An Exploratory Study of Change Mechanisms for Ambivalence Reduction in Young Adult
Cyclical Relationships

by

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Abstract

Cyclical relationships (where multiple break-ups and renewals have occurred) have been characterized as being in a state of "stable instability" (Vennum & Johnson, 2015), and emerging adulthood has been deemed a critical phase of relational development and learning, as well as a time marked by instability (Arnett 2000; 2007). While the research continues to expand on what we know about the concurrent and enduring risks for distress associated with relationship cycling, little is known about what change mechanisms/interventions may reduce these risks, or how helping professionals (therapists, relationship educators) can specifically assist young adults in cyclical relationships. After conducting five focus groups, researchers found specific factors that promote or detract from "decision-making resiliency", or DMR. Specific points of intervention for professionals working with cyclical relationships to promote DMR are discussed, which included identity development, communication, power/control dynamics and intentionality. Building off of what is known about the nuances of cyclical relationships, this study aims to inform assessments and intervention(s) that would help bolster resilience and decision-making skills in cyclical couples (or couples who have slid into relationships and are, thus, at risk for cycling) in an effort to reduce further distress.

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Acknowledgements

Dedication

This project is unquestionably dedicated to my dear husband, Paul. We began discussing the fascinating phenomenon of cycling together as we compared our own previous cyclical relationships and talked about the turmoil we experienced in the past, which drove me to pursue this project out of passion. This project felt impossible at times; Paul, you were an invaluable member of my academic team, as well as a constant source of love and support during times when I felt most ungrounded. Thank you for supporting me in *all* my endeavors, especially my passion for learning (we've done a *lot* of learning together throughout the years). I don't know what I would've done without you this past year, and I'm glad I don't have to know. I love you!

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Arnett (2004, 2007) described emerging adulthood (ages 18-29) as the "age of instability," (p.8) and a stage of life filled with new relationship experiences where individuals begin to formulate views about navigating relationship formation that they carry with them into later adulthood. Additionally, the experiences individuals have during their early relationships impact their experiences in later relationships and influence well-being outcomes (Overbeek, Stattin, Vermulst, Ha, & Engles, 2007). Cultural, economic, and technological shifts create a social context in which current generations of emerging adults are connecting in increasingly diverse ways, without a clear path for navigating relationship development (Arnett, 2000; Stanley, Rhoades, Whitton., 2010). When individuals form new relationships without clarifying ambiguity about the state of the relationship, this is referred to as "*sliding*" into the relationship (as opposed to purposefully *deciding* to enter the relationship after conscious deliberation; Stanley & Rhoades, 2009).

Stanley and Rhoades (2009) suggest that when partners do not fully evaluate the consequences of relationship transitions (e.g., advancing sexually, moving in together, ending and renewing the relationship, etc.), this results in the advancement of the relationship extrinsically (e.g., partners may share a living space, accrue shared property, and integrate friend groups), without advancement of levels of commitment to the relationship intrinsically (i.e., personal levels of dedication to making the relationship work; Vennum & Johnson, 2014). This process can seriously limit individuals' ability to make decisions that are in the best interest of both partners due to the various ways sliding behaviors constrain or limit partners' options to leave the relationship (Stanley & Rhoades, 2009). Stanley & Rhoades (2009) state that "people who slide through major transitions up to and into marriage can be predicted to have poorer

prospects for lifelong love and security, if for no other reason than there is not a clear basis of commitment to call upon when times are tough," (p. 41).

This lack of evaluation of and communication about the relationship is more prevalent in relationships that have ended and renewed (i.e., cyclical relationships; Vennum, Hardy, Sibley, Fincham, 2015) than in continuously together relationships. Cyclical relationships, defined as having broken up and gotten back together at least once in a romantic relationship (e.g., Dailey, Pfiester, Jin, Beck & Clark, 2009) are common in emerging adulthood, with 30% to 50% of young adult dating partners and one-third of cohabiting couples having experienced at least one breakup and reconciliation with their current partner (e.g., Dailey et al., 2009; Vennum, Lindstrom, Monk, & Adams, 2013). When partners have experienced one or more transitions into and out of their relationship, uncertainty about the state of the relationship increases, and partners are likely to have ambivalence surrounding the viability of the relationship long-term (Vennum, 2011). Unfortunately, this increasing uncertainty may inhibit couples' ability to communicate directly about the relationship (Knobloch & Theiss, 2011), further decreasing their proclivity to make deliberate decisions about their dedication to making the relationship work going forward, resulting in lower relationship maintenance and greater distress (Clifford, Vennum, Busk, & Fincham, 2017; Vennum et al., 2015). Compared to couples who are consistently together, couples who end and renew their relationships report lower commitment and satisfaction, poorer communication, greater uncertainty about the future of their relationship, and experience higher levels of verbal abuse and physical violence (e.g., Dailey, Middleton, & Green, 2012; Dailey et al., 2009; Halpern-Meekin, Manning, Giordano, & Longmore, 2013).

Given the lower levels of explicit relationship decision making reported by partners in cyclical relationships (Vennum, 2011; Clifford et al., 2017), and the negative impact of

ambiguity on relationship quality (Clifford et al., 2017; Knobloch & Theiss, 2011; Stanley et al., 2010), Dailey, Jin, Pfiester & Beck (2011) implore researchers to further "explore the nature of post-dissolution-pre-renewal phases in on-off relationships," (p.437), to achieve a greater level of understanding of a how individuals can better advocate for the future state of their relationships. Because emerging adulthood has been deemed a critical phase of relational development and learning (Erikson, 1950), and experiences during this phase can have long-term ramifications, the purpose of this study is to obtain the perspectives of emerging adults who are experiencing or have experienced stressful levels of ambivalence in their on-again/off-again relationship processes to inform an intervention for pre-marital and marital education, as well as therapeutic settings to reduce ambiguity and bolster intentionality in relationship formation.

Chapter 2 - Review of Literature

Dedication, Constraint, and Relationship Stability

Stanley and Markman (1992) expand on interdependence theory (e.g., Kelley & Thibaut, 1978) and the investment model (e.g. Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998) to explain two aspects of commitment that interplay to influence stability in romantic relationships: *personal dedication* and *constraint commitment.* Any actions or desires to continue or improve the relationship that benefit both partners (as opposed to solely oneself) are signatures of dedication (Stanley & Markman, 1992). Constraint commitment, on the other hand, encompasses motivating factors to maintain the state of the relationship out of fear of personal discomfort or loss. In other words, Stanley and Markman deconstruct commitment into "wanting" to stay (dedication) versus "having to" or "needing" to stay (constraint commitment; Rhoades, Stanley, Markman, 2010; Stanley, Rhoades, Whitton, 2010). More specifically, constraint commitment is a process of avoiding the permanent ending of a relationship because of potential material or financial constraints (i.e., shared debt; shared lease or pet), perceived constraints (i.e., social or emotional investments) or "felt" constraint, which is defined as feeling "trapped" or "stuck" in the relationship (Rhoades, Stanley & Markman, 2010, p. 545; Stanley & Markman, 1992; Clifford et al., 2017). Specific types of constraint commitment (material and perceived constraints) can serve a purpose similar to dedication – increasing longevity of a relationship (Rhoades, Stanley & Markman, 2010). However, when constraints persistently outweigh partners' dedication to making the relationship work, these constraints may serve to enhance the length of a relationship that is reducing in quality (Rhoades, Stanley, Markman, 2010), potentially resulting in simultaneous forces pulling the partners together and pushing them apart.

Halpern-Meekin and colleagues (2012) stated that, "Family researchers typically conceive of 'relationship instability' in terms of individuals transitioning from being in a relationship to not being in one. This conceptualization downplays the notion that some relationships are more aptly described as "not together, but not completely broken up," (p. 167). Dailey & colleagues (2011) report that often when cyclical couples break up, the status of the relationship is still questionable, and that couples often feel their levels of commitment to their partner when *together* are as ambiguous as their levels of commitment post-breakup. More specifically, cyclers who were "broken up" report not actually perceiving the relationship as dissolved, but rather in a state of limbo (Dailey et al., 2011). On average, cyclical couples experience 2-3 breakup and renewals throughout the duration of the relationship and, if they persist into marriage, are more likely to experience trial separations (Vennum & Johnson, 2015) than couples who never broke up and renewed prior to marriage. Vennum and Johnson (2015) discuss the idea of "stable [or ongoing] instability" when describing cyclical couples' processes: the only predictable relationship component many cyclical couples can reliably count on is consistent *inconsistency* in their levels of commitment to one another.

High Risk Relationship Development

Ambivalence is one of the most frequently reported stressors of partners in on-again/off-again relationships (Dailey et al., 2011), and cyclical partners' uncertainty about the future of their relationship increases with each breakup and renewal (Vennum, 2011). Unfortunately, as uncertainty increases, partners are less likely to communicate with each other about the status of their relationship (Clifford et al., 2017; Knobloch & Theiss, 2011), potentially due to fear that doing so will result in an unfavorable outcome. Stanley et al. (2011) term this phenomenon "motivated ambiguity" to describe actions or instances where uncertainty is purposefully not

clarified or reduced because negative outcomes (as a result of clarifying uncertainty) are anticipated. In this sense, couples are sliding through the relationship at least partially to increase the longevity of the relationship, but leaving the uncertainty unresolved reduces the chances that couples will actively commit to the relationship. Stanley and Rhoades (2009) state that, "*At the root, commitment means making a decision to choose one alternative over others, and that in choosing, one is deciding to give up the other alternatives. Deciding is fundamental to commitment,*" (p. 35).

Stanley and Rhoades (2009) argue that failure to evaluate or communicate about the consequences of relationship decisions (e.g., advancing sexually, moving in together, ending and renewing the relationship) and each partners' commitment to the relationship, may reduce the likelihood that partners will actively *decide* to invest in the behaviors necessary to making the relationship function well (i.e., sacrifice, expressions of gratitude, conversations about commitment or relationship transitions) while increasing external barriers/constraints to leaving the relationship (shared lease, friend groups, etc.). In support of this hypothesis, Clifford et al. (2017) found that sliding in romantic relationships predicted lower constructive communication (a type of relationship maintenance behavior), satisfaction, and dedication seven weeks later, even when controlling for earlier levels of these variables.

Dailey and colleagues (2012) report that couples who have broken up and renewed or "taken a break" may often have a "wait and see' mentality" about the state of their relationship going forward. In such cases, the process of waiting and seeing may result in accruing more constraints (i.e., sharing material assets; having overlapping social networks; external social pressure to stay in the relationship) that make severing ties more circumstantially and/or emotionally difficult (Stanley et al., 2009) without a desire to invest in relationship maintenance

behaviors due to the potential for the relationship to end. Research on the characteristics of cyclical relationships suggests this may be what is happening: partners in cyclical relationships report greater uncertainty, sliding, avoidance of relationship talk, and constraints to permanently ending the relationship, in addition to more physical violence and verbal abuse than partners in non-cyclical relationships (Dailey, Middleton, & Green, 2012; Dailey et al., 2009; Halpern-Meekin et al., 2013; Vennum et al., 2013). Additionally, cyclical partners also report lower satisfaction than non-cyclical partners and increasingly lower dedication with each breakup and renewal (Vennum et al., 2013; Vennum et al., 2015).

The risks that seem to be linked with cyclical relationships in young adulthood appear to endure. For example, longitudinal research findings indicate that during the first five years of marriage, couples who had broken up and renewed their relationship even once prior to marriage were more likely to experience a trail separation (as opposed to divorce, which would be an effective means of reducing relational ambiguity), and fared worse than non-cyclical couples on a variety of marital adjustment indicators (Vennum & Johnson, 2015). Greater constraints along with lower relationship quality and dedication, on average, than their non-cyclical counterparts put couples that have ended and renewed their relationship at increased risk for the continuation of a distressed relationship that otherwise may have ended had the constraints not been present, thus increasing the chances for negative outcomes for the couple, as well as any children they may have.

Facilitating Hard versus Soft Transitions

Scott Stanley describes "hard" breakups as clear and certain permanent dissolutions and "soft" breakups as ambiguous (i.e., remaining Facebook friends, maintaining contact via technological avenues of communicating such as texting, email). Cyclical partners' experiences

of break-ups are often ambiguous in that whether the relationship is *permanently* dissolved is not clear to one or both partners (Dailey, Jin, Pfiester & Beck, 2011; Dailey et al., 2009). A general state of uncertainty about what the break-up meant, or in other words, how serious the dissolution was (i.e., "I think there's a chance we might get back together") has been shown to result in an increased chance of renewing the relationship, especially if partners have already ended and renewed that relationship once before (Dailey, et al., 2011). Additionally, compared to non-cyclical couples, cyclical partners' decisions to break up and renew are often made unilaterally with one partner repeatedly initiating the dissolutions and the other initiating the renewals, with mutual decisions to end the relationship being more likely to result in a permanent breakup (Daily et al., 2011). Sbarra & Emery (2005) state that re-connecting with an ex-partner rekindles feelings of affection, so the various mediums of contact through which one can stay in contact with an ex-partner may facilitate hope that the relationship will continue if the decision to break up was unilateral, and social media is a popular medium through which emerging adults frequently make contact after breaking up (Dardis & Gidycs, 2017).

Arnett (2007) discusses that emerging adulthood is a period where individuals learn and solidify roles, behaviors and relationship skills that they continue to utilize throughout the rest of their lives. Based on recent statistics about the frequency of cycling in romantic relationships in emerging adulthood, it seems that clear transitions in and out of romantic relationships (i.e. "hard breakups") is a skill that is either underused, misunderstood, or underdeveloped in emerging adulthood. Because of the aforementioned risks associated with prevalent relationship uncertainty and cycling in emerging adulthood, it is important to explore mechanisms for reducing relational uncertainty and helping couples move from stable instability to continuous stability. This could mean either a movement out of "wait and see" into a decision to actively

invest in the relationship or a decision based on conscious evaluation to end the relationship for good.

Previous research indicates that "directness" (Wilmot, Carbaugh, & Baxter, 1985; Dailey et al., 2013), tone (e.g., civil vs. hostile; Dailey et al., 2012; 2013), explicitness (vs. implicitness) of messages sent, struggle (i.e., how difficult a break-up or renewal is), agreement (how mutual is the decision to transition in the relationship), resolution (how resolved or committed to the transition one feels), and internal processing (introspection and reflection on the transition) are useful characteristics to consider when navigating transitions in on-again/off-again relationships. Furthermore, Vennum and Johnson (2014) stated, "…more research is needed on the positive interpersonal processes… that may neutralize the negative effects of poor communication and other challenges that place cyclical couples at risk for further relationship distress and instability," (p. 450). Regarding the interpersonal processes in cyclical relationships, research suggests that "partners reporting… more explicit transition negotiations… may be more likely to reach relative stability," and that "less deliberate transition negotiations… may also predict when relationships will continue to cycle," (Dailey et al., 2013, p. 402).

Although relationship education on the risks of sliding has been shown to improve emerging adults' intentionality in their relationships in general (Vennum & Fincham, 2011), partners who have already experienced the ending and renewal of their relationship may face additional barriers to making and communicating clear relationship decisions. Accordingly, cyclical couples may need a more specifically tailored intervention. For example, Doherty (2017) founded "Discernment Counseling" in order to help married couples with differing levels of commitment come to a clear decision about whether or not to work on their relationship prior to considering divorce. In accordance with this approach, this study aims to inform an intervention

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that would similarly serve to reduce ambivalence for emerging adults in cyclical relationships.

Present Study

Snyder (2006) stated, "Learning how to form, maintain, and gracefully end romantic and sexual relationships with others is arguably one of the critical developmental tasks of adolescence and early adulthood," (p. 161). The graceful formation, maintenance or dissolution of relationships is the antithesis of a cyclical relationship, and cycling is a common experience during young adulthood (e.g., Halpern-Meekin et al., 2012; 2013). While the research continues to expand on the risks associated with relationship cycling, little is known about what change mechanisms/interventions may reduce these risks, or how professionals (therapists and relationship educators) can specifically assist young adults in preventing relationship cycling or moving previously cyclical relationships into consistent high quality stability or permanent dissolution.

Building off of what is known about the nuances of cyclical relationships, this study aims to inform an intervention that would help bolster resilience and decision-making skills for young adults in cyclical couples (or couples who have slid into relationships and are, thus, at risk for cycling) to heighten partners' capacities to make clear transitions and counteract the potentially negative impacts that constraints pose in relationships where intentionality and dedication to one's partner *and* the relationship have not been clarified. Specifically, the purpose of this study is to hear from individuals who have experienced distressing levels of ambivalence in cyclical relationships about their struggles during the process of making explicit and deliberate decisions about ending, renewing, and stabilizing their relationships. The answers to the following research questions will serve to inform interventions for dissemination through relationship education and therapeutic settings to improve outcomes for these couples:

RQ1: What factors (thoughts, behaviors, constraints, events, etc.) effectively reduce

ambiguity or facilitate deliberate decision-making in the relationship before the initial

breakup, during the post-breakup/pre-renewal time, and after the renewal?

RQ2: For cyclical relationships that have effectively reduced the uncertainty and cycling in

their relationship, are there specific behaviors that were utilized to achieve a state of

stability? If so, what are these specific behaviors?

RQ3: What prompts partners in cyclical relationships to end the relationship for good?

RQ4: What prompts partners in cyclical relationships decide to invest in making the

relationship work?

Chapter 3 - Methods

Participants and Procedure

Morgan (2009) discusses the methodologically sound use of focus groups to "develop the content of applied programs and interventions," (p. 3). Focus groups were decided upon as the method of choice because of their common use in applied research, specifically with regard to program development and implementation (Patton, 2015). Participation for this study was restricted to individuals who personally characterize the cyclical nature (defined as an exclusive relationship where partners broke up and renewed at least once) of a previous or current relationship as somewhat or very stressful. To create a safe environment where participants can be open in their responses, focus groups must have some level of homogeneity while maintaining enough diversity of experiences to stimulate rich dialog (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Participants in the present study were grouped according to Dailey, Middleton and Green's (2012) three-category conceptualization of stability: 1) emerging adults who have been in a cyclical relationship within the past 3 years, but are no longer with that person ("Former Cycler"), 2) emerging adults who are, at the present time, in a cyclical relationship and are currently "together", ("Current Cycler") and 3) emerging adults who have recently broken up with their partner and are considering renewing the relationship ("Contemplating Renewal"). Dailey and colleagues (2012) discuss the importance of parsing cyclers into more specified categories because of the drastically different ways cyclical relationships are defined (and re-defined) throughout the course of breaking up and reconciling. Furthermore, because cyclical relationships are characterized by increased levels of relational uncertainty (Dailey et al., 2009), categorizing cyclical relationships by relationship stage accurately reflected individual experiences and facilitated a more complete and nuanced understanding of how the needs and

challenges of partners may differ when intervening from a therapeutic standpoint (Dailey et al., 2012).

Because "men may have a tendency to speak more frequently and with more authority in groups with women" (Kruger & Casey, 2015, p. 67), four out of five of the focus groups were divided by gender (male & female). Due to low response rates from males in general, as well as from individuals describing their relationship as in the "contemplating renewal" stage, one group consisted of males and females combined so as to have enough participants for the "contemplating renewal" group. The remaining groups consisted solely of females.

Recruitment. Participants were recruited from a community in the Midwest using Facebook ads, paper flyers posted at local establishments, and word of mouth. Emerging adult students were also recruited from a Midwestern university using in-class announcements and email. Focus group participants received a $15 gift card to Amazon.com and were told about this incentive at the time of recruitment. Monetary incentivizing assisted in recruitment of participants from a variety of contexts (e.g. college campuses, faith-based organizations, a variety of work settings and socioeconomic statuses) to achieve a good balance of heterogeneity and homogeneity in the focus groups (Patton, 2015). In doing so, this helped to increase the generalizability, reliability and validity of the results of this study (Gibbs, 2007). A light meal and/or refreshments were provided for participants during the focus groups to promote casual and comfortable conversation among the participants (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Participants signed up to participate and completed a screening questionnaire through a Qualtrics link, and out of those who met the screening criteria, 10 participants were randomly selected for each of the six groups. In addition to conducting focus groups, the pre-tests and post-tests assessing level of ambiguity and feelings about their cyclical relationship were administered prior to and after

the focus groups to determine if the discussion of one's cyclical relationship assisted with ambivalence reduction in and of itself.

Screening questionnaire. The screening questionnaire asked participants about their age, gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, current relationship status, their history of relationship cycling (in the current and previous relationships), and how much distress they feel/felt in their cyclical relationship. Previous literature has found that most individuals in cyclical relationships report a variety of major stressors with being in an on-off relationship (Dailey, et al., 2011); however, 2.1% of participants who completed the screening questionnaire, in fact, reported that the stresses of being in a cyclical relationship were minimal for them personally. While many individuals in cyclical relationships report lower relational quality when compared to those in non-cyclical relationships (Dailey et al., 2010; Dailey, Pfiester, et al., 2009), cyclical relationships "should not be viewed as inherently problematic; the on-off nature can be advantageous for some couples," (Dailey et al., 2013, p. 403), specifically couples who found the gradual process of finalizing a relationship transition to provide a sense of reassurance that the decision of dissolving or renewing the relationship was right. Because the purpose of this study was to explore how to reduce the stress and risk factors associated with cycling, only participants who reported having experienced some level of distress within their cyclical relationships were included in focus groups. Of the 116 participants who completed the initial screening questionnaire, 91 participants reported having broken up and gotten back together with their current or former partner at least once and reported that their cyclical relationship was either "somewhat stressful" or "very stressful". Of the 91 eligible participants, 51 stated that they had cycled in their relationship within the past three months. Of these 51 participants, 15 participants stated that they had cycled within the past 3 months, were still broken up with their ex and

"there's no chance we will ever get back together,"; 26 participants stated that they had cycled in their current relationship within the past three months and were "back together,"; and 10 stated that they were still broken up with their former partner within the past three months and indicated that "there is a chance we might get back together." The remainder of participants (34) had cycled within the past 3 years (6 of the surveys had missing data about their cycling history), of which 18 reported having cycled with "no chance we will ever get back together"; 15 reported that they had cycled and were "back together,"; and 1 reported being broken up with "a chance we might get back together."

Participants. The study aimed for the optimum size recommended for focus groups (5-8 people per group; Kruger & Casey, 2015), but due to low response rates, several groups fell below that standard. Out of 21 total participants, there were seven female "Former Cyclers" (five in group 1; two in group 2), eight female "Currently Cyclers" (five in group 1; three in group 2), and six participants (four females, two males) who were "Contemplating Renewal" (individuals contemplating renewing their relationship with their ex). All participants reported having broken up and gotten back together with their current or former partner at least once within the past three years, and 14 participants reported having cycled within the past three months (Former Cyclers = 4; Current Cyclers = 5; Contemplating Renewal = 5), with the exception of one female participant who reported having cycled four years ago. All participants characterized the process of breaking up and getting back together as "somewhat stressful" or "very stressful." The majority of participants were Caucasian (86%), 4.8% were American Indian, 4.8% were Asian, and 4.8% were African American. Participants ranged in age from 18-28 years old, and the average age was 21.6 years old. Most participants were "exclusively dating"/"in a committed relationship" (38%), followed by 33.3% of participants "casually dating." The remainder of

participants reported being "single" (19%), "engaged" (4.8%), or "married" (4.8%) (See Table 1).

 Measures

Pre-tests were administered prior to the focus groups. The pre-test included questions inquiring about demographic information, as well as questions about participants' level of certainty about staying broken up (for Former Cyclers and Contemplating Renewal) or staying together (Current Cyclers). The pre-tests and post-tests also inquired about participants' levels of confusion, clarity, anger, forgiveness, regret, peace, and certainty about the future when thinking about their current or past cyclical relationships. The focus groups lasted about 90 minutes each. When conducting the focus groups, participants were asked questions such as, "How certain were you/are you that you were/are broken up for good? How did/do you know?"; "What factors did/are you think[ing] about when deciding to get back with your ex?"; What would be/would have been helpful to "move on" after breaking up?" Additional questions specifically designed for each of the three groups mentioned above were also asked to supplement general questions such as, "What ultimately helped you make decision to break it off for good?"; "What was helpful in arriving at that decision to break up for good?"; "What would've been more helpful?"; "What did you learn from that relationship?" (for Former Cyclers), "What barriers do you see to this relationship lasting long-term?" and "What keeps the relationship going?" (for Current Cyclers); and "What concerns, if any, do you have about getting back together with your ex?" and "How would you know if it was time to permanently end the relationship or to take the relationship to the next stage of commitment?" (for Contemplating Renewal; See full list of focus group questions included in the appendix).

Analysis Strategy

Prior to conducting the focus groups, a pilot focus group was conducted with three males and three females (six individuals total) to assess validity and reliability of focus group discussion questions. The primary author conducted the pilot and final focus groups. Additionally, research assistants helped with note-taking (quotes, non-verbals, etc.) during the focus groups, as well as tracking themes discussed throughout. All five focus groups were transcribed using the transcription service Rev.com (rated with a transcription accuracy of 99.7%).

Thematic analysis is a widely used means of analyzing qualitative data that aims to conceptualize participants' responses by identifying common themes and patterns (Mills, Durepos, Wiebe, 2010; Braun & Clark, 2006). While eliminating all preconceptions or bias from data analysis would be impossible, two other graduate students trained in directed content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) assisted in the identification of themes in the data to increase fidelity of coding participants' responses. The coders conducted a thematic analysis using directed content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) guided by Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman's (2006) "Sliding vs. Deciding" theory using the QDA Miner Lite Software. To begin data analysis, all three coders conducted an initial reading of two of the five transcripts while creating a framework for categorization of themes guided by the "Sliding vs. Deciding" theory (Stanley, Rhoades, Markman, 2006). Once the transcripts were read through once, coders discussed their categorization methods and agreed upon guiding themes to organize data by. Next, researchers re-read all of the transcripts to ensure appropriateness of the categories created before finalizing themes, after which the themes were refined. Once themes were finalized, the coders went through the transcripts independently and coded all relevant "meaning units" (Mills, Durepos,

Wiebe, 2010; Gibbs, 2007). Then, all three coders came together to go through the first transcript to discuss meaning units and any discrepancies in the coding process, after which consensus regarding the themes and meaning units was reached. After the first transcript, the researchers coded the remaining transcripts independently and came together in pairs (with the main author/focus group facilitator participating in coding all four remaining transcripts) to cross-check (Thyer, 2001; Miles & Huberman, 1994) meaning units and discuss any discrepancies in coding responses until consensus was reached on all meaning units. All data was discussed in pairs until agreement was reached to strengthen the reliability of the interpretation of the qualitative results (Baxter & Eyles, 1997). All three coders reached consensus on 100% of the coding after cross-examination (Thyer, 2001; Miles & Huberman, 1994) of transcripts. If any additional themes were discovered as relevant during the coding process, emergent themes were added to the codebook and transcripts that were coded initially were re-coded to ensure all meaning units were indicated in all relevant data.

Chapter 4 - Results

When viewing the data through Scott Stanley's "Sliding vs. Deciding" theory, a concept emerged from the data that I will refer to as "decision-making resiliency" (DMR). This idea encapsulates an individual's capacity to utilize one's value system and confidence in themselves to make and *abide by* difficult decisions amidst constraints that might pressure one to go back on their decision. Accordingly, all experiential data were categorized as either 1) detracting from DMR (DDMR), or 2) promoting DMR (PDMR). Within the two categories of detracting from or promoting DMR, eight overarching themes emerged with multiple sub-themes within (see Table 2). Percentages of meaning units were calculated within categories (promoting or detracting from DMR), as well as within groups (Current Cyclers, Former Cyclers, and Contemplating Renewal). Analysis of the pre- and post-test questions did not reveal any significant differences between the participants' pre-tests and post-tests.

Themes that occurred in the focus groups in order of overall prevalence (DDMR and PDMR meaning units combined) included: Identity Development (20.5%), Communication (19.7%), Power/Control Dynamics (13.0%), Hope for Future with Partner (12.7%), Sliding vs. Deciding (10.4%), Constraints (9.0%), Outside Influences (6.4%), and Other (7.5% total: Anxiety about the Future: 3.2%; Perceiving/Pursuing Other Alternatives: 2.6%; Infidelity: 1.6%; and Mental Illness: 0.07%).

Within the DDMR category, themes that seemed to detract from DMR, in order of prevalence, included: Lacking Identity Development (19.5%); Power/Control Dynamics (17.4%); Avoiding Communication (14.7%); Constraints (12.2%); Lacking Intentionality in Relationship Transitions ("Sliding" as opposed to "Deciding"; 11.0%); Hope for Future of Relationship if Partner or Context Changes (9.3%); Outside Influences (6.7%); Anxiety about

Future (5.2%); Perceiving/Pursuing Other Alternatives (1.7%); Mental Illness (1.2%), and

Infidelity (0.9%).

Themes that occurred in the focus groups that seemed to promote DMR, in order of

prevalence, included: Direct and Open Communication (27.9%); Identity Development (22.2%);

Evidence Over Time Compromised Hope for Future of Relationship (18.2%); Deliberate

Decision-Making about Relationship Transitions ("Deciding" as opposed to "Sliding"; 9.3%);

Outside Influences (5.9%); Power/Control Dynamics (6%); Constraints Promoting Commitment

(4.0%); Perceiving or Pursuing Other Alternatives as Better or Worse (4.0%); and Infidelity

(2.7%).

I will discuss the results of the thematic analysis in more detail in order of the most to the

least prevalent themes (overall prevalence was calculated by adding meaning units within similar

themes of DDMR and PDMR units). As I discuss the overarching themes, I will discuss the sub-

themes that emerged within the DDMR and PDMR categories and how these sub-themes

differed in prevalence of meaning units between groups (i.e., comparing prevalence of "avoiding

communication" between Current Cyclers and Former Cyclers). Participant suggestions for

others in similar situations or for helping professionals working with cyclical partners will be

presented with the relevant themes in the results section and discussed at more length in the

discussion.

 The Role of Identity Development in Relationship Decision Making

Discussion relating to the development of worth or identity was the most prevalent theme

overall (20.5%) that emerged in all five focus groups as detracting from DMR (19.5% of DDMR

codes), and the second most prevalent theme of elements that promote DMR when it was

developed (22.2% of PDMR codes). While the concept of "identity development" is broad, five

sub-themes of development emerged to explain ways in which lack of identity development detracted from DMR in cyclical relationships: 1) having undefined values, or living incongruently with one's values (72 meaning units), 2) low trust in self and one's decisions (65 meaning units), 3) relationship contingent self-esteem (when one's self-worth is tied to the relationship; Knee, Canevello, Bush, Cook, 2008) (52 meaning units), 4) low self-esteem or feelings of worthlessness (45 meaning units), and 5) jealousy (15 meaning units). Inversely, having a more solid definition of one's identity promoted DMR. Identity sub-themes that emerged in the PDMR category included 1) being aware of and living congruently with one's values (68 meaning units), 2) having high levels of DMR overall (59 meaning units), and 3) one's self-esteem not being contingent on one's partner or relationship (47 meaning units).

With regard to values, participants talked about how their relationships were difficult to define when they did not know what they actually wanted in a partner or what traits they wanted to expound on in themselves: *"Finding yourself, making sure you know who you are… what other traits could I have picked up from him that I'm like, 'Am I really this way because I'm this way, or because I picked it up from that person?'"* (Female, Former Cycler). Participants also talked about having their values and goals undefined, which affected their ability to function in their daily lives or relationships as well as they'd like: *"We had some friends suggest that we needed to figure out our own lives without the use of alcohol."* (Female, Contemplating Renewal).

Participants also talked about how their relationships were impacted by low confidence or ability to follow through with decisions in relationships: *"I mean, I want to say that we're not getting back together, but I said that the first time, and then we got back together right after that."* (Female, Contemplating Renewal). Relating to confidence in their decisions, there was

discussion amongst participants in the Former Cyclers groups about wishing they had *"trust[ed] [their] gut"* (Female) and listened to their initial intuitions about their former relationship. Participants also discussed having an overall distrust in their ability to make *"good"* decisions, or in other words, lacking confidence in their decision-making abilities:

> *"For me, I think I should be more confident in the decisions that I make. I rely a lot on what people say to me… sometimes Mom's advice is not the best but I always listen to what she has to say and then I typically make the decision that she said to do even though it's not the one that I wanted… I just need to learn to be more confident…in my ability to make decisions rather than what my mom and dad or my friends or brothers have to say about it."* (Female, Contemplating Renewal).

Knee and colleagues (2008) define relationship-contingent self-esteem as the degree to which one's selfhood is subjected to change dependent upon the successes or failures of his/her relationship. There were comments made about the negative impacts of relying too much on one's partner or the relationship for self-worth (relationship contingent self-esteem), and the difficulties of balancing togetherness and individuality: *"How much you can be together and need to be together. You have to find that balance of when you were being too dependent…"* (Female, Current Cycler). Participants shared that they believed it is important to know why you're in the relationship, and to re-consider staying in the relationship if you are co-dependent with your partner: *"... Knowing that you can be okay on your own and then knowing why you're in that relationship. You're not just in it because you want someone to text 24/7 or you're not just in it because you've always been in it."* (Female, Current Cycler). Participants also talked about ways that they changed or hoped they would change as a result of the breakup: *"I… hoped that I would change from the breakup, just not being so codependent…"* (Female, Current

Cycler). Similar to this notion, another participant stated, *"I was so much more codependent than he was."* (Female, Current Cycler).

With regards to identity development, participants also talked about ways that being unsure about themselves resulted in being unsure about the relationship, specifically discussing the effect of lacking confidence in themselves as people or having low self-esteem: *"…What I'm afraid of, is somebody going to like me for who I am? Or accept me? Am I too intimidating? Am I too bold and abrasive? What is it about me? I'm afraid to let people get close…the fear of rejection."* (Female, Former Cycler). Participants also talked about believing their partner would be better off without them, and wanting to be more confident in their worth: *"…I think I just need to learn to be more confident in myself,"* (Female, Contemplating Renewal). Participants also talked about perceiving themselves as being foolish, and attributing this to the cause of the cyclical nature of their relationships: *"So I want to say, 'No, we're not getting back together.' Obviously it didn't work the first three times. But, I'm a sucker, so…"* (Contemplating Renewal).

Lastly, jealousy was mentioned as a factor that increased ambiguity. This sub-theme was organized within the "Identity Development" theme because jealousy was frequently mentioned in the context of believing one's partner might be happier with someone else, which resulted in feeling inadequate and detracted from feeling confident in oneself: *"Jealousy, insecurity… what's going to happen if he meets someone…"* (Female, Current Cycler). Some participants mentioned jealousy in the context of infidelity, but also mentioned how their own jealous feelings and/or their partner's jealousy inhibited their ability as a couple to communicate effectively about relationship issues: *"Jealousy…that thought, 'What if he gives them what he wouldn't give me? Would he talk to them and he wouldn't talk to me?"* (Female, Current Cycler).

On the other hand, participants' knowledge of their values helped them hold firm to their relationship decisions, and there was discussion about the importance of prioritizing self-exploration and identity development as a necessary step in life. For example, when talking about the importance of her values, one participant said: *"No amount of lovie dovie stuff can get me to change my view on life."* (Female, Contemplating Renewal)*.* There was discussion about the importance of being aware of one's life and relationship goals in order to feel secure in one's decision to commit to a relationship long-term: *"It's just maturity levels and deciding where we are and what we want."* (Female, Contemplating Renewal). Participants also talked about how solidified values and identity assisted in individuals being intentional and, *"being able to say, 'this is why I love you, this is why we're in a relationship'…"* (Female, Current Cycler). Participants also talked generally about the value of trusting in their decisions and being deliberate about their choices as an element of identity development: *"I knew that it was over because I actually said, 'I'm done, I cannot do this anymore. I'm done.'"* (Female, Former Cycler). Lastly, participants discussed the importance of having a personal foundation of self-worth that is not contingent upon one's partner or relationship. Individuals talked about removing themselves from co-dependent positions in relationships helped them to trust in their decisions more (and ultimately trust themselves more overall): *"… while it's fine to lean on someone for emotional support, they shouldn't be everything. You have to have other outlets."* (Female, Current Cycler). The importance of personal independence was also discussed with regard to self-worth: *"I think [the breakup] made me a much more independent person and that made me realize I didn't need to be with him, but that I wanted to be with him…"* (Female, Current Cycler). Participants also talked about the value in knowing your worth and capacity to overcome pain as an element of identity development: *"…At the end of the day, they're just*

people. They can't make or break us… And I've come to realize that it's important to just be

okay with yourself completely…" (Female, Current Cycler). Overall, participants in all three

groups of cyclers acknowledged the difficulty of relationships, particularly cyclical relationships,

when identity is in flux: *"This is a real issue… it's a big change in your life while you're still*

developing…" (Female, Current Cycler).

   Participant recommendations for identity development. When asked about what

professionals should know to help individuals struggling in cyclical relationships, participants

shared that they believe it is important for emerging adults to know *"what kind of person… you*

want to end up with," (Female, Former Cycler). Participants recommended that therapists and

relationship educators should work with individuals to identify *"relationship goals,"* (Female,

Former Cycler), and to assist individuals in knowing "*…what you want to get out of the*

relationship, what didn't work in the past, and what they didn't like about the relationship. You

can work on it and make a better relationship." (Female, Former Cycler). One participant

shared, *"[A therapist asking] 'What is your confidence level with this?' That would have made*

me question, actually…" (Female, Former Cycler).

Direct & Open Communication for Reducing Ambivalence

   Discussion about avoidance of communication was the second most prevalent theme

overall (19.7%), the third most commonly discussed theme in the DDMR category (comprising

14.7% of the DDMR data) and the *most* prevalent theme in the PDMR category (27.9%).

Participants in the focus groups commented frequently about how avoidance of communication

about relationship issues, status or expectations was either the cause of the breakup or the reason

they felt ambiguous about their relationship generally. Sub-themes that emerged within the

DDMR category included avoiding communication about: 1) relational issues (117 meaning

units) or 2) relationship status (53 meaning units), as well as 3) avoidance of communication using technology (18 meaning units). Three sub-themes also emerged within the PDMR category of communication, which included direct and open communication about 1) relational issues (95 meaning units), and 2) relationship status (53 meaning units), and 3) defining expectations of one's partner and the relationship (18 meaning units).

Participants discussed their experiences of avoiding discussions about relational issues, such as the reasons behind the breakup: *"I don't think we really ever talked about [the reasons behind the breakup]. We sit down and have good conversations, but we never really talk about why. Or what can make it better or anything."* (Female, Former Cycler). Participants also mentioned avoidance about discussions regarding specific issues and concerns about their future with that person: *"…He never really told me if there was anything that was bothering him besides that he didn't want to be without me."* (Female, Former Cycler). Participants stated that relationship talk avoidance was an issue before the breakup, as well as during the dissolution period and after renewals: *"We'd break up then when I would try to talk to him about it he really didn't want to…"* (Female, Current Cycler). Participants also mentioned that sometimes breaking up was actually an effort to communicate about issues that weren't being communicated about in the relationship: *"[Breaking up] was sort of a way to vent frustration to kind of be dramatic. It wasn't like an actual breakup,"* (Female, Current Cycler).

When talking about communication avoidance, participants discussed some of the difficulties with talking about relationship status, such as not knowing what a committed relationship looks like: *"And there was a weak definition of the relationship, so what I thought a relationship was not exactly what she thought it was. And so that detriment was where all those questions came from."* (Male, Contemplating Renewal). Participants also mentioned difficulties

encountered with knowing *how* to define a relationship: *"We needed to DTR [define the relationship], but we didn't know what DTR was... sometimes [people] don't know that they need a DTR, sometimes they did one but not the right way,"* (Male, Contemplating Renewal). Participants also talked about using technology (i.e. texting, Snapchat, etc.) to avoid communication: *"Most of our communication was done via text message…so it just wasn't as much of an actual relationship."* (Female, Former Cycler).

Not surprisingly, the importance of direct, open and honest communication was the most commonly discussed theme within the category of things that promote DMR, and was described as a necessary component of a relationship that is healthy; additionally, many participants commented on the ways they can now retrospectively see how direct communication could have helped their former relationships or could have helped avoid previous breakups in their current relationship. Participants talked specifically about the importance of communicating about expectations to ensure that they are realistic: *"She thinks romance novels give you an accurate description of what a relationship should be like."* (Male, Contemplating Renewal). Participants also talked about how *"brutal"* and *"honest"* (Female, Former Cyclers) communication helped to resolve issues that were perpetuating cyclical patterns in their relationships.

Participant recommendations to improve communication. When asked about advice participants would give others in their previous or current situation, participants in all three focus groups discussed the importance of using direct and open communication to define expectations in the relationship: *"I talk to him more… and am more honest about my expectations."* (Female, Current Cyclers). Participants suggested that open communication about one's feelings and hopes for the relationship is necessary, and encouraged others to, *"Just say out their real feelings and what they really want out of a relationship, and if they want to make it work."* (Female,

Former Cycler). When looking back on her relationship, one female stated, "*There were no expectations in the beginning. When I broke up with him it was just kind of because we needed to talk about it. We needed to set those expectations, and now we have them, and they're very well understood…*" (Current Cyclers). Participants gave examples of how they communicated clearly in order to finalize a breakup: "*I think for our relationship maybe communication could have been better, and just… brutal honesty,*" (Female, Former Cyclers), and discussed how important clear communication was in order to make a successful (long-lasting) renewal possible:

"*I think it took the breakup with me saying, 'Okay, you've cheated on me, you're not in this. We're done.' Separating and then having a clearness. That it really being definite, and that's what made us able to communicate, which made getting back together possible*" (Current Cycler).

Power and Control Dynamics in Cyclical Relationships

A theme that emerged (comprising 13.0% of overall data) was the existence of dynamics regarding power and control, which was especially prevalent in the DDMR category. Most (83.2%) of the Power/Control meaning units were coded within the DDMR category, whereas only 16.8% of the Power/Control meaning units were coded as promoting DMR. Additionally, it is important to note that the majority of Power/Control meaning units (139) were coded in the Former Cyclers group within the DMR category. Seven sub-themes emerged within the DDMR category, which included: 1) general existence of power differentials between partners (28 meaning units), 2) differing levels of commitment (69 meaning units), 3) feeling like one lacks power to influence the outcome of the relationship (62 meaning units), 4) lacking DMR, which contributes to feeling powerless overall (13 meaning units), 5) holding power to hurt one's partner (i.e., by being the one who cares the least, by cheating, or by being the less committed

partner or the one to initiate the breakup; 29 meaning units), 6) feeling manipulated/"guilted"

back into the relationship (12 meaning units), and 7) technology use contributing to feeling

powerless or being used to re-gain power (10 meaning units).

Five sub-themes emerged within the PDMR category, which included: 1) Feeling like

one has power to influence the outcome of the relationship (18 meaning units); 2) Higher levels

of DMR, resulting in one feeling more powerful (10 meaning units), 3) No outstanding power

differentials exist in relationship, and feeling there are equal levels of power with one's partner

(9 meaning units); 4) possessing power to hurt one's partner (4 meaning units), 5) wielding

power via technology use (4 meaning units).

At a basic level, even when no mal-intent was perceived, participants discussed how

power differentials made their relationship challenging: *"I broke up with him, which*

theoretically means I had the power, I think. In reality, I think he had a stronger hold over me,

not intentionally, but just emotionally he had a lot more power over me at the time… not

intentionally manipulative, but…". One factor that contributed to power differentials in these

cyclical relationships was when partners had differing levels of commitment. Participants often

discussed discrepant commitment levels as an element of the relationship that resulted in them

personally feeling powerless, or seeing that their partner felt powerless when participants

perceived that they cared less about the relationship than their partner: "*I don't think I had a lot*

of power because I wanted it to work," (Female, Current Cycler). Lack of power resulted in

some participants feeling helpless to effect change in their relationship or feeling like they didn't

have a voice. For example, one participant explained that her partner's avoidance kept her from

feeling heard: *"I didn't really have much power. I kept trying to have the conversation, but it*

didn't really work until he was at the point where he wanted to."; *"It was a breakup to be like,*

'listen to me!'" (Current Cycler). Participants also mentioned instances when feeling a lack of power or too much power resulted in a lack of DMR: *"I guess I had all the power, but I didn't like it. In the back of my head, I knew we'd probably always get back together…"* (Female, Current Cycler). Participants also discussed relationships where one partner seemingly possessed power to hurt the other partner, and often times expressed not wanting to hold that power: *"I had the power of breaking up but, I was like, 'I don't want this!'"* (Female, Former Cycler). Also within this sub-theme, participants discussed using certain actions or avoidance techniques to try to avoid hurting their partner: *"At one point before I broke up with him, I wanted him to break up with me so I was being mean to him."* (Female, Former Cycler).

Power dynamics also emerged when participants reported feeling manipulated or "guilted" back into the relationship when their partners blamed them for the pain of the breakup, or when partners tried to *"convince"* them to renew the relationship while disregarding participants' initial reasons for breaking up in the first place: *"He texted me afterwards and was like, 'You broke my heart, you're the worst person ever,' and I was like, 'Oh, I feel so bad.'"* (Female, Former Cycler); *"He was texting me, and he was like, 'How could you do this to me? You said you would always love me…"* (Female, Former Cycler). Some participants also mentioned using technology as a way to re-gain power (i.e., texting to break up to *"have the last word",* [Female, Former Cyclers]).

Power was not only discussed as a negative – participants shared experiences where feeling empowered to advocate for their needs in the relationship resulted in the relationship permanently ending or the relationship stabilizing (exiting the cycling pattern). However, for participants who reported that power resulted in a stabilization of the relationship, it was usually when power differentials were addressed and partners re-negotiated their relationship contract

through open and direct communication about their expectations. When power resulted in the permanent dissolution of the relationship, participants reported that *"having the last word"* (Female, Former Cyclers) was the only way for them to break free from a relationship where their partner typically had more power. The Current Cyclers groups also talked about how the breakup actually resulted in narrowing the gap of power they perceived as existing between themselves and their partner prior to the breakup, discussing how individuals felt they had more freedom to advocate for their needs when they were distanced from the pull of their partner (as a result of the breakup).

Beliefs about the Future of the Relationship

The theme of "Beliefs/Hopes about Future with Partner" was the fourth most prevalent theme overall, comprising 12.7% of the meaning units between both the DDMR and PDMR categories (DDMR: 45.6%; PDMR: 54.4%). Sub-themes that emerged within the DDMR category included 1) beliefs/hopes that the relationship will change if context changes (59 meaning units), 2) beliefs/hopes that one's partner will would/will change (54 meaning units), and 3) beliefs/hopes that one can personally fix/change their partner (6 meaning units).

When talking about the ways that beliefs about the future promoted DMR, participants discussed ways that accrual of evidence over time ultimately compromised previously existing hope for the future of the relationship: 1) after realizing that one's partner hasn't changed enough (39 meaning units), 2) because of differing values, goals or lifestyles (37 meaning units), 3) because of differing levels of commitment (16 meaning units), 4) losing hope for the future of the relationship overall, for no specific reasons (14 meaning units), 5) losing hope because of the number of breakups that had previously occurred (11 meaning units), 6) and losing hope because of outside opinions/perspectives about the relationship (11 meaning units). Conversely, a second

set of themes within the PDMR category included comments where evidence over time actually *promoted* participants' hope for the future of their relationship (and consequently promoted DMR and relationship maintenance behaviors), including: 1) finding that their partner *had* changed (11 meaning units), and 2) context changing which resulted in the relationship changing (3 meaning units).

Participants talked about how they felt ambiguous about their relationship because they knew they weren't happy with the way things were then, but that they had solid hopes for the future of the relationship: *"...the excitement for the new, improved us."* (Female, Contemplating Renewal). Participants discussed hopes they had for the future of the relationship if their partner or context or their partner changed: *"Wondering if... I loved more recklessly or fully committed or just gave it more time it would be okay."* (Female, Former Cycler). Sometimes, the context upon which participants' hopes for the future of the relationship was contingent upon context changing was very vague, but alluded to wanting the relationship to work and hoping *"external factors would kind of shake things up in a way we couldn't do,"* (Female, Former Cycler). Participants also talked about hoping that their partner's values or goals would change:

> *"I was at a different place in my life...I want to settle down... every time that we continued to get together, he'd get a little bit closer to that step, and I know where I want him to be, but then that's also me pushing him to be somebody that he's not ready to be yet..."* (Female, Contemplating Renewal).

Participants also specifically mentioned that they had previously held beliefs that they could personally fix or change their partner: *"I wish I would have known that I could not fix him. I couldn't make his depression go away, I couldn't make him be more ambitious... no matter how hard I tried."* (Female, Former Cycler). Participants also shared their experiences of holding

prior beliefs about hopes of changing their partner in the context of discussing reasons to get back together: *"I didn't want him to want me to get back together just because he's comfortable in our relationship. I want to make sure it's going to change and everything… make sure the good parts were good and the bad parts were at bay, I guess,"* (Female, Current Cycler).

With regard to experiences that promoted DMR, participants shared times in which they recognized that previous beliefs and hopes about the future of their relationship were probably not accurate or realistic, often when they realized that they had more evidence that weighed in favor of breaking up than staying together. One realization mentioned by participants was that their partner hadn't changed enough for the relationship to be successful long-term:

> *"… You've just got to understand… it didn't work out because he was rude… But then he comes back, he's not going to change. Like, he can be all sweet and he can turn on that nice charm, but he's always got those roots. You've got to understand people really deep down don't change. At least I don't think, anyways."* (Female, Former Cycler).

A second type of realization was that partners' differing lifestyles compromised hope for the future with that person: "…*that was not the life that I could picture for myself. Like, I couldn't be married to someone that's working at a grocery store at 35 years old, like that just can't happen for me*" (Female, Former Cycler). Participants also discussed how differing values and goals complicated the relationship and made a case for why they felt the relationship may not work: *"He wants to buy a house, have a baby, and I want to do an internship in London, somewhere…"*, (Female, Current Cycler). Discrepancies in levels of commitment between partners was mentioned as a fourth form of evidence that made the future of the relationship seem unviable: "*When we broke up, I didn't want to. I wanted to keep working, but I told him, "If you're not going to put forth any effort, then I'm no*t.". The number of breakups that occurred also

provided evidence that the relationship was no longer worth investing in, as participants shared experiences where they realized after a certain number of breakups and renewals that the relationship seemed destined for failure. Finally, participants mentioned that opinions of friends or family members about their partner or the relationship solidified their decisions to break up:

> *"His mom [told me], 'You have to do what you're going to do. Don't do it for him… he's an asshole, and his dad is an asshole, an arrogant asshole…' She looked me in the eye and she said, "You're a beautiful girl. You're going to go far in life. Don't hold back for this guy."* (Female, Former Cyclers).

With regard to instances evidence over time promoted hope for the future (PDMR), participants talked about ways in which alterations to their circumstances or context (i.e. living closer to one another or having a more reliable car which made long-distance dating easier) made the relationship seem viable: *"…if I went to K-State, then we were going to get engaged... my heart 100% told me K-State, and I think that was kind of like, 'This is it'"*. (Female, Current Cycler). Participants also talked about experiences that proved to them their partners had changed enough for the relationship to work: *"I actually had restored faith in the relationship… when the traumatic event happened and he came up to visit me immediately. That sort of restored faith in [the relationship]…"* (Female, Current Cycler).

Participant recommendations for promoting realistic expectations. This theme generated a lot of discussion about having realistic expectations for your partner and your relationship. Participants suggested that therapists and relationship educators provide space to talk about expectations and challenge unhelpful or unrealistic thinking: *"I would say that people don't change. You need to be open-minded about that. And be realistic about it. People really don't change. You are who you are…"* (Female, Former Cyclers). In conjunction with having

realistic expectations, participants talked about the value of *"processing their relationships… to see patterns,"* (Female, Former Cyclers), and specifically discussed the value of having guidance to realize whether the relationship is actually viable: *"…When you get off that high of being together and we realize that it's just not gonna work, we're just going through the same cycles. Which we kind of realized last time but we're still in the end of the breakup, like buyer's remorse, but break-up remorse…"* (Male, Contemplating Renewal). Participants also talked about the value of having an outside party to discuss relational patterns in order to appropriately address relational issues. One participant shared her experiences of talking with a therapist about her relationship, and stated, *"I think context is really important… I could not… step back from the details to look at the bigger picture. So the therapist really helped me step back [and see], "Okay this is why we broke up" … it was more like what was the bigger picture of why, what does our relationship look like, and what were our roles in that relationship…"* (Female, Current Cycler).

Sliding vs. Deciding: Intentionality Reduces Ambivalence

Following the theme of "Hope for the Future with Partner," "Sliding vs. Deciding" was the next most prevalent theme in the data (10.4% of all meaning units). Five sub-themes emerged within this theme: two within DDMR (comprising 65.9% of the meaning units) and three within PDMR (comprising 34.1% of the meaning units). The sub-themes within DDMR included: 1) continued contact (either seeing each other in person or via the use of technology; 72 meaning units), 2) lack of intentionality about relationship transitions (44 meaning units), and 3) still trying to be friends after breaking up (25 meaning units). Within the PDMR category, the sub-themes that emerged were 1) deliberate decision-making about relationship transitions (30

meaning units), 2) setting and enforcing boundaries (28 meaning units), and 3) setting and enforcing boundaries using technology (15 meaning units).

Participants discussed ways in which continued contact after breaking up made sliding behaviors (specifically, getting back together after a breakup) more likely. Participants talked about continued contact occurring when they would use technology to stay in touch (e.g. texting; 25 meaning units): "…*one day he text [me] and it was like, 'Oh, what are you thinking girlfriend?', and I was like, 'I didn't know this was happening again.'"* (Female, Former Cycler). Participants also talked about continued contact in the form of seeing one another in person (e.g. *"hanging out"* or chatting at social outings (30 meaning units)*: "Mine was like spur of the moment. I was like, yeah sure we should hang out again… So I went over to his house and then after that it was… like we were dating to him, and I was kind of like, 'Oh, sure.'"* (Female, Former Cycler). Participants also mentioned seeing their ex's in public by coincidence (17 meaning units), which made the breakup more difficult and increased sliding behaviors (e.g. talking to each other, then hanging out): *"It's kind of hard being in high school because I had 38 people in my graduating class… I mean his locker was right next to mine… and we have the same friend group…"* (Female, Former Cycler). Participants mentioned the ways that continued contact, whether purposeful or not, made intentional behaviors post-breakup more difficult: "…*we would breakup but we would still see each other every day, like sports stuff, just games and everything. It was kind of always there. It was weird seeing him when we were broken up…"* (Female, Current Cycler). Participants in all three focus groups talked about how continued contact during separations or dissolution periods made the breakup more confusing and resulted in sliding back into a dating relationship:

"In my head I knew we were breaking up, but in his head, I think he thought we had

problems we need to talk about. Which I did. We'd move around with the same group of

friends so we would hang out, and hold hands and still flirt, that sort of thing, and then

we'd get back together." (Female, Contemplating Renewal).

Participants talked about how a lack of intentionality resulted in riding a rollercoaster of

extremes in their relationship: *"Because we were either at one extreme or at the other… just*

platonic friends who just chit-chat every once in a while, or we were just head over heels in a

relationship." (Female, Contemplating Renewal). This is exemplified by the following quote in

which a participant shared about "sliding" through the relationship transition of breaking up, as

well as getting back together: *"…I went and broke up with him and then we hung out that night…*

then we kept hanging out... we just kept hanging out like we weren't broken up." (Female,

Current Cycler). Participants talked about how the ambiguity of previous breakups was

particularly heightened when they and their ex's attempted to remain friends:

"Then I went home… and he asked me to meet up to become friends and stuff. So, we met

up and then I think we just kept hanging out every time I'd go home. So, in my head we

were breaking up and just hanging out, kinda. But in his head, we were talking and like

the breakup was just… kind of ambiguous… for a while." (Female, Current Cycler).

A common discussion amongst all three groups of cyclers was the increased likelihood of

renewing the relationship if individuals attempted to maintain friendship after breaking up:

"…And figure out… how we could have just stayed friends without falling back into sleeping

together." (Female, Contemplating Renewal).

When talking about intentionality promoting DMR, participants discussed the importance of discussing what the next steps would be in their relationship and how to maintain decisions that they made as a couple (i.e., to either break up or get back together). Participants shared specific experiences about ways that setting boundaries helped clarify some ambiguity about their relationship status: *"We… talked about setting some ground rules, and trying to figure out how we could still be friends.*" (Female, Contemplating Renewal). Participants also mentioned ways they set boundaries by texting their expectations to their partners, or by blocking their partners' phone number or on social media in order to maintain the boundaries they had set of discontinued contact after breaking up.

Participant suggestions for promoting intentionality. When asked about ways professionals could assist individuals in cyclical relationships, participants talked again about the importance of clarifying values and setting clearer expectations, which requires very deliberate effort (deciding, not sliding): *"For us to get back together we would have to seriously address everything that happened. We can't just start dating tomorrow and expect everything to be okay."* (Female, Contemplating Renewal). Participants also talked about how the pain of the breakup (or the idea of breaking up) was incredibly difficult, so having a professional assist them in dealing with grief in productive ways might be useful: *"…my young brain, all I could think about was the details and just the grief. Like, I literally didn't know how I was going to live without him, you know?…Getting through all of that."* (Female, Current Cycler). Participants suggested that having an outside party to help one make sense of that pain would be useful: *"…Maybe someone to help me be like, 'Wow, it sounds like maybe you're feeling a lot of this…"* (Female, Former Cycler), specifically in the way of helping individuals process the meaning

behind their pain and how to uphold their personal values (using deciding/deliberate decision-making skills) amidst the difficult emotions within or outside of the relationship.

Constraints' Influence on Relationship Decision Making

The sixth most prevalent theme was "Constraints", derived from Stanley & Markman's (1992) theory of commitment differentiating constraint commitment from dedication. "Constraints" comprised 9.0% of the meaning units (187 meaning units) between both categories of DDMR and PDMR. "Constraints" were far more prevalent in the within the DDMR category (83.4%; 156 meaning units) than in the PDMR category (16.6%; 31 meaning units). Within the DDMR category, the seven constraint sub-themes were divided by sub-themes that *detracted* from commitment or constraints that *kept partners in* the relationship (but didn't necessarily promote commitment). Sub-themes of "Constraints" in the DDMR category that *detracted from commitment* included 1) perceived constraints (23 meaning units), 2) material constraints (21 meaning units), and 3) felt constraints (1 meaning unit). Sub-themes within DDMR that *kept individuals in the relationship* (but didn't necessarily promote commitment) included: 1) perceived constraints (62 meaning units), 2) material constraints (26 meaning units), 3) feeling responsible for partner's well-being/feeling guilt about hurting one's partner keeping you in the relationship (20 meaning units), and 4) felt constraints (3 meaning units). Within the PDMR category, the following two sub-themes emerged: 1) perceived constraints promoting commitment (22 meaning units), and 2) material constraints promoting commitment (9 meaning units).

Constraints detracting from commitment. Perceived constraints that detracted from participants' levels of commitment (but kept individuals in the relationship) included participants not wanting to be alone, but not necessarily wanting to be with their partner, either. Participants

also discussed disapproval from family or friends about being in the relationship: *"…my mom is not really a big fan of him"* (Female, Former Cycler). Participants also discussed how the stigma of being in a cyclical relationship increased indecision (i.e. participants' commitment to the relationship became more difficult because of others' judgements, but the prospect of breaking up would also potentially result in being judged for cycling again):

> *"I've always been the person that was like, 'Don't go back to your ex, you're an idiot if you go back to your ex.' Then I got back together with my ex, so I was really worried about what people would say. I didn't keep the relationship private, but I didn't post about it. I definitely wasn't confident in it."* (Female, Former Cycler).

Material constraints that detracted from commitment included difficulties of long-distance relationships (e.g. long-distance made communication more difficult), or financial difficulties: *"money was probably an issue…he was living with me and my… roommates, he wasn't paying rent because he didn't have a job…"* (Female, Former Cycler). Felt constraints were mentioned (albeit, rarely) as detracting from commitment while also keeping partners in the relationship (e.g. participants' partners were avoiding communicating about issues) due to *"being legally binded"* by marriage (Female, Current Cycler).

Constraints keeping partners in the relationship. Participants talked most about how perceived constraints, such as caring about the person or not wanting to hurt their partner made breaking up difficult and made staying together more likely. For example, participants shared experiences about the difficulty of being broken up previously made breaking up for good seem too difficult to follow through with, despite being dissatisfied with elements of their relationships: *"…being single is not comfortable for me… he's comfortable for me, he knows me, and I know him. And it's nice being with someone who knows everything about you…"* (Female,

Former Cycler). Material constraints that kept individuals in the relationship but detracted from DMR presented themselves mostly in the form of constraints due to living arrangements:

> *"He definitely would…make it clear that we were not together. But we lived together. So, he would go to work, I would go to work, or class or whatever. But, yeah, I mean we shared a bed. But that's pretty ambiguous I mean if you're together or just mad at each other, just separate then."* (Former cycler).

Participants also discussed how feeling responsible for their partner's well-being prevented them from making decisions or fully committing to being together or being apart: *"It was one of those things where I'm such a feeler that I cannot break somebody's heart. I will wait to be broken up with because I hate hurting people's feelings."* (Female, Former Cycler). Participants discussed felt constraints in the context of participants discussing feeling *"stuck in this circle of trying to fix things,"* (Female, Former Cycler).

When talking about ways in which constraints promoted DMR, participants in the Current Cyclers group shared experiences that confirmed that their partner was *"my person"* or *"the only one who can really understand me."* Perceived constraints also presented themselves in the form of enduring difficult experiences together (*"We had gone through pretty much everything together,"* - Female, Current Cycler) and feeling a unique connection to one's partner due to those experiences which made breaking up seem like the less desirable option. Material constraints that promoted DMR included living together, living in the same home town, or financial stability.

Outside Influences

External factors came up intermittently throughout all five focus groups (6.9% of the meaning units overall), but were more prevalent amongst Current Cyclers (57% of the meaning

units in this theme were from the Current Cyclers groups). Seven sub-themes emerged within outside influences. Within the DDMR category the following sub-themes emerged: 1) Distance (54 meaning units), 2) Family and Friends (23 meaning units), and 3) Time passed between breakups (9 meaning units). Within the PDMR category, the sub-themes were 1) Distance (22 meaning units), 2) Time Passed Between Breakups (14 meaning units), 3) Family and Friends (6 meaning units), and 4) Additional Resources (4 meaning units).

A very common discussion amongst Current Cyclers was the difficulty of long-distance relationships, and how navigating the difficulties of long-distance was a main contributing factor to the cyclical patterns of their relationships: *"He broke up with me right before he went off to college because he didn't know if he could handle long distance… long distance was… hard, but I'd rather try long distance than not do anything."* (Female, Current Cyclers). A second outside influence that made relationship decisions more difficult for participants was their partner's family of origin (i.e., family communication styles that made communicating about relational issues difficult). Participants also mentioned difficulties encountered when friends' opinions or perspectives about the relationship were incongruent with how participants viewed the relationship. Time was the third outside influence within the category of DDMR, that participants reported made relationship decisions more difficult because the amount of time spent broken up or together was incongruent with their relationship status: *"So we talked for three, four months, and he would never actually date me or make it official",* (Female, Former Cycler)."

With regard to outside influences that promoted DMR, participants mentioned that sometimes having distance or time helped to clarify one's decision to stay together or break up: *"I kind of needed space, I didn't want to talk to him or see him or anything… if he did try to talk*

to me or see me it would've made it worse." (Female, Current Cycler). Participants mentioned

space or distance helped with development and allowed for an increase in self-awareness:

> *I think it made me a much more independent person and that made me realize I didn't*
>
> *need to be with him but that I wanted to be with him. I think that's a really big turning*
>
> *point in us getting back together, too, was that realization that I was okay not being with*
>
> *him and that I made it through all those crappy things by myself. So that was good.*
> *(Female, Current)*

Participants mentioned that the time between breaking up and getting back together

helped participants to gain confidence in their decisions and gain clarity on relational issues that

were once ambiguous, and that often times, distance allowed for the time and space necessary to

gain such clarity. Seeing a character trait (e.g., communication style) of one's partner as a bi-

product of their partner's family of origin also sometimes clarified their decision to cut off

contact because they no longer believed their relationship had the possibility of changing:

"…That's how their family works and so like understand that I can't blame this kid for being like

that because that's how his dad is. That's how his granddad is. That's how all the men in his

family are." (Female, Former Cycler). Lastly, some individuals in the Current Cyclers groups

mentioned ambiguity reduced once they had more resources (i.e., a more reliable car to see each

other more often, or more financial stability), which allowed them to see their partner more

frequently and/or communicate more effectively.

Participants' suggestions for navigating outside influences. Participants in the Former

and Current Cyclers focus groups suggested that therapists promote awareness of how one

another's families of origin might influence the relationship: *"...knowing each couple's family*

background or each partner's family background, knowing just kind of a little bit to get about

their personalities. And just kind of the dynamic of the relationship in general is just a big one as well.” (Female, Current Cycler). Participants also recommended the importance of knowing how one another's families communicate, and being aware of the ways in which one's current relationship issues might trace back to the way one's family of origin communicates:

> *“I think a lot of the struggles that we had was "Well this is how my dad talks to my mom" and, that's not okay… my parents don't talk to each other like that, so you don't get to talk to me like that. And it wasn't horrible, but it was just like a different basis of we come from different homes, so… it took us a long time to figure that out, 'Why is this such a big issue?' And "this is all I know", so it's like teaching something completely different than how they've been raised in teaching marriage.*” (Female, Current Cycler).

Minor Themes

Other sub-themes that emerged throughout the focus groups as DDMR were: 1) anxiety about the future of the relationship (67 meaning units), 2) perceiving or pursuing other alternatives seeming better or worse than one's current situation (22 meaning units) 3) issues pertaining to mental health (15 meaning units), and 4) infidelity (12 meaning units). Other sub-themes that emerged as PDMR were: 1) perceiving or pursuing other alternatives seeming better or worse than one's current situation (31 meaning units), and 2) infidelity (21 meaning units).

Participants mentioned that anxiety about the future increased ambivalence and reduced their ability to make deliberate decisions. Specifically, participants mentioned that the previous breakups had created additional stressors that reduced their motivation to talk about the status of the relationship out of fear of what the resulting decisions might incur: *“… the fact [the breakup] did happen, and I'm fearful of it happening again…”* (Female, Current Cycler).

Discussion about perceiving or pursuing other alternatives came up as a factor both promoting and detracting from DMR. Participants mentioned that dating others or seeing their former partner date others was sometimes the "nail in the coffin", so to speak, and other times it incited feelings of jealousy or pain that motivated individuals to stay in the relationship (i.e., "*thinking about him with another girl*"). Infidelity was also a common theme that came up across all groups, but presented slightly more often as a factor promoting DMR than it did as a factor detracting from DMR. Some participants reported that infidelity made the relationship more confusing (DDMR), but didn't necessarily result in feeling pulled strongly toward re-committing or breaking up:

> "*...we both found out that we cheated on each other... So we said, 'Okay, we came clean, let's just keep dating.' But that was really hard then to trust each other, so there were breakups and definitely insecurities in the relationship.*" (Female, Former Cycler).

Others reported that incidents of infidelity increased their confidence in the decision to break up: *"I needed to see him in bed with that girl, like I needed that to know that I need to move on."* (Female, Former Cycler). Lastly, mental health was a theme that came up in some of the focus groups. Some participants mentioned that their partners had mental illnesses (*"depression"*, Female, Former Cycler) that made breaking up feel like a morally ambiguous decision. Specifically, some participants mentioned feeling obligated to try to make the relationship work out of fear that their partner might *"hurt themselves"* (Female, Former Cycler) if they broke up, fearing that they (participants) would feel responsible for their partner if something happened due to pain the breakup caused. Many of the mental health themes were also double coded in the "Constraints: Feeling responsible for my partner's wellbeing" sub-theme. Mental health also

presented in the way of personal anxieties, as individuals mentioned wanting to *"work on myself"* and *"figure out my issues"* (Female, Current Cycler).

Chapter 5 - Implications & Discussion

The current study was an initial exploratory examination of what factors reduce ambiguity in cyclical relationships. Based on themes that predominantly emerged from the data, therapists and relationship educators working with individuals who have been in or are currently in cyclical relationship should seriously consider assessing a few critical items: 1) To what degree does it seem like the individual's *self-worth* is contingent upon his/her partner or the relationship? 2) How defined is the individual's *value system*, and what ways is she/he living congruently or incongruently with his/her value system? 3) Is the individual motivated to stay in a cyclical relationship because he/*she hopes or believes she/he can change or fix his/her partner*? Or does the he/she believe the relationship will improve and be worth investing in if context changes? 4) What does this individual's *communication* with current/past relationship partner(s) look like? Specifically, is the individual able to communicate about relationship issues and status, personal information and general concerns in a direct, clear and open manner? 5) What are the *power and control dynamics* within the context of the individual's relationship(s)? Are there unequal power differentials that may prevent the individual or individual's partner from advocating for their needs in the relationship and maintaining a healthy level of DMR? 6) To what extent does the individual *maintain contact with her/his ex?*

Factors that Reduce Ambiguity

Identity development. The emergence of "Identity Development" meaning units presenting as frequently as they did fits with current theories about emerging adulthood being a critical period of identity development (i.e. Erikson, 1950; Whitbourne, Sneed, Sayer, 2009), and makes a compelling case for the importance of a therapeutic intervention designed for emerging adults in cyclical relationships. Emerging adulthood is a period of time wherein individuals feel

pressure to find a "coherent integration of their beliefs, interests, and childhood influences,"

(Ritchie et al., 2013, p. 416), and due to these findings, it seems highly plausible that the process

of identity formation in emerging adulthood is heavily impacting relationship formation for those

in cyclical relationships. The extant literature on "sliding" shows that progressing through

relationship transitions without deliberate decision-making and communication about the

meaning of transitions is prominent in cyclical relationship dynamics (Clifford et al., 2017;

Vennum et al., 2015). Based on the themes that emerged, identity formation (or the lack thereof)

may be one of the main contributing factors inhibiting deliberate decision making. More

specifically, individuals who lack a strong foundation in terms of their values and sense of self

might arguably find themselves at a disadvantage when it comes to knowing *how* to make

deliberate decisions. Thus, intervening in ways that help individuals strengthen their sense of self

might better assist individuals in knowing *how* to be deliberate. Based on the data that emerged

from this study, I propose that DMR will increase as values are explored defined in a therapeutic

context, and as DMR increases, emerging adults will be more capable of clear decision-making,

increasing the chances they will end up on the low-risk path of relationship formation (Stanley &

Rhoades, 2009).

     Values identification and self-esteem. Many of the current family therapy models

theorize that value identification and formation is critical to personal growth and authentic

connection in relationships (Bowen, 1978). Murray Bowen posits that individuals who have

lower levels of "differentiation" (a balance of individuality and connectedness) are more

emotionally reactive, more anxious, are less capable of maintaining a solid sense of identity in

close relationships, and are more severely impacted by stress and anxiety, especially in the

context of close, interpersonal relationships (Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Skowron &

Dendy, 2004). A key theoretical component of differentiation theory is that of "fusion," or a state of relational inter*dependence*. Bowen (1978) defines fusion as the "borrowing and trading of 'self' in making one's own decisions," (Skowron & Schmidt, 2003, p. 210). Bowen (1978) discusses the nature of fusion in various levels of intensity, and posits that the more fusion exists in one's relationships, the more "governed by automatic emotional forces" individuals tend to be, and consequently tend to have less control over their own lives, (p. 305). When anxiety burdens a relationship, fusion can manifest itself in one of two ways: emotional dependence or emotional cut-off (Kerr, 1992; Schnarch, 2009), which, in a cyclical context, can look like the oscillation between the two extremes of staying together in a co-dependent relationship or breaking up. Both of these outcomes are theoretically motivated by anxiety in the relationship, which goes un-soothed and left alone to fester without emotional regulation because of low levels of differentiation (Schnarch, 2009). The ability to maintain one's values, opinions and sense of self (integral components of differentiation) amidst the constraints brought about by intimate commitment (Stanley & Markman, 1992) is integral in maintaining stability in long-term intimate relationships (Klever, 1998).

Relationship contingent self-esteem is described in the literature as an unhealthy state of interdependency as individuals with high relationship contingent self-esteem tend to perceive even minor relational issues to be much more significant because their perceptions of their own self-worth are directly related to relationship success and stability (Knee, et al., 2008). Previous literature (e.g., Knee et al., 2008; Knee et al., 2001) has also found high levels of relationship contingent self-esteem to be significantly highly correlated with anxiety. Multiple participants used the word *co-dependent* to describe their cyclical relationships, and heeded others in similar situations to *"know who you are"* before you get into a serious relationship. In line with identity

formation via values exploration, therapists can also address relationship contingent self-esteem as clients in cyclical relationships become more aware of the ways they are dependent upon their partner for self-worth and consequently might oscillate between extremes of togetherness and separateness.

Participants stated that having a therapist explore their confidence level with a decision and implicitly challenging the ways in which they might be living within their value system (or not) would have helped them handle their cyclical relationship more gracefully. I propose that therapeutic interventions when working with couples who have experienced a breakup and renewal or are experiencing high uncertainty need to include the introspective process of determining their value system (and also determining what ways they are living incongruently with their values), to help partners *intentionally* advocate for their desires in a way that does not compromise their values.

Identify relationship goals. A specific intervention that was suggested by participants was that of *"identifying your relationship goals"* (Female, Former Cyclers). A component of values clarification work professionals should consider is the process of guiding individuals through identifying how their values inform the goals they have specific to their current and/or future relationship(s). In doing so, therapists and relationship educators might enable emerging adults to advocate for their relationship in intentional ways because they know *what* they are advocating for.

Direct and Open Communication

In line with previous research, our findings show clear communication is an important component to reducing the ambiguity in cyclical relationships. Key to deciding, rather than sliding, is communicating about the state of the relationship now and expectations for the future

to assess whether partners' align in their goals (Stanley & Rhoades, 2009). Since one of the hallmarks of sliding behaviors is unclear communication, or avoidance of communication altogether (e.g., Clifford et al., 2017), professionals can infer that assessing for straightforward, open and direct communication is a key to disrupting the pattern of cycling or preventing cycling for couples in their emerging adulthood years. Additionally, I propose that an element of communication work in therapy coincides with exploring the dynamics of individuals' families of origin. Participants in the focus groups specifically recommended exploring familial communication dynamics to increase relational and self-awareness pertaining to how communication issues are impacted by one's own family patterns.

Power and Control Dynamics in Cyclical Relationships

Power presented itself in the results as an element of cyclical relationships that, when unchecked, was reportedly used to *"manipulate"* (Female, Former Cyclers) individuals into staying in the relationship or to feel guilty for their decision to break things off, and resulted in many individuals feeling more confused about their relationship. Congruent with much of the literature on intimate partner violence that report such relational dynamics typically have an element of unbalanced power differentials where one partner feels powerless and the other feels that they must be in control (e.g. Dutton & Painter, 1993), cyclical relationships have a higher prevalence rate of verbal and physical abuse in when compared with non-cyclical relationships (e.g., Dailey, Middleton, & Green, 2012; Dailey et al., 2009; Halpern-Meekin, Manning, Giordano, & Longmore, 2013; Vennum et al., 2013). The Former Cyclers groups shared many stories highlighting unbalanced power differentials that ultimately led to the final breakup, and the Current Cyclers groups shared stories about how addressing unbalanced power differentials resulted in the relationship achieving a newfound stability. It is important to note that the

prevalence of instances where power dynamics were mentioned as an element promoting DMR were only 16.8% (compared to 83.2% in the DDMR category), and those who mentioned power/control as an element promoting DMR were either talking about re-gaining power by breaking up, or re-gaining power via communicating or addressing differences in commitment. Additionally, this group commented that the cyclical pattern was a result of feeling powerless to influence the future of the relationship.

Because unbalanced power/control arrangements is a symptom of unhealthy relationships in general (e.g. Dutton & Painter, 1993), it might be that when partners in cyclical relationships feel powerless they use breaking up or getting back together as an attempt to control their future. Despite how important "open" and "direct communication" was reported to be, participants also mentioned that attempts to communicate were sometimes overridden by individuals wielding power through manipulation tactics such as attempting to incite feelings of guilt in one's ex for their decision to break up. Professionals working with cyclical couples should assess for how powerful partners feel in cyclical relationships, and efforts they use to control each other, such as persuading or convincing the other to stay together when one partner has explicitly stated that they want to break up, as well as using communication avoidance (or other behaviors that are antithetical to relationship maintenance) as a mechanism to maintain or re-gain power.

Assessing the "Why" of Commitment

The emergence of themes relating to "hoping one's partner might change," or hoping the relationship would look and feel different in the future, and hoping that outside influences would result in a shift in the relationship (and consequently relationship satisfaction) were pervasive throughout all three groups of cyclers. More specifically, individuals in the Former Cyclers group talked a lot about how they were staying in their former relationship because they hoped

things would get better, and because they were in love with the *potential* of who their partners could be if their partners changed. When working with couples, therapists will often assess for commitment to the relationship by asking questions such as, "On a scale of 1-10, how committed are you to making this work?" While this form of assessment and intervention might be useful for cyclical couples, what may be more useful to assess for is *why* (or why *not*) cyclical couples are committed to their partners, and to see if there are unrealistic expectations or beliefs that are clouding individuals' vision of the future with their partner. If such hopes, beliefs or expectations come out in therapy (i.e., clients disclosing that they are waiting for their partner to *"come around",* or *"change"*), therapists should consider the importance of challenging potentially harmful (and unrealistic) beliefs about individuals' abilities to *"change"* their partner's values, level of commitment, or lifestyle.

Participants in the Former Cyclers group explicitly advised others in similar positions to revise their beliefs about the capacity for any individual to truly change, and stated that they believe professionals should challenge these beliefs if they present themselves. Only 14 meaning units total were recorded denoting participant reports of evidence over time revealing their partner or relationship had changed to a point where it was worth investing in, and discussions around this theme usually consisted of participants retrospectively realizing that their beliefs about their partner's ability to change were unfair and unrealistic. Based on the findings of this study, it is important for professionals to help partners assess the gap between where the relationship is currently and where partners want it to be and how committed each partner is to making those expectations a reality.

Our findings confirm previous research that constraints (perceived and material, specifically; Rhoades, Stanley, Markman, 2010; Stanley & Markman, 1992) can serve to

promote commitment to a relationship, but not necessarily dedication. In line with assessing for *why* couples are in the relationship, therapists should ask specific constraint-related questions to assess for levels of dedication (vs. constraint commitment; Rhoades, Stanley, Markman, 2010) to see if individuals are staying in the relationship to avoid pain (constraint commitment) rather than to truly pursue connection with their partner (dedication). Former Cycler focus group participants frequently mentioned the driving force of perceived constraint in their past relationships when they talked about staying in the relationship because breaking up would be *"painful"* or *"difficult,"* in addition to acknowledging that they weren't necessarily happy in that relationship. If individuals are staying in the relationship for reasons motivated by fear of pain (rather than love), it might prove useful to help clients explore the reasons that the pain of breaking up might be worth it in the long-run. Participants in the Former Cyclers group mentioned that assistance from an outside third party (i.e., therapist or relationship educator) would have been useful in breaking free from their unhealthy patterns. One female specifically stated that having someone to *"process"* with and help *"identify our patterns"* would have reduced the time she spent with her former partner and saved her a lot of heartache. One male in the Contemplating Renewal group reported that he *"made a flow chart"* to try and weigh the pros and cons of getting back together with his ex; therapists might be able to provide invaluable assistance in this process of deliberating about the potential outcomes of relationship decisions.

Anxiety about the Future Reduces DMR, Prevents Deliberate Decision-Making. Previous research shows that anxiety about relationship trajectories prevents individuals from intentionally defining their relationships, leaving individuals passively progressing through their relationships in a state of "motivated ambiguity" (Stanley, Rhoades, Fincham, 2011; Clifford et al., 2017, p. 235). Therapists and relationship educators should consider discussing the level of

anxiety individuals in cyclical relationships have about their future, and provide space for individuals to contemplate the ways in which their anxieties are preventing proactive relationship maintenance behaviors. Clifford and colleagues (2017) found that individuals in cyclical relationships will often avoid relationship talk (a relationship maintenance behavior) because they are fearful of the results of certain conversations (e.g., "If we talk about the relationship, we might break up").

Focus group participants confirmed these findings and discussed times they avoided talking about relationship issues for fear of hurting their partner or out of fear of relationship dissolution. However, the longer that anxiety promotes indecision and avoidance, the longer the relationship continues to slide forward, all the while more constraints accrue, potentially resulting in individuals ultimately feeling trapped (felt constraint) in a relationship they never agreed to be in (lacking dedication). Avoiding communication about and evaluation of the relationship is likely to result in the perpetuation of cyclical patterns in the future (Vennum, Hardy, Sibley, Fincham, 2015). Professionals should explicitly discuss with individuals in cyclical relationships the detriments of avoidance behaviors, as well as the potential positive outcomes of deliberate behaviors (clear and open communication) as protective factors for relationship satisfaction and longevity (i.e., Clifford et al., 2017).

Continued Contact during Breakups

Previous research has found that continued contact with one's ex increases the likelihood of getting back together and also potentially continuing the pattern of cycling (Dailey, Jin, Beck, 2011). Participants in all three groups discussed the ways in which continued contact was a catalyst for cycling behaviors. Whether continuation of contact occurred via texting, trying to stay friends, or running into each other at a social outing, all three focus groups represented the

notion that continuing contact with one's ex increases the likelihood of getting back together. While getting back together after a breakup is not always a negative outcome, doing so because you *"run into each other"* speaks to the unintentional behaviors (sliding) that continued contact promotes. For individuals in cyclical relationships trying to reduce ambiguity during a breakup, professionals might discuss with individuals what purpose continued contact serves (if it is within their control, such as texting or hanging out, rather than running into each other by happenstance), and whether individuals believe that continued contact is helping or hindering their ability to make intentional decisions about their relationship(s).

The Importance of Honoring Individuals' Experiences

When asked about other recommendations participants had for therapists working with individuals in cyclical relationships, participants in all three groups discussed the importance of treating individual's experiences as unique, and heeded therapists to avoid prescribing solutions and to, instead, provide space to discuss the relationship to illuminate relational patterns that may be unhealthy. Individuals talked about the importance of *"… not feeling judged by the therapist for whatever you tried to do…",* and encouraged therapists working with individuals in cyclical relationships to normalize the stresses of cycling, whilst also avoiding making assumptions about what the "right" thing to do is (i.e. break up, stay together or get back together).

Chapter 6 - Conclusion

Because of the serious implications for distress and instability that accompany cyclical relationships, the results of this study provide important initial ideas for addressing ambivalence and enhancing decision-making resiliency for couples where sliding and/or cycling has occurred. Specifically, the focus group data illuminated ways for therapists and educators to interrupt and reverse the negative factors associated with relationships where intentionality is lacking and promote DMR in emerging adult romantic relationships. Specifically, values clarification, identity exploration, addressing communication patterns, as well as clarifying expectations about one's future with their partner were suggested by participants as specific intervention points for helping young adults break free from unhealthy and stressful patterns of indecision in cyclical relationships. Lastly, it might be helpful for therapists and relationship educators to discuss intentionality with young adults, specifically asking questions about internal (e.g., fear or anxiety) and external influences (e.g., distance, continued) that might be thwarting young adults' perceived capacities to advocate for the state of their relationships.

Chapter 7 - Limitations & Future Research

One of the main limitations of this study was the underrepresentation of males in the data. Additionally, due to the low number of emerging adults contemplating renewal recruited for this study, this focus group was a combination of males and females, and we noticed that the females shared less vulnerable information and talked less frequently in this focus group than in other focus groups that were all-female. More information is needed on the experienced of young adults who are post-dissolution-pre-renewal (Dailey, Jin, Pfiester, & Beck, 2011, p. 437), to further understand what would help in clarifying relationship expectations during this time. Additionally, while this study was not limited to heterosexual participants, only participants who identified as heterosexual participated in the focus groups, thus it is unknown the extent to which similar forces operate to push and pull partners in and out of same-sex relationships.

Lastly, future researchers should consider screening for long-distance as a variable in cyclical relationships to better assess what contributes to stressful levels of ambivalence in relationships that are not enduring stresses that are unique to long-distance relationships. The issue of long distance showed up significantly more frequently for those in the Current Cyclers group than in the other two groups, and it is possible that the issues pertaining to relationships that are both cyclical *and* long-distance are different from issues that cyclers face who are not in a long-distance relationship.

With regard to data analysis, the focus groups were coded by meaning units. Future qualitative research on this topic might consider coding results by number of participants speaking to any given theme, as opposed to counting the number of units. Because meaning units were not coded in a mutually exclusive fashion (i.e., the code "Evidence over time compromises hope for the future *generally* could also be coded with "Evidence over time compromises hope

for future because partner hasn't changed enough), some codes were as prevalent as they were because there were multiple sub-themes within some general themes.

Future research should look more specifically at how power and control dynamics intersect with cyclical relationships. This theme came up unexpectedly and, to date, no research has been conducted on how power differentials influence or perpetuate cycling patterns in emerging adulthood relationship formation. Additionally, further research is needed on change mechanisms experienced by those who were in a distressing cyclical relationship and were able to exit their cycle and move forward with deliberate action to continue crafting a comprehensive assessment and intervention for individuals in cyclical relationships.

Table 1. Demographics for Norm Sample: Descriptive Statistics

(N=21)

Variables	*M* or *n*	*Former Cyclers (N=7)*	*Current Cyclers (N=8)*	*Contemplating Renewal (N=6)*	*SD or %*	*Range*
Age	21.6	20.71(2.06)	21.5(2.98)	22.83 (3.9)	2.99	18 - 28
Gender					0.52	
Female	19	7	8	4	90.5%	
Male	2	0	0	2	9.5%	
Race/Ethnicity						
White (Non-Hispanic)	18	7	7	4	85.7%	
American-Indian	1	0	1	0	4.8%	
Asian/Pacific Islander	1	0	0	1	4.8%	
Hispanic	0	0	0	0	0.0%	
Black/African-American	1	0	0	1	4.8%	
Multiracial	0	0	0	0	0.0%	
Other	0	0	0	0	0.0%	
Relationship						
Single	4	2	0	2	19.0%	
Casually Dating	7	3	0	4	33.3%	
Exclusively Dating	8	2	6	0	38.1%	
Engaged	1	0	1	0	4.8%	
Married	1	0	1	0	4.8%	

Table 2 Prevalence of Themes within Categories & Groups of Cyclers

			Category 1: Detracts from Decision-Making Resiliency (DDMR)					Category 2: Promotes from Decision-Making Resiliency (PDMR)				
	Overall Totals		Former (n=7)	Current (n=8)	Contem-plating (n=6)	DDMR Total Count		Former (n=7)	Current (n=8)	Contem-plating (n=6)	PDMR Total Count	
Theme	N	% of Total	N (%) w/in theme	N (%) w/in theme	N (%) w/in theme	N (%) w/in theme	% w/in DDMR	N (%) w/in theme	N (%) w/in theme	N (%) w/in theme	N (%) w/in theme	% w/in PDMR
Identity Development	423	20.5%	82 (32.9%)	101 (40.6%)	66 (26.5%)	249 (58.9%)	19.5%	65 (37.4%)	71 (40.8%)	38 (21.8%)	174 (41.1%)	22.2%
Communication	406	19.7%	82 (43.6%)	73 (38.8%)	33 (17.6%)	188 (46.3%)	14.7%	72 (33.0%)	124 (56.7%)	22 (10.1%)	218 (53.7%)	27.9%
Power/Control Dynamics	268	13.0%	139 (62.3%)	58 (26.0%)	26 (11.7%)	223 (83.2%)	17.4%	26 (57.8%)	19 (42.2%)	0 (0.0%)	45 (16.8%)	5.8%
Hope for Future with Partner	261	12.7%	61 (51.3%)	32 (26.9%)	26 (21.9%)	119 (45.6%)	9.3%	92 (64.8%)	18 (12.7%)	31 (21.8%)	142 (54.4%)	18.2%
Sliding vs. Deciding	214	10.4%	47 (33.3%)	39 (27.7%)	55 (39.0%)	141 (65.9%)	11.0%	33 (45.2%)	32 (43.9%)	8 (11.0%)	73 (34.1%)	9.3%
Constraints	187	9.0%	65 (41.7%)	62 (39.7%)	29 (18.6%)	156 (83.4%)	12.2%	0 (0.0%)	30 (96.8%)	1 (3.2%)	31 (16.6%)	4.0%
Outside Influences	132	6.4%	12 (14.0%)	51 (59.3%)	23 (26.7%)	86 (65.2%)	6.7%	14 (30.4%)	24 (52.2%)	8 (17.4%)	46 (34.8%)	5.9%
Other:												
Anxiety about Future	67	3.2%	22 (32.8%)	29 (43.3%)	16 (23.9%)	67 (100%)	5.2%	-	-	-	-	-
Perceiving/Pursuing Other Alternatives	53	2.6%	9 (40.9%)	9 (40.9%)	4 (18.1%)	22 (41.5%)	1.7%	10 (32.3%)	21 (67.7%)	0 (0.0%)	31 (58.5%)	4.0%
Infidelity	33	1.6%	7 (58.3%)	5 (41.7%)	0 (0.0%)	12 (36.4%)	0.9%	9 (42.9%)	11 (52.4%)	1 (4.8%)	21 (63.6%)	2.7%
Mental Illness	15	0.1%	5 (33.3%)	6 (40.0%)	4 (26.7%)	15 (100%)	1.2%	-	-	-	-	-
OVERALL TOTALS	2,059					1,278					781	

*percentages within parentheses are the % of meaning units for a theme across categories

**N = number of meaning un

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Appendix A - Screening Questionnaire

Q1 **Please read the following Informed Consent Form regarding the study this screening questionnaire is being used for.** **INFORMED CONSENT FORM** **PROJECT TITLE:** An Exploratory Study of Change Mechanisms for Ambivalence Reduction in Cyclical Relationships **PRINCIPLE INVESTIGATOR:** Amber Vennum **CO-INVESTIGATOR(S):** Michelle Washburn-Busk; Marcie Lechtenberg; Elaine Johannes **CONTACT DETAILS FOR PROBLEMS/QUESTIONS:** Michelle Washburn-Busk; mbusk@ksu.edu; 801-597-8695 **IRB CHAIR CONTACT INFORMATION:** Rick Scheidt; 785-532-1483; rscheidt@ksu.edu **PROJECT SPONSOR:** Internal funds received via Poresky Assistantship **PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH:** The purpose of this study is to hear from people who have have been in a relationship where they broke up and got back together and found the experience stressful in order to inform an intervention that would help reduce stress in this situation. **PROCEDURES OR METHODS TO BE USED:** Based on your responses to the screening questionnaire, you will be entered into a pool from which about 48 people will be randomly selected to participate. If you are selected, you will be contacted about your availability for scheduling the focus group. We will use your answers to the screening questionnaire to create focus groups of 5-8 people with similar experiences. The focus groups will last around 60 minutes and will ask about your experiences and what you would recommend for others in similar relationships. Refreshments will be provided, and after the focus group you will be given a $15 Amazon gift card to thank you for your participation. **RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS ANTICIPATED:** During and after the focus group, emotional distress may occur as a result of discussing your on-again/off-again romantic relationship(s). Additionally, it is possible that discomfort may occur due to the knowledge that you are being recorded. You have the right to discontinue participation in the study at any point in time. **BENEFITS ANTICIPATED:** Discussing your experience of being in a cyclical/on-again/off-again relationship in the focus group might serve to reduce ambivalence about your relationship(s) in and of itself. Additionally, you may potentially benefit personally from hearing others' experiences of being in cyclical relationships and learn more about the patterns of behavior that might provide information to make informed decisions in your own relationship(s). The information you provide during these focus groups may assist in crafting an intervention that may increase people's chances of reducing distress and increasing longevity and satisfaction in relationships, specifically those in cyclical relationships. **EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY:** During the focus group, you will be asked to use the pseudonym you selected in the screening questionnaire to protect your identity and to keep your responses anonymous. The focus groups will be audio and video-recorded and transcribed using a confidential online transcription service. Any information discussed in the focus groups will remain anonymous (per the use of your pseudonym) and the recordings and transcription of the focus group you participate in will be kept private and locked on a password protected computer. Any identifying information will be removed from the transcript, and only the graduate assistants and authors will view the transcript of your responses. The only individual who will see the video-recordings will be the focus group facilitator (main author). No identifying information will be used in any presentations or publications with this data. All information will be kept confidential; the only instance that exempts confidentiality is if a situation arises where harm or potential future harm to yourself or others is disclosed and needs to be reported to ensure safety. Compensation for medical treatment is not available if injury occurs.

Q2 Please read the terms of participation statement below:"I understand this project is research, and that my participation is voluntary. I also understand that if I decide to participate in this study, I may withdraw my consent at any time, and stop participating at any time without explanation, penalty, or loss of benefits, or academic standing to which I may otherwise be entitled. I verify that my signature below indicates that I have read and understand this consent form, and willingly agree to

participate in this study under the terms described, and that my signature acknowledges that I have received a signed and dated copy of this consent form."**If you agree to the terms of participation, please type your first and last name below.**

_____

Q3 Please enter the email where you can be reached for follow-up if you are selected to participate in the study (your contact information will not be shared, and you will **not** be contacted for anything other than details pertaining to this study).

_____

Q4 Please enter the best phone number to reach you if you are selected to participate in the study (your contact information will not be shared, and you will **not** be contacted for anything other than details pertaining to this study, such as scheduling, etc.).

_____

Q5 Have you experienced the process of breaking up and getting back together with your current or former romantic partner within the past 3 years (please select all that apply)?

☐ Yes, with my current partner (1)

☐ Yes, with my former partner (2)

☐ No, I have never broken up and gotten back together with my partner. (3)

Q6 Did you feel like the process of breaking up and getting back together with your current or former partner was stressful?

○ Yes, very stressful (1)

○ Yes, somewhat stressful (2)

○ Not sure (3)

○ No (4)

Q7 Have you and your current or previous romantic partner broken up within the past 3 months?

   ○ Yes, and we are back together. (1)

   ○ Yes, and we are still broken up, but there's a chance we might get back together. (2)

   ○ Yes, and we are still broken up, and there's no chance we will ever get back together. (3)

   ○ No (4)

   ○ Not applicable to my relationship status or relationship history (5)

Q8 Have you and your current or previous romantic partner broken up within the past 3 years?

   ○ Yes, and we are back together. (1)

   ○ Yes, and we are still broken up, but there's a chance we might get back together. (2)

   ○ Yes, and we are still broken up, and there's no chance we will ever get back together. (3)

   ○ No (4)

   ○ Not applicable to my relationship status or relationship history (5)

Q9 What is your age range?

   ○ Younger than 18 years (1)

   ○ Between 18 and 24 (2)

   ○ Between 25 and 29 (3)

   ○ 30 or older (4)

Skip To: End of Survey If What is your age range? = Younger than 18 years
Skip To: End of Survey If What is your age range? = 30 or older

Q10 What is your age?

○ Younger than 18 years (1)

○ Between 18 and 24 (2)

○ Between 25 and 29 (3)

○ 30 or older (4)

Q11 Please enter your exact age (example: 19).

_____

Q12 What gender do you identify with?

○ Female (1)

○ Male (2)

○ Other (please specify) (3) _____

Q13 What is your sexual orientation?

○ Heterosexual (1)

○ Homosexual (2)

○ Bisexual (3)

○ Other (please specify) (4) _____

○ Prefer not to specify (5)

Skip To: End of Survey If What is your sexual orientation? = Homosexual

Q14 Please select your current relationship status.

○ Single (1)

○ Casually dating (2)

○ Exclusively dating (committed romantic relationship) (3)

○ Engaged (4)

○ Married (5)

○ Other (please specify) (6) _____

○ Unsure (please explain) (7) _____

Q15 What gender does your current and/or former committed romantic partner identify with (please select all that apply)?

☐ Male (1)

☐ Female (2)

☐ Other (please specify) (3) _____

☐ I've never been in a committed romantic relationship (4)

☐ Prefer not to specify (5)

Skip To: End of Survey If What gender does your current and/or former committed romantic partner identify with (please sele...
= I've never been in a committed romantic relationship

Q16 How many times have you and your current partner broken up? (If this question does not apply to your current relationship status, please select "Not applicable")

○ Never (1)

○ Once (2)

○ Twice (3)

○ Three times (4)

○ Four times (5)

○ Five times (6)

○ More than five times (please enter number) (7) _____

○ Not applicable (8)

Q17 How many times have you and your former partner broken up?

○ Never (1)

○ Once (2)

○ Twice (3)

○ Three times (4)

○ Four times (5)

○ Five times (6)

○ More than five times (please enter number) (7) _____

○ Not applicable to my former dating experience (8)

Q18 Think back to the times you and your current or former partner broken up and got back together. Who initiated the break-up and who initiated getting back together?

○ I usually initiated the break-up (1)

○ I usually tried to get back together with my partner and renew the relationship after breaking up. (2)

○ Sometimes I initiated the breakup, sometimes I initiated getting back together. (3)

○ Other (please explain) (4) _____

Q19 So the researcher can contact you if you are selected to participate in this study, what is the best way to reach you? (please select all that apply)

☐ Cell phone (1)

☐ Email (2)

☐ Office phone (3)

☐ Other (please specify) (4) _____

Thank you so much for taking the time to complete this survey! If you are selected to participate in this study, you will be contacted by Michelle Busk (mbusk@ksu.edu) shortly to arrange a time to meet for the focus group interview. If you are selected and agree to participate, you will receive a $15 Amazon gift card for generously offering your time in the focus groups (about 1 hour).

Appendix B - Pre-Test: Former Cyclers

Q1 What is your first and last name?

Q2 How old are you?

Q3 What is your race?

○ American Indian/Alaskan Native (1)

○ Asian (2)

○ Black/African American (3)

○ Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander (4)

○ White/Caucasian (5)

○ Other (please specify) (6) _____

Q4 What is your ethnicity?

○ Hispanic or Latino (1)

○ Not Hispanic or Latino (2)

Q5 Have you been in a relationship where you and your current or former partner broke up and got back together?

○ Current partner (1)

○ Former partner (2)

○ Both my current and former partner (3)

Q6 How much time passed between the period of breaking up and getting back together in your former relationship?

Q7 Did you ever go to therapy to work on your relationship?

○ Yes (1)

○ No (2)

Q8 - How likely do you think it is that you will experience another breakup and renewal in your current or future relationships?

○ Extremely likely (1)

○ Somewhat likely (2)

○ Slightly likely (3)

○ Unsure (4)

○ Slightly unlikely (5)

○ Somewhat unlikely (6)

○ Extremely unlikely (7)

Q9 How likely do you think it is that you will break up and get back together with your current or future partner(s)?

○ Extremely likely (1)

○ Somewhat likely (2)

○ Slightly likely (3)

○ Unsure (4)

○ Slightly unlikely (5)

○ Somewhat unlikely (6)

○ Extremely unlikely (7)

Q10 When you think about your past relationship, how much confusion do you feel?

○ A great deal (1)

○ A lot (2)

○ A moderate amount (3)

○ A little (4)

○ None at all (5)

Q11 As you think about your past relationship where you broke up and got back together, please indicate on the scale what you feel about it.

Confusion (1)	
Clarity (2)	
Anger (3)	
Forgiveness (4)	
Regret (5)	
Peace (6)	
Distress (7)	
Contentment (8)	
Certain of our future together (9)	
Uncertain of our future together (10)	

Appendix C – Pre-Test: Current Cyclers

Q1 What is your first and last name?

_____

Q2 How old are you?

_____

Q3 What is your race?

○ American Indian/Alaskan Native (1)

○ Asian (2)

○ Black/African American (3)

○ Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander (4)

○ White/Caucasian (5)

○ Other (please specify) (6) _____

Q4 What is your ethnicity?

○ Hispanic or Latino (1)

○ Not Hispanic or Latino (2)

Q5 Have you been in a relationship where you and your current or former partner broke up and got back together?

○ Current partner (1)

○ Former partner (2)

○ Both my current and former partner (3)

Q6 How much time passed between the period of breaking up and getting back together in your current/former relationship?

_____

Q7 Did you ever go to therapy to work on your relationship?

○ Yes (1)

○ No (2)

Q8 How likely do you think it is that you will experience another breakup and renewal in your relationship?

○ Extremely likely (1)

○ Somewhat likely (2)

○ Slightly likely (3)

○ Unsure (4)

○ Slightly unlikely (5)

○ Somewhat unlikely (6)

○ Extremely unlikely (7)

Q9 How likely do you think it is that you will remain with your partner long-term?

○ Extremely likely (1)

○ Somewhat likely (2)

○ Slightly likely (3)

○ Unsure (4)

○ Slightly unlikely (5)

○ Somewhat unlikely (6)

○ Extremely unlikely (7)

Q10 How likely do you think it is that you and your partner will eventually break up permanently?

○ Extremely likely (1)

○ Somewhat likely (2)

○ Slightly likely (3)

○ Unsure (4)

○ Slightly unlikely (5)

○ Somewhat unlikely (6)

○ Extremely unlikely (7)

Q11 When you think about your relationship, how much confusion do you feel?

○ A great deal (1)

○ A lot (2)

○ A moderate amount (3)

○ A little (4)

○ None at all (5)

Q12 As you think about your relationship, please indicate on the scale what you feel about it.
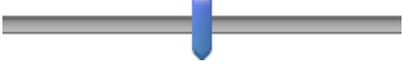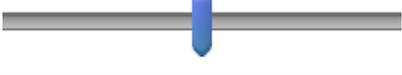
Confusion (1)	
Clarity (2)	
Anger (3)	
Forgiveness (4)	
Regret (5)	
Peace (6)	
Distress (7)	
Contentment (8)	
Certain of our future together (9)	
Uncertain of our future together (10)	

Appendix D – Pre-Test: Contemplating Renewal

Q1 What is your first and last name?

_____

Q2 How old are you?

_____

Q3 What is your race?

○ American Indian/Alaskan Native (1)

○ Asian (2)

○ Black/African American (3)

○ Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander (4)

○ White/Caucasian (5)

○ Other (please specify) (6) _____

Q4 What is your ethnicity?

○ Hispanic or Latino (1)

○ Not Hispanic or Latino (2)

Q5 Have you been in a relationship where you and your current or former partner broke up and got back together?

○ Current partner (1)

○ Former partner (2)

○ Both my current and former partner (3)

Q6 How much time passed between the period of breaking up and getting back together in your on-again/off-again relationship?

_____

Q7 Did you ever go to therapy to work on your on-again/off-again relationship?

○ Yes (1)

○ No (2)

Q8 How likely do you think it is that you will break up and get back together with your current or future partner(s)?

○ Extremely likely (1)

○ Somewhat likely (2)

○ Slightly likely (3)

○ Unsure (4)

○ Slightly unlikely (5)

○ Somewhat unlikely (6)

○ Extremely unlikely (7)

Q9 How likely do you think it is that you will get back together with the partner you had the on-again/off-again relationship with?

○ Extremely likely (1)

○ Somewhat likely (2)

○ Unsure (3)

○ Slightly unlikely (4)

○ Somewhat unlkely (5)

○ Extremely unlikely (6)

Q10 How likely do you think it is that you will break up and get back together with your current or future partner(s)?

○ Extremely likely (1)

○ Somewhat likely (2)

○ Slightly likely (3)

○ Unsure (4)

○ Slightly unlikely (5)

○ Somewhat unlikely (6)

○ Extremely unlikely (7)

Q11 When you think about your on-again/off-again relationship, how much confusion do you feel?

○ A great deal (1)

○ A lot (2)

○ A moderate amount (3)

○ A little (4)

○ None at all (5)

Q13 As you think about your past relationship where you broke up and got back together, please indicate on the scale what you feel about it (0= I don't feel this way at all; 100 = This describes exactly how I feel).

Confusion (1)	
Clarity (2)	
Anger (3)	
Forgiveness (4)	
Regret (5)	
Peace (6)	
Distress (7)	
Contentment (8)	
Certain of our future together (9)	
Uncertain of our future together (10)	

Appendix E – Post-Test: Former Cyclers

Q1 What is your first and last name?

_____

Q2 How likely do you think it is that you will experience another breakup and renewal in your current or future relationships?

○ Extremely likely (1)

○ Somewhat likely (2)

○ Slightly likely (3)

○ Unsure (4)

○ Slightly unlikely (5)

○ Somewhat unlikely (6)

○ Extremely unlikely (7)

Q3 How likely do you think it is that you will break up and get back together with your current or future partner(s)?

○ Extremely likely (1)

○ Somewhat likely (2)

○ Slightly likely (3)

○ Unsure (4)

○ Slightly unlikely (5)

○ Somewhat unlikely (6)

○ Extremely unlikely (7)

Q4 As you think about your past relationship where you broke up and got back together, please indicate on the scale what you feel about it.

Confusion (1)	
Clarity (2)	
Anger (3)	
Forgiveness (4)	
Regret (5)	
Peace (6)	
Distress (7)	
Contentment (8)	
Certain of our future together (9)	
Uncertain of our future together (10)	

Q5 What, if anything, has been helpful about discussing your relationship(s) in this focus group?

_____

Q6 What, if anything, was *not* helpful about discussing your relationship(s) in this focus group?

_____

Q7 What, if any, insights have you had about yourself during as a result of this focus group?

_____

Q8 What, if any, insights have you had about your relationship as a result of this focus group?

_____

Appendix F – Post-Test: Current Cyclers

Q1 What is your first and last name?

_____

Q2 How likely do you think it is that you will experience another breakup and renewal in your relationship?

○ Extremely likely (1)

○ Somewhat likely (2)

○ Slightly likely (3)

○ Unsure (4)

○ Slightly unlikely (5)

○ Somewhat unlikely (6)

○ Extremely unlikely (7)

Q3 How likely do you think it is that you will remain with your partner long-term?

○ Extremely likely (1)

○ Somewhat likely (2)

○ Slightly likely (3)

○ Unsure (4)

○ Slightly unlikely (5)

○ Somewhat unlikely (6)

○ Extremely unlikely (7)

Q4 How likely do you think it is that you and your partner will eventually break up permanently?

○ Extremely likely (1)

○ Somewhat likely (2)

○ Slightly likely (3)

○ Unsure (4)

○ Slightly unlikely (5)

○ Somewhat unlikely (6)

○ Extremely unlikely (7)

Q5 When you think about your relationship, how much confusion do you feel?

○ A great deal (1)

○ A lot (2)

○ A moderate amount (3)

○ A little (4)

○ None at all (5)

○

Q6 As you think about your relationship, please indicate on the scale what you feel about it.
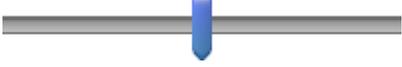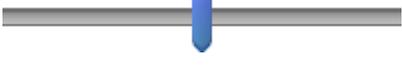
Confusion (1)	
Clarity (2)	
Anger (3)	
Forgiveness (4)	
Regret (5)	
Peace (6)	
Distress (7)	
Contentment (8)	
Certain of our future together (9)	
Uncertain of our future together (10)	

Q7 What, if anything, has been helpful about discussing your relationship in this focus group?

_____

Q8 What, if anything, was *not* helpful about discussing your relationship in this focus group?

_____

Q9 What, if any, insights have you had about yourself as a result of this focus group?

_____

Q10 What, if any, insights have you had about your relationship as a result of this focus group?

_____

Appendix G – Post-Test: Contemplating Renewal Cyclers

Q1 What is your first and last name?

_____

Q2 How likely do you think it is that you will get back together with the partner you had the on-again/off-again relationship with?

○ Extremely likely (1)

○ Somewhat likely (2)

○ Slightly likely (3)

○ Unsure (4)

○ Slightly unlikely (5)

○ Somewhat unlikely (6)

○ Extremely unlikely (7)

Q3 How likely do you think it is that you will break up and get back together with your current or future partner(s)?

○ Extremely likely (1)

○ Somewhat likely (2)

○ Slightly likely (3)

○ Unsure (4)

○ Slightly unlikely (5)

○ Somewhat unlikely (6)

○ Extremely unlikely (7)

Q4 When you think about your on-again/off-again relationship, how much confusion do you feel?

○ A great deal (1)

○ A lot (2)

○ A moderate amount (3)

○ A little (4)

○ None at all (5)

Q5 As you think about your relationship where you broke up and got back together, please indicate on the scale what you feel about it (0= I do not feel this way at all; 100 = This describes exactly how I feel).

Confusion (1)	
Clarity (2)	
Anger (3)	
Forgiveness (4)	
Regret (5)	
Peace (6)	
Distress (7)	
Contentment (8)	
Certain of our future together (9)	
Uncertain of our future together (10)	

Q6 What, if anything, has been helpful about discussing your on-again/off-again relationship(s) in this focus group?

_____

Q7 What, if anything, was *not* helpful about discussing your on-again/off-again relationship(s) in this focus group?

_____

Q8 What, if any, insights have you had about yourself during as a result of this focus group?

_____

Q9 What, if any, insights have you had about your relationship as a result of this focus group?

_____

Q10 Thank you so much for your time and all you shared in the focus group!!

Appendix H – Former Cyclers Focus Group Question Guide

Focus Group Guide: Cycled in Former Relationship

Icebreaker – 30 seconds to tell your "life story"

(Intro.)

Block 1: Getting to know you

1. How did you meet your former partner and how long were you together overall?
   (assistant summarize)

Block 2: Breakup

This first set of questions is about times in your relationship when you and your partner have been broken up or were taking a break.

2. Who usually initiated break-up? Renewal?
3. Thinking back on that relationship, what do you think led to the first breakup?
   a. Subsequent breakups, in general
4. What, if anything, could have prevented the first breakup?
5. What do you wish you would have known before your relationship ended the first time? Why?
6. During the time(s) you were previously broken up:
   a. How did you know you were broken up?
   b. What made the breakup clear?
   c. What made the breakup ambiguous?
7. What, if anything, would have prevented recurring breakups?
   (assistant summarize)

Block 3: Renewal process

We will now discuss the process of how you and your partner got back together.

8. What concerns, if any, did you have about getting back together after breaking up?
9. What factors influenced you and your partner getting back together? (For example, your own feelings about the relationship or your life, characteristics of the relationship, factors outside the relationship, the reactions of friends and family….)
10. How did you and your partner get back together? *(what was the process- behaviors – saw each other at work, hooked up, share experience if need to, etc.)*
11. What do you wish you would have known during that time when you were broken up and considering getting back together?
12. How did having experienced a breakup influence the relationship after you got back together?

13. How did you and your ex try to address the causes of the previous breakup(s)?
14. To what extent do you feel you had the power to influence the outcome of this relationship? Explain.
15. What do you think would have helped your relationship at that time?
    (assistant summarize)

Block 4: Final breakup

This next set of questions is about your relationship now.

14. What ultimately led to the relationship ending for good?
15. How did the final breakup process differ from the previous times when you separated but got back together again?
    a. How did the breakup itself differ?
    b. How did/do you know the relationship is permanently over?
16. How has the experience of a relationship where you broke-up and got back together impacted…
    a. You personally?
    b. How you think about relationships?
    c. What you want in a relationship?
    d. Your behavior in relationships or towards potential romantic partners?
    (assistant summarize)

Block 5: Advice

For this last set of questions, we'd like you to reflect on what you think would have been helpful for you and what would be helpful for others in similar types of relationships.

17. Knowing what you know now, what advice would you give to others who are considering getting back with a previous partner?
18. When thinking about making the decision to renew a relationship, what do you think people need to know about ….
    a. Themselves
    b. Their partner
    c. Their relationship
    d. Their circumstances (living arrangements, school, job, family, etc.)
19. What would you want therapists to know who are working with people who are …
    a. considering getting back with an ex
    b. trying to improve a relationship after experiencing a breakup and renewal?
20. Is there anything else you think is important for therapists to know who are trying to help people in relationships where there has been a breakup and renewal?

    (assistant summarize)

Appendix I – Current Cyclers Focus Group Question Guide

Focus Group Guide: Cycled in Current Relationship

Icebreaker: 30 seconds to tell their "life story"

(Intro)

Block 1: Getting to know you

1. How did you meet your partner?
2. How long have you been together?
3. How do you label your current relationship status and why?
   (assistant summarize)

Block 2: Breakup

This first set of questions is about times in your relationship when you and your partner have been broken up or were taking a break.

4. Who usually initiated break-up? Renewal?
5. What led to your current relationship previously ending the first time
   a. Subsequent break-ups? In general?
6. During the time(s) you were previously broken up:
   a. What made the breakup clear?
   b. What made the breakup ambiguous?
   c. How much power did you feel you had to influence the relationship? Why?
7. What, if anything, could have prevented the previous breakup(s)?
   (assistant summarize)

Block 3: Renewal process

We will now discuss the process of how you and your partner got back together.

8. What concerns, if any, did you have about getting back together at the time?
9. What factors influenced you and your partner getting back together? (For example, your own feelings about the relationship or your life, characteristics of the relationship, factors outside the relationship, the reactions of friends and family….)
10. How did you and your partner get back together? *(what was the process- behaviors)*
11. **(skip if need) What helped clarify the decision clearer of whether or not to get back together?**
12. What would have helped?
    (assistant summarize)

Block 4: Current/ Future

This next set of questions is about your relationship now.

10. How has experiencing the ending and renewing of your relationship impacted…

a. you personally?
b. your relationship?
c. how you think about relationships?
d. what you want in a relationship?
11. How have you and your partner addressed the reason behind previous breakups?
12. What barriers do you see to this relationship lasting?
13. On the other hand, what keeps the relationship going?
14. To what extent do you feel you have the power to influence the outcome of this relationship? Explain.
15. How would you know if it is time to permanently end the relationship?
16. How would you know if it is time to take the relationship to a more committed stage?
(assistant summarize)

Block 5: Advice

For this last set of questions, we'd like you to reflect on what you think would have been helpful for you and what would be helpful for others in similar types of relationships.

17. What do you know now that you wish you would have known before your relationship ended the first time? Why?
18. Knowing what you know now, what advice would you give to others who….
    a. are considering getting back with a previous partner?
    b. have previously experienced a breakup and renewal in a relationship they are trying to make work long-term?
19. What do you think people need to learn about themselves before making the decision to get back together,?
    a. their partner?
    b. their relationship?
    c. their circumstances (living arrangements, school, job, family, etc.)
20. What do therapists need to know to be able to effectively help people who …
    a. are considering getting back with an ex
    b. have experienced a breakup and renewal in their current relationship
    c. have previously been in a relationship where they experienced a breakup and renewal?
21. Anything else you think is important for therapists to know who are working with people in relationships where there has been a breakup and renewal?
(assistant summarize)

Appendix J – Contemplating Renewal Focus Group Question Guide

Focus Group Guide: Contemplating Renewal

Icebreaker – 30 seconds to tell your "life story"

Block 1: Getting to know you

1. How do you label your current relationship status with your current and/or former partners, and why?
2. How did you meet your former partner and how long were you together overall?
   (assistant summarize)

Block 2: Breakup

This set of questions is about times in your relationship when you and your former partner have been broken up or were taking a break, including now.

3. Who usually initiated break-up? Renewal?
4. Thinking back on that relationship, what do you think led to the first breakup?
   a. **(skip if need)** Subsequent breakups, in general
   b. The most recent breakup
5. What, if anything, could have prevented the first breakup?
6. What do you wish you would have known before your relationship ended the first time? Why?
7. During the time(s) you were previously broken up:
   d. What made the breakup clear?
   e. What made the breakup ambiguous?
8. What, if anything, would have prevented recurring breakups?
   (assistant summarize)

Block 3: Renewal process

We will now discuss the process of how you and your partner got back together.

9. What concerns, if any, did/**do** you have about getting back together after breaking up?
10. **(skip if need)** What factors influenced you and your partner getting back together in the past? (For example, your own feelings about the relationship or your life, characteristics of the relationship, factors outside the relationship, the reactions of friends and family….)
11. **(skip if need)** How did you and your partner get back together? *(what was the process-behaviors – saw each other at work, hooked up, share experience if need to, etc.)*
12. What do you wish you would have known during the time(s) when you were broken up and considering getting back together?
13. How did having experienced a breakup influence the relationship after you got back together?

14. How have you and your ex addressed the reason behind previous breakups, including the most recent breakup?
15. **(skip if need)** What helped clarify the decision clearer of whether or not to get back together when you did get back together in the past?
    (assistant summarize)

Block 4: Current/Future

You have all expressed that there's a chance you might get back together with your ex. The next set of questions will be about your current and future thoughts about this decision.

16. How has the experience of a relationship where you broke-up and got back together impacted…
    e. You personally?
    f. **(skip if need)** How you think about relationships?
    g. **(skip if need)** What you want in a relationship?
    h. **(skip if need)** Your behavior in relationships or towards potential romantic partners?
17. To what extent do you feel you have power to influence the outcome of this relationship? Explain.
18. What are your motivations for getting back together? Permanently breaking up?
19. What are your hesitations about getting back together? Permanently breaking up?
20. What barriers do you see to this relationship lasting?
21. How would you know if it is time to permanently end the relationship?
22. How would you know if it is time to take the relationship to a more committed stage?
23. What would help you come to a decision about whether or not to renew the relationship?
24. How would you know, looking back, that you made the right decision to renew the relationship or to permanently end it?
    (assistant summarize)

Block 5: Advice

For this last set of questions, we'd like you to reflect on what you think would have been helpful for you and what would be helpful for others in similar types of relationships.

25. Knowing what you know now, what advice would you give to others who are considering getting back with a previous partner?
26. When thinking about making the decision to renew a relationship, what do you think people need to know about ….
    e. Themselves
    f. Their partner
    g. Their relationship
    h. Their circumstances (living arrangements, school, job, family, etc.)
27. What would you want therapists to know who are working with people who are …
    c. considering getting back with an ex

d. trying to improve a relationship after experiencing a breakup and renewal?

29. Is there anything else you think is important for therapists to know who are trying to help people in relationships where there has been a breakup and renewal?

(assistant summarize)