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Romantic disengagement as a developmental process that contributes to marital distress and decline

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ROMANTIC DISENGAGEMENT

AS A DEVELOPMENTAL PROCESS

THAT CONTRIBUTES TO MARITAL DISTRESS AND DECLINE

by

Robin Ann Barry

An Abstract

Of a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the Doctor of
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Thesis Supervisor: Associate Professor Erika Lawrence

Romantic disengagement is a disturbingly prevalent yet understudied cause of marital distress and dissolution. Existing research on disengagement has been primarily descriptive and limited by reliance on retrospective reports from already disengaged spouses. Therefore, theoretically informed prospective research to elucidate the process through which some spouses become increasingly disengaged from their partners over time is necessary to facilitate clinical intervention efforts. The present research aimed to address this need by presenting and performing preliminary tests of a theoretically informed model of the process of romantic disengagement. The model was tested in a sample of 103 married couples assessed six times over their first seven years of marriage.

Pieces of the model that were tested include (1) the proposal that avoidant and disengaging behaviors toward one's partner, particularly during times of need or increased stress (such as marital conflict interactions), are indicators of a process of romantic disengagement, (2) specific predispositional and contextual factors proposed to interact to predict a spouse's greater tendency to behave avoidantly during couple interactions, and (3) the proposal that a spouse's tendency to be more avoidant with his or her partner later in marriage will be greater to the extent that avoidance is reinforced early in marriage. First**,** I examined whether avoidant behavior during marital conflict contributes to a process of romantic disengagement as evidenced by declines in trust and intimacy and declines in marital satisfaction. Consistent with hypotheses, I found higher conflict avoidance was associated with declines in trust and intimacy and declines in marital satisfaction. Second, I tested two predispositional (i.e., spouses' attachment avoidance and avoidant coping style) and two contextual factors (spouses' role during support interactions, and the partner's negative affect) that were expected to interact to

predict whether spouses behave avoidantly during specific couple interactions. I found mixed support for hypotheses depending on spouse and interaction type. Specifically, during conflict interactions, husbands and wives with higher attachment avoidance, and wives with more avoidant coping styles, behaved more avoidantly to the extent that their partners were higher in negative affect. During supportive transactions, husbands with more avoidant coping styles were more disengaged to the extent that their wives were higher in negative affect. Third, I tested my hypothesis that a spouse will be more avoidant with his or her partner later in marriage to the extent that avoidance is reinforced early in marriage. I found partial support for this hypothesis. Husbands' disengagement during conflict interactions interacted with improved mood post-interaction to predict husbands' disengagement across interactions at 7 years of marriage. In summary, this research presents an integrated theoretical model of romantic disengagement and provides preliminary support for aspects of the model.

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

PH.D. THESIS

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To Brian Roulo and Mary Jane and Jack Barry

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CHAPTER I

GENERAL OVERVIEW

Romantic disengagement comprises feelings of indifference toward one's partner and cognitive and behavioral efforts to increase distance with one's partner (Barry, Lawrence, & Langer, 2008). It is one of the most common reasons why couples seek marital therapy (Geiss & O'Leary, 1981; Whisman, Dixon, & Johnson, 1997), and is among the most frequently cited reasons dating and married couples give for their relationship distress and dissolution (Albrecht, Bahr, & Goodman, 1983; Amato & Previti, 2003; Baxter, 1986; Bloom & Hodges, 1981; Gigy & Kelly, 1992; Sprecher, 1994). Unfortunately, existing marital therapies appear ill-equipped to effectively combat romantic disengagement. Specifically, disengaged couples are less likely to benefit from traditional forms of couple therapy compared to their more engaged counterparts (Hahlweg, Schindler, Revenstorf, & Brengelmann, 1984). One reason why disengaged spouses do not respond well to couple therapy may be that these spouses wait until their marriages have deteriorated to an advanced stage of disengagement before seeking marital therapy. Indeed, one study found that couples entering therapy reported waiting an average of six years after they identified serious marital difficulties before pursuing therapy (Notarius & Buongiorno, 1992, as cited in Gottman & Gottman, 1999). Thus, identifying and intervening in the process of disengagement early on may prove to be a more effective means of addressing distress caused by romantic disengagement.

The development of more effective interventions targeting the process of disengagement cannot be accomplished until these processes are truly understood. Unfortunately, what remains elusive in the literature at this time is an understanding of

these processes of disengagement. In fact, very little research has focused the construct of disengagement per se. Further, the research that does exist is limited in two ways. First, the majority of this research has been descriptive rather than theoretically driven. Although descriptive research is important, theory is necessary to facilitate the formation of a priori hypotheses and to advance science (Casmir, 1994). Second, most studies of disengagement or related topics have relied on retrospective rather than prospective research designs. Retrospective reports are problematic because they are subject to memory bias and often found to be inaccurate (Neisser & Fivush, 1994). Thus, relying on reports of already disengaged spouses to explicate processes of disengagement likely reflects those spouses' biases. In sum, theoretically grounded research using prospective research designs is necessary to elucidate the processes through which couples become disengaged.

The purpose of the present research was to begin to address these gaps in the literature. First, I developed a theoretically informed model of the process of romantic disengagement. Second, I examined different aspects of my model in order to provide preliminary support for the model. I present my dissertation research as a series of three stand-alone, publishable papers. In the first paper, I review existing research on romantic disengagement and related constructs. Then I review and integrate theories that together inform my process model of disengagement. Finally, I present the model and describe implications of the model for research on disengagement. More specifically, adult attachment theory provides a detailed description of how relationship partners may become disengaged. Therefore, attachment theory comprised the primary framework for my model of romantic disengagement. Behavioral learning theory was used to elaborate

on the model and fill an important gap in the model. I then incorporated three other literatures to elaborate on and provided support for specific aspects of my model: Bowen systems theory, the affect regulation literature and the coping literature.

In the second and third papers, I tested several specific hypotheses extrapolated from my model. Specifically, an important implication of my model is that avoidant and disengaging behaviors toward one's partner, particularly during times of need or increased stress, are indicators of a process of romantic disengagement. Thus**,** in my second paper, I examine whether avoidant behavior during marital conflict contributes to a process of romantic disengagement (i.e., declines in trust and intimacy and increased marital distress). In addition to declines in trust and intimacy, I test a competing mediator through which conflict avoidance contributes to marital decline: declines in communication and conflict resolution. In my third paper, based upon my proposal that avoidant behavior toward one's spouse during times of need or increased stress indicates a process of disengagement, I test two predispositional and two contextual factors that I propose interact to predict a spouse's greater tendency to behave avoidantly during couple interactions. In this third paper, I also test my hypothesis -- based on operant conditioning theory -- that a spouse will be more avoidant with his or her partner later in marriage to the extent that avoidance is reinforced early in marriage. In sum, my second and third papers test specific hypotheses derived from my model of romantic disengagement.

In summary, my research presents an integrated theoretical model of romantic disengagement and tests of several components of the model. Although there are many additional questions to address related to the process of romantic disengagement, this

research contributes a solid framework for the study of this detrimental process, and the two empirical studies provide preliminary support for specific facets of the model. This research represents a critical first step in understanding the processes of romantic disengagement in order to enhance the efficacy of couple interventions designed to prevent disengagement and subsequent distress and divorce.

CHAPTER II

AN INTEGRATIVE THEORETICAL PROCESS MODEL OF ROMANTIC DISENGAGEMENT

Romantic disengagement, commonly referred to as "growing apart" or "falling out of love" with one's romantic partner, is an all-too-common stage of relationship decline from which few couples recover (Gottman, 1999; Kayser, 1993). Indeed, disengagement is among the most frequently cited reasons dating and married couples give for their relationship distress and dissolution (Amato & Previti, 2003; Baxter, 1986; Gigy & Kelly, 1992; Sprecher, 1994), and couple therapists report that nearly half of couples entering therapy cite disengagement as a primary concern (Geiss & O'Leary, 1981; Whisman, Dixon, & Johnson, 1997). Clinicians also rank disengagement as the most difficult presenting problem to treat (Whisman et al., 1997). Finally, consistent with therapists' reports, research suggests that disengagement predicts poor prognosis for couple therapy (e.g., Hahlweg, Schindler, Revenstorf, & Brengelmann, 1984). In sum, romantic disengagement is disturbingly prevalent, a particularly difficult stage of relationship decline for couples, and uniquely challenging to couple therapists.

Importantly, romantic disengagement is distinct from marital conflict – both in terms of its phenomenology and its contributions to marital decline. Whereas highly conflictual couples express high levels of negative affect and low levels of positive affect toward each other (Gottman, 1999; Fincham & Linfield, 1997), disengaged individuals express low levels of *both* positive and negative affect toward their partners (Gottman, 1999; Kayser, 1993). Factor analytic studies also demonstrate the distinction between disengagement and marital conflict. Snyder and Regts (1979) conducted factor analyses

of 127 items assessing global marital distress and found two factors: one representing marital conflict (which they termed “disharmony”) and one representing romantic disengagement (which they termed “disaffection”). Similarly, in the process of creating a measure of romantic disengagement, Barry, Lawrence, and Langer (2008) found that romantic disengagement formed a factor separate (albeit related) from negative affect. In sum, there is converging evidence from both factor analytic and basic research studies that romantic disengagement represents a stage of marital decline that is relatively unique from high levels of marital conflict.

Despite the importance of romantic disengagement and the evidence that it represents a unique pathway to marital distress, relatively little research has focused on disengagement. Additionally, most of the existing studies of romantic disengagement have been limited in two respects. First, the majority of this research has been descriptive rather than theoretically driven. Theory is necessary to explicitly address the interrelations among meaningful parts rather than simply observing and describing these parts. Theory facilitates the formation of hypotheses and allows the proposed interrelations among component parts to be tested, thus advancing science (Casmir, 1994). Second, most studies of disengagement or related topics (e.g., Kayser, 1993; Whisman et al., 1997) have employed retrospective rather than prospective research designs, which are subject to memory bias and often inaccurate (Neisser & Fivush, 1994).

Given that disengagement is an important cause of relationship distress and dissolution and predicts poor prognosis for couple therapy, and given the devastating consequences of relationship distress and dissolution for adults and their children (Amato, 2000; Belsky, & Jaffee, 2006; Robles & Kiecolt-Glaser, 2003), theoretically

grounded research elucidating the processes through which couples become disengaged is sorely needed. Such research would inform clinical efforts to prevent couples from becoming disengaged and efforts to treat couples in which one or both partners are currently disengaged. The purpose of this paper is to introduce a theoretically derived model of the processes through which an individual may become increasingly disengaged from his or her partner over time. In service of this goal, I will first review and critique the existing research on romantic disengagement. Second, I will review existing theories and research that, although not heretofore applied to the study of romantic disengagement per se, have direct utility for creating a *theoretically informed process model of romantic disengagement*. Third, I will review existing theories and research that further elaborate and support the model. Fourth, I will discuss and integrate the implications of my review as they relate to my new proposed process model of romantic disengagement.

Review of Existing Research on Romantic Disengagement

In this section, I will review and critique the existing research on romantic disengagement. I have included research on the conceptualization of romantic disengagement as well research on the process of disengagement. After reviewing each topic, I will provide a brief critique.

Conceptualizing Romantic Disengagement

Defining and conceptualizing romantic disengagement is complicated because different researchers have focused on different aspects of romantic disengagement in their research, including emotional, affective, cognitive, and behavioral components. Although discussing these components separately aids in description, factor analyses

suggest that disengagement comprises a single broad factor in which these four components are included (Barry et al., 2008). Therefore, in the present paper, I conceptualize disengagement as a single construct that includes emotional, affective, cognitive, and behavioral components.

The *emotional or affective* aspects of disengagement have been termed disaffection (Kayser, 1993; Snyder & Regts, 1982; Herrington et al., 2008), emotional disengagement (Gottman, 1999), and indifference (Fincham & Linfield, 1997). Despite these different terms, researchers agree that feelings of indifference, including a lack of strong positive emotions (e.g., low levels of love) and relatively little negative emotion (e.g., anger; Gottman, 1999; Fincham & Linfield, 1997) toward one's partner and one's relationship are important aspects of romantic disengagement. Emotional disengagement has also been defined by low levels of positive *affect* such as low interest in the spouse or relationship (Gottman, 1999; Kayser, 1993; 1996; Snyder & Regts, 1982), and by low levels of energy and excitement expressed during interactions with one's spouse (Smith, Vivian, & O'Leary, 1990). Although researchers describe disengagement as low positive and low negative affect, factor analyses find disengagement to be a unique construct from positive affect and emotional states (e.g., positive affect, Smith et al., 1990; love, and intimacy, Barry et al., 2008) and from negative affect and emotional states (e.g., negative affect, Smith et al., 1990; disharmony, Snyder & Regts, 1982; dissatisfaction, Barry et al., 2008).

In addition to the emotional or affective components, researchers have described key *cognitive and behavioral* facets of disengagement. These cognitions and behaviors are purportedly used to increase psychological or physical distance from one's partner

(i.e., relational distancing; Hess, 2002). For example, definitions of romantic disengagement routinely include references to avoidance and withdrawal (Barry et al, 2008; Gottman, 1999; Kayser, 1993; Snyder & Regts, 1982). Compared to individuals who are relatively more engaged, disengaged individuals are less involved in their partners' lives (Gottman, 1999), and speak with their partners less frequently (Kayser, 1993). They also tend to interact with their partners in less intimate ways (e.g., refraining from personal disclosures; Kayser, 1993), and are less attentive to their partners and their relationships (Barry et al., 2008; Gottman, 1999; Kayser, 1993). In sum, relational distancing, whether achieved via cognitive or behavioral strategies, is another key component of romantic disengagement.

In contrast with researchers' general consensus that romantic disengagement comprises emotional and affective components as well as cognitive and behavior relational distancing strategies, other potential facets of the construct have not achieved consensus. For example, Gottman's description of disengagement includes tension and sadness (Gottman, 1999), and Kayser's includes anger, disappointment, and hopelessness (Kayser, 1993). Nevertheless, factor analyses suggest that these specific feelings are *not* components or indicators of romantic disengagement (Barry et al., 2008). In sum, there has only been limited agreement among researchers about the breadth and scope of the construct of disengagement. In the present research, my working conceptualization of disengagement is based on the facets of the construct for which there is general agreement: relative emotional or affective indifference toward one's partner and behavioral and cognitive distancing from one's partner.

Explaining the Process of Romantic Disengagement

Processes of romantic disengagement have been studied primarily within the context of understanding why relationships dissolve. Within this broader context, disengagement is considered one of several processes that may lead to dissolution (e.g., Baxter, 1979; 1982; 1983; 1984; 1985; 1987; Knapp, 1978). Three research programs provide conceptual or descriptive frameworks applicable to understanding the process of romantic disengagement: research on the reversal hypothesis, research on communication strategies that appear to facilitate the process of relationship dissolution; and research on individuals' post-disengaged perceptions of their own process of disengagement.

The reversal hypothesis. The reversal hypothesis (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Knapp, 1978) suggests that the process of disengagement, described at the couple level rather than at the individual level, follows the same stages couples experience during romantic relationship formation in reverse. Proponents of this hypothesis emphasize the role that couple communication plays in the long-term process of romantic disengagement (Guerrero & Floyd, 2006). The reversal hypotheses allows that the timing through which couples enter different stages of disengagement is highly variable, and that some couples may skip some stages altogether, or may remain in a given stage for extended periods of time. During the first stage -- the differentiating stage -- individuals focus on differences between themselves and their partners to emphasize their unique personal identities over their relational identities. During the second stage -- the circumscribing stage -- couples' communication becomes increasingly superficial rather than personal. For example, couples tend to avoid discussing particular topics that could lead to personal disclosures or personal vulnerability. In the third stage -- the stagnating

stage -- communication is greatly reduced and is increasingly perceived by couples to be "pointless." During the fourth stage -- the avoiding stage -- physical separation occurs, and the fifth stage is relationship termination. Guerrero and Floyd (2006) emphasize the importance of avoidant and withdrawing behaviors during each of these stages.

Research on the reversal hypothesis certainly supports my conceptualization that disengaged individuals employ relational distancing strategies such as avoidant behaviors (e.g., communicating more superficially, spending less time with each other). However, some researchers have challenged the conceptualization of the process of disengagement as the process of relationship formation in reverse (Baxter, 1983; Duck & Lea, 1982). These researchers argue, for example, that during relationship formation, couples gain new knowledge about each other; however, during disengagement, partners do not "lose" knowledge about one another, and in some cases gain new knowledge about their partner and relationship (for a review see Miller & Parks, 1982). Further, critics of the reversal hypothesis point out that, although partners may perceive increased psychological and physical distance as they become more disengaged, because of their relationship history they can never truly become strangers to one another (as they were prior to meeting each other). Finally, the reversal hypothesis focuses on disengagement as a couple-level phenomenon; however, research suggests that one partner is typically more disengaged than the other (Baxter, 1983).

Communication strategies. Baxter also sought to understand the process of relationship disengagement (Baxter, 1979; 1982; 1983; 1984; 1985; 1987), which she referred to as a process of "un-bonding" during relationship dissolution. By integrating multiple conceptual frameworks, including exchange theory and the reversal hypothesis

(Altman & Taylor, 1973; Knapp, 1978), and by studying multiple types of non-marital relationships (e.g., hypothetical relationships, past friendships and romantic partners; Baxter, 1979; 1982; 1983), Baxter sought to identify specific communication strategies individuals use to end relationships.

Within the process of disengagement, Baxter classifies individuals' communication strategies along two dimensions. The first dimension is "other-orientation," defined as the degree to which an individual's communication about dissolution is oriented toward protecting one's partner from emotional pain. The second dimension is characterized by how directly an individual communicates his or her wish to end the relationship (i.e., direct versus indirect). Direct strategies include explicit statements to the partner that one wishes to terminate the relationship. For example, "fait-accompli" (Baxter, 1985, p. 249) communication comprises explicit announcements to the partner that the relationship is over, without providing the partner the opportunity to influence this decision. Another direct strategy is the "state of the relationship talk," in which the disengager makes his or her desire for relationship termination known while talking about problems that exist in the relationship (Baxter, 1985). Indirect strategies fall into three categories of action: withdrawal, pseudo-de-escalation, and cost escalation. Withdrawal comprises communication aimed at reducing intimacy and contact with one's partner. Pseudo-de-escalation involves communicating to one's partner the desire to decrease intimacy in the relationship (e.g., asking for more "personal space" or time spent without the partner). Finally, cost-escalation represents communication strategies intended to make the relationship seem less valuable or more costly to one's partner (e.g., picking a fight, purposefully annoying one's partner; Baxter, 1985).

Baxter's research supports my conceptualization that disengaged individuals engage in relational distancing strategies. Her research also suggests that the process of disengagement may include the use of negative behaviors (i.e., strategies included in cost-escalation) to increase relational distance. However, Baxter's research generally focuses on disengagement strategies that occur when the individual has decided upon the goal of relationship termination (Baxter, 1983). Alternatively, I am interested in understanding processes that *may lead to* increased disengagement, particularly when neither partner explicitly has relationship dissolution as a goal. Also, Baxter conceptualizes disengagement strategies as identical across types of relationships, whereas I argued that the process of disengagement in romantic relationships is different from disengagement processes in other relationships (Barry et al., 2008).

Post-disengaged perceptions. Kayser (1993) has also studied the process of romantic disengagement. Her research builds on descriptive models of processes of relationship dissolution, including the reversal hypothesis and communication strategies (e.g., Altman & Taylor, 1973; Knapp, 1978; Baxter, 1984), as well as building on broader models of relationship dissolution not necessarily linked to romantic disengagement (e.g., topographical model of relationship disengagement and dissolution; Duck, 1982). Through interviews with 50 self-described maritally "disaffected" individuals, Kayser identified three stages in the process of romantic disengagement (which she referred to as the process of marital disaffection). During the first phase, individuals experience feelings of disillusionment and disappointment with their partners and/or with the relationships. In the second phase, individuals experience intense anger and hurt. During the third phase, spouses experience feelings of indifference toward their partners, and feel

hopeless about the possibility of resolving relationship difficulties. Disaffected individuals in the third phase either seek to dissolve their marriages or remain in their marriages but lead lives that are largely separate from their partners (Kayser, 1993).

Kayser's research provides important descriptive information about individuals' retrospective perceptions of the process of disengagement. For example, her work suggests that negative experiences with one's partner (e.g., disappointing experiences, hurtful experiences) may begin the process of disengagement. Also, this research highlights the importance of increasing emotional indifference toward one's partner or relationship during the process of disengagement. Thus, Kayser's work represents an important first step in understanding the process of disengagement. However, Kayser's conceptualization of romantic disengagement differs from mine in that it includes negative affect (anger) and emotional experiences (hopelessness; Kayser, 1993), which I argue may influence the process of disengagement but represent distinct constructs from disengagement. Additionally, the retrospective nature of the reports from individuals already disengaged from their partners limits our ability to confidently state -- or to predict prospectively -- that these stages will capture individuals as they go through the process online.

Critique. The research reviewed here on the process of disengagement provides conceptual and descriptive frameworks to aid in understanding how and why couples may disengage in romantic relationships. However, an important criticism of much of this research is that it has relied primarily on *retrospective* reports of individuals who are already disengaged (Baxter, 1983; Kayser, 1993). Retrospective reports of personal histories (Neisser & Fivush, 1994) and relationship histories (Halford, Keefer, &

Osgarby, 2002; Karney & Frye, 2002) tend not to be accurate. For example, spouses who are less satisfied in their relationships tend to report lower levels of relationship satisfaction retrospectively compared to the levels of marital satisfaction they report online (Halford et al., 2002; Karney & Frye, 2002). Less satisfied spouses also tend to have better recall of negative marital events rather than positive marital events compared to more satisfied spouses (Halford et al., 2002). A second important criticism is that this literature is primarily descriptive, and much of it has not been subjected to rigorous methodological testing. Finally, most of these process hypotheses have not been tested in ongoing romantic relationships specifically. Therefore, additional rigorous and prospective research is necessary to clarify the processes of disengagement.

Theories Relevant to the Formation of a Process

Model of Romantic Disengagement

In this section I will review theory and research that, although not previously applied to the study of romantic disengagement per se, has direct utility for creating a process model of romantic disengagement. In service of this goal, I will discuss the relevant contributions of attachment and behavioral learning theory. Attachment theory provides a broad framework within which to embed my process model of romantic disengagement. However, this theory is insufficient for developing my model, as important gaps in the framework remain. To fill those gaps, I use behavioral learning theory (including classical conditioning and operant conditioning) to further develop the overarching framework for my new process model. Behavioral learning theory is also used to further elaborate key components of my model.

After reviewing the relevant basic principles of each theory, I will highlight the

implications of each theory and research for developing my process model of disengagement. I will also examine the limitations or weaknesses of each perspective for the study of disengagement. At the end of this section, I will integrate these theories to demonstrate how they contribute to my new model of romantic disengagement.

Attachment Theory

Attachment theory provides a biosocial explanation for why humans form and maintain close relationships, and explicates the processes through which some relationships become distressed and ultimately dissolve (Bowlby, 1969/1982; 1973; 1980; Feeney, 1999; Hazan & Shaver, 1994). Through evolutionary processes, humans have developed a drive to form and maintain close relationships in order to feel comforted, supported, physically safe, and emotionally secure (see Mikulincer, Shaver, & Pereg, 2003 for a review). Secure attachment relationships are consistent and reliable sources of these needs, and experiences with attachment partners in which these needs are met bolster trust in the relationship and enhance individual functioning (Collins & Read, 1990; Mikulincer et al., 2003). In contrast, insecure attachment relationships fail to provide consistent need fulfillment which, in turn, can lead to individual distress and emotional detachment from one's partner (Bowlby, 1969/1982; 1973; 1980; Feeney & Monin, 2008). Therefore, within an attachment framework, the process of romantic disengagement can be conceptualized as the process through which an individual becomes increasingly detached from his or her partner.

Attachment bonds and styles. Attachment has been conceptualized as both a relationship-specific variable (i.e., attachment bonds) and as an individual-difference variable (i.e., attachment styles). *Attachment bonds* are specific relationships between

individuals and their attachment figures (i.e., infant-mother, husband-wife). *Attachment styles* represent individuals' generalized beliefs about and expectations for close relationships, and typical patterns of behavior in attachment relationships (Bowlby, 1969/1982; 1973; 1980). The quality of attachment bonds and styles are described along two orthogonal dimensions: attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance (Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994). Individuals who are low on both the anxiety and avoidance dimensions are considered securely attached. Secure attachments are characterized by trust that the attachment figure will be available and helpful in times of need, and by the ability to strike an optimal balance between closeness/intimacy and independence/autonomy in close relationships. Individuals high on the attachment anxiety dimension have a strong desire for intimacy with their partners, coupled with feelings of insecurity and a fear of interpersonal rejection. Individuals high on the attachment avoidance dimension are characterized by discomfort with and devaluation of intimacy (for a review see Rholes & Simpson, 2004).

The quality of early attachment bonds (i.e., whether attachment bonds are secure, anxious or avoidant) is influenced by individuals' biologically-based temperaments and their experiences with attachment figures (e.g., Rothbart & Bates, 2006; Thompson, 2006). Once formed, attachment bonds are amenable to change in response to partners' behaviors, by relationships, or by life events (Bowlby, 1969/1980; Weinfield, Sroufe, & Egeland, 2000; Weinfield, Whaley, & Egeland, 2004). Additionally, there is evidence that individuals do not have the same quality of attachment bond with every attachment figure (e.g., Cook, 2000; Barry, Lakey & Orehek, 2007). Nevertheless, the quality of early *attachment bonds* are believed to influence the quality of subsequent attachment

bonds (i.e., attachments with peers, extended family members, spouses; Collins, Guichard, Ford, & Feeney, 2004) and, ultimately, to influence the quality of individuals' *attachment styles* (Collins et al., 2004). Attachment styles exert long-lasting and broadly generalized influences on one's functioning in close relationships and on one's individual functioning throughout the lifespan (for a review see Cassidy & Shaver, 1999).

The attachment behavioral system. In addition to the research on attachment bonds and styles, attachment theory also emphasizes the functioning of the attachment behavioral system (ABS; e.g., Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1973; Mikulincer et al., 2003). Specifically, a motivational-control system is believed to have evolved to regulate proximity with attachment figures. When the ABS is activated, an individual performs behaviors aimed at reestablishing or maintaining proximity with the attachment figure. The ABS is hypothesized to become activated primarily in times of stress, illness, or when there is a perceived threat to the physical or psychological availability of the attachment figure. Proximity maintenance allows for the provision of comfort, support, and physical and emotional safety (see Mikulincer, Shaver & Pereg, 2003 for a review).

Attachment styles, bonds, and behavioral systems exert mutual influences over each other, and the responsiveness of the attachment figure plays a critical role in these influences (Bowlby, 1973; Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002). For example, when one's ABS is activated, individuals learn -- through the quality of the attachment figure's response to the individual's distress -- whether the attachment figure can be trusted to provide appropriate comfort and care during times of need. This learning process then influences the quality of one's attachment bond with that partner, and may influence the

development of his or her attachment style. If the partner tends to be sensitively responsive to the individual's distress and the individual is adequately soothed, the individual will form a secure attachment. If the partner tends to be inconsistent in his or her response and/or the individual is only occasionally soothed, s/he is likely to form an anxious attachment. If the partner is rejecting or the individual is repeatedly disappointed by his or her partner's response, an avoidant attachment is formed. Individual's existing attachment style should predispose them to form bonds that are of the same quality, due in part to the individual's expectations for and beliefs about attachment figures (Collins et al., 2004). Over time, if the partner continues to be rejecting or physically or psychologically unavailable, the individual will become detached, which represents a loss of the attachment bond (Bowlby, 1969/1982).

Most relevant to the present discussion is the process through which an individual's bond may become progressively more avoidant over time and lead to detachment. This process begins with the activation of the individual's ABS by the experience of stress, illness or threat to proximity with the partner. Once the ABS is activated, individuals who are not already relatively detached tend to approach the attachment figure either through proximity seeking (e.g., open communication) or by engaging in some form of protest behavior (e.g., negative affect) to signal that proximity is desired (Kobak & Dummeuler, 1994). When approach behaviors repeatedly fail to reestablish proximity, attachment theory maintains that the individual will experience feelings of anger, despair and hopelessness. Failure to re-establish proximity may result from absence of or rejection by the attachment figure (Feeney & Monin, 2008). Through this process, the individual learns that his or her attempts to reestablish proximity may

not be successful. That is, the individual learns that his or her behavioral efforts to reestablish proximity (i.e., proximity seeking and protest) have failed in the past and are likely to fail in the future (Bowlby, 1969/1980). Thus, next time the individual's ABS becomes activated, s/he may employ avoidant strategies instead, by denying or repressing attachment-related anxiety and his/her desire for proximity with the attachment figure, by avoiding contact with the attachment figure, or by actively turning his/her attention away from the partner or the relationship.

Avoidant strategies, within the context of ABS activation, purportedly serve two purposes. First, given that the individual's previous use of protest and/or proximity seeking strategies failed, avoidant strategies may reduce the risk of relationship termination with the attachment figure (Main & Weston, 1982). That is, previous attempts to engage the attachment figure have likely met with rejection, anger or inexpressiveness by the attachment figure, causing further distance from the attachment figure. In such situations, avoidance helps to maintain the relationship (Main & Weston, 1982). Second, avoidant strategies protect the individual from the emotional pain of being rejected or disappointed by the attachment figure (Kobak & Duemmler, 1994). Avoidant behaviors in response to ABS activation are referred to as *deactivation* strategies, because they "switch off" the ABS (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2008), suppressing attachment-related anxiety and repressing proximity seeking and protest behaviors. In sum, avoidant strategies in response to ABS activation may help maintain a troubled relationship and protect the individual from emotional distress.

By potentially reducing the risk of relationship termination, deactivation may indeed serve to *maintain* that relationship; however, it is less likely to *re-establish*

proximity to the attachment figure compared to approach behaviors (e.g., open constructive communication; Kobak & Duemmler, 1994). The failure to re-establish proximity is largely because deactivation does not provide the same opportunities for intimacy and relational growth as approach behaviors do. Because these opportunities are not provided, deactivation is likely to result in increased romantic disengagement. Indeed, whereas some couples report increased intimacy following shared stressful situations (Bodemann, Pihet & Kayser, 2006), deactivation is associated with feelings of lower intimacy in close relationships compared to individuals who do not employ deactivation strategies (e.g., Fraley & Shaver, 1997; Mikulincer et al., 1996). Additionally, Bowlby (1969/1982) explained that extended psychological or physical distance from one's attachment figure results in detachment. Therefore, because deactivation fails to re-establish proximity, thereby maintaining distance, it contributes to the process of detachment.

Implications of attachment theory for understanding the process of romantic disengagement. Although the process of relationship disengagement has been conceptualized as the loss of an attachment bond (e.g., Hazan & Shaver, 1994), no published research has explicitly linked processes of romantic disengagement to attachment theory. Nevertheless, attachment theory provides an excellent theoretical framework for the study of romantic disengagement, because the process through which an individuals' romantic attachment bond becomes progressively more avoidant over time and the individual may detach is conceptually identical to romantic disengagement. In addition to depicting a process of disengagement, applying an attachment theoretical perspective helps explain why disengagement is detrimental to individual and

relationship well-being, and suggests individual differences and contextual variables that may predict disengagement.

The first implication of an attachment theory perspective to understanding the process of disengagement is that it suggests that an individual's avoidant behavior toward the romantic partner may be an important *indicator* of the process of romantic disengagement. This is because avoidant behavior, particularly in the context of increased stress, may indicate that the individual expects to be rejected or disappointed, and interferes with the provision and maintenance of intimacy, support and security that bolster trust in the relationship. A second implication of this perspective is that an individual's level of avoidant attachment with his or her partner at a specific point in time (i.e., how avoidant the bond is) should be conceptually similar to his or her level of disengagement from the partner. This is because avoidant attachment includes individuals' typical behaviors with his/her partner (avoidant behavior in the case of avoidant attachment) as well as attitudes and expectations of the partner's behavior and relationship.

A third implication is that an individual's attachment style should influence the likelihood that an individual will become romantically disengaged. Specifically, an individual with an avoidant attachment style would be expected to be relatively more disengaged from his or her partner compared to individuals with less avoidant styles, and predisposed to entering into a process in which his or her disengagement increases over time. Individuals with avoidant styles tend to devalue intimacy with significant others in general. Additionally, their tendency to utilize deactivation when their ABS are activated will interfere with their ability to elicit and provide comfort, support, and physical and

emotional safety, which attachment theorists view as essential for healthy relationship and individual functioning (see Mikulincer et al., 2003 for a review).

Fourth, this perspective suggests two contextual variables that influence the process of disengagement: the partner's behavior and increased stressful experiences. When the partner behaves in an unresponsive or rejecting manner toward the individual in the context of the individual's ABS activation, the individual is more likely to behave avoidantly, and therefore more likely to become disengaged. Evidence that romantic partners are likely to behave avoidantly in response to their partner's aversive behaviors during stressful interactions comes from the literature on the demand-withdrawal pattern of marital communication (see Eldridge & Christensen, 2002 for a review). A demand-withdraw pattern occurs when one spouse demands or pursues an interaction with his or her partner (e.g., by exhibiting negative affect), while the other spouse withdraws from or avoids the interaction (e.g., by refusing to talk about an issue or by leaving the room). The demand-withdraw pattern of communication is common among distressed couples during conflict (Eldridge & Christensen, 2002), and conflictual interactions are typically stressful for such couples (Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 2005). Moreover, individuals' avoidant behaviors are temporally associated with their partners' demand behaviors during these interactions (Klintob & Smith, 1996).

Increased experiences with stress, illness and threats to proximity with the partner should also increase opportunities for disengagement, particularly for individuals who are predisposed to become disengaged (i.e., individuals with avoidant styles). This is because stress, illness or increased distance from one's attachment figure is required for ABS activation. Consistent with this assertion, research demonstrates that individuals with

avoidant attachment styles are more likely to behave avoidantly toward their romantic partner compared to individuals with more secure or anxious attachment styles when experiencing stress or temporary separation from the partner (see Feeney, 2004 and Mikulincer et al., 2003 for reviews). In sum, the partner's behavior in times of stress, and increased experiences of stress, illness and distance from one's partner should increase opportunities for disengagement, particularly for individuals with avoidant attachment styles.

A fifth implication of an attachment theory perspective for understanding the process of disengagement is that avoidant behavior is expected to provide short-term relief. Attachment theorists maintain that avoidant behavior toward one's partner in the context of ABS activation deactivates the individual's ABS. Consequently, the individual should experience a decrease in attachment-related anxiety as a result of the avoidant behavior, providing the individual with some sense of short-term relief. Although this outcome is not as satisfying as the comfort, intimacy and reassurance experienced by individuals with secure bonds who are able to approach their partners, individuals with avoidant styles or bonds likely believe that this is the best option available to them (Kobak & Duemmler, 1994).

A sixth implication is that this perspective suggests why disengagement is detrimental to the individual and relationship. Specifically, according to attachment theory, individuals have an innate biosocial need to form attachment relationships. When the attachment bond is characterized by higher attachment avoidance, the individual is less likely to seek out and receive adequate intimacy with and comfort from the partner (Kobak et al., 1994). As a result, the individual may be at higher risk for serious

intrapersonal problems such as depression. Indeed, both romantic disengagement (Heim & Snyder, 1991) and attachment avoidance (e.g., Mallinckrodt & Wei, 2005; Wei, Mallinckrodt, Russell, & Abraham, 2004) are associated with higher levels of depressive symptoms. With regard to relationship functioning, both disengagement (Barry et al., 2008; Snyder & Regts, 1982) and avoidant attachment styles (Feeney, 1994) are associated with increased romantic relationship distress. Additionally, because intimacy and comfort are considered basic human needs, disengaged individuals may be more likely to seek out extramarital affairs in order to meet those needs (Gottman, 1999). In sum, this perspective suggests that disengagement leads to increased personal and relationship distress because it interferes with the essential relationship provisions of intimacy and comfort closeness.

Limitations of attachment theory for understanding the process of romantic disengagement. Despite these six implications of attachment theory for informing a process model of romantic disengagement, I have identified two important weaknesses as well. The first weakness is that researchers have yet to disentangle the conceptual overlap between the presence of an attachment relationship (i.e., whether one is attached to a romantic partner or not) and the quality of an attachment relationship (i.e., whether the attachment is best described as secure, avoidant or anxious; Fraley & Shaver, 2000). The lack of theoretical clarity becomes important for the study of the process of romantic disengagement, because I argue that disengagement is similar to becoming progressively more detached from one's partner, and may include the quality of an attachment relationship becoming more avoidant over time. Whereas detachment represents a process of "un-bonding," an avoidant attachment bond represents an intact attachment

bond. In sum, the distinction between processes of detachment and an avoidant attachment bond has yet to be made. Nevertheless, this conceptualization is consistent with the fact that some spouses remain married despite experiencing notably high levels of disengagement (Gottman, 1999).

The second weakness of this perspective is that, although attachment theorists maintain that attachment bonds change in quality over time (e.g., become more avoidant over time) as individuals learn from repeated interactions with their attachment figures during times of need (Bowlby, 1969/1980), the theory fails to explain *how* this learning takes place. That is, although attachment theory provides a beginning framework for a process model of romantic disengagement, as depicted in Figure 1, the framework is incomplete as it does not address how these two processes are connected.

Conclusion. Conceptualizing disengagement within an attachment framework is useful because it provides a description of a process of disengagement, suggests risk factors for disengagement that include both personal predisposition and contextual variables, and explains how disengagement may lead to individual and relationship distress. One advantage and challenge of the process proposed is that it recognizes the complexity of close relationships and does not propose a single starting point for the process of disengagement. Instead, the model recognizes multiple possible contributors. First, individuals bring their personal vulnerabilities and histories with them into relationships in the form of their attachment styles. Second, partner behaviors influence individuals' behaviors, beliefs and expectations for the relationship, and stressful life circumstances or relationship events increase opportunities for disengagement to occur.

The theory also highlights the importance of avoidant behavior toward one's

partner, particularly in the context of increased stress, as an indicator of romantic disengagement. This is consistent with the existing descriptive research on the process of romantic disengagement reviewed above, which also emphasized the role of avoidant behavior toward one's partner.

Additionally, attachment theory suggests that avoidant behavior should function to reduce anxiety; therefore, although avoidance may have negative consequences for the relationship when used repeatedly, it should have some short-term benefit for the individual. Finally, attachment theory explains that disengagement is detrimental for individual and relationship functioning because it interferes with the provision of intimacy, comfort and security that bolster trust in the partner and relationship.

Unfortunately, attachment theory fails to explain how individuals' attachment bonds become more avoidant over time. For this reason, although attachment theory provides a beginning framework for a process model of romantic disengagement, the framework remains incomplete as it is not clear how these figures are connected. In contrast, behavioral learning theory explains how avoidant behavior may become more frequent and generalize across couple interactions. Additionally, these theories provide elaboration of the proposed process mode. Thus, I now turn to a discussion of behavioral learning theory.

Behavioral Learning Theory

Behavioral learning theorists attempt to explain the causes of human behavior by focusing on individuals' current and past exposures to environmental stimuli. A central tenet of the theory is that behavior can be explained as an individual's responses to his or her environment and as responses to the individual's history with his or her environment

(Skinner, 1965). The review presented here focuses on principles of classical fear conditioning and operant conditioning, as they elaborate my process model of romantic disengagement or similar behaviors.

Classical conditioning. Many basic principles of behavior theory were initially identified by Pavlov's (1927) classical conditioning experiments. Classical conditioning focuses on behaviors that are relatively automatic or reflexive, and that occur in response to environmental cues. For example, salivation (the behavior) occurs in response to food (the cue). In this example, salivation is an unconditioned response to the unconditioned stimulus of food. Classical conditioning explains how automatic behaviors can begin to occur in response to relatively benign or coincidental stimuli that are paired either contextually or temporally with unconditioned stimuli. For example, when the sound of a bell (an originally benign stimulus) is repeatedly paired with the presentation of food, salivation becomes the conditioned response to the sound of the bell (now the conditioned stimulus). Once conditioning takes place, the response occurs even when the originally benign stimulus is presented alone (without the conditioned stimulus; Pavlov, 1927).

Because physiological fear responses (e.g., freezing, increased arousal, increased heart rate) are relatively automatic, experiences that arouse fear are particularly amenable to classical conditioning (for reviews see Bouton, Mineka, & Barlow, 2001 and Delgado, Olsson, & Phelps, 2006). Once conditioned, cues associated with feared situations trigger fear responses and anticipatory anxiety (Bouton et al., 2001). Interestingly, direct experience with fearful stimuli is not necessary to develop a conditioned fear response. In fact, in many animal species, including humans, fear responses can become conditioned

after observing the experiences of other individuals (e.g. Hygge & Ohman, 1978; John, Chesler, Bartlett, & Victor, 1968; Kavaliers, Choleris, & Colwell, 2001; Mineka, Davidson, Cook, & Keir, 1984; Olsson & Phelps, 2004). Additionally, in humans, fear can also be learned through verbal communication (Rachman, 1977).

Operant conditioning. In contrast with classical conditioning, operant learning occurs when future behavior is influenced by the consequences the individual experiences after engaging in a given behavior (for a review see Skinner, 1965). These consequences are referred to as reinforcement and punishment. Reinforcement increases the likelihood that the behavior will occur more frequently in the future, whereas punishment decreases the likelihood that the behavior will occur in the future. Reinforcements and punishments can be either positive (i.e., something is added to the individual's environment or experience) or negative (i.e., something is removed from the individual's environment or experience). Further, reinforcements and punishments that occur closer in time to the behavior are much more influential than delayed consequences (see Lerman & Iwata, 1996 for a review). Similar to classical conditioning, associations between behavior and consequences can also be learned through observing the experiences of others (i.e., vicarious conditioning, Kanfer, 1972; modeling, Bandura, 1977) or through verbal communication (Bandura, 1977).

Generalization. The principles of generalization apply to both classical and operant conditioning processes. Generalization occurs when learning that happens in one context (or in response to one set of stimuli) carries over into new and different contexts (or stimuli). In terms of classical conditioning, generalization occurs when the conditioned response transfers to a new stimulus; the new stimulus may be related but not

identical to the original conditioned stimulus (Pearce, 1987; Rescorla, 1988). If generalization were to occur in paradigm discussed previously, salivation would begin to occur when the dog was presented with a chime or a horn (in addition to their existing response to the sound of a bell). In terms of operant conditioning, generalization is evident when an individual performs the previously reinforced behavior in a new context, or when he or she avoids previously punished behavior in a new context. For example, if a spouse behaves avoidantly towards his or her partner when the partner yells, generalization may be said to occur if the spouse begins to behave avoidantly when his or her partner evidences other behaviors (e.g., cries, or criticizes).

Several factors influence the probability and extent to which response generalization and maintenance of learning occur (for a review see Stokes & Baer, 1977). First, as reviewed in Bouton (2002), generalization is facilitated by the fact that individuals often become conditioned to contextual (e.g., person, place, time, mood state) and interoceptive cues (e.g., the physical symptoms of anxiety and fear) that are associated with the original stimulus. For example, learned behaviors may generalize to novel stimuli simply because a person is in the same room where the learning originally occurred (see Pearce, 1987 for a review). Similarly, fear reactions can occur in response to physical sensations of anxiety (Bouton, 2002). Second, the similarity of new stimuli, contexts, and situations to those in which the original conditioning occurred increases the probability of generalization (Peterson, Prout, & Schwarz, 1991; Stokes & Baer, 1977). Third, the frequency with which learning trials are repeated influences generalization, such that a greater number of learning trials in a shorter span of time increases the likelihood that the response will be learned and subsequently generalized (Pearce, 1987).

Fourth, schedules of reinforcement (or punishment) substantially impact response generalization and maintenance (Schoenfeld, Farmer, & Vickery, 1970). Continuous reinforcement (in this case, punishment) during early learning trials, followed by partial reinforcement during later learning trails, increases maintenance of the learned response.

Extinction. Extinction is a process whereby an individual fails to demonstrate previously learned behavior. In terms of classical conditioning, extinction occurs when the conditioned stimulus fails to elicit the conditioned response. Extinction may be facilitated when the individual is repeatedly presented with the conditioned stimulus and not with the unconditioned stimulus (Pavlov, 1927). In terms of operant conditioning, extinction may be facilitated when the individual performs the behavior and does not receive the reinforcement or punishment previously associated with the behavior. Nevertheless, extinction does not represent the "un-learning" of associations between stimuli and behavior, but rather represents new learning (Bouton, 2002).

Implications of behavioral learning theory for understanding the process of romantic disengagement. Behavioral learning theory is relevant to the study of the process of romantic disengagement for several reasons. First, principles of classical and operant learning elaborate the model by describing processes that may cause individuals to behave avoidantly during couple interactions. Second, classical and operant learning fill a void in the proposed model by explaining how and why avoidance during couple interactions may become more frequent over time. Third, the theory provides an explanation of how the individual's learning history, or experiences in other relationships, may influence his or her tendency to behave avoidantly with their partner. Fourth, an alternative way of conceptualizing individuals' level of romantic

disengagement is suggested based on an extrapolation of the theory.

One process through which an individual may learn to behave avoidantly during couple interactions is based on principles of classical fear conditioning. Fear may be evoked during couple interactions. For example, conflict interactions in with physically aggressive partners have been found to evoke fear in both men and women (Capaldi & Owen, 2001). Additionally, based on attachment theory, interactions with the partner may evoke fear of rejection, abandonment or intimacy (see Greenberg & Goldberg, 2008 for a review). Therefore, fear evoked by such interactions may become conditioned to cues associated with the interactions. Additionally, anxiety may be conditioned so that when the individual encounters cues that communicate the likelihood of similar interactions, he or she may avoid the partner or situation. Thus, avoidance during couple interactions may occur in response to anxiety and fear evoked by cues associated with feared relational interactions such as couple conflict.

Operant conditioning processes provide another explanation for avoidance during couple interactions. While attempting to engage in interactions with one's partner, an individual may experience punishment. For example, in relational conflict, an individual may attempt to engage his or her partner in constructive communication only to find that the partner behaves in such a way that the individual is left feeling emotionally or physically hurt. The high incidence of psychological aggression (Gelles, 1997; Stets, 1990) and physical aggression (e.g., Lawrence & Bradbury, 2001; Leonard & Senchak, 1996) reported in couple interactions supports the assertion that couple interactions may be experienced as punishing. To the extent that approaching the partner during such interactions is punished, approach behavior becomes less likely and avoidance becomes

the individual's learned response evoked during such interactions.

In addition to conflict interactions, individuals may experience punishment in other types of couple interactions. For example, in couple interactions where the intent is to provide or experience positive reinforcement (e.g. sexual, intimate, supportive, or affectionate interactions), an individual may approach his or her partner and receive an unsatisfying or rejecting response. Such failed attempts to gain positive reinforcement have been referred to as "frustrative non-reward" (McNaughton & Gray, 2000), and are experienced as punishing (McNaughton & Gray, 2000). To the extent that the experiences of frustrative non-reward are repeated, approach behaviors will decline over time. Further, according to Gray and colleagues (McNaughton & Gray, 2000), *signals* of non-reward begin to inhibit the initiation of approach behaviors by engaging the behavioral inhibition system. In the absence of approach behaviors, avoidant behaviors with the partner become the dominant response.

Much of the present discussion on behavioral learning theory has focused on the functional significance of *fear and anxiety*; however, research focusing on the experience of frustrative non-reward is important because it highlights the functional significance of *disappointment* in processes of disengagement. When individuals approach their partner seeking positive reinforcement and do not receive it, they experience disappointment. Indeed, self-identified disengaged individuals, when asked to retrospectively describe the process through which they disengaged from their partner, consistently report experiencing disappointment with their partner and marriage (Kayser, 1993). In sum, these theories suggest that experiences with fear, anxiety and disappointment contribute to the likelihood that an individual will behave avoidantly towards his or her partner

during specific interactions.

In addition to explaining reasons that individuals may engage in avoidant behavior during couple interactions, the theory also has implications for explaining how and why avoidance becomes more frequent over time in the romantic relationship. Regardless of whether one learns to behave avoidantly during couple interactions as a result of classical or operant conditioning processes, this avoidance may be reinforced. Reinforcement increases the likelihood that one will behave avoidantly in similar interactions in the future. For example, to the extent that the individual has been conditioned to fear relational conflict, he or she is likely to experience anxiety when cues of relational conflict arise. Avoidance during such a situation reduces that anxiety, thereby negatively reinforcing avoidant behavior. This process has been used to explain the development and maintenance of avoidance behavior in phobic and anxiety disorders (Bouton et al., 2001). Another example is provided by operant conditioning. When approaching the partner has been punished in the past, and the individual chooses instead to avoid the partner so that the punishment does not occur, the individual may experience relief (McNaughton & Gray, 2000). Relief serves to positively reinforce avoidance. In either case, reinforcement increases the likelihood that avoidant behavior towards the partner will occur more frequently in the future in similar circumstances. Additionally, because reinforcement/ punishment that occurs closer in time to the behavior is more powerful than those that occur more distally, short-term reinforcement of avoidance is likely to be more influential than the fact that avoidance during couple interactions does not reduce distress (and in fact appears to increase distress) in the long-term (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Smith et al., 1990).

The principles of generalization help explain why individuals may learn avoidance in response to interactions that differ substantially from the types of interactions in which avoidance was initially learned. For example, the individual may initially behave avoidantly as a fear response to the partner threatening dissolution. The partner's threat triggers a fear response in the individual, which becomes conditioned to contextual (e.g., tone of the partner's voice) or interoceptive (e.g., anxiety) cues in addition to the partner's threat. Therefore, the next time a similar interaction arises, or the individual begins to feel anxious in the partner's presence, the individual is more likely to behave avoidantly towards the partner. Additionally, the reduction in anxiety following this disengagement negatively reinforces the avoidance, making it more likely to occur in the future. The similarity of new stimuli, contexts and situations to those in which the avoidance response was learned and previously reinforced increases the probability of generalization. If avoidance is the individual's conditioned response to the partner's negative affect (i.e., anxiety, sadness), then the individual may behave avoidantly in response to the partner's negative affect in different types of interactions (e.g., intimate interactions). Even though the individual may experience different aversive emotions across different types of couple interactions (e.g., feelings of disappointment during an intimate interaction versus feelings of anxiety during a conflict interaction), the similarity of the cues (i.e., partner's negative affect) can facilitate generalization of avoidance. Third, the more frequently the partner enacts the punishing behaviors initially (e.g., negative affect), the more the individuals' avoidance will generalize (Pearce, 1987). Fourth, after the avoidant response is well learned, a partial reinforcement schedule (e.g., occasional punishment or reinforcement) increases maintenance of the avoidant response.

Based on my overly simplistic description of how avoidance towards the partner may be learned and generalized, these theories may appear to over-predict disengagement. However, researchers have explained that conditioning is an adjustment made when the outcome of an event differs from what is expected based on previous learning history (Bouton et al., 2001; Rescorla & Holland, 1977). Additionally, conditioning continues with each new experience such that individuals become conditioned to many contextual and interoceptive stimuli (Bouton et al., 2001; Rescorla & Holland, 1977). Some of these stimuli promote avoidance and others inhibit avoidance (or promote other behaviors). Each of these stimuli contributes to whether or not, and to what extent, the individual behaves avoidantly during a specific interaction. Thus, from this perspective, the processes involved in disengagement are very complex.

Another implication of the behavioral learning theory is that they emphasize the importance of individuals' learning histories in other relationships for the process of disengagement. So far I have discussed how avoidance during couple interactions may occur in one's current relationship as a result of classical or operant conditioning. However, conditioning that occurs in other relationships can generalize to the current intimate relationship. For example, learning can occur in one of the individuals' other past or current relationships (e.g., with one's parents or previous romantic partners) or through observation (e.g., by observing one's parents' interactions) or verbal communication of others' experiences, and then generalize to one's own romantic relationship. Indeed, individuals who have a conditioned fear of relational conflict, or whose approach behavior towards other partners has been punished, may be sensitized to particular interpersonal or contextual cues. Sensitization increases the ease with which an

individual re-acquires a previously extinguished fear or behavioral response (Bouton, 2002), such as avoidance, in a new relationship

Finally, the theory has implications for the conceptualization of individuals' level of disengagement in their relationship. Based on this theory, individuals would be said to be highly disengaged from their partner to the extent that they behave avoidantly towards their partner all the time, regardless of type of interactions (e.g., conflict, sexual, supportive interactions). Thus, both frequency and generalization of the avoidant response are implicated. This perspective suggests that there is a link between individuals' behaviors in specific interactions (at least once avoidance generalizes to some extent across interactions and time) and their sense of being romantically disengaged (i.e., that they have "grown apart").

Limitations of behavioral learning theory for understanding the process of romantic disengagement. I have identified two weaknesses of this perspective for the study of romantic disengagement. First, based on the theory, one would predict that individuals would become disengaged in a relationship in which interactions are experienced as highly punishing. Nevertheless, the high incidence of psychological aggression (Gelles, 1997; Stets, 1990) and physical aggression (Lawrence & Bradbury, 2001; Leonard & Senchak, 1996; O'Leary et al., 1989) in ongoing couple relationships suggests that this is often not the case. Additionally, much of the aggression in intimate relationships is bi-directional (e.g., Renauer, & Henning, 2005); emphasizing the fact that avoidance is not the only response to punishment. Alternatively, an argument can be made that even in relationships with highly punishing interactions; individuals experience some reinforcement for remaining in the relationship. This discussion highlights the

difficulty of capturing the complexity of the process being discussed.

A second weakness is that very little research has specifically examined automatic physiological fear responses in couple interactions. Instead, research has tended to use self-report and has often broadened the concept of fear to overlap with anxiety and discomfort (for an example see research on fear of intimacy; Sherman, & Thelen, 1996; Thelen, Vander Wal, Muir Thomas, & Harmon, 2000). However, fear as described in classical fear conditioning, is an automatic flight, fight or freeze response to threatening stimuli (Bouton et al., 2001). Once the association is learned, cues associated with the presence of the threat evoke anticipatory anxiety which facilitate avoidance. Overlapping the constructs of fear and anxiety impedes their utility. As such, it is unclear whether intimacy, rejection and abandonment evoke fear or not. If they evoke fear they are subject to classical conditioning processes but if they evoke less reflexive forms of negative affect, they are more likely subject to operant conditioning principles.

Conclusion. Behavioral learning theory provides explanations for initial learning of avoidance as a behavioral response, reasons why avoidance from one's partner may occur more frequently over time in particular situations, and how disengagement learned in one type of interaction (i.e., couple conflict) may generalize to other types of couple interactions. Additionally, the theory suggests ways that learning in other relationships may generalize to the current romantic relationship. Finally, within this context, an individual's level of romantic disengagement can be conceptualized as the extent to which they engage in avoidant behavior across types of interactions and time.

A Process Model of Romantic Disengagement Informed by Attachment and Behavioral Learning Theories

Although attachment and behavioral learning theory come from very different traditions[1], each of these theories prov ides essential non-overlapping contributions to my process model. Attachment theory provides a theoretical explanation for the importance of avoidant behavior in couple interactions as a potential indicator of a process of romantic disengagement. This is consistent with existing research on disengagement which also consistently emphasizes the role of avoidant behavior. Attachment theory also provides an explanation for why psychological and physical proximity with the romantic partner, as the typically preferred attachment partner in adulthood (e.g., Renauer, & Henning, 2005), is important for individual and relationship well-being. In this way, the theory suggests that avoidance towards the partner, when it occurs frequently, is problematic and may lead to individual and/or relationship distress. The primary essential contribution for the process model from behavioral learning theory is the explanation of how avoidance may become more frequent over time and generalize across different types of couple interactions. In sum, both attachment and the behavioral learning theory are necessary to create a complete process model of romantic disengagement.

In addition to their essential unique contributions, these theories also yield some converging and complementary implications for the study of romantic disengagement. First, both theories suggest that avoidant behavior is used to regulate negative affect in specific couple interactions. Both theories maintain that avoidant behavior reduces negative affect thereby producing short-term relief from anxiety. Second, both theories suggest that having developed a pattern of using avoidant behavior in close relationships,

(e.g., in the family of origin) increases the likelihood that they will behave avoidantly with their romantic partner. Third, attachment theory suggests that when individuals experience greater stress, illness or distance from the partner the opportunity for avoidant behavior increases, particularly when they are predisposed to behaving avoidantly in close relationships. Fourth, attachment theory suggests that increasing avoidance with the partner leads to relationship distress because it interferes with the necessary provisions of closeness and comfort and instead increases romantic disengagement from the partner. Thus, as depicted in Figure 2, attachment and the behavioral theories are sufficient for the creation of a process model of disengagement.

Theories and Literature that Support and Elaborate the Model of Romantic Disengagement

Bowen's family systems theory and research on coping and affect regulation[2] support and elaborate specific components of the proposed model. Therefore, I now turn to a discussion of each of these theories. I briefly review the relevant basic principles of each theory and then I highlight implications of each theory and literature for the process model. Finally, I identify and discuss weaknesses in each perspective for the study of disengagement.

Bowen's Family Systems Theory

Based on attachment theory I have argued that avoidant behavior during specific couple interactions may be an early indicator of a process of romantic disengagement. Bowen's family systems theory includes the concept of emotional distancing which is conceptually similar to avoidant behavior. Emotional distancing includes avoidance of physical contact, distracting oneself with other activities, emotional inexpressiveness, and

ignoring one's partner (Papero, 1990). It is described as an automatic, behavioral response that occurs during specific interactions between family members, including couple interactions (Hargrove, 2009; Kerr, 1981). I selected Bowen's theory because of the similarities between emotional distancing and avoidant behavior within the context of couple interactions.

Bowen's theory views the family as the unit of analysis rather than the individual. Therefore, problems such as depression or marital distress are believed to be caused by family processes, rather than by individual pathology (Hargrove, 2009). Additionally, emotional distress in one family member is viewed as influencing and being influenced by the behavior and emotions of other family members (Papero, 1990). Although Bowen's theory is quite extensive, I focus here on only a few concepts that I identified as relevant to the process of disengagement.

Bowen suggested that one of the challenges facing families is coping with togetherness, an intense fusion of emotional selves within the family. Based on control systems theory, the theory suggests that healthy families maintain a balance between emotional connections of family relationships and each member's individuality (Kerr, 1981). The challenge of maintaining this balance between can create anxiety within the family system; for example, anxiety may increase when one member perceives there is too much closeness or too much distance (Brown, 1999). Additionally, anxiety arises from other sources such as life stressors (Hargrove, 2009). When anxiety arises, regardless of the source (i.e., from within the family system or from an outside source), the intensity of family relationships is exacerbated, and the system's ability to maintain a balance is challenged (Papero, 1990). Theory maintains that families engage four

mechanisms to cope with anxiety and attempt to regain balance. The mechanisms include emotional distance, marital conflict, dysfunction in the spouse, and transmitting the problem to the child (Bowen, 1978; Papero, 1990).

As mentioned previously, most relevant to this discussion is emotional distancing. Theory maintains that distancing is an adaptive strategy for managing short-term anxiety (Hargrove, 2009). As such, distancing provides short-term relief from anxiety in the family system. However, when it is used too frequently, it can increase anxiety in the family system by upsetting the balance between togetherness and individuality. This can lead to individual and/or family dysfunction (Papero, 1990). Alternatively, other theorists suggest that frequent distancing can also lead to an adaptive long-term outcome because it allows relatively incompatible partners to continue a relationship, albeit a distant one (Hargrove, 2009). Thus, emotional distancing is adaptive when used in moderation or when maintaining a difficult relationship is the desired outcome, but it may lead to dysfunction when used frequently.

Bowen's theory also suggests three variables that influence the likelihood that individuals will engage in emotional distancing. These variables include emotional reactivity in close relationships, the level of anxiety being experienced in the family system, and the partner's affect during specific couple interactions. Theory maintains these variables interact with one another to determine the likelihood that the individual will engage in distancing with their partner.

One variable is the individual's personal level of emotional reactivity in family relationships. Emotional reactivity is conceptualized as an individual difference variable. Individuals with high reactivity are overly sensitive to the emotions of others, and tend to

experience thoughts and emotion as fused with one another (Bowen, 1976).

A second variable that influences whether the individual distances from the partner is stress or anxiety in the family system. This is because emotional distancing is proposed to be a mechanism for coping with stress and anxiety in the system. Thus, increased experiences of stress and anxiety create more opportunities distancing. Additionally, theory maintains that individuals with higher reactivity require a lower level of stress and anxiety to distance, and should react more strongly to stress, compared to individuals with lower reactivity. Therefore, the likelihood that stress and anxiety will increase distancing will be moderated by the individual's emotional reactivity.

A third variable that influences the likelihood that individuals will distance from their partner is the partner's affective response to stress in the family system. This is because distancing is an automatic reaction to the partner's affect during times of increased stress (Kerr, 1981). However, theory is not specific about what types of partner affect will increase the likelihood of the individual's distancing. Perception of excessive closeness in the family system causes increased anxiety and may subsequently increase distancing; therefore, partner positive affect that increases closeness (e.g., joy) may increase the likelihood of distancing. Alternatively, partner negative affect that increases anxiety directly (e.g., anger) also increases the likelihood of distancing. In sum, although the partner's affective response to stress interacts with the individual's level of emotional reactivity to predict distancing, based on Bowen's theory, either positive or negative affect can produce this effect.

It must be noted that these three variables (emotional reactivity, increased stress in the family system, and partner affect) do not predict emotional distancing specifically.

Instead, these variables influence the likelihood that individuals will engage in one of the four coping mechanisms proposed by theory (i.e., emotional distancing, marital conflict, locating dysfunction in the spouse, and transmitting the problem to the child; Bowen, 1978; Papero, 1990). Therefore, these variables increase opportunities for emotional distancing; however, individuals may select one of the other strategies instead. The theory does not specify who will be more likely to select emotional distancing rather than one of the other strategies.

Implications of Bowen's family system theory for understanding the process of romantic disengagement. Although Hargrove speculated that emotional distance may cause a couple to "grow apart" (2009), research has not explicitly linked distancing to processes of romantic disengagement. Nevertheless, because of the importance of avoidant behavior in my model, and the conceptual similarity of avoidance and distancing, the theory provides support and elaboration for the process model. Specifically, Bowen's theory describes additional risk factors that increase the likelihood that individuals will engage in avoidance (i.e., emotional distancing) during couple interactions, suggests circumstances under which avoidance is adaptive and maladaptive, and explains how avoidance contributes to individual and relationship distress.

A first implication of the theory for the study of disengagement is that it proposes the personal vulnerability of emotional reactivity increases risk for avoidance during interactions. This is because more reactive individuals experience more opportunities for avoidance with the partner.

A second implication of the theory is that individuals in families experiencing increased stress and anxiety are also more likely than those experiencing less stress to

behave avoidantly during couple interactions. Thus, stress and anxiety in the family system is a proposed contextual variable that increases opportunities for avoidance with the partner.

Third, more reactive individuals are more likely to perceive and more sensitive to stress and anxiety in the family system. Thus the effect of individuals' reactivity in predicting avoidance is moderated by the level of stress and anxiety in the family system.

Fourth, theory maintains that avoidance is a response to the partner's affect during interactions (Hargrove, 2009). However, theory suggests mechanisms whereby either positive or negative affect may increase avoidance during couple interactions; therefore, this implication does not suggest specific hypotheses for the study of the romantic disengagement process.

A fifth implication of Bowen's theory for the study of disengagement is that it describes both adaptive and maladaptive use of avoidance as a strategy to manage anxiety. Avoidance during couple interactions provides the individual with short-term relief of anxiety. Thus, it produces a benefit to the individual in the short-term. Therefore, as long as this avoidance does not jeopardize the couple's balance between togetherness and individuality, its use is adaptive. However, when avoidance contributes to relatively sustained imbalance, it is likely to contribute to individual and/or relationship distress (Papero, 1990). An imbalance is most likely to occur when the individual frequently engages in avoidance during interactions with the partner (Papero, 1990). Additionally, whether avoidance is considered to be adaptive or maladaptive may depend upon the goal being considered. For example, although frequently avoiding the partner during couple interactions contributes to individuals and/or relationship distress, it may also allow a

troubled relationship to remain intact (Hargrove, 2009). Therefore if maintaining a difficulty relationship is the goal than frequent avoidance is an adaptive strategy. In sum, avoiding the partner during couple interactions only appears to cause individual and/or relationship distress when the individual frequently engages in avoidance, and despite the distress it may cause, even frequent avoidance may carry some benefit when relationship maintenance is the goal.

Limitations of Bowen's family systems theory for understanding the process of romantic disengagement. There are four primary weaknesses of this perspective as applied to the study of romantic disengagement. First, research has not examined Bowen's concept of emotional distance as a mechanism to moderate anxiety within family relationships. Therefore, although the theory provides testable hypotheses regarding the process of disengagement, these hypotheses remain untested. A second weakness of this perspective is that at least two of the concepts discussed above as relevant to the process of romantic disengagement are subsumed under the multidimensional construct of differentiation of the self in the research literature. Although many definitions and operationalizations of differentiation of the self have been proposed, it is typically thought to include the task of achieving a balance between emotional togetherness and individuality, emotional cutoff from family of origin, and emotional reactivity in close relationships (Kerr & Bowen, 1988; see Miller, Anderson, & Keala, 2004 for a review). Research has found low differentiation is related to lower marital satisfaction, and chronic anxiety is related to lower levels of differentiation (see Miller et al., 2004 for a review). This research is consistent with the discussion above. However, including the task of balancing togetherness with individuality and emotional

reactivity within the same broad construct makes it difficult to examine the unique contributions of these constructs to the process of disengagement.

A third weakness is that theory does not explain when emotional distancing will be selected as the specific strategy for managing anxiety instead of marital conflict, locating dysfunction in the spouse, or transmitting the problem to the child. Therefore, emotional reactivity and higher stress appear to be non-specific risk factors. They increase the likelihood that the individual will engage in one of the four strategies, but theory provides no guidance about when emotional distance will be selected specifically. Fourth, although theory suggests that frequent use of emotional distance will increase the risk of marital distress, it does not specify how or why the use of emotional distancing increases over time within the relationship.

Conclusion. Bowen's family systems theory highlights the importance of relationship rather than individual processes in contributing to individual and relationship well-being. It emphasizes the importance and difficulty of maintaining a balance between having close intimate family relationships, and forming independent identities. This challenge can create anxiety in the family system as members attempt to maintain a balance. Anxiety from within the system or from outside sources interacts with individuals' personal level of emotional reactivity to determine the likelihood that family members will use engage in one of four mechanisms to reduce anxiety. One mechanism is emotional distancing from family members. Within the context of the couple relationship, emotional distancing is conceptually identical to avoidance during couple interactions. Thus the process described above suggests that anxiety experienced by the couple and the individual's emotional reactivity interact to predict avoidance during

couple interactions. Additionally, although avoidance can reduce short-term anxiety, the theory suggests that frequent avoidance, because it creates relatively sustained imbalance between togetherness and individuality, promotes individual and relationship distress.

Coping Literature

Research on coping examines the associations between individuals' reactions to stressors and their adjustment, health and well-being (Lazarus, 1993). Lazarus (1993) defines coping as "ongoing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person" (p. 237).

Much of this research can be divided in to the study of coping styles (i.e., coping as an individual differences phenomenon; e.g., Elklit, 1996) and coping processes (i.e., coping as it unfolds in response to specific types of stressors or in specific contexts; for a review see Lazarus, 1993). When conceptualized as a style, there is significant stability in individuals' selections of coping responses (e.g., Powers, Gallagher-Thompson, & Kraemer, 2002; Louvet, Gaudreau, Menaut, Genty, & Deneuve, 2007), and certain coping styles are more or less adaptive than others (Day & Livingstone, 2001; Suls & Fletcher, 1985). When conceptualized as a process, individuals' coping responses vary widely, depending on the nature of the stressors they are experiencing and the context in which those stressors occur (Lazarus, 1993). Additionally, stressors, contexts and coping efforts change over time further suggesting the utility of examining coping as a process (Lazarus, 1993).

Whether coping strategies are used stylistically or in response to specific stressors, researchers have taken different approaches to classifying coping strategies

(e.g., Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989; Kahana, Kahana, & Young, 1987). For example, some researchers have classified coping strategies into two groups -- problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies – each of which serves a different function. Problem-focused coping strategies are attempts to resolve the external (to the individual) source of a stressor, whereas emotion-focused coping strategies serve to manage emotional reactions associated with a stressor (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987).

Despite the many different methods of categorizing coping strategies, it is widely accepted that individuals engage in avoidance as a coping strategy. Avoidant coping includes cognitive, behavioral and emotional avoidance strategies (e.g., Finset, Steine, Haugli, Steen & Laerum, 2002; for reviews see Roth & Cohen, 1986 and Suls & Fletcher, 1985). In fact, some researchers categorized coping strategies into approach vs. avoidance coping strategies[3] (e.g., Roth & Cohen, 1986). Within the approach-avoidance framework, avoidant coping strategies include repression, rejection, fragmentation, denial, selective inattention, and blunting (see Suls & Fletcher for a review). Repression is conceptualized as a general orientation away from threat, and involves the avoidance of anxiety-arousing stimuli. Rejection is described as a tendency to orient away from stressors and from one's emotional reactions to stressors. Fragmentation is a type of denial in which people compartmentalize themselves separately from their stressors. Denial has been described as attempts to purposefully remove stressful material from consciousness and memory. Selective inattention describes inattention to specific threatening stimuli. Finally, blunting includes avoidant strategies such as seeking distraction, relaxation, denial of threat, practiced detachment, and intellectualization.

Research has generally found that avoidant coping is associated with poorer

outcomes (e.g., depression, Blalock & Joiner, 2000; Holahan, Moos, Holahan, Brennan & Schultte, 2005; poorer health, Day & Livingstone, 2001; efficacy of treatment for alcohol disorders, Levin, Ilgin & Moos, 2007; mortality among patients with congestive heart failure, Murberg, Furze & Bru, 2004; physical symptoms of anxiety during an experimental procedure, Spira, Zvolensky, Eifert & Feldner, 2004). From a practical perspective, avoidant coping can be maladaptive because it impedes problem-solving (Roth & Cohen, 1986). Additionally, avoidance may interfere with individuals "working through" distressing emotions, thoughts or memories related to stressors (Horowitz, 1979; Zilberg, Weiss, & Horowitz, 1982). Horowitz and colleagues suggested that avoidant coping may lead to increased intrusive thoughts associated with the stressor. Indeed, several experimental studies have demonstrated that instructing individuals to avoid certain thoughts has the paradoxical effect of increasing such thoughts (e.g., Clark, Ball, & Pape, 1991; Wegner, Schneider, Carter, & White, 1987).

Although avoidant coping is generally found to be less adaptive than approach coping, there is evidence that several factors may moderate the link between avoidant coping and outcome. These factors include coping style, when avoidant coping occurs in response to specific stressors, and timing of the outcome and outcome being considered[3].

First, findings depend in part on the individual's coping style (i.e., individual differences). Miller and Mangan (1983) examined the extent to which individuals' coping styles were matched with whether or not they were exposed to health-care education. For example, a match for individuals with avoidant coping styles would be represented by not receiving educational material about an impending medical procedure. Matching coping styles to the intervention predicted lower distress relative to a mismatch. Kenardy and

Tan (2006) reported similar findings. Avoidant coping styles interacted with brief exposure to written disclosure treatment to predict greater trauma-specific and physical symptoms. In contrast, individuals with non-avoidant coping styles, and those exposed to longer treatment, had fewer symptoms. These findings suggest that individuals' coping styles should be considered when determining educational or exposure interventions.

Second, the link between avoidant coping and outcome depends on when avoidant coping occurs in relation to the stressor and when the outcome is measured. For example, avoidant coping is a common response immediately following a traumatic experience such as losing a loved one or experiencing rape (Stewart, 1999; Schnider, Elhai & Gray, 2007). There is evidence that avoidant strategies are useful in reducing stress and anxiety in situations where stress and anxiety may become crippling (e.g., Roth & Cohen, 1986). Coping theorists propose that avoidant coping immediately following a trauma allows individuals to function in the short-term, so that they may *slowly* expose themselves to aspects of the trauma. Indeed, avoidant coping in response to trauma only appears to predict poorer outcomes (i.e. Posttraumatic Stress Disorder or Complicated Grief) when individuals employ avoidant coping strategies over an extended period of time (Schnider et al., 2007). Similarly, avoiding health care treatment may reduce personal distress in the short-term. However, if one has a medical problem, avoidance prevents early treatment potentially leading to poorer health outcomes and greater personal distress over time (Roth & Cohen, 1986). Additionally, meta-analyses have provided additional support that avoidant coping is associated with adaptive outcomes including decreased distress and perception of pain immediately following a stressor; however, avoidance was generally not superior to approach strategies (Suls & Fletcher, 1985).Taken together this research

suggests avoidant coping can confer short-term benefits when used in close temporal proximity to stressors. However, there are maladaptive outcomes from ongoing use of avoidant coping (e.g., psychopathology, health problems, greater distress).

Implications of coping research for understanding the process of romantic disengagement. The research on coping provides a valuable framework within which to view individuals' avoidance towards the partner during stressful couple interactions. Indeed, the theoretical arguments explaining this behavior (i.e., attachment, behavioral and Bowen's theories) have implied that this avoidance is a coping response to stress during couple interactions. A coping perspective has several important implications for explaining why some individuals engage in avoidance during couple interactions and understanding the circumstances under which this avoidance will be adaptive versus maladaptive.

A first implication from the coping research is that individuals who have avoidant coping styles should be more likely to behave avoidantly during couple interactions that are perceived as stressful. Indeed there is evidence of significant stability in individuals' use of avoidant coping over time (Powers et al., 2002). Additionally, physiological signs of stress are elicited during couple conflict (e.g., Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 2005). Thus, individuals with more avoidant coping styles are more likely to engage in avoidant behavior during stressful interactions with partners, such as couple conflict.

Second, a coping perspective describes circumstances under which avoidant behavior during stressful couple interactions will be associated with adaptive (or less maladaptive) versus maladaptive outcomes. For example, research has shown that individuals with an avoidant coping style are less distressed when they are allowed to

engage in avoidance in stressful situations. A possible extension of this finding to the study of disengagement is that individuals with avoidant coping styles may experience greater stress reduction from their avoidance during couple interactions compared to individuals with less avoidant styles who engage in avoidance during couple interactions. Additionally, avoidant behavior during couple interaction may be more adaptive (or less maladaptive) in the short-term compared to longer-term outcomes. For example, avoidance may lead to a decrease in personal distress immediately following the interaction, but lead to increased personal distress over time as problems in the relationship continue to be unresolved and resentment builds.

This example also highlights two ways that avoidant coping may lead to relationship distress. First, because avoidant coping precludes active efforts to resolve relationship stressors, these strategies may impede conflict resolution thereby increasing distress in the relationship. Second, avoidant coping may increase intrusive thoughts of relationship stressors. This is because avoidant coping includes cognitive efforts such as denial and suppression which have been found to increase intrusive thoughts (Clark et al., 1991; Gold & Wegner, 1995; Wegner et al., 1987).

Limitations of coping research for understanding the process of romantic disengagement. I have identified two weaknesses of a coping perspective for the study of disengagement. One problem is that much of the research on coping strategies categorizes coping strategies into problem-focused versus emotion-focused coping (Skinner et al., 2003). This approach is not useful for the study of disengagement because while problem-focused is clearly active, and therefore does not include avoidance; emotion-focused coping includes both active (e.g., problem reappraisal) and avoidant

strategies (e.g., denial). Thus, conclusions about the effects of avoidant coping cannot be inferred based on research using these methods of categorization.

A second weakness is that any behavior can function as avoidance if it allows the individual to divert their attention and resources away from the stressor. Therefore, it is very important to identify the stressor in question. This is not always easily done in the context of couple conflict as partners may have different definitions of the problem.

Conclusion. The research on coping has two important implications for the study of disengagement. First this research suggests that individuals engage in avoidance during couple interactions that are perceived as stressful in an effort to manage personal and relationship stress. Second, this perspective suggests that avoidance during stressful couple interactions may be an effective form of coping with some outcomes (e.g., personal distress) in the short-term; however, it is likely to be associated with poor outcomes (e.g., personal and relationship distress) over time.

Affect Regulation Research

Affect regulation describes processes whereby individuals employ various strategies (e.g., seeking social support, distraction, emotional suppression; Larsen, 2000) to regulate their experiences of negative and positive affect (Larsen & Prizmic, 2004; Parkinson & Totterdell, 1999). Historically, processes of affect regulation have been used to explain the development of various forms of individual psychopathology (e.g., Bradley, 2000; Cummings, & Davies, 1996; Gross & Munoz, 1995) as well as normal emotional development (e.g., Dahl, 2003; Kochanska, Coy, & Murray, 2001). Of note, attachment theory has been described as a theory of affect regulation because proximity maintenance with the attachment figure is used to sooth negative affect (Mikulincer et al.,

2003) and infants develop affect-regulation within the context of the infant-caregiver relationship (for a review see Schore & Schore, 2008). Effective affect regulation is necessary for the adaptive manipulation of, and navigation through, one's environment (Gross, 1998; Gross & Munoz, 1995).

Affect regulation strategies have been studied as habitual stylistic responses (i.e., as individual differences phenomena; e.g., Connelly, Keefe, Affleck, Lumley, Anderson, & Waters, 2007; Mikulincer et al., 2003) as well as situation-specific behavioral strategies (e.g., Zeman, & Shipman, 1997). Indeed, both conceptualizations have garnered support as individuals appear to have stylistic tendencies to use certain strategies more frequently, and styles vary across individuals (Kamholz, Hayes, Carver, Gulliver, & Perlman, 2006). Moreover, individuals use different affect regulation strategies in different situations (Larsen & Prizmic, 2004).

The effectiveness of one's efforts to regulate affect depends in part on the appropriateness of one's affect regulation strategies. When the employed strategies are effective for regulating affect and are adaptive for the individual, they contribute to individual well-being (Larsen, 2000) and/or interpersonal functioning (Fisher, Manstead, Evers, Timmers, & Valk, 2004; Fletcher & Fitness, 1996). Some affect regulation strategies have been found to be more effective and adaptive on average than others (Larsen & Prizmic, 2004). For example, some strategies—thought suppression, experiential avoidance, and rumination—relate to poor adjustment and psychopathology (Hayes, Wilson, Gifford, Follette, & Strosahl, 1996; Lyumbomirsky & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1993; 1995; Nolen-Hoeksema & Morrow, 1993; Nolen-Hoeksema, Morrow, & Fredrickson, 1993; Wegner, Erber, & Zanakos, 1993; Wenzlaff, 1993). Other strategies—

acceptance, mindfulness, and positive reframing—are associated with healthier adjustment to stressors and better general outcomes (e.g., lower incidence of mental illness following traumatic experiences; McMillen, Smith, & Fisher, 1997; post-traumatic personal growth, Cadell, Regehr, Hemsworth, 2003). Additionally, many strategies may effectively regulate affect for a short period of time, but be maladaptive for the individual's general well-being (e.g., binge eating, Mauler, Hamm, Weike, Tischen-Caffer, 2006; self-injurious behavior, Nixon, Cloutier, & Aggarwal, 2002). Therefore, employment of maladaptive strategies, or the overuse of strategies that would be adaptive if they were only used in moderation, leads to individual dysfunction such as depression or anxiety (Cassidy, 2000; Cassidy & Kobak, 1988; Kring & Werner, 2004).

The literature on affect regulation has identified disengagement as an affect regulation strategy (Larsen & Prizmic, 2004; Parkinson & Totterdell, 1999). Specifically, disengagement in this context refers to various emotional, behavioral and cognitive efforts to avoid or withdraw from the situation in order to regulate affect (Parkinson & Totterdell, 1999). Disengagement strategies include distraction, repressing emotional expression, social withdrawal, and avoidance behaviors (Larsen & Prizmic, 2004; Gross & Levenson, 1997). Individuals with depression and neuroticism are more likely to use disengagement rather than engagement strategies (Friedman-Wheeler, Haaga, Gunthert, Ahrens, & McIntosh, 2008; Silk, Steinberg, & Morris, 2003).

Researchers have argued that the short- and long-term consequences of disengagement may differ (Larsen & Prizmic, 2004; Pauls, 2004). Although disengagement strategies have been shown to contribute to individual psychopathology, physiological consequences and social dysfunction (for a review see Pauls, 2004) some

research has found that consequences differ depend on when they are measured. For example, one study found that disengagement strategies decreased subsequent negative affectivity and increased subsequent positive affectivity for approximately 6 to 12 hours. However, after this time period, participants' affect returns to baseline (Larsen, 1993 as cited in Larsen & Prizmic, 2004). Similarly, in the regulation of angry affect, disengagement may correspond to better social outcomes in the short-term. This is because anger expression is positively associated with physical assault and verbal aggression; however, disengaging to regulate anger is associated with poorer health outcomes in the long-term (i.e., heart disease, high blood pressure, see Pauls 2004 for a review). In sum, disengagement may help to regulate negative affect in the short-run but contribute to poor outcomes longer-term.

Implications of affect regulation research for understanding the process of romantic disengagement. Affect regulation research has several implications for the study of romantic disengagement. Implications include issues of conceptualization of romantic disengagement, reasons why individuals behave avoidantly during couple interactions, and descriptions of the circumstances under which avoidance during interactions will be adaptive versus maladaptive.

First, the use of the term disengagement to describe a set of affect regulation strategies draws an interesting parallel between the short-term behavior (i.e., disengagement as affect regulation) and the longer-term process of romantic disengagement. Disengagement as an affect regulation strategy describes efforts to withdraw oneself from a situation whereas romantic disengagement describes a process of becoming increasingly withdrawn from one's partner over time. The description of

disengagement as a regulation strategy is similar to avoidance during couple interactions. Therefore, a conceptual parallel may be indicated between avoidance during couple interactions and the process of romantic disengagement itself. Nevertheless, there are important differences between disengagement from specific situations and romantic disengagement with the most obvious being the length of time involved. Additionally, short-term disengagement is more likely to be circumscribed whereas romantic disengagement becomes generalized. Finally, with romantic disengagement individuals make globalized judgments that they have "grown apart," or "fallen out of love."

Second, an affect regulation perspective implies that avoidance during couple interactions occurs to regulate the individual's affect. As discussed previously, individuals regulate both negative and positive affect. Thus, avoidance towards the partner during couple interactions may occur in response to negative or positive affect. Therefore, this perspective suggests that individuals might behave avoidantly during intimate or supportive interactions that generate positive affect such as joy and love. This suggestion seems counterintuitive and indeed, most research suggests that in general, people typically attempt to maintain rather than dampen good feelings (e.g., Isen, 2000; Wegener & Petty, 1994). Nevertheless, some individuals down-regulate positive affect. For example, individuals with low self-esteem tend to down-regulate positive affect. Researchers have proposed that this occurs because low self-esteem individuals feel they do not deserve positive affect or because positive affect is discrepant with their view of themselves and they down-regulate in to reduce this discrepancy (Wood, Heimpel & Michela, 2003; Wood, Heimpel, Manwell, & Whittington, 2009). Additionally, research suggests that dampening positive affect is associated with symptoms of anxiety (Eisner,

Johnson, & Carver, 2009). This suggests that for these individuals experiencing positive affect may increase feelings of anxiety. In sum, during couple interactions that generate positive affect, individuals with greater anxiety symptoms or lower self-esteem may be more likely to behave avoidantly in order to dampen their positive affect. However, dampening of positive affect appears to actually be motivated by co-occurring negative affect.

Third, this perspective suggests two personal vulnerabilities increase individuals' tendency to use disengagement to regulate affect – neuroticism and depression. Individuals with higher neuroticism and higher depressive symptoms are more likely to engage in disengagement strategies Friedman-Wheeler et al., 2008; Silk et al., 2003). Therefore, individuals with higher neuroticism and depressive symptoms may be more likely to avoid their partner during couple interactions.

Fourth, this perspective is useful for explaining why individuals may behave avoidantly in response to feelings of anger. Anger is a frequent and important emotion experienced within the context of romantic relationships (Sanford, 2005; Smith, Haynes, Lazarus, & Pope, 1993). This perspective suggests that some individuals may perceive anger or angry behavior, either theirs or their partner's, as personally intolerable or threatening to the individual or relationship, and therefore must be avoided.

Fifth, research suggests that disengagement strategies may produce short-term reduction in personal distress (Larsen, 1993 as cited in Larsen & Prizmic, 2004), but are typically associated with maladaptive outcomes including individual psychopathology and social dysfunction (for a review see Pauls, 2004). Therefore avoidance during couple interactions may decrease distress or discomfort in the short-term, but are likely

associated with greater individual and relationship distress in the long-term.

Limitations of affect regulation research for understanding the process of romantic disengagement. There are two primary weakness of this perspective for the study of the process of romantic disengagement. The first is that to our knowledge there are no studies conceptualizing avoidance during couple interactions as an affect regulation strategy. Therefore, the proposed implications have yet to be tested. Second, affect regulation represents a hypothesis about motivation for behavior; therefore, one way to test whether disengagement occurs to regulate affect is to examine whether the behavior succeeds in changing affect. Unfortunately, with avoidant behavior, much of the change is likely to occur quickly following the behavior and to be relatively short-lasting (e.g., Larsen & Prizmic, 2004; Mendolia & Baker, 2008); therefore, this process may be very difficult to capture.

Conclusion. Research on affect regulation is useful for the study of romantic disengagement for several reasons. First, this literature suggests that avoidance during couple interactions is similar to the process of romantic disengagement except that it occurs within moments whereas the larger process may take years. Second, this perspective suggests that avoidance may occur in response to affectively positive couple interactions (e.g., intimacy, support) as well as negative interactions (e.g., conflict); however, the underlying motivation for avoidance from positive interaction appears to be negative affect that co-occurs with positive affect. Third, low self-esteem and higher anxiety symptoms may predispose individuals to avoid affectively positive couple interactions and greater neuroticism and depression predispose individuals to engage in avoidance for affect regulation during couple interactions more generally. Fourth, this

perspective provides an explanation for avoidance in response to anger during couple interactions. Finally, fifth, this perspective suggests that avoidance during couple interactions may provide short-term relief from personal distress, but is likely to be associated with increased personal and relationship distress over time.

A Process Model of Romantic Disengagement

Informed by Theory and Research

The basic framework for the process model is based on attachment and behavioral theories; however, Bowen's family systems theory, coping and affect regulation research provide some converging and some distinct descriptions of aspects of the disengagement process. In this section I integrate the implications of all the theories and research reviewed for the process of romantic disengagement, highlighting similarities and differences.

Avoidant Behavior during Couple Interactions

An important assumption, based on attachment theory, is that avoidance during couple interactions is an important indicator of the process of disengagement. Although this review suggests avoidance during a single couple interaction is not necessarily indicative of disengagement, the context in which avoidance occurs, and the frequency and generalization of avoidance with one’s partner, may be predictive of disengagement.

The different literatures reviewed also provide somewhat different conceptualizations of avoidance during couple interactions. Specifically, avoidant behavior in specific contexts can be conceptualized as (a) deactivation of the attachment behavioral system, (b) a fear response or a response to cues of punishment, and (c) a coping or affect regulation strategy.

Internal experiences and contexts that predict avoidance. These different conceptualizations identify some converging and some distinct emotional and cognitive experiences that motivate avoidance during couple interactions. All of the literatures reviewed propose that avoidance may be motivated by anxiety, though they propose various sources of anxiety. All of these literatures suggest that anxiety, or negative affect more generally, can be elicited by the partner's behavior. For example, they may be elicited by the partner's unresponsive, rejecting, frightening, or punishing behavior. Attachment and family systems theories suggest that anxiety can arise from physical distance from one's partner. Family systems theory and affect regulation research suggest that affectively positive interactions can stimulate anxiety and discomfort, motivating avoidance. These theories also suggest that anxiety arising from stressors outside the specific interaction, such as illness or life events, increase avoidance during couple interactions. Finally, in addition to anxiety, the literatures reviewed identify other specific emotional or affective experiences that motivate avoidance. These experiences include feelings of hopelessness regarding the likelihood that engaging in the interaction will be successful, fear, disappointment and anger.

Personal risk factors for avoidance. Each of these perspectives provides insight into personal risk factors that individuals bring to their relationships that may increase their avoidance in a given situation. The attachment, family systems, coping, and affect regulation literatures each emphasize individual difference variables that imply that some individuals exhibit a behavioral tendency to react to stress or to negative emotional experiences with avoidance. These tendencies include having an avoidant attachment style, an avoidant coping style, or a preference for employing disengagement as an affect

regulation strategy. Each of these individual differences is expected to interact with the contextual circumstances or the individual's emotional experiences discussed above to determine whether the individual will behave avoidantly in a given couple interaction.

Another individual difference variable that may increase avoidance during couple interactions is the family systems concept of emotional reactivity in close relationships. Emotional reactivity is similar to an anxious attachment style. Extrapolating predictions from family systems to attachment theory would suggest that avoidant behavior during stressful couple interactions would be most frequently observed with individuals who are high on both the anxious attachment and avoidant attachment dimensions.

Affect regulation research identifies two other individual difference variables that I propose may contribute to avoidance during couple interactions: self-esteem and neuroticism. Individuals with low self-esteem have been found to down regulate positive affect during interactions that elicit positive affect (Wood et al., 2003; Wood et al., 2009). Thus, because avoidance is one way to regulate affect, these individuals may engage in avoidance during affectively positive couple interactions. This literature also suggests that individuals with higher neuroticism will be more likely to engage in avoidance to regulate affect during couple interactions generally. Neuroticism is related to -- and likely explains much of the effects of -- each of the specific personal risk factors discussed, including attachment avoidance anxiety (Meij et al., 2007), and low self-esteem (Lönnqvist, Verkasalo, Mäkinen, & Henriksson, 2009).

In addition to individual difference variables, the research reviewed highlights other personal risk factors that may increase avoidance during couple interactions. First, based on affect regulation research, depression likely predicts greater use of avoidance

(Friedman-Wheeler et al., 2008; Silk et al., 2003) and anxiety symptoms likely predict avoidance to dampen positive affect during couple interactions (Eisner et al., 2009). Of note, individuals who are higher on neuroticism are more likely to experience symptoms of depression and anxiety (e.g., Jylhä & Isometsä, 2007); therefore, neuroticism may explain the link between these personal risk factors. Second, based on the behavioral theories, individuals' learning histories serve as an additional risk factor for avoidance during couple interactions. Individuals may have learned the utility of avoidance in response to particular interpersonal cues from direct experience in past close relationships, or from observing or hearing about the experiences of others. In sum, I propose that individuals bring various personal vulnerabilities, many of which interact with the circumstances of a particular interaction, to increase the likelihood of avoidance during couple interactions.

Benefits of avoidant behavior. In addition to the intrapersonal, interpersonal and contextual influences that increase the likelihood of avoidance, the research reviewed suggests that individuals engage in avoidance because it benefits the individual. The short-term benefits include (a) the reduction of attachment-related anxiety (attachment theory), (b) the reduction of anxiety impacting the family system (Bowen's theory), (c) reduced fear, anxiety or increased feelings of relief (behavioral theories), (d) decreased stress (coping research), and (e) better regulated affect (affect regulation research). All of the literature reviewed indicates that avoidance produces decreases in negative affect in the short-term. Additionally, as previously reviewed, reinforcement received immediately following a behavior is more influential than reinforcement or punishment that occurs more distally (Skinner, 1965). Thus, these short-term benefits may be more influential

than longer-term consequences of avoidance during couple interactions. Also, attachment and family systems theories both suggest that avoidant behavior during couple interactions may help maintain a relationship in distress. These theories propose that even distressed relationships have value. Moreover, as context changes, relationship functioning may improve. Therefore, the facilitation of relationship maintenance is a second way that avoidance can benefit individuals.

How avoidance toward one's partner increases. The literature reviewed has important implications for the study of processes through which avoidance becomes increasingly frequent and generalized in a relationship over time. First, based on behavior theory, when avoidance is reinforced, it is more likely to occur in the future. Likewise, when engaging the partner during particular interactions is punished, engagement is less likely to occur in the future and avoidance may become the dominant response. Based on these experiences, individuals learn what cues signal when avoidance will be reinforced and what cues signal when engagement will be punished through repeated interactions with the partner. Cues and contexts that are similar facilitate generalization of avoidance to different kinds of couple interactions.

Negative consequences of avoidance during couple interactions. Based on the literatures reviewed, I propose that under particular circumstances avoidance during couple interactions will have negative consequences, including relationship distress. Consistent with this hypothesis, research on couple conflict avoidance, which primarily has focused on couple conflict, has generally found avoidance to be associated with lower levels of relationship satisfaction both cross-sectionally (Bowman, 1990; Smith et al., 1990) and longitudinally (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Smith et al., 1990). However,

researchers have yet to investigate the *mechanisms* through which avoidant behaviors during marital conflict lead to marital decline. In the present research I propose two mechanisms that contribute to relationship distress in part through their association with the process of romantic disengagement. First, attachment and family systems theories suggest that avoidance during couple interactions is only problematic when it happens frequently. Based on these theories, frequent avoidance interferes with intimacy, and leads to greater disengagement and personal and relationship distress. Second, based on the coping literature, avoidance during problem-solving interactions may lead to personal and relationship distress because problems in the relationship are left unresolved and anger, resentment and anxiety may build. Avoidance may also lead to personal distress by increasing intrusive thoughts of relationship difficulties.

Although only attachment theory implies that frequent avoidant behavior leads to increasing romantic disengagement per se, I propose that the negative consequences implied by coping research contribute to the complex process of disengagement (see Figure 3). As problems in the relationship are left unresolved, individuals who have learned to behave avoidantly in the relationship will also avoid thinking about relationship problems. Behavioral theories suggest that avoidant behavior may generalize so that the individual increasingly avoids thoughts of the partner and/or of the relationship as well. To avoid thoughts of the partner and relationship, the individual may further begin to avoid any interaction with the partner, which further interferes with the positive provisions of romantic relationships. Thus, avoidance during couple interactions interferes with intimacy and conflict resolution, both of which may contribute to increased disengagement over time.

How Romantic Disengagement is Conceptualized

Attachment and behavior theories each provide unique but potentially overlapping conceptualizations of what it means to be disengaged. Specifically, disengagement can be conceptualized as (a) how avoidant one's attachment bond is and (b) frequent and generalized avoidant behavior during couple interactions. Conceptualized as an avoidant attachment bond, romantic disengagement should include a devaluation of and discomfort with intimacy with the partner as well as avoidance of the partner during times of need. In contrast, a conceptualization based on the behavioral theories requires no inferences about the individual's evaluation of intimacy; that perspective highlights only observable behavior and learning history surrounding the behavior. Thus, future research should investigate the extent to which romantic disengagement, an avoidant attachment bond, and generalized disengagement are conceptually similar constructs, as well as examining the utility of different conceptualizations.

Conclusion

The present research addresses an important void in the research on romantic relationships by integrating different theoretical perspectives and research literatures to propose a process model of romantic disengagement. My review suggested that no single theory was adequate to fully explain the process; however, an integration of attachment and behavioral theories provided an explanation (see Figure 1). Based on this initial model, I expanded my review to include Bowen's family systems theory and the coping and affect regulation literatures because this research appeared to support and further elaborate particular aspects of the model. The final model as presented (see Figure 2) includes both personal and contextual risk factors that interact to contribute to the

avoidance during couple interactions. Avoidance is presumed to be a key indicator and mechanism that increasingly interferes with vital functions of and functioning in romantic relationships. Due to increased romantic disengagement, this process is proposed to contribute to individual and relationship distress and increased risk of relationship dissolution. Relationship distress and dissolution are robustly linked with poor psychosocial and health outcomes for adults and their children (Amato, 2000; Belsky & Jaffe, 2006; Robles & Kiecolt-Glaser, 2003). Now that we have a theoretical framework within which to conceptualize the developmental process of romantic disengagement, researchers can conduct theoretically grounded research to inform clinical prevention and intervention efforts.

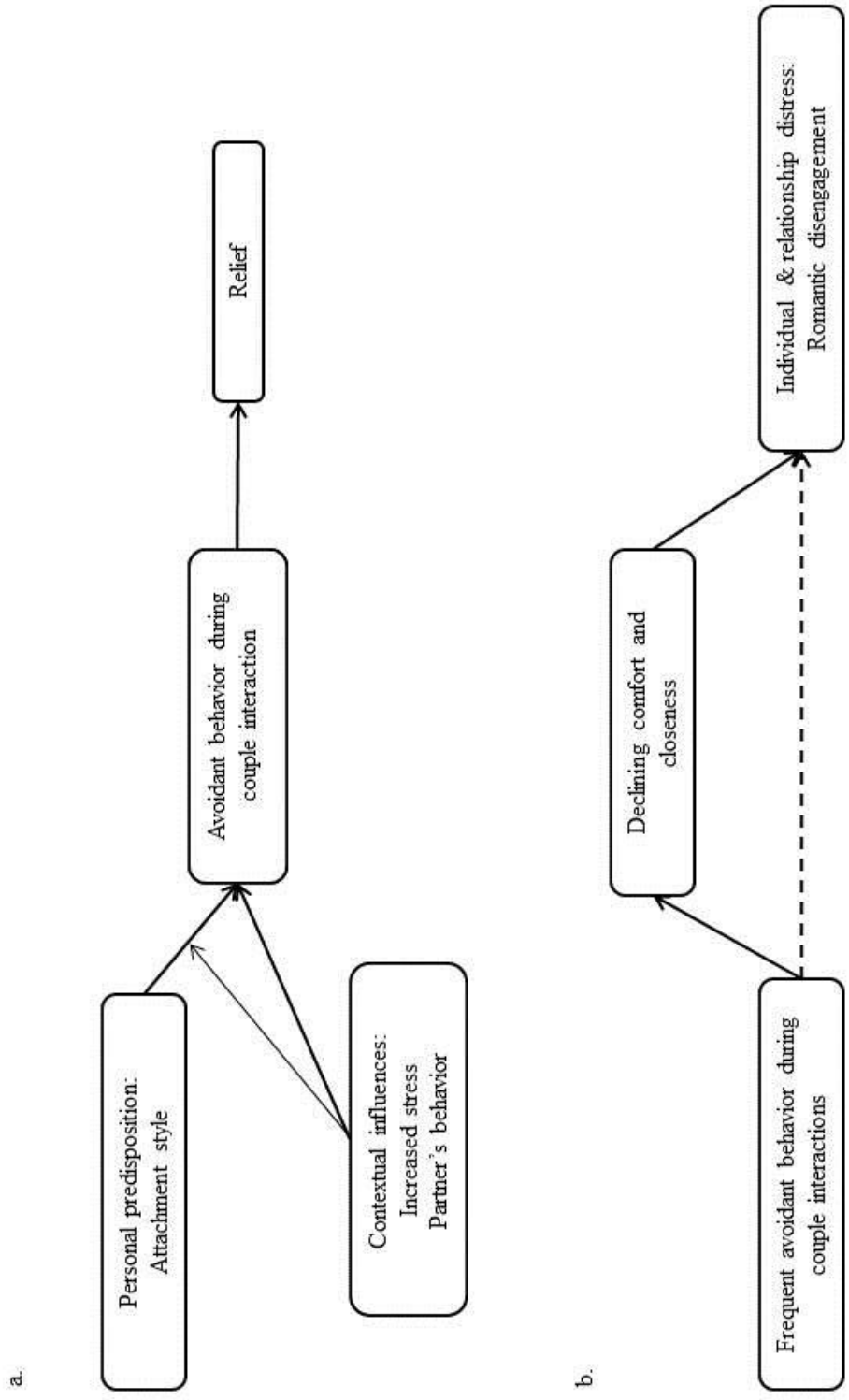

Figure 1. The proposed process model of romantic disengagement based on attachment theory.

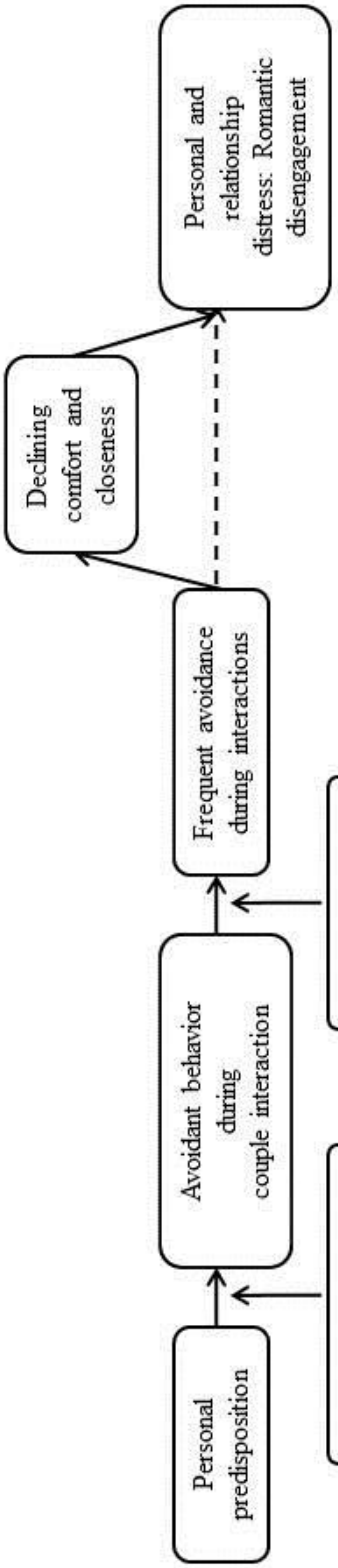

Figure 2. The proposed process model of romantic disengagement based on an integration of attachment and operant learning theories.

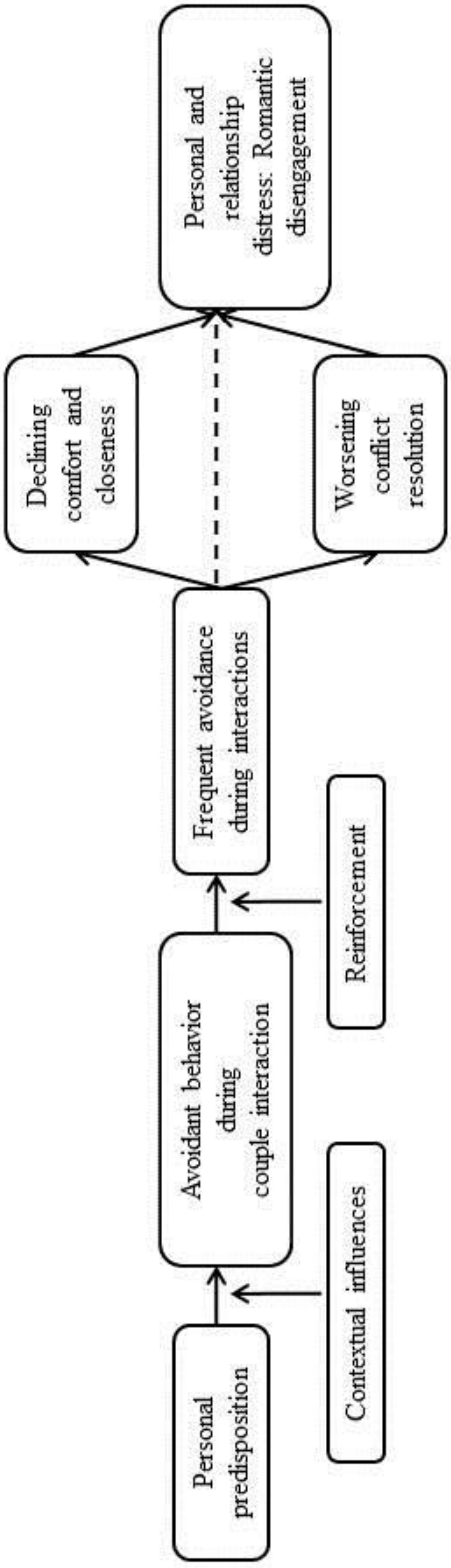

Figure 3. The final process model of romantic disengagement.

Notes

[1] Attachment theory was originally proposed to explain the personality development of infants following extended separation from mothers; therefore, it is inherently an etiologically driven theory. In contrast, behavior theories such as operant conditioning are inherently a-ontological.

[2] Although affect regulation is similar to coping, the concept of coping refers more broadly to how individuals manage stressful life events; in contrast, the concept of affect regulation refers to strategies individuals use to maintain or change their experience of affect (Parkinson & Totterdell, 1999).

[3] Researchers have also suggested that the link between avoidant coping and maladaptive outcomes may depend upon whether the individual has control over the stressor (for a review see Roth & Cohen, 1986). This hypothesis, however, has not been supported (e.g., Bowman & Stern, 1995).

CHAPTER III

THE PROCESSES THROUGH WHICH DISENGAGEMENT DURING MARITAL CONFLICT CONTRIBUTES TO MARITAL DISTRESS

Disengaging from or behaving avoidantly[1] during marital conflict is significantly associated with marital distress both cross-sectionally and longitudinally (Bowman, 1990; Gottman, 1999; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Heavey, Christensen, & Malamuth, 1995; Roberts, 2000; Smith, Vivian, & O'Leary, 1990). Further, factor analyses demonstrate that avoidant and disengaging behaviors during conflict are distinct from negative behaviors and affect (e.g., anger) and from positive behaviors and affect; this distinction has been found using self-report questionnaires (Bowman, 1990) and behavioral observation data (Smith et al., 1990). Disengagement also predicts lower marital satisfaction over and above the effects of negative and positive affect (Smith et al., 1990).

Despite the generally significant findings linking conflict avoidance to marital distress, two important gaps in this literature exist. First, some of this research has produced inconsistent results. For example, some researchers have found that wives' conflict avoidance is associated with concurrent distress, whereas husbands' conflict avoidance is associated with longitudinal decline (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Heavey et al., 1995). These inconsistencies are likely due, at least in part, to differences in method of data collection and design (e.g., self-report vs. behavioral observation methods, cross-sectional vs. longitudinal designs, individual vs. couple level analyses). Second, researchers have yet to examine *how* disengagement during marital conflict contributes to marital distress. The current study addressed these gaps by (a) testing two potentially competing mediating hypotheses drawn from attachment and coping perspectives and (b)

by overcoming prior methodological limitations. Understanding the processes that contribute to marital distress is particularly important given that approximately ¼ of intact marriages are characterized by unremitting marital distress (Gallup, 1990), and marital distress is linked to serious mental and physical health problems for spouses (e.g., Humbad, Donnellan, Iacono, & Burt, 2010; Robles, & Kiecolt-Glaser, 2003; Whisman, 2007) and their children (for a review see Belsky & Jaffee, 2006).

An Attachment Perspective of how Conflict Avoidance and Disengagement Contribute to Marital Distress

Attachment theorists maintain that close relationships fulfill basic human needs for intimacy, comfort, and physical and emotional security (Bowlby, 1969/1982; 1973; 1980; Feeney, 1999; Hazan & Shaver, 1994). In adulthood, romantic partners are typically the preferred source of fulfillment of attachment-related needs (Hazan & Shaver, 1994b). These needs become particularly salient during times of stress, illness, and threats to proximity with one's attachment partner (Bowlby, 1969/1982; 1973; 1980; Mikulincer et al., 2003). Further, because romantic relationships represent bi-directional attachments, both partners ideally provide and solicit appropriate care from one another in times of need. Secure attachment relationships provide consistent and reliable sources of need fulfillment, which bolsters trust in one's partner and enhances individual functioning (Collins & Read, 1990; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Mikulincer et al., 2003). In contrast, a relationship that fails to provide need fulfillment leads to individual distress and emotional detachment from one's partner over time (Bowlby, 1969/1982; 1973; 1980; Feeney & Monin, 2008). In sum, attachment theory offers a propitious explanation for why individuals form and maintain close relationships, and for how those

relationships deteriorate over time.

Based on this perspective, avoidant behavior during marital interactions increases psychological distance from one's partner and interferes with the solicitation and provision of comfort and intimacy, thereby eroding trust in one's partner and relationship. Because theorists view comfort and intimacy with close others as basic needs, a reduction in these benefits increases marital distress. Over time, extended or repeated episodes of distancing from one's partner, due to either spouse's avoidance in times of need, results in *emotional detachment* (i.e., romantic disengagement, growing apart; Gottman, 1999) from one's partner (Bowlby, 1969/1982; 1973; 1980; Feeney & Monin, 2008). Additionally, as intimacy and trust diminish (i.e., as emotional detachment increases), individuals are even more likely to disengage from their partners over time. Research supports the argument that a lack of intimacy/increased detachment contributes to relationship distress. Indeed, "growing apart" (detachment) is among the most frequently cited reasons couples give for their relationship distress and dissolution (Amato & Previti, 2003; Gigy & Kelly, 1992). In sum, avoidance during marital interactions contributes to relationship distress by interfering with trust and intimacy in the relationship.

Because adult attachments are bi-directional, when *either* partner perceives extended or repeated episodes of distance from the partner, erosions in trust and intimacy and subsequent relationship distress should occur. First, individuals who frequently behave avoidantly during couple interactions are at risk for declines in trust and intimacy and subsequent relationship distress. Second, partners who *perceive* their spouses' efforts as disengaging are also at risk for erosions in trust and intimacy and relationship distress.

Finally, based on attachment theory, avoidance and disengagement should be more detrimental when enacted during particular *types* of interactions. Specifically, the need for intimacy with one's partner -- for comfort and care -- increases when an individual is under stress, is ill, or perceives that proximity to one's partner is threatened. Couple conflict is one such context in which attachment-related behaviors are likely to be activated; as such, couple conflict has been studied extensively by attachment researchers. (See Pietromonaco, Greenwood, & Feldman Barrett, 2004 for a review.) Conflict between partners elicits significant amounts of stress in spouses (e.g., Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 2005), and couples often perceive conflict as a threat to relationship stability (e.g., Simpson, Oriña, & Ikles, 2003). Thus, avoidance during couple interactions that increase stress or perceptions of threat to the relationship, such as marital conflict, should be particularly damaging to marital relationships.

In sum, attachment theorists assert that episodes of repeated or extended distancing from one's partner, particularly during times of need, interfere with intimacy and trust, which contributes to relationship distress. Disengagement in times of stress -- such as during marital conflict -- is particularly likely to create psychological distance between partners. Therefore, to the extent that either spouse experiences increased distance from his or her partner in times of need -- either because he or she is behaving avoidantly or because he or she perceives that the partner is behaving avoidantly – the spouse is at increased risk for erosions in intimacy and trust and for increased marital distress.

A Coping Perspective of how Conflict Avoidance Contributes to Marital Distress

Because marital conflict is frequently perceived as stressful, avoidant and disengaging behavior during marital conflict is also often conceptualized as a coping strategy (e.g., Bowman, 1990; Badr, Taylor, Carmack, 2004; Bouchard, 2003; Manne, Ostroff, Norton, Fox, Goldstein, Grana, 2006). Coping strategies are defined as "ongoing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person" (Lazarus, 1993, p. 237). Although there are many approaches to classifying coping strategies (e.g., Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989; Kahana, Kahana, & Young, 1987), it is widely accepted that avoidant and disengaging behaviors represent one type of coping strategy (for reviews see Roth & Cohen, 1986; Suls & Fletcher, 1985).

Within the broader coping literature, avoidant coping has been shown to be effective at reducing short-term *personal* distress (i.e., within minutes to hours following the stressor; Larsen, 1993 as cited in Larsen & Prizmic, 2004; Suls & Fletcher, 1985). However, avoidant coping is typically associated with poorer outcomes, including *marital* distress, overall and longitudinally (Bowman, 1990; for a review see Roth & Cohen, 1986). Coping researchers offer two explanations for why avoidant coping contributes to poorer outcomes. First, avoidant coping impedes the use of effective problem-solving strategies, which contributes to marital distress (Roth & Cohen, 1986). Second, avoidant coping limits the extent to which individuals "work through" distressing emotions, thoughts or memories related to a given stressor (Horowitz, 1976; 1979; Zilberg et al., 1982).

A coping perspective provides a propitious explanation for how marital conflict avoidance contributes to marital decline. For example, by avoiding discussion of the problem and remaining emotionally distant and inattentive during marital conflict, individuals limit their involvement in the problem-solving process, potentially allowing problems in the marriage to fester. In this way, avoidance during marital conflict differs from constructive conflict communication (e.g., validation, compromise) because it limits communication about the problem and problems in the relationship remain unresolved. However, it also differs from less severe forms of negative conflict communication (e.g., whining, crying, and anger) that may at least allow for expression of feelings and thoughts about marital problems. Thus, disengagement during marital conflict may contribute to marital distress by interfering with communication and conflict resolution in the relationship.

Based on this argument, either spouse's marital conflict avoidance should contribute to both spouse's marital distress to the extent it hinders effective communication and conflict resolution in the marriage. Therefore, the avoidant spouse and/or his or her partner will experience increased marital distress to the extent that the conflict avoidance impedes communication and conflict resolution in the marriage. (Notably, these explanations have not yet been tested empirically.)

Overview of the Present Study

Given evidence that conflict avoidance is associated with marital decline, the purpose of the present study was to explicate *how* conflict avoidance leads to marital decline. I embedded my study in an integrated theoretical approach based on attachment and coping perspectives. Based on attachment theory, I hypothesized that marital conflict

avoidance would interfere with the experience of trust and emotional intimacy. In turn, declines in trust and emotional intimacy were expected to contribute to greater marital distress. Based on a coping perspective, I hypothesized that marital conflict avoidance would impede effective communication and conflict resolution, and poorer conflict resolution would in turn contribute to increased marital distress over time. In sum, I examined two potential mediators of the link between conflict avoidance and marital decline: (1) trust and intimacy and (2) communication and conflict resolution. Additionally, I sought to overcome prior methodological limitations in this literature by (a) collecting data via self-reports and behavioral observations of conflict avoidance, (b) by employing a longitudinal design, and (b) by assessing married couples rather than just individuals.

Method

Participants

Husbands and wives were recruited through marriage license records from Johnson and Linn Counties of Iowa. Couples were mailed letters explaining the study and inviting them to participate. Interested couples were screened to ensure they met eligibility requirements: both spouses were over the age of 18, relatively fluent in English, married less than six months, and in their first marriages. Of the 358 couples who responded, the first 105 couples who met criteria and kept their scheduled appointments were included in this study. One couple's data were removed because it was revealed that it was not the wife's first marriage. Another couple was removed from the study because the husband's data at Time 1 were deemed unusable. Thus, the final sample consisted of 103 couples. Additionally, over the course of the seven-year study, 5

couples withdrew from the study (a 95% retention rate was attained) and 12 divorced or permanently separated; however, all available data were included in the present study.

Couples dated an average of 32 months (*SD* = 25) prior to engagement, 44 months (*SD* = 27) prior to marriage, and 80% cohabited premaritally. At 3-6 months of marriage, couples' median annual joint income was between $40,001 and $50,000. Husbands' and wives' average ages were 26.4 (*SD* = 4.7) and 25.1 (*SD* = 4.3), respectively. Both spouses' modal education was 14 years. For 15% of the sample, at least one spouse identified him or herself as a member of an ethnic minority group. (The proportion of non-Caucasian individuals in the state in which the research was conducted is estimated to be 9%; U.S. Census, 2008.) Couples participating in this study were participating in a longitudinal study of newlywed marriage.

Procedures

Couples completed six waves of data collection: at 3-6 months (Time 1), 12-15 months (Time 2), 21-24 months (Time 3), 30-33 months (Time 4), 54-57 months (Time 5), and 75-78 months (Time 6) of marriage. At Time 1, questionnaire packets were mailed to couples' homes. These packets included measures of avoidant behavior during marital conflict, marital adjustment and measures beyond the scope of this study. Spouses were asked to complete questionnaires independently from their partners and bring the packets with them to their laboratory appointments. Couples then came into the laboratory to complete additional questionnaires and participate in a series of videotaped interactions, and participate in a series of procedures beyond the scope of this study. Questionnaires completed in the lab included the measures of trust and intimacy and conflict resolution. Spouses completed these questionnaires in separate rooms.

To facilitate the video-taped conflict interactions, each spouse identified a problem that was a source of tension in the marriage using the Marital Problem Inventory (Geiss & O'Leary, 1981). Couples were then asked to discuss in randomized order: (a) a relationship problem topic selected by the husband and (b) a relationship problem topic selected by the wife. In rare cases, when spouses chose the same topic for discussion, that topic was assigned to the spouse who was selected to be first and the other spouse was asked if he or she would discuss their second choice of topic during the second discussion. Before beginning, couples were instructed to "discuss the topic for 10 minutes and try to work toward a mutually satisfying solution."

For Times 2-6 questionnaires were mailed to couples' homes. Husbands and wives were instructed to complete the measures separately and privately, to seal them in the separate envelopes provided, and to mail them back in the self-addressed stamped envelopes provided. Couples were paid between $25 and $100 at each time point.

Measures

Disengaging behaviors observed during conflict interactions. Spouses' behavioral disengagement during the video-taped conflict interactions was coded using the Romantic Disengagement Behavioral Coding system (R-Dis; Barry, Lawrence, Riesberg, Harms, & Hall, 2010). This measure includes 17 codes based on behavioral descriptions of disengagement (Gottman, 1999; Guerrero, 2005; Hess, 2002; Heyman & Vivian, 2000; Parkinson & Totterdall, 1999; Smith et al., 1990; Suls & Fletcher, 1985). These behaviors imply shutting the partner out emotionally or behaviorally (e.g., remaining silent and looking away from the partner for 3 seconds or more), closed body language (e.g., covering one's face), seeming bored, tired, uninterested, less involved

(e.g., yawning, slouching), distracting oneself (e.g., commenting on objects in the room), denying the importance of a topic, or avoiding the discussion (e.g., refusing to talk about an issue). The presence of each behavior, for each spouse, was coded once during each 10-second segment of time if it occurred during that time. Eight coders trained for approximately 40 hours to reliability. Once coders completed training, coders met weekly with the first author for the first month and bi-weekly thereafter to code sample interactions as a group to ensure ongoing inter-rater agreement. Twenty percent of the interactions were coded by multiple raters to estimate the overall inter-rater reliability. Inter-rater reliabilities were calculated as intra-class correlations for each code across pairs of coders and ranged from .74 to .98. Each spouse was coded separately and coders were blind to the hypotheses of the study. Cronbach alphas were calculated across codes to demonstrate the internal consistency of the measure and found to range from .59 to .73 within spouses and interactions suggesting that the codes represent a broad construct. To form composite scores, each code was standardized across spouses and interactions and then summed within spouse and interaction, finally a mean score for each spouse was computed across the two interactions (i.e., across husbands' topic and wives' topic interactions).

Conflict avoidance. Conflict avoidance was also assessed via self-report using the Marital Coping Inventory, Avoidance Subscale (MCI; Bowman, 1990). The MCI has been described as a measure of problem-solving avoidance (Kurdek, 1991). Items represent actions, thoughts and feelings spouses have when dealing with their "most serious recurring marital difficulty." Spouses are instructed to write down their "most serious recurring marital difficulty." Then spouses rate the degree to which they engaged

in each strategy. The Avoidance Subscale includes 11 items that are rated from 1 (usually) to 5 (never). Items include, "Deny that anything is wrong or change the subject if my partner brings up the problem" and "Try to initiate discussion with my partner" (reverse coded). αs ranged from .70 to .85 across spouses and time.

Trust and emotional intimacy and communication and conflict resolution. Trust and emotional intimacy and communication and conflict resolution were assessed with a self-report version of the Relationship Quality Interview (RQI), Trust, Closeness, and Emotional Intimacy Section and Communication and Conflict Resolution Sections (Lawrence et al., 2008). The RQI comprises five dimensions of relationship quality: (a) trust, closeness, and emotional intimacy; (b) inter-partner support; (c) quality of the sexual relationship; (c) respect, power, and control; and (e) communication and conflict resolution. Only the two sections of the RQI were included in the current study**.**

The *Trust, Closeness, and Emotional Intimacy* section of the RQI measures a couple's ability to create mutual emotional closeness and intimacy in their relationship. It comprises (a) emotional closeness (an overall, mutual sense of closeness, warmth, affection, and interdependence), (b) trust (trust that one's partner will not lie, betray, abandon, or hurt you; how much each partner trusts the other to help maintain the intimate bond of the relationship), (c) self-disclosure and emotional vulnerability (partners' ability to confide in each other, to disclose emotional, difficult-to-share information that is not typically discussed in other relationships), and (d) demonstrations of love and affection (quantity and quality of love and affection expressed in the relationship, including verbal and physical expressions of love). After considering each of these components, spouses make a global rating of the quality of trust, closeness, and

emotional intimacy in their relationship over the previous six months on a scale ranging from 1 (“Emotionally distant, inability to confide in partner, inability to trust partner, not able to be oneself around partner”) to 9 (“Extremely close, confide in partner completely, trust each other completely, comfortable being self around partner”). A written description is also provided for the midpoint.

The *Communication and Conflict Resolution* section of the RQI measures the quality of couples’ problem-solving communication and ability to resolve conflict. It comprises the (a) frequency of arguments (a) how couples’ express themselves during arguments and (c) how well spouses feel conflict is resolved by these discussions. After considering each of these components, spouses make a global rating of the quality of communication and conflict resolution in their relationship over the previous six months on a scale ranging from 1 (Discussions typically lead to arguments, arguments typically involve verbal and physical aggression, arguments rarely get resolved) to 9 (Able to have differences of opinion without arguing, discussions never include verbal or physical aggression, good conflict resolution). A written description is also provided for the midpoint.

The self-report version of the *Trust, Closeness, and Emotional Intimacy* and *Communication and Conflict Resolution* sections of the RQI demonstrated adequate convergent and discriminant validity in the current sample. Convergent validity was assessed by comparing ratings made by spouses with ratings made by trained interviewers. For both spouses, the correlations between the self-report ratings and the ratings made by trained interviewers were moderate for trust and intimacy, *r*s = .43, and .32, and for communication and conflict resolution, *r*s = .42 and .31, for husbands and

wives, respectively, *p*s < .001. Discriminant validity was assessed by comparing these ratings to individual differences variables that assess similar constructs to these relationship-specific constructs. Trust and intimacy was compared to self-report measures of spouses' attachment avoidance which represents spouses' tendency to avoid and devalue intimacy across close relationships in general. Correlations were non-significant for husbands and wives (*r*s = -.19 and -.18, respectively, *ns*). Communication and conflict resolution was compared to self-report measures of spouses' negative temperament or tendency to experience negative emotions in general. These correlations were weak for husbands and wives (*r*s = -.26 and -.28, respectively), *p*s < .05. The pattern of correlations supports the convergent and discriminant validity of these measures.

Marital adjustment. Marital Adjustment was assessed with the Marital Adjustment Test (MAT; Locke & Wallace, 1959). The MAT is a widely-used 15-item measure of marital adjustment. Nine of the items ask participants to rate the frequency with which they disagree on various marital issues (e.g., "ways of dealing with in-laws", "handling family finances") on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = "always agree to 6 = "always disagree." Six items ask about how disagreements are dealt with, how leisure time is spent, possible regrets about marring the spouse, and disclosure using a forced-choice response format. The MAT also asks spouses to rate their degree of happiness on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1= "very unhappy" to 7 = "perfectly happy." Possible scores on the MAT range from 2 – 158 with higher scores indicating better marital adjustment. The MAT has been shown to discriminate between non-distressed and distressed individuals (Birchler & Webb, 1977), and has a split-half reliability of .84 (Locke & Wallace, 1959).

Data Analyses

Because data gathered from couples are theoretically and often statistically interdependent, hypotheses were tested using an actor-partner interdependence model (APIM) for mixed independent variables (see Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006 for a review). APIM allows researchers to investigate issues of mutual influence among dyads in four ways. First, when dyad members are distinguishable, as is the case in my sample of heterosexual married couples, there are at least two actor effects – one for the effects of the husband's predictor on the husband's outcome, and one for the effect of the wife's predictor on the wife's outcome. There are also at least two partner effects, one for the effect of the husband's predictor on the wife's outcome, and one for the effect of the wife's predictor on the husband's outcome. In all analyses, I included all four paths unless otherwise noted. However, for ease of presentation, I collapse across actor and partner paths when I provide equations for Level 1 models in the Results section. Second, correlations between husbands' and wives' predictors were estimated in all equations unless otherwise noted. Third, the residual non-independence in outcome scores is represented by the correlation between the error terms in husbands' and wives' outcomes, and was estimated in all equations. Fourth, I ran chi-square tests to assess the homogeneity of husbands' versus wives' Level 1 variance for each baseline model. When this chi-square test was significant, those residual terms were entered as simultaneous outcomes of all relevant predictors in subsequent models.

Growth curve modeling techniques (GCM; Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002) were used to estimate trajectories of change described by two parameters: the intercept (overall levels of the variable across time points assessed) and slope (average rate of linear change

of the variable over time). When appropriate, quadratic terms were included by squaring the linear terms. The first stage of GCM (Level 1) allows for the examination of within-spouse and across-spouse differences on variables measured repeatedly. Additional time-varying independent variables can also be entered into the Level 1 equations in order to determine their within- and/or cross-spouse associations with the outcome variable. The second stage of GCM (Level 2) allows for the examination of between-couple differences.

As recommended by Raudenbush, Brennan, and Barnett (1995), I analyzed husbands' and wives' data within the same equations (as opposed to nesting spouses within couples). I also included actor (within-spouse) and partner (cross-spouse) paths for all variables unless otherwise noted. In all analyses I examined whether there was evidence of significant sex differences; however, to conserve space, only significant findings are reported. Error terms in all models were specified as random effects unless specified.

To address mediation hypothesis I followed a stepwise procedure outlined by Kenny, Kashy, and Bolger (1998). Additionally, time-varying variables were deconstructed into their between-couple and within-spouse components to reduce the risk of Type I errors in mediation analyses. This was accomplished by centering time-varying variables within context (i.e., group-mean centering across time) and then reintroducing the means that were subtracted from Level 1 into the Level 2 equations as recommended by Zhang and colleagues (Zhang, Zyphur, & Preacher, 2009). To test the significance of the indirect effects for the potential mediational pathways, I used the Sobel test (Sobel, 1982). To conserve space, I generally only report significant findings.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

At the individual item level, less than 5% of the data were missing and were replaced using a mean imputation procedure. Measures were found to be adequately normally distributed with skew less than 2 and kurtosis less than 5.

Correlations between couple demographics and study variables were examined to determine whether demographics should be controlled in the main analyses. Length of time spouses dated before marriage was associated with husbands' trust and intimacy at Time 1 (r =.23), husbands' conflict resolution at Times 1 and 3 (rs = .34 and .22, respectively), and wives' trust and intimacy at Times 3 and 4 (rs = .32 and .25, respectively). However, length of time spouses dated before marriage was not associated with other study variables (i.e. observed disengagement, conflict avoidance, or marital adjustment), indicating that it was unlikely to explain hypothesized associations among study variables. Therefore, length of time couples dated was not retained as a control variable in subsequent analyses.

Descriptive Analyses

Means and standard deviations for all measures are presented in Table 1. On average, both husbands and wives reported moderate levels of avoidance during marital conflict, and perceived marital conflict to be somewhat stressful and emotionally distressing. On average, spouses' marital adjustment remained in the satisfied range; however, during at least one time point in the course of the study, 29% of husbands and 23% of wives fell into the moderately distressed range (i.e., scored between 80 – 99 on MAT, Abramowitz & Sewell, 1980), and 21% of husbands and 23% of wives fell into the

severely distressed range (i.e., scored below 79 on MAT, Abramowitz & Sewell, 1980).

I also examined mean differences between husbands' and wives' variables. Husbands' observed disengagement during conflict interactions at Time 1 was significantly higher than that for wives', $t(102) = 3.08$, $p < .01$. There were no other mean differences between husbands' and wives' variables, *t*s(102) > 1.53, *ns*.

Next I examined cross-spouse correlations. During conflict interactions, husbands' and wives' observed disengagement were moderately correlated ($r = .32$, $p < .01$). At each time point, correlations between husbands' and wives' variables ranged from weak to moderate (conflict avoidance: *r*s ranged from .07 to .24, *ns* to $p < .05$; trust and intimacy: *r*s ranged from .25 to .60, *p*s < .05; *r*s ranged from .36 to .70, *p*s < .05; marital adjustment: *r*s ranged from .48 to .69, *p*s < .05). In sum, these correlations demonstrate some consistency within couples across time.

Correlations between observed conflict disengagement (assessed at Time 1) and self-reported conflict avoidance were also examined, as these measures represent conceptually similar constructs. Husbands' observed conflict disengagement and husbands' conflict avoidance were weakly correlated at Time 1 ($r = .21$, $p < .05$); however, husbands' observed conflict disengagement was not significantly correlated with husbands' conflict avoidance assessed at other time points (*r*s ranged from -.05 to .15, *ns*). Wives' Time 1 observed conflict disengagement was weakly correlated with wives' self-reported conflict avoidance at Time 3 ($r = .27$, $p < .05$), but not with wives' self-reported conflict avoidance at other time points (*r*s ranged from .01 to .11, *ns*). These correlations suggest that, despite their conceptual similarity, observed disengagement and self-reported conflict avoidance are distinct constructs.

Preliminary Growth Curve and APIM analyses

I examined the baseline trajectories for each variable measured longitudinally: (a) marital conflict avoidance (self-reported), (b) trust and intimacy, (c) conflict resolution, and (d) marital adjustment. Chi-square deviance tests were used to determine whether including linear and quadratic slopes improved model fit. Parameters that improved model fit were retained in subsequent analyses. With the exception of marital adjustment, linear models best fit the data, as shown in the following Level 1 equation:

$$Y_{ij(Outcome)} = \beta_{1j(Husband\ intercept)} + \beta_{2j(Wife\ intercept)} + \beta_{3j(H\ Time)} + \beta_{4j(W\ Time)} + r_{ij}.$$

For marital adjustment, terms representing quadratic change for both husbands and wives were found to significantly improve model fit, $\chi 2$s(4) < 31.00, *p*s < .001, and were therefore included.

I examined the results of each of the baseline models. First, husbands' and wives' marital conflict avoidance did not demonstrate significant linear change over time (*b* = .01, *SE* = .01, and *b* = .02 and *SE* = .02, respectively, *ns*). On average, husbands reported greater overall levels of self-reported conflict avoidance compared to wives ($\chi 2[1] = 6.94$, $p < .01$). Second, trust and intimacy declined significantly over time for husbands (*b* = -.01, *SE* = .002) and for wives (*b* = -.01, *SE* = .002), *p*s <.001. Third, husbands viewed communication and conflict resolution as (marginally) worsening over time (*b* = -.006, *SE* = .003, *p* = .06). In contrast, wives' perceptions of communication and conflict resolution did not demonstrate systematic linear change over time (*b* = -.003, *SE* = .003, *ns*). Fourth, husbands' and wives' marital adjustment declined linearly over time (*b* = -.35, *SE* = .13, and *b* = -.29, *SE* = .13, respectively), *p*s < .001. Although, quadratic slopes improved the fit of this model, these slopes were non-significant for husbands (*b* = .001,

SE = .001) and wives (*b* = .001, *SE* = .002), *ns*.

I also examined the between-subject variability of the parameters (husbands' and wives' intercepts and linear slopes) for all models. With two exceptions, I found significant variability in the parameters of all these models (χ2s ranged from 114.93 to 260.74, *p*s < .05). The exceptions were the variance components for husbands' linear slopes in the models of marital conflict avoidance and trust and intimacy. These components were marginally significant, (χ2s were 108.24 and 107.35 respectively, *p*s < .07). This suggests that it was appropriate to predict these parameters.

Tests of the homogeneity of husbands' and wives' Level-1 variance for each baseline model were significant for all models, suggesting that variance differed for husbands versus wives (conflict avoidance: χ2[93] = 115.60; trust and intimacy: χ2[93] = 149.39; conflict resolution: χ2[93] = 114.02; marital adjustment: χ2[93] = 233.11, all *ps* < .05). Thus, for all analyses, I specified models as having different central tendencies and variability for husbands and wives.

First Set of Mediation Analyses: Do Trust/Emotional Intimacy and/or Communication/Conflict Resolution Mediate the Link between Observed Disengagement Early in Marriage and Marital Adjustment?

I first examined my mediational hypotheses using spouses' *behaviorally observed disengagement at Time 1* as the predictor of marital adjustment. Because the predictors (husbands' and wives' behaviorally observed conflict disengagement) were only measured at Time 1, only between-couple mediation effects were used to test the indirect effects (Zhang et al., 2009). However, within-spouse effects of the time-varying

mediators were estimated as well.

Step 1: Observed conflict disengagement predicting marital adjustment. I tested the effect of observed conflict disengagement (predictor) on marital adjustment (outcome), using the following equation at Level 1:

$$Y_{ij(\text{marital adjustment})} = \beta_{1j\ (\text{Husband})} + \beta_{2j\ (\text{Wife})} + \beta_{3j\ (\text{H Linear time})} + \beta_{4j\ (\text{W Linear time})} + \beta_{5j\ (\text{H Quad time})} + \beta_{6j\ (\text{W Quad time})} + r_{ij.}$$

I entered husbands' and wives' observed conflict disengagement into the Level 2 equations as follows:

$$\beta_{1j\ (\text{Husband intercept})} = \beta_{10} + \beta_{11\ (\text{H Disengagement})} + \beta_{12(\text{W Disengagement})} + u_{1j};$$

$$\beta_{2j\ (\text{Wife intercept})} = \beta_{20} + \beta_{21(\text{H Disengagement})} + \beta_{22(\text{W Disengagement})} + u_{2j};$$

$$\beta_{3j\ (\text{Husband Linear Slope})} = \beta_{30} + \beta_{31\ (\text{H Disengagement})} + \beta_{32(\text{W Disengagement})} + u_{3j};$$

$$\beta_{4j\ (\text{Wife Linear Slope})} = \beta_{40} + \beta_{41(\text{H Disengagement})} + \beta_{42(\text{W Disengagement})} + u_{4j};$$

where β_{11}, β_{12}, β_{21}, and β_{22} represent the effects of husbands' and wives' observed conflict disengagement on husbands' and wives' overall levels of marital adjustment, and β_{31}, β_{32}, β_{41}, and β_{42} represent the effects of husbands' and wives' observed conflict disengagement on rates of change in marital adjustment. Error terms for the quadratic slopes (not depicted above) were fixed to allow models to run.

Husbands' and wives' conflict disengagement predicted their own overall marital adjustment (b = -11.18, SE = 4.36, and b = -11.41, SE = 2.38, respectively, ps > .01), and their partners' overall marital adjustment (predicting wives': b = -8.63, SE = 4.09, and husbands': b = -6.58, SE = 2.84, respectively, ps > .05). When either husbands or wives are more disengaged during conflict early in marriage, both spouses are more maritally distressed across the first 7 years of marriage. Observed conflict disengagement did not

predict change in husbands' or wives' marital adjustment over time (*t*s[102] > 1.53, *ns*). See Table 2 for mediation pathways tested.

Step 2: Observed conflict disengagement predicting trust and intimacy and communication and conflict resolution. I then tested the effect of observed conflict disengagement (predictor) on each of the mediators (trust/intimacy and communication/conflict resolution). Two separate models were run, using the following Level 1 equation:

$$Y_{ij(Mediator)} = \beta_{1j\ (Husband)} + \beta_{2j\ (Wife)} + \beta_{3j\ (H\ Time)} + \beta_{4j\ (W\ Time)} + r_{ij.}$$

At Level 2, the same 4 equations from Step 1 were used. However, β_{11}, β_{12}, β_{21}, and β_{22} represented the effects of husbands' and wives' observed conflict disengagement on husbands' and wives' overall levels of the mediators (trust/intimacy or communication/conflict resolution), and β_{31}, β_{32}, β_{41}, and β_{42} represented the effects of husbands' and wives' observed conflict disengagement on rates of change in the mediators.

Observed disengagement predicting trust and intimacy. Husbands' and wives' disengagement predicted their own overall levels of trust and intimacy (*b* = -.48, *SE* = .21, and *b* = -.87, *SE* = 16, respectively, *p*s < .01), and their partners' overall levels of trust and intimacy (predicting wives': *b* = -.36, *SE* = .19, *p* = .07, and husbands': *b* = -.34, *SE* = .23, *p* < .01). When either husbands or wives are more disengaged during conflict early in marriage, both spouses experience lower trust and intimacy in their marriages. The effect of wives' conflict disengagement on their own trust and intimacy was stronger than the effect of husbands' conflict disengagement on wives' trust and intimacy (χ2s[1] = 4.10, *p* < .05).

Husbands' and wives' conflict disengagement also predicted wives' *declines* in trust and intimacy over time (b = -.015, SE = .007, and b = -.012, SE = .005, respectively, ps < .05). When either husbands or wives were more disengaged during conflict early in marriage, wives' trust and intimacy declined at a faster rate compared to spouses who were less disengaged. Wives' conflict disengagement was a stronger predictor of their own declines in trust and intimacy compared to the effect of husbands' disengagement on wives' declines, and compared to the (non-significant) effect of husbands' disengagement on their own declines (χ2s[1] = 5.45, p < .05).

Observed conflict avoidance predicting communication and conflict resolution. Husbands' and wives' conflict disengagement predicted their own overall levels of conflict resolution (b = -.58, SE = .26, and b = -.67, SE = .32, respectively, ps > .05). Husbands' disengagement also predicted wives' conflict resolution (b = -.88, SE = .29, p > .01). Husbands and wives who are more disengaged during early conflict experienced poorer communication and conflict resolution during their marriages. Wives whose husbands were more disengaged also experienced poorer communication and conflict resolution. Wives' disengagement also marginally predicted *declines* in their communication and conflict resolution (b = -.008, SE = .004, p = .06). Thus, wives who were more disengaged during conflict at Time 1 experienced faster declines in their communication and conflict resolution over time.

Steps 3 and 4: Observed conflict disengagement, trust/intimacy, and communication/conflict resolution predicting marital adjustment. I tested the effects of the predictor (observed conflict disengagement) and the mediators (trust/intimacy and communication/conflict resolution)[2] on the outcome (marital adjustment). Mediators

were group mean centered at Level 1 to control for and examine within-spouse effects of each mediator:

$$Y_{ij\ (\text{Marital Adjustment})} = \beta_{1j\ (\text{Husband})} + \beta_{2j\ (\text{Wife})} + \beta_{3j\ (\text{H Linear time})} + \beta_{4j\ (\text{W Linear time})} + \beta_{5j\ (\text{H Quad time})} + \beta_{6j\ (\text{W Quad time})} + \beta_{7j\ (\text{H Intimacy} - \text{H Intimacy.})} + \beta_{8j\ (\text{W Intimacy} - \text{H Intimacy.})} + \beta_{9j\ (\text{H Conflict resolution} - \text{H Conflict resolution.})} + \beta_{10j\ (\text{W Conflict resolution} - \text{W Conflict resolution.})} + r_{ij}$$

where β_7 and β_8 represent the effects of within-spouse rates of change in trust and intimacy and β_9 and β_{10} represent the effects of within-spouse rates of change of communication and conflict resolution on rates of change in marital adjustment. Due to the complexity of the model, the error terms for partner effects of mediators were fixed.

At Level 2, mean values for mediators were entered as predictors of husbands' and wives' intercepts and linear slopes. This allowed me to estimate between-couple effects for each mediator. Because the predictor (observed conflict disengagement) was time-invariant as well, the mean values for the mediators) were entered into the Level 2 equations as follows:

$$\beta_{1j} = \beta_{10} + \beta_{11\ (\text{H Disengagement})} + \beta_{12(\text{W Disengagement})} + \beta_{13\ (\text{H Intimacy.})} + \beta_{14(\text{W Intimacy.})} + \beta_{15\ (\text{H Conflict resolution.})} + \beta_{16(\text{W Conflict resolution.})} + u_{1j};$$

$$\beta_{2j} = \beta_{20} + \beta_{21(\text{H Disengagement})} + \beta_{22(\text{W Disengagement})} + \beta_{23\ (\text{H Intimacy.})} + \beta_{24(\text{W Intimacy.})} + \beta_{25\ (\text{H Conflict resolution.})} + \beta_{26(\text{W Conflict resolution.})} + u_{2j};$$

$$\beta_{3j} = \beta_{30} + \beta_{31\ (\text{H Disengagement})} + \beta_{32(\text{W Disengagement})} + \beta_{33\ (\text{H Intimacy.})} + \beta_{34(\text{W Intimacy.})} + \beta_{35\ (\text{H Conflict resolution.})} + \beta_{36(\text{W Conflict resolution.})} + u_{3j};$$

$$\beta_{4j} = \beta_{40} + \beta_{41(\text{H Disengagement})} + \beta_{42(\text{W Disengagement})} + + \beta_{43\ (\text{H Intimacy.})} + \beta_{44(\text{W Intimacy.})} + \beta_{45\ (\text{H Conflict resolution.})} + \beta_{46(\text{W Conflict resolution.})} + u_{4j};$$

First I looked at *between-spouse/couple effects* of trust and intimacy and

communication and conflict resolution on marital adjustment. Husbands with higher overall trust and intimacy and husbands with better overall communication and conflict resolution had better overall marital adjustment (b = 10.32, SE = 1.79, and b = 5.40, SE = 1.43, respectively, ps < .01). The effect of husbands' trust and intimacy was marginally stronger than the effect of husbands' communication and conflict resolution ($\chi 2[1] = 3.58$, $p = .06$).

Husbands' levels of communication and conflict resolution predicted wives' overall marital adjustment (b = 4.67, SE = 1.48, $p < .01$), and this effect was significantly stronger than the (non-significant) effect of wives' communication and conflict resolution on wives' overall adjustment ($\chi 2[1] = 9.80$ $p < .01$). Husbands' and wives' trust and intimacy marginally predicted wives' overall marital adjustment (b = 3.68, SE = 2.04, p = .07, and b = 3.51, SE = 1.88, p = .06, respectively). The effect of husbands' average trust and intimacy on husbands' overall adjustment was stronger than the effect of wives' average trust and intimacy on wives' overall adjustment ($\chi 2[1] = 6.48$, $p < .01$). Husbands' communication and conflict resolution on husbands' overall adjustment was marginally larger than the effect of wives' communication and conflict resolution on wives' overall adjustment ($\chi 2[1] = 3.44$, $p = .06$). Husbands' average trust and intimacy also predicted wives' *linear change* in marital adjustment over time (b = .14, SE = .07, $p < .05$). This result indicates that, when husbands experienced less trust and intimacy in their marriages, wives experienced faster declines in marital adjustment.

Next I examined *within-spouse/couple effects* of trust and intimacy and communication and conflict resolution on marital adjustment. Husbands' and wives' declines in trust and intimacy predicted their own declines in marital adjustment (b =

4.54, *SE* = .91, and *b* = 5.35, *SE* = 1.10, respectively, *p*s < .01). Husbands' and wives' declines in communication and conflict resolution also predicted their own declines in marital adjustment (*b* = 2.09, *SE* = .86, and *b* = 2.73, *SE* = .87, respectively), *p*s < .01. The effects of husbands' and wives' trust and intimacy were stronger than the effects of husbands' and wives' communication and conflict resolution on their own adjustment (χ2s[1] > 3.04, *p* < .08).

Declines in wives' trust and intimacy predicted declines in husbands' marital adjustment (*b* = 2.46, *SE* = .79, *p*s < .01), and declines in husbands' communication and conflict resolution predicted declines in wives' marital adjustment (*b* = 1.78, *SE* = .68, *p* < .01). The magnitudes of these paths did not significantly differ (χs2[1] > 2.44, *ns*).

Finally, I examined whether the effects of observed conflict disengagement (predictor) on marital adjustment (outcome) changed with the mediators in the model. In Step 1, husbands' and wives' conflict disengagement predicted their own and their partners' overall levels of marital adjustment. The effects of husbands' disengagement on husbands' and wives' marital adjustment, and the effect of wives' disengagement on husbands' adjustment, all dropped to non-significance (*t*s[99] > -1.45, *ns*). In contrast, the effect of wives' disengagement on their own marital adjustment decreased but remained significant (*b* = -7.81, *SE* = 2.81, *p* < .05).

Taking into account the above findings and the tests of the indirect effects (see Table 2), the following mediation effects were found. First, the effect of husbands' disengagement on husbands' overall marital adjustment was fully mediated by husbands' trust and intimacy and by husbands' communication and conflict resolution. Thus, husbands who were more disengaged at Time 1 had poorer overall marital adjustment

over the first seven years of marriage *because* they experienced less trust and intimacy and poorer communication and conflict resolution. Second, the effect of wives' disengagement on wives' overall marital adjustment was partially mediated by wives' average trust and intimacy. Wives who were more disengaged during Time 1 conflict had poorer overall marital adjustment *partially* because they experienced less trust and intimacy in their marriages. Third, the effect of husbands' disengagement on wives' marital adjustment was fully mediated by husbands' communication and conflict resolution. Thus, husbands who were more disengaged during early conflict experienced poorer communication and conflict resolution on average, which contributed to wives' worse overall marital adjustment.

Second Set of Mediation Analyses: Do Trust/Emotional Intimacy and/or Communication/Conflict Resolution Mediate the Link between Self-Reported Conflict Avoidance and Marital Distress?

In these analyses I examined my mediational hypotheses using *spouses' self-reported conflict avoidance* measured repeatedly over time as the predictor of marital adjustment. Because the predictor was time-varying, mediation may occur at either the between-couple or within-spouse/couple level. Mediation at both levels was analyzed and is presented here.

Step 1: Conflict avoidance predicting marital adjustment. Husbands' and wives' group-mean centered conflict avoidance were entered into the Level 1 equation predicting husbands' and wives' marital adjustment to examine within-spouse effects of disengagement:

$$Y_{ij(\text{marital adjustment})} = \beta_{1j\ (\text{Husband})} + \beta_{2j\ (\text{Wife})} + \beta_{3j\ (\text{H Linear time})} + \beta_{4j\ (\text{W Linear time})} + \beta_{5j\ (\text{H Quad time})} + \beta_{6j\ (\text{W Quad time})} + \beta_{7j\ (\text{H Conflict avoidance} - \text{H Conflict avoidance.})} + \beta_{7j\ (\text{W Conflict avoidance} - \text{W Conflict avoidance.})} + r_{ij}.$$

I entered husbands' and wives' mean conflict avoidance into the Level 2 equations predicting the intercepts and linear slopes to examine between-spouse/couple effects on marital adjustment:

$$\beta_{1j} = \beta_{10} + \beta_{11(\text{H Conflict avoidance.})} + \beta_{12(\text{W Conflict avoidance.})} + u_{1j};$$

$$\beta_{2j} = \beta_{20} + \beta_{21(\text{H Conflict avoidance.})} + \beta_{22(\text{W Conflict avoidance.})} + u_{2j};$$

$$\beta_{3j} = \beta_{30} + \beta_{31(\text{H Conflict avoidance.})} + \beta_{32(\text{W Conflict avoidance.})} + u_{3j};$$

$$\beta_{4j} = \beta_{40} + \beta_{41(\text{H Conflict avoidance.})} + \beta_{42(\text{W Conflict avoidance.})} + u_{4j};$$

where β_{11}, β_{12}, β_{21}, and β_{22} represent the effects of husbands' and wives' average conflict avoidance on husbands' and wives' overall levels of marital adjustment, and β_{31}, β_{32}, β_{41}, and β_{42} represent the effects of husbands' and wives' average conflict avoidance on rates of change in marital adjustment. Error terms for the quadratic slopes (not depicted above) were fixed to allow models to run.

I first examined the *between-couple effects*. Husbands' average conflict avoidance predicted husbands' and wives' overall marital adjustment (b = -1.25, SE = .36, and b = -1.25, SE = .38, respectively, ps < .01). The effect of husbands' conflict avoidance on husbands' adjustment was significantly stronger than the effect of wives' conflict avoidance on wives' adjustment ($\chi 2[1] = 5.24$, $p < .05$). Husbands' average conflict avoidance also marginally predicted declines in wives' adjustment (b = -.02, SE = .008, p = .06); this effect was significantly stronger than the effect of wives' avoidance on their own adjustment ($\chi 2[1] = 4.93$, $p < .05$). These results suggest that husbands' average

conflict avoidance distinguished couples who had poorer marital adjustment over time. Wives' adjustment also declined at a faster rate compared to wives whose husbands were less conflict avoidant. See Table 3 for mediation pathways tested.

Next I examined the *within-spouse/couple effects*. Increases in husbands' and wives' conflict avoidance were associated with greater declines in marital adjustment for both husbands (b = -.88, SE = .20, $p < .001$) and wives (b = -.47, SE = .20), ps < .05. The more spouses engaged in avoidance during marital conflict, the more their own marital adjustment declined over time. See Table 3 for mediation pathways tested.

Step 2: The effect of conflict avoidance on trust/intimacy and/or communication/conflict resolution. I tested the effects of conflict avoidance (predictor) on each of the mediators in two separate models. In each model, husbands' and wives' group-mean centered conflict avoidance (predictor) was entered into the Level 1 equations as follows:

$$Y_{ij(\text{mediator})} = \beta_{1j\ (\text{Husband})} + \beta_{2j\ (\text{Wife})} + \beta_{3j\ (\text{H Linear time})} + \beta_{4j\ (\text{W Linear time})} + \beta_{5j\ (\text{H Conflict avoidance} - \text{H Conflict avoidance.})} + \beta_{6j\ (\text{W Conflict avoidance} - \text{W Conflict avoidance.})} + r_{ij}.$$

At Level 2, the same 4 equations from Step 1 were used. However, β_{11}, β_{12}, β_{21}, and β_{22} *now* represented the effects of husbands' and wives' average conflict avoidance on husbands' and wives' overall levels of the mediator (trust/intimacy or communication/conflict resolution), and β_{31}, β_{32}, β_{41}, and β_{42} now represented the effects of husbands' and wives' average conflict avoidance on rates of change in the mediator.

Conflict avoidance predicting trust and intimacy. *Between-couple effects* are reported first. Husbands' average conflict avoidance predicted both husbands' and wives' overall trust and intimacy (b = -.08, SE = .02, and b = -.04, SE = .02, respectively, ps <

.05). To the extent that husbands were (on average) more conflict avoidant over the first 7 years of marriage, they and their wives experienced less trust and intimacy over this same time period. The effect of husbands' conflict avoidance on their own trust and intimacy was stronger than the effect of wives' conflict avoidance on their own trust and intimacy ($\chi 2[1] = 5.32$, $p < .05$).

Then I examined *within-spouse/couple effects*. Husbands' and wives' increases in conflict avoidance predicted their own declines in trust and emotional intimacy over time ($b = -.04$, $SE = .01$ and $b = -.07$, $SE = .03$, respectively, ps $< .01$). Thus, spouse who became more conflict avoidant over time also experienced greater declines in trust and intimacy over time.

Conflict avoidance predicting communication and conflict resolution. *Between-couple effects* are reported first. Husbands' average conflict avoidance predicted husbands', and marginally predicted wives', overall levels of communication and conflict resolution ($b = -.08$, $SE = .02$, $p < .001$, and $b = -.06$, $SE = .03$, $p = .06$, respectively). To the extent that husbands were more conflict avoidant across the first 7 years of marriage, they and their wives experienced poorer overall communication and conflict resolution.

Next I examined the *within-spouse/couple effects*. These effects were non-significant once between-couple effects were controlled. Thus, once *levels* of conflict avoidance were accounted for, being more or less conflict avoidant at a specific time point did not, on average, influence the quality of communication and conflict resolution at that time point.

Steps 3 and 4: Conflict avoidance, trust/intimacy and communication/conflict resolution predicting marital adjustment. The group mean centered mediators (trust and intimacy and communication and conflict resolution)[2] were added to the Level 1 model predicting marital adjustment with husbands' and wives' conflict avoidance using the following equation:

$$Y_{ij\ (\text{Marital Adjustment})} = \beta_{1j\ (\text{Husband})} + \beta_{2j\ (\text{Wife})} + \beta_{3j\ (\text{H Time})} + \beta_{4j\ (\text{W Time})} + \beta_{5j\ (\text{H Conflict avoidance} - \text{H Conflict avoidance.})} + \beta_{6j\ (\text{W Conflict avoidance} - \text{W Conflict avoidance.})} + \beta_{7j\ (\text{H Trust} - \text{H Trust.})} + \beta_{8j\ (\text{W Trust} - \text{W Trust.})} + \beta_{9j\ (\text{H Conflict resolution} - \text{H Conflict resolution.})} + \beta_{10j\ (\text{W Conflict resolution} - \text{W Conflict resolution.})} r_{ij}.$$

where β_7 and β_8 represent the effects of within-spouse rates of change in trust and intimacy and β_9 and β_{10} represent the effects of within-spouse rates of change of communication and conflict resolution on rates of change in marital adjustment. Due to the complexity of the model, the error terms for partner effects of mediators were fixed.

At Level 2, means for conflict avoidance and the mediators were entered as predictors of husbands' and wives' intercepts and linear slopes to estimate between-couple effects:

$$\beta_{1j} = \beta_{10} + \beta_{11\ (\text{H Conflict avoidance.})} + \beta_{12(\text{W Conflict avoidance.})} + \beta_{13\ (\text{H Trust.})} + \beta_{14(\text{W Trust.})} + \beta_{15\ (\text{H Conflict resolution.})} + \beta_{16(\text{W Conflict resolution.})} + u_{1j};$$

$$\beta_{2j} = \beta_{20} + \beta_{21(\text{H Conflict avoidance.})} + \beta_{22(\text{W Conflict avoidance.})} + \beta_{23\ (\text{H Trust.})} + \beta_{24(\text{W Trust.})} + \beta_{25\ (\text{H Conflict resolution.})} + \beta_{26(\text{W Conflict resolution.})} + u_{2j};$$

$$\beta_{3j} = \beta_{30} + \beta_{31\ (\text{H Conflict avoidance.})} + \beta_{32(\text{W Conflict avoidance.})} + \beta_{33\ (\text{H Trust.})} + \beta_{34(\text{W Trust.})} + \beta_{35\ (\text{H Conflict resolution.})} + \beta_{36(\text{W Conflict resolution.})} + u_{3j};$$

$$\beta_{4j} = \beta_{40} + \beta_{41(\text{H Conflict avoidance.})} + \beta_{42(\text{W Conflict avoidance.})} + \beta_{43\ (\text{H Trust.})} + \beta_{44(\text{W Trust.})} + \beta_{45}$$

$_{(\text{H Conflict resolution.})} + \beta_{46(\text{W Conflict resolution.})} + u_{4j};$

Between-couple effects of trust and intimacy and communication and conflict resolution are presented first. Husbands with greater overall trust and intimacy and better overall communication and conflict resolution had better overall marital adjustment (b = 9.35, SE = 1.58, $p < .001$, and b = 4.73, SE = 1.35, respectively, ps < .001). Husbands of wives with greater overall trust and intimacy also had better overall adjustment (b = 2.40.99, SE = 1.35, p = .08). Also, when both husbands and wives had better overall communication and conflict resolution, wives had better overall adjustment (b = 3.39, SE = 1.59, and b = 2.71, SE = 1.39, respectively, ps < .05).

Importantly, husbands' and wives' trust and intimacy were stronger predictors of husbands' overall adjustment than husbands' and wives' communication and conflict resolution were ($\chi 2[1] = 3.74$, $p < .05$, and $\chi 2[1] = 2.65$, p = .09). These results suggest that husbands' overall experience of trust and intimacy early in marriage is a particularly important predictor of their overall marital adjustment compared to communication and conflict resolution during this same period, and it was more important for husbands compared to wives.

Two significant sex differences are worth noting. First, the effect of husbands' communication and conflict resolution on wives' adjustment was stronger than the effect of wives' communication and conflict resolution on husbands' adjustment ($\chi 2[1] = 6.24$, $p < .01$). Second, the effect of husbands' trust and intimacy on husbands' adjustment was stronger than the effect of wives' trust and intimacy on wives' adjustment ($\chi 2[1] = 6.76$, $p < .01$).

Husbands' average trust and intimacy was also associated with less *decline* in

marital adjustment over time (b = .14, SE = .05, p < .01). Husbands who (on average) experienced more trust and intimacy experienced greater stability in their marital adjustment over time compared to husbands with less trusting and intimate marriages.

Next I examined *within-spouse/couple effects* of trust and intimacy and communication and conflict resolution. Husbands' and wives' declines in trust and intimacy predicted declines in their own marital adjustment (b = 4.68, SE = .97, and b = 5.90, SE = .86, respectively, ps < .001), and in their partners' marital adjustment over time (predicting wives: b = 2.91, SE = 1.05, and husbands: b = 3.70, SE = 1.07, respectively, ps < .01). Husbands' and wives' declines in communication and conflict resolution also predicted declines in their own marital adjustment (b = 1.19, SE = .66, p = .07 and b = 2.50, SE = 1.03, p < .05, respectively), and their partners' adjustment (predicting wives: b = 1.85, SE = .72, and husbands: b = 2.18, SE = .78, ps < .01). The effects of husbands' and wives' trust and intimacy were stronger predictors of their own adjustment than the effects of their own communication and conflict resolution ($\chi 2[1] >$ 5.14, ps < .05).

Next I examined whether the effects of conflict avoidance on marital adjustment reduced to non-significance when the mediators were included in the model. I began by looking at the *between-couple effects*. In Step 1, husbands' overall levels of conflict avoidance predicted husbands' and wives' overall levels of marital adjustment, and marginally predicted declines in wives' adjustment. The effect of husbands' average conflict avoidance on wives' marital decline remained significant (b = -.02, SE = .008, p < .01). However, all other effects of husbands' overall levels of conflict avoidance dropped to non-significance (ts[92] = -1.62, ns).

Taking into account the above findings and the tests of the indirect effects (see Table 3), two mediators were found. First, the effect of husbands' average conflict avoidance on husbands' overall adjustment was fully mediated through husbands' overall trust and intimacy and through communication and conflict resolution. Thus, husbands who are (on average) more conflict avoidant had poorer overall marital adjustment *because* they experienced less trust and intimacy and poorer communication and conflict resolution in their marriages. Second, the effect of husbands' overall conflict avoidance on wives' overall marital adjustment was fully mediated through husbands', and marginally through wives', communication and conflict resolution. These results suggest that the reason wives of more conflict avoidant husbands are less satisfied with their marriages is because both they and their husbands experience poorer communication and conflict resolution in their marriages.

Within-spouse/couple effects of conflict avoidance on marital adjustment, with the mediators included in the model, are reported next. In Step 1, both spouses' increases in conflict avoidance predicted their own declines in marital adjustment over time. Once the mediators were included in the model, the effect of husbands' conflict avoidance on husbands' adjustment decreased but remained significant (b = -.55, SE = .19, $p < .001$), and the effect of wives' conflict disengagement on wives' adjustment dropped to non-significance (t[92] = -.48, *ns*).

Taking into account the above findings and the tests of the indirect effects, the following mediators were found. First, the effect of husbands' conflict avoidance on their own marital decline was *partially mediated* through their own declines in trust and intimacy. Second, the effect of wives' conflict avoidance on their own marital decline was

fully mediated through their own declines in trust and intimacy (see Table 3).

Discussion

Given evidence that marital conflict avoidance is associated with marital distress, the purpose of the present study was to explicate *how* conflict avoidance contributes to marital distress. Specifically, I sought to advance research on marital conflict avoidance beyond simply predicting associations between couples' avoidant conflict behaviors and marital well-being by providing theoretically driven and empirically supported explanations for the mediators of this link. First, based on attachment theory, I hypothesized that avoidant behaviors during marital conflict would influence marital distress because they interfere with trust and emotional intimacy. Second, based on a coping perspective, I hypothesized that conflict avoidance would impede effective communication and conflict resolution in the marriage, thereby allowing marital problems and tensions to persist, resulting in marital distress. In general, I found support for both hypotheses. Additionally, previous research examining associations between conflict avoidance and marital distress have yielded inconsistent results, at least partially due to differences across studies in how conflict avoidance was measured (i.e., behavioral observations vs. self-report), differences in design (whether associations were examined cross-sectionally or longitudinally), and sample limitations (examining individuals rather than couples). Therefore, I examined these associations using behavioral observations and self-report measures, using a longitudinal design, and via data provided by both husbands and wives.

Summary and Interpretation of Results

Comparing self-report and behavioral observation measures of conflict avoidance. Correlations between observed conflict disengagement and self-reported conflict avoidance were low, suggesting little concordance between these measures. This is likely due to the fact that observations of disengagement occurred within a specific discussion whereas self-reported disengagement assessed the frequency with which spouses avoided their most difficult marital problem. Similarly, researchers have found that comparing context-specific measures of behavior to context-general measures of behavior typically results in low correlations (for a review see Lorenz, Melby, Conger, & Xu, 2007). In contrast, when self-report instruments and observational measures have been used to assess the same context, researchers have found high agreement (e.g., Sanford, 2010). Thus, I likely found low correlations between observed disengagement and self-reported conflict avoidance because these measures assessed difference contexts.

Early marital conflict disengagement predicts marital distress. When either husbands or wives were more disengaged during early marital conflict, both spouses had poorer marital adjustment over the first seven years of marriage. Spouses who were more disengaged during early marital conflict generally experienced their marriages as less trusting and intimate and as having poorer communication and conflict resolution skills and were, therefore, more maritally distressed overall. One potential explanation for this finding is that conflict disengagement is part of a maladaptive dynamic that some spouses bring into, or develop early on in their marriages that persists over time and is associated with poorer marital outcomes. This explanation is consistent with the "enduring dynamics model," which has generally been applied to examinations of how early marital or

premarital negative conflict behaviors (e.g., hostility, whining) are associated with later marital distress (e.g., Huston et al., 2001; Markman, Rhoades, Stanley, Ragan, & Whitton, 2010). The enduring dynamics model suggests that couples who are more disengaged during early marital conflict are more disengaged during conflict interactions with their partners over time. However, it is equally likely that what endures over time is not marital conflict disengagement, but the lower trust and intimacy and poor communication and conflict resolution with which early marital conflict disengagement is associated. Further, my research suggests that it is *because* of its association with lower trust and intimacy and poorer communication and conflict resolution that marital conflict disengagement is a maladaptive dynamic for couples.

Overall conflict avoidance predicts overall marital distress. Husbands who were more conflict avoidant on average experienced greater marital distress, and this was because they experienced their marriages as less trusting and intimate and as having poorer communication and conflict resolution. The wives of more conflict avoidant husbands also experienced greater marital distress, and this was due to the poor quality of communication and conflict resolution in their marriages. These findings are similar to those found for early (observed) marital conflict disengagement, suggesting that (a) early conflict disengagement and (b) conflict avoidance in general (over years) contribute to marital distress in similar ways: they both interfere with the development and maintenance of trust and intimacy and effective communication and conflict resolution.

In addition to similarities among the findings for early disengagement and overall avoidance, I found notable differences. Specifically, only husbands' *overall* conflict avoidance -- not wives' predicted marital distress. In contrast, both husbands' and wives'

early (observed) disengagement predicted marital distress. This pattern of findings suggests that husbands' overall conflict avoidance is more detrimental to spouses' marital adjustment than wives' avoidance, whereas *early* disengagement is problematic regardless of which spouse disengages.

Although these gender patterns only speak to one part of the dynamic (conflict avoidance), they are consistent with research on the demand-withdraw pattern of couple communication. This research has found that, on average, women tend to pursue discussions and husbands tend to withdraw from them. Moreover, this dynamic is more pronounced in maritally distressed couples (Eldridge et al., 2007).

Problems associated with husbands' higher overall conflict avoidance may reflect different underlying processes that are consistent with the theoretical foci of this research. First, consistent with an attachment perspective, this behavior among husbands may reflect a more avoidant attachment bond or a more avoidant attachment style in general (i.e., across attachment relationships). Indeed, some research has found that spouses with more avoidant attachment styles are more likely to behave avoidantly during marital conflict (e.g., Cann et al., 2008; O'Connell Corcoran & Mallinckrodt, 2000), and avoidantly attached individuals tend to be uncomfortable with and have difficulty trusting and relying on significant others, especially during times of need. Second, husbands' greater overall conflict avoidance may reflect skill deficits. These husbands may avoid conflict because they lack the necessary skills to effectively communicate with their wives about marital difficulties. Both arguments are consistent with my findings.

Interestingly, these arguments also demonstrate how the associations between marital conflict avoidance and the proposed mediators are likely bi-directional. For

example, as problems with trust, intimacy, communication and conflict resolution develop in relationships, they likely promote further avoidance, which will promote further problems in these areas and subsequent marital decline. Nevertheless, there was evidence that spouses' avoidant and disengaging behaviors during marital conflict effected change in trust and intimacy, communication and conflict resolution, and marital adjustment over time. Specifically, (a) husbands' and wives' early conflict disengagement predicted steeper declines in wives' trust and intimacy, (b) wives' greater conflict avoidance marginally predicted steeper declines in wives' communication and conflict resolution, and (c) husbands' overall conflict avoidance predicted steeper declines in wives' marital adjustment over time. In sum, although the associations between conflict avoidance and trust and intimacy and between conflict avoidance and communication and conflict resolution are likely reciprocal, there is evidence that avoidant and disengaging behavior during marital conflict promotes declines in trust and intimacy, communication and conflict resolution, and marital adjustment.

Changes in conflict avoidance predict changes in marital distress over time. Husbands and wives who were more conflict avoidant experienced greater declines in trust and intimacy and these declines were associated with greater marital distress over time. In contrast, once spouses' average tendencies to avoid conflict were controlled, changes in conflict avoidance over time did not influence changes in communication and conflict resolution. These results suggest that only spouses' dispositional tendencies to avoid conflict influenced their perceptions of communication and conflict resolution in their marriages. In sum, these results support an attachment theory explanation of the links between spouses' increases in conflict avoidance and marital decline.

Although declines in husbands' trust and intimacy were found to partially mediate the effect of husbands' conflict avoidance on husbands' marital distress, this effect remained significant. Thus, an attachment perspective appears to provide only a partial explanation of the processes through which husbands' marital conflict avoidance contributes to their marital distress over time. One possible avenue for future study is to examine a broader ecological explanation. For example, husbands' increased marital conflict avoidance may be associated with stressors external to the marriage that impact marital adjustment without altering global perceptions of trust and intimacy or of communication and conflict resolution.

The influences of trust and intimacy and communication and conflict resolution on marital distress. In addition to describing mediational paths between conflict avoidance and marital distress, this study also provides greater insight into the importance of trust and intimacy and communication and conflict resolution for marital well-being in general. One notable finding was that trust and intimacy tended to be a stronger predictor of marital adjustment than communication/conflict resolution. These findings are interesting given that conflict resolution skills are typically the primary target of intervention in couple therapies (e.g., Behavioral Marital Therapy; Jacobson & Holtzworth-Munroe, 1986; Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program; Floyd, Markman, Kelly, Blumberg, & Stanley, 1995). In contrast, the present research highlights the importance of trust and intimacy as potential targets of intervention

Strengths and Limitations of the Present Study

This study comprises several novel features that enhance its contributions to the field. First, my hypotheses were informed by an integrated theoretical model of romantic

disengagement (Barry & Lawrence, 2010). This approach allowed me to consider and test two potentially competing or complimentary explanations for spouses' conflict avoidance. Second, due to inconsistencies in previous research, I examined both observed conflict disengagement as well as self-reported conflict avoidance. To my knowledge, this is the first study to include these two common methods of assessing disengaging and avoidant marital conflict behavior. Third, I examined both between-couples and within-spouse/couples effects, reducing the risk of Type I error in the examination of mediational paths (Zhang et al., 2009). Fourth, the longitudinal design allowed for an examination of the consequences of marital conflict avoidance on overall marital adjustment as well as on change in marital adjustment over time. Fifth, I controlled for and examined the interdependence among husbands and wives by including both spouses and using actor-partner interdependence modeling to examine all hypotheses.

Interpretation of the findings must also be qualified by several factors. First, although similar to other published studies comprising newly married couples (e.g., Carrére, Buehlman, Gottman, Coan, & Ruckstuhl, 2000), my sample was relatively small. However, the multi-observation design resulted in sufficient power to detect my hypothesized effects. Second, my sample comprised heterosexual, predominantly Caucasian couples in the first seven years of marriage. Although reduced heterogeneity limits the number of third factor variables that might account for my results (e.g., duration of marriage; first vs. higher-order marriages; Bradbury, Cohan, & Karney, 1998), I cannot conclude that my findings would generalize to same-sex couples or to ethnic minorities, for example. Third, I cannot conclude that my findings would generalize to a sample of treatment-seeking couples; however, rates of marital distress in

this sample were similar to those reported in other published samples of couples in the early years of marriage (e.g., Lawrence & Bradbury, 2001), increasing my confidence in the generalizability of my findings.

Implications of the Present Study

This research has implications for research on avoidant and disengaging behaviors with one's partner more generally, adult attachment, and research on romantic disengagement – processes through which spouses grow apart from their partner over time. First, this study focused on marital conflict as the context in which avoidance of one's partner is particularly destructive for the relationship. However, both attachment theorists and coping researchers imply that it is not avoidance during *conflict* that is detrimental: it is any context characterized by higher levels of *stress or relationship threat*. Thus, future research should examine whether avoidance in other contexts characterized by increased stress is associated with marital distress. Additionally, attachment theorists imply that avoidant behavior during caregiving interactions is detrimental to the relationship (Feeney & Collins, 2001). Thus, future research should examine whether spouses' disengagement during caregiving is associated with marital distress. Second, although this research examined marital adjustment as the outcome, both attachment and coping research also suggest that avoiding one's partner during times of need or stress is associated with poorer *individual outcomes*, such as increased depressive symptoms (Bowlby, 1969/1982; e.g., Blalock & Joiner, 2000; Holahan, Moos, Holahan, Brennan & Schultte, 2005). Therefore, I recommend future research examine individual outcomes of avoiding partners in these contexts.

With regard to the attachment literature, this study has implications for

understanding avoidant attachment. Attachment researchers have primarily focused on the effects of adult attachment styles; however, research has shown that adults form unique attachment bonds that have important implications for individual and relationship functioning (Cook, 2000; Barry et al., 2007; Merlo & Lakey, 2007). Moreover, the process through which a spouse's attachment bond with his or her partner becomes progressively more avoidant and potentially detached over time may be conceptually identical to the process of romantic disengagement. For these reasons, future research should focus on the specific marital attachment bond and on the processes through which this bond is maintained (or changes) over time. Such a shift would inform adult attachment theory and potentially elucidate additional processes of romantic disengagement.

This research has other important implications for the study of romantic disengagement. Specifically, my findings suggest that the process of romantic disengagement may begin with avoidance of marital conflict, and that marital conflict avoidance may indicate a process of disengagement. When avoidance becomes an increasingly common response to marital conflict, it leads to declines in emotional intimacy and trust. Given that intimacy is strongly correlated with romantic disengagement (e.g., Barry, Lawrence & Langer, 2008), conflict avoidance is likely to also lead to romantic disengagement. Further, my finding that declines in intimacy and trust predict marital decline is consistent with the fact that couples often report emotional disengagement as the "reason" for relationship distress and dissolution (Amato & Previti, 2003; Gigy & Kelly, 1992).

Conclusion

In the present study I bridged important gaps in the literature on marital conflict avoidance, including explaining how avoidance leads to marital decline. This research demonstrated that the link between spouses' conflict avoidance and marital distress is mediated by declines in trust and intimacy and by declines in communication and conflict resolution. Specifically, marital conflict avoidance may indicate a process of romantic disengagement because it is associated with spouses' declines in trust and intimacy over time, which contributes to marital distress over time. Understanding the processes that lead couples to emotionally disengage from one another is important because therapists cite disengagement as among the most difficult problems to treat in couple therapy (Whisman, Dixon, & Johnson, 1997), and disengagement predicts poorer prognosis for couple therapy (Hahlweg, Schindler, Revenstorf, & Brengelmann, 1984).

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations of Variables for Husbands and Wives across Time

	3-6 mos.	12-15 mos.	21-24 mos.	30-33 mos.	54-57 mos.	75-78 mos.
	M (SD)	*M (SD)*	*M (SD)*	*M (SD)*	*M (SD)*	*M (SD)*
	Behavioral Disengagement During Conflict Interactions					
H	.06 (.30)					
W	-.03 (.22)					
	Marital Conflict Avoidance					
H	28.01 (6.57)	24.63 (6.28)	27.76 (6.22)	-----	28.89 (6.23)	-----
W	25.96 (5.85)	25.55 (5.94)	26.63 (6.42)	-----	26.63 (6.42)	-----
	Trust and Emotional Intimacy					
H	8.23 (1.00)	-----	7.95 (1.25)	7.92 (1.28)	7.70 (1.62)	7.21 (1.60)
W	8.23 (1.02)	-----	8.02 (1.55)	7.94 (1.59)	8.11 (.99)	7.16 (1.92)

Table 1 (continued).

	3-6 mos.	12-15 mos.	21-24 mos.	30-33 mos.	54-57 mos.	75-78 mos.
	M (SD)	*M (SD)*	*M (SD)*	*M (SD)*	*M (SD)*	*M (SD)*
	Communication and Conflict Resolution					
H	7.24 (1.56)	-----	7.16 (1.68)	7.25 (1.56)	7.17 (1.73)	6.46 (2.04)
W	7.14 (1.66)	-----	7.41 (1.40)	7.48 (1.62)	7.39 (1.58)	6.68 (1.98)
	Marital Adjustment					
H	122.88 (19.68)	109.24 (18.84)	108.11 (20.69)	105.23 (22.81)	104.58 (23.67)	101.54 (21.59)
W	123.86 (18.59)	110.75 (21.16)	108.32 (22.04)	104.94 (25.45)	107.36 (20.67)	102.99 (24.28)

Note. H = Husband, W = wife, M = Mean, SD = Standard deviation.

Table 2. Summary of Tests of the Indirect Effects of Observed Conflict Disengagement on Marital Adjustment through Trust and Intimacy and Communication and Conflict Resolution

Independent Variable	Mediator	Outcome		Independent Variable	Mediator	Outcome	
Conflict Disengagement	Trust & Intimacy	Marital Adjustment	Sobel Test	Conflict Disengagement	Communication & Conflict Resolution	Marital Adjustment	Sobel Test
Husband →	Husband →	Husband	-2.12*	Husband →	Husband →	Husband	-1.84*
Husband →	Wife - - →	Husband	-------	Husband →	Wife - - →	Husband	-------
Husband →	Husband →	Wife	-1.37	Husband →	Husband →	Wife	-1.85*
Husband →	Wife →	Wife	-1.37	Husband →	Wife →	Wife	------
Wife →	Wife →	Wife	-2.30*	Wife →	Wife →	Wife	------
Wife →	Husband →	Wife	-1.12	Wife - - →	Husband →	Wife	-------
Wife →	Wife - - →	Husband	-------	Wife →	Wife - - →	Husband	-------
Wife →	Husband →	Husband	-1.43	Wife - - →	Husband →	Husband	-------

Note. Table depicts all possible mediational paths based on results of Step 1 (independent variable predicting outcome). Results for independent variable predicting each of the mediators came from separate models for each mediator, results for mediators predicting outcome controlling for independent variable came from one model testing both mediators. Solid arrows depict significant paths and dashed arrows depict non-significant paths.

+ $p < .10$. * $p < .05$.

Table 3. Summary of Tests of the Indirect Effects of Conflict Avoidance on Marital Adjustment through Trust and Intimacy and Communication and Conflict Resolution

Independent Variable	Mediator	Outcome		Independent Variable	Mediator	Outcome	
Conflict Avoidance	Trust & Intimacy	Marital Adjustment	Sobel Test	Conflict Avoidance	Communication & Conflict Resolution	Marital Adjustment	Sobel Test
Between- Couples Effects							
Husband →	Husband →	Husband	-3.19**	Husband →	Husband →	Husband	-2.37*
Husband →	Wife - - ▸	Husband	-1.45	Husband →	Wife - - ▸	Husband	------
Husband →	Husband →	Wife	------	Husband →	Husband →	Wife	-2.11*
Husband →	Wife →	Wife	------	Husband →	Wife →	Wife	-1.70+
Husband - - ▸	Husband Change →	Wife Change	------	Husband - - ▸	Husband Change - - ▸	Wife Change	------
Husband - - ▸	Wife Change - - ▸	Wife Change	------	Husband - - ▸	Wife Change - - ▸	Wife Change	------
Within-Spouse/Couple Effects							
Husband →	Husband →	Husband	-3.08**	Husband - - ▸	Husband →	Wife	------
Husband - - ▸	Wife →	Husband	------	Husband - - ▸	Wife →	Wife	------
Wife →	Wife →	Wife	-2.21*	Wife - - ▸	Wife →	Husband	------
Wife - - ▸	Husband →	Wife	------	Wife - - ▸	Husband →	Husband	------

Note. Table depicts all possible mediational paths based on results of Step 1(independent variable predicting outcome). Results for independent variable predicting each of the mediators are from separate models for each mediator, results for mediators predicting outcome controlling for independent variable are from one model testing both mediators. Solid arrows depict significant paths and dashed arrows depict non-significant paths.

+ $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$

Notes

[1] I conceptualize avoidant and disengaged behavior during marital interactions as conceptually similar constructs. Therefore, avoidance and disengagement are used interchangeably. Avoidance during marital communication has been described to include refusing to talk about an issue, closed-off body language, and appearing quiet or withdrawn (Heyman & Vivian, 2000). Similarly, disengagement has been described as being quiet, displaying little excitement (Smith, Davis & Vivian, 1990), and engaging in denial, distraction, and avoidance (Parkinson & Totterdall, 1999). I argue that disengagement represents a broader construct that includes avoidant behavior and that indicates a lower level of involvement in the interaction.

[2] The effects of each mediator (trust and intimacy and communication and conflict resolution) on marital adjustment (Steps 3 and 4) were first tested in separate models, then mediators were included together in a full model to examine each potential mediator controlling for the effects of the other. The results of models testing mediators individually were not presented to conserve space and because results were not meaningfully different.

CHAPTER IV

EXPLICATING THE PROCESS OF ROMANTIC DISENGAGEMENT DURING THE EARLY YEARS OF MARRIAGE: HOW AND WHY COUPLES DISENGAGE

Nearly half of all marriages end in divorce (Kreider, 2005), and an estimated ¼ of intact marriages are marked by severe, unremitting marital distress (Gallup, 1990). Marital distress and dissolution are robustly associated with serious mental and physical health problems for adults (e.g., Amato, 2000; Robles, & Kiecolt-Glaser, 2003) and their children (for a review see Belsky & Jaffee, 2006). Researchers have demonstrated a strong and consistent link between how couples communicate and resolve conflicts and subsequent distress and dissolution (e.g., Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998; Markman, Rhoades, Stanley, Ragan, & Whitton, 2010). Historically, researchers investigating marital communication and conflict resolution have categorized communication behaviors primarily into negative (e.g., anger, criticism) and positive (e.g., humor, validation) behaviors. However, factor analyses demonstrate that avoidant and disengaging[1] behaviors when interacting with one's partner (e.g., remaining silent, being inattentive) represent a distinct category of behaviors; this distinction has been found using self-report questionnaires (Barry, Lawrence, & Langer, 2008) and behavioral observations (Smith, Vivian, & O'Leary, 1990). Moreover, the limited research that does exist on avoidant or disengaging behavior during marital interactions suggests that it is also detrimental to marital satisfaction and adjustment (Bowman, 1990; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Heavey, Christensen, & Malamuth, 1995; Smith et al., 1990). Additionally, because disengagement interferes with healthy couple communication, it is

likely to lead spouses to grow apart from one another, particularly when it occurs frequently and across different types of interactions (e.g., conflictual discussions, supportive discussions). Nevertheless, questions remain regarding why couples disengage during interactions and *how* disengagement increases in frequency and context (i.e., type of interaction) over time. The purpose of the present study was to address these questions and, more generally, to inform research on the developmental processes that promote disengagement in marriage. Understanding these processes is a critical first step toward enhancing the efficacy of couple interventions designed to prevent distress and divorce.

Why Spouses Disengage during Marital Interactions: Drawing on Attachment Theory and a Coping Perspective

Attachment Theory

Attachment theorists assert that a primary function of close relationships is the provision of comfort, intimacy and support, particularly during times of stress, illness and threats to proximity to one's partner. Individuals develop attachment styles through their experiences with relationship partners (i.e., how well their partners fulfill these needs). Consequently, adult attachment styles represent generalized beliefs about and expectations for close relationships (Feeney, 1999; Hazan & Shaver, 1994). Although both continuous and categorical measures of attachment quality have been used in this literature (for a review see Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994), the quality of adult attachment styles is typically assessed via self-report and described along two orthogonal dimensions: attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance (Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994). Low scores on both the anxiety and avoidance dimensions represent secure

attachment, characterized by trust that one's attachment figure will be available and helpful in times of need, and by an ability to strike an optimal balance between intimacy and autonomy in close relationships (for a review see Rholes & Simpson, 2004). High scores on attachment anxiety represent a strong desire for intimacy with one's partner, coupled with feelings of insecurity and fears of rejection. High scores on attachment avoidance represent a discomfort with and devaluation of intimacy, as well as difficulty trusting and relying on significant others for support and care. Because the present study focuses on avoidant behavior specifically, I will focus on the avoidant attachment dimension for the rest of this section[2].

Adult romantic relationships represent bidirectional attachments: partners ideally seek out care *from* each other when distressed, and care *for* each other when they observe such distress (Hazan & Shaver, 1994). However, a more avoidant attachment style predisposes an individual to disengage from his or her partner during such interactions. First, more avoidantly attached individuals are likely to disengage during times of distress, because they tend to believe that partners are unlikely to respond in caring, helpful ways (Mikulincer, Shaver, & Pereg, 2003). Times of distress include stressful or aversive couple interactions, such as disagreements and arguments (for a review see Pietromonaco, Greenwood, & Feldman Barrett, 2004). Second, because of their discomfort with intimacy, avoidantly attached individuals are more likely to disengage during interactions in which they are called upon to provide care (Feeney & Collins, 2001).

Partners' behaviors during interactions should also influence the extent to which more avoidantly attached individuals disengage (Bowlby, 1969/1982). When a partner

exhibits negative affect during an interaction (e.g., anger, criticism, contempt), any individual is likely to perceive the interaction as more stressful or/distressing. However, avoidantly attached individuals are particularly likely to *disengage* during stressful or distressing interactions (Mikulincer et al., 2003). Additionally, the partner's negative affect suggests or reinforces the avoidantly attached spouse's belief that attachment figures will be rejecting or unresponsive during times of stress (Bowlby, 1969/1982). In both instances, the avoidantly attached individual should be even more likely to disengage during a given interaction to the extent that his or her partner exhibits negative affect.

Similarly, disengaging behavior should be more likely to occur when one's partner exhibits a need for care, comfort or support (e.g., expressions of anxiety, sadness; Feeney & Collins, 2001). The avoidantly attached individual's tendency to disengage from intimate interactions should only be heightened when a partner signals the need for such intimacy. Thus, the partner's negative affect is likely to strengthen the link between an avoidant attachment style and disengaging behavior, regardless of the nature of the discussion (e.g., a conflictual discussion, an emotionally intimate interaction).

In sum, attachment theory offers a framework in which to conceptualize disengaging behavior by avoidantly attached individuals. Avoidantly attached individuals are more likely to disengage during times of distress (potentially stressful or aversive interactions) and during times when they could provide care (potentially positive, caring interactions) compared to less avoidantly attached individuals. Moreover, these links should be even stronger as a function of the partner's behavior during the interaction -- in particular, as a function of the partner's negative affect.

Empirical support for the link between attachment theory and disengagement. The majority of research examining the link between avoidant attachment and avoidant behavior during couple interactions has been conducted in the context of couple conflict. Indeed, couple conflict is an appropriate context for the study of attachment behavior because it evokes stress responses in spouses (e.g., Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 2005). However, this research has produced mixed findings. With one exception (Levy & Davis, 1988), studies using *continuous* measures of attachment and self-reported conflict avoidance have generally found higher scores on attachment avoidance to be associated with increased conflict avoidance in romantic relationships (Cann, Norman, Welbourne, & Calhoun, 2008; Creasey, Kershaw, & Boston, 1999; Creasey & Hesson-McInnis, 2001; O'Connell Corcoran & Mallinckrodt, 2000; Shi, 2003). However, studies using *categorical* measures of attachment avoidance and self-reported conflict avoidance have found mixed results. One study failed to yield a significant association (Pistole, 1989), and a second study found that individuals characterized as having dismissing attachment styles (i.e., low avoidant attachment and low anxious attachment) were more avoidant than those who were securely attached (Pistole & Arricale, 2003). In contrast, Bouthillier and colleagues, using a continuous measure of attachment avoidance and a behavioral observation measure of conflict avoidance, failed to find a significant association between avoidant attachment and avoidant behavior in a small sample of cohabiting couples (N = 40; Bouthillier, Julien, Dube, Belanger, & Hamelin, 2002). In sum, there is inconsistent evidence of a link between attachment avoidance and avoidant behavior during couple conflict.

Additionally, a naturalistic study of couples in airport terminals where some

couples were anticipating separating – a situation that increases attachment-related anxiety – provided evidence of an association between avoidant attachment and increased avoidant behavior. Women (but not men) with more avoidant attachment styles engaged in more avoidant behavior, less proximity maintenance, and less caregiving with romantic partners when they were about to be separated from their partners, compared to women who were traveling with their partners (and thus not anticipating a separation; Fraley & Shaver, 1998).

Finally, of the research focusing on couples' supportive interactions, only one study has examined the link between avoidant attachment and avoidant behavior. Using behavioral observation methods, dating couples were examined when the female partner was waiting to undergo an anxiety provoking task. The authors found no significant associations between avoidant attachment and avoidant behavior for either males or females (Campbell, Simpson, Kashy, & Rholes, 2002).

Critique of existing research. Although some of the studies reviewed above provide support for a link between attachment avoidance and avoidant behavior during stressful interactions, the generalizability of this research for understanding disengagement during marital interactions is limited in three ways. First, none of the studies focused exclusively on married couples. Two of the studies comprised samples where at least the majority of participants were married (Bouthillier et al., 2002; O'Connell Corcoran, & Mallinckrodt, 2000), but the remaining studies comprised primarily dating participants. Research on dating and cohabiting couples may not generalize to married couples. Second, researchers have generally aggregated across types of relationships (e.g., dating, cohabiting, married), which is problematic because

there may be important differences (e.g., in levels of commitment and expectations) across relationship types. Third, with few exceptions (Bouthillier et al., 2002; Campbell et al., 2002; Fraley & Shaver, 1998), this research has focused exclusively on individuals rather than couples. Although attachment styles are conceptualized as individual characteristics, attachment behaviors such as avoidance are elicited in the context of specific dyadic relationships (Kobak, 1994). To understand the function of attachment behavior, it is necessary to examine both members of the dyad (Feeney, 2004; Kobak, 1994). In the present study I sought to overcome these methodological weaknesses by examining married couples specifically.

Finally, although attachment theorists suggest that partners' expressions of negative affect during couple interactions should increase avoidant behavior among the avoidantly attached, this hypothesis has never been tested. There is, however, evidence of a link between individuals' avoidant behaviors and partners' negative affect from the marital literature. Specifically, there is a body of literature examining the demand-withdraw pattern of communication in couples (see Eldridge & Christensen, 2002 for a review). A demand-withdraw pattern occurs when one spouse demands or pursues an interaction with his or her partner (i.e., by exhibiting negative affect), while the other spouse withdraws from or behaves avoidantly during the interaction. This pattern of couple communication is surprisingly common (Eldridge & Christensen, 2002), and individuals' avoidant behaviors are temporally associated with their partner's demand behaviors during interactions (Klintob & Smith, 1996). In sum, although research has demonstrated an association between a partner's negative affect and an individual's avoidant behavior during couple interactions (in the demand-withdraw literature), the

influence of *avoidant attachment* on this link has not been examined.

Coping Perspective

Spouses' avoidant behavior during couple interactions is often viewed as a form of coping (e.g., Bowman, 1990; Manne et al., 2006). Coping comprises "cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person" (Lazarus, 1993, p. 237). Although there are many different methods of categorizing coping strategies, it is widely accepted that avoidance is one of them (for reviews see Roth & Cohen, 1986; Suls & Fletcher, 1985).

Coping researchers have found that individuals tend to use specific forms of coping -- such as avoidance -- habitually across types of stressors and across time. An individual's tendency to use a specific category of coping strategies habitually is referred to as his or her coping style (for reviews see Lazarus, 1993; Moos & Holahan, 2003). Individuals with more avoidant coping styles tend to respond to stressors more avoidantly (Powers, Gallagher-Thompson, & Kraemer, 2002). Although the link between having an avoidant coping style and behaving avoidantly during marital interactions has not been established, the coping perspective suggests that having an avoidant style predisposes individuals to behave avoidantly in situations characterized by stress, which includes some types of marital interactions.

Proponents of a coping perspective emphasize that, for a behavior to be classified as a coping strategy, it must occur in response to stress. In the context of marital interactions, stress may arise from problems that couples face within a marriage (e.g., infertility; Peterson, Newton, Rosen, & Schulman, 2006) or from negative emotional

spillover from sources external to the marriage (e.g., work; Schaer, Bodenmann, & Klink, 2008). Additionally, a partner's negative affect during an interaction may function as a stressor. Indeed, couple conflict interactions often evoke stress (e.g., Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 2005). In sum, the coping perspective suggests that marital interactions characterized by increased stress -- due to the partner's negative affect or to the presence of marital conflict -- will elicit a coping response. Individuals with avoidant coping styles are more likely than those with other coping styles to select avoidance as a way to cope with stress during couple interactions.

Integrating Attachment and Coping Perspectives to Explain Why Spouses Disengage

Attachment and coping perspectives are highly applicable to understanding why spouses disengage during marital interactions. First, both perspectives indicate that some individuals are predisposed to behave avoidantly in response to stress. Attachment theorists suggest that individuals with more avoidant attachment styles are more likely to behave avoidantly toward their partners when they experience stress. Proponents of a coping perspective suggest that individuals with more avoidant coping styles will avoid stressors or reminders of stressors (e.g., talking about a marital problem; Suls & Fletcher, 1985). Therefore, avoidant coping will occur during couple interactions to the extent that one's partner (a) is the cause of the stress or (b) attempts to engage the spouse in active forms of coping. In sum, both perspectives suggest that a spouse's predisposition to avoid – via an avoidant attachment style or an avoidant coping style -- will be associated with increased avoidant behavior during stressful marital interactions.

Second, proponents of these perspectives generally agree on the nature of the

influence of stress on avoidant behavior, and expect avoidant behavior to function similarly during stressful marital interactions such as marital conflict. However, they suggest different hypotheses regarding whether individuals will disengage during *supportive* interactions. During supportive interactions, relationship partners typically assume different roles. For example, one person is the support provider (i.e., caregiver) and one is the support solicitor (i.e., care seeker, e.g., Pasch & Bradbury, 1998; Feeney & Collins, 2001). These different roles should evoke different levels of stress. Specifically, the role of support solicitor should evoke more stress than the role of support provider, because the support solicitor is discussing a personal stressor. Based on the coping perspective, individuals with more avoidant coping styles should be more disengaged when in the role of support solicitor compared to the role of support provider. In contrast, individuals with avoidant attachment styles are uncomfortable with intimacy. Responsive provision of support increases emotional intimacy with one's partner (Collins, Ford, Guichard, Kane, & Feeney, 2010). Therefore, more avoidantly attached individuals would be more likely to disengage than less avoidantly attached individuals when in the role of support provider. Additionally, because the role of support solicitor should evoke increased stress, avoidantly attached individuals should be more disengaged than less avoidantly attached individuals when in the role of support solicitor. In sum, individuals with avoidant coping styles should be more disengaged when in the role of support solicitor compared to the role of support provider, whereas individuals with more avoidant *attachment* styles are more likely to disengage than less avoidantly attached individuals, regardless of which role they assume in a support transaction.

Third, both perspectives suggest that an avoidant predisposition should interact

with a partner's negative affect to increase avoidant behavior. Specifically, a partner's negative affect increases the stressfulness of the interaction, thereby increasing the likelihood that individuals with more avoidant attachment styles or more avoidant coping styles will behave avoidantly. Additionally, for individuals with more avoidant attachment styles, a partner's negative affect may be perceived as rejecting, unresponsive, or as an indication of the partner's greater need for care, to which avoidantly attached individuals are likely to respond with avoidance. In sum, a partner's negative affect should interact with a spouse's avoidant predisposition in both conflict and supportive interactions.

How Disengagement Increases in Frequency and Dyadic Context Over Time: Drawing on Attachment and Operant Learning Theories

Attachment Theory

Attachment theorists suggest that psychological and physical proximity to relationship partners is required for the fulfillment of the basic needs of comfort, intimacy and support. Extended or repeated disruptions to this proximity impede one's ability to obtain comfort and care. Disengagement during marital interactions is one way that proximity to one's partner is impeded. Moreover, when spouses repeatedly disengage during couple interactions, they are at greater risk for later detachment (i.e., growing apart emotionally) from their partners (Feeney & Monin, 2008). Therefore, understanding what causes spouses to disengage from their partners is a critical step toward understanding (and preventing) the longitudinal process of detachment from one's partner.

Attachment theorists argue that, depending on one's level of attachment avoidance, and on the quality of interactions with his or her partner, spouses may learn to disengage more frequently over time. As discussed in the previous section, the "qualities of interactions" include the partner's behavior and the spouse's perception of that behavior as rejecting and unresponsive.

Notably, attachment theorists do not offer an explanation of *how* spouses learn to disengage more frequently over time. However, they do identify two important benefits of disengaging that may motivate this process. First, theorists argue that individuals disengage to regulate attachment related anxiety evoked during interactions. Second, they argue that, in relationships where particular interactions with one's partner are poorly managed or perceived as intolerable, disengagement reduces the risk of relationship termination (Main & Weston, 1982). As such, disengagement maintains some limited level of proximity with one's attachment figure. Thus, disengagement may benefit avoidantly attached individuals, and these benefits may motivate the process of becoming increasingly disengaged over time.

In sum, attachment theorists maintain that it is important to understand what causes spouses to be more disengaged across types of interactions, because frequent disengagement leads to detachment from one's partner. Also, under particular conditions, disengaging from specific marital interactions may be part of a process of learning to disengage more frequently over time. Although attachment theory does not explain how this process of learning occurs, it does identify two benefits of disengagement. Specifically, disengagement helps individuals reduce their negative emotions during difficult interactions and reduces the risk of relationship termination in difficult

relationships. Therefore, I argue that these benefits may motivate some individuals to disengage from their partners with increasing frequency over time.

Operant Learning Theory

Operant conditioning provides an explanation of *how* a process of disengagement develops over time. Proponents of operant conditioning maintain that future behavior is influenced by the consequences one experiences after engaging in a given behavior (for a review see Skinner, 1965). These consequences are referred to as reinforcement and punishment. Reinforcement increases the likelihood that the behavior will occur more frequently in the future, whereas punishment decreases the likelihood that the behavior will occur in the future. Reinforcements and punishments can be either positive (i.e., something is added to the individual's environment or experience) or negative (i.e., something is removed from the individual's environment or experience). Further, reinforcements and punishments that occur closer in time to the behavior are far more influential than delayed consequences (see Lerman & Iwata, 1996 for a review).

Applied to the study of disengagement during couple interactions, operant learning theory suggests two ways in which disengaging behaviors may become more frequent over time. First, when disengagement is reinforced an individual is more likely to disengage during similar situations in the future. For example, an individual may feel anxiety discussing a particular topic with his or her partner and disengagement may reduce that anxiety. The reduction in anxiety negatively reinforces his or her disengagement. Second, disengagement during specific marital interactions may be learned after approach behavior is punished. For example, during a disagreement, a spouse may attempt to engage his or her partner in constructive communication.

However, the partner responds by blaming and attacking the spouse. Consequently, the spouse is left feeling emotionally or physically hurt. Feelings of hurt punish approach behavior; therefore, approach behavior becomes less frequent over time. During the next disagreement, the spouse may disengage to avoid the punishment associated with approach behavior. When he or she is not punished (the partner does not attack), the spouse experiences relief, which serves to positively reinforce the disengaging behavior (McNaughton & Gray, 2000). Notably, these two pathways are not mutually exclusive: a single behavior can have multiple reinforcements and punishments (Skinner, 1965). Nevertheless, these examples illustrate ways in which disengaging behavior early in a relationship, to the extent that it is reinforced (and/or approach behavior is punished) can lead to frequent and generalized disengaging behavior over time.

Integrating Attachment and Learning Theories to Explain How Disengagement Increases in Frequency and Dyadic Context over Time

Attachment and operant learning theories contribute to an understanding of how disengagement increases over time. First, attachment theorists suggest that disengagement during a specific marital interaction may contribute to a process of learning to disengage more frequently and across different types of interactions later in marriage. Second, although attachment theorists do not discuss the mechanics of the learning process that leads to more frequent disengagement over time, they emphasize that frequent disengagement from one's partner is a learned response. Third, attachment theorists identify two possible benefits of disengaging during marital interactions: reduced attachment related anxiety and relationship maintenance. I argue that these

benefits motivate the learning process.

Consistent with my assertion that these benefits motivate learning, proponents of operant learning theory would argue that the reduction in attachment related anxiety negatively reinforces disengagement. Similarly, individuals whose approach behavior has been punished in the past are likely to disengage in the future in order to avoid such punishment and to experience relief (when the spouse is not punished again). The experience of relief serves to positively reinforce disengagement. The experiences of relief or reductions in attachment anxiety lead to increasingly frequently disengagement during similar interactions over time.

Finally, attachment theorists argue that frequent disengagement contributes to a process of detachment and, given the importance of proximity to one's partner for obtaining need fulfillment, detachment contributes to personal and relationship distress (Bowlby, 1969/1982). Consistent with this argument, researchers have found that avoidance during couple interactions is associated with greater marital distress (Bowman, 1990; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Heavey et al., 1995; Smith et al., 1990). Nevertheless, because reinforcements and punishments that occur closer in time to the target behavior are more powerful than those that occur more distally, reinforcement of avoidance *during* a given interaction is likely to be more influential than the arguably more distal punishments of increased personal and relationship distress. In sum, although attachment theory and operant learning theory come from very different traditions[3], an integration of these perspectives provides a propitious explanation for the process through which individuals may learn to disengage more frequently and across types of marital interactions over time.

Overview of the Present Study

This study was guided by two aims. My first aim was to understand *why* spouses disengage during marital interactions. Drawing on attachment theory and a coping perspective I proposed that specific predisposing factors interact with specific features of couple interactions to influence spousal disengagement. Accordingly, I investigated the effects of two predispositions to behave avoidantly -- avoidant attachment and avoidant coping. I also examined two contextual aspects of marital interactions – the partner's negative affect during both marital conflict and support interactions and the role that spouses assume during supportive interactions. I have also argued that particular types of interactions -- marital conflict and supportive transactions -- are particularly applicable to examining these hypotheses.

For Aim 1, I hypothesized that a spouse's predisposition to be avoidant would interact with his or her partner's negative affect to predict disengaging behavior. Specifically, I expected spouses with more avoidant attachment styles to be more disengaged during both conflict and supportive interactions to the extent that their partners exhibited more negative affect. I also expected spouses with more avoidant coping styles to be more disengaged during both conflict and supportive interactions to the extent that their partners exhibited more negative affect.

I also generated a series of hypotheses specific to support interactions. I hypothesized that a spouse's predisposition to be avoidant would interact with his or her role in support interactions to predict disengaging behavior. Specifically, I hypothesized that spouses with more avoidant attachment styles would be more disengaged during supportive interactions regardless of their roles (support solicitor versus support

provider), compared to spouses with less avoidant attachment styles (a main effect). However, I hypothesized that spouses with more avoidant coping styles would be more disengaged during interactions where they were in the role of support solicitor compared to when they were in the role of support provider. In contrast to supportive interactions, spouses do not typically assume specific roles during conflict interactions. Therefore, analogous hypotheses are not offered for roles in conflict interactions.

My second aim was to understand *how* early disengagement during specific interactions contributes to greater disengagement across interactions later in marriage. Based on operant conditioning theory I proposed that, when a spouse's early disengagement is reinforced by improved mood following the interaction, he or she will be more likely to disengage across interactions later in marriage. Thus, I examined how spouses' levels of disengagement during both conflict and support interactions early in marriage contribute to levels of disengagement across marital interactions later in marriage as a function of improved mood post-interaction (reinforcing disengaging behavior). Behavior during a given couple interaction was considered reinforced to the extent that the spouse's mood improved following the interaction and was considered punished to the extent that the spouse's mood worsened following the interaction. My central hypothesis under Aim 2 was that, when spouses (a) were more disengaged during conflict and support interactions and (b) experienced improved mood following interactions, they would disengage more frequently and across different types of interactions later in marriage.

Method

Participants

Husbands and wives were recruited through marriage license records from Johnson and Linn Counties of Iowa. Couples were mailed letters explaining the study and inviting them to participate. Interested couples were screened to ensure they met eligibility requirements: both spouses were over the age of 18, relatively fluent in English, married less than six months, and in their first marriages. Of the 358 couples who responded, the first 105 couples who met criteria and kept their scheduled appointments were included in this study. One couple's data were removed because it was revealed that it was not the wife's first marriage. Another couple was removed from the study because the husband's data at Time 1 were deemed unusable. Thus, the final sample consisted of 103 couples. Additionally, over the course of the 7-year study, 5 couples withdrew from the study (a 95% retention rate was attained) and 12 divorced or permanently separated; however, all available data were included in the present study.

Three wives did not complete the measure of avoidant coping and 62 of the 103 couples participated in support interactions[4]. Therefore, Aim 1 analyses included 100 couples for conflict interactions and 61 couples for support interactions. Additionally, 57 of the original 103 couples completed the daily diary procedures during the 2nd wave of data collection (Year 7). Of these 57, 32 had completed the support interactions at the 1st wave of data collection (Year 1). Thus, Aim 2 analyses included 57 couples for the model of early conflict interactions and 32 couples for the model of early support interactions.

Couples dated an average of 32 months (*SD* = 25) prior to engagement, 44 months (*SD* = 27) prior to marriage, and 80% cohabited premaritally. At 3-6 months of marriage,

couples' median annual joint income was between $40,001 and $50,000. Husbands' and wives' average ages were 26.4 (*SD* = 4.7) and 25.1 (*SD* = 4.3), respectively. Both spouses' modal education was 14 years. For 15% of the sample, at least one spouse identified him or herself as a member of an ethnic minority group. (The proportion of non-Caucasian individuals in the state in which the research was conducted is estimated to be 9%; U.S. Census, 2008.) Couples participating in the present study were participating in a longitudinal study of newlywed marriage. This study used data collected at 3-6 months of marriage (Time 1), and 75-78 months of marriage (Time 2).

Procedures

Time 1 (3-6 months of marriage). Questionnaire packets were mailed to couples' homes. These packets included measures of coping styles and measures beyond the scope of the present study. Spouses were asked to complete questionnaires independently from their partners and bring the packets with them to their laboratory appointments. Couples then came into the laboratory to complete additional questionnaires, participate in a series of videotaped interactions, and participate in a series of procedures beyond the scope of this research. Questionnaires completed in the lab included the measure of avoidant attachment. Spouses completed these questionnaires in separate rooms.

Problem-solving/conflictual interactions. To facilitate the video-taped conflict interactions, each spouse identified a problem that was a source of tension in the marriage using the Marital Problem Inventory (Geiss & O'Leary, 1981). Couples were then asked to discuss in randomized order: (a) a relationship problem topic selected by the husband and (b) a relationship problem topic selected by the wife. In rare cases, when spouses

chose the same topic for discussion, that topic was assigned to the spouse who was selected to be first and the other spouse was asked if he or she would discuss their second choice of topic during the second discussion. Before beginning, couples were instructed to "discuss the topic for 10 minutes and try to work toward a mutually satisfying solution." Before and after each discussion, spouses rated their mood.

Support interactions. Sixty-two of the couples also participated in two ten-minute videotaped interactions to assess their behaviors when soliciting support from and providing support to their partner. Between the conflict and support tasks, partners were given a fifteen-minute break in order to reduce emotional carry-over from the conflict task. Before support discussions took place, each spouse was asked to identify an important personal characteristic, problem, or issue that he or she wanted to change, with the explicit instruction that the topic could not be a source of tension in the marriage. Common topics included making a career change, losing weight, improving family-of-origin relationships, being more assertive, dealing with stress, and being more organized. In the first supportive discussion, one spouse was selected randomly and asked to discuss their topic. The partner was instructed to "be involved in the discussion and respond in whatever way you wish." During the second discussion the spouses' roles were reversed so that each spouse served as the support solicitor (i.e., talking about a personal issue he or she wanted to change) and support provider (i.e., talking with his or her partner about a personal issue the partner wanted to change). Again, both before and after each discussion spouses rated their mood. Couples were paid $100 for completing all study procedures at Time 1.

Time 2 (75-78 months of marriage). Husbands and wives each completed daily-diary reports of their level of disengagement during specific couple interactions. These interactions included a disagreement and a comfort/closeness interaction that they may have had with their partner that day, if they had not had either of these types of interactions, they were asked to report on any time spent with their partner that day. Spouses were instructed to complete reports independently, each evening, for 14 consecutive days. Most spouses completed reports online, but five husbands and four wives chose to complete paper-and-pencil versions. Participants completed reports online were given a URL address to access the report each day. Participants who completed the paper-and-pencil version were given 14 copies of the form and 14 self-addressed stamped envelopes for the return of diary questionnaires. Participants were contacted via phone or E-Mail (depending on the participant's preference) each day to remind them to complete diary reports. Couples received $25 as compensation for completing reports.

Measures

Avoidant attachment. Avoidant attachment was measured with the Relationship Scales Questionnaire, Avoidance Subscale (RSQ; Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994). The RSQ directs respondents to consider how they feel about close relationships in general, both past and present, on a 1 ("not at all like me") to 5 ("very much like me") scale. The avoidance and anxiety subscales identified by Kurdek (2002) as representing Simpson et al.'s (Simpson, Rholes, & Nelligan, 1992) operationalization of the constructs were used because they have the strongest empirical support (Kurdek, 2002). Only the avoidance subscale was included in the present study. The avoidance subscale comprises 8 items and demonstrates factorial validity and adequate discriminant validity with measures of

personality traits (Kurdek, 2002). An example of an avoidance item is "I find it difficult to depend on other people." Scores can range from 8 to 40 on this subscale with higher scores indicating greater avoidance. Internal consistency alphas (α) were .78 for husbands and .81 for wives in the present sample.

Avoidant coping style. Avoidant coping was measured with sub-scales of the COPE (Carver, Scheier & Kumari Weintraub, 1989), a multi-dimensional measure of coping strategies. The present research used the denial (e.g., "I refuse to believe that it has happened"), behavioral disengagement (e.g., "I reduce the amount of effort I'm putting into solving the problem"), and mental disengagement (e.g., "I daydream about things other than this") subscales, because these scales conceptually capture constructs frequently categorized as avoidance strategies in the coping literature (Roth & Cohen, 1986). Correlations among these sub-scales ranged from .17 to .45 ($p < .01$; Carver et al., 1989). Participants were instructed to indicate how often they used each coping strategy in response to difficult or stressful events over the past six months using a Likert-type response scale that ranges from 1 ("I didn't do this at all") to 4 ("I did this a lot"). 'Composites were formed by summing the items from the subscales in the present sample (with a total of 12 items). The composites were internally consistent in the present sample, with alphas above .70 for husbands and wives. Possible scores ranged from 12 – 48 with higher score indicating more of avoidant coping styles.

Mood change from before to after interactions. Mood was measured with a semantic differential scale (SD; Osgood, Tannenbaum & Suci, 1957). The SD technique developed by Osgood and colleagues (Osgood et al., 1957) asks respondents to rate bipolar adjectives placed on each end of a continuum. Test-retest reliability of SD scales

when measured twice over a span of three to five days, have been found to be adequate (*r*s ranging from .60 to .80; DiVesta & Dick, 1966). In the present research there were nine SD scales that included "unhappy – happy," "hopeless – hopeful," "tense/nervous – relaxed," "threatened/frightened - secure/safe," "angry – calm," "out of control – in control," "hurtful – compassionate," "feelings hurt – comforted," and "defensive – non-defensive." Cronbach's alpha reliability estimates for husbands ranged from .91 to .96 for pre-interaction measures, and .95 to .97 for post-interaction measures. Alphas for wives ranged from .88 to .95 for pre-interaction measures and .94 to .95 for post-interaction measures. Composites were computed across each of the 9 items for each pre-interaction and post-interaction assessment by averaging the items. Next, each spouse's post-interaction score was subtracted from their pre-interaction score, to create an index of change from before to after each interaction. Values above zero represent improved mood and values below zero represent worse mood post interaction. Composites representing mean mood change were computed across the two conflict interactions and across the two support interactions for each spouse.

Negative affect observed during conflict interactions. Spouses' negative affect during couples' video-taped conflict discussions was coded using the Revised Specific Affect Coding System (SPAFF-R; Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998). The SPAFF-R coding system consists of 16 codes: 5 positive codes (interest, affection/caring, humor, delight/ excitement/ surprise, and validation), 10 negative codes (disgust, contempt, belligerence, domineering, anger, defensiveness, whining, sadness, fear/tension, and stonewalling), and one neutral code. Codes were assigned to every 5-second segment of each 10-minute discussion, resulting in 120 codes per spouse for each

interaction. Codes were assigned based on verbal content, voice tone, and nonverbal affect, with the greatest weight being given to nonverbal affect. Four research associates were trained for six months to ensure validity of coder ratings and to obtain inter-rater agreement greater than .90. Composites of the negative codes, with stonewalling excluded, were used in this study. Stone-walling was excluded because it overlaps conceptually with disengagement. Inter-rater percent agreement for negative affect (composite of 10 negative codes) was 93%. Once coding began, intra-rater reliability ratings were calculated for anyone coding longer than 4 months to prevent coder drift over time.

Negative affect observed during support interactions. Spouses' negative support provision and solicitation were coded with the Social Support Interaction Coding System (SSICS; Bradbury & Pasch, 1992). The SSICS includes 6 codes for support provision (positive instrumental, positive emotional, positive other, negative, neutral, or off-task), and 4 codes for support solicitation (positive, negative, neutral, or off-task). Coders were psychology students who knew the topic of the discussion and the role each spouse was assigned, but were not aware of the purpose of the present study. Codes were assigned to each spouse for each 5-second segment of each discussion. Only negative codes were used in this study and did not require aggregation. Examples of negative support provision are criticizing the partner's plan to accomplish change, or expressing annoyance or impatience when the partner is speaking. An example of negative solicitation is accusing partner of not giving appropriate support.

After training on a sample of pilot interactions, coders independently coded the interactions with the SSICS. Meetings were held regularly during which coders practiced

coding, discussed coding problems, and received feedback on levels of inter-rater agreement. Twenty percent of interactions were double coded to assess inter-rater reliability. Inter-rater reliability was found to be acceptable with intra-class correlations of .89 for negative support provision and .84 for negative support solicitation.

Disengaging behaviors observed during conflict and support interactions. Spouses' behavioral disengagement during the video-taped conflict and supportive interactions was coded using the Romantic Disengagement Behavioral Coding system (R-Dis; Barry, Lawrence, Riesberg, Harms, & Hall, 2010). This measure includes 17 codes based on behavioral descriptions of disengagement (Gottman, 1999; Guerrero, 2005; Hess, 2002; Heyman & Vivian, 2000; Parkinson & Totterdall, 1999; Smith et al., 1990; Suls & Fletcher, 1985). These behaviors imply shutting the partner out emotionally or behaviorally (e.g., remaining silent and looking away from the partner for 3 seconds or more), closed body language (e.g., covering one's face), seeming bored, tired, uninterested, less involved (e.g., yawning, slouching), distracting oneself (e.g., commenting on objects in the room), denying the importance of a topic, or avoiding the discussion (e.g., refusing to talk about an issue). The presence of each behavior, for each spouse, was coded once during each 10-second segment of time if it occurred during that time. Eight coders trained for approximately 40 hours to reliability. Once coders completed training, coders met weekly with me for 4 weeks and bi-weekly therafter to code sample interactions as a group and ensure ongoing inter-rater agreement. Twenty percent of the interactions were coded by multiple raters to estimate the overall inter-rater reliability. Inter-rater reliabilities were calculated as intra-class correlations for each code across pairs of coders and ranged from .74 to .98. Each spouse was coded separately and

coders were blind to the hypotheses of the study. Cronbach alphas were calculated across codes to demonstrate the internal consistency of the measure and found to range from .59 to .73 within spouses and interactions suggesting that the codes represent a broad construct. To form composite scores, each code was standardized across spouses and interactions and then summed within spouse and within interaction to create a score for each spouse for each interaction for Aim 1 analyses. This allowed me to compare level of disengagement across spouses and interactions. For Aim 2 analyses, spouses' scores were aggregated across the two conflict interactions and across the two support interactions by computing means.

Daily diary reports of disengagement. Daily diary reports were used to assess level of disengagement during specific daily interactions. Online daily reports automatically recorded the time and date each report was completed, whereas individuals completing paper-and-pencil versions recorded this information by hand. Each day spouses were asked to describe (1) the conflict interaction and (2) the comfort/closeness interaction that stood out most in their minds, if a spouse reported that neither type of interaction had occurred that day, he or she was asked to describe any time spent with their partner. For each type of interaction (conflict, comfort/ closeness or any time spent together), spouses then reported their level of disengagement during the interactions.

Disengagement was measured using 3 items. The first item asked spouses to rate the extent to which they felt disengaged during the interaction. Spouses rated the item on a 5-point Likert-type response scales ranging from 1 ("very slightly or not at all") to 5 ("extremely"). The other two items used semantic differential scales. The scales were "I was completely open about my feelings/thoughts – I kept all my feelings/thoughts to

myself," and "I participated fully in interaction – I avoided participating in the interaction as much as possible." These items were based on a previous conceptualization of disengagement (Barry et al., 2008). Correlations among items were above strong (*r*s > .65, *p*s < .01) across spouses and time. Therefore, the 3 items were z-scored and aggregated to increase reliability of measurement. A mean score representing total disengagement across interactions for each day was computed for each spouse.

Data Analyses

Because data gathered from couples are theoretically, and often statistically, interdependent, hypotheses were tested using actor-partner interdependence models (APIM) for mixed independent variables (see Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006 for a review). APIM allows researchers to investigate mutual influences among dyads in four ways. First, when dyad members are distinguishable, as is the case in my sample of heterosexual married couples, there are at least two actor effects – one for the effects of the husband's predictor on the husband's outcome, and one for the effect of the wife's predictor on the wife's outcome. There are also at least two partner effects, one for the effect of the husband's predictor on the wife's outcome, and one for the effect of the wife's predictor on the husband's outcome. In all analyses, all four paths were included unless otherwise noted. Second, correlations between husbands' and wives' predictors were estimated in all equations unless otherwise noted. Third, the residual non-independence in outcome scores is represented by the correlation between the error terms in husbands' and wives' outcomes, and was estimated in all equations. Fourth, chi-square tests were used to assess the homogeneity of husbands' versus wives' Level 1 variance for each baseline model. When this chi-square test was significant, those residual terms

were entered as simultaneous outcomes of all relevant predictors in subsequent models.

Multilevel modeling techniques (MLM; Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002) were used to estimate all models. As recommended by Raudenbush, Brennan, and Barnett (1995), I analyzed husbands' and wives' data within the same equations (as opposed to nesting spouses within couples). This approach provided estimated effects for husbands and for wives simultaneously. The first stage of MLM (Level 1) allows for the examination of within-couple differences on variables measured repeatedly. In all models intercepts were estimated for each spouse representing the average levels of the variable across assessments. Additional predictors measured repeatedly (either across multiple interactions as in Aim 1, or across days as in Aim 2) can also be entered into the Level 1 equations in order to determine their within- and/or cross-spouse associations with the outcome variable.

The second stage of MLM (Level 2) allows for the examination of between-couple differences in associations between time-invariant predictors and outcomes; that is, the associations between individual characteristics (or time-invariant variables) and the intercepts and slopes of time-varying characteristics can be examined. Consistent with APIM, actor (within-spouse) and partner (cross-spouse) effects for all variables were included unless otherwise noted. Error terms in all models were specified as random effects unless otherwise noted.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

At the individual item level, less than 5% of the data were missing and were replaced using multiple imputation procedures. Measures were found to be adequately

normally distributed with skew less than 2 and kurtosis less than 5. The group of 62 couples who completed the social support lab task was compared to the 41 couples who did not. Husbands who completed the social support task were significantly less avoidantly attached compared to husbands who did not, $t(102) = -3.65$, $p < .001$. Also, couples who completed the task were significantly younger (husbands: $t[102] = 2.17$, $p = .04$; wives: $t[102] = 2.56$) and less likely to cohabit premaritally compared to couples who did not complete the task, $\chi 2 = .26$, $ps < .01$.

At Time 2, 85 couples remained intact and remained enrolled in the study (95% retention rate). Of these couples, 57 (67%) agreed to participate in the diary procedures. Therefore, I examined whether couples who completed daily reports differed significantly from couples who did not. For these analyses couples were placed in 3 groups: divorced/permanently separated couples, intact couples who did not complete the diary measures, and couples who completed the diary measures. One-way ANOVAs were conducted to examine mean differences among groups. None of the study variables at Time 1 differentiated groups. Of the demographic variables, only husbands' educational attainment differentiated groups ($F(2, 101) = 5.35$, $p < .01$). Tukey tests indicated that husbands who eventually divorced or separated had attained a significantly lower level of education ($M = 3.55$, $SD = 2.07$, between "some college" and "associates degree") compared to individuals who participated in daily reports ($M = 6.33$, $SD = 3.27$, "bachelor's degree").

I examined associations between demographics (age, ethnicity and race, education, income, duration of premarital relationship and premarital cohabitation) and study variables (Time 1: avoidant attachment, avoidant coping, negative affect, mood

change, disengagement during conflict and support interactions, Time 2: disengagement across interactions) to determine whether demographics should be controlled in the main analyses. Husbands' age was weakly correlated with key variables including their own avoidant attachment, and avoidant coping. This suggests that older husbands tended to be more avoidantly attached and have higher avoidant coping. Husbands who cohabited prior to marriage had significantly higher levels of avoidant attachment compared to husbands who did not cohabit (t[102] = 2.51, $p < .01$). However spouses' age and cohabitation, were not associated with other study variables (i.e., avoidant coping, negative affect, mood change, disengagement during conflict and support interactions, or disengagement across interactions at Time 2), indicating that they were unlikely to explain hypothesized associations; therefore, they were not retained as control variables in subsequent analyses.

Descriptive Analyses

Means and standard deviations for measures at Time 1 are presented in Table 1. On average, both husbands and wives reported low levels of avoidant attachment and avoidant coping and experienced improved mood following conflict and support interactions. Paired sample t-tests were used to compare like measures across spouses and within-spouse scores across interactions. Husbands had marginally higher avoidant attachment compared to wives, t(102) =1.69, p = .09. There were no differences between husbands' and wives' levels of avoidant coping, t(99) = -.54, negative affect and mood change during conflict discussions, ts(102) < -1.41, or negative affect and mood change during support discussions, ts(61) < -1.03, all *ns*. There was no difference between husbands' and wives' disengagement during support interactions when husbands' were in

the role of support solicitor (i.e., when husbands' topic was discussed), $t(61) = .33$, *ns*. However, husbands were significantly more disengaged than wives during conflict interactions, $t(102) = -.2.42$, and during support interactions when in the role of support provider (i.e., when wives' topic was discussed) $t(61) = -2.80$, ps $< .05$.

For within-spouse mean differences across interactions, there were no differences in husbands' negative affect or wives' negative affect, ts$(102) < 1.05$, and support, ts$(61) < .61$, *ns*. Husbands' disengagement did not differ across the two conflict interactions, $t(102) = -.07$, *ns*; however, husbands were more disengaged during support interactions when husbands were in the role of support provider compared to when husbands were in the role of support solicitor, $t(61) = 2.30$, $p < .05$. Wives' disengagement across interactions did not differ across conflict interactions, $t(102) = -.65$, or support interactions, $t(61) = .51$, nor did it differ across types of interactions, ts$(61) > .77$, all *ns*.

Means and standard deviations for the measures at Time 2 are presented in Table 2. On average, both husbands and wives reported on at least one type of interaction (conflict, comfort/closeness or any time together) on 12 of the 14 days assessed. Spouses reported a low number of disagreements and enjoyed comfort and closeness interactions on most of the days that were assessed. Both husbands and wives reported low levels of disengagement across types of interactions.

Table 3 displays correlations among measures. I first examined correlations among like constructs measured during different interactions. Husbands' negative affect across the two conflict interactions and across the two support interactions correlated strongly. Correlations between husbands' negative affect during conflict and during support interactions ranged from non-significant to strong. Wives' negative affect across

the two conflict interactions were not significantly correlated, and wives' negative affect across the two support interactions correlated weakly. Correlations between wives' negative affect during conflict and support interactions ranged from non-significant to strong. Husbands' disengagement across the two conflict interactions correlated moderately and disengagement across the two support interactions were marginally correlated. Correlations between husbands' disengagement across conflict and support interactions ranged from non-significant to strong. Wives' disengagement across the two conflict interactions were not significantly correlated, and wives' disengagement across the two support interactions correlated weakly. Correlations between wives' disengagement during conflict and support interactions were non-significant. Husbands' mood change across the two conflict interactions correlated moderately and mood change across the two support interactions correlated strongly. Correlations between husbands' mood change across the four interactions ranged from non-significant to strong. Wives' mood change was not significantly correlated across the two conflict interactions, and wives' mood change across the two support interactions correlated moderately. Correlations between wives' mood change during conflict and support interactions ranged from non-significant to moderate. Finally, correlations between self-reported disengagement during conflict interactions and comfort and closeness interactions on the same day at Time 2 were moderate for wives, $r = .39$, and strong for husbands, $r = .56$, $ps < .01$. In general, these correlations suggest some consistency in each spouse's behavior and mood change across interactions.

I next examined correlations across husbands and wives within the same interaction. These analyses were restricted to variables collected at Time 1 because

during the daily reports, spouses frequently reported on different interactions. Specifically, spouses reported on the same interaction for 9% of disagreements, 31% of comfort/closeness interactions, and 14% of any time spent together. At Time 1, the correlations between husbands' and wives' negative affect within the same conflict interactions and within the same support interactions ranged from non-significant to moderate. Husbands' and wives' disengagement within the same conflict interactions were non-significant to weak and within support interactions were non-significant to moderate. Husbands' and wives' mood change within the same conflict interactions were weak to strong and within support interactions were non-significant. These results suggest some similarity in behavior and in mood change within couples within the same interactions.

Aim 1: Why Do Spouses Disengage from Interactions Early in Marriage?

Baseline models. At Level 1, the baseline model for spousal disengagement during conflict interactions included each spouse's intercept (β_1 and β_2) and whose topic was being discussed (β_3 and β_4):

$$Y_{ij\ (\text{Conflict disengagement})} = \beta_{1j(\text{Husband})} + \beta_{2j(\text{Wife})} + \beta_{3j\ (\text{H Topic}) +} + \beta_{4j\ (\text{W Topic}) +} r_{ij},$$

The Level 1 baseline model for spousal disengagement during support interactions also included each spouse's intercept (β_1 and β_2) and whose topic was being discussed (β_3 and β_4):

$$Y_{ij\ (\text{Support disengagement})} = \beta_{1j(\text{Husband})} + \beta_{2j(\text{Wife})} + \beta_{3j\ (\text{H Role}) +} + \beta_{4j\ (\text{W Role}) +} r_{ij},$$

For the baseline models of conflict disengagement and support disengagement the Level 2 equations were identical as follows:

$\beta_{1j} = \beta_{10} + u_{1j}$;

$\beta_{2j} = \beta_{20} + u_{2j}$;

$\beta_{3j} = \beta_{30} + u_{3j}$;

$\beta_{4j} = \beta_{40} + u_{4j}$;

Intercepts for the model of conflict and the model of support were summed z-scores; as such, they were not significantly different from zero. The model of conflict disengagement included spouses' slopes representing the effects of whose topic was discussed. The model of support included spouses' slopes representing the effects of spouses' roles during each interaction. These slope effects were not significant for either spouse in the model of conflict, *t*s(96) > .02, or support, *t*s(60) > -.02, ns. Nevertheless, including the slope parameters improved the fit of the model for conflict, $\chi 2(2) = 6.07$, and for support, $\chi 2(2) = 5.83$, *p*s < .05 and were therefore retained. Tests of the homogeneity of Level 1 variance were non-significant for models predicting conflict disengagement, $\chi 2(94) = 17.04$, and support disengagement, $\chi 2(58) = 8.79$, ns. The variance components of model parameters were significant for conflict disengagement, $\chi 2$s (96) > 151.33, and support, $\chi 2$s(58) > 107.72, *p*s < .001.

Do attachment avoidance and avoidant coping moderate the link between partners' negative affect and spouses' disengagement? Conflict and support interactions were examined in two separate models. In both models husbands' and wives' negative affect were entered as time-varying covariates at Level 1. The Level 1 model for conflict disengagement was specified as follows:

$$Y_{ij\,(\text{Conflict disengagement})} = \beta_{1j(\text{Husband})} + \beta_{2j(\text{Wife})} + \beta_{3j(\text{H Topic})} + \beta_{4j(\text{W Topic})} +$$

$$\beta_{5j(\text{Actor effect of H Negative affect during conflict})} + \beta_{6j(\text{Actor effect of W Negative affect during conflict})} +$$

$\beta_{7j(\text{Partner effect of H Negative affect during conflict})} + \beta_{8j(\text{Partner effect of W Negative affect during conflict})} + r_{ij}$,

The Level 1 model for support disengagement was specified as follows:

$$Y_{ij\ (\text{Support disengagement})} = \beta_{1j(\text{Husband})} + \beta_{2j(\text{Wife})} + \beta_{3j(\text{H Role})} + \beta_{4j(\text{W Role})} +$$

$$\beta_{5j(\text{Actor effect of H Negative affect during support})} + \beta_{6j(\text{Actor effect of W Negative affect during support})} +$$

$$\beta_{7j(\text{Partner effect of H Negative affect during support})} + \beta_{8j(\text{Partner effect of W Negative affect during support})} + r_{ij},$$

where β_7 and β_8 represent the effects of the partner's negative affect on the spouses' disengagement across the two models. The Level 2 models of conflict and support were identically specified: I entered husbands' and wives' attachment avoidance and avoidant coping into the Level 2 equations for the intercepts (β_1 and β_2) of each model to control for their main effects, and into the Level 2 equations for the partner effects of each spouse's negative affect (β_7 and β_8) to examine whether attachment avoidance and avoidant coping moderated these effects:

$$\beta_{1j} = \beta_{10} + \beta_{11\ (\text{H Attach})} + \beta_{12(\text{W Attach})} + \beta_{13\ (\text{H Coping})} + \beta_{14(\text{W Coping})} + u_{1j};$$

$$\beta_{2j} = \beta_{20} + \beta_{21(\text{H Attach})} + \beta_{22(\text{W Attach})} + \beta_{23(\text{H Coping})} + \beta_{24(\text{W Coping})} + u_{2j};$$

$$\beta_{3j} = \beta_{30};$$

$$\beta_{4j} = \beta_{40};$$

$$\beta_{5j} = \beta_{50} + u_{5j};$$

$$\beta_{6j} = \beta_{60} + u_{6j};$$

$$\beta_{7j} = \beta_{70} + \beta_{71\ (\text{H Attach})} + \beta_{72\ (\text{W Attach})} + \beta_{73\ (\text{H Coping})} + \beta_{74(\text{W Coping})} + u_{7j};$$

$$\beta_{8j} = \beta_{80} + \beta_{81\ (\text{H Attach})} + \beta_{82(\text{W Attach})} + \beta_{83(\text{H Coping})} + \beta_{84(\text{W Coping})} + u_{8j};$$

where β_{11}, β_{21}, β_{12}, and β_{22} represent the effects of husbands' and wives' levels of attachment avoidance on husbands' and wives' disengagement; β_{13}, β_{23}, β_{14}, and β_{24}

represent the effects of husbands' and wives' levels of avoidant coping on husbands' and wives' disengagement; β_{71}, β_{81}, β_{72}, and β_{82} represent the potential moderation effects of husbands' and wives' attachment avoidance on the link between partner's negative affect and husbands' and wives' disengagement; and β_{73}, β_{83}, β_{74}, and β_{84} represent the potential moderation effects of each spouse's avoidant coping on the link between partner's negative affect and husbands' and wives' disengagement. Due to model complexity, it was necessary to fix the error terms for the equations estimating the effects of spouses' topic during conflict interactions, and the effects of spouses' role during support interactions (in both models these effects are represented by β_3 and β_4).

I found a significant main effect for wives' negative affect predicting husbands' conflict disengagement, (b = .004, SE = .002, p < .05), and a marginal effect of husbands' negative affect predicting wives' conflict disengagement (b = .018, SE = .006, p = .09). The difference in the magnitudes of these effects for husbands and wives was not significant, $\chi 2(1) = 1.89$, *ns*. These results suggest that both husbands and wives tend to be more disengaged during conflict interactions when their partners exhibit more negative affect.

There were significant main effects of husbands' attachment avoidance on husbands' disengagement during conflict and support interactions (b = .02, SE = .007, and b = .019, SE = .017, respectively) ps < .05. To the extent that husbands were higher in avoidant attachment they were more disengaged during conflict and support interactions. There was also a main effect of wives' avoidant coping on wives' disengagement during conflict (b = .04, SE = .015, p < .01) such that when wives were higher in avoidant coping they were more disengaged during conflict interactions.

I found support for my hypothesis regarding attachment avoidance in conflict interactions but not in support discussions. Husbands' attachment avoidance significantly predicted the link between wives' negative affect and husbands' disengagement (b = .001, SE = .0004, $p < .05$). There was also a marginal effect of wives' avoidant attachment predicting the link between husbands' negative affect and wives' conflict disengagement (b = .001, SE = .001, p = .07). The difference in the magnitudes of these effects was non-significant, $\chi 2(1) = .17$, *ns*. These results suggest that during conflict, when spouses are higher on attachment avoidance and their partners engage in more negative affect, spouses are more disengaged.

There was mixed support for my hypothesis regarding avoidant coping. For the model of conflict, wives' avoidant coping moderated the link between husbands' negative affect and wives' disengagement (b = .003, SE = .001, $p < .01$). This suggests that wives with higher avoidant coping were more disengaged during conflict discussions to the extent that their husbands engaged in more negative affect during those discussions. This effect was not significantly larger than the effect of husbands' avoidant coping on the link between wives' negative affect and husbands' conflict disengagement, $\chi 2(1) = 1.05$, *ns*. For the model of support, husbands' avoidant coping moderated the link between wives' negative affect and husbands' disengagement (b = .003, SE = .001, $p < .05$). Thus, husbands with higher avoidant coping were more disengaged during support discussions to the extent that their wives engaged in more negative affect during those discussions. This effect was marginally larger than wives' avoidant coping predicting the link between husbands' negative affect and wives' support disengagement, $\chi 2(1) = 2.85$, p = .08.

Do attachment avoidance and avoidant coping moderate the link between spouse's role during support interactions and spouses' disengagement? I expected avoidant attachment to predict disengagement in support interactions regardless of the role that the spouse assumed (solicitor versus provider). In contrast, I expected spouses with more avoidant coping styles to be more disengaged during supportive interactions when they were in the role of support solicitor compared to when they were in the role of support provider. To examine these hypotheses, the model was estimated at Level 1 using the following equation:

$$Y_{ij\ (\text{Support disengagement})} = \beta_{1j(\text{Husband})} + \beta_{2j(\text{Wife})} + \beta_{3j\ (\text{H Role}) +} + \beta_{4j\ (\text{W Role}) +} r_{ij},$$

and at Level 2 using the following equations:

$$\beta_{1j} = \beta_{10} + \beta_{11\ (\text{H Attach})} + \beta_{12(\text{W Attach})} + \beta_{13\ (\text{H Coping})} + \beta_{14(\text{W Coping})} + u_{1j};$$

$$\beta_{2j} = \beta_{20} + \beta_{21(\text{H Attach})} + \beta_{22(\text{W Attach})} + \beta_{23(\text{H Coping})} + \beta_{24(\text{W Coping})} + u_{2j};$$

$$\beta_{3j} = \beta_{30} + \beta_{31(\text{H Attach})} + \beta_{32(\text{W Attach})} + \beta_{33(\text{H Coping})} + \beta_{34(\text{W Coping})} + u_{3j};$$

$$\beta_{4j} = \beta_{40} + \beta_{41(\text{H Attach})} + \beta_{42(\text{W Attach})} + \beta_{43(\text{H Coping})} + \beta_{44(\text{W Coping})} + u_{4j};$$

Husbands' and wives' attachment avoidance and avoidant coping were entered into the 1st two Level 2 equations to examine and control for main effects, and into the 3rd and 4th equations to examine whether avoidant coping and attachment moderated the links between role and disengagement.

Expectations regarding attachment avoidance were met for husbands, but not for wives. Husbands' higher avoidant attachment predicted husbands' greater disengagement during support interactions (b = .03, SE = .01, p < .01). However, this effect was not significantly different from wives' avoidant attachment predicting wives' disengagement, $\chi 2(1) = 1.84$, *ns*, and therefore does not represent a significant sex difference.

Additionally, neither husbands' nor wives' avoidant attachment moderated the link between role and level of disengagement (*t*s[102] < -1.10, *ns*).

There was an interesting main effect of husbands' avoidant coping on wives' disengagement (b = -.044, SE = .019, $p < .05$). During support interactions, wives of husbands who had more avoidant coping styles were less disengaged. This effect was significantly greater than the effect of wives' avoidant coping on husbands' support disengagement, $\chi 2(1) = 4.11$, $p < .05$).

Next I tested my hypothesis that avoidant coping would moderate the link between the spouse's role during support interactions and disengagement, such that individuals with stronger avoidant coping styles would be more disengaged when in the role of support solicitor compared to support provider. Results were not consistent with expectations for either spouse (*t*s[102] < -.16, *ns*). Instead I found that husbands' avoidant coping styles moderated the link between wives' roles and wives' disengagement (b = .052, SE = .022, $p < .05$). When husbands were higher in avoidant coping and wives assumed the role of support solicitor, wives were more disengaged than when they assume the role of support provider. This effect was marginally larger than the effect of wives' avoidant coping on the link between husbands' role and husbands' support disengagement, $\chi 2(1) = 3.48$, $p = .06$.

Aim 2: How Does Early Disengagement Contribute to Disengagement Later in Marriage?

Baseline model. The Level 1 equations of the baseline models for Time 2 disengagement was specified as follows:

$$Y_{ij\ (\text{Time 2 disengagement})} = \beta_{1j(\text{Husband})} + \beta_{2j(\text{Wife})} + r_{ij},$$

The Level 2 equations were specified as follows:

$$\beta_{1j} = \beta_{10} + u_{1j};$$

$$\beta_{2j} = \beta_{20} + u_{2j};$$

The intercepts representing husbands' and wives' average disengagement at Time 2 were significant (*b* = -1.86, *SE* =.13, and *b* = -2.04, *SE* =.14, respectively) *p*s < .001. There were no significant differences between husbands' and wives' levels of Time 2 disengagement, *t*s(1) = .68, *ns*. Additionally, the slopes representing linear change in husbands' and wives' disengagement over the course of the 14 day diary period were not significant (*t*s[56] > |.28|, *ns*) and including linear slopes in the models did not improve the fit of either model (χ2[7] = .54, *ns*). Tests of the homogeneity of Level 1 variance were significant, χ2(56) = 330.09, *p*s < .001. Therefore, I specified husbands and wives as having different central tendencies and variability for these models. Finally, the variance components of model parameters were significant χ2s(56) > 171.25, *p*s < .001.

Main analyses. I hypothesized that spouses who were more disengaged during Time 1 interactions and experienced improved mood following those interactions would be more disengaged across interactions at Time 2. Baseline models were used at Level 1. Interaction terms were created by centering husbands' and wives' disengagement and mood change during conflict interactions and support interactions. I then multiplied husbands' conflict disengagement by husbands' mood change during conflict, wives' conflict disengagement by wives' mood change during conflict, husbands' support disengagement by husbands' mood change during support, and wives' support disengagement by wives' mood change during support. I tested the effects of early conflict disengagement and early support disengagement on later disengagement in two

separate models.

First, I examined the effects of Time 1 conflict disengagement, mood change during those interactions and their interaction term predicting disengagement at Time 2 by entering these variables into the Level 2 equations predicting husbands' and wives' average Time 2 disengagement (β_1 and β_2). Spouses' average initial mood (before interactions) was also entered as a control variable:

$$\beta_{1j} = \beta_{10} + \beta_{11\,(\text{H Conflict disengagement})} + \beta_{12(\text{W Conflict disengagement})} + \beta_{13\,(\text{H Initial mood})} + \beta_{14\,(\text{W Initial mood})} + \beta_{15\,(\text{H Mood change})} + \beta_{16(\text{W Mood change})} + \beta_{17\,(\text{H Conflict disengagement X H Mood change})} + \beta_{18(\text{W Conflict disengagement X W Mood change})} + u_{1j};$$

$$\beta_{2j} = \beta_{20} + \beta_{21\,(\text{H Conflict disengagement})} + \beta_{22(\text{W Conflict disengagement})} + \beta_{23\,(\text{H Initial mood})} + \beta_{24\,(\text{W Initial mood})} + \beta_{25\,(\text{H Mood change})} + \beta_{26(\text{W Mood change})} + \beta_{27\,(\text{H Conflict disengagement X H Mood change})} + \beta_{28(\text{W Conflict disengagement X W Mood change})} + u_{1j};$$

Husbands' conflict disengagement at Time 1 predicted disengagement at Time 2 such that, the more disengaged they were during conflict at Time 1, the more disengaged they were across interactions at Time 2 (b = .57, SE = .25, $p < .05$). This effect was marginally larger than the effect of wives' conflict disengagement predicting their future disengagement, $\chi 2(1) = 2.85$, $p = .08$.

The effects of husbands' better average mood before conflict interactions also predicted husbands' lower Time 2 disengagement, b = -.27, SE = .10, $p < .01$. This suggested that when husbands reported a better mood before engaging in conflict interactions, they were less disengaged across interactions later in marriage. This effect did not differ significantly from the effect of wives' pre-interaction mood on their own later disengagement, $\chi 2(1) = .72$, *ns*.

There was also a significant interaction effect of husbands' conflict disengagement by husbands' mood change on later disengagement (b = .16, SE = .07, p < .05). This effect was not significantly different from wives' interaction term predicting wives' disengagement, $\chi 2(1) = .82$, *ns*. To probe this effect I used a utility designed to probe interaction effects in HLM (Preacher, Curran, & Bauer, 2006). Low levels of conflict disengagement and negative mood change were represented by scores 1 *SD* below each variable's mean and high levels of conflict disengagement and positive mood change were represented by scores 1 *SD* above the means. Figure 1 depicts the results. For husbands whose moods worsened following early conflict, level of conflict disengagement only marginally predicted their levels of disengagement at Time 2 (simple slope: b = .40, SE = .21, p = .07). In contrast, for husbands whose moods improved following conflict interactions, levels of conflict disengagement predicted disengagement at Time 2 (simple slope b = .75, SE = .30, p = .02). These results indicate that husbands who were less disengaged during conflict early in marriage and had improved mood following those interactions were less disengaged across marital interactions later in marriage. In contrast, husbands who were more disengaged during early conflict interactions and had improved mood following the interactions were more disengaged across interactions later in marriage.

Second, I tested the effects of Time 1 support disengagement, mood change during those interactions and their interaction term predicting disengagement at Time 2 by entering these variables into the Level 2 equations predicting husbands' and wives' average Time 2 disengagement (β_1 and β_2):

$$\beta_{1j} = \beta_{10} + \beta_{11\,(\text{H Support disengagement})} + \beta_{12(\text{W Support disengagement})} + \beta_{13\,(\text{H Mood change})} + \beta_{14(\text{W}}$$

Mood change) + β_{15} (H Support disengagement X H Mood change) + β_{16}(W Support disengagement X W Mood change)+ u_{1j};

$\beta_{2j} = \beta_{20} + \beta_{21}$ (H Support disengagement) + β_{22}(W Support disengagement) + β_{23} (H Mood change) + β_{24}(W Mood change) + β_{25} (H Support disengagement X H Mood change) + β_{26}(W Support disengagement X W Mood change)+ u_{1j};

I found a main effect of husbands' Time 1 support disengagement predicting wives' Time 2 disengagement (*b* = 4.71, *SE* = .91, *p*s < .001). This suggested that when husbands were more disengaged during support interactions early in marriage, their wives were more disengaged across interactions at Time 2. This effect was significantly larger than the effects of husbands' early support disengagement predicting wives' later disengagement, $\chi 2(1) > .4.32$, $p < .05$. There was also a significant effect of husbands' mood change following support interactions on husbands' later disengagement (*b* = -.49, *SE* = .15, *p* < .01). When husbands felt relatively worse following early support interactions, they were more disengaged during interactions at Time 2. This effect was marginally larger than the effect of wives' mood change on wives' future disengagement, $\chi 2(1) = 2.62$, $p = .10$. Husbands' and wives' mood before support interactions also predicted their own later disengagement (*b* = -.58, *SE* = .20, and *b* = -.62, *SE* = .17, respectively, *p*s <.01). These findings suggested that when husbands' and wives' reported poorer mood before support interactions, they were more disengaged during interactions later in marriage. The interaction terms for early support interactions were non-significant *t*s (31) = .80, *ns*.

Discussion

Theory, research and clinical evidence converge to support a link between avoidant and disengaged couple communication and marital distress (Bowlby, 1969/1980; Bowman, 1990; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Heavey et al., 1995; Smith et al., 1990). Nevertheless, few studies have examined *why* romantic partners disengage during couple communication or no other studies have examined *how* early disengagement contributes to disengagement across interactions later in marriage.

Summary and Interpretation of Results

Sex differences in levels of disengagement. Although many of the findings appeared to differ for husbands and wives, there was little statistical evidence of sex differences. One area where husbands and wives clearly differed was in overall levels of disengagement across early conflict and support interactions. With one exception (when husbands were in the role of support solicitor), husbands were more disengaged than wives across all early marital interactions. Consistent with these findings, studies have found men are more avoidant during couple conflict compared to women (Cann et al., 2008; Shi, 2003). Women, in contrast, tend to pursue discussion during conflict (for see Eldridge & Christensen, 2002) and provide more responsive support to their spouses compared to men (Neff & Karney, 2005). These findings are also consistent with sex-role theory and research that has identified evolutionary, biological and psychosocial processes that promote women's greater focus on close relationships compared to men (for a review see Eagly, 2009; Gabriel & Gardner, 1999).

Aim 1: Why do spouses disengage from early marital interactions? I found that both spouses were more disengaged during conflict interactions to the extent that the partner expressed more negative affect (a main effect). These results may reflect a demand-withdraw communication pattern where one spouse engages in negative affect to attempt to pursue the interaction or demand attention and the other spouse disengages defensively. Of note, although couples' demand-withdraw behaviors are temporally related (Klintob & Smith, 1996), there is no evidence that the partner's negative affect causes the spouse to disengage or, conversely, that the spouse's disengagement causes the partner's negative affect. Instead, the beginning of this cycle likely differs across couples and across interactions.

Surprisingly, I did not find similar main effects in the support interactions. Previous research suggests that this destructive pattern of couple communication is stronger during marital conflict than supportive interactions (Eldridge et al., 2007). However, this pattern is observed in the support interactions of couples whose marriages are more distressed (Eldridge et al., 2007). Therefore, because my study included relatively happy newlyweds, it is not surprising that this pattern was not found during support interactions.

I also hypothesized that the link between partner negative affect and disengagement would be stronger when spouses were more avoidantly attached or had more avoidant coping styles.. For attachment avoidance, I found support for my hypothesis for conflict interactions, but not support interactions. One possible explanation for this pattern of findings is that the conflict interactions induced greater attachment-related anxiety compared to support interactions. During conflict discussions, couples

discussed areas of ongoing disagreement within the relationship whereas during supportive interactions couples were explicitly instructed not to discuss topics that were a source of marital tension. Therefore, conflict discussions were more likely than supportive interactions to elicit anxiety about the relationship.

Next I examined the effects of avoidant coping styles. For conflict, wives with more avoidant coping styles were more disengaged to the extent that husbands' negative affect was higher. For support, husbands with more avoidant coping styles were more disengaged to the extent that wives' negative affect was higher. These results provide partial support for my hypotheses and suggest that the partner's greater expression of negative affect increases stress during the interaction and elicits an avoidant coping response from individuals with more avoidant coping styles.

The influence of spouses' role during support interactions. First, I proposed that individuals with more avoidant attachment styles would behave avoidantly during support interactions regardless of their role during the interaction (support provider or solicitor). I found support for this hypothesis for husbands but not for wives. These findings are consistent with theorists' suggestions that having a more avoidant attachment style predisposes individuals to disengage during couple interactions when under increased stress (i.e., conflict, support-seeking) or when called upon to care for their partners (support-providing).

Second, I expected individuals with more avoidant coping styles to behave avoidantly during support discussions when they assumed the role of support solicitor (but not when they assumed the role of support provider). Enacting the role of support solicitor should be more stressful than enacting the role of support provider. Results did

not support this hypothesis for either spouse. Thus, these roles do not appear to evoke levels of stress that differ enough to elicit different degrees of avoidant coping.

I did find, however, that when husbands were higher on avoidant coping, and wives were in the role of support solicitor (versus support provider), wives were more disengaged. One possible explanation for this result is that wives are aware on some level of their husbands' tendencies to avoid dealing with stressors. Thus, when wives are given the opportunity to seek support from stress-avoiding husbands, they may do so tentatively because they do not expect their husbands to responsively engage in a discussion of their personal stressors. Thus, they are more disengaged during the interaction.

Aim 2: How does early disengagement contribute to disengagement later in marriage? First, based on operant learning theory, I hypothesized that spouses who disengaged during early interactions and felt relatively better following those interactions would be more disengaged across interactions at Time 2. I found support for this hypothesis for husbands' conflict disengagement. This finding is consistent with theory and research that maintains that proximal reinforcements or punishments are far more influential than more distal consequences of behavior. Therefore, despite the fact that research suggests that disengaging and avoiding marital conflict contributes to marital distress (an arguably more distal consequence), husbands are more likely to disengage from future interactions when disengaging makes them feel relatively better immediately following those interactions (a proximal reinforcement).

Second, husbands who reported a poorer mood before conflict, and both husbands and wives who were in a poorer mood before support interactions, early in marriage were more disengaged during interactions later in marriage. These results may suggest that

spouses who disengaged more frequently during later marital interactions were less likely to look forward to interacting with their partners early in marriage.

Third, husbands and wives who felt relatively worse following support interactions were more disengaged during interactions later in marriage. Spousal support has been found to buffer the effects of stress and bolster individual functioning (Turner, 1999). Spouses who report feeling worse following supportive interactions likely do not experience these benefits because they do not perceive these interactions as supportive. Instead, they may feel disappointed and be less likely to engage in these interactions in the future. This interpretation is consistent with qualitative research that has found that spouses who have become romantically disengaged (i.e., detached; Bowlby, 1969/1982; perceive they are "growing apart"; Barry et al., 2008) from their partners retrospectively report instances of feeling disappointed by their partner (Kayser, 1993).

Strengths and Limitations of the Present Study

This study comprises several novel features that enhance its contributions to the field. First, my hypotheses were informed by an integrated theoretical model of romantic disengagement (see Paper #1). This approach allowed me to consider and test several potentially competing or complementary explanations for spouses' disengagement. Second, I examined multiple types of couple interactions (i.e., conflict and support). To my knowledge, only one other study has examined couples' avoidant behavior across multiple types of interactions (i.e., conflict and support; Eldridge et al., 2007). The majority of research on avoidant or disengaging behavior during couple interactions has focused on couple conflict. However, it is important to understand disengagement across multiple types of interactions in order to improve couple communication. To maintain

healthy relationships, both successful conflict resolution and positive supportive interactions are important (e.g., Markman, Rhoades, Stanley, Ragan, & Whitton, 2010). Additionally, I argue that the process of romantic disengagement includes spouses becoming more disengaged across types of interactions. Therefore, if we were to only study conflict interactions it would be impossible to examine this aspect of the process. Third, I examined multi-source, multi-method data (i.e., self-report and partner report questionnaires, third person coded behavioral observation, daily diary data), which reduces measurement error. Fourth, I used multiple observations of disengagement, negative affect, and mood change early in marriage (across 4 interactions) and disengagement later in marriage (across 14 days), providing robust measures of three of the variables of interest. Fifth, I examined both cross-sectional and longitudinal data, allowing for an examination of early marital disengagement as well as the later consequences of this behavior. Sixth, I controlled for and examined the interdependence among husbands and wives by including both spouses and using actor-partner interdependence modeling to examine all hypotheses.

Interpretation of the findings must also be qualified by several factors. First, although similar to other published studies comprising newly married couples (e.g., Carrére, Buehlman, Gottman, Coan, & Ruckstuhl, 2000), my sample was relatively small. However, the multi-observation design resulted in sufficient power to detect my hypothesized effects. Second, my sample comprised heterosexual, predominantly Caucasian couples in the first seven years of marriage. Although reduced heterogeneity limits the number of third factor variables that might account for my results (e.g., duration of marriage; first vs. higher-order marriages; Bradbury, Cohan, & Karney,

1998), I cannot conclude that my findings would generalize to same-sex couples or to ethnic minorities, for example. Third, I cannot conclude that my findings would generalize to a sample of treatment-seeking couples; however, 29% of husbands and 23% of wives were moderately distressed (MAT scores of 80 – 99; Abramowitz & Sewell, 1980), and 21% of husbands and 23% of wives were severely distressed over the course of the study (MAT scores below 79; Abramowitz & Sewell, 1980). These rates are similar to those reported in other published samples of couples in the early years of marriage (e.g., Lawrence & Bradbury, 2001), increasing my confidence in the generalizability of my findings.

Implications of the Present Study

This research suggests the utility of applying an integrated theoretical model to the study of disengagement in marriage. Specifically, this approach allowed me to examine hypotheses that bridge disparate research literatures and potentially inform multiple literatures. The findings have implications for attachment, coping and operant learning perspectives, and for basic research on romantic disengagement.

With regard to attachment theory, researchers have called for a move away from simply describing and studying adult attachment as an individual differences phenomenon to recognizing the interpersonal and dynamic nature of adult attachment processes (e.g., Feeney, 2004; Kobak, 1994; Mikulincer et al., 2003). I incorporated this shift into my design by examining how attachment styles interact with contextual factors, including the role the spouse assumed and partner behavior to influence disengagement. As a result, I am able to offer two specific recommendations for elaborating adult attachment theory. First, whereas much of the prior research has examined individual

differences in attachment styles, I recommend that future studies shift focus to attachment behavioral processes. Attachment viewed as a system that motivates attachment-related behavior emphasizes the dynamic role attachment processes play in ongoing close relationships. Second, I recommend that researchers incorporate both individual influences and partner influences into their attachment models. Both partners in an attachment relationship influence the quality of the attachment bond and the functioning of attachment behavior (Kobak, 1994; Feeney, 2004). Only by modeling these mutual influences within couples can we elucidate the role and meaning of attachment behavior in marital relationships.

Similarly, much of the coping literature has focused on coping styles or, alternatively, coping processes (for a review see Moos & Holahan, 2003). Coping researchers recognize the importance of both styles and processes and have proposed models that integrate these constructs within the context of ongoing stressors and specific events to contribute to health and well-being (e.g., Moos & Holahan, 2003). This study exemplifies this approach by examining how spouses' avoidant coping styles interact with specific aspects of marital interactions to influence disengagement, which potentially represents a coping process. Thus, I recommend that future coping research incorporates both styles and contextual influences to further elaborate processes through which individuals and couples manage stressful experiences and how these processes contribute to personal or relationship well-being.

This study also used very basic principles of operant conditioning theory regarding reinforcement to explain how early disengagement contributes to spouses' levels of disengagement across interactions later in marriage. Although I examined

disengagement across interactions later in marriage, I did not examine mechanisms that promote generalization of disengagement from one type of interaction to different dyadic contexts. Nevertheless, I assert that, in addition to understanding how disengagement becomes more frequent, it is also important to understand how it may generalize from one type of interaction to multiple types of marital interactions to elucidate processes through which spouses become romantically disengaged (i.e., grow apart) over time. Fortunately, behavioral learning theories describe factors that influence the probability and extent to which response generalization and maintenance of learning occur (for a review see Stokes & Baer, 1977). Thus, I recommend that research on disengagement examine processes of generalization as well as frequency over time to elucidate processes of romantic disengagement.

This research also has important implications for the study of romantic disengagement. Based on attachment theory, I have argued that disengagement during specific marital interactions may represent an early indicator of a process of romantic disengagement (Barry & Lawrence, 2010). This is because interaction-specific disengagement interferes with conflict resolution, intimacy and ultimately trust. The results of this study are consistent with this argument in that they suggest that early disengagement within specific types of interactions contributes to level of disengagement assessed across types of marital interactions later in marriage. Understanding processes that lead couples to emotionally disengage from one another is important because romantic disengagement is among the most frequently cited reasons couples give for their relationship distress and dissolution (Amato & Previti, 2003; Gigy & Kelly, 1992). It is also cited by therapists as the most difficult problem to treat in couple therapy (Whisman,

Dixon, & Johnson, 1997), and predicts poorer prognosis for couple therapy (Hahlweg, Schindler, Revenstorf, & Brengelmann, 1984).

Conclusion

In the present study I bridged important gaps in the literature on disengagement during marital interactions, including explaining why some spouses disengage during marital conflict and marital support interactions and how early disengagement from specific interactions contributes to the level of disengagement across interactions later in marriage. My research has implications for the elaboration of research on attachment and coping by examining individual differences as well as dyadic and dynamic marital processes. Consistent with these perspectives, this research suggests that predisposing factors and contextual aspects of marital interactions both influence whether spouses will disengage during interactions. Also, consistent with operant learning theory, I found evidence that when husbands' disengagement early in marriage is reinforced, they are more disengaged during interactions later in marriage. This research represents a critical first step in understanding processes of romantic disengagement in order to enhance the efficacy of couple interventions designed to prevent disengagement and subsequent distress and divorce.

Table 4. Means and Standard Deviations at 3-6 Months of Marriage (Time 1)

	Husbands		Wives	
	M	SD	M	SD
Avoidant Attachment	18.17	5.18	16.90	5.69
Avoidant Coping	17.43	5.37	17.93	5.37

	Husbands' Topic				Wives' Topic			
	Husbands		Wives		Husbands		Wives	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Conflict Interactions								
Negative affect	7.61	12.70	10.15	20.17	7.12	13.35	10.55	15.86
Disengagement	.06	.32	-.04	.24	.06	.37	-.02	.29
Mood change	1.41	.96	1.53	.87	1.42	.96	1.41	1.02
Support Interactions								
Negative affect	5.29	7.27	6.08	7.83	5.56	8.20	5.34	6.28
Disengagement	-.04	.23	-.03	.27	.04	.27	-.05	.24
Mood change	1.40	1.00	1.16	.70	1.20	.77	1.35	.97

Note. Negative affect in conflict interactions and support interactions was measured using different coding systems and therefore cannot be compared. In support interactions, spouses' who chose the topic were in the role of support solicitor and their partner was in the role of support provider.

Table 5. Means and Standard Deviations at 75-78 Months of Marriage (Time 2)

	Husbands		Wives	
	M	SD	M	SD
Number of days				
Disagreement reported	2.41	1.88	2.88	2.65
Comfort/closeness reported	6.54	3.46	8.68	3.14
Any time spent together	3.02	2.45	1.85	1.69
Completed reports	11.70	2.06	11.74	2.44
Disengagement during types of interactions				
Disagreements	-1.10	1.47	-1.25	1.53
Comfort/closeness interactions	-1.85	1.06	-1.74	1.29
Any time spent together	-.99	1.38	-1.07	1.48
Total disengagement	-1.90	1.47	-2.00	1.66

Table 6. Correlations across Measures at Time 1: Within-spouse Correlations for Husbands are Above Diagonal and for Wives are Below Diagonal, Correlations across Husbands and Wives are on Diagonal and Bolded

			Conflict						Support					
	Attach	Cope	HT NA	HT Dis	HT Ch	WT NA	WT Dis	WT Ch	HT NA	HT Dis	HT Ch	WT NA	WT Dis	WT Ch
Attach	**.02**	.24*	.06	-.16	.05	.06	-.00	.07	.13	.31*	.12	.08	.32*	.18
Cope	.17	**.22***	.09	-.21*	-.06	.08	-.06	.05	.19	.24	.14	.07	.24	.11
Conflict														
HT NA	.14	.17	**.30****	.08	-.31**	.67**	.18	-.26**	.20	.22	-.16	.21	-.02	-.17
HT Dis	.07	.48**	.21*	**.01**	.08	.01	.44**	-.16	.04	.06	-.02	.05	.10	-.05
HT Ch	-.06	-.08	-.08	-.07	**.28****	-.19	-.04	.34**	.17	-.12	.47**	-.06	-.10	.24
WT NA	-.06	-.07	.19	-.04	.21*	**.07**	.00	-.33**	.47**	.34**	-.17	.26*	.12	-.29*
WT Dis	.12	.17	-.03	.12	.03	-.01	**.23***	-.12	.07	.23	-.12	-.06	.17	-.14
WT Ch	.04	-.12	.04	-.19	.14	-.09	-.03	**.43****	.06	-.12	.01	-.07	.02	.08

Table 6 (continued).

			Conflict						Support					
		HT	HT	HT	WT	WT	WT	HT	HT	HT	WT	WT	WT
Attach	Cope	NA	Dis	Ch	NA	Dis	Ch	NA	Dis	Ch	NA	Dis	Ch
Support													
HT NA -.32*	-.01	-.14	.01	-.23	-.04	.04	-.19	**.38****	.23	-.07	.42**	.14	-.09
HT Dis -.04	-.03	.00	-.11	.06	.18	.13	-.12	.21	**.16**	-.13	.10	.42**	-.22
HT Ch -.22	-.08	.13	-.01	.05	.16	-.35**	.16	.01	-.09	**.12**	-.24	-.07	.47**
WT NA -.10	-.19	.19	.09	-.05	.53**	-.01	-.10	.26*	-.01	.09	**.04**	.07	.16
WT Dis -.14	.06	-.11	.11	-.12	-.06	.01	-.16	.25	.26*	.03	-.03	**.39****	.00
WT Ch -.06	-.08	-.07	-.04	.37**	.03	-.10	.24	-.08	.03	.35**	.06	-.11	**.11**

Note. Attach = avoidant attachment, Cope = avoidant coping, HT = husbands' topic, WT = wives' topic, NA = negative affect, Dis = disengagement, Ch = mood change. In support interactions, spouses' who chose the topic were in the role of support solicitor and their partner was in the role of support provider.

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

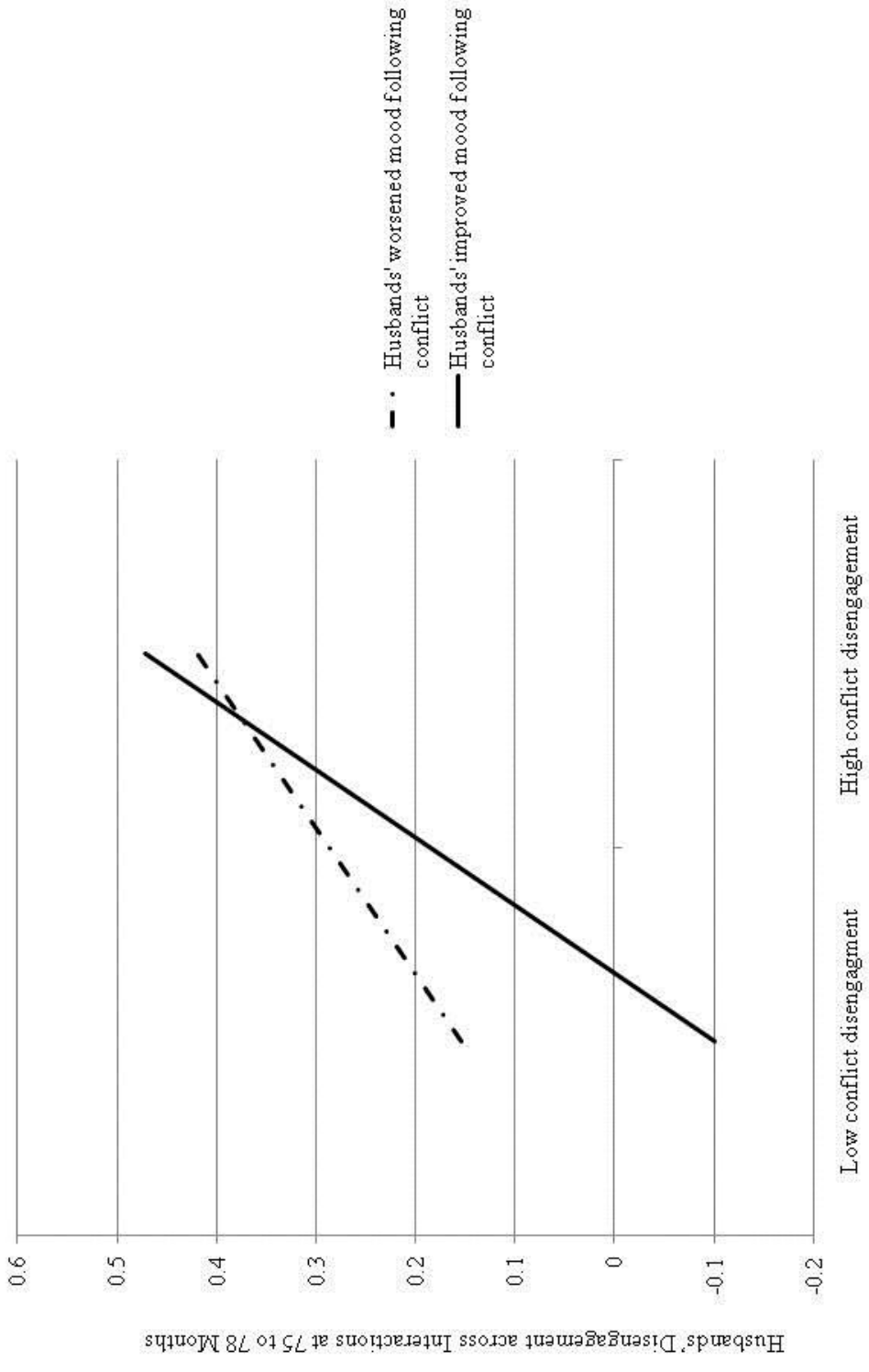

Figure 4. Husbands' conflict disengagement and mood change following conflict at Time 1 interacted to predict husbands' Time 2 disengagement.

Notes

[1] I conceptualize avoidant and disengaged behavior during marital interactions as similar constructs. Therefore, avoidance and disengagement are used interchangeably. Avoidance during marital communication has been described to include refusing to talk about an issue, closed-off body language, appearing quiet or withdrawn (Heyman & Vivian, 2000). Similarly, disengagement has been described as being quiet, displaying low excitement (Smith, Davis & Vivian, 1990), engaging in denial, distraction, and avoidance (Parkinson & Totterdall, 1999). I argue that disengagement represents a broader construct that includes avoidant behavior and indicates a lower level of involvement in the interaction.

[2] Fraley and Shaver (2000) proposed that the avoidant attachment dimension specifically regulates behavioral responses to attachment needs. Thus, individuals' levels of attachment avoidance should determine whether they approach or withdraw from their partners when distressed. Consequently, I focused on the dimension of attachment avoidance in this study.

[3] Sixty-two of 103 couples participated in the social support laboratory task because compensation was available for three hours of lab time per couple. Therefore, when couples took longer on questionnaires or other in-lab procedures, the social support task was omitted.

[4] Attachment theory was originally proposed to explain the personality development of infants following extended separation from mothers. Therefore, it is inherently an etiologically driven theory. In contrast, behavioral theories such as operant conditioning are inherently a-ontological.

[5] To determine the baseline models for each outcome variable I followed a stepwise sequence beginning with the simplest model that only included intercepts for husbands and wives. I then compared this model to a more complex model (i.e., with more parameters) and used deviance statistics and the hypothesis testing function of HLM 6 to determine whether the added complexity resulted in improved fit.

CHAPTER V

GENERAL CONCLUSION

The purpose of the present research was twofold. First, I developed and proposed a model of the process through which spouses disengage from their partners over time. This model was based on a review of existing research on disengagement and a review of relevant theories. Second, I tested specific aspects of the model to provide preliminary empirical support for the model. Specifically, I tested the following specific aspects of my model: (1) the assumption that avoidant and disengaging behaviors toward one's spouse are associated with processes of romantic disengagement; (2) two proposed mechanisms through which avoidant and disengaging behaviors contribute to marital distress over time; (3) two predispositional and two contextual factors that I proposed interact to predict increased avoidant behavior toward one's spouse; and (4) the circumstances under which early disengagement will contribute to the likelihood that spouses will be more disengaged from their partners later in marriage.

First, based on attachment theory, I proposed that avoidance during couple interactions, particularly when it occurs during times of increased stress or need, is an important indicator that spouses are experiencing a process of disengagement. In support of this argument, in Paper 2, I found that spouses' increases in self-reported conflict avoidance predicted spouses' declines in trust and intimacy over time. Spouses' observed disengagement during early marital conflict interactions also predicted steeper declines in wives' trust and intimacy over time. These results provide preliminary evidence that spouses' avoidant and disengaging behavior, at least during marital conflict, is linked with a process of romantic disengagement.

Second, I proposed two mechanisms through which spouses' avoidant behavior during times of increased stress or need contributes to marital distress over time: trust and intimacy and communication and conflict. I found support for each of these mechanisms in Paper 2. Associations between spouses' conflict avoidance and marital distress at the between-couples level of analyses were mediated by lower levels of trust and intimacy and by less effective communication and conflict resolution. At the within-spouse level of analysis, the association between increases in conflict avoidance and increases in marital distress over time was mediated by declines in trust and intimacy for both husbands and wives. This research explains how spouses' avoidant behavior during marital conflict contributes to marital distress.

Third, based on my model I proposed that specific predispositional factors would interact with contextual factors to predict whether spouses will behave avoidantly during a given couple interaction. In Paper 3, I examined two predispositional factors: avoidant attachment style and avoidant coping style. I also examined two contextual factors: the spouse's role (i.e., support solicitor vs. provider) during supportive interactions and the partner's negative affect during both conflict and supportive interactions. I found no evidence that spouses with more avoidant coping styles were more disengaged when in the role of support solicitor compared to support provider. In contrast, for conflict interactions, husbands' attachment avoidance and wives' avoidant coping each interacted with their partners' negative affect to predict their own avoidant behavior. Moreover, during support interactions, husbands' avoidant coping interacted with wives' negative affect to predict husbands' avoidant behavior. In sum, I found some support that each of the avoidant predispositions interacted with the partner's negative affect during specific

interactions to predict greater disengagement during marital interactions.

Fourth, extrapolating from operant conditioning theory, I proposed that when spouses' avoidant and disengaging behavior was reinforced, it would be more likely to occur during in the future. In support of this argument, in Paper 3, I found that husbands who were more disengaged during early marital conflict (at 3-6 months of marriage) and experienced improved mood by the end of that conflict (reinforcement) engaged in significantly more disengagement at 7 years of marriage compared to husbands who were more disengaged during early marital conflict but experienced worsened mood during those interactions. These results suggest that early conflict avoidance is perpetuated over time to the extent that it provides short-term mood improvement, at least for husbands.

In conclusion, the present research addresses an important void in research on romantic relationships by integrating different theoretical perspectives and different literatures to propose and provide preliminary tests of a process model of romantic disengagement. Although several aspects of the model were examined, there are many implications of the model that have yet to be investigated, and replication in different samples is necessary to demonstrate the generalizability of the model. Nevertheless, this research represents a critical first step in exploring an understudied phenomenon – romantic disengagement: a major cause of relationship distress and dissolution (Albrecht, Bahr, & Goodman, 1983; Amato & Previti, 2003; Gigy & Kelly, 1992; Sprecher, 1994) that existing couple therapies appear ill-equipped to effectively resolve (Hahlweg, Schindler, Revenstorf, & Brengelmann, 1984; Whisman, Dixon, & Johnson, 1997). Research on the process of disengagement is expected to inform clinical efforts to prevent couples from becoming disengaged and to treat individuals who are disengaged.

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