

ATTACHMENT AND RELATIONSHIP  
SATISFACTION AS MODERATORS OF THE  
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FEMALE REPAIR  
ATTEMPT BEHAVIOR AND COUPLE EMOTIONAL  
FLEXIBILITY DURING MARITAL CONFLICT

By

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to examine husbands' and wives' reports of attachment-related anxiety, attachment-related avoidance, and relationship satisfaction as moderators of the relationship between wives' self-reported repair attempt behaviors and couples' emotional flexibility during conversations regarding past hurts in their relationships. Participants consisted of 23 couples between 20 and 60 years of age who had been married no less than six months and were within their first marriage. Couples completed measures of relationship satisfaction, repair attempt behaviors, and attachment, followed by discussing past hurts in their marriages. Partners then reported continuous affect responses while watching a video of their discussions regarding past hurts, which revealed their levels of emotional flexibility during these difficult conversations. A series of hierarchical regression analyses were used to determine influential trends of moderation. Though analyses yielded non-significant results, findings revealed that the husbands' reports had an overall greater moderating impact than the wives' reports, and that husbands' satisfaction exerted a substantially greater predictive influence on the relationship between wives' self-reported repairing behaviors and couples' emotional flexibility when discussing past hurts than other variables. Clinical implications for couples' therapy and recommendations for future research on repair attempts and positive sentiment override are discussed.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Research has found that marital dissolution occurs in approximately half of all marriages (Amato 2010). Marital conflict, a major predictor of divorce, has been shown to be detrimental to the health of both spouses (Burman & Margolin, 1992; Gottman, 1998) and to be especially harmful to any children involved (Cavanagh, 2008; Fabricius & Luecken, 2007; King & Sobolewski, 2006). Because of the undeniably destructive intergenerational impact that high-conflict or disbanded marriages have on society, it is crucial for researchers to continue exploring the way husbands and wives engage in conflict and the risk factors involved. Research shows that the amount of negativity expressed between partners is the most reliable predictor of marital dissatisfaction and dissolution (Griffin, 1993). Thus, it is important to understand the dynamics that help or hinder the process of de-escalating negativity during marital conflict.

Relationship scholar, John Gottman (2014), describes couples' use of "repair attempts" (i.e., any attempt to introduce positivity into a potentially negative interaction) as having a profound impact on their ability to de-escalate conflict and maintain constructive conversations. Related to the concept of repair attempts, researchers

examined use of skills regarding verbal content and nonverbal tones in relation to couples' affect during marital communication (Johnson et al., 2005). They found that a lack of positive emotion combined with negative content and tones during communication predicted significant detrimental effects to the marital relationships; however, they also found that the use of humor, affection, enthusiasm, and showing interest in one another (i.e., repair attempts) had the power to eliminate these otherwise damaging effects. Though it is clear that repair attempt behaviors can have a very positive impact during negative couple interactions, there is little research done to describe what makes repair attempts successful or unsuccessful.

Gender differences are important to consider when examining dynamics involved during spousal repair behaviors. Research has indicated that wives show a greater receptivity to their spouses' repair attempts than husbands, and that wives are more likely to initiate divorce when their repair attempts toward their husbands are unacknowledged or unreciprocated (Cross & Madson, 1997; Wanic, & Kulik, 2011). Recent research has yielded the finding that women who reported more frequently engaging in positive repair attempt behavior also experienced greater emotional rigidity with their spouses during negative conversations (Smith & Gardner, 2015). This lack of emotional flexibility during negative conversations is counterintuitive, as it is expected that attempts to de-escalate marital conflict would be correlated with greater emotional flexibility (i.e. ability to move in and out of positivity and negativity) during negative conversations.

The presence of increased emotional rigidity during negative marital interaction in association with wives' reported repair attempt behaviors is not only an unexpected finding, but it is a concerning one as well. Research has shown that experiences of



negative rigidity in women, such as more negative and longer lasting emotional flooding after times of conflict and more frequent and consistent depressive symptoms over time, are predictive of the path of marital dissolution (Doohan, Carrère, & Riggs, 2010; Gottman & Levenson, 1992). Thus, the counterintuitive presence of this shared negative rigidity during couples' interactions *in correlation with* wives' reports of positive repair attempt behaviors is a phenomenon that calls for a greater depth of understanding as to when and under what circumstance this relationship exists. To address this research need, the present study will examine potential moderating variables of this relationship between increased reports of repair attempt behavior and negative affect rigidity in hopes that the results may provide new insights into the underlying relational dynamics fueling the potentially destructive moment-to-moment interactions between couples during conflict. The following review will examine research regarding the impact of marital conflict on women, the destructive role of negative rigidity, and the significant moderating influence of attachment-related anxiety/avoidance and relationship satisfaction on moment-to-moment marital interactions. The current study will then explore attachment and satisfaction as potential moderators of the relationship between wives' repair and couples' lack of emotional flexibility during negative marital interaction.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

#### **Impact of Marital Conflict on Women**

Research has predominantly shown women to play a unique role in their relationships, particularly regarding the emotional climate present in their marriages. In fact, both Floyd and Markman (1983) and Gottman (1994) used the phrase “relational barometers” to describe the greater extent to which women are typically “tuned in” to their marital quality and levels of marital distress in comparison to their male counterparts. Because of this heightened sensitivity to the relational quality of their marriages, women have been shown to not only spend more time thinking and talking about their marriages than their husbands (Acitelli, 1992, 2001; Swenson, et al., 2015), but to also recall more vividly and become more upset about their marital disagreements than their spouses (Almeida & Kessler, 1998; Mohr, et al., 2003; Nolen-Hoeksema & Jackson, 2001; Ross & Holmberg, 1990). The negative impact of marital conflict has therefore been shown to be greater for women than for men when it comes to experiencing longer-term negative effects such as depression and persistent physiological reactions, especially when there is significantly prolonged negativity between partners

(Bloor et al., 2004; Brody & Brody, 2009; Brosschot et al., 2006; Kiecolt-Glaser, Glaser, Cacioppo, & Malarkey, 1998; Mayne et al., 1997; Smith et al., 2004). These negative effects of marital conflict on women have been shown to strongly influence the likelihood that women will be the initiators of divorce.

### **Marital Conflict Leading to Wife-Initiated Marital Dissolution**

Research has shown that, by and large, wives do not tend to be silent sufferers in their marriages. On the contrary, wives are generally more involved in and concerned about the maintenance of their relationships (Knee, et al., 2005), and have been shown to vocalize their discontentment and share their feelings in their marriage more frequently than their counterparts (Harvey, Wells, & Alvarez, 1978; Kiecolt-Glaser, & Newton, 2001; Simon & Nath, 2004). As the partners who tend to be more likely to perceive and speak up about a problem occurring in their relationship, researchers have found that wives typically fall into the role of more actively attempting to restore the relationship to a higher level of satisfaction (Beach, et al., 2003; Cancian, 1987; Komter, 1989).

The trend of women being the spouses who more frequently assume responsibility for changing the quality of their marriages has important implications for marital unions. Researchers have found that the negative impact of marital conflict on wives is significantly more predictive of marital dysfunction and dissolution than that of their husbands and that a wife-demand-husband-withdraw pattern during conflict is highly predictive of divorce (Gottman & Levenson, 1992; Gottman & Levenson, 2000). Research has shown that wives are more likely than husbands to initiate divorce (Segrin & Flora, 2005), to be more motivated than their husbands to divorce due to relational issues (Rodrigues et al., 2006), and to experience more positive emotions than their

husbands after initiating divorce (Kitson & Morgan, 1990). Research also suggests that wives are more likely to strive for a more satisfying marriage, and that a predictor of wife-initiated divorce is the presence of unsuccessful repair attempts from wives to husbands during times of marital distress (Cross & Madson, 1997; Wanic, & Kulik, 2011). This dynamic is of key importance in seeking to understand the function of repair attempt behavior and the potential for repair attempts to produce negative effects when unreciprocated by male partners, as it is a phenomenon that sheds light on the recent finding that husbands and wives experienced increased negative emotional rigidity despite wives' increased positive repair attempt behavior during marital conflict (Smith & Gardner, 2015). In order to better understand this relationship between wives' reports of positive repair behavior and couples' negative emotion during conflict, it is helpful to further examine what research has found on the presence of emotional flexibility in females.

### **The Inverse Relationship Between Affect and Flexibility in Women**

Thus far, there has not been much research examining the real-time impact of a positive and negative emotional climate on emotional flexibility in marital dyads. During a recent study (Smith & Gardner, 2015), moment-by-moment self-reported affective data were collected during both negative and positive conversations between spouses. This method of data collection captured the incremental fluctuation of emotion within partners and depicted the combined spousal affective reports for each couple using state space grids to give detailed representations of emotional flexibility for each marital dyad. Partners also reported on the repair attempt behavior of both themselves and their spouses. As previously mentioned, findings in this study included the counterintuitive

positive correlation between increased repair attempt behavior and greater negative emotional rigidity in women during negative marital conversations (Smith & Gardner, 2015). A potential explanation of this finding is that higher amounts of women's attempts to restore their relationships during conflict increases negative emotional rigidity if their partners do not reciprocate these repair attempts (i.e., the attempts do not result in an improved emotional climate during a negative context, thus resulting in frustration and rigidity in the attempting partner).

Another recent study examined the relationship between emotional flexibility and emotional climate in conversations between mothers and their adolescent daughters (Hollenstein & Lewis, 2006). Using the same data collection methods and state space grids analyses as the previously discussed study, researchers found very similar results in regards to the correlation between flexibility/rigidity and negativity/positivity in female samples. Interestingly, the more negativity was expressed within these mother-daughter dyads during difficult conversations, the more flexibility to fluctuate between emotional states was depicted in the state space grids. Inversely, Smith and Gardner (2015) found that the more wives reported using repair attempts (i.e., expressed positivity) during difficult conversations, the less they expressed flexibility across emotional states as depicted in the state space grids.

Research conducted prior to the findings in these two studies show there is a likelihood that a decrease in flexibility is indicative of underlying emotion regulation, and that, as partners increasingly engage in emotion regulation, the more controlled (relatively rigid) their behavior becomes (Hollenstein, 2005). This more rigid behavior implies less emotional impulsivity and a constricted range of behavioral expressions,

sometimes in attempts to maintain a more positive and constructive conversation (i.e., repair attempts). However, these less flexible behaviors, whether or not they are positively intended, could be used to disguise negative emotions that the individuals are actually feeling and attempting to regulate within themselves (Hollenstein, 2005). Thus, if unreciprocated, these attempts to deescalate negativity during marital conflict might actually be exacerbating the underlying negativity within the attempting partner. As research has shown, women seem to be at a significantly higher risk for this emotional rigidity than men, as they are more likely to be the partner to engage in repair attempt behavior and are more negatively affected by marital discord. Therefore, it is critical that this relationship dynamic be further explored. A first step in addressing this inverse relationship is to examine variables that could potentially moderate the relationship between female repair attempts and decreased emotional flexibility during marital conflict. Attachment-related anxiety, attachment-related avoidance, and relationship satisfaction have each been shown to be potential moderators for partner behavior and emotional responses during marital conflict.

### **Attachment-related Anxiety and Attachment-related Avoidance as Moderators**

Research has shown that attachment plays an important role in shaping people's view of themselves and others, and thus significantly impacts the way in which partners communicate with one another (Feeney, 1999; Miller, Perlman, & Brehm, 2007). Because examining the stable dimensions of attachment-related anxiety and attachment-related avoidance is a fundamental way to address the interplay of attachment dynamics (Picardi et al., 2005), the present study will assess partners' attachment levels via continuous measures of attachment-related anxiety and attachment-related avoidance,

rather than through categorical attachment styles. Due to many attachment researchers having measured attachment through the broader categories of attachment styles (which is a method that enables researchers to gain a large-scale, simplified understanding of complex systems, see Watts, 1999), the following review will incorporate attachment-style research as it seeks to examine the moderating impact of attachment-related anxiety and attachment-related avoidance on marital interaction.

Attachment styles (i.e., categorical levels of attachment-related anxiety and attachment-related avoidance) are linked with their individual drive toward safety and stability (Dinero et al., 2011), both of which are necessary ingredients to a successful marriage. The concept of attachment styles began in application to infants (Ainsworth et al., 1978) and was then applied to adult relationships as secure attachment, avoidant attachment, and anxious/ambivalent attachment (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Those who have secure attachment styles have a positive sense of both self and others, allowing them to strike a healthy balance between personal autonomy and intimacy in their relationships (Bartholomew, 1990; Collins & Read, 1990). Striking this balance is more difficult for anxious or avoidant attached individuals, however, as they tend to have a negative view of self or others that inhibits their capacity for intimacy with others especially during marital conflict.

The interplay between partners' attachment-related anxiety and attachment-related avoidance within their marital dyad is an interesting one. These attachment dynamics are especially important when it comes to couples engaging in marital conflict, as research has found attachment to be a moderator of partners' ability to co-regulate their emotions during negative conflict (Butner, Diamond, & Hicks, 2007). When sensing

a threat to stability within their relationships, avoidant attached spouses engage in diminished emotionally expressive relationship maintenance strategies (Edenfield, Adams, & Briihl, 2012), while anxious attached spouses are primarily concerned with minimizing distance rather than creating closeness with partners (Locke, 2008). Research has shown these pervasive attachment dynamics to impact both the present and future intimacy in relationships (Holland & Roisman, 2010; Simpson, 1990). Thus, the impact that attachment-related anxiety and attachment-related avoidance have on the emotional climate and emotional communication in spousal relationships has been shown to have significant moderating effects on dynamics present within marital conflict.

To examine the impact of adult attachment styles on marital conflict, Besharat (2003) conducted a study in which 40 couples answered questions about their adult attachment experiences and the quality of their marriages. The study yielded significant differences between marital quality based on whether partners had secure or insecure attachments; namely, that relationships characterized by secure attachment tended to have greater trust, commitment, and satisfaction, while relationships with insecurely attached partners showed significant distress regarding conflict and separation, exhibited placating or ignoring behaviors, and had an increased amount of difficulty resolving problems. Such findings, coupled with many others using varied assessment protocols such as the Adult Attachment Interview (Butner, Diamond, & Hicks, 2007; Holland & Roisman, 2010), attachment scales (e.g., Simpson, 1990), and the Experiences in Close Relationships Inventory (Edenfield, Adams, & Briihl, 2012), suggest that spouses' attachment styles (i.e., the broad categories that reflect their levels of attachment-related



anxiety and attachment-related avoidance) significantly impact marital conflict and likelihood of marital dissolution.

**Impact of attachment on ability to repair.** There is much research indicating that attachment-related anxiety and attachment-related avoidance are risk factors for marital problems due to the decreased likelihood of giving or reciprocating partners' repair attempts. Sadikaj, Moskowitz, and Zuroff (2011) examined partners' affect as influenced by their attachment orientations as they reported their perceptions of their partners' behaviors during interactions. Findings indicated that partners with more anxious attachment experienced stronger negative affect regarding perceived partners' behavior, while avoidant attachment was associated with weaker negative affect. Hicks and Diamond (2011) conducted a study with cohabitating couples that completed end-of-day diaries and next morning ratings of negativity, stress, and sleep responses to conflict with their partners. This study yielded similar findings regarding avoidant-attached partners experiencing less distress during conflict than anxious-attached partners. Interestingly, they also found that avoidant-attached partners experienced the most pervasive negativity due to feeling negative for longer periods of time following conflict with romantic partners. Thus, both anxious- and avoidant-attached partners experience increased negativity either during or after couple conflict when compared to securely attached partners, indicating that these partners may experience more "negative sentiment override" (an overarching negative perception) of their partners and their relationships which decreases the likelihood that repair attempts will be made.

Many studies have contributed to the field's current knowledge of the way attachment impacts partners' views of self and others in relationships, and the

mechanisms through which these attachment orientations subsequently impact likelihood of successful repair attempts during marital conflict. Bartholemew and Horowitz (1991) conducted two studies that measured attachment through both self- and friend-reports of participants' self-concept and interpersonal functioning, as well as independent assessments of attachment style in both peer and family-of-origin contexts. Results indicated a wide range of significantly distinct attachment styles. From their data, the authors proposed a model of four categorical attachment styles (secure, preoccupied, dismissive, and fearful). They found that avoidant-attached individuals maintained high self-esteem through minimizing the importance of others whom they have experienced as rejecting and placing a high value on independence due to believing that others are unreliable sources of intimacy; however, those with more anxiety-driven attachments experienced self-blame when they perceived themselves to be rejected by others, due to a low internalized sense of self-worth and an overall positive view of others. It can be inferred from these findings that the amounts of attachment-related anxiety and attachment-related avoidance interferes with partner's abilities to give, receive, or reciprocate repair attempts during conflict when one most feels the need to protect one's sense of stability or security in relation to others.

While it is widely understood that couples' use of positive behaviors has significant benefits (Hicks & Diamond, 2008) and have been shown to eliminate otherwise damaging effects of negativity within relationships (Johnson et al., 2005), the use of these repair attempts alone is not the biggest influence on the success of couple relationships. Rather, research has shown strong associations between adult attachment and quality of adult romantic relationships (McCarthy & Maughan, 2010), and there have

been many significant findings regarding the positive impact of secure adult attachment on adult relationship qualities, such as greater trust, commitment, communication, satisfaction, security, interdependence, and warmth (Besharat, 2003; Dinero et al., 2001; Hollan & Roisman, 2010; Simpson, 1990). Many studies have also found a significantly negative impact of insecure adult attachment on adult relationship qualities, such as stronger and more pervasive negativity, avoidance of intimacy due to a more negative view of self and/or others, and higher degrees of jealousy (Bartholemew & Horowitz, 1991; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Hicks & Diamond, 2011; Sadikaj, Moskowitz, & Zuroff, 2011).

A recent study found counterintuitive results when examining the impact of attachment on the transmission of emotion between partners, namely that anxiously attached partners decreased emotional transmission (Randall & Butler, 2013), which suggests that the act of pursuing one's partner during conflict (which anxiously attached partners do) actually shuts down the ability for partners to emotionally communicate. Further, research measuring anxiety, emotional security, and overall rigidity in women has shown that those with high-anxiety and those with low-anxiety have significant differences in rigidity and emotional security (Vohra & Sen, 1986). These findings, in addition to the finding that having an insecure attachment hinders a woman's ability to express the anger that she is feeling (Liu, Cohen, Schulz, & Waldinger, 2011), suggests that the presence of attachment-related anxiety will moderate the likelihood that women will internalize an increased negative state during their increased repair attempt behavior during marital conflict. Thus, the current research suggests that the level of attachment-related anxiety impacts partners' abilities to engage in successful repair attempt behaviors

during marital conflict, and that having attachment-related anxiety or avoidance interferes with partner's abilities to give, receive, or reciprocate repair attempts during conflict. The present study will contribute to the literature by examining the potential moderating influence that attachment-related anxiety and attachment-related avoidance have on wives' self-reported repair attempt behaviors and couples' emotional flexibility during marital conflict.

### **Relationship Satisfaction As A Moderator**

According to the Journal of Marriage and Family's most recent decade review (Fincham & Beach, 2010), marital researchers have continued to give considerable attention to the context in which conflict occurs. Although this research has mostly examined relationship satisfaction as an outcome variable, some studies have examined relationship satisfaction as a moderating variable as well. Using a video recall method, Waldinger and Schulz (2006) had couples report their own intentions and their perceived partner-intentions during a difficult discussion about an upsetting event in their relationship. They found that relationship satisfaction had a moderating role between self-reported intentions and attributions about partner intentions during couple interaction, which suggests that the level of satisfaction couples feel about their relationship has a governing effect on how they perceive their partners' actions during conflict and how they subsequently react to their partner.

Another study found relationship satisfaction to be a significant moderator between daily-perceived partner responses and women's depression (Rosen et al., 2014). Researchers found that higher relationship satisfaction reported by female partners moderated the association between perceived positive male partner responses and female-

reported depression, and that lower relationship satisfaction reported by female partners moderated the association between perceived negative male partner responses and female-reported depression. They found this same moderating effect within male reports; namely that, when male partners reported higher relationship satisfaction there was a decrease in female depression despite self-reported negative male partner responses. They also found that when male partners reported lower relationship satisfaction, there was an increase in female depression in association with their self-reported negative male partner responses. These findings suggest that relationship satisfaction plays a significant moderating role during both positive and negative daily couple interactions.

Research examining the phenomenon of “sentiment override” (Weiss, 1980) also presents compelling evidence that the amount of positivity or negativity couples feel regarding their relationship indeed colors the outcomes during marital conflict, and is not the outcome in and of itself. Positive sentiment override has been defined as, “greater positive appraisal of spouse's affiliative behavior than is warranted by observed behavior” (Story et al., 2007). Similarly, negative sentiment override can be described as being a greater negative appraisal of partner behavior than is warranted by the observed behavior. It is important to point out that, while relationship satisfaction and sentiment override have been used as separate variables in some studies, there has been some debate in the field over the feasibility of making a distinction between the two. It has been stated that the “association between attribution and relationship satisfaction is overwhelming” (Fincham, 2001), and that the overlap between relationship satisfaction and related constructs “poses a challenge to the validity of research findings on relationship satisfaction” (Fincham & Beach, 2006).

One response to this challenge has been to create conceptual simplicity by broadening the definition of relationship satisfaction as a subjective, encompassing evaluation of the relationship (Fincham & Beach, 2006), which is a definition that lends itself to include the concept of sentiment override. Griffin (2002) describes the couples' evaluations of their relationship to be a set of cognitive attributions that have evolved over time and manifest themselves in the verbal, behavioral, and emotional realms. Further, Griffin (2002) posits that, regardless of the realm in which the attributions are manifested, the same phenomenon is reflected: the quality of the relationship. Thus, there is a lack of need to discriminate against the mode of determining how couples perceive their relationship quality because any manifestation of these attributions (self-report, observed behaviors, reported affect) have "similar discriminatory power" (Griffin, 2002). Therefore, the present study will refer the concept of relationship satisfaction as an overarching representation of partners' perceived relationship quality that is inseparable from the construct of sentiment override.

Sentiment override has been shown to reliably indicate levels of couple satisfaction. Murray, Holmes, and Griffin (1996) found that positive idealistic distortion of relationship partners correlated with happier marriages. Fincham and Bradbury (1989) also found that spouses had happier marriages when they attributed positive relationship events to their partner and negative relationship events to themselves. Interestingly, research has shown sentiment override to be a significantly influential filter through which wives perceive their husbands' behavior, and this same result was not found for husbands (Hawkins, Carrère, & Gottman, 2002). Another study examined sentiment override in relation to partner self-esteem and found support for the impact that sentiment

override has on predicting positive or negative outcomes in couple interaction; namely, that couples with low self-esteem had greater negative sentiment override, which put them at a greater risk for declined relationship satisfaction throughout a one-year period (Murray et al., 2009). Thus, there is a substantial amount of research indicating that how partners positive or negatively evaluate their partners and their overall relationship greatly impacts their perception and interpretation of their partner's intentions, and significantly influences the overall dynamics within couple interactions.

The sentiment override phenomenon has crucial implications for struggling couples. If partners are unable to disengage from their negative cycles, they form rigid boundaries that decrease the cohesion, communication, and flexibility within their relationship (Olson, 2000). The longer a couple sustains their cycle of negativity, the greater their sense of negative sentiment override becomes. In other words, the couple will likely begin to view all of the verbal and nonverbal communication within their relationship through a more negative lens, which then further perpetuates their conflict cycle and can lead to marital dissolution if repair attempts are not successfully initiated, received, and reciprocated.

In contrast, when positivity is actively incorporated into marital conflict (i.e., repair attempts are being made) then partners are likely to experience more soothing and less physiological arousal (Carstensen et al., 1995; Levenson & Gottman, 1983), which is associated with higher levels of future marital stability (Gottman & Levenson, 1992) and less likelihood of divorce (Gottman & Levenson, 2000; Gottman, 2014). Interestingly, the ability for wives' to down-regulate their negative emotion during conflict has been significantly associated with both wives' and husbands' marital satisfaction (Bloch,

Haase, & Levenson, 2014). Because of the undeniable influence that overall satisfaction has on partners' perceptions and subsequent behaviors and emotional experiences, the current study will examine the potential moderating effects of relationship satisfaction on the correlation between wives' repair attempt behaviors and increased negative affect rigidity in couples' during marital conflict.

### **Gender Differences in Impact of Attachment and Satisfaction on Repair**

Collins and Read (1990) found gender differences in how attachment and appraisal of relationships impact couple communication. The researchers conducted three studies to examine the correlations between adult attachment styles and their working models beliefs (e.g., if one can be close with others, if one can depend on others, if one fears being abandoned or unloved, etc), partner matching, and relationship quality. They also examined connections between the attachment style of one's partner and caregiving style of one's parents. Their findings offer significant insights into the impact of attachment styles on adult relationship dynamics and shed light on gender differences in this regard. For instance, they found that men evaluated their relationships most negatively when they sensed their female partners' anxiety about being unloved or abandoned, and that men with anxious partners reported less self-disclosure during communication. Women's fear of abandonment was also the strongest predictor of their own negative appraisal of their relationships, as well as decreased feelings of satisfaction and closeness to their partners. Collins and Read (1990) also found that partners' attachment styles were strongly related to how each partner perceived the relationship. Because negative sentiment override has been known to perpetuate couple conflict cycles, it would make sense that relationship experiences characterized by actual or



perceived pursue-withdraw patterns would negatively impact adult romantic relationships and potentially lead them down the path of marital dissolution.

Furthermore, Collins and Read (1990) found that men's good communication skills predicted women's satisfaction, but women's good communication skills did not predict men's satisfaction. They suggested that this could be due to the socialization of women to experience emotional closeness with others and of men to value independence and personal freedom, which might lead men to be especially sensitive to any perceived attempt by women to restrict their independence and lead women to be especially sensitive to men's lack of emotional connection during communication. Likewise, men might attribute women's repair attempt behaviors as expected due to the traditional stereotypes that women value communication more than men, which often leaves women feeling unnoticed, unappreciated, and perceived as the "nagging" pursuer within the relationship.

There is research indicating that women sustain negative affect longer than their male counterparts, and it has been suggested that this finding is indicative of a consistently negative internal state experienced by women despite apparent positive behaviors indicating otherwise (Griffin 1993). If women are indeed making repair attempts that are going unnoticed by men due to these dynamics, then researchers would expect to see a correlation between female repair attempt behavior and increased emotional rigidity during marital conflict. Research indicating that women are more likely than men to exit a distressed marriage due to unsuccessful repair attempts (Cross & Madson, 1997; Wanic, & Kulik, 2011) is indicative that this rigid frustration due to unrequited repair attempts is an important dynamic to be explored within future research.

## **The Current Study**

Research has historically shown the detrimental impact that divorce has on society. Repair attempt behavior has been traditionally viewed as a key ingredient to de-escalating conflict that could lead couples to divorce. As illustrated within the review of current literature regarding the impact of female repair attempts on emotional rigidity during marital conflict, it is reasonable to conclude that unsuccessful repair attempts contribute to an increased likelihood of marital dissolution, and that women seem to be at an increased risk for such outcomes. Thus, gaining a better understanding of the characteristics that allow for negative emotional rigidity to take place despite women's reports of engaging in positive external behaviors during marital conflict is crucial. In order to address the field's current lack of research on what relational dynamics increase the risk of women experiencing this emotional rigidity, the current study used multiple regression analyses to examine attachment-related anxiety, attachment-related avoidance and relationship satisfaction as moderators of the relationship between wives' self-reported repair attempt behaviors and couples' emotional flexibility during marital conflict. Implications of findings and directions for future research will be explored.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

#### **Participants**

The sample for this study consists of 23 married couples (46 spouses) who had been married no less than six months and were within their first marriage. Couples were recruited from undergraduate classes at a southwestern university and through local religious and community organizations. Both spouses gave consent in order to participate in the study. Marital dyads were heterosexual and between 20 and 60 years of age. Due to the demographic breakdown of ethnicities in the area, the majority of participants were Caucasian (around 80%), while other ethnicities were Mexican-American (around 6%), Asian (around 5%), African-American (around 5%), and Puerto-Rican (2.2%). The sample represents an overall higher education level, with the vast majority of participants having completed at least some undergraduate-level coursework. The sample was comprised of at least 50% of participants having full-time employment and/or a family income of at least \$30,000. Participants received a \$20 gift card in return for participating in this study.

## **General Procedures**

Upon arriving at the research laboratory, spouses were taken to separate rooms where they were given the gift card, consent forms and an assessment packet containing the demographic and repair attempt questionnaires. Once partners had completed the paperwork, they were individually briefed on the specifics of what the study entailed (i.e., being videotaped while engaging in a potentially negative emotional experience by discussing a difficult issue within their relationship). Before reuniting as a couple, each spouse was given the following prompt: “Think about a recent time when your partner hurt, angered, or offended you-an incident that you still have feelings about” (a procedure borrowed from Waldinger, Moore, & Schulz, 2003) After having time to ponder on a recent incident, each spouse was prompted to briefly describe the situation and how he/she felt about it. Each partner was then instructed to attempt to reach a satisfactory resolution regarding the identified relationship issue during the time that they will be allotted with their partner. Finally, partners were individually debriefed on how to operate the computer software that they would be using to rate their emotional experience immediately after the interaction with each other.

Spouses were then given an envelope, seated across from each other, and left alone in a small observable room. After being cued to begin by a slight knock on the door, couples discussed the issues that they had been previously prompted to think about. After 10 minutes of discussion, another knock on the door was given to signal to the couples that it was time to open the envelope, which contained the instruction: “Please share with your partner a time when you felt cared-for and supported by her/him, and discuss how you think such experiences affect your relationship.” Couples were given 7

minutes to discuss this new prompt before the conversation was ended and partners were led them to a room with two computers. Sitting back to back with headsets on, the couples watched the video of the 17-minute conversation that they just had. While watching the video, each partner simultaneously moved his/her computer mouse to reflect his/her moment-to-moment emotional experience during the interaction.

## **Measures**

**Self-reported affect.** To obtain a moment-to-moment stream of self-report data for each partner's affective experience, the previously mentioned video recall procedure was combined with a continuous-response measure (Biocca, David, & West, 1994). The self-reported data captured how positively or negatively each partner felt during their difficult and positive conversations, and were collected via computer software as participants used a mouse to rate their affect along a color-coded, 9-point vertical scale (9 = *high positivity*, 1 = *high negativity*). Research shows that ratings such as these are reliable, valid measures of what an individual is feeling during an episode of marital interaction, as the participants tend to “physiologically re-experience” instead of simply “recall” how they felt during the interaction (Gottman & Levenson, 1985). Many studies have shown that self-reported affect data are not only reliable (Gottman & Levenson, 1985, 1992; Griffin, 1993; Levenson & Gottman, 1983), but that they are likely to be accurately reflective of partners' emotional experience (Levenson & Gottman, 1983, 1985).

**Affective flexibility.** Each couples' continuous affect data were entered into a State Space Grid (SSG) created by the GridWare program (Hollenstein, 2013; Lewis, Lamey, & Douglas, 1999). A measure of flexibility known as *duration per event* was

taken before and after the switch to a positive conversation was prompted. This measurement of partners' affective flexibility (Thompson, 1990) indicated persistence (length of time spent) during each specific emotional response. Affective flexibility was calculated by how many seconds per minute, on average, each couple spent in each affect state visited and was represented by the size of the dots on the grids.

***Affective negativity.*** Like the flexibility measures, a measurement of negativity known as *negative duration* was also calculated through participant couples' SSGs, derived from the GridWare software. Negative duration refers to the length of time couples spent in negative region of the State Space Grid (SSG) and was calculated as the number of seconds per minute, on average, the couple spent in the negative region. Though the measures of both affective flexibility and affective negativity are both indicators of the average amount of seconds spent in an emotional state, affective negativity only calculated time spent in negativity (i.e., when at least one partner reported being in a state of negativity on the SSG). This measure of negativity was used as a control in the present study in order to determine if controlling for amount of time spent in negativity will affect results in any substantial way. If there are no substantial differences after controlling for affective negativity, there is an increased likelihood that findings involving measures of affective flexibility during the conversations regarding past hurts really do represent couples who are interacting within the negative region of the SSG.

**Attachment-Related Anxiety and Attachment-related Avoidance.** Each partner took the Experiences in Close Relationship Inventory (ECRI) assessment (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998, see Appendix B, Measure 1), which has been shown to

be an accurate, continuous measure of adult attachment throughout many studies (Nakao & Kato, 2004; Wei, Russell, Mallinckrodt, & Vogel, 2007). This assessment is comprised of two 18-item subscales, an avoidance subscale that measured discomfort with closeness (e.g., “I find it difficult to allow myself to depend on romantic partners”) and an anxiety scale that measured concern for abandonment (e.g., “I worry a fair amount about losing my partner”). With each item, partners rated their level of agreement on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (disagree strongly) to 7 (agree strongly).

**Relationship satisfaction.** Each individual completed the Marital Adjustment Test (Locke & Wallace, 1959), which is a 15-item measure that assesses for partners’ overall perception of their marriage (see in Appendix B, Measure 2). The items prompted partners to rate their overall marital satisfaction, the level of agreement and disagreement among potential areas of conflict (“handling family finances,” “matters of recreation,” “demonstration of affection,” “friends,” “sex relations,” “philosophy of life,” “conventionality,” and “ways of dealing with in-laws”), communication (e.g., “Do you confide in your mate?”), sense of cohesion (e.g., “How much do you and your mate engage in outside interests together?”), and compatibility (e.g., “In leisure time do you generally prefer to be on the go or to stay at home? Does your mate generally prefer to be on the go or to stay at home?”).

The possible range of scores for each individual is 2 to 158, with higher scores indicating greater satisfaction and the cutoff between satisfied and dissatisfied being 100. The Marital Adjustment Test has been shown to be a valid, reliable measure of global relationship satisfaction (Cohen, 1985) that has been widely used since 1960, thereby allowing the results of the present study to be compared with a vast amount of previously

conducted research. As previously mentioned, relationship satisfaction represents partners' subjective overarching evaluation of the relationship; as such, it is a construct that is inseparable from the concept of sentiment override, which is an overarching positive or negative perception of the relationship that colors marital interactions. Thus, the Marital Adjustment Test is a measure of global relationship satisfaction that addresses couples' sentiment override as well.

**Repair attempts.** Repair attempts are verbal or nonverbal actions done in attempt to de-escalate negativity during conflict to allow couples to exit the cycle of negative reciprocity they have entered into during conflict. Research has shown the presence of repair attempts in a couple's relationship reliably predicts partners' ability to remain constructive during difficult conversations (Gottman, 2014). In the present study, the items on the original "Repair Attempts Questionnaire" by Gottman (1999) were adapted to capture partners' perceptions of how well they, or their partners, attempt to create positivity when they are in a disagreement or are having a difficult time in their conversations. In this study, participants used a modified repair attempts questionnaire (see in Appendix B, Measure 3) that measured repair attempt activity for each marital partner ("this is what I do"), as well as how each partner views the repair attempt activity of his/her spouse ("this is what my partner does").

The 16-item questionnaire for this study was customized to include a 5-point likert scale per item (1 = *not at all like me/my partner*, 5 = *very much like me/my partner*) in which partners rated statements following the prompt "When we are in an argument..." Examples of statements following this prompt that were used to assess for repair attempt behaviors include: "...I still try to be affectionate," "...my partner



expresses appreciation for nice things I do,” “...and I comment on how I would like to communicate differently, my partner usually listens to me.” Item responses were summed to create scores. Four means were calculated per couple, with both “self” and “partner” scores given to each spouse. Because only female self-reports of repair attempt behaviors showed significance in relation to couples’ emotional flexibility in a previous study using this data (Smith & Gardner, 2015), the current study will only be examining these female self-reports of repair in its analyses.

### **Plan of Analyses**

Moderating variables explain when and under what conditions the independent and dependent variables are related. The research on attachment-related anxiety, attachment-related avoidance, and relationship satisfaction suggest that each of these large-scale factors pervasively influence the moment-to-moment relational dynamics between partners and, as such, serve as an undertow or overriding presence that covertly colors overt partner interactions. Because the impact of stable negativity despite reports of positive repair attempt behaviors is a risk factor for divorce, it is important to understand what variables are moderating this phenomenon. To address this research need, a series of hierarchical regressions were conducted to examine male and female measures of attachment-related anxiety, attachment-related avoidance, and relationship satisfaction as moderators of the relationship between self-reported females’ repair attempt behaviors and couples’ emotional flexibility during negative marital interactions.

**Hypothesis 1.** It is predicted that the relationship between self-reported females’ repair attempt behaviors and couples’ emotional flexibility during negative marital interactions will vary by male and female reports of attachment-related anxiety, such that

the relationship will decrease as the anxiety decreases. Analyses were conducted using hierarchical regression analyses to test for influential trends of moderation in the data.

**Hypothesis 2.** It is predicted that the relationship between self-reported females' repair attempt behaviors and couples' emotional flexibility during negative marital interactions will vary by male and female reports of attachment-related avoidance, such that the relationship will decrease as the avoidance decreases. Analyses were conducted using hierarchical regression analyses to test for influential trends of moderation in the data.

**Hypothesis 3.** It is predicted that the relationship between self-reported females' repair attempt behaviors and couples' emotional flexibility during negative marital interactions will vary by male and female reports of relationship satisfaction, such that the relationship will decrease as satisfaction increases. Analyses were conducted using hierarchical regression analyses to test for influential trends of moderation in the data.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

The primary goal of data analyses was to examine whether the effects of female self-reported repair attempt behaviors on couple emotional flexibility during negative marital interactions was moderated by male and female reports of attachment-related anxiety, attachment-related avoidance, and relationship satisfaction. Because only female self-reports of repair attempt behaviors showed significance in relation to couples' emotional flexibility in a previous study using this data (Smith & Gardner, 2015), the current study only examined female self-reports of repair in its analyses. Six hierarchical regressions were tested.

Descriptive statistics of these variables are presented in Table 1, and the six tests are presented in Tables 2-7. Each test consisted of three models. The first model represents the relationship between female self-reported repair attempts and couples' emotional flexibility, which accounts for 15% of the variance and is a medium to small effect. The second model adds in the interaction for one of the six moderators. The third model includes the moderation of the second model while also controlling for negative duration. This control was added to test for any substantial differences within results, with the expectation that having no substantial differences is indicative of an increased

likelihood that findings involving measures of affective flexibility during the conversations regarding past hurts accurately represent couples experiencing negativity. For each hierarchical regression, controlling for negative duration failed to yield significant differences within results. Overall results indicated that, when paired with females' self-reports of repair attempt behaviors, males' reports of higher satisfaction and anxiety exerted the most predictive influence on spouses' lack of emotional flexibility during conversations regarding past hurts in the relationship.

**Relationship satisfaction.** As indicated by the data in Table 2, the largest moderating effect was found in male reports of marital satisfaction, which explained an additional 16% of the variability in the outcome, had a small to medium effect size, and almost obtained significance ( $p = .061$ ,  $\beta = 0.41$ ,  $R^2 = 0.31$ ,  $\Delta R^2 = 0.16$ ). This finding indicates that, as husbands' satisfaction increased, wives' self-reported repair attempt behaviors more strongly predicted couples' decreased emotional flexibility during negative marital interactions. Table 3 depicts that wives' reports of marital satisfaction explained 1% of the variability in the outcome, indicating no moderating effect. However, there was a small to medium effect size ( $\beta = 0.42$ ,  $p = .139$ ) without the interaction with repair, indicating that female satisfaction had a main effect on couples' emotional flexibility.

**Attachment-related anxiety.** As indicated in Table 4, male reports of attachment-related anxiety accounted for an additional 15% of the variability in the outcome, although effect size was small and results were not significant ( $p = .239$ ,  $\beta = 0.26$ ,  $R^2 = 0.30$ ,  $\Delta R^2 = 0.15$ ). This finding indicates that, as husbands' attachment-related anxiety increased, wives' self-reported repair attempt behaviors at some level predicted

couples' decreased emotional flexibility during negative marital interactions. There was a small to medium effect size ( $\beta = 0.43, p = .072$ ) without the interaction with repair, indicating that male attachment anxiety a fairly influential main effect on couples' emotional flexibility; however, because of the small effect size when including the interaction, results indicate less of a moderating effect on the relationship between wives' self-reported repair attempt behaviors and couples' emotional flexibility. As depicted in Table 5, wives' reports of attachment-related anxiety explained 11% of the variability in the outcome and, similar to the male reports, had a minute effect on the interaction between repair and emotional flexibility ( $p = .619, \beta = 0.12, R^2 = 0.26, \Delta R^2 = 0.11$ ). However, like the male reports, there was a notably increased effect size ( $\beta = 0.38, p = .108$ ) without the interaction with repair, indicating that female attachment anxiety had a main effect on couples' emotional flexibility.

**Attachment-related avoidance.** Male reports of attachment-related avoidance had a small effect size ( $\beta = -0.21$ ) and accounted for only 4% of the variability in the outcome (see Table 6), indicating no significant moderating effect on the relationship between female repair and couple emotional flexibility. As indicated in Table 7, female reports of attachment-related avoidance had a small effect size ( $\beta = 0.17$ ), and accounted for 10% of the variability in the outcome. Though results were non-significant for the interaction, wives' attachment-related avoidance had an increased effect size ( $\beta = 0.32, p = .178$ ) without the interaction with repair, indicating that female attachment avoidance had a main effect on couples' emotional flexibility.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

This study was conducted based on previous findings indicating a significant, counterintuitive relationship between wives' self-reported repair attempt behaviors and couples' decreased emotional flexibility during negative marital interactions (Smith & Gardner, 2015). Repair attempt behaviors have historically been associated with emotional flexibility because they serve the function of interrupting couples' cycles of negativity and bring partners into states of greater positivity (Gottman, 2014). Therefore, decreased emotional flexibility in association with increased repair behaviors raised questions regarding how and under what circumstances this relationship exists. To answer these questions in the present study, potential moderators of the relationship between wives' self-reported repair and couples' emotional flexibility were examined. A review of previous research has shown attachment and satisfaction to be moderators between multiple dynamics within couple interactions. Therefore, the purpose of the present study was to examine the following research question: How much predictive influence do variables of attachment-related anxiety, attachment-related avoidance, and relationship satisfaction have on the relationship between females' self-reported repair attempt behaviors and couples' emotional flexibility during marital conflict?

To address this research questions, the present study examined attachment-related anxiety, attachment-related avoidance, and relationship satisfaction in men and women as moderating variables in the relationship between female repair attempt behavior and couple emotional flexibility during negative marital interactions. Using hierarchical regression models, data analyses yielded that the most influential trends of moderation in the relationship between female self-reports of repair behavior and lack of emotional flexibility during marital conflict occurred with male reports of relationship satisfaction and attachment-related anxiety.

### **Moderating Influence of Male Satisfaction**

Male and female reports of satisfaction and attachment measures were examined, and findings yielded that male satisfaction exerted the most predictive influence on the relation between female reports of repair and emotional rigidity during marital conflict. This moderation had a large effect size, indicating a high predictive influence on the relationship between females' reports of repair attempt behaviors and couples' emotional rigidity during marital conflict. In other words, the more satisfied husbands were, the more wives' reports of repair attempts were able to predict couples' lack of emotional flexibility during marital conflict. This counterintuitive finding did not support the hypothesis that decreased satisfaction would strengthen the relationship between females' reports of repair and couples' emotional flexibility.

As previously mentioned, research has shown that overall satisfaction governs how partners perceive and react to each other during conflict (Waldinger & Schulz, 2006). Additionally, males have been described as less aware of the quality of their marriages and the levels of distress that exist within (Gottman, 1994), while females are

more likely to more accurately perceive marital problems and be more attuned to and vocal about their negative feelings regarding these concerns (Beach, et al., 2003; Knee, et al., 2005; Simon & Nath, 2004). Thus, a potential explanation for the large moderating influence of positive satisfaction in males during negative conversations could be that positive sentiment override in males is driving their interactions in a way that is incongruent with females' internal experiences, causing feelings of invalidation and increased frustration. This rationalization is supported by research describing women's heightened sensitivity to men's lack of emotional connection during communication (Pedro, Ribeiro, & Shelton, 2015). It would make sense that, the more wives reported identifying with attuning to their relationship and initiating repair attempt behaviors, the more frustrated and negative they might become if their male counterparts did not reciprocate their emotional attunement to the past hurts that needed to be tended to within their relationships. This potential invalidation of females through males' emotional incongruency offers a viable explanation as to why male satisfaction had such a large moderating influence on the relationship between self-reported repair attempts in females and emotional rigidity during conversations regarding past hurts in their relationships.

An alternative way to interpret the finding that higher male satisfaction has predictive influence on the relationship between female reports of repair attempt behavior and less emotional flexibility during marital conflict could be that perhaps higher male satisfaction served as a protective factor against couples experiencing deeper levels of negativity than they might have otherwise. In other words, perhaps the less emotional flexibility is not reflecting greater duration of negativity, rather it could be instead reflecting a relatively neutral stability during conversations in which more negativity



would have been otherwise experienced if the males were not as satisfied with the relationship. Support for this explanation lies in the fact that higher satisfaction is generally associated with positive, protective factors in relationships. However, when controlling for negative duration in the analyses, results showed no substantial difference before and after the control was added. This outcome increases the likelihood that results are accurately representing couples that are experiencing negativity during the examined interactions in this study. Additionally, it was found that only male satisfaction had predictive influence on the data, while female satisfaction showed no significant influence. Given that previous research has shown female satisfaction to be more predictive of positivity experienced in the relationship than male satisfaction, one might hesitate to assume that finding predictive influence from male satisfaction without any influence from female satisfaction is simply indicative of greater positivity within the relationship dynamics. Rather, given the previous research describing males' relative lack of attunement to the quality of relationships in comparison to their female counterparts, as well as research regarding the negative impact on females when their male counterparts do not reciprocate willingness to attune to negativity present in their relationship, it is worth considering that the higher male satisfaction could be indicative of a negative, invalidating impact during the marital conversations regarding past hurts.

The second largest influence on the relationship between female reports of repair and emotional rigidity during marital conflict was male's attachment anxiety. Though the evidence for male attachment anxiety was not as strong as for male satisfaction, there was still a trend between higher levels of attachment anxiety in men and greater likelihood for female reported repair attempts to have a significant relationship with emotional rigidity

during marital conflict. Additionally, there was a small trend in the data indicating that as men's avoidance decreased, the strength of the relationship between female-reported repair attempt behavior and emotional rigidity during marital conflict increased. The trend of decreased avoidance predicting of a stronger relationship between repair and flexibility is moving in the opposite direction than that which was hypothesized; however, this small trend could be considered as further support for the more substantial trend of increased anxiety predicting a stronger relationship between repair and flexibility, as decreased avoidance and increased anxiety are considered one and the same if placed along a spectrum of attachment-related dynamics. This finding provides further support for the importance of men's emotional congruence when discussing past marital hurts. Whether driven by anxious- or avoidant-related attachment, research suggests that the risk is high for men to invalidate their wives' internal experiences regarding past hurts. This study brings to light the potential risk that males' high relationship satisfaction (or "positive sentiment override") during conversations regarding past hurts within the marriage can bring to marital dynamics when it is incongruent with the negative issue at hand.

As for female satisfaction, female attachment anxiety, and female avoidance, there were little to no moderating effects. While these findings suggests that female variables did not have predictive influence on the relationship between female reported repair attempt behavior and emotional rigidity during marital conflict, it could be the case that these variables would have reached levels of significance if measured within a larger sample size. However, it is clear that even within the small sample size, male reports did exert larger moderating influences than female reports. Interestingly, when examining the

impact of repair on emotional flexibility (Smith & Gardner, 2015), it was the female reports that exerted more influence than male reports. Thus, both partners are playing an important, influential role: it is the interplay between male reports of higher satisfaction *combined* with female self-reports of increased repair attempt behavior that predicts less emotional flexibility during negative marital interaction. In other words, when paired with females who highly identify with the role of attuning to and initiating repair attempt behaviors, men with high levels of marital satisfaction (or “positive sentiment override”) can present potential risk factors during conversations regarding past hurts in the relationship.

In light of research regarding men’s relative lack of attunement to relationship quality in comparison to women, it seems that high displays of positivity during conversations regarding past hurts is a risk factor for women’s increased frustration and couples’ emotional rigidity. Further, if men are higher in levels of attachment-related anxiety, it seems there is an increased risk for couples’ emotional rigidity as well. Perhaps this increased rigidity is due to husbands invalidating their wives’ more negative internal experiences by anxiously minimizing the hurtful issue at hand or diverting the conversation to a more surface-level positivity in efforts to quickly regain a sense of closeness in the relationship.

### **Clinical Implications**

In light of the previous discussion of how high levels of relationship satisfaction can potentially become a risk factor if it is expressed during conversations regarding past hurts, couples’ therapists should maintain awareness of the level of emotional congruency between partners when facilitating these difficult conversations. Because positivity is so

commonly associated with healthy relationship dynamics, it is crucial for clinicians to be aware of the potentially underlying barriers to intimacy that can come in the unexpected form of high satisfaction presented by one or even both partners. One such barrier to can sometimes be in the form of idealistic distortion (Bonds-Raacke et al., 2001; Fowers, Lyons, Montel, & Shaked, 2001). Although it can serve as a protective mechanism for relationships, the presence of idealistic distortion has the potential to prevent the depth of intimacy that is experienced by partners who are able to address and work through negative issues in their relationship. To assess for the presence of idealistic distortion, therapists can use clinical tools to assess for idealistic distortion (e.g., the Enrich Marital Satisfaction Scale, see Fowers & Olson, 1993) or ask questions directly to highly satisfied partners regarding their ability to discuss the negative aspects of their relationship. Clinicians should take note that couples that report high levels of satisfaction at the beginning of therapy might report lower levels of satisfaction during the course of therapy as their idealistic distortion or barriers to intimacy are broken down. At later stages of therapy, couples are more able to address more difficult things and, as such, are feeling more negative emotions than they were when they avoided such topics. This dip into negativity is normal and indicative of progress toward goals of increased intimacy in the relationship.

It is also beneficial for clinicians to keep in mind that, because men are relatively less attuned to marital distress than women (Gottman, 1994; Knee, et al., 2005; Swenson, et al., 2015), couples might commonly refer to their dynamics as the man consistently minimizing the situation and the woman continuously nagging the man. This pattern of interaction is known as a cycle of wife-demand-husband-withdraw that is commonly seen

in couples, and has been shown to increase risk of divorce (Gottman & Levenson, 2000). When these dynamics are presented to therapy, it is important for clinicians to be aware of any incongruence between partners due to discussing past hurts with positive tones rooted in idealistic distortion, and to be mindful of the risk for this incongruence to produce increased frustration in the partner whose hurt from these past experiences is being minimized. In these situations, clinicians should work to increase congruency so that both partners can experience depth of understanding and subsequent depth of intimacy and connection. For clinicians who are seeking to increase emotional congruency and depth of shared understanding with couples, there are techniques specific to Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy (Greenberg, Ford, Alden, & Johnson, 1993; Johnson, 2004, 2008) that have been shown to be very helpful toward this end.

### **Limitations**

Because of the relatively small sample size of 46 participants, the results of this study are limited in generalizability to the overall population. Another threat to external validity is the lack of diversity included within the sample of participants. These limitations could be addressed in future research by including more methods of outreach in an effort to recruit participants, and to intentionally recruit from ethnically diverse people groups or organizations. These limitations no doubt restricted the ability to obtain significant findings, and such significance might have surfaced if the sample size had been greater. Additionally, the wording on the repair attempt questionnaire sometimes measured not only for initiation of repair, but the success of that repair as well. This success component limited the questionnaire's ability to simply capture the frequency of

attempts to repair, regardless of how often the attempts bring about positive results in the relationship.

### **Directions for Future Research**

To avoid limited external validity, future research should examine the relations among variables examined in the present study within larger, more diverse samples. In light of the findings in this study, researchers examining variables related to couples' satisfaction should be aware of potential risks associated with reports of high levels of satisfaction in addition to the common positive implications associated with satisfaction. The phenomenon of "positive sentiment override" was commonly discussed in association with relationship satisfaction but was not directly measured within this study. Future research would benefit from measuring and examining positive sentiment override as a potential moderator of the relationship between females' self-reported repair attempt behavior and couples' emotional flexibility.

For the purposes of this study, it was beneficial to examine self-reported repair attempt data in order to obtain information regarding partners' perceptions of their own repair attempt behaviors. Through self-reports, findings were able to represent the degree to which partners identified with being attuned to their relationships and initiating repair. However, in future research on repair attempt behaviors, it would be additionally beneficial to code the actual attempts taking place within observable interactions. It would also be interesting to examine the difference between male and female satisfaction as a moderator of the relationship between female self-reported repair attempts and couples' emotional flexibility, as well as examining a combined variable of male satisfaction and male attachment-anxiety as an individual moderator.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A

#### Tables

Table 1

*Descriptive Statistics*

Variable	Mean	<i>SD</i>	Minimum	Maximum
coupemoflex	49.10	14.45	28.48	85.67
wrepair	3.61	0.63	2.75	5.00
hsat	105.78	21.79	49.00	137.00
wsat	105.74	23.19	32.00	150.00
hanx	53.22	14.76	27.00	79.00
wanx	61.00	23.68	30.00	122.00
havoid	39.43	16.47	20.00	90.00
wavoid	39.57	20.92	20.00	82.00

*Note.* Coupemoflex = couples' emotional flexibility during conversations regarding past hurts. Wrepair = wives' self-reported repair behavior. Hsat = husbands' relationship satisfaction. Wsat = wives' relationship satisfaction. Hanx = husbands' attachment-related anxiety. Wanx = wives' attachment-related anxiety. Havoid = husbands' attachment-related avoidance. Wavoid = wives' attachment-related avoidance.

Table 2

*Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Moderation of Male Relationship Satisfaction on Relationship Between Female Repair Attempt Behavior and Couple Emotional Flexibility During Marital Conflict (N = 23)*

Model	<i>b</i>	Std. Error	$\beta$	<i>p</i>
1 (Constant)	0.00	0.20		1.000
Zscore(wrepair)	0.39	0.20	0.39	.067
R <sup>2</sup>	0.15			
2 (Constant)	-0.04	0.19		.832
Zscore(wrepair)	0.21	0.21	0.21	.317
Zscore(hsat)	0.14	0.19	0.14	.481
ZwrepairXZhsat	0.50	0.35	0.41	.061
R <sup>2</sup>	0.31			
$\Delta R^2$	0.16			
3 (Constant)	0.13	0.38		.737
Zscore(wrepair)	0.17	0.23	0.17	.454
Zscore(hsat)	0.12	0.20	0.12	.534
ZwrepairXZhsat	0.51	0.26	0.42	.062
Negative Duration	0.00	0.00	-0.11	.609

*Note.* R<sup>2</sup> = 0.32 and  $\Delta R^2$  = 0.01 for Model 3, which indicates no substantial change in variance when controlling for negative duration. Wrepair = wives' reported repair behavior. Hsat = husbands' satisfaction.

Table 3

*Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Moderation of Female Relationship Satisfaction on Relationship Between Female Repair Attempt Behavior and Couple Emotional Flexibility During Marital Conflict (N = 23)*

Model	<i>b</i>	Std. Error	$\beta$	<i>p</i>
1 (Constant)	0.00	0.20		1.000
Zscore(wrepair)	0.39	0.20	0.39	.067
R <sup>2</sup>	0.15			
2 (Constant)	0.03	0.23		.894
Zscore(wrepair)	0.42	0.27	0.42	.139
Zscore(wsat)	-0.01	0.25	-0.01	.959
ZwrepairXZwsat	-0.06	0.21	-0.07	.769
R <sup>2</sup>	0.16			
$\Delta R^2$	0.01			
3 (Constant)	0.24	0.49		.634
Zscore(wrepair)	0.42	0.28	0.42	.150
Zscore(wsat)	-0.09	0.31	-0.09	.763
ZwrepairXZwsat	-0.07	0.21	-0.13	.762
Negative Duration	0.00	0.00	-0.13	.637

*Note.* R<sup>2</sup> = 0.17 and  $\Delta R^2$  = 0.01 for Model 3, which indicates no substantial change in variance when controlling for negative duration. Wrepair = wives' reported repair behavior. Wsat = wives' satisfaction.

Table 4

*Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Moderation of Male Attachment-Related Anxiety on Relationship Between Female Repair Attempt Behavior and Couple Emotional Flexibility During Marital Conflict (N = 23)*

Model	<i>b</i>	Std. Error	$\beta$	<i>p</i>
1 (Constant)	0.00	0.20		1.000
Zscore(wrepair)	0.39	0.20	0.39	.067
R <sup>2</sup>	0.15			
2 (Constant)	0.06	0.19		.752
Zscore(wrepair)	0.43	0.22	0.43	.072
Zscore(hanx)	-0.31	0.20	-0.31	.133
ZwrepairXZhanx	0.24	0.20	0.26	.239
R <sup>2</sup>	0.30			
$\Delta R^2$	0.15			
3 (Constant)	-0.06	0.40		.891
Zscore(wrepair)	0.45	0.24	0.45	.077
Zscore(hanx)	-0.34	0.22	-0.34	.138
ZwrepairXZhanx	0.25	0.21	0.27	.236
Negative Duration	0.00	0.00	0.08	.737

*Note.* R<sup>2</sup> = 0.31 and  $\Delta R^2$  = 0.01 for Model 3, which indicates no substantial change in variance when controlling for negative duration. Wrepair = wives' reported repair behavior. Hanx = husbands' attachment-related anxiety.

Table 5

*Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Moderation of Female Attachment-Related Anxiety on Relationship Between Female Repair Attempt Behavior and Couple Emotional Flexibility During Marital Conflict (N = 23)*

Model	b	Std. Error	$\beta$	p
1 (Constant)	0.00	0.20		1.000
Zscore(wrepair)	0.39	0.20	0.39	.067
R <sup>2</sup>	0.15			
2 (Constant)	0.02	0.20		.930
Zscore(wrepair)	0.38	0.23	0.38	.108
Zscore(wanx)	-0.27	0.22	-0.27	.222
ZwrepairXZwanx	0.10	0.19	0.12	.619
R <sup>2</sup>	0.26			
$\Delta R^2$	0.11			
3 (Constant)	0.05	0.41		.903
Zscore(wrepair)	0.38	0.24	0.38	.131
Zscore(wanx)	-0.27	0.23	-0.27	.267
ZwrepairXZwanx	0.10	0.20	0.12	.623
Negative Duration	0.00	0.00	-0.02	.928

*Note.* R<sup>2</sup> = 0.26 and  $\Delta R^2$  = 0.00 for Model 3, which indicates no change in variance when controlling for negative duration. Wrepair = wives' reported repair behavior. Wanx = wives' attachment-related anxiety.

Table 6

*Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Moderation of Male Attachment-Related Avoidance on Relationship Between Female Repair Attempt Behavior and Couple Emotional Flexibility During Marital Conflict (N = 23)*

Model	<i>b</i>	Std. Error	$\beta$	<i>p</i>
1 (Constant)	0.00	0.20		1.000
Zscore(wrepair)	0.39	0.20	0.39	.067
R <sup>2</sup>	0.15			
2 (Constant)	-0.06	0.21		.793
Zscore(wrepair)	0.29	0.24	0.29	.228
Zscore(havoid)	0.02	0.21	0.02	.913
ZwrepairXZhavoid	-0.29	0.32	-0.21	.376
R <sup>2</sup>	0.19			
$\Delta R^2$	0.04			
3 (Constant)	0.02	0.44		.962
Zscore(wrepair)	0.28	0.25	0.28	.268
Zscore(havoid)	0.03	0.22	0.03	.907
ZwrepairXZhavoid	-0.28	0.34	-0.20	.428
Negative Duration	0.00	0.00	-0.05	.840

*Note.* R<sup>2</sup> = 0.19 and  $\Delta R^2$  = 0.00 for Model 3, which indicates no change in variance when controlling for negative duration. Wrepair = wives' reported repair behavior. Havoid = husbands' attachment-related avoidance.



Table 7

*Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Moderation of Female Attachment-Related Avoidance on Relationship Between Female Repair Attempt Behavior and Couple Emotional Flexibility During Marital Conflict (N = 23)*

Model	<i>b</i>	Std. Error	$\beta$	<i>p</i>
1 (Constant)	0.00	0.20		1.000
Zscore(wrepair)	0.39	0.20	0.39	.067
R <sup>2</sup>	0.15			
2 (Constant)	0.07	0.21		.754
Zscore(wrepair)	0.32	0.23	0.32	.178
Zscore(wavoid)	-0.21	0.25	-0.21	.400
ZwrepairXZwavoid	0.18	0.23	0.17	.462
R <sup>2</sup>	0.25			
$\Delta R^2$	0.10			
3 (Constant)	0.07	0.43		.871
Zscore(wrepair)	0.32	0.24	0.32	.197
Zscore(wavoid)	-0.21	0.27	-0.21	.446
ZwrepairXZwavoid	0.18	0.24	0.17	.476
Negative Duration	0.00	0.00	0.00	.994

*Note.* R<sup>2</sup> = 0.25 and  $\Delta R^2$  = 0.00 for Model 3, which indicates no change in variance when controlling for negative duration. Wrepair = wives' reported repair behavior. Wavoid = wives' attachment-related avoidance.

Appendix B

Measures

Measure 1

Subject Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Please circle one:      Female      Male

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The Experiences in Close Relationships Inventory

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The following statements concern how you feel in romantic relationships. *We are interested in how you generally experience relationships, not just in what is happening in a current relationship.* Respond to each statement by indicating how much you agree or disagree with it. Write the number in the space provided, using the following rating scale:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Disagree Strongly			Neutral/ Mixed			Agree Strongly

- \_\_\_ 1. I prefer not to show a partner how I feel deep down.
- \_\_\_ 2. I worry about being abandoned.
- \_\_\_ 3. I am very comfortable being close to romantic partners.
- \_\_\_ 4. I worry a lot about my relationships.
- \_\_\_ 5. Just when my partner starts to get close to me I find myself pulling away.
- \_\_\_ 6. I worry that romantic partners won't care about me as much as I care about them.
- \_\_\_ 7. I get uncomfortable when a romantic partner wants to be very close.
- \_\_\_ 8. I worry a fair amount about losing my partner.
- \_\_\_ 9. I don't feel comfortable opening up to romantic partners.
- \_\_\_ 10. I often wish that my partner's feelings for me were as strong as my feelings for

him/her.

- \_\_\_ 11. I want to get close to my partner, but I keep pulling back.
- \_\_\_ 12. I often want to merge completely with romantic partners, and this sometimes scares them away.
- \_\_\_ 13. I am nervous when partners get too close to me.
- \_\_\_ 14. I worry about being alone.
- \_\_\_ 15. I feel comfortable sharing my private thoughts and feelings with my partner.
- \_\_\_ 16. My desire to be very close sometimes scares people away.
- \_\_\_ 17. I try to avoid getting too close to my partner.
- \_\_\_ 18. I need a lot of reassurance that I am loved by my partner.
- \_\_\_ 19. I find it relatively easy to get close to my partner.
- \_\_\_ 20. Sometimes I feel that I force my partners to show more feeling, more commitment.
- \_\_\_ 21. I find it difficult to allow myself to depend on romantic partners.
- \_\_\_ 22. I do not often worry about being abandoned.
- \_\_\_ 23. I prefer not to be too close to romantic partners.
- \_\_\_ 24. If I can't get my partner to show interest in me, I get upset or angry.
- \_\_\_ 25. I tell my partner just about everything.
- \_\_\_ 26. I find that my partner(s) don't want to get as close as I would like.
- \_\_\_ 27. I usually discuss my problems and concerns with my partner.
- \_\_\_ 28. When I'm not involved in a relationship, I feel somewhat anxious and insecure.
- \_\_\_ 29. I feel comfortable depending on romantic partners.
- \_\_\_ 30. I get frustrated when my partner is not around as much as I would like.
- \_\_\_ 31. I don't mind asking romantic partners for comfort, advice, or help.
- \_\_\_ 32. I get frustrated if romantic partners are not available when I need them.
- \_\_\_ 33. It helps to turn to my romantic partner in times of need.
- \_\_\_ 34. When romantic partners disapprove of me, I feel really bad about myself.
- \_\_\_ 35. I turn to my partner for many things, including comfort and reassurance.
- \_\_\_ 36. I resent it when my partner spends time away from me.

Measure 2

Subject Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Please circle one:      Female                  Male

**Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test**

1. Circle the dot on the scale below which best describes the degree of happiness, everything considered, of your present marriage. The middle point, "happy," represents the degree of happiness which most people get from marriage, and the scale gradually ranges on one side to those few people who are very unhappy in marriage, and on the other, to those few who experience extreme joy or felicity in marriage.

·	·	·	·	·	·	·
Very Unhappy			Happy			Perfectly Happy

State the approximate extent of agreement or disagreement between you and your mate on the following items. Please place a check beside each item.

	Always Agree	Almost Always Agree	Occasional ly Disagree	Frequently Disagree	Almost Always Disagree	Always Disagree
2. Handling family finances						
3. Matters of recreation						
4. Demonstration of affection						
5. Friends						

6. Sex relations						
7. Conventionality (good or proper conduct)						
8. Philosophy of life						
9. Ways of dealing with in-laws						

10. When disagreements arise, they usually result in:  
 Husband giving in      Wife giving in      Agreement by mutual give and take

11. How much do you and your mate engage in outside interests together?  
 All of them      Some of them      Very few of them      None of them

12. In leisure time do you generally prefer: To be "on the go," To stay at home?  
 Does your mate generally prefer: To be "on the go," To stay at home?

13. Do you ever wish you had not married?  
 Frequently      Occasionally      Rarely      Never

14. If you had your life to live over, do you think you would:  
 Marry the same person      Marry a different person      Not marry at all

15. Do you confide in your mate:  
 Almost never      Rarely      In most things      In everything

Measure 3

Subject Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Please circle one:      Female      Male

**Repair Attempts  
Questionnaire**

Please read each statement and circle the number that best describes you/your partner.

<b>When we are in an argument...</b>	Not at all like me/my partner	Somewhat like me/my partner	Very much like me/my partner		
...I still try and be affectionate.	1	2	3	4	5
...and my partner says we should talk to each other in a different way, it usually makes a lot of sense.	1	2	3	4	5
...my partner expresses appreciation for nice things I do.	1	2	3	4	5
...and I comment on how I would like to communicate differently, my partner usually listens to me.	1	2	3	4	5
...I can say that I am wrong.	1	2	3	4	5
...I can usually recognize when my partner is trying to make things better.	1	2	3	4	5
...my partner is good at 'putting on the brakes' if our discussion gets too heated.	1	2	3	4	5
...and I apologize, it is usually accepted by my partner.	1	2	3	4	5
...I try and say things that keep the argument from getting out of control.	1	2	3	4	5
...I am able to accept positive or nice things that my partner says.	1	2	3	4	5
...my partner often says/does nice or humorous things that interrupt the flow of the conflict.	1	2	3	4	5
...my partner is able to recognize when I'm trying to make things better.	1	2	3	4	5
...I can maintain a sense of humor.	1	2	3	4	5
...my partner is usually able to calm me down.	1	2	3	4	5
...my partner is able to say that she/he is wrong.	1	2	3	4	5
...my attempts to soothe or calm my partner usually work.	1	2	3	4	5

*Adapted from:* Gottman, J. M. (1999). *The marriage clinic: A scientifically-based marital therapy* (pp. 170-172). New York: W. W. Norton.

VITA

Jennifer Reigh Smith

Candidate for the Degree of

Master of Science

Thesis: ATTACHMENT AND RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION AS  
MODERATORS OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FEMALE REPAIR  
ATTEMPT BEHAVIOR AND COUPLE EMOTIONAL FLEXIBILITY  
DURING MARITAL CONFLICT

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