unexpected and psychologically demanding challenge surface (Afifi et al., 2016).

According to Afifi et al. (2016), when individuals are running on empty (i.e., they have accrued little positive emotional reserves to pull from in times of stress), it will be more difficult for them to find the energy to exhibit self-control during conflict with loved ones (Afifi et al., 2016; Pronk et al., 2019). When individuals are regulating their emotions (especially strong negative ones) and controlling their impulses (especially ones prompting them to communicate negatively) during conflict, they will be expending a large amount of energy (Afifi et al., 2016). In addition, Afifi et al. (2016) articulated that when individuals have accrued relational load and are, therefore, running on empty, they may have difficulties displaying empathy towards their relational partners who are in distress, which might serve to increase the “hits” to people’s psychological, relational, and emotional resources (p. 665). When individuals are not expending a large amount of energy engaging in self-control, however, this energy may be redirected to constructive communication behaviors such as offering one another better social support (Afifi et al., 2016). Social support, like affectionate communication, is predicted to buffer against the harmful effects of stress on the body (Afifi et al., 2016; Priem & Solomon, 2015). When individuals receive social support, that is another prosocial behavior that might add to their emotional reserves (Afifi et al., 2016).

When couples converse about stressors when they are already emotionally depleted, the stress from that conversation can put more strain on their “relational system” by further depleting their resources (e.g., emotional, relational, mental) (Afifi et al., 2016, p. 672). The TRRL

predicts that individuals' patterns of interaction (e.g., conflict, threat-based appraisals) mediate the association between relational maintenance/emotional reserves and perceived stress/health outcomes (Afifi et al., 2016). Specifically, when individuals have little emotional reserves/relational maintenance to pull from, they might report more negative conflict behavior because the demands on resources might be overwhelming the available resources that they have at their disposal to cope effectively/enact self-control which may, in turn, predict worse health/resilience (Afifi et al., 2016).

For example, Afifi et al. (2021) conducted a laboratory study with a sample of dating dyads wherein participants' mental health was assessed before the dating dyads were prompted to talk about something stressful. For five consecutive days following that stress-related conversation in the laboratory, participants filled out surveys (Afifi et al., 2021). Those who received more investments from their partners in the form of relational maintenance reported feeling more unified as a couple and reported experiencing fewer relational conflicts (Afifi et al., 2021). In support of the TRRL, increased relational maintenance and decreased conflict predicted less relational load (Afifi et al., 2021). Those who experienced more relational load, on the other hand, reported experiencing less unity as a couple (Afifi et al., 2021). In other words, couples experiencing relational load felt disconnected from their romantic partners five days after the stressful conversation in the laboratory. Furthermore, those who experienced more relational load also reported experiencing poor mental health outcomes, although it may be the case that relational load's negative impact on mental health is not long-lasting (Afifi et al., 2021). Both males' and females' mental health were restored to baseline levels (i.e., what it was before having the stressful conversation in the laboratory) after just five days (Afifi et al., 2021). Perhaps, in the long-term, stressful conversations with romantic partners do not influence mental

health outcomes as much they influence couple's relational wellbeing – but this question has not yet been adequately addressed in available research (Afifi et al. 2021).

To cope, these individuals with depleted resources might attempt to avoid addressing the state of their life (i.e., trying to make themselves numb to their reality) (Afifi et al., 2016). In doing so, they may eventually lose the ability to self-regulate their own emotions (Afifi et al., 2016). They may also experience a decline in executive functioning (Afifi et al., 2021; Afifi et al., 2016). Taken together, these individuals may no longer be able to understand what another person is going through and relate to that person's situation (i.e., the ability to experience and express empathy) (Afifi et al., 2016). Without empathy, individuals might not respect close others as much, as evidenced by displays of more contempt and criticism (Afifi et al., 2016).

Another way individuals might attempt to avoid conflict would be to withdraw from it altogether (Schrodt et al., 2014). In the demand-withdraw pattern of conflict, one individual typically is perceived to be nagging their partner to make a change (Schrodt et al., 2014). Their partner then further withdraws from the situation in response to the nagging (Schrodt et al., 2014). Situating the practical utility of the TRRL within the demand-withdraw literature, it is possible that an individual may want their partner to engage in more relational maintenance to create emotional reserves, as well as adopt a communal orientation; however, they may be perceived to be the “demander” and their partner may take on the role of the “withdrawer” by pulling further away each time their partner brings up the notion of changing the relational system (Afifi et al., 2016; Schrodt et al., 2014). The TRRL asserts that from an equity perspective, change would likely be perceived to benefit the “demander” more than it would the “withdrawer” (Afifi et al., 2016; Schrodt et al., 2014). If the demand-withdraw pattern of interaction continues over time, both parties would likely experience negative outcomes (Malis

& Roloff, 2006; Schrodt et al., 2014). The one demanding may experience increases in rumination and hyperarousal, while the one withdrawing may experience more stress (Malis & Roloff, 2006). Furthermore, according to the predictions of the TRRL, both partners would experience more relational load (Afifi et al., 2016).

Relational Load and Short-/Long-Term Health Outcomes. Three of the TRRL's propositions (i.e., propositions six, seven, and eight) predict various health outcomes that may follow from the experience of increased relational load. The sixth proposition of the TRRL is that relational load is created when stress arises and individuals' resources are drained (Afifi et al., 2016). The seventh proposition of the TRRL is that in both the short-term and the long-term (but especially in the long-term), individuals' lack of resources as well as an increase in their relational load will predict poor health (e.g., relational, mental, physical) (Afifi et al., 2016). The eighth proposition of the TRRL is that in the short-term and in the long-term, individuals' security-based appraisals and communication rhythms will predict positive health outcomes (e.g., relational, mental, physical), as well as resilience (Afifi et al., 2016).

Individuals involved in happy marital relationships tend to enjoy a host of positive health benefits such as having a lower risk of experiencing depression and living longer (Robles & Glaser-Kiecolt, 2003) compared to unmarried counterparts. With that said, the quality of the marriage is an important predictor of the nature of individuals' health outcomes. Experiencing marital conflict is associated with experiencing higher blood pressure, heart rates, cortisol, epinephrine, and pain, as well as having a worsened ability to recover from health-related problems (e.g., dysregulated immune system functioning) (Robles & Glaser-Kiecolt, 2003).

Therefore, the ways in which families engage in positive communication (e.g., affectionate communication, quality social support) (Floyd & Riforgiate, 2008) or negative

communication (e.g., four horsemen of the apocalypse, conflict-promoting attributions) impact the health and wellbeing of families (Durtzchi et al., 2011; Gottman & Levenson, 2000), with the negative communication having a stronger effect than that which is positive (Baumeister et al., 2001; Gottman, 1994).

For example, Afifi et al. (2020a) investigated the TRRL using a dyadic sample of working parents and their children. At the time of participation in the study, parents were raising at least two children who were living under their roof with at least one of those children being between the ages of 13 and 18 (Afifi et al., 2020a). Participants completed survey items, daily diary logs, and provided saliva samples (Afifi et al., 2020a). The results of the study offer support for propositions in the TRRL that link received relational maintenance with short-term health outcomes. In general, Afifi et al. (2020a) discovered that prosocial communication in the form of relational maintenance from a close other is positively associated with improved health and increased wellbeing for working parents. Specifically, parents who received more prosocial communication from each other and children who received more prosocial communication from their parents experienced healthier stress responses evidenced by increases in their cortisol awakening responses (CAR) (Afifi et al., 2020a). For children who reported receiving more relational maintenance from their parents, immune system functioning was greater (Afifi et al., 2020a). Fathers and mothers reporting less relational maintenance during the previous month reported heightened feelings of loneliness and conflict during the week (Afifi et al., 2020a). Specifically, mothers who did not receive or enact as much relational maintenance during the previous month reported experiencing more conflict during the week, which predicted less satisfaction with their own ability to juggle family and work life (Afifi et al., 2020a).

Although it is true that the body can adapt to environmental stressors such as those encountered by dual career families, that does not mean that said stressors will not have detrimental effects on health long-term. Because family relationships are interdependent (Kelley et al., 1983), these relationships will require calibration upon experiencing stressors (Afifi et al., 2016). Because relationships, as systems, do not automatically recalibrate themselves, it is important to consider at what level of stress relationships can flourish, and at what level of stress relationships become drained (Afifi et al., 2016).

The process and the extent to which relationships are drained will likely give way to various short-term and long-term effects (Afifi et al., 2016). When individuals are engaging in more threat-based appraisals, they may experience diminished cognitive functioning as evidenced by a marred ability to make decisions, a diminished attention span, a weakened willpower, and/or a sluggish response time (Afifi et al., 2016). Because individuals' ability to think in creative ways and process the support they are receiving from their family members may be impaired when facing stressors, individuals might encounter trouble making decisions and solving problems creatively when recalibrating relationships in the face of stressors (i.e., in the short-term, at least) (Afifi et al., 2016). This could continue to adversely affect the relationships, especially if the family continues to have conversations about the stressor as time goes on (Afifi et al., 2016). Over time, when individuals continue to experience interactions that are stressful in nature and, consequently, that drain them, relational load is generated (Afifi et al., 2016).

Relational load is conceptualized as the product of the experience of chronic stress, as well as the product of continual drainage of resources, whether those resources be psychological, relational, or emotional (Afifi et al., 2016). In essence, it is the "wear and tear" on a relationship (Afifi et al., 2016, p. 674). In the short-term, relational load is predicted to have a detrimental

effect on the homeostasis of family relationships, but in the long-term, relational load is predicted to tarnish the overall health of the relationship(s) (Afifi et al., 2016). This is evidenced in studies demonstrating that conflict and neuroendocrine functioning serve as predictors of indicators of relational wellbeing 10 years later (i.e., satisfaction, divorce) (Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 2003). For example, family members who care for loved ones experiencing dementia are subject to relational and personal health issues themselves, as they might have less of a communal orientation with their loved one, may be investing much time and energy into caring for their loved one, and might be experiencing impaired executive functioning as well as dysregulation of their own biological stress (Afifi et al., 2016).

Markers of relational load include decreased satisfaction with the relationship, increased feelings of loneliness, stress, or negatively valenced moods, as well as negative health outcomes (Afifi et al., 2016). The relationships among stress, health, poor relationship quality, and mental health challenges are reciprocal (e.g., stress might predict poor relationship quality, and poor relationship quality might predict stress) (Afifi et al., 2016). When individuals in a family are together in a physical space, their moods, reports of conflict, and stressful experiences are highly correlated (Afifi et al., 2016; Saxbe & Repetti, 2010). Therefore, when individuals live in the same physical space, relational load may be exacerbated if relational dynamics are strained and otherwise tense (Afifi et al., 2022; Afifi et al., 2016). In other words, relational load can continue to climb over time, unless individuals maintain their relationships, filling up their emotional reserves, positively impacting the homeostasis of their relationships (Afifi et al., 2016). For this to work, partners need to have both the willingness to exert effort into bettering their relationship and the cognitive capability (e.g., free from illnesses wherein individuals experience deteriorating cognitive functioning) to accept relational maintenance from their significant others

(Afifi et al., 2016). When individuals communicate security-based appraisals and invest in their relationships even throughout the stressful seasons of life, family members should feel as though they have a place where they feel safe, which should ultimately lead to family flourishing (Afifi et al., 2016).

Resilience as Learned. The ninth proposition of the TRRL is that relational load and resilience influence whether individuals choose to operate from a communal orientation, whether individuals employ threat- and/or security-based appraisals, and whether individuals invest in their relationships (Afifi et al., 2016). As relational load increases, relational maintenance and communal orientation might decrease (Afifi et al., 2016). In other words, as individuals become emotionally disconnected from close others, partners and/or families might not invest as much energy into their relationships (e.g., by offering affection, by telling one another how they feel). Subsequently, they may start to feel as though are not on the same team anymore (Afifi et al., 2016). They may even feel as though their relationships lack equity (Afifi et al., 2016; Roloff, 1981; Sprecher, 2001). For example, individuals may feel as though they are investing more into their relationships than are their close others (Stafford & Canary, 2006), or they may feel as though they are operating with a communal orientation even though their loved ones are not (Afifi et al., 2016). Perceptions of inequity might give way to experiencing negative emotions associated with being under- or over-benefited (Afifi et al., 2016; Sprecher, 2001; Stafford & Canary, 2006).

According to Afifi et al., (2016), to prevent this from happening, individuals should check the emotional temperature of their close relationships often. After taking the relational climate into account, individuals can make the necessary shifts to their cognitions, emotions, and behaviors (Afifi et al., 2016). When individuals start to feel emotionally distant from one

another, they can invest in their relationships through relational maintenance or affectionate communication to encourage stress-reduction and promote the health and wellbeing of the relationship, as well as the health and wellbeing of the people involved in the relationship (Afifi et al., 2016; Floyd et al., 2009).

For example, Afifi et al. (2020b) examined the TRRL with a sample of individuals involved in romantic relationships who had knowledge that they cast a vote for a different presidential candidate than the one their partner voted for during the presidential election held in 2016. According to Afifi et al. (2020b), these couples experienced less communal orientation. Perhaps this is because it felt like they and their partner were not on the same team (i.e., at least not in the political realm) (Afifi et al., 2020b). A lower communal orientation predicted fewer investments in the relationship in the form of relational maintenance, as well as heightened stress and conflict, which then predicted decreased resilience and increased relational load for these individuals (Afifi et al., 2020b). Having knowledge that one's partner voted for a different presidential candidate was stress-inducing for couples; however, the TRRL provides hope for individuals traversing similar stressful seasons of life (Afifi et al., 2020b). In this longitudinal investigation, at every one of the three data collection time periods (i.e., two weeks before, one day after, and approximately one month after Trump's presidential inauguration), Afifi et al. (2020b) discovered that individuals involved in romantic relationships marked by more relational maintenance reported experiencing less relational load and less conflict, in addition to more resilience and an endorsement of a communal orientation.

Therefore, the tenth proposition of the TRRL is that there is hope for couples and families who are not currently flourishing because they can grow in their abilities to enact maintenance (Afifi et al., 2016). In doing so, they can bolster family health and wellbeing, as well as

demonstrate resilience (Afifi et al., 2016). This proposition illustrates that the TRRL is well-suited for tests of interventions (Afifi et al., 2016). These future tests of interventions might aim to teach individuals how to enact routine relational maintenance or teach couples/families how to adopt a communal orientation in close relationships (Afifi et al., 2016). In this way, individuals could learn to communicate with loved ones in encouraging ways in times of stress instead of in threatening ways that further drain them of valuable resources in times of stress (Afifi et al., 2016).

One such intervention-based study was conducted by Afifi et al. (2019), who recruited couples who were in the process of raising a child with type 1 diabetes (T1D). In this ambitious study, Afifi et al. (2019) collected participants' responses to survey items, participants' saliva samples, and recordings of couples' conversations about T1D-related problems pre-intervention. During a two-week intervention, the participants were instructed to invest more time and energy into their romantic relationships (Afifi et al., 2019). For example, they were to express affection towards one another, as well as communicate that they were there for one another emotionally, should the other need their help (Afifi et al., 2019). During the intervention, the participants filled out daily diary logs and filled out survey items. A final saliva sample was collected after the two-week intervention ended. Afifi et al. (2019) uncovered that received relational maintenance mediated the relationship between the adoption of a communal orientation and a decrease in T1D-related stress for wives, but not for husbands. Instead, for husbands, operating from a communal orientation directly predicted less T1D-related stress (Afifi et al., 2019). Husbands and wives who received more relational maintenance from one another experienced less conflict during a conversation about T1D-related stress and the increase in cortisol after the conflict was not as stark for both husbands and wives (Afifi et al., 2019). This study offered

some evidence in support of the final proposition of the TRRL in that these productive communication behaviors can be learned, incorporated into daily relational experiences, and potentially better the lives of couples and families (Afifi et al., 2019).

Scope Conditions of the TRRL

Now that the propositions of the TRRL have been thoroughly detailed, the scope conditions of the TRRL will be explained. First, the TRRL is to be applied to situations wherein stressors are present either outside or inside romantic relationships or family systems (Afifi et al., 2016). As mentioned previously, the stressor could even be the relationship itself (Afifi et al., 2016). Stress is conceptualized as the sum of the daily tasks, challenges, etc., family members traverse (Afifi et al., 2016). In this way, the TRRL focuses on the ways in which family members communicate with one another, and how they see their communication with one another during those seasons of stress, as it reflects the ways in which family members have invested in their relationship leading up to that point (Afifi et al., 2016).

Second, although many different relationship types can be fruitfully investigated using the TRRL, the common thread should be that those relationships are interpersonal in nature (Afifi et al., 2016; Kelley et al., 1983). In other words, they should be characterized by closeness (Afifi et al., 2016). Specifically, individuals need to be in communication with one another as that provides evidence that they may be at least somewhat attached to each other (Afifi et al., 2016; Guerrero et al., 2011). In this way, the TRRL should be tested within the context of interpersonal/family relationships, broadly defined (Afifi et al., 2016; Guerrero et al., 2011). If those criteria are satisfied, the TRRL should retain its explanatory and predictive abilities when applied to any type of close relationship (Afifi et al., 2016). For example, the TRRL should work when tested in the context of romantic partners who are separated by long distances (Awonuga,

2020), as well as those that are geographically proximal (Afifi et al., 2016). Likewise, the TRRL should apply in heterosexual marriages, as well as same-gender marriages and polyamorous relationships (Afifi et al., 2016; Rubinsky, 2019). Finally, the TRRL should apply in the context of other types of family structures, such as single-parent families, and to any type of close relationship, such as friendships (Afifi et al., 2016). The theory lends itself to the examination of entire family systems as well as it does to the focus on unique dyads or triads within larger family systems (Afifi et al., 2016; Yoshimura & Galvin, 2018). Conversely, the TRRL should prove to be less applicable to friendships or dating relationships that are just beginning, wherein closeness and interdependence have not yet been fully developed (Afifi et al., 2016). If friends or dating dyads have not yet had sufficient time to become attached to one another, the TRRL would not be applicable (Afifi et al., 2016).

Third, Afifi et al. (2016) pointed out that not every person is wired the same. Individual differences might explain unique variance when woven into studies testing the TRRL (Afifi et al., 2016; Crowley et al., 2003). For example, Afifi et al. (2016) hypothesized that those who see the world through a positive lens (i.e., optimists) and those who trust themselves and others (i.e., securely attached individuals) might be particularly apt to demonstrate resilience because they typically see the best in their partner, and might be more likely to engage in behaviors intended to maintain the relationship with their partner (Dainton, 2007; Dainton & Myers, 2020). Afifi et al. (2016) even suggested the possibility of exploring the role of genotypes in predicting other variables within the TRRL. Thus, the TRRL—while offering a number of specific predictions by way of the theory’s propositions—also allows for the possibility that other variables may be at play that may impact the primary theoretical constructs.

Fourth, the TRRL was crafted using extant research conducted largely within the United States (Afifi et al., 2016). Therefore, it is not clear at this point whether the TRRL is applicable in diverse cultures (Afifi et al., 2016). As just one example, it is possible that individuals who were socialized in cultures other than the United States maintain various types of relationships (e.g., parent-child, friendships) in unique ways (Afifi et al., 2016). In addition, Afifi et al. (2016) clarified that the TRRL might offer more utility for females (i.e., as opposed to males) because females are more likely to maintain relationships (Stafford et al., 2000), as well as endorse higher standards for those relationships, and when those standards are not met, it tends to elicit more disappointment for females (Afifi et al., 2012; Afifi et al., 2016).

According to Afifi et al. (2016), tests of the TRRL do not have to employ physiological measures of stress, and a great number of published tests of the TRRL rely on self-report assessments (Afifi et al., 2016). In addition, studies examining the TRRL do not need to be longitudinal, yet could be (Afifi et al., 2016). Further, the numerous propositions of the TRRL do not have to be tested all at once. It can be tested in chunks (Afifi et al., 2016). Among many future directions, the theory could be tested for those transitioning to being parents for the first time, those struggling financially, those affected by a natural disaster, those who are caring for a family member with a disease, as well as just those dealing with the buildup of everyday stress in their relationships (Afifi et al., 2016). Studies with interventions might prompt individuals to maintain their relationships in preparation for a stressful season (e.g., ask students and academics to increase relational maintenance the month before Finals Week to prepare for the stressful week ahead). Afifi et al. (2016) also stated that there is a possibility the TRRL could be used as a tool to explain the rich results emerging from qualitative research designs (Afifi et al., 2016).

For example, Waldron and Farnworth (2020) did pull from the TRRL as a theoretical lens

to unpack qualitative findings from adults who had been in a committed relationship with their partner for at least 20 years. In interviews with the participants, Waldron and Farnworth (2020) learned about how the participants' romantic relationships had evolved during the preceding ten years as they overcame adversities as a couple. The participants shared the life lessons they had gleaned (Waldron & Farnworth, 2020). After exploring the data via a thematic analysis, two important findings emerged that are related to ways to test the TRRL in future studies. To start, network support (i.e., counting on people other than partners to be there for them in times of stress) emerged as a common way in which these couples reported tackling the adverse circumstances they faced as a couple (Waldron & Farnworth, 2020). Furthermore, many couples noted that putting their faith first provided them an anchor to keep them steady amidst the storms of life (Waldron & Farnworth, 2020). In other words, it is worth noting that external forces seem to play an important role in encouraging family flourishing over the course of life (Waldron & Farnworth, 2020).

In another piece illuminating the importance of positive network involvement in romantic relationships, Haughton and Afifi (2022) investigated two competing models in the context of interracial-interethnic relationships (IIRs): the stress reduction (mediation) model, which is more in line with the ways in which the TRRL had previously been tested; and the stress-buffering (moderation) model, which was derived from the logic of the TRRL but had not yet been formally tested. The stress reduction (mediation) model posited that appraisals of IIR-related stress and conflict would mediate the relationships between the predictor variables of relational maintenance and communal orientation and the outcome variables of relational load and relationship satisfaction (Haughton & Afifi, 2022). In this way, individuals might appraise stress and conflict related to IIR stigma as being less negative because of the ways in which they

regularly make deposits into their relationship and see problems as communal in nature (Haughton & Afifi, 2022). On the other hand, the stress-buffering (moderation) model argued that relational maintenance and communal orientation would moderate the relationship between predictor variables of IIR stigma-related stress and conflict and the outcome variables of relational load and relationship satisfaction (Haughton & Afifi, 2022). In this way, maintaining one's relationship and having a communal perspective about tackling problems together would buffer the harmful effects of high levels of stress and conflict regarding IIRs (Haughton & Afifi, 2022).

In analyzing the data, Haughton and Afifi (2022) discovered that the stress reduction (mediation) model fit better for those Latinx individuals involved in Latinx-white IIRs. On the other hand, the stress-buffering (moderation) model fit better for individuals involved in Black-white IIRs (Haughton & Afifi, 2022). Interestingly, Haughton and Afifi (2022) discovered that a communal orientation helped to buffer some of the damaging effects of IIR-related stress on relationships, but only to a point. When IIR-related stress was high, the stress still got in the way of the wellbeing/relationship satisfaction for individuals involved in Black-white IIRs who reported frequently maintaining their romantic relationships (Haughton & Afifi, 2022). Perhaps this is because the individuals were investing large amounts of time and energy into maintaining their romantic relationships, but they were still being met with IIR-related stigma from their networks, which would be discouraging (Haughton & Afifi, 2022). The findings from this study underscore areas in which the TRRL may not operate as originally articulated with diverse samples (Haughton & Afifi, 2022). Specifically, in direct opposition to the TRRL, there may be times when couples who are very close (i.e., they maintain their relationships regularly and have a high communal orientation) might have an even more challenging time navigating stressful

situations, especially when those stressful situations involve their own ingroup members not supporting their romantic relationships (Haughton & Afifi, 2022).

Empty Nest/Postparental Period

One context wherein the TRRL might be particularly applicable is parents' transition to becoming empty nesters (or the phase of life called the "postparental period" by some; Bouchard, 2014; Raup & Myers, 1989). The transition to becoming empty nesters, or the time in a marriage wherein partners learn to enact new patterns of relating to one another within the confines of their new schedules that do not include children living under their roof, can be positively valenced, negatively valenced, or a mix of both (Bouchard, 2014; King & Theiss, 2016). According to Harkins (1978), not all mothers agree upon what it means for them to be empty nesters. Most noted that it occurred either when the last child living in their house went to college and/or moved somewhere else (Harkins, 1978). Some mothers noted that they would not think of themselves as being empty nesters until their last child was married (Harkins, 1978). Still, others indicated that they would think of themselves as empty nesters when their last child graduated high school or when their last child accepted a job (Harkins, 1978).

When the transition is perceived to be a positive one that breathes new life into the marriage by fostering feelings of closeness and happiness within one's marriage through the enjoyment of more freedom to allow them to be more spontaneous and spend more time together just the two of them, that is called the empty nest experience (Raup & Myers, 1989). On the other hand, when these individuals experience a negative transition that frustrates them as they cope with a sense of loss that comes from their children leaving the home that prompts experiences of deep sadness and depression, they may experience added stress on their marriage

that prompts conflict, which is called empty nest syndrome (Kahana & Kahana, 1982; Raup & Myers, 1989).

Although change itself might be the culprit for increased conflict during this season of life, it is also feasible that married partners who experience increased conflict following their last child leaving their home have not properly been maintaining their relationships in the months leading up to that day (Afifi et al., 2016; King & Theiss, 2016). Because families often have some forewarning regarding the date when their last child will move out (e.g., college move-in date), it might be especially helpful for those traversing the empty-nest phase of their life to intentionally build up their emotional reserves in preparation for the challenging and new season ahead of them, in line with the TRRL (Afifi et al., 2016).

There are many positive outcomes that could be associated with the season occurring when the last child leaves the home (Harkins, 1978), in line with the role strain (relief) perspective (Bouchard, 2014). For example, some couples might experience less financial strain once their kids are no longer living under their roofs (Harkins, 1978). Some parents may report positive affect following their last child leaving the home (Bouchard, 2014), especially when parents still have a chance to maintain frequent contact with their child(ren) and parents have other treasured aspects of their identity outside of that which is defined by their roles as mothers or fathers (Crowley et al., 2003; Raup & Myers, 1989). In a qualitative study, Nagy and Theiss (2013) discovered five themes regarding the experience of being an empty nester including: (a) higher frequency of communication between partners, (b) having more flexibility with how they spend their time, (c) enjoying more private conversations, (d) having more alone time together, and (e) feeling like this is the start of something fresh and exciting for their marriage. With that said, it is possible that given the increased time to communicate with their spouse, some couples

might separate or divorce around the empty-nest phase, perhaps because parents were waiting until their children were no longer present to do so. Alternatively, they might experience difficulties even knowing how to get “back to” being a couple after spending 18(+) years centering everything around the kids, during which their romantic relationship might have taken a backseat (Bouchard, 2014).

Hence, there are also many negative outcomes that could be associated with the season occurring when the last child leaves the home, in line with the role loss perspective (Bouchard, 2014). This might be particularly pronounced for mothers of children whose last child has graduated high school who perceive that their last child has not yet fully “left” the home (Harkins, 1978). Parents might ponder the effectiveness of their past parenting decisions, prompting feelings of guilt for those who self-evaluate their work as a parent as poor. Reflecting on their past as parents raising their (now) adult children might also stir up feelings of rejection should parents feel as though their adult children are doing well without them (Raup & Myers, 1989). Although it has not been commonly reported in available studies, navigating new roles in this transition may be associated with poor mental health (e.g., depression, anxiety) (Kahana & Kahana, 1982), as well as higher reports of loneliness for mothers (Bouchard, 2014). Therefore, it might be difficult to manage other stressors, such as conflict regarding stress-inducing topics that emerge during this potentially stressful season of transition.

Regardless of whether the act of sending children out into the world to fend for themselves is a good thing or a bad thing for parents, the transition itself may make roles that were once crystal clear murky for a short time (i.e., less than two years following the departure of their last child; Harkins, 1978). During this transition to becoming empty nesters, how individuals envision themselves and their primary roles in their families becomes salient and

they might start to shift from seeing themselves as fathers and/or mothers to putting more emphasis on their identities as husbands and/or wives (Borland, 1982; Raup & Myers, 1989). Women might struggle with this transition a bit more if they were the ones who invested the most resources (e.g., emotion, time, energy) into their relationships with their children, especially when they do not know who they are outside of their role as a caregiver (Harkins, 1978). For this reason, it might be especially important for wives to perceive that their husbands are “filling up their cups” by investing time and energy into the marriage. Operating from a communal perspective wherein one partner’s problems are tackled by both partners hand-in-hand, spouses may help each other to verbally process their feelings and thoughts about the joys and challenges that accompany this new season in their family’s life. These displays of empathy and active listening may help spouses replenish their emotional reserves, and therefore enact more resilience.

Empty nesters are learning new patterns of interaction. Many empty nesters may have been married or in a committed relationship for 20+ years with a routine that worked for them when they had kids in the house (King & Theiss, 2016). Without having to orient their schedules around their children’s soccer practices, piano lessons, and study group meetings, for example, they may experience a disruption in the established schedules they have grown accustomed to performing (King & Theiss, 2016). When trying to figure out these new routines, partners might get in each other’s way (perhaps without even trying to do), which might provide fertile soil for conflict to emerge about the ways in which their partner makes their life harder (Kelley et al., 1983; King & Theiss, 2016; Solomon et al., 2016). Therefore, this may be a season ripe for integrating new patterns of investing into the health and wellness of the marriage. Husbands and

wives might learn to better enact relational maintenance, restoring the emotional reserves of their partner following this pivotal turning point in their marriages.

According to King and Theiss (2016), when empty nesters experience conflict, it can manifest physiologically. Specifically, King and Theiss (2016) discovered that when empty nesters experience conflict that is passive, they may experience heightened cortisol levels. When empty nesters experience conflict that is aggressive, they may experience the same physiological manifestations of the conflict that endure for longer than they would otherwise, which has implications for those adults' health as it relates to their susceptibility to diseases and immune system functioning (King & Theiss, 2016). Therefore, spousal conflict in the empty-nest phase of life is likely predictive of health and wellbeing outcomes for the couples as it relates to relational satisfaction, relational load, and resilience.

Given that the transition to the empty-nest phase of marriage can be a difficult one associated with the possibility of both positive and negative outcomes, and because empty nesters are typically working through this transition as an interdependent couple (Kelley et al., 1983), the TRRL (Afifi et al., 2016) offers a practical lens through which to explain why some married couples traverse this transition successfully, demonstrating resilience, while others do not. To briefly recap the previously discussed propositions of the TRRL, when individuals adopt a communal orientation and maintain their relationships, they will be more apt to appraise stress more beneficially than they would have otherwise and communicate in more productive ways, prompting less relational load and greater resilience. The following hypotheses, which draw from the previously discussed propositions of the TRRL, will guide this investigation (also see Figure 1):

Hypotheses

*H*₁: Empty nesters' communal orientation will be (*H*_{1a}) negatively associated with their relational load and (*H*_{1b}) positively associated with their resilience. Likewise, empty nesters' received active-empathic listening will be (*H*_{1c}) negatively associated with their relational load and (*H*_{1d}) positively associated with their resilience.

*H*₂: Empty nesters' communal orientation will be (*H*_{2a}) negatively associated with their stress, (*H*_{2b}) as well as their marital conflict. Similarly, empty nesters' received active-empathic listening will be (*H*_{2c}) negatively associated with their stress, (*H*_{2d}) as well as their marital conflict.

*H*₃: Empty nesters' stress will be (*H*_{3a}) positively associated with their relational load and (*H*_{3b}) negatively associated with their resilience. Likewise, empty nesters' marital conflict will be (*H*_{3c}) positively associated with their relational load and (*H*_{3d}) negatively associated with their resilience.

*H*₄: Empty nesters' stress and marital conflict will mediate the effect of communal orientation on relational load.

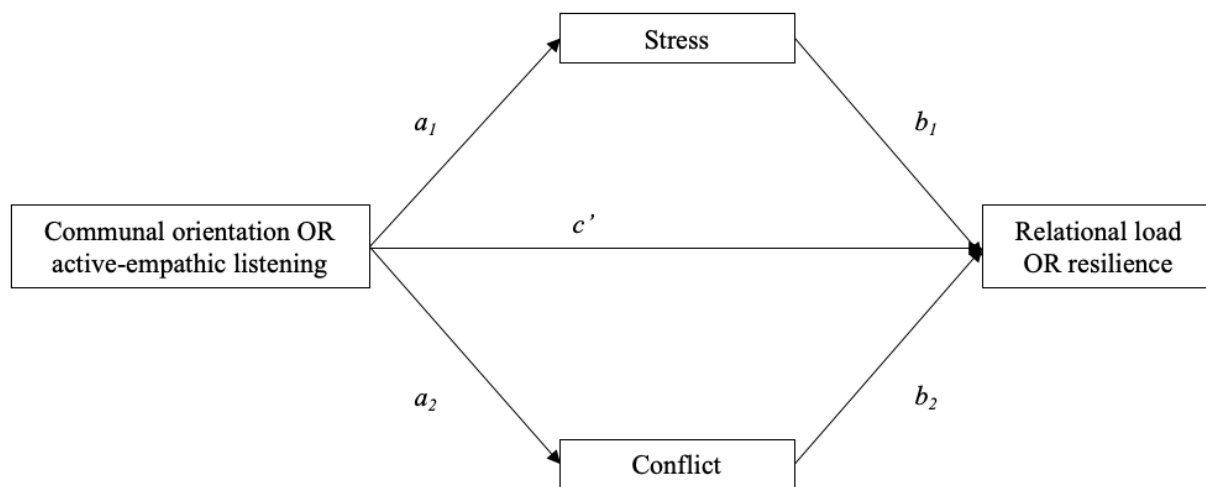
*H*₅: Empty nesters' stress and marital conflict will mediate the effect of active-empathic listening on relational load.

*H*₆: Empty nesters' stress and marital conflict will mediate the effect of communal orientation on resilience.

*H*₇: Empty nesters' stress and marital conflict will mediate the effect of active-empathic listening on resilience.

Figure 1

Conceptual Parallel Multiple Mediation Models



Note. Depending on the results of the preliminary analyses, covariates may be entered in final model testing.

Summary

In this chapter, I overviewed the literature on the theory of resilience and relational load (TRRL) by detailing the theoretical roots, key terms, assumptions, propositions, and scope conditions of the theory. I also described the challenges connected to the empty-nest phase of life. Many married individuals traverse the challenges connected to the empty-nest phase of life together. Given that many of these couples may have some foresight as to approximately when they will enter the empty-nest phase of life, the TRRL, which asserts that individuals can store emotional reserves via having a communal orientation and investing in their relationships in preparation for stormy seasons of life, might offer a theoretical explanation for why some couples demonstrate increased resilience after their children leave their home and why others do not. Therefore, one of the aims of the present study is to test the core propositions of the TRRL in the context of married empty nesters. Another goal of the present study is to explore active-empathic listening as a way that these empty nesters might be able to invest in and maintain their relationships in prosocial ways to build emotional reserves to pull from when they encounter stressors during the transition to the empty-nest phase of their marriages. When empty nesters have more emotional reserves to pull from, they are hypothesized to experience less stress and conflict, which, in turn, is hypothesized to result in less relational load, as well as greater resilience.

Chapter Two

Methodology

Participants

After removing participants who did not fit the study criteria, the final sample included 113 participants who were married individuals who had recently transitioned into the empty-nest phase of their lives, which meant that within the last 18 months (informed by the inclusion criteria used to identify parents who were empty nesters in King and Theiss' (2016) recent study), the last of the parents' children moved out of their parents' place of residence. Parents could identify as biological parents; however, they did not have to be biological parents to participate in the study. They could identify as stepparents, adoptive parents, etc. On a similar note, parents could be married to the biological parent, but they did not have to be married to the biological parent to be eligible to participate in the study. If biological parents were married and got divorced, they were still eligible to participate in the study if they were remarried to another partner (i.e., not the biological parent of the children in question).

Responses were collected from 13 males and 89 females. The average age of the participating parents was 51.402 years ($SD = 6.435$; ranging from 35 to 82 years) and the average age of their spouses was 52.265 years ($SD = 6.285$; ranging from 36 to 73 years). The average length of time participants had been married to their current spouse was 21.961 years ($SD = 7.469$; ranging from 2 to 36 years). Likewise, most partners indicated that they had not been previously married ($n = 84$); however, 19 participants said that they had been previously married one time. Most participants indicated that their current spouse was the biological parent of their child(ren) ($n = 86$), and one participant specifically indicated that they had adopted their child ("we adopted our son"). For those who indicated that their current spouse was not the biological

parent of their child(ren), 11 participants reported that they were actively coparenting with the biological parent of their child(ren).

The average number of children for parents was 2.608 ($SD = 1.045$; ranging from 1 to 5 children). The average length of time elapsed from the date when the last of their children (or child) left their place of residence was 8.466 months ($SD = 4.671$; ranging from 2 to 18 months). Most participants identified as the biological parent of the last one of their children (or child) to leave their place of residence ($n = 98$). Two participants identified as grandparents, two participants identified as stepparents, and one participant identified as an adoptive parent of the last one of their children (or child) to leave their place of residence. Of the participating parents, 99 saw themselves as the primary caregiver of the last of their children (or child) to leave the home. For parents with more than one child, the average length of time elapsed from the date when their first child(ren) left their place of residence was 3.958 years ($SD = 3.608$; ranging from 0 to 25 years).

When asked about their ethnicity, participating parents self-identified as White ($n = 89$), Latinx/Hispanic ($n = 4$), Middle Eastern ($n = 3$), Asian ($n = 2$), Black/African American ($n = 1$), Native American ($n = 1$), Multiethnic ($n = 1$), and other, which they specified as “Cape Verdean” ($n = 1$). When asked about their current spouse’s ethnicity, participants identified their current spouse as White ($n = 90$), Middle Eastern ($n = 3$), Native American ($n = 3$), Latinx/Hispanic ($n = 2$), Multiethnic ($n = 2$), Asian ($n = 1$), and Black/African American ($n = 1$).

When asked about the highest level of education that they had completed, participating parents indicated that they had earned a 4-year college degree ($n = 40$), earned a graduate degree ($n = 28$), completed some college ($n = 13$), finished high school (i.e., earned a diploma or a high school equivalency certificate) ($n = 11$), and earned a 2-year college degree ($n = 10$). When

asked about the highest level of education that their current spouse had completed, participants indicated that their spouse had earned a 4-year college degree ($n = 30$), earned a graduate degree ($n = 30$), finished high school (i.e., earned a diploma or a high school equivalency certificate) ($n = 19$), completed some college ($n = 13$), earned a 2-year college degree ($n = 8$), and completed some high school ($n = 2$).

When asked about their personal annual income, participating parents indicated that they earned \$40,000 to \$59,000 ($n = 22$), more than \$100,000 ($n = 21$), \$80,000 to \$100,000 ($n = 17$), \$60,000 to \$79,000 ($n = 12$), \$20,000 to \$39,000 ($n = 11$), and less than \$20,000 ($n = 2$). Some clarified that they do not work outside the home ($n = 10$), and others indicated that they were retired ($n = 3$). When asked about their current spouse's personal annual income, participating parents indicated that their spouse earned more than \$100,000 ($n = 40$), \$80,000 to \$100,000 ($n = 19$), \$60,000 to \$79,000 ($n = 16$), \$40,000 to \$59,000 ($n = 14$), \$20,000 to \$39,000 ($n = 4$), and less than \$20,000 ($n = 2$). Some clarified that their spouse does not work outside the home ($n = 4$) and one person said that their spouse was retired.

Procedures

After securing Institutional Review Board approval at West Virginia University (Protocol #: 2211683560), for a small amount of extra credit in classes offered in the Communication Studies department at West Virginia University, students were given the opportunity to recruit a parent who recently transitioned into the empty-nest phase of their marriage (i.e., their last child left home within the last 18 months) to participate in an online study hosted by Qualtrics. Recruitment efforts occurred on social media as well. Three criteria were required for study participation: 1) participants were to be recent empty nesters (i.e., have transitioned from having at least one child living full time in their home to having no children living full time in their

home within the last 18 months), 2) participants had to be currently involved in a marriage, and 3) participants had to be 18 years of age or older. It was specified in the recruitment materials and in the questionnaire itself that they would be considered empty nesters regardless of whether one or more of their children still comes home to live with them during breaks from work or school (e.g., for holidays, for summer). After completion of the online questionnaires, the participants were prompted to provide basic demographic information. Afterwards, the participants were given an opportunity to complete another optional survey hosted by Qualtrics (that was in no way attached to the main survey responses, to maintain data confidentiality) to provide identifiable information that would be sent to instructors for extra credit purposes (e.g., name of the student who recruited them/who should be awarded extra credit, course they want extra credit in, course instructor name) and/or used for prize raffle purposes (e.g., participants could choose to provide this information if they wished to be entered into a random drawing to win one of four \$20 Amazon gift cards).

Measures

All variables were assessed using a 7-point Likert-type scale wherein higher values equal “more” of the phenomenon in question (e.g., 1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*, 1 = *never or almost never true*, 7 = *always or almost always true*). All measures were to be completed in reference to the month after the participants’ last child left their home. Therefore, an added question stem (“During the month AFTER my last child left my home...”) preceded all items. See Appendix B for all scales used in this study. Composite reliabilities for all measures were computed using Hancock and An’s (2020) closed-form estimate in the OMEGA macro in SPSS (Hayes & Coutts, 2020) with 5,000 bootstrapped samples to generate 95% confidence intervals.

Communal Orientation

Employing an adapted and shortened version of Afifi et al.'s (2019) communal orientation scale, participants completed four items to assess communal orientation in their marriages (e.g., "My spouse and I approached life in general as a team"), $M = 5.854$, $SD = 1.226$, $\omega = .930$ [95% CI: .877, .960]. Afifi et al. (2019) demonstrated strong reliability for the original scale for husbands ($\alpha = .97$) and wives ($\alpha = .98$).

Active-Empathic Listening

Using an adapted version of Bodie's (2011) active-empathic listening scale (AELS), participants completed 11 items to measure perceptions of their spouses' effectiveness in performing the three stages of the active-empathic listening process. Four items (e.g., "My spouse was aware of what I implied but did not say") assessed *sensing*, three items (e.g., "My spouse summarized points of agreement and disagreement when appropriate") assessed *processing*, and four items (e.g., "My spouse assured me that s/he was listening by using verbal acknowledgements") assessed *responding*. Using Bodie and Jones' (2012) work as precedent for treating this scale as unidimensional, these three subscales were combined to form one composite variable measuring received active-empathic listening, which was then used in all subsequent analyses. The scale demonstrated excellent reliability, $M = 4.931$, $SD = 1.098$, $\omega = .926$ [95% CI: .882, .950]. Bodie and Jones (2012) reported strong reliability for this scale ($\alpha = .93$) in their study on person-centered support messages, nonverbal immediacy, and listening.

Stress

Employing an adapted version of Cohen et al.'s (1983) perceived stress scale, participants completed four items, two of which were reverse coded, to assess perceptions of their own stress (e.g., "I often felt I was unable to control the important things in my life"), $M = 2.988$, $SD = 1.241$, $\omega = .710$ [95% CI: .467, .835]. In a longitudinal test of the TRRL, Afifi et al. (2020b) also

adapted four items from Cohen et al.'s (1983) scale to assess election-related stress at multiple points in time. In that study, values for Cronbach's alpha ranged from .77 to .79 (Afifi et al., 2020b).

Conflict

Using an adapted version of Gyrch et al.'s (1992) perception of the frequency and intensity of interparental conflict measure, participants completed ten items, three of which were reverse coded, to assess perceptions of their marital conflict during the month after their last child left their home (e.g., "My spouse and I hardly ever yelled when we had a disagreement"), $M = 2.970$, $SD = 1.302$, $\omega = .898$ [95% CI: .850, .930]. In Haughton and Afifi's (2022) study on IIRs, an adapted version of Gyrch et al.'s (1992) measure was used to operationalize stigma-related conflict in romantic relationships. In that study, the scale demonstrated strong reliability ($\alpha = .86$) (Haughton & Afifi, 2022).

Relational Load

Following past TRRL research (e.g., Afifi et al., 2020b; Haughton & Afifi, 2022), an adapted version of Maslach and Jackson's (1981) employee burnout measure was employed to assess relational load. Participants completed seven items to measure perceptions of relational load during the month after their last child left their home (e.g., "I felt burned out from my marriage"), $M = 2.384$, $SD = 1.565$, $\omega = .968$ [95% CI: .950, .980]. Afifi et al. (2021) reported strong reliability when using seven adapted items from the employee burnout measure (Maslach & Jackson, 1981) to operationalize relational load for males ($\omega = .85$ [95% CI: .75, .90]) and females ($\omega = .84$ [95% CI: .74, .89]) involved in romantic relationships.

Resilience

Using an adapted version of Sinclair and Wallston's (2004) brief resilient coping scale (BRCS), participants completed four items to measure perceptions of their own resilience (e.g., "I actively looked for ways to replace the losses I encountered in life"), $M = 5.805$, $SD = 1.565$, $\omega = .658$ [95% CI: .479, .765]. In developing the scale, Sinclair and Wallston (2004) assessed the reliability of the BRCS more than once. The values for Cronbach's alpha ranged from .64 to .76 (Sinclair & Wallston, 2004).

Data Analysis

Preliminary Analyses

Potential covariates will be explored via preliminary analyses, which will then be included in substantive analyses where/if necessary. Specifically, to test for sex differences, as well as differences between those who did/did not identify as the primary caregiver of the last of their children (or child) to leave their home, independent samples t -tests will be run in SPSS to test for any group differences between males and females, as well as test for any group differences between those who did identify as primary caregivers and those who did not identify as primary caregivers, on the study variables. If there are statistically significant mean differences between groups on any of the study variables ($p < .05$), sex and/or primary caregiver identification will be entered as (a) covariate(s) in subsequent analyses. In addition, to test for statistically significant associations between the potential covariates of time elapsed since the last child left their home, as well as closeness with the last of their children (or child) to leave during the month prior to the last child leaving their home, and the study variables, bivariate Pearson correlations will be run in SPSS. If time elapsed since the last child left their home and closeness with the last child to leave home during the month prior to the last child leaving their home are statistically significantly associated with any of the study variables ($p < .05$), they will be entered as covariates in subsequent analyses.

Tests of Hypotheses

To test H_1 , H_2 , and H_3 , Pearson correlations will be used to investigate the relationships among study variables using the p -value cutoff of p is less than .05 when determining whether I have evidence of statistical significance. The results of these Pearson correlations will be presented in a table. To test H_4 , H_5 , H_6 , and H_7 , parallel multiple mediation models will be used to test the hypothesized causal processes. Specifically, employing the PROCESS 4.1 macro in SPSS, the manifest composites of the study variables will be run in parallel multiple mediation models using 5,000 bootstrapped samples with accompanying percentile bootstrap confidence intervals for the direct and indirect effects (Hayes, 2022). Parallel mediation offers an advantage over simple mediation here, as the former analysis controls for each mediator's effect simultaneously. Both unstandardized and standardized values will be reported for the direct and indirect effects. Finally, the unstandardized path model coefficients and R^2 values for the endogenous variables will be reported in figures.

Summary

In this chapter, data collection procedures and participant demographics were detailed. In addition, the measures used to operationalize the study variables within the TRRL were advanced. After considering and exploring the potential for there to be covariates worth controlling for in subsequent analyses, data will be analyzed using Pearson correlations, as well as parallel multiple mediation models using the PROCESS 4.1 macro in SPSS (i.e., Model 4) (Hayes, 2022). Ultimately, the goal is to test stress and conflict as parallel mediators between emotional reserves that individuals build via having a communal orientation and/or active-empathic listening and wellbeing outcomes of relational load and resilience.

Chapter Three

Results

In this chapter, the results of preliminary analyses are presented. To this end, zero-order Pearson correlations among study variables and control variables are displayed in Table 1. Next, in testing Hypotheses 1-3, the findings of the Pearson correlations are advanced. Finally, in testing Hypotheses 4-7, the results of the parallel multiple mediation models are detailed. Unstandardized model estimates for the parallel multiple mediation models are displayed in Tables 3-6. Figures 2-5 offer visual representations of the findings of the parallel multiple mediation models.

Preliminary Analyses

To explore potential covariates, preliminary analyses were administered. Results of a Pearson correlation evidenced that time elapsed since the last child left their home demonstrated a significant association with a couple study variables (see Table 1). Using an adapted version of Buchanan et al.'s (1991) measure of relational closeness often employed in research on parent-child relationships (e.g., Fellers et al., 2023; Fellers & Schrod, 2021), participants completed ten items, one of which was reverse coded, to assess perceptions of closeness with the last of their children (or child) to leave during the month prior to the last child leaving their home (e.g., "How close did you feel to your child?"). The scale demonstrated acceptable reliability, $M = 5.320$, $SD = .828$, $\omega = .772$ [95% CI: .708, .867]. Results of a Pearson correlation also evidenced that closeness with the last of their children (or child) to leave during the month prior to the last child leaving their home demonstrated significant associations with many study variables (see Table 1). Therefore, time elapsed since the last child left their home and closeness with the last of their children (or child) to leave during the month prior to the last child leaving their home were

entered as covariates in all subsequent analyses testing H_1-H_7 . For the first, second, and third hypotheses, the results of these preliminary analyses necessitated a change in the analysis plan, wherein second-order partial correlations will be used to accommodate inclusion of the two covariates. The results of these second-order partial correlations among study variables controlling for the covariates are displayed in Table 2.

Due to insufficient cell sizes, participant sex, as well as participant identification as a primary caregiver of the last of their children (or child) to leave their home, were not included in the analyses as covariates. Specifically, only 13 of the participants identified as males and only 4 of the participants indicated that they did not see themselves as the primary caregiver of the last of their children (or child) to leave the home.

Other potential covariates that were explored were assessed via an adapted version of a coparenting measure comprised of two subscales capturing (a) perceived antagonism in conflict when discussing parenting issues with one's current spouse, and (b) perceived supportiveness when discussing parenting issues with one's current spouse (Ahrons, 1981). After careful consideration, these subscales were not included in the subsequent analyses as covariates. Results of a bivariate Pearson correlation evidenced a strong relationship between the measure employed in the study to operationalize marital conflict as part of the TRRL and the first coparenting subscale of antagonism, $r(104) = .716, p < .001$. In addition, a moderate relationship between the active-empathic listening measure employed in the study to operationalize maintenance as part of the TRRL and the second coparenting subscale of supportiveness was observed, $r(103) = .534, p < .001$. Upon further examination of the items used in the marital conflict measure employed in the study and the antagonism coparenting subscale, both measures seemed quite similar as they both assessed perceptions regarding marital conflict

communication. Similar concerns surfaced when examining the items used in the active-empathic listening measure employed in the study and the supportiveness coparenting subscale. Although the first coparenting subscale of antagonism might have been able to replace the general conflict measure used in the study altogether, the general conflict measure produced a stronger reliability estimate than the one produced by the first coparenting scale. In summary, based on the empirical evidence and the theoretical considerations that prompted concerns of conceptual overlap, the two coparenting subscales were not included as covariates in subsequent analyses as they were deemed likely to explain the same or similar variance as conflict and active-empathic listening would explain in the endogenous variables in the parallel multiple mediation models.

Tests of Hypotheses

The first hypothesis predicted that empty nesters' communal orientation would be (H_{1a}) negatively associated with their relational load and (H_{1b}) positively associated with their resilience. H_{1a} was supported; however, H_{1b} was not supported. Controlling for time elapsed since the last child left their home and closeness with the last of their children (or child) to leave during the month prior to the last child leaving their home, results of a second-order partial correlation revealed a significant and inverse relationship between empty nesters' communal orientation and their relational load, $r(96) = -.476, p < .001$, but did not reveal a significant and positive relationship between empty nesters' communal orientation and their resilience, $r(96) = .154, p = .129$. In addition, the first hypothesis predicted that empty nesters' received active-empathic listening would be (H_{1c}) negatively associated with their relational load and (H_{1d}) positively associated with their resilience. H_{1c} was supported; however, H_{1d} was not supported. Controlling for time elapsed since the last child left their home and closeness with the last of

Table 1*Zero-Order Correlations Among Study Variables and Covariates*

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Communal orientation	--							
2. Active-empathic listening	.752**	--						
3. Stress	-.280**	-.119	--					
4. Marital conflict	-.459**	-.366**	.473**	--				
5. Relational load	-.501**	-.326**	.461**	.701**	--			
6. Resilience	.212*	.241*	-.235*	-.034	.015	--		
7. Time elapsed since last child left	.053	.041	-.191	-.249*	-.322**	.132	--	
8. Closeness with last child before they left	.276**	.346**	.002	-.217*	-.204*	.171	.023	--

Note. * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

Table 2*Second-Order Correlations Among Study Variables Controlling for Covariates*

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Communal orientation	--					
2. Active-empathic listening	.739**	--				
3. Stress	-.266**	-.113	--			
4. Marital conflict	-.411**	-.300**	.452**	--		
5. Relational load	-.476**	-.278**	.430**	.647**	--	
6. Resilience	.154	.188	-.237*	.054	.116	--

Note. * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ Time elapsed since the last child left their home and closeness with the last of their children (or child) to leave during the month prior to the last child leaving their home were entered as covariates.

their children (or child) to leave during the month prior to the last child leaving their home, results of a second-order partial correlation revealed a significant and inverse relationship between empty nesters' received active-empathic listening and their relational load, $r(96) = -.278, p = .006$, but did not reveal a significant and positive relationship between empty nesters' received active-empathic listening and their resilience, $r(96) = .188, p = .064$.

The second hypothesis predicted that empty nesters' communal orientation would be (H_{2a}) negatively associated with their stress, (H_{2b}) as well as their marital conflict. Both H_{2a} and H_{2b} were supported. Controlling for time elapsed since the last child left their home and closeness with the last of their children (or child) to leave during the month prior to the last child leaving their home, results of a second-order partial correlation revealed a significant and inverse relationship between empty nesters' communal orientation and their stress, $r(96) = -.266, p = .008$, as well as their marital conflict, $r(96) = -.411, p < .001$. In addition, the second hypothesis predicted that empty nesters' received active-empathic listening would be (H_{2c}) negatively associated with their stress, (H_{2d}) as well as their marital conflict. H_{2c} was not supported; however, H_{2d} was supported. Controlling for time elapsed since the last child left their home and closeness with the last of their children (or child) to leave during the month prior to the last child leaving their home, results of a second-order partial correlation did not reveal a significant negative relationship between empty nesters' received active-empathic listening and their stress, $r(96) = -.113, p = .268$, but did reveal a significant and inverse relationship between empty nesters' received active-empathic listening and their marital conflict, $r(96) = -.300, p = .003$.

The third hypothesis predicted that empty nesters' stress would be (H_{3a}) positively associated with their relational load and (H_{3b}) negatively associated with their resilience. Both H_{3a} and H_{3b} were supported. Controlling for time elapsed since the last child left their home and

closeness with the last of their children (or child) to leave during the month prior to the last child leaving their home, results of a second-order partial correlation revealed a significant and positive relationship between empty nesters' stress and their relational load, $r(96) = .430, p < .001$, as well as a significant and inverse relationship between empty nesters' stress and their resilience, $r(96) = -.237, p = .019$. In addition, the third hypothesis also predicted that empty nesters' marital conflict would be (H_{3c}) positively associated with their relational load and (H_{3d}) negatively associated with their resilience. H_{3c} was supported; however, H_{3d} was not supported. Controlling for time elapsed since the last child left their home and closeness with the last of their children (or child) to leave during the month prior to the last child leaving their home, results of a second-order partial correlation revealed a significant and positive relationship between empty nesters' marital conflict and their relational load, $r(96) = .647, p < .001$, but a second-order partial correlation did not reveal a significant negative relationship between empty nesters' marital conflict and their resilience, $r(96) = .054, p = .600$.

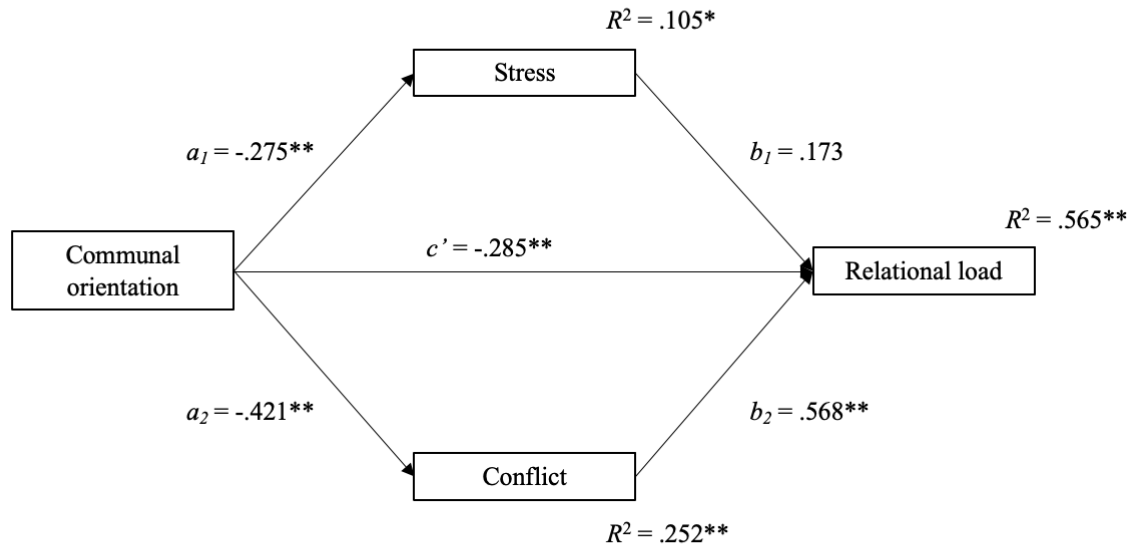
The remaining study hypotheses were tested with the PROCESS version 4.1 macro in SPSS (Hayes, 2022) to estimate ordinary least squares path analysis. Specifically, parallel multiple mediation models were run using 5,000 percentile bootstrap samples. The path model coefficients and the effect sizes are reported in Figures 2-5. The unstandardized model estimates are presented in Tables 3-6.

The fourth hypothesis predicted that empty nesters' stress and marital conflict would mediate the effect of communal orientation on relational load. Results of a parallel multiple mediation model supported the fourth hypothesis (see Figure 2 and Table 3). Controlling for time elapsed since the last child left their home and closeness with the last of their children (or child) to leave during the month prior to the last child leaving their home, communal orientation

indirectly decreased relational load through stress ($a_1b_1 = -.048 [-.126, -.002]$; $a_1b_{1cs} = -.038$) and marital conflict ($a_2b_2 = -.239 [-.407, -.083]$; $a_2b_{2cs} = -.190$), controlling for each other as mediators. Controlling for time elapsed since the last child left their home and closeness with the last of their children (or child) to leave during the month prior to the last child leaving their home, communal orientation also directly decreased relational load ($c' = -.285 [-.479, -.090]$; $c'_{cs} = -.227$), controlling for stress and marital conflict. There was evidence that the parallel indirect effects differed in magnitude (indirect effect contrast = $.191 [.015, .366]$; $contrast_{cs} = .152 [.012, .293]$), which means that, in this model, marital conflict was a stronger negative mediator as compared to stress.

Figure 2

Parallel Multiple Mediation Model Predicting Relational Load with Communal Orientation (H_4)



Note. * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ Time elapsed since the last child left their home and closeness with the last of their children (or child) to leave during the month prior to the last child leaving their home were entered as covariates. Path coefficients are unstandardized.

Table 3*Unstandardized Model Estimates (H₄)*

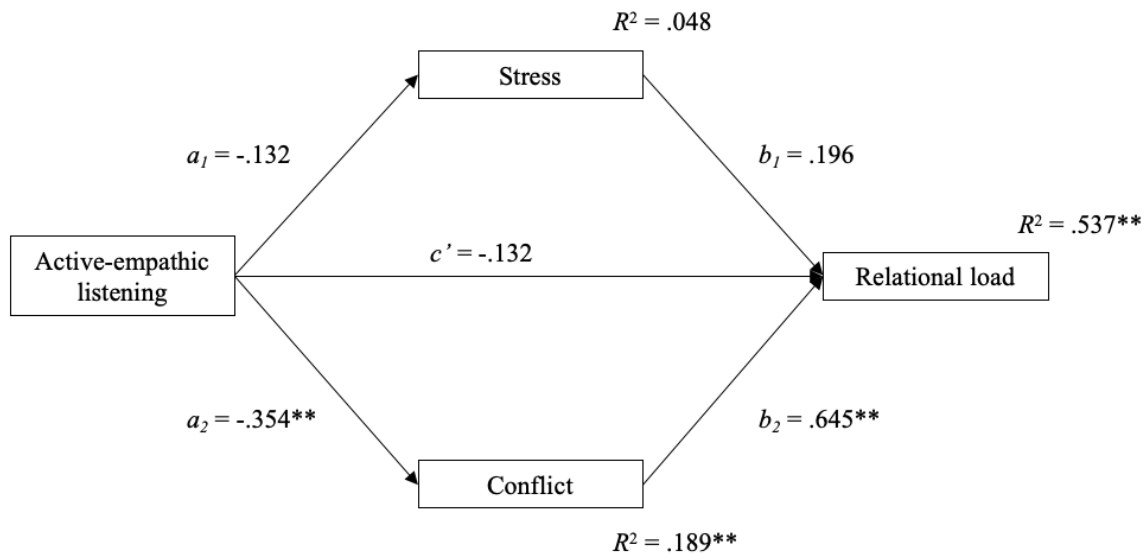
<i>F</i> (3, 97) = 3.797, <i>p</i> = .013, <i>R</i> ² = .105				
Stress				
	Estimate	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI
Communal orientation	-.275	.102	.008	[-.476, -.073]
Stress	-	-	-	-
Marital conflict	-	-	-	-
Time elapsed since last child left	-.048	.026	.065	[-.098, .003]
Closeness with last child before they left	.087	.160	.587	[-.230, .404]
<i>F</i> (3, 97) = 10.895, <i>p</i> < .001, <i>R</i> ² = .252				
Marital conflict				
	Estimate	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI
Communal orientation	-.421	.097	<.001	[-.612, -.229]
Stress	-	-	-	-
Marital conflict	-	-	-	-
Time elapsed since last child left	-.061	.024	.013	[-.110, -.013]
Closeness with last child before they left	-.158	.152	.302	[-.459, .144]
<i>F</i> (5, 95) = 24.693, <i>p</i> < .001, <i>R</i> ² = .565				
Relational load				
	Estimate	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI
Communal orientation	-.285	.098	.005	[-.479, -.090]
Stress	.173	.097	.077	[-.019, .366]
Marital conflict	.568	.102	<.001	 [.365, .770]
Time elapsed since last child left	-.054	.023	.022	[-.100, -.008]
Closeness with last child before they left	-.100	.142	.483	[-.382, .182]

Note. Bold numbers indicate a significant unstandardized estimate.

The fifth hypothesis predicted that empty nesters' stress and marital conflict would mediate the effect of received active-empathic listening on relational load. Results of a parallel multiple mediation model partially supported the fifth hypothesis (see Figure 3 and Table 4). Controlling for time elapsed since the last child left their home and closeness with the last of their children (or child) to leave during the month prior to the last child leaving their home, active-empathic listening did not indirectly decrease relational load through stress ($a_1b_1 = -.026$ [-.105, .016]; $a_1b_{1cs} = -.018$), but did indirectly decrease relational load through marital conflict ($a_2b_2 = -.229$ [-.423, -.028]; $a_2b_{2cs} = -.159$), controlling for each other as mediators. Controlling for time elapsed since the last child left their home and closeness with the last of their children (or child) to leave during the month prior to the last child leaving their home, received active-empathic listening did not directly decrease relational load ($c' = -.132$ [-.351, .088], $c'_{cs} = -.092$), controlling for stress and marital conflict.

Figure 3

Parallel Multiple Mediation Model Predicting Relational Load with Active-Empathic Listening (H₃)



Note. * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ Time elapsed since the last child left their home and closeness with the last of their children (or child) to leave during the month prior to the last child leaving their home were entered as covariates. Path coefficients are unstandardized.

Table 4*Unstandardized Model Estimates (H5)*

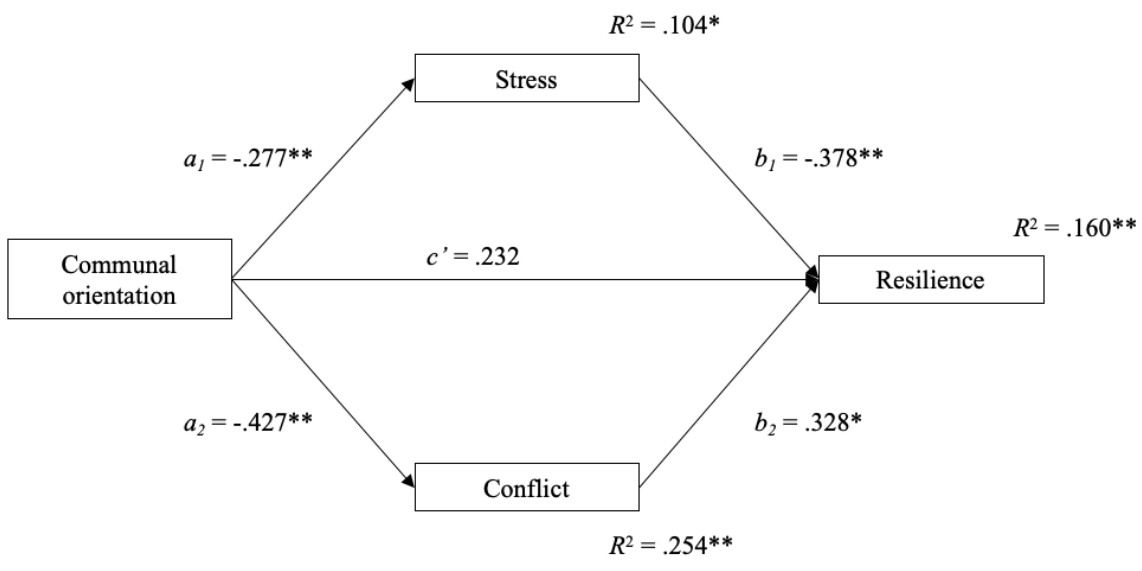
$F(3, 97) = 1.618, p = .190, R^2 = .048$				
Stress				
	Estimate	SE	<i>p</i>	95% CI
Active-empathic listening	-.132	.118	.267	[-.366, .103]
Stress	-	-	-	-
Marital conflict	-	-	-	-
Time elapsed since last child left	-.049	.027	.069	[-.103, .004]
Closeness with last child before they left	.015	.165	.929	[-.312, .342]
$F(3, 97) = 7.538, p < .001, R^2 = .189$				
Marital conflict				
	Estimate	SE	<i>p</i>	95% CI
Active-empathic listening	-.354	.114	.003	[-.580, -.128]
Stress	-	-	-	-
Marital conflict	-	-	-	-
Time elapsed since last child left	-.063	.026	.017	[-.114, -.012]
Closeness with last child before they left	-.226	.159	.158	[-.541, .089]
$F(5, 95) = 21.992, p < .001, R^2 = .537$				
Relational load				
	Estimate	SE	<i>p</i>	95% CI
Active-empathic listening	-.132	.111	.236	[-.351, .088]
Stress	.196	.101	.055	[-.005, .396]
Marital conflict	.645	.105	< .001	 [.438, .853]
Time elapsed since last child left	-.052	.025	.040	[-.101, -.002]
Closeness with last child before they left	-.172	.149	.251	[-.468, .124]

Note. Bold numbers indicate a significant unstandardized estimate.

The sixth hypothesis predicted that empty nesters' stress and marital conflict would mediate the effect of communal orientation on resilience. Results of a parallel multiple mediation model partially supported the sixth hypothesis (see Figure 4 and Table 5). Controlling for time elapsed since the last child left their home and closeness with the last of their children (or child) to leave during the month prior to the last child leaving their home, communal orientation indirectly increased resilience through stress ($a_1b_1 = .105$ [.020, .192]; $a_1b_{1cs} = .084$); however, in contrast with what the propositions of the TRRL would suggest, communal orientation indirectly decreased resilience through marital conflict ($a_2b_2 = -.140$ [-.289, -.002]; $a_2b_{2cs} = -.113$). Controlling for time elapsed since the last child left their home and closeness with the last of their children (or child) to leave during the month prior to the last child leaving their home, communal orientation did not directly increase resilience ($c' = .232$ [-.038, .502]; $c'_{cs} = .186$), controlling for stress and marital conflict.

Figure 4

Parallel Multiple Mediation Model Predicting Resilience with Communal Orientation (H₆)



Note. * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ Time elapsed since the last child left their home and closeness with the last of their children (or child) to leave during the month prior to the last child leaving their home were entered as covariates. Path coefficients are unstandardized.

Table 5*Unstandardized Model Estimates (H₆)*

$F(3, 96) = 3.721, p = .014, R^2 = .104$				
Stress				
	Estimate	SE	<i>p</i>	95% CI
Communal orientation	-.277	.102	.008	[-.480, -.074]
Stress	-	-	-	-
Marital conflict	-	-	-	-
Time elapsed since last child left	-.046	.026	.082	[-.098, .006]
Closeness with last child before they left	.085	.161	.599	[-.235, .404]

$F(3, 96) = 10.865, p < .001, R^2 = .254$				
Marital conflict				
	Estimate	SE	<i>p</i>	95% CI
Communal orientation	-.427	.097	< .001	[-.620, -.235]
Stress	-	-	-	-
Marital conflict	-	-	-	-
Time elapsed since last child left	-.057	.025	.025	[-.106, -.007]
Closeness with last child before they left	-.165	.152	.281	[-.467, .137]

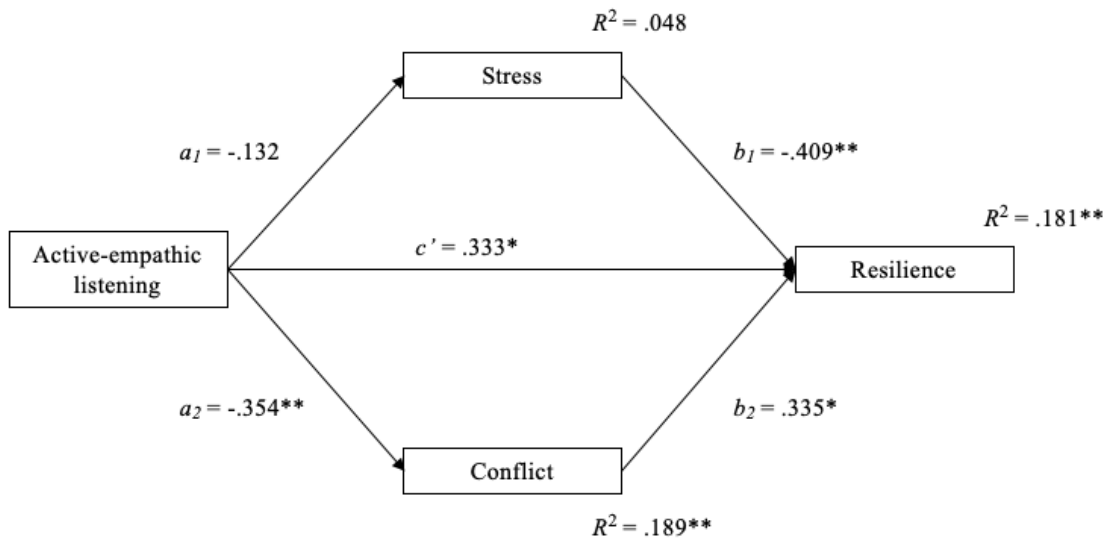
$F(5, 94) = 3.592, p = .005, R^2 = .160$				
Resilience				
	Estimate	SE	<i>p</i>	95% CI
Communal orientation	.232	.136	.092	[-.038, .502]
Stress	-.378	.134	.006	[-.644, -.113]
Marital conflict	.328	.141	.022	 [.048, .608]
Time elapsed since last child left	.040	.033	.225	[-.025, .105]
Closeness with last child before they left	.353	.196	.075	[-.036, .743]

Note. Bold numbers indicate a significant unstandardized estimate.

The seventh hypothesis predicted that empty nesters' stress and marital conflict would mediate the effect of received active-empathic listening on resilience. Results of a parallel multiple mediation model did not support the seventh hypothesis (see Figure 5 and Table 6). Controlling for time elapsed since the last child left their home and closeness with the last of their children (or child) to leave during the month prior to the last child leaving their home, active-empathic listening did not indirectly increase resilience through stress ($a_1b_1 = .054 [-.044, .145]$; $a_1b_{1cs} = .039$) or through marital conflict ($a_2b_2 = -.119 [-.250, .004]$; $a_2b_{2cs} = -.085$). Controlling for time elapsed since the last child left their home and closeness with the last of their children (or child) to leave during the month prior to the last child leaving their home, active-empathic listening did directly increase resilience ($c' = .333 [.049, .617]$; $c'_{cs} = .238$), controlling for stress and marital conflict.

Figure 5

Parallel Multiple Mediation Model Predicting Resilience with Active-Empathic Listening (H7)



Note. * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ Time elapsed since the last child left their home and closeness with the last of their children (or child) to leave during the month prior to the last child leaving their home were entered as covariates. Path coefficients are unstandardized.

Table 6*Unstandardized Model Estimates (H7)*

$F(3, 97) = 1.618, p = .190, R^2 = .048$				
Stress				
	Estimate	SE	<i>p</i>	95% CI
Active-empathic listening	-.132	.118	.267	[-.366, .103]
Stress	-	-	-	-
Marital conflict	-	-	-	-
Time elapsed since last child left	-.049	.027	.069	[-.103, .004]
Closeness with last child before they left	.015	.165	.929	[-.312, .342]
$F(3, 97) = 7.538, p < .001, R^2 = .189$				
Marital conflict				
	Estimate	SE	<i>p</i>	95% CI
Active-empathic listening	-.354	.114	.003	[-.580, -.128]
Stress	-	-	-	-
Marital conflict	-	-	-	-
Time elapsed since last child left	-.063	.026	.017	[-.114, -.012]
Closeness with last child before they left	-.226	.159	.158	[-.541, .089]
$F(5, 95) = 4.207, p = .002, R^2 = .181$				
Resilience				
	Estimate	SE	<i>p</i>	95% CI
Active-empathic listening	.333	.143	.022	 [.049, .617]
Stress	-.409	.130	.002	[-.668, -.150]
Marital conflict	.335	.135	.015	 [.067, .604]
Time elapsed since last child left	.041	.032	.209	[-.023, .104]
Closeness with last child before they left	.323	.193	.097	[-.060, .706]

Note. Bold numbers indicate a significant unstandardized estimate.

Summary

This chapter reported the findings for the preliminary analyses and the tests of the study hypotheses. As the preliminary analyses suggested the inclusion of two covariates, second-order partial correlations were run to test the first, second, and third hypotheses, all of which were at least partially supported. Four parallel multiple mediation models were run to test the fourth, fifth, and sixth hypotheses, all of which were at least partially supported, as well as the seventh hypothesis, which was not supported. A brief recap of the findings is as follows. First, communal orientation indirectly reduced relational load through both stress and marital conflict, controlling for each other as mediators, as well as the two covariates in the model. Second, received active-empathic listening did not indirectly reduce relational load through stress, but did indirectly decrease relational load through marital conflict, controlling for each other as mediators, as well as the two covariates in the model. Third, controlling for the covariates in the model, communal orientation indirectly increased resilience through stress, controlling for the other mediator of conflict; however, contrary to our prediction, communal orientation indirectly decreased resilience through marital conflict, controlling for the other mediator of stress. Fourth, controlling for the covariates in the model, received active-empathic listening did not indirectly increase resilience through stress or through marital conflict, controlling for each other as mediators. In the next chapter, these results will be unpacked in greater detail. Specifically, theoretical implications, practical implications, limitations, and future research will be discussed.

Chapter Four

Discussion

The aim of this study was to test the theory of resilience and relational load in the context of married individuals who recently became empty nesters. Specifically, we explored the possible benefits of adopting a communal orientation as a couple, as well as the ramifications of being a recipient of active-empathic listening from one's spouse during the early days of the empty nest phase of life. In this chapter, we will (a) discuss the role of active-empathic listening in the empty nest season of life, (b) unpack potential theoretical explanations for the surprising consequence of empty nesters operating from a communal orientation, and (c) postulate a different way of conceptualizing the function of relational maintenance within the TRRL, as well as (d) advance alternative ways of measuring resilience. Limitations and future directions are embedded throughout this chapter, but some of them are also formally outlined near the end of the chapter.

The Role of Active-Empathic Listening in the Empty Nest Phase of Life

To date, active-empathic listening has not received much scholarly attention from those who study communication and has not yet been explored as a potential part of the TRRL framework. Yet, the findings of this study point to many reasons why this should not be the case moving forward. In the following paragraphs, intriguing theoretical and practical insights and implications will be discussed, as well as promising avenues for future research using active-empathic listening as a proxy for relational maintenance when testing the TRRL, which will be sprinkled throughout.

Theoretical Implications

The results of this study illuminate the importance of effective listening as it relates to marital conflict communication. In correlational tests of the second hypothesis, active-empathic listening was inversely associated with empty nesters' reports of marital conflict, controlling for the time elapsed since the last child left their home and closeness with the last of their children (or child) to leave during the month prior to the last child leaving their home (H_{2d}). These findings offer some support for the fourth proposition of the TRRL in this particular context (Afifi et al., 2016).

According to the TRRL (Afifi et al., 2016), when individuals experience stressful times, the emotional reserves that they have accumulated through received relational maintenance (i.e., such as active-empathic listening) should help promote healthier communication in their close relationships (e.g., less threat-based appraisals and more security-based appraisals). Conversely, when individuals experience stressful times and they have not stored up emotional reserves through received relational maintenance (e.g., perhaps because their partner does not often practice active-empathic listening), they may be apt to communicate in ways that prioritize protecting themselves at the expense of close others (Afifi et al., 2016). This may manifest in destructive conflict communication, which could be harmful to one's spouse, in the context of this study, as well as to the relationship itself.

In accordance with the TRRL, received active-empathic listening indirectly led to reduced relational load through marital conflict, but contrary to expectations, it did not indirectly lead to reduced relational load through the mediator of stress, controlling for each other as mediators, as well as the time elapsed since the last child left their home and closeness with the last of their children (or child) to leave during the month prior to the last child leaving their home (H_5). In that model testing H_5 , results revealed that received active-empathic listening did not

directly lead to reduced relational load even though received active-empathic listening did directly lead to increased resilience in testing a parallel mediation model for H_7 . As one potential explanation for these findings, perhaps received active-empathic listening emerged as a direct predictor of individual resilience (as opposed to relational load) in a parallel mediation model with stress and marital conflict entered as mediators because resilience (in terms of the way it was operationalized in this study) has more to do with how the individual sees themselves, whereas relational load (in terms of the way it was measured in this study) has more to do with how the individual sees their relationship. In this way, when it counts, empty nesters might be able to grow in their propensity to demonstrate resilience as an individual when their partner is a good listener (e.g., asking them questions that make it easier to process through their next steps during hard times).

Contrary to the predictions of H_7 , stress and marital conflict did not mediate the relationship between active-empathic listening and resilience when controlling for each other as mediators and the time elapsed since the last child left their home and closeness with the last of their children (or child) to leave during the month prior to the last child leaving their home. But, the star of the show was actually active-empathic listening, which emerged as a direct predictor of resilience in this model, as briefly mentioned in the previous paragraph. Of course, it is possible that the measurement issues with resilience (which will be discussed in detail later) could be contributing to some of these nonsignificant indirect effects. Yet, it is also important to note that even with a relatively small sample size and even after controlling for other variables, having a spouse who excelled in sensing, processing, and responding (i.e., the three stages of active-empathic listening) directly led to greater resilience for recent empty nesters.

Perhaps this can be explained by the way resilience was operationalized in this study. Sinclair and Wallston's (2004) brief resilient coping scale (BRCS) seemed to assess a person's efficacy to control their own reactions to stressful seasons of life. It seems logical then that a spouse who excels at active-empathic listening would be able to help their spouse demonstrate resilience. For example, a spouse could sense when their partner needed to talk. They could listen to their partner with intention and purpose. They could ask thoughtful follow-up questions intended to help their partner recognize the agency they have in controlling their own reactions to the stressful situations they face.

An additional finding related to role of active-empathic listening from the current study that has implications for the TRRL is as follows. According to the first proposition of the TRRL (Afifi et al., 2016), people who receive greater relational maintenance from a close other might appraise their stress differently than they would have otherwise appraised it (i.e., had they received less relational maintenance from a close other). Yet, based on the results of a second-order partial correlation, when controlling for the time elapsed since the last child left their home and closeness with the last of their children (or child) to leave during the month prior to the last child leaving their home, empty nesters' received active-empathic listening was not statistically significantly associated with their reports of stress during the month after their last child left the home (H_{2c}). It may be the case that these results demonstrate that stress is simply a normal part of the human experience, in line with the second assumption of the TRRL (Afifi et al., 2016). Logically, it makes sense that the experience of certain stress-inducing events, such as navigating the early days of the empty nest phase of life with one's spouse, might prompt heightened levels of stress for people—regardless of how well they have tried to ward it off or otherwise attempted

to shore up their defenses in preparation for it (e.g., with prosocial relational maintenance behaviors like active-empathic listening).

Moving to another noteworthy theoretical implication that emerged from this study's findings related to active-empathic listening is that when interpreting the findings of this study and pondering what they might mean for the TRRL moving forward, it is important to be mindful of the limitations of the study design. Specifically, this study was not longitudinal in nature, nor did it include an experimental manipulation or intervention. As Afifi et al. (2022) explains, the theory is quite complex, which means that the TRRL is "best tested in parts" (p. 350). Therefore, it remains unclear whether asking married empty nesters to engage in more active-empathic listening with their spouse during the month after their last child leaves the nest would help them to appraise their stress as less severe than they did before an intervention transpired (i.e., within-subjects design), and/or as less severe than if they were not prompted to engage in heightened relational maintenance with their spouse at all (i.e., based on statistical comparisons between an intervention group and a control group).

With that said, perhaps it would be advantageous to design an intervention-based experiment for married empty nesters similar to the one Afifi and colleagues (2019) conducted in the context of families wherein one of the couple's adolescent children had type 1 diabetes (T1D). Afifi et al. (2019) created an intervention for the parents to encourage them to engage in more daily prosocial relational maintenance in their romantic relationships (i.e., physical touch, words of affirmation, quality time, acts of service). Couples were randomly assigned to either the intervention condition, wherein they were asked to enact the prosocial relational maintenance behaviors described above, or the control condition, wherein they were not prompted by the researchers to enact those behaviors (Afifi et al., 2019). Because of the longitudinal design of

Afifi et al.'s (2019) study, the research team was well-positioned to measure stress at multiple time points, and the findings revealed that more maintenance predicted less T1D-related stress for the wives/mothers in the study. Therefore, perhaps researchers could measure stress at multiple time points for an intervention group and a control group of married empty nesters during the month after becoming empty nesters. In the same way that receiving more helpful maintenance behaviors from one's husband served to decrease T1D-related stress for mothers of children with T1D, it is possible that receiving positive maintenance behaviors such as active-empathic listening would work to decrease stress for empty nesters (perhaps especially for mothers, given the results of Afifi et al.'s study in 2019), particularly during the early days of this transition.

Spouses are not likely to be the only people who could offer effective support to recent empty nesters through active-empathic listening. Future researchers might investigate the impact of parents receiving support from other empty-nest parents during this time using the TRRL framework. The overwhelming majority of this study's sample identified as the primary caregiver of the last of their children (or child) to leave the home. Therefore, perhaps it might be helpful for those who consider themselves to be the primary caregivers for their children (or child) to have conversations with other parents who also see themselves in this way (i.e., as the primary caregiver) as they navigate this transition to the empty nest phase of life. In a qualitative study using the TRRL as a theoretical framework, Waldron and Farnworth (2020) identified relying on external networks as one way in which those who were a part of a committed romantic relationship for at least 20 years demonstrated resilience through adversity they faced with their partner. Furthermore, for single parents navigating this transition to the empty nest

phase of life, it might be particularly important to rely on friends who can sense when something is wrong, retain what they have said, and respond to them in loving and supportive ways.

Practical Implications

Now that the importance of active-empathic listening has been established in unpacking the results of this study on married, recent empty nesters, practically speaking, how often is this skill taught? Julian Treasure, a renowned speaker with a heart for studying sound and communication, delivered a TED talk in 2011 titled, “5 Ways to Listen Better.” During this TED talk, after offering many tips and tricks to help people grow in their listening skills, Treasure (2011) exclaimed, “We need to teach listening in our schools as a skill. Why is it not taught? It’s crazy.” That sentiment is worth echoing here.

Covering listening in pre-marital and marital counseling is a good start; however, it might be particularly helpful to host conferences or workshops intended to encourage couples to practice these skills. Employing active learning strategies such as role-playing, facilitators of these events could unpack the three stages of active-empathic listening with married or soon-to-be married individuals. To begin, facilitators could describe and provide examples of (1) sensing, (2) processing, and (3) responding (Bodie, 2011).

It is possible that some married people will have already mastered some of the aspects of active-empathic listening by the time they become empty nesters, yet there is always room to grow. Facilitators of marital listening conferences or workshops should try their best to help couples think about which aspects of active-empathic listening they might benefit from focusing on the most during the conference or workshop. Because the average number of years participants in this sample had been married to their current spouse was 21.961 years, it seems that many married, recent empty nesters—at least in this sample—have been married to their

current spouse for decades. Perhaps this extended time together has allowed them to become more familiar with how their spouse communicates their emotions through subtle changes in their nonverbal communication behaviors (i.e., sensing) (Bodie et al., 2013). Maybe some of them need to learn or even re-learn how to carve out the time to listen to their spouse in ways that will allow them to retain what their partner has said (i.e., processing) (Bodie et al., 2013). This could mean being intentional to put away one's phone or other technology when their spouse is sharing their heart with them (see Sbarra et al., 2019 for insights on and potential impacts of what they call technofence). Finally, the art of asking good follow-up questions is a beautiful one to master in any marriage (i.e., responding) (Bodie et al., 2013). The facilitator could share encouragement that couples who are able to respond to their spouse in ways that help their spouse feel welcome to verbally process through their feelings and cognitions and engage in cognitive reappraisals of those stressful experiences, might actually be able to play a role in helping their spouse feel better after a hard day (Jones & Wirtz, 2006), in line with the theory of conversationally induced reappraisals (Burlison & Goldsmith, 1998). Giving examples of and encouragement regarding the three stages of active-empathic listening might help the married individuals identify their strengths and weaknesses as a listener before diving into the active-learning activity.

Next, the facilitator could prompt individuals to put what they learned about active-empathic listening into practice by being intentional regarding implementing what they learned about being a good listener while their spouse is sharing a story about a stressful experience they recently encountered. After five minutes, the partners could switch roles. Once each person has had a turn to put what they learned into practice, the facilitator could lead individuals through a process of thoughtful and quiet individual reflection (e.g., filling out handouts with questions

evaluating how well they think they and their partner did at practicing active-empathic listening during the exercise) and collaborative and fruitful group debriefs (e.g., facilitating a discussion about what worked and what did not work for people when trying to implement what they learned about active-empathic listening when hearing their spouse talk for five minutes about something stressful). Finally, the facilitator could encourage the group to identify their own next steps in becoming a better listener. If efficacious, interventions intended to improve empty nesters' effective listening skills could, in turn, improve married couples' resilience, as per the TRRL.

The Surprising Consequence (and Benefits) of Operating From a Communal Orientation

Similar to active-empathic listening, the endorsement of a communal orientation also promoted many positive outcomes for empty nesters. In accordance with the predictions of the TRRL, endorsement of a communal orientation was inversely related to empty nesters' stress (H_{2a}). Those who have a communal orientation might perceive the challenges they face (such as those that accompany a transition to the empty nest phase of life) to be less stressful because they see themselves as having a teammate who is willing and eager to share in the struggles they face. As Afifi et al. (2016) suggested, individuals may also make more external attributions for stress that they experience in their relationships when they have a communal orientation. For example, perhaps empty nesters with a communal orientation might blame the transition to the empty nest phase of life itself (as opposed to each other) for any stress encountered in trying to find new rhythms and routines that work for them now that the children are gone. Therefore, they might see the good in their partner and communicate with their partner in benevolent ways, which might correspond with less stress. Similarly, endorsement of a communal orientation was inversely related to empty nesters' reports of marital conflict (H_{2b}). Perhaps this is because those

who see their spouse as their teammate in life communicate in marital conflicts with that same mentality (e.g., believing that they are on the same team as their spouse), prompting less divisive conflict communication (Rahim, 1983).

In a parallel multiple mediation model, as expected, communal orientation indirectly predicted reduced relational load through empty nesters' stress and marital conflict, controlling for each other as mediators as well as the time elapsed since the last child left their home and closeness with the last of their children (or child) to leave during the month prior to the last child leaving their home (*H4*), but marital conflict was the stronger mediator of the two. In the model, communal orientation also emerged as a direct predictor of reduced relational load. In these ways, the theory worked as outlined. Because increased relational load is theorized to negatively impact a person's relational, physical, and mental health in the short- and long-term (due to the depletion of one's available resources; Afifi et al., 2016), it is important to enact behaviors that ward against increased relational load. The results of these analyses support the endorsement of a communal orientation as one promising way for empty nesters to reduce relational load in their marriages both directly and indirectly through stress and marital conflict, which will then *hopefully* allow them to healthier lives, both in the short-term and the long-term.

Contrary to what was predicted in the sixth hypothesis, endorsement of a communal orientation decreased resilience through marital conflict, when controlling for stress, as well as the time elapsed since the last child left their home and closeness with the last of their children (or child) to leave during the month prior to the last child leaving their home. Although it is possible that we may be seeing a suppression effect here (considering the evidence of nonsignificant associations between marital conflict and resilience presented in both Table 1 and Table 2), it is still worth exploring some theoretical explanations as to why this unexpected result

may have emerged. Again, Haughton and Afifi (2022) pointed out that as it currently stands, the TRRL does not account for times wherein individuals experience diminished wellbeing even though they are doing all the “right” things from the TRRL’s perspective (e.g., communicating in conflict in more positive ways with less threat-based appraisals and more security-based appraisals; Afifi et al., 2016). Perhaps future research with the TRRL could explore additional best practices for promoting resilience through hard times (e.g., volunteer work to focus on helping others when you are down, relying on one’s external network or even one’s faith in a higher power to get through a difficult season; Waldron & Farnworth, 2020).

In addition, although the TRRL is often used to study how some people can demonstrate resilience with close others despite stressful circumstances, it is possible that this surprising finding illuminates how couples can experience greater resilience *because* they went through difficult times together that prompted greater marital conflict communication. For one, conflict, however challenging it may be to navigate, has the propensity to bring couples closer (Afifi et al., 2015; Afifi et al., 2022). Furthermore, looking back on the marital conflicts they have successfully navigated as a couple may give these long-married individuals the confidence and efficacy to believe that they can get through anything else that life throws their way because they know that they have already walked through difficult seasons with their spouse, and they made it to the other side. The theory of relational entropy might also shed some light on this unexpected finding, which will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

Reimagining Relational Maintenance and Resilience

Relational Maintenance

Integrating knowledge from extant theoretical perspectives can serve to elevate the quality of our scholarship. As it currently stands, the function of relational maintenance within

the TRRL is to accumulate emotional reserves for people to pull from later (Afifi et al., 2016). Unlike the TRRL, the theory of relational entropy (TRE) does not postulate that relational maintenance can be stored as emotional reserves (Ledbetter & Fellers, 2022); however, if it did, it would take the position that over the passage of time, the cup of emotional reserves would always be leaking and thus would be in need of continued replenishment. According to the TRE, the function of relational maintenance is to counteract entropy in relationships due to decay and destruction (Ledbetter & Fellers, 2022). The TRE's articulation of the function of relational maintenance may be helpful to consider within the TRRL.

In other words, it might be advantageous for the TRRL to take the stance that not only does enacting relational maintenance serve to build emotional reserves to pull from later, but it also serves to reduce cognitive and emotional entropy in relationships right then and there (Afifi et al., 2016; Fellers & Ledbetter, 2023). Doing so might help the TRRL to explain not only why couples and families survive difficult circumstances by enacting resilience, but it might also shed light on the reasons why they are better for having traversed difficult circumstances (potentially experiencing gains in intimacy, closeness, and connection with their family members and other loved ones). Put another way, informed by the logic of the TRE, the TRRL may be better positioned to help us understand how couples become stronger and more resilient *because* they went through hard times, and not just in spite of going through hard times. Now that the conceptualization of relational maintenance within the TRRL has been discussed, the methodological issues with operationalizing another one of the TRRL's main variables (i.e., resilience) will be outlined.

Resilience

In line with the basic tenets of the TRRL, individuals can grow in ways that promote resilience (Afifi et al., 2016). According to the tenth proposition of the TRRL, there is hope for those who are struggling as they can learn how to enact greater relational maintenance in their close relationships, which will make it easier for them to demonstrate resilience through challenging times (Afifi et al., 2016). When conducting a study on the TRRL, finding a measure that operationalizes resilience as a process can prove to be a challenging feat. For example, the brief resilience scale is a popular measure of resilience, but upon closer examination of the items, it seems to tap into resiliency (i.e., a stable individual trait) rather than resilience (i.e., a teachable process) with items such as “I usually come through difficult times with little trouble” and “I tend to bounce back quickly after hard times” (Smith et al., 2008, p. 196). Resiliency could reasonably function as a moderator of some of the processes predicted in the TRRL in future research; however, due to its trait-like nature, it would not make as much sense if it were to be positioned as an outcome variable within a traditional TRRL study.

Sinclair and Wallston’s (2004) four-item BRCS did include items that seemed, at least to some degree, to operationalize resilience as a process as opposed to a trait; however, the reliability of the adapted measure left something to be desired in this study (with that said, the reliability estimate was on par with past reliability estimates that have been reported in previous research employing this scale; Sinclair & Wallston, 2004). Perhaps this issue with measurement explains, at least in part, why resilience was not quite statistically significantly associated with communal orientation (H_{1b}) or active-empathic listening (H_{1d}) in the second-order partial correlation controlling for the time elapsed since the last child left their home and closeness with the last of their children (or child) to leave during the month prior to the last child leaving their home.

A promising alternative measure of resilience might be an adapted version of subscales four, six, seven, and eight from the workplace resilience inventory (WRI; McLarnon & Rothstein, 2013) as those four subscales also seem to tap into resilience as a process (Fisher & Law, 2021). For instance, subscales six, seven, and eight include items assessing self-regulation processes following a significant event/experience that are affective (e.g., “Since the significant event/experience I have more often based my goals in life on feelings, rather than logic”), behavioral (e.g., “Since the significant event/experience I have been able to refrain from doing things that may be bad for me in the long run, even if they might make me feel good in the short term”), and cognitive (e.g., “Since the significant event/experience I have found it easy to control my thoughts”) in nature (McLarnon & Rothstein, 2013, p. 140). On the downside, there is a large number of items included across those four subscales, and the items would likely need to be adapted substantially if they were being used in any other context than the one it was designed for, which is, of course, the workplace. Regardless, future researchers should be inventive and intentional about the measures they choose to operationalize such an important variable in the TRRL.

Limitations and Future Directions

As a researcher, one of the challenges in studying empty nesters is being able to clearly articulate what it means to be an empty nester to potential participants. For example, some might think that if their child lives with them for the summer breaks from school, they are not an empty nester; however, they would be considered an empty nester according to the inclusion criteria of this study. Despite our best efforts to clearly communicate the study criteria for being an empty nester, a few participants did not identify as empty nesters in one of the first questions of the survey, but then they met the criteria specified for being considered a recent empty nester in the

study as determined by their responses to the demographic questions at the end of the survey. Therefore, their responses were retained. Perhaps future qualitative work would be helpful in exploring what being an empty nester means to parents or even at which point in their life they started to identify as one (if ever). Furthermore, it might be interesting to investigate the ways in which the parents communicate with one another and with their child(ren) differently based on whether they would self-identify as empty nesters. Relatedly, future research might consider exploring the ways in which the frequency and quality of parent-child communication with the child(ren) who have left the nest influences the resilience of the married couple during the early, but also later, days of the empty-nest phase of life. Finally, another limitation of this study is that the sample was largely composed of those who identified as White females, which impacts the extent to which these findings are generalizable.

Next, although it is quite clear from the TRRL's standpoint and the results of this study that operating from a communal orientation and engaging in active-empathic listening has the propensity to better a marriage, what happens when one person in the marriage has adopted a communal orientation and is engaging in more relational maintenance, but their partner is reluctant to get on board? Future dyadic research might compare relational and individual outcomes associated with both partners engaging in these best practices as opposed to only one partner engaging in these best practices. On a practical note, communication scholars might think about how those individuals who are engaging in these best practices might be able to gently and effectively encourage their partners to do the same without falling into cyclical demand-withdraw conflict communication (Schrodt et al., 2014), wherein one partner fruitlessly badgers the other to change, which, in turn, just makes their partner pull away even more than before.

Familiarity with both the TRRL and the TRE may give readers the impression that “more” is always better (i.e., more relational maintenance in terms of both the TRRL and the TRE, and more of a communal orientation for the TRRL). Yet, perhaps there comes a point where it is not empowering to see all the struggles that surface in one’s own life as being those that one’s spouse should help resolve. Maybe for some, it is possible that this mentality could create an overreliance or overdependence on one’s spouse to fix everything for them in a way that does not help them to feel efficacious to enact resilience without their spouse doing the work for them. Future qualitative work might explore this idea of a communal orientation driving overdependence on one’s spouse, which might then reduce one’s efficacy to solve one’s own problems without their spouse’s help.

Conclusion

In closing, in using the theory of resilience and relational load as a theoretical lens to predict individual and relational wellbeing outcomes such as resilience and relational load with communal orientation and active-empathic listening through stress and marital conflict, many theoretical and practical insights were gleaned. In general, the results suggest that there are benefits that come from empty nesters receiving active-empathic listening from their spouse during the month after their child leaves the home, as well as benefits that come from empty nesters operating from a communal orientation in their marriage at that time. Hopefully, this relatively new theory (i.e., the TRRL; Afifi et al., 2016) will continue to receive scholarly attention in the future that can shed light on even more ways in which constructive communication can drive flourishing in families.

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Appendix A

Study Cover Letter



2211683560
Department of Communication Studies
5/2022 V4.0

Dear Prospective Participant,

This letter is a request for you to participate in a research project that will explore perceptions of marital communication during the transition to the empty nest phase of life. This project is being conducted by Lauren E. Fellers, Ph.D. Candidate in the Department of Communication Studies at WVU under the supervision of Dr. Megan R. Dillow, an Associate Professor in the Department of Communication Studies, to fulfill requirements for a Ph.D. in Communication Studies.

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to complete an online Qualtrics survey. Your participation in this project will take approximately 20 minutes. The criteria for participating in this study include the following: (a) you are currently involved in a marriage and (b) have recently transitioned into the empty nest phase of life, which means that within the last year and a half (18 months), you have transitioned from having at least one child living in your home (at least part time) to having no children living in your home. Please note that even if one or more of your children still comes home to live with you during breaks from school or work (e.g., for holidays, for summer), you still meet this criterion of having recently transitioned into the empty nest phase of life. You must be 18 years of age or older to participate. You or the student who recruited you may be eligible to receive extra credit to be determined by the instructor of the communication studies (COMM) course that you list on your research receipt survey. In addition, you may choose to enter a prize raffle for a chance to win one of four \$20 Amazon gift cards. In order to receive extra credit and enter into the prize raffle, you will be asked to complete a research receipt survey.

Your participation in this project will be kept as confidential as legally possible. After completing the main study survey, if you wish, you will have the opportunity to provide some personal information in a separate research receipt survey. This research receipt survey is optional and will only be used for purposes of receiving extra credit and entering into the prize raffle. Any personal information provided in the research receipt survey will not be connected back to the main study survey responses. All data will be reported in the aggregate. Your participation is entirely voluntary. You may skip any question that you do not wish to answer, and you may discontinue at any time. Your class standing, grades, student work status, or status on an athletic team, if applicable, will not be affected if you decide not to participate or withdraw. Your employment status will not be affected if you choose not to participate or withdraw. The West Virginia University Institutional Review Board's review of this research project is on file with the WVU Office of Human Research Protections.

If you have any questions about this research project, please feel free to contact me at 304-293-3905 or by email at mrtdillow@mix.wvu.edu, the PI, Dr. Megan R. Dillow or Lauren E. Fellers at 304-293-3905 or lec00003@mix.wvu.edu. Additionally, you can contact the WVU Office of Human Research Protections at 304-293-7073.

I hope that you will participate in this research project, as it could help us better understand the experience of married empty nesters. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Megan R. Dillow

For Participant: I agree that I have read and understand what this project is about, and by clicking the link below, I agree to participate in the project. Please follow the survey link here:

https://wvu.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_6Gs3IGrrkbgGUXY

West Virginia University OHRP
PO Box 6845, Morgantown, WV 26506-6845
Phone: 304-293-7073 Email: irb@mail.wvu.edu

Approved:12-Dec-2022Expires:11-Dec-2027Number:2211683560

Appendix B

Study Questionnaire

Are you **currently involved** in a marriage?

- Yes
- No

Within the last year and a half (18 months), have you transitioned from having at least one child living in your home (at least part time) to having NO children living in your home?

Important note: The answer would STILL be “YES” to this question REGARDLESS OF WHETHER one or more of your children still comes home to live with you during breaks from work or school (e.g., for holidays, for summer).

- Yes
- No

Directions: Using the following items, please indicate how close you were with the CHILD who was LAST to leave your home during the month PRIOR to them leaving your home.

During the month PRIOR to your last child leaving your home...

Not at all (1)	(2)	(3)	Moderately (4)	(5)	(6)	Very much (7)
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- 1) How openly did you talk with your child?
- 2) How careful did you feel you had to be about what you said to your child? (R)
- 3) How comfortable did you feel admitting doubts and fears to your child?
- 4) How interested was your child when you talked to each other?
- 5) How often did your child express affection or liking for you?
- 6) How well did your child know what you were really like?

- 7) How close did you feel to your child?
- 8) How confident were you that your child would help you if you had a problem?
- 9) If you needed money, how comfortable would you have been asking your child for it?
- 10) How interested was your child in the things you did?

Directions: Please think about the ways in which you and your spouse have tackled issues that came up in your marriage. Please indicate the extent to which you and **your spouse** handled stress as a unit **during the month AFTER your last child left your home.**

During the month AFTER my last child left my home...

Strongly disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Somewhat disagree (3)	Neither agree nor disagree (4)	Somewhat agree (5)	Agree (6)	Strongly agree (7)
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- 1) We were both “in it together” when it came to life’s challenges.
- 2) My spouse and I approached life in general as a team.
- 3) My spouse and I were a team when it came to how we approached stress that affected our relationship or family.
- 4) My spouse and I would always get through our stress together.

Directions: Please think about how well your spouse has listened to you. Please read each statement and indicate how frequently you perceived it was true about your spouse **during the month AFTER your last child left your home.**

During the month AFTER my last child left my home...

Never or almost never true (1)	Usually not true (2)	Sometimes but infrequently true (3)	Occasionally true (4)	Often true (5)	Usually true (6)	Always or almost always true (7)
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- 1) My spouse was sensitive to what I was not saying.
- 2) My spouse was aware of what I implied but did not say.
- 3) My spouse understood how I felt.
- 4) My spouse listened for more than just the spoken words.
- 5) My spouse assured me that s/he would remember what I said.
- 6) My spouse summarized points of agreement and disagreement when appropriate.
- 7) My spouse kept track of points I made.
- 8) My spouse assured me that s/he was listening by using verbal acknowledgements.
- 9) My spouse assured me that s/he was receptive to my ideas.
- 10) My spouse asked questions that showed an understanding of my position.
- 11) My spouse showed me that s/he is listening by body language (e.g., head nods).

Directions: Please think about how often you experienced situations that were stressful. Please indicate how often you felt or thought a certain way **during the month AFTER your last child left your home.**

Strongly disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Somewhat disagree (3)	Neither agree nor disagree (4)	Somewhat agree (5)	Agree (6)	Strongly agree (7)
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During the month AFTER my last child left my home...

- 1) I often felt I was unable to control the important things in my life.
- 2) I often felt confident about my ability to handle my personal problems. (R)
- 3) I often felt that things were going my way. (R)
- 4) I often felt that difficulties were piling up so high that I could not overcome them.

Directions: In every marriage there are times when partners do not get along. Please think about

the conflicts you have experienced with your spouse. For the following items, please choose which number best reflects your perceptions of the conflict(s) you had with your spouse **during the month AFTER your last child left your home.**

Strongly disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Somewhat disagree (3)	Neither agree nor disagree (4)	Somewhat agree (5)	Agree (6)	Strongly agree (7)
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During the month AFTER my last child left my home...

- 1) My spouse and I got really mad when we argued.
- 2) My spouse and I disagreed a lot.
- 3) My spouse and I often nagged and complained about each other.
- 4) My spouse and I often argued.
- 5) When my spouse and I had an argument, we said mean things to each other.
- 6) My spouse and I hardly ever yelled when we had a disagreement. (R)
- 7) My spouse and I hardly ever argued. (R)
- 8) When my spouse and I had an argument, we yelled a lot.
- 9) My spouse and I were mean to each other.
- 10) When my spouse and I had a disagreement, we discussed it quietly. (R)

Directions: Please think about the communication you have had with your spouse about parenting. For the following items, please choose which number best reflects your perceptions of the **conversations about parenting** you had with your spouse **during the month AFTER your last child left your home.**

During the month AFTER your last child left your home...

Never (1)	Rarely (2)	Sometimes (3)	Often (4)	Always (5)
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- 1) When you and your spouse discussed parenting issues, how often did an argument result?
- 2) How often was the underlying atmosphere one of hostility and anger?
- 3) How often was the conversation stressful and tense?
- 4) Did you and your spouse have basic differences of opinion about issues related to child rearing?
- 5) When you needed help regarding the child(ren), did you seek it from your spouse?
- 6) Would you say that your spouse was a resource to you in raising the child(ren)?
- 7) Would you say that you were a resource to your spouse in raising the child(ren)?
- 8) Did you feel that your spouse understood and was supportive of your special needs as a parent?

Directions: Please indicate the extent to which you felt relationally, psychologically, and physically drained from your marriage **during the month AFTER your last child left your home.**

During the month AFTER my last child left my home...

Strongly disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Somewhat disagree (3)	Neither agree nor disagree (4)	Somewhat agree (5)	Agree (6)	Strongly agree (7)
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- 1) I felt burned out from my marriage.
- 2) I felt used up in my marriage.
- 3) I became insensitive or uncaring toward my spouse.
- 4) I felt tired when I got up in the morning and had to face another day in my marriage.
- 5) Being in my marriage was a real strain for me.

- 6) I felt emotionally drained from my marriage.
- 7) I worried that my marriage was hardening me emotionally.

Directions: Please indicate the extent to which you demonstrated resilience during the month AFTER your last child left your home. Consider how well the following statements describe your behavior and actions **during the month AFTER your last child left your home.**

During the month AFTER my last child left my home...

Does not describe me at all (1)	(2)	(3)	Describes me somewhat (4)	(5)	(6)	Describes me very well (7)
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- 1) I looked for creative ways to alter difficult situations.
- 2) Regardless of what happened to me, I believed I could control my reaction to it.
- 3) I believed I could grow in positive ways by dealing with difficult situations.
- 4) I actively looked for ways to replace the losses I encountered in life.

Thank you for your participation!

This is the final page of the survey. Please answer the remaining demographic questions and click the next arrow for instructions regarding how to enter the **prize raffle** for a chance at winning one of four \$20 Amazon gift cards, as well as instructions regarding how to provide a student's information for purposes of them receiving **extra credit**.

Have you been married to your current spouse **for at least 19 months**?

- Yes, I have been married to my current spouse for at least 19 months.
- No, I have NOT been married to my current spouse for at least 19 months.

Approximately how long have you been married to your current spouse (**in years**)?

- Less than 1 year

- 1 year
- 2 years
- 3 years
- 4 years
- 5 years
- 6 years
- 7 years
- 8 years
- 9 years
- 10 years
- 11 years
- 12 years
- 13 years
- 14 years
- 15 years
- 16 years
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- 85 years
- 86 years
- 87 years
- 88 years
- 89 years
- 90 years
- 90+ years

Have **you** been previously married before?

- Yes
- No

IF you have been previously married before, how many times have you been previously married before?

- N/A; I have not been married previously married before.
- 1 previous marriage
- 2 previous marriages
- 3 previous marriages
- 4 previous marriages
- 5 previous marriages
- 6 previous marriages
- 7 previous marriages
- 8 previous marriages
- 9 previous marriages
- 10+ previous marriages

Is your current spouse the biological parent of your child(ren)?

- Yes
- No
- Other _____

IF your current spouse is not the biological parent of your child(ren), are you actively **coparenting** with the biological parent of your child(ren)?

- Yes
- No

How many children do you have?

- 1 child
- 2 children
- 3 children
- 4 children
- 5 children
- 6 children
- 7 children
- 8 children
- 9 children
- 10 children
- 11 children
- 12 children
- 13+ children
- I do not have any children.

Approximately how long has it been (**in months**) from the date when the **LAST** of your children (or child) moved out of your place of residence?

- Less than 1 month
- 1 month
- 2 months
- 3 months
- 4 months
- 5 months

- 6 months
- 7 months
- 8 months
- 9 months
- 10 months
- 11 months
- 12 months
- 13 months
- 14 months
- 15 months
- 16 months
- 17 months
- 18 months
- More than 18 months

Just to check, was the last of your children (or your child) living with you (at least part time) **prior** to moving out of your place of residence on the previously mentioned date?

- Yes, they were living with me prior to moving out.
- No, they were not living with me prior to moving out.

Was the last of your children (or your child) living with you full time or part time **prior** to moving out of your place of residence?

- They were living with me FULL TIME prior to moving out.
- They were living with me PART TIME prior to moving out.

Which of the following **BEST** describes your relationship to the **LAST** of your children (or

child) who moved out of your place of residence?

- Adoptive parent
- Biological parent
- Foster parent
- Grandparent
- Stepparent
- Other (please specify): _____

Did you consider yourself to be the primary caretaker of the **LAST** of your children (or child) who moved out of your place of residence?

- Yes
- No

IF you have MORE THAN ONE CHILD, approximately how long has it been (**in years**) from the date when the **FIRST** of your children (or child) moved out of your place of residence?

- Less than 1 year
- 1 year
- 2 years
- 3 years
- 4 years
- 5 years
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- 25 years
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- 27 years
- 28 years
- 29 years
- 30+ years

What is **your** biological sex?

- Male

- Female
- Non-binary
- Male-to-female transgender
- Female-to-male transgender
- Prefer not to say

What is **your current spouse's** biological sex?

- Male
- Female
- Non-binary
- Male-to-female transgender
- Female-to-male transgender
- Prefer not to say

What is **your** age (in years)?

- 18 years old
- 19 years old
- 20 years old
- 21 years old
- 22 years old
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- 120 years old
- 121 years old
- 122 years old

What is **your current spouse's** age (in years)?

- 18 years old
- 19 years old
- 20 years old
- 21 years old
- 22 years old
- 23 years old
- 24 years old
- 25 years old
- 26 years old
- 27 years old
- 28 years old
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- 121 years old
- 122 years old

What is **your** ethnicity?

- Asian
- Black/African American
- Latinx/Hispanic
- Middle Eastern
- Native American

- Pacific Islander
- White
- Multiethnic
- Other (please specify): _____

What is **your current spouse's** ethnicity?

- Asian
- Black/African American
- Latinx/Hispanic
- Middle Eastern
- Native American
- Pacific Islander
- White
- Multiethnic
- Other (please specify): _____

Which of the following best describes **your** religious affiliation?

- Agnostic
- Atheist
- Baptist
- Buddhist
- Catholic
- Disciples of Christ
- Hindu
- Islam

- Judaism
- Lutheran
- Methodist
- Mormon-Latter-Day Saint
- Non-denominational Christian
- Presbyterian
- Other (please specify): _____

Which of the following best describes **your current spouse's** religious affiliation?

- Agnostic
- Atheist
- Baptist
- Buddhist
- Catholic
- Disciples of Christ
- Hindu
- Islam
- Judaism
- Lutheran
- Methodist
- Mormon-Latter-Day Saint
- Non-denominational Christian
- Presbyterian
- Other (please specify): _____

What is the highest level of education **you** have completed?

- Some high school
- High school diploma/earned high school equivalency certificate
- Some college
- 2-year college degree
- 4-year college degree
- Graduate degree

What is the highest level of education **your current spouse** has completed?

- Some high school
- High school diploma/earned high school equivalency certificate
- Some college
- 2-year college degree
- 4-year college degree
- Graduate degree

If you work outside the home, what is **your** annual income? Not your household income, but your personal income.

- I do not work outside the home
- Retired
- Less than \$20,000
- \$20,000 to \$39,000
- \$40,000 to \$59,000
- \$60,000 to \$79,000
- \$80,000 to \$100,000

- More than \$100,000

If your current spouse works outside the home, what is **your current spouse's** annual income?

Not your household income, but their personal income.

- My spouse does not work outside the home
- Retired
- Less than \$20,000
- \$20,000 to \$39,000
- \$40,000 to \$59,000
- \$60,000 to \$79,000
- \$80,000 to \$100,000
- More than \$100,000

Thank you for your participation; it is truly appreciated!

IF you or a student who recruited you to participate in this study would like **extra credit**, please continue to the next step to enter the student's information. In addition, IF you are interested in entering the **prize raffle** for a chance at winning one of four \$20 Amazon gift cards, please continue to the next step to enter your information.