

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF RELATIONSHIP EFFORT IN EMERGING  
ADULT CYCLICAL DATING RELATIONSHIPS

by

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B.S., Brigham Young University, 2011  
M.S., Brigham Young University, 2013

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

School of Family Studies and Human Services  
College of Human Ecology

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY  
Manhattan, Kansas

2016

## **Abstract**

Cyclical romantic relationships—those characterized by breaking up and getting back together or having on/off periods—are a frequent phenomenon in the emerging adult population. These dating relationships maintain some distinctions from other more stable relationships, including the ways that partners strive to sustain relationship health. The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative inquiry was to increase in-depth understanding of how emerging adult dating partners' relationship effort affects relationship transitions within cyclical dating relationships. Ten heterosexual emerging adult couples (10 men, 10 women) currently in cyclical dating relationships were interviewed about their experiences with relationship effort and maintenance. Participant interviews were analyzed according to the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) method. Specific themes emerged from the data, focusing on how perceived individual effort in the relationship, perceived partner effort in the relationship, and specific maintenance behaviors couples used to sustain relational health affected couple decisions about relationship transition. Implications regarding relationship education and clinical intervention among cyclical emerging adult couples are discussed. Future research could focus on continued expansion of understanding when in relationship history cyclical patterns begin, and how partners navigate transitions when both perceive reduced relationship effort.

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## **Dedication**

I dedicate this dissertation to my beautiful wife, Ashlee Elizabeth Knapp. I simply cannot imagine pursuing this dream with anyone else by my side. She has remained sunny when I could only see clouds, provided countless hours of listening when I needed to be heard, laughed with me when I needed to lighten up, and taken every step with me from the beginning. She has been my spark, my sustenance, and my remedy. I love her eternally and dedicate this project to her. Toucan kiss.

## Chapter 1 - Introduction

If there was a relationship factor in over half of couples in a given cohort that was associated with physical and verbal abuse, poor communication, relationship stress, and decreased commitment and relationship satisfaction, then it stands to reason that researchers, educators, and clinicians working with couples would want to understand that factor in more detail. Examining this relationship factor would likely be considered a necessary and invaluable facet of couples research, with efforts focused on increasing knowledge about the factor and developing potential prevention- and intervention-based strategies. Recent research about couple relationships has revealed a relationship factor with these features known as *relationship cycling*, or *relationship churning*. Cyclical couples break up and get back together at least once, and sometimes several times, within the course of their time as committed partners (Dailey, Pfiester, Jin, Beck, & Clark, 2009; Halpern-Meehin, Manning, Giordano, & Longmore, 2013a) and this relationship transition process is associated with many unhealthy couple outcomes (Dailey et al., 2009; Dailey, Middleton, & Green, 2012).

Emerging adulthood has been identified as a unique developmental period between adolescence and adulthood, usually between 18 and 29 years of age (Arnett, 2005), when individuals explore a wide assortment of romantic relationships (Arnett, 2007a; Arnett, 2007b). Previous research has characterized relationship churning to be highly frequent among this cohort (see Dailey et al., 2009; Halpern-Meehin et al., 2013a) in dating or cohabiting relationships, as well as in some marriages. Considering the high rate of relationship cycling among the emerging adult dating population—with estimates as high as 60% of emerging adults having experienced a cyclical relationship at some point—investigating factors related to cycling in this developmental stage is an important task for relationship researchers.

*Relationship effort* is defined as the level or intensity of persistence in attempting to improve one's relationship (Halford, Wilson, Lizzio, & Occhipinti, 2007); it is a broad construct that has been linked with a variety of healthy relationship outcomes for couples including higher levels of relationship satisfaction (see Halford et al., 2007; Weigel & Ballard-Reisch, 1999, Shafer, Jensen, & Larson, 2014b). Relationship effort acts as one possible driving force behind use of relationship maintenance behaviors (Hazelwood, 2012; Shafer et al., 2014b); these behaviors are specific strategies aimed at improving and sustaining romantic relationships (Halford, 2001). More effort in a relationship is often evidenced by partner's engaging in relationship-enhancing behaviors (Shafer et al., 2014b). Researchers have been able to link relationship effort to various couple outcomes, but have yet to determine *why* or *how* relationship effort leads to these assorted outcomes.

Within cyclical relationships, maintenance behaviors have been linked to improving relationship satisfaction (Dailey et al., 2012). Maintenance involves the ability of intimate partners to monitor relational processes and work on maintaining relationship functioning (Halford et al., 2007), and is often achieved through specific strategies including goal setting and implementation, personal evaluations of effort, and examination of relationship improvement (Halford, 2001). Other scholars note that positivity, assurances between partners, including partners in social networks (Canary, Stafford, & Semic, 2002), and trying new behaviors in attempts to improve the relationship (Halford et al., 2007) are also integral maintenance behaviors. Cyclical couples that report engaging in a greater number of relationship maintenance behaviors indicate love and positive communication at higher frequencies than do cyclical couples that report engagement in fewer relationship maintenance behaviors (Dailey et al., 2009). Since relationship effort acts as an underlying motivator to engage in these specific

maintenance strategies (Hazelwood, 2012; Shafer et al., 2014b), it seems particularly relevant to cyclical couples. Understanding the specific maintenance strategies that are indicative of effort for these couples may provide insights into the cycling process, specifically about decisions of breakup, renewal, or remaining together (non-transition).

Most emerging adults in the U.S. value marriage and plan on having a long-term, committed relationship in their futures (Crissey, 2005; Gassanov, Nicholson, & Koch-Turner, 2008; Manning, Longmore, & Giordano, 2007). Given the high rates of cyclical relationships in young adulthood and the links between cycling and unhealthy relationship outcomes, a greater understanding of relationship effort within cyclical relationships may provide researchers, educators, and clinicians with information to develop prevention or intervention strategies aimed at helping cyclical couples develop healthier decision-making in their relationships. In this study, I will utilize qualitative methodology to gain more insight into the phenomenon of relationship effort as experienced by individuals in cyclical couple relationships. Specifically, I will examine individual and partner perspectives of relationship effort and the impact these perspectives have on different maintenance strategies used in emerging adult cyclical dating relationships, and how those factors relate to decisions about staying together, breaking up, or getting back together.

### **Theoretical Framework**

According to the investment model of commitment processes (Rusbult, 1980; 1983), relationships persist due to overall relational satisfaction, level of investment in the relationship, and an absence of preferable alternatives. Commitment between romantic partners is expected to influence relationship efforts (Rusbult, Agnew, & Arriaga, 2012) including the use of maintenance behaviors aimed at increasing and enhancing trust and investment (Wieselquist, Rusbult, Foster, & Agnew, 1999). Wieselquist and colleagues (1999) have adapted Rusbult's

(1980; 1983) investment model to explain relationship processes. Their model operates from a systemic framework that takes into account partners' perceptions of each other's relationship-enhancing behaviors, and suggests that these perspectives and behaviors are linked together in a cycle. The first piece of the cycle is perception of partner behaviors. Partners perceive each other's effort as evidenced by behaving in ways that either enhance a relationship or detract from it. These perceptions cycle into partners determining whether or not these perceived actions increase or decrease trust in their relationship. As trust either increases or decreases, partners then feel more or less likely to depend on each other, and this mutual dependence—or lack thereof—influences the level of commitment partners display and feel in their relationships. Level of commitment influences relationship behaviors, as those who are more committed are more likely to behave in relationship-enhancing ways and those who are less committed are less likely to try enhancing their relationships. Thus, the cycle starts again and continues throughout the duration of the relationship.

This framework has allowed me to conceptualize my study with a similar perspective. I believe that relationship effort, similarly to pro-relationship behaviors in Wiesequist's and colleagues' (1999) model, would impact the commitment process for cyclical couples according to the way partners perceive the other's effort as demonstrated through engagement in specific relationship maintenance behaviors. Those perceptions of maintenance behaviors—and the effort driving those behaviors—may influence the way couples trust and depend on each other, which may affect their overall commitment. For example, partners may view each other as engaging in the relationship with high effort (demonstrated by engagement in specific relationship maintenance behaviors), which increases the trust they feel in their relationship. As trust grows, they are more able to depend on each other to meet each other's needs, and having more needs



met leads to higher commitment to each other. With a higher commitment to each other, they are more likely to engage in greater effort in their relationship and keep their relationship together. Then, those perceived effortful actions begin this cycle again and may lead to different relationship outcomes, including transitions, depending upon the initial perceptions of relationship-enhancing behaviors. Because cyclical couples often report their commitment levels to be somewhat unstable and/or lacking (Kellas, Bean, Cunningham, & Chang, 2008; Halpern-Meekin et al., 2013a), understanding how perceived relationship effort influences stability, through maintenance behaviors, seems an important task in helping cyclical couples improve their relationships. In the present study, I will examine the way that perceived relationship effort affects cyclical couples' maintenance behaviors and patterns of breakup and renewal, using the commitment, pro-relationship behaviors and trust framework (Wieselquist et al., 1999) as my conceptual foundation.

## **Summary**

The high rate of cyclical patterns in emerging adult romantic relationships (see Dailey et al., 2009) and the negative outcomes associated with these relationships (Dailey et al., 2012; Halpern-Meekin et al., 2013a; Halpern-Meekin et al., 2013b; Monk et al., 2014) suggests a need to understand more about how cyclical couples can integrate and sustain healthy maintenance behaviors into their relationships in order to make more informed decisions about relationship transitions. Relationship effort is believed to be an underlying force that affects maintenance that has been found to have a particularly significant effect on relationship quality (Shafer et al., 2014b) and use of specific maintenance behaviors (Hazelwood, 2012; Shafer et al., 2014b). Maintenance strategies have been linked with cyclical patterns (see Dillow et al., 2008; Dindia, 2003), and I hope to discover more about which specific maintenance behaviors are indicative of

effort for cyclical couples. I will examine the experiences of emerging adults in cyclical relationships in order to gain insight into how relationship effort—specifically how partners perceive each other’s effort—plays a role in their maintenance behaviors and decisions about breakup and renewal.

Theoretically, my study is grounded within the framework of Wieselquist’s and colleagues’ (1999) adapted investment model of commitment in romantic relationships. These authors proposed that mutual perceptions of partners’ pro-relationship behaviors influence the levels of trust and dependence within a relationship, which influences couple commitment. The present study is operating from a similar perspective: mutual perception of partners’ relationship maintenance strategies—which evidence effort in couple experience—is hypothesized to affect couple transitioning or stability as they make decisions to stay in committed relationships or to dissolve them. Because commitment is an especially challenging area for emerging adult dating couples in cyclical patterns (see Dailey et al., 2012; Halpern-Meekin et al., 2013b) it is important to examine factors such as relationship effort that may influence maintenance behaviors linked to staying together, breaking up, and getting back together.

## Chapter 2 - Review of Literature

### Cyclical Couple Relationships in Emerging Adulthood

On-again-off-again relationships—also known as *relationship cycling* (Dailey et al., 2009) or *relationship churning* (Halpern-MeeKin et al., 2013a)—are characterized by romantic relationships that break up and then get back together. Cyclical couple relationships are categorically between the more customary relationship types of formal couplehood and those couples who identify as completely broken up (Dailey et al., 2012). Scholars have hypothesized that cycling may be more common in emerging adulthood than in other stages of life, as this developmental period is often marked by explorations of romantic and intimate relationships (Arnett, 2005). Current research offers support for that hypothesis, as individuals in cyclical patterns have reported that exploring alternative partner options influences the breakup/renewal process (Dailey, McCracken, Jin, Rossetto, & Green, 2013). With 60% of emerging adults estimated to have experienced relationship cycling at some point (Dailey et al., 2009), and between one-third to one-half of emerging adults reporting cycling with their *current* partners (e.g. Dailey et al., 2009; Halpern-MeeKin et al., 2013a), the churning phenomenon in emerging adulthood is impacting a large number of individuals and couples.

Previous inquiry about emerging adult cyclical couples has demonstrated that most report breaking up because of frequent and/or intense fighting or arguing (Dailey, Rossetto, Pfiester, & Surra, 2009). Relationship cycling patterns have also been associated with negative processes and unhealthy outcomes for couples. Compared to non-cyclical emerging adult relationships, cyclical relationships are linked with higher levels of physical and verbal conflict and abuse (Halpern-MeeKin et al., 2013b), relational stress (Dailey et al., 2012), problematic communication (Dailey et al. 2009), and lower levels of commitment, between-partner validation

(Halpern-Meehin et al., 2013a), and relationship dedication (Monk, Vennum, Ogolsky, & Fincham, 2014). Additionally, some researchers have suggested that cyclical partners are at greater risk of future cycling (Vennum et al., 2013), which may lead to repetition of the aforementioned negative outcomes often associated with cyclical patterns. Finally, cyclical patterns in dating relationships has been linked to future cycling in long-term committed relationships such as marriage or serious cohabitation (Vennum et al., 2013), with couples who marry after cycling reporting higher distress than those who did not cycle before marriage (Vennum & Johnson, 2014). As researchers continue to examine relationship cycling more closely, understanding the role relationship effort plays in the cycling process of emerging adult dating couples may prove helpful for clinicians and educators working to inform these couples about factors that may play a role in their relationship transition decision-making.

### **Relationship Effort & Maintenance Strategies**

**Relationship Effort.** Relationship effort is characterized as persistence in behavior and attitude directed at relationship improvement while considering partner and personal reaction to the impact of that persistence on relationship quality (Halford et al., 1994; Hazelwood, 2012; Shafer et al., 2014a). While similarly defined and often correlated (Halford et al., 2007), it is important to make a distinction between relationship effort and commitment. Frequently, commitment is referred to or conceptualized as an attitude or sense (Rusbult, Coolsen, Kirchner, & Clarke, 2006), whereas effort adds the elements of behavior and action (Halford, 2011). Commitment has been linked with cyclical patterns (Vennum et al., 2015), with scholars suggesting that perhaps relationship effort and maintenance behaviors or other relationship processes may have an influence on commitment in these relationships (Vennum & Fincham, 2011).

Many relationship scholars have proposed that it takes persistence and effort to sustain healthy romantic relationships and to maintain commitment (Canary et al., 2002). Researchers have found strong, positive associations between relationship effort and relationship quality (Shafer et al., 2014b), with some findings indicating a stronger link between relationship effort and relationship satisfaction than between healthy communication and relationship satisfaction (Halford et al., 2007). Relationship effort has a significant, long-lasting impact on relationship quality (Halford, 2011) within first marriages, remarriages, and cohabiting relationships (Shafer et al., 2014a). There is increasing evidence suggesting that relationship effort is an important aspect of relationships that significantly impacts couple relationship functioning, potentially due to its association with maintenance behaviors. In fact, some scholars believe that relationship effort directly affects individual implementation—or lack thereof—of specific maintenance behaviors within a romantic relationship (Hazelwood, 2012) including changing and tracking problematic behaviors, giving and receiving feedback between partners, and monitoring personal behavioral impact upon overall relationship quality (Shafer et al., 2014b). Because relationship effort is often enacted through maintenance behaviors, it is important to examine these behaviors in the context of this study.

**Relationship Maintenance Behaviors.** Relationship maintenance is a broad term referring to behaviors that couples engage in to improve their relationships, prevent relationship deterioration, and repair relationships (see Dindia & Canary, 1993; Halford et al., 2007; Hardy, Soloski, Ratcliffe, Anderson, & Willoughby, 2014; Wilson, Charker, Lizzio, Halford, & Kimlin, 2005). Relationship maintenance often involves couples' use of strategies centered on monitoring and improving relational processes (Halford et al., 1994; Halford et al., 2007) and is associated with positive relationship outcomes (Halford et al., 1994). Maintenance strategies may

include deliberately setting and implementing relational goals, examining and building self- and relationship-awareness, evaluating individual and partner effort, and assessing overall relationship improvements (Halford, 2001). Additionally, maintenance contributes to relationship stability and longevity via behaviors geared toward demonstrating hopefulness about the relationship, sharing typical couple tasks (e.g. housework, financial responsibilities), disclosing information to a partner, using social supports, keeping the relationship enjoyable, and making statements that imply commitment to and longevity of the relationship (Stafford & Canary, 1991).

Couples that report effective relationship maintenance experience higher levels of satisfaction, commitment, and relationship quality (Canary & Stafford, 1992; Halford et al., 2007; Ramirez, 2008; Weigel & Ballard-Reisch, 1999). In contrast, couples less effective in utilizing maintenance reported lower levels of marital satisfaction for both partners (Halford et al., 2007), accounting for 25%-30% of the variance in both partners' relationship satisfaction over time (Wilson et al., 2005), and even demonstrated a greater likelihood of terminating a relationship (Guerrero, Eloy, & Wabnik, 1993).

**Cyclical Couple Relationship Effort and Maintenance.** Much of our understanding about relationship effort and maintenance processes within emerging adult cyclical couples stems from research about reconciliation within marital relationships. Patterson and O'Hair (1992) found differences in the way couples maintain relationships versus the way they reconcile, leading them to hypothesize that reconciliation and renewal may even be a distinct stage of relationship development. This line of thought fits well with modern conceptualizations of cyclical couples as distinct from other types of couples (see Dailey et al., 2012). Other research on reconciliation suggests that individuals may view relationship reconciliation as

worthwhile as long as partners are willing to demonstrate renewed effort in the relationship (Dillow, Morse, & Afifi, 2008). Further, as individuals put more effort into relationship maintenance strategies, this effort contributes to sustaining current relationship status (e.g., staying together versus breaking up; Dindia, 2003) or changing it (Guerrero et al., 1993). Hence, there is evidence that relationship effort is linked to relationship maintenance behaviors and the reconciliation process and, therefore, seems to be an important factor in understanding decisions related to cyclical patterns in emerging adult dating relationships.

Cyclical couples engage in maintenance behaviors at different levels than other couple types, with lower levels of relationship maintenance than those in stable/“together” relationships but higher than those who are no longer in a relationship (Dailey et al., 2012). Specifically, Dailey and colleagues (2010) found that individuals in cyclical relationships reported less cooperation, patience, and kindness in maintenance conversations with partners compared to those in non-cyclical relationships. These authors hypothesized that lower relationship maintenance may be the reason why cyclical patterns emerge for some couples; as less maintenance occurs in a relationship, it may be more difficult to consistently identify a formal relationship status and navigate commitment.

One unique aspect of cyclical relationships to consider is that unlike other relationships, maintenance for these relationships is also likely occurring during “off periods” or times when the couple is broken up. As scholars have suggested, research has primarily focused on relationship transition as a dichotomy of either complete partner separation or complete partner togetherness rather than including multiple types of transition (Binstock & Thornton, 2003; Dailey et al., 2010). Cyclical partners may fall somewhere in a continuum of together versus

separated, and accordingly may engage in some forms of relationship maintenance even during periods of separation or dissolution of the relationship.

Overall, the initial research on relationship maintenance within cyclical couples is somewhat limited in scope. Most of this research demonstrates correlations between relationship maintenance, cycling, and relationship outcomes. While this research greatly contributes to the general understanding of cyclical relationships, it deals mainly with outcomes and correlations, and lacks detail about the actual processes cyclical couples use in making relationship decisions based on effort and perceived effort in their relationships. Relationship effort is often enacted through maintenance behaviors (Hazelwood, 2012; Shafer et al., 2014b), and maintenance behaviors are linked with positive relationship outcomes (Halford et al., 2007; Wilson et al., 2005); therefore, exploring how cyclical couples perceive which specific maintenance strategies are indicative of effort in their relationships may provide more insight about how effort contributes to relationship transitions. Additionally, I will explore how couples' perceptions of their own and their partners' efforts—as evidenced via use of specific maintenance strategies—contribute to decision making about relationship transitions. These findings will be able to enhance intervention and prevention aimed at helping cyclical couples successfully integrate maintenance behaviors into their relationships. As the theoretical basis for this study implies, it is of particular importance to examine effort and maintenance behaviors in the context of partner perceptions.

### **Partner Perceptions of Relationship Phenomena in Research**

Partner perceptions have been utilized as key indicators of dyadic relationship functioning in quantitative research (see Cui, Lorenz, Conger, Melby, & Bryant, 2005; van Dulmen & Goncy, 2010), and scholars have called for stronger utilization of partner perceptions



in couples research (Jacobson & Moore, 1981; van Dulmen & Goncy, 2010). The theoretical advantages of exploring partner perceptions of romantic relationship processes have been demonstrated in previous research (Matthews, Wickrama, & Conger, 1996), with scholars proposing that partner perception of behavior is a more accurate measure of actual behavior than is self-report. Evaluating partner perceptions within dyadic research strengthens methodology because it furnishes a “complimentary picture of both individual and relational functioning...and highlights the importance of incorporating information from both individuals” (van Dulmen & Goncy, 2010, p. 874). In qualitative inquiry, many scholars support the idea of incorporating partner’s perspectives in both analysis and data collection (see Bjornholt & Farstad, 2014; Doucet, 2001) as well.

Within relationship maintenance literature, Shafer and colleagues (2014b) found that partner perception of relationship effort was more influential on overall relationship quality than was actual individual effort; not only do these findings imply that partner perceptions of effort in relationships matter greatly, but that they need to be explored further within cyclical relationships since these relationships are often lacking in maintenance behaviors (Dailey et al., 2012). As emerging adults utilize relationship effort to maintain their romantic relationships, it is important to consider how each partner views the other partner’s demonstration of effort as the relationship becomes cyclical in nature. For example, as partners make the decision to reconcile after a period of separation, each may have differing perceptions of the other’s efforts in the relationship via specific maintenance behaviors. Those perceptions may be directed toward past behaviors or toward considering future relationship processes, including displays of effort, in their reconciled status. Additionally, perceived lack of effort may result in initiating a breakup after a period of reconciliation. By gathering and analyzing cross-informant data, I will gain a

more holistic perspective in my study by assessing partner perceptions of the relationship effort phenomenon as experienced by those who have participated in cyclical relationships. Although we collected and analyzed data individually, collecting information from partners helped us interpret the findings through both individual *and* relationship lenses rather than through only the individual lens. My findings will expand application for clinicians and educators working with couples to help provide an understanding of the role of relationship effort in cyclical patterns and maximize positive use of relationship maintenance behaviors within cyclical emerging adult dating couples.

## **Research Questions**

In order to answer my research questions about how relationship effort is related to maintenance behaviors and cycling in emerging adult couples, I used phenomenological qualitative inquiry. This method allowed me to gain detailed, process-oriented information from those who have directly participated in cyclical relationships. By using a qualitative methodology, I was able to ask process questions and understand in more depth the examined phenomena, which expanded previous knowledge about these topics as I focused on how these couples engage in these processes rather than solely focusing on outcomes associated with these processes. I explored which maintenance behaviors were indicative of effort for these couples and how those strategies related to couple experience of staying together, breaking up, or reconciling. I also examined how self- and partner-perceptions of these behaviors influenced relationship breakups, renewals, or non-transitions. Increasing understanding about the phenomena of effort and cyclical patterns may help improve intervention and prevention strategies for working with emerging adult cyclical couples. My study will be guided by one overarching research question that contains three sub-questions, as follows:

- I. How does relationship effort affect maintenance behaviors and decisions about staying together, breaking up, and reconciling in cyclical couple dating relationships in emerging adulthood?
  1. Does relationship effort in specific maintenance behaviors differentially contribute to decisions about relationship transitions?
  2. How does perception of partner relationship effort affect cyclical couple relationship transitions?
  3. How does perception of individual relationship effort affect cyclical couple relationship transition?

## **Chapter 3 - Method**

### **Approach**

Research on relationship effort has mainly been quantitative and has not often addressed relationship effort dyadically (Shafer et al., 2014b) or examined how perceptions of self and partner effort affect relationship outcomes and processes (Halford, 2011). Scholars have more often investigated how individual effort influences individual satisfaction and relationship stability (Hazelwood, 2012). Additionally, studies on relationship effort have not specifically focused on cyclical couples; those that have focused on cyclical couples have not focused on relationship effort specifically, instead relying on measures of relationship maintenance behaviors that required participants to report on predetermined behaviors rather than allowing them to voice their own experiences about maintenance strategies (see Dailey et al., 2013a; Dailey et al., 2012). In order to answer my research questions and fill some of the existing gaps in this literature, I used a phenomenological qualitative approach.

This method focuses on understanding the meaning(s) of a specific phenomenon for a group of people, and often examines that meaning in relation to the shared experience of those who have firsthand experience of the specific phenomenon being examined (Patton, 2002). A phenomenological approach involves gathering data from those who actually have lived out a certain phenomenon—not simply an “expert” on the subject, but someone who has actually experienced the phenomenon personally. In the present study, I sought to understand the meanings of relationship effort within cyclical relationships, and explored that phenomenon among individuals who have directly been involved in cyclical relationships themselves. Thus, a phenomenological exploration suited my approach to answering my research questions.

Specifically, I used a type of phenomenological analysis known as Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith, 1996) in designing data collection and analysis procedures. IPA was chosen for this study not only because it fits with answering my research questions, but because it is rooted in phenomenological and interpretative approaches. Using IPA means exploring unique experiences of individuals rather than making generalized statements about them (Smith, 1996) and incorporating the researcher's own conceptions about retrieved information in order to make sense of participant experiences (Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999). General phenomenological analysis usually aims more to voice participant experiences without providing a specific interpretation of data (Patton, 2002), whereas IPA adds an interpretative component in order to expand findings based on the researchers' own conceptions about what was found. Gaining detailed insight into the personal worlds of those who have firsthand experience of the investigated phenomena is an important task of IPA (Smith & Osborn, 2003), and one that I integrated thoroughly into data collection and analysis procedures. I explored the lived experiences of participants and also interpreted the information they provided into valuable findings that enriched the understanding of cyclical relationships according to IPA guidelines.

## **Research Team**

Data analysis and participant recruitment were conducted by members of a research team consisting of the primary investigator and six undergraduate students. Team members were trained in basic qualitative analysis skills as well as in specific facets of IPA. Details about the research team will be provided in order to provide more information about the analysis process.

### **Recruitment to Research Team**

As the primary investigator, I had previously taught undergraduate courses in family studies. In order to recruit data analysts for the research team, I asked students who had taken

previous courses from me if they would be interested in joining my team by sending out emails about the project to prior course email lists. No students from current courses were recruited to ensure that their performance in the course was not connected to their participation in my research. Six former-student undergraduates responded to my recruitment invitation, and I discussed requirements and expectations for being on the team with each of them. Each agreed to participate, and we determined to work together on this project.

### **Research Team Training**

Having had extensive graduate training in qualitative methodology and prior qualitative research experience, I provided training to all undergraduate research team members prior to data collection and analysis. I began by offering training about basic qualitative research methods, and then instructed team members about IPA specifically. Trainings were done in one-on-one contexts, as well as in group settings. In each setting, analysts reviewed research-informed information about the qualitative analysis process and then completed several practice exercises to ensure that they could apply these skills during analysis. Once I reviewed the practice exercises with each team member, I allowed them to begin analyzing data. All trainings were done with the present study's data, to ensure that each team member felt comfortable understanding the specific analysis process being used in this project as it corresponded to this specific data.

### **Participants and Recruitment**

Participation in this study was restricted to couples who presently identified as belonging to an on-again-off-again relationship in an exclusive relationship (i.e., only having one current romantic partner). Because of the nature of cyclical relationships, I considered many specific points in determining the sampling strategy. I recruited couples that were currently “together” as

defined by the couple. Couples were not required to have been broken up/separated or “together” for a specific amount of time because there is a high degree of variance about the meaning of “together” or “broken up” among these couples (Dailey et al., 2012; Dailey et al., 2013a). Although this decision may have precluded obtaining data from couples/individuals whose relationships were terminated or whose relationships were in an “off” period, the likelihood of recruiting both partners from dissolved/suspended relationships seemed relatively low. The dyadic, systemic nature of my overarching research questions seemed to fit better with relationships as units of sampling rather than individuals, even if those relationships were only those couples reporting a current “together” status. These couples were required to have broken up and reconciled and/or “taken a break” at least one time during their relationship, which is consistent with other previously conducted research about cyclical relationships using both qualitative and quantitative methodologies (see Dailey et al., 2009; Dailey et al., 2013b; Halpern-Meekin et al., 2013a). Given the limited sampling pool, I specifically recruited heterosexual couples in an effort to more accurately portray couple experiences and to account for differences in relationship dynamics that may be present when comparing heterosexual and gay and lesbian couples. I recruited ten couples for participation, which number corresponds to other IPA investigations (see Sampson et al., 2013) and standards (Turpin et al., 1997).

Participants were recruited from large, undergraduate family studies and sociology courses at Kansas State University. Members of the research team advertised in those classes in-person or sent an approved recruitment email to course instructors, who then forwarded the email to class members. As part of recruitment, participants were each required to complete an online demographic survey to ensure that they were currently in a heterosexual cyclical dating relationship. During this survey, they were asked how they would like to be contacted to set up

an interview and provided time availabilities for interviewing. Once this information was received online from both partners as they completed separate surveys, the primary researcher contacted participants according to their chosen contact method and set up individual interviews accordingly. At each interview, the primary researcher reviewed appropriate informative documents about the study and obtained informed consent from each participant. Individuals were compensated with \$15 cash each at the conclusion of their separate interviews.

Demographic information was attained from couples in order to establish their inclusion criteria and to provide insight into background factors (see Table 3-1). All couples had broken up or had an “off period” at least once, although they were currently “together.” None of the individuals had children and all individuals were currently enrolled in college. The average age for women was 20 years old and the average age for men was 21. All couples had been together for at least two years, with the longest relationship lasting six years and one month. One couple was cohabiting, one couple was preparing to move in together, and two couples were making plans for engagement although they were not yet engaged.

### **Data Collection**

Participants were interviewed individually by the primary investigator in order to ensure that the interview process was as similar as possible for all participants. Qualitative scholars have frequently discussed the advantages and disadvantages of conducting joint couple interviews (Bjornholt & Farstad, 2014), often with mixed recommendations about whether couple interviews or individual interviews are preferable. Some argue that multiple-person interviews may yield richer data than individual interviews (Bjornholt & Farstad, 2014), possibly because of the way multiple interviewees can build upon each other’s comments and discussion points (Morgan & Krueger, 1993). However, because of the nature of the topic, I felt that richer data



could be collected if participants were alone, as they may feel more comfortable speaking privately and confidentially about sensitive subject matter (Bjornholt & Farstad, 2014). In-depth information about relationship effort, maintenance behaviors, and decisions of breakup and renewal were discussed, therefore, as a relationally ethical researcher (Tracy, 2010), I felt it was my duty to recognize the potential consequences of my research on others and to minimize potential couple conflicts and reduce the study's influence on relationship decision processes. Thus, I conducted individual interviews with each partner.

Each semi-structured, open-ended interview lasted for approximately one hour, with interview times ranging from 37 minutes to 61 minutes. I used an interview guide (see Appendix A) with prompts of discussion points to use in gathering information about relationship effort, perception of partner's relationship effort, how effort is related to maintenance behaviors, and how those components connect and influence breakup and renewal decisions. As part of each interview, participants were asked to compose a written relationship timeline of their current relationship on a pre-constructed worksheet (see Appendix A), which is a process similar to one that has been used in previous studies among this population (see Dailey et al, 2009). This timeline also included an axis that measured participants' self-reported relationship effort compared to their perceptions of their partners' relationship effort throughout the relationship timeline. Each participant constructed a timeline and plotted color coded points (black to represent self, purple to represent partner) corresponding to perceived levels of relationship effort. The timeline was then used as a discussion point for the interview: I asked questions about each individual's relationship effort at different points on the relationship timeline; each participant was asked questions about his/her perceptions of romantic partners' relationship

efforts throughout the relationship timeline; and the written timeline was referenced to compare differences in effort between partners at various points in the relationship.

Relationship timelines were kept confidential, as partners were not shown each other's interview documents. Each participant was given the option to provide a pseudonym to be used in reporting findings, but all participants declined that option, and were provided pseudonyms by the researchers instead in order to maintain privacy, and those pseudonyms have been used throughout this manuscript. All interviews were audio and video recorded and transcribed verbatim to use in analysis. Only audio recordings were used in analysis, with video recording in place as backup in the event that audio recording equipment malfunctioned. No videos were viewed and analyzed because audio equipment provided the necessary information for this project. Audio, video, and transcription digital files were encrypted and stored securely in order to maintain participant confidentiality. Audio and transcription data were de-identified to further ensure confidentiality standards were thoroughly upheld, with the participant number the only identifying information included on file names. Video files were destroyed according to procedures outlined by the Kansas State University Family Center, where interviews occurred.

## **Analysis**

Data analysis was conducted by research team members, with two subgroups of analysts focusing on analyzing data according to each research question. Each subgroup was a set of three undergraduate analysts plus the primary investigator. Each subgroup analyzed the data for two research questions (initially there were four research questions, but as themes emerged during analysis it became apparent that reworking the research questions into three questions was most appropriate). Interview data was analyzed using the following four processes outlined in IPA procedures (Smith & Osborn, 2003). First, each transcribed interview was read and then reread

multiple times in order to observe themes and interpret substantive findings. During this phase of the process, each researcher read participant interviews and kept an initial list of potential themes, in an open coding process (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Second, analysts individually determined which of these potential themes were repeated across a majority of interviews or seemed substantively significant, and designated their specific chosen themes and subthemes. Then analysts coded for these themes across all interviews. This focused coding (Charmaz, 2006) was done as analysts designated specific quotes from interviewees that supported or fit within a particular theme. After each analyst completed this process individually, we met together as a group to integrate our themes and establish credibility of findings. Third, the themes were connected, interwoven, and written into a cohesive body. This was done as analysts met together to identify how their individual findings corresponded across all analysts. We discussed overlap in the themes we found, determining to use themes found by multiple analysts, and I wrote those themes into a cohesive body. Each analyst read over the written results and provided feedback about how the writing appropriately portrayed findings and participant experience. Fourth, all previously coded transcripts were reread after themes were constructed in an effort to ensure that themes contextually fit across a majority of interviews. After this overview of all transcripts was complete, no new findings were added, and analysts determined that the themes they had found were accurate reflections of participant lived experiences.

Each interview was read by at least four analysts, using careful line-by-line evaluation of the interview data. The four analysts individually used open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) for each interview according to specific research questions using standard IPA procedures and steps as outlined above. Then, they used focused coding (Charmaz, 2006) to identify specific quotes and participant experiences that matched the themes found during initial open coding. Once

coding was completed, analysts met together with the primary researcher to discuss themes that could be connected and interwoven, and structured them into a cohesive body. During these meetings, if any team members voiced discrepant views about which themes should be included or which information fit into which theme, the group would discuss accordingly. As disparate views arose, the primary investigator asked for input from each team member and a consensus was reached. No cases of opposing viewpoints were left unresolved, and each team member fully supported the themes that were chosen. After themes were determined and written, all previously coded transcripts were reread by the same four analysts to establish credibility of these themes in the context of participant data, as suggested within standard IPA guidelines (Smith & Osborn, 2003), and to verify that the themes were reported according to what had been established during research team analysis meetings. Once the rereading had taken place, confirmation of the original themes was provided by each analyst, who gave affirmation of the presented findings to the primary investigator. At that point themes were solidified as the final results from this analysis, as each individual analyst confirmed through final readings of interviews that our results appropriately reflected participant voices of their lived experiences of these phenomena.

### **Credibility Methods**

The IPA methodology calls for researchers to interpret qualitative data according to their own conceptions in order to draw conclusions about participant experiences (Smith, 1996). Subjectivity is required in this approach, yet is typically not something emphasized in other research methods. Because the subjective nature of this analysis method differs from the objective stances used in other analysis strategies, it was especially important to include credibility methods as part of the analysis process in IPA. These methods help researchers to present findings to be as trustworthy as possible through means of reflexivity and triangulation

(Patton, 2002; Tracy, 2010). Another consideration in qualitative research is the idea of generalizability, which is conceptualized as recognizing the context of participant experiences and allowing their unique voice to be heard (Patton, 2002). While findings may be applied to a broad audience, using credibility methods allows findings to be taken within appropriate context and not overstated (Tracy, 2010). I integrated several common credibility methods into this study in order to maximize the trustworthiness and generalizability of my findings.

First, as Strauss and Corbin (1998) recommended, I used bracketing prior to and throughout data collection. Bracketing typically involves the data analysts thoroughly examining their potential biases toward the phenomena being studied, often through writing down personal reactions to preconceived notions about these phenomena and discussing those reactions with co-investigators (Patton, 2002). I used this approach to bracketing in the present study by having all data analysts write their preconceived notions about relationship effort and cyclical patterns prior to data analysis. Specifically, analysts bracketed their reactions to and journaled about these topics as they read a thorough literature review, which process has been done in other IPA research (see Sampson, 2013). During data collection and analysis, researchers used this credibility-enhancing strategy and continued to bracket—write small notes to themselves about personal biases/reactions to participant interviews—as we analyzed interview data. We consulted with other analysts to minimize bias throughout the process (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) as we discussed individual biases that arose while we used bracketing during analysis.

Second, Tracy (2010) recommends using triangulation as a method for enhancing trustworthiness of qualitative findings. This method involves the philosophy that if two or more types of data, theories, data sources, previous findings, or researchers draw similar conclusions, then the credibility of those findings is enhanced (Denzin, 1978). I triangulated findings with

previous research findings by comparing what I found to other literature about relationship effort and cyclical relationships, a strategy Patton (2002) has suggested. Additionally, I used researcher triangulation (Patton, 2002) by having multiple analysts examine the data and evaluate their findings separately, and then coming together to discuss how our individual findings converged. Each analyst had been trained in IPA procedures through either participation in a Family Studies and Human Services research team at Kansas State University that has received qualitative analysis training, or because they had taken graduate level qualitative methodology courses. After analysts had conducted their separate analyses according to the IPA procedures outlined above, they met together with me, the primary investigator, to discuss similarities and differences among findings and to determine the substantive themes that emerged from the data.

Third, I used a type of member checking procedure commonly used to establish credibility of findings (Tracy, 2010). This process involved summarizing main themes and significant factors about participant experiences at the end of each data collection interview, and then reflecting that summary back to the participant. At that point, the participant was provided the opportunity to confirm, clarify, and/or adjust the summary I had given in order to establish that I had understood participant experience of these phenomena successfully. This member checking procedure was used both within interviews and across interviews in order to further establish validity to these findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### **Researcher Reflexivity**

As a qualitative researcher, it is important to be reflexive about the ways that personal factors contributed to the research process (Patton, 2002). Sharing personal information relevant to the topics studied is one way to enhance credibility of findings, as those who review this research will understand more about those who analyzed the data and what may have contributed

to their analysis and findings contextually (Daly, 2007). Because the data were analyzed by multiple researchers, I felt that providing information about all data analysts would be helpful in putting our findings in context of our own biases.

As the primary investigator, I interviewed all twenty participants and analyzed interview data. I am a married, heterosexual Caucasian male with one toddler son. I am a couples therapist, and I have worked with both cyclical and non-cyclical couples in therapy on numerous occasions. Primarily, I have worked with couples about problems in their relationships related to emotional intimacy, physical intimacy, communication, infidelity, and other couple issues. I enjoy working with couples very much, and especially enjoy working with them on building and sustaining healthy relationship-enhancing skills and tools. I was in a cyclical relationship myself prior to getting married. That cyclical relationship lasted for fourteen months, and the relationship was broken off and renewed three separate times during my early twenties. My wife was also in a cyclical relationship that lasted for about three years before we married. I have two sisters-in-law who have been part of multiple cyclical relationships, and it is a frequent discussion of family conversations with them. I believe that when couple relationships are at risk, it is important to work toward reducing and managing risk factors in order to maximize couples' chances at having a healthy relationship.

Six other analysts reviewed participant data. All six of these analysts were undergraduate students during the analysis. Four of the analysts are twenty years old, while two are twenty-one. One of these analysts is male, and the other five are female. Four identify their ethnicity as Caucasian, while one identifies as Asian American and the other as biracial Filipino-Caucasian. Four of these analysts have been in cyclical relationships themselves, with one analyst currently involved with her cyclical partner of five years. Cyclical relationship length ranged from just

over one year together to five years together, with analysts reporting breaking up twice, three times, or four times during the duration of the relationship. Although one of the analysts had not been in a cyclical relationship herself, she reported that her older sister, with whom she has a close relationship, was in an on/off relationship for about ten years with at least three breakups. While none of these analysts have worked with couples in a therapy context, all have taken multiple college courses about romantic relationships, and have experience reading and writing about couple relationships on a regular basis as part of their undergraduate education in family studies. Understanding more about these personal aspects of all data analysts and our individual experiences in cyclical relationships provides valuable information for viewing our findings as credible, yet also for interpreting them within the context of our backgrounds. I encourage readers to interpret our findings within a lens that includes these factors and how they shaped our findings.



**Table 3-1***Demographic Information of Participant Couples (N=10 Couples; 20 Individuals)*

Variables	Females		Males	
Average Age (Years)	20 Range 18-22		21 Range 18-23	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
Education				
Enrolled in College	10	100%	10	100%
Annual Income				
Below \$25,000	10	100%	10	100%
Religion				
Catholic	1	10%	1	10%
Methodist	2	20%	1	10%
Other Christian	4	40%	6	60%
No Preference	3	30%	2	20%
Race/Ethnicity				
Asian	1	10%	0	0%
Caucasian	7	80%	10	100%
Latino/a, Hispanic	2	20%	0	0%
			Couples <i>N</i>	%
Length of Relationship				
1-2 Years			0	0%
2-3 Years			3	30%
3-4 Years			3	30%
4-5 Years			2	20%
5+ Years			2	20%
Number of Breakups/Off Periods				
1			5	50%
2			3	30%
3			2	20%
4+			0	0%

## **Chapter 4 - Results**

Through the steps and procedures of IPA, several distinct themes emerged from the data that answered the research questions from this study. The themes worked to answer questions about which specific maintenance behaviors evidenced effort for these couples and contributed most meaningfully to relationship transitions, and how perceptions of partner and personal effort, via use of relationship strategies, affected transitions. Refer to Table B-1 (see Appendix B) for a full display of themes and subthemes from each research question with supporting quotes from participants.

Before findings from each research question are presented, I will report two findings that emerged from analysis that were unrelated to the research questions. These two findings contribute unique information to prior conceptualizations of relationship effort and relationship churning. Additionally, these findings provide a helpful context for interpreting the remainder of the findings that correspond to each research question individually. Each of the following two findings makes a unique contribution to previous research and sets the stage for explaining further results according to research question, and those findings are presented below.

### **Mutual Understanding of Individual and Partner Effort**

An analysis of participant relationship timelines yielded interesting results concerning perceptions of effort between partners. Although constructed independently from each other, partners included all relationship breaks and reconciliations on their timelines, and eight of the ten couples indicated matching perceptions of level of effort demonstrated at all breakup and renewal points. For example, when one partner designated the couple's only breakup, he marked his effort at a high point but his partner's effort at a significantly lower point. When his partner specified the breakup in their relationship, she marked her timeline similarly, with her own level

of effort significantly lower than his. This happened for eight of these couples, even when multiple breakups were listed by each partner. What this seems to demonstrate is that partners experienced a mutual understanding of relationship effort at relationship transitions, and that partners were willing to honestly indicate when they had high or low levels of effort rather than solely blame or praise their partners when relationship transitions occurred.

It was somewhat surprising to us as researchers that participant ratings of personal and partner effort were so accurately reported between partners. We had wondered if partner's reports of effort would diverge for various reasons including social desirability, or perhaps if partners would over-report their own efforts and under-report their partners'. Given the fact that individuals in these cyclical dating relationships did see effort accurately in their dyads, our findings support other scholars' calls for including both self- and partner-report in dyadic research (van Dulmen & Goncy, 2010). If we combine this finding about the accuracy of partner- and self-reports of effort with our other finding about the specific maintenance behaviors that evidenced effort for these couples (findings reported under Research Question 1 results), we can infer that perhaps couples are perceiving similar amounts of displayed effort through specific maintenance behaviors. For example, if both partners viewed relationship-focused communication as high, then they also both indicated effort was high. It could be that each partner viewed the same maintenance behaviors as indicative of similar amounts of effort displayed in the relationship. There could be other possible explanations for this inference, and future research could explore this in more detail.

### **Cyclical Relationships Began in Adolescence**

Another interesting finding in this study, although not directly related to the research questions originally posed, is that nine of the ten participating couples reported that they had

started their relationships as teenagers during high school. Their first relationship transitions had come during high school or right after high school ended but before they began college. This means that the longest-lasting relationships in the sample were lengthy because they originated in mid- to late-adolescence and lasted for several years. Characteristics of cyclical relationships began manifesting for these nine couples during adolescence. This lies in contrast to current literature, in which most researchers have characterized cyclical relationships to be a phenomenon primarily occurring in adult or emerging adult relationships (e.g. Dailey et al., 2009; Halpern-Meekin et al., 2013a).

Other researchers have acknowledged cyclical relationships between adolescent dating partners (Matson, Chung, & Ellen, 2009), finding that many adolescents had broken up and reconciled with the same partner, which was an unexpected finding that they highlighted in their conclusions. Perhaps factors contributing to relationship churning are occurring earlier on in the lifespan than previously thought, as our findings indicated that adolescents were participating in cyclical relationships that continued into emerging adulthood. Because of the small sample size, these results should be interpreted within the context of this study and not overstated; however, this finding may be something for relationship scholars to consider as they study cyclical relationships in other developmental stages and demographic groups.

### **Themes from Research Question 1**

The first research question focused on which maintenance behaviors contributed to decisions about relationship transitions. Although couples engage in a wide spectrum of maintenance strategies in their relationships, this question explored those maintenance behaviors that couples' perceived were the most meaningful to relationship transitions. For these couples, transitions included breaking up, reconciling, and the absence of transition (i.e., staying

together). Some of the maintenance behaviors couples experienced directly contributed to breakup or renewal, whereas other maintenance behaviors were perceived as having a connection to non-transition (i.e., staying together). This meant that couples viewed some maintenance strategies as increasing general relationship health, and that as their relationships maintained adequate/exceptional health, they were less likely to break up. The analysis revealed six main themes as answers to this question, with one theme having two subthemes. Themes included (1) *relationship-focused communication* with two subthemes including *self-disclosure* and *openness about relationship issues*. The other themes were (2) *deliberate quality time*, (3) *going out of your way for your partner*, (4) *providing affirmation and reassurance of relationship value*, (5) *the little things* and (6) *purposeful maintenance breakups*. As participants described their experiences of effort in their cyclical relationships, it was clear that these themes were specific maintenance behaviors that contributed to couples' breakups, renewals, or non-transition/stability.

### **Relationship-Focused Communication**

The most prominent theme that emerged from analysis of this research question was the importance of effortful communication between partners. Every couple mentioned that communication was a contributor to their relationship satisfaction and building intimacy, and that their communication played a major role in keeping their relationship healthy. Relationship health was often portrayed as directly pertinent to cycling for participants, as they discussed that maintaining a quality relationship kept them from breaking up and/or contributed to reconciling. It was clear that these partners valued communication as a vital component of healthy relationship intimacy and keeping their relationships stable, and that maintaining relationship quality was linked with non-transition. Accordingly, *relationship-focused communication*

emerged as a main theme in the analysis. For example, Eddy stated the importance of communication for his relationship health as follows:

I think communication is one of the key things. And definitely intimate communication where you can sit down together and talk about yourselves and have deeper conversations instead of being always on the go. You need to slow down and talk about things that you actually need to talk about.

Additionally, Cady reported that communication was important in her relationship:

I feel like communication has been a big part for me....we need to reconvene and make sure we're communicating at the same level.... communication is a huge thing. Just being able to tell each other things that they need to work on or just communicating your feelings in general and just being honest.

Each of these participants then reflected about the importance of communication in keeping their relationships healthy. In their experience, as a high level of relationship quality was maintained, they were less likely to experience the transition of breaking up, and actually thought they were less likely to do so because of the level of relationship health they were sustaining due to engaging in healthy communication.

Not only did the participants value communication as a manifestation of effort in keeping their relationships healthy and less likely to break up, but communication often played a direct role in couple transitions. Some participants described communication as a reason that they took a break in the relationship. For example, Caleb said, "communication is the biggest thing. We always go back to that. We always allude back to when we broke up because we weren't talking. And we say we don't want that to happen again." Similarly, Erin pointed to general communication being one key reason behind her breakup:

He was just too scared to say something wrong to me, which is kind of frustrating, because if you don't say anything to me, which is ultimately the reason we broke up. I was like, 'if you don't talk to me, then why are we dating?' So I—I couldn't...I tried talking to him. And it just didn't work out so I was like 'I don't want to date someone who can't even talk to me.'

Kevin talked about how he and his girlfriend originally had problems with communication that led to a breakup, but have since tried to change their communication for the better:

Before we broke up we just let things build up, we didn't really talk about problems. We just figured things would fix themselves and we would be fine again. And I think it finally just blew up because we would never talk about it. And it just kept happening. Now we have conversations like 'are we still happy?' just because we did recently break up a few months ago. So we try to make sure everything is still good.

Actually we have the conversations to try and avoid it from happening again.

Jeff reported a similar occurrence, stating that "once we finally talked about something instead of just keeping everything to yourself and started thinking about it, everything just became a lot better. It's a lot more stable now." He and his girlfriend had poorer communication leading to a breakup, but realized how important it was for relationship stability and have tried to adapt their communication accordingly.

Participants also reported that communication led to renewals in relationships that had previously broken up. Several of these emerging adults discussed that communication was an instigating factor in reconciling. For example, Cady discussed that in her relationship, when communicating about relationship issues, it actually led to a renewal. She talked about a conversation she and her boyfriend had right before they renewed their relationship, noting that

“it was the first time we actually talked through our problems and realized, okay, we need to communicate or else we’re just going to assume things are going on. That was a really good time.” The majority of participants repeatedly emphasized the importance of communication. In addition to discussing how general communication affected relationship transitions, participants also described some specific facets of communication very relevant to relationship transition (or lack thereof), as described in the subthemes outlined below.

Each of the 20 individuals in this study emphasized certain facets of communication that denoted meaningful use of communication as a maintenance strategy related to their cyclical patterns. As they related their experiences, it became clear that two distinct aspects of communication related to the ways in which they perceived *relationship-focused communication* to be a meaningful maintenance strategy. We designated those two aspects of communication as the following two subthemes. Each subtheme represents a component of the maintenance strategy *relationship-focused communication* that participants viewed as a meaningful demonstration of effort in their relationships that contributed to couples staying together, breaking up, or reconciling.

### **Self-Disclosure**

As previously examined, participants discussed the importance of communication in sustaining a healthy relationship; in their experiences, if they perceived their relationship as healthy, it kept them together. For several couples, communication that involved *self-disclosure* was especially indicative of a healthy relationship that was not likely to break up. As these participants discussed, self-disclosure in communication was a way they measured the value of communication as a maintenance behavior. For example, Jeff said:



When I use my words to express what I'm feeling—I don't like to talk about myself a whole bunch. I don't like to talk a whole bunch period. So when I actually do tell her what's on my heart or what's on my mind, she always gets happy.

Aaron talked about the importance of self-disclosure in communication as well, noting that a lack of self-disclosure may lead to problems between him and his partner:

She'll always ask me questions about some sort of current event or something. And she wants me to tell her about it so she can find out more about me. When I'm trying to be invested and put into it, I'll tell her how I feel about it. When I'm—sometimes I just don't want to. And then she usually gets upset that I don't share any more with her.

Erin shared a similar thought process, indicating that she perceived an increased effort from her partner when he self-disclosed:

When his dog died, it was terrible. It was so sad....that was a time where I said 'you need to sit down and talk and I know that she was a huge part of your life.' And he was like 'you're right, I never got a chance to grieve and that was terrible.' I feel like any time he actually shares how he feels with me shows that he's trying.

For these participants, *self-disclosure* in communication evidenced a satisfying level of effort and reflected adequate relationship health, and that health contributed to their experiences of non-transition.

### **Openness about Relationship Issues**

The majority of participants disclosed that their experiences with communication about issues in their relationships had contributed to relationship transitions directly. Collectively, participants expressed that breakups were often related to unwillingness and reticence toward having discussions about problems in their relationships. If one or both partners did not discuss

relationship problems, it often led to breaking up or spending time in an off period, which is why the subtheme *openness about relationship issues* is included in findings regarding the use of *relationship-focused communication* as a meaningful maintenance strategy in these couples' relationships. For example, Caleb reported the following when asked about what led to one of the breakups he experienced with his girlfriend:

We wouldn't talk about what we were struggling with with each other. We just kept it bottled up kind of thing. And we would go stints without talking to each other like in general. For a couple days. And then things just didn't feel the same.

Britney reported something similar when she discussed how failure to openly discuss relationship issues led to a breakup:

The second time we broke up...throughout the whole time he hadn't told me that I was doing all those things. So, like, I had no idea that I was making him feel that certain way. He never told me. But if he had told me I wouldn't have pressured him to do all those things or wouldn't have asked to do all those things. I obviously would have been—would have backed off. But he never told me until one day he just snapped. And he just told me we were done.

Cady reported a similar issue in her relationship, noting the following about her pre-breakup relationship:

We just kind of jumped to conclusions about what you're doing or how you're feeling instead of just blatantly asking, 'How do you feel on this?' or maybe just apologizing for something....If it [communication] would've been better from the beginning I feel like our highs and lows wouldn't have been so up and down and we wouldn't have broken up so many times.

In contrast, partners also described relationship renewal as a time when they were able to open up about problems in the relationship and communicate effectively about them in an effort to avoid repeating the same problems. Eddy disclosed that after one of the renewals with his partner, “We were both able to communicate with each other better and have conversations instead of sitting there and instead of just basic talking we were able to actually talk about things more seriously.” Cady also explained that being open about relationship issues contributed to her relationship renewal, stating that as she and her partner spent more time together in an “off” period as casual friends rather than romantic partners, he grew more comfortable around her. Eventually, a reconciliation occurred as she noted that “he actually started opening up to me and able to be vulnerable and trust me with things he wouldn’t trust just a random person with, so I feel like that helped a lot.” Alexa discussed a similar viewpoint as she talked about her relationship once they had reconciled:

We just had a lot more conversations and were just a lot more honest with each other.

And I remember we had a lot of conversations that was talking about why we broke up....you have this significant other in your life, they’re there for you, and they love you, they want to be there for you. And it’s important that you communicate your needs and how you’re feeling so that you can work on things and fix things.

Similarly, Janice talked about her experience with relationship-issue conversations being helpful as she got back together with her boyfriend:

I remember after our first date getting back together we were driving in the car back home, and just a lot of things were shared that time. Just about feelings, like how he felt when I broke up with him, and that whole time what he went through....During the ride

home he talked about how I hurt him. He basically got his feelings out more than he had before.

Altogether, these couples highlighted the salience of direct communication about relationship issues, and how that communication affected the transitions in their relationships.

### **Deliberate Quality Time**

Participants described that spending quality time together was a behavior that significantly impacted their experience of effort associated with relationship transitions. These emerging adults voiced that beyond the act of spending time together, initiative and deliberateness in those moments was particularly important. For these partners, it was not solely the act of spending time together that mattered, but that the time spent together was high-quality and specifically designed to enhance the relationship. It was apparent that participants valued their time together and saw that spending quality time together equated demonstration of effort for most partners and was linked to relationship transitions. Accordingly, the theme *deliberate quality time* was included in these findings. Some participants experienced *deliberate quality time* as contributing to non-transition in their relationship. For example, the following two participants explained that in their relationships, there were certain points of relationship stability and non-transition because of effort demonstrated via quality time. Eddy described that he and his girlfriend understand the major role quality time plays in their relationship effort:

We like to plan like going out to dinner together. One of us will choose, one of us will say 'hey we're going to go out to dinner.' And then one of us will choose where we go. I'd say sometimes I'll plan times for us to just go to [a local park] and take walks and stuff like that. I think that's a special thing that we do. Definitely planning events is special. Showing that you care about the relationship in that way.

He went on to describe how his relationship feels especially stable when this particular strategy is implemented. Erin discussed a similar experience and perspective, also noting that *deliberate quality time* was a demonstration of effort that made her feel that her relationship was not at risk of breaking up:

Especially with busy schedules, you have to plan those dates....I think that's a big thing because if you plan out something it shows that you care. That's a huge thing, like you took the time to think about what your partner likes, what kind of food or whatever you plan to do. If they plan it out, you feel special because they care about you and they're taking the time to do something for you.

She continued, explaining that her relationship felt more stable when she and her partner were spending more intentional quality time together.

Participants also described the role *deliberate quality time* as a maintenance strategy played in their experiences of relationship renewals. Alexa described a change she made in her relationship after a renewal in order to increase quality time in her relationship:

I know one change I made is, I'm on my phone a lot, like reading emails, Instagramming, tweeting, and he doesn't like that. He likes quality time and me to be there and be present when we're there together, so that's one thing I've definitely been working on, is trying not to be on my phone now that we're back together.

Gretchen described a similar experience about deliberate quality time during the renewal stage of her relationship:

I guess, even in the renewal stage, this is silly, I just kind of wanted to spend more time, like quality time. So there's an example of one time he brought me ice cream but he just kind of was like 'Here's your ice cream,' and just kind of left. So, to him I guess at that

point he felt like he was doing a courteous thing of bringing me ice cream, but to me I was like ‘I don’t just want the ice cream.’

Caleb also described a change that he had been trying to make in his relationship as he and his partner reconciled:

Maybe just taking her out on a date every once in a while. Just getting away from all of this crazy college life and taking her out to eat somewhere, whether it’s just Olive Garden, showing her that I still have time for just her in my life.

These examples illustrate the emphasis that participants placed on deliberate quality time during renewals.

In addition, participants also described their experiences of deliberate quality time as linked to breaking up. Many partners disclosed that a decrease in initiated quality time led to breaking up, often because the lack of decreased quality time was perceived as an indicator of less relationship effort. For example, Eddy discussed how a lack of quality time as a couple contributed to his breakup by stating “I’d say that we weren’t really spending a lot of time just by ourselves together. We’d only be with her friends.” Aaron reported the following when describing what led to a breakup with his partner:

I wasn’t inviting her to hang out with me or anything like that. I was just hanging out with my friends a lot more. And when she asked me to hang out sometimes I would just say that I was hanging out with my friends and didn’t want to. And I never really took her out on dates or anything. Just stuff like that. Just kind of neglect, I guess.

Alexa reported a similar experience when discussing effort behaviors that led to her breaking up:

When I'd be really busy and stressed out, I didn't put in as much time as I need to. Like, if I have three tests in a week, and I have seven meetings to go to, then I won't invest the time in in, and I'll just kind of let him fall on the back burner.

Increases in purposeful quality time were demonstrations of effort for these participants, and that effort conveyed a sense of relationship stability related to non-transition. Intentional quality time also played a key role during renewals, as more quality time was usually sought as part of the renewal process. In contrast, dips in quality time were often perceived as indicators of decreased relationship effort that led to breaking up. Overall, the theme *deliberate quality time* seems to reflect participant experiences with this particular behavior as being an effort demonstration linked to relationship transitions.

### **Going Out of Your Way for Your Partner**

Participants described numerous experiences in which one of them had done something deliberately to help the other person at personal expense. It was clear that participants valued these demonstrations of effort in particular, and that these demonstrations contributed to relationship stability as one partner noticed the other deliberately doing something that took extra time, energy, or planning. Many participants used the phrase "going out of your way" in particular, which led to the inclusion of the theme *going out of your way for your partner*. Caleb reported that in his relationship "we go out of our way to see each other" even when it is difficult to match schedules, while Eddy said that his partner finds it meaningful when he is "going out of my way to get her, pick her up" because they do not live near each other. Glen also reported a similar view, noting that the way he and his partner went out of their way to help each other in the relationship was particularly demonstrative of effort and contributed to relationship stability:

You know, if you need help studying or something, I'll help you study. Or with homework, anything. If you need me to go put gas in the car. Anything. We're always willing to help each other right away....One specific thing: she loves that I love our dog. So doing small things like taking the dog out all the time or taking her [the dog] to play and stuff.

In particular, it seemed that participants valued demonstrations of effort as partners went out of their way to do something the other enjoyed doing, even if it was not personally enjoyable. Alexa discussed the following aspects of how she and her partner integrate that type of effort in their relationship:

He loves baseball, and I could care less about baseball, but I know that's really important to him, so I make an effort to go to Royals games over the summer. And he always likes me to do baseball trivia, and so I always look that up and I'll ask him trivia questions, and I really try to make that an effort, to talk about things he likes. And then I guess this is small, but I give him control of the radio. I think he appreciates that more than I do.

Jeff discussed a similar dynamic in his relationship, as he and his partner have navigated going out of their way for each other:

Like for her, she really likes her music and stuff. She loves to be in choir. I am tone deaf and could really care less about music. But I know she cares about it so I will support her and go to her concerts or listen to her and everything. I'll support her. On the other hand I'm a big nerd and I love to play video games. And she actually says, 'Yeah, go play Xbox or go do this. You deserve a little time.' And it's like 'Well, thank you.'

Ben also recalled a similar experience, even directly linking it with cyclical patterns in his relationship:



She likes tennis, I absolutely hate it....You know after like breaking up once or twice, or after breaking up the first time, she'd asked me before to play, but I never did. But once we got back together and got going, I started trying to do activities that I knew she likes to do.

Some participants explained that part of the reason they find it meaningful for their partners to go out of their way was because those actions helped them know that they were one of their partner's priorities. For example, Gretchen explained that her partner invited her on a meaningful trip even though he could have asked someone else to go: "His parents gave him like a trip for his, um, graduation. Like I mean, he had the opportunity to ask anybody. He could have asked his friends or something, so I mean that's why I thought that was significant." Cady reported a similar experience, noting that she felt prioritized when her partner went out of his way to spend time with her: "Over Christmas break he was going to hang out with a group of his friends from college, and instead he decided not to and he spent the weekend with me, so that was nice." As partners experienced the other going out of his/her way for the other's benefit, they perceived enhanced relationship effort, which was related to stability in their relationship.

### **Providing Affirmation and Reassurance of Relationship Value**

Another theme regarding specific maintenance behaviors that were evidence of relationship effort and contributed to relationship stability revolved around partners offering affirmation of their relationship's worth to the other. Participants described that partners made comments about the meaningfulness of their couple relationship in their lives, spoke of commitment to each other, referenced future couple-focused events, or made other reassuring comments about their relationship. As these affirming exchanges occurred, partners perceived intensified effort and perceived greater relationship stability. For example, Caleb stated that

“since we’ve been on and off for so long, just knowing that I feel she’s here to stay now...that she always wants to be in my life. We are looking forward to what’s gonna happen next with us.” Aaron explained a similar experience, noting “just the word ‘love,’ when she says that—she doesn’t say it a lot, so when she does I just know it’s reassuring to me. And then when she talks about a future, that’s reassuring that she wants that.” Finn also reported the importance of using relationship-affirming behaviors by working toward a future together, stating “right now we’re working on getting engaged and then getting married. So we’re the most serious we’ve been. So that’s kind of why our investment is higher.”

Some participants expressed that there were specific events or actions that reaffirmed the relationship’s worth. Erin voiced her experience with commemorating relationship milestones as an affirmation of the relationship’s value that was meaningful effort. She stated that “once those big year marks start showing up, we both get really excited about it, we’re like ‘what do you want to do for it?’ We try to come up with something different to do each year to celebrate.” Diane also talked about specific actions that communicated commitment and reassured her of her relationship’s value. She said, “last spring we signed the lease for the house we live at together now, which really showed me that he was serious about us because signing the lease with me and living with me was a pretty big deal.” Altogether, the theme *providing affirmation and reassurance of relationship value* demonstrated that partners who engaged in affirming behaviors found those actions particularly meaningful contributions of effort and, therefore were related to greater perceived relationship stability and non-transition.

### **The Little Things**

Participants expressed that their partners’ involvement in doing small, day-to-day actions was particularly meaningful in showing effort in the relationship. They described perceiving

their relationships as stronger when each partner was using these small behaviors on a regular basis. As they perceived a stronger relationship, they relayed an expectation of non-transition. Multiple participants used the phrasing “the little things” in their discussions of these acts of effort, which captures the collective mentality about *the little things* as integral demonstrations of effort. “It’s little things, his actions,” Erin stated, continuing that “obviously actions speak louder than words.” Alexa also discussed that she tries “to do little things like that, things that I know it may not be big, but it’s something he cares about” when talking about making a snack, helping clean, or helping with schoolwork. Jeff also noticed these little things, explaining

I always notice her doing little things. She’ll go and make me cookies or I’ll just be sitting there and I—I like to have my head scratched or my back scratched and she’ll just reach over, if she’s playing on her phone, and do that. Just the little things I notice. She’s always smiling, she always asks me about my day.

Glen noted that it was “just normal relationship stuff” that showed his partner and him were showing effort in their relationship, explaining that “we both do things for each other, as far as helping out and surprises and stuff like that. And cooking for each other.” Damien also explained that these “typical” behaviors were strong evidence of relationship effort, describing how in his relationship, buildup of these daily behaviors shows meaningful contribution: “if she needed to go to the grocery store or whatever I did. Just kind of help each other do that and just kinda [*sic*] helping each other live day to day.”

Specifically, Eddy discussed some routine experiences he and his partner use in showing effort in their relationship: “Sometimes we’ll bring each other food. If I’m studying somewhere sometimes she’ll pop in with food, or I’ll do the same. I just randomly go pick her up and get ice cream or something like that.” Caleb also described how he uses small actions to show effort in

his relationship, noting that “sometimes I’ll just go into her room when she’s not there and leave notes.”

Britney explained that once she recognized that her partner valued those small acts in their relationship, she was able to do more of them to show more effort:

So if he has a really big test he needs to study for, but if I did his laundry for him, that’s how he feels the most loved. So now I go towards more trying to do things for him like picking him up from class, doing his laundry, little things like that.

Finn recalled an experience where his partner had thought about doing some of *the little things* for him and it emphasized her effort in their relationship:

I went to pick up my bike the other day ‘cause she gave me the car for the night and she just made me lunch in ten minutes and I ate before I left. It was just, I hadn’t thought about eating and she thought about it before I did, so, I think that was really nice.

As these emerging adults described effort in their relationships, it became clear that engaging in *the little things* was an integral demonstration of relationship effort related to their perceptions of relationship health. Because *the little things* augmented their relationship health in their experience, it also related to expecting non-transition in their relationships.

### **Purposeful Maintenance Breakups**

The next theme involved a specific behavior that was only present in one couple from the sample. However, each member of the research team independently identified this finding as substantive, and we determined that it should be included in our findings because of its impact. Within phenomenological analysis, including IPA, researchers may determine a finding to be of significance because of its substance, even if it is not shared across multiple participant experiences (Patton, 2002); because each data analyst found this theme to be important, we

included it in our findings despite only one couple acknowledging this type of maintenance behavior. The couple reported purposefully taking a break in their relationships as a strategy to improve their relationship. Because the purpose behind this breakup aimed to enhance the relationship, partners reported that the breakup indicated effort in their perspective.

They spoke of breaking up as a useful tool in maintaining relationship health. It seemed that there was a distinction made between breaking up in order to end the relationship and breaking up in order to use the break as a repair strategy. Although the purpose behind the breakup was to improve their relationship, this couple did not intentionally *time* their breakup. It seemed that once the relationship had reached a point of dissatisfaction, they took a break with the aim to improve their functioning. They did not have conversations where they discussed taking an intentionally timed break to improve the relationship; rather, their breakup occurred as a reaction to experiencing low points in relationship satisfaction and health. While one partner hoped that the breakup would be temporary and used the breakup as an attempt to repair the relationship, there was not a specific plan to break up. Although different from other forms of relationship effort that are more deliberate and intentional, we still concurred that this was a demonstration of effort because the purpose was to improve the relationship even though there was little pre-planned deliberateness of the breakup.

Karen discussed her experience being the one who initiated the breakup as an intentional strategy aimed at improving the relationship:

I just wanted a break to see how I felt, how he reacted, if anything changed. I pretty much planned on getting back together. It wasn't that I hated him or didn't want to continue it, but I thought that was the easiest way to get change.

Kevin, Karen's partner, described his experience with a *purposeful maintenance breakup* as a partner on the non-initiating side of the breakup as follows:

Breaking up was just to get me to realize what I was doing...I was asking for another chance and stuff. And she was like "well we're just going to take a break and see how things go." It didn't last long. And that's why my effort went all the way back up, because it took about a day to realize that I didn't like the way it's been going. Ever since getting back together things have been pretty good.

It seemed that this couple's experience related to using a breakup as a form of maintenance behavior aimed at improving the relationship or reducing problems. They also reported a largely positive view of doing so, noting later on in their separate interviews that they viewed this breakup as a turning point for the better in their relationship. Thus, this *purposeful maintenance breakup* proved a meaningful maintenance strategy that partners perceived as effortful.

## **Themes from Research Question 2**

The second research question sought insights about how perceptions of partner effort contributed to relationship transitions. Analysis yielded the following themes: (1) *perceptions of lower partner effort linked with negative thoughts/emotions*; (2) *previous history of effort*; and (3) *over-effort*. Participants described their experiences related to these themes, highlighting that perceptions of partner effort impacted relationship transitions in distinct ways.

### **Perceptions of Lower Partner Effort Linked with Negative Thoughts/Emotions**

One common thread among the majority of participants focused on their experience in feeling negative emotions or thinking negative thoughts due to perceiving low effort from their partners. Many discussed feeling sad, stressed, hurt, or frustrated, and expressed that they began thinking about the relationship in a more negative light. Often, they reported that these negative

thoughts or emotions were linked to relationship transitions in some way. For example, Eddy noted that he perceived his partner's decreased effort around their second breakup, saying "It's like, kind of stressful and a little bit annoying when you seem like you're pulling more of the weight and they're just kind of laying back and going with whatever." Aaron also discussed feeling negatively when he perceived low effort from his partner right before they broke up, saying "at the time I felt like I was giving more effort than she was. And so it felt like I wasn't getting respect I guess."

Erin also described an experience during which she had asked her partner to change something and he had not made any attempts to do so, which led her to initiate a breakup. She said she felt impatient and hurt, wondering

'why isn't this going quicker, why aren't you making more of an effort now? Like I just asked you to make an effort, and it doesn't even seem like you're trying.' I struggled with it and he didn't even do anything. So that kind of—like I tried hard, but it didn't matter to him. So it mattered to me and not to him.

Cady had a similar experience, noting that "I felt like his effort was just going down, like he wasn't really invested in this relationship. He was kind of like, 'Whatever happens, happens,'" which she said hurt her feelings and led to a breakup. For Alexa, it seemed frustrating for her that she was putting in effort but perceived low effort from her partner, which ultimately led to the first breakup they experienced:

I would have to always ask him to hang out, or always plan dates or things to do and that's just not necessarily something he was doing, and it was really frustrating to me because I didn't necessarily feel like I was—it was being reciprocated.

As participants perceived low effort from their partners, they noted an increase in negative thoughts and feelings that were influential in breakup transitions.

### **Previous History of Effort**

Collectively, participant experiences highlighted the relevance of partner perceptions of previous demonstrations of effort in navigating relationship transitions. As partners recalled perceptions of high effort or low effort from each other, it impacted couple reconciliations and/or breakups. Many individuals recalled these perceptions as playing integral roles in multiple transitions in their relationships, which led to the inclusion of this theme in our results.

Some participants discussed how *previous history of effort* affected their relationship reconciliations. For example, Aaron, at a different point in his relationship, recalled that “when I first met her to try to talk to her about trying to talk again, I think she was a little apprehensive at first just because of the way things ended the first time,” referencing a low point in his effort during their previous time together. Alexa described a similar experience as her relationship reconciled, stating “I think he felt like since he put all that effort in the first time we dated, that he didn’t really want to do that again if I wasn’t going to reinvest the time,” again recognizing her partner’s prior demonstration of effort as the relationship transitioned. Erin explained her experience with renewing a relationship and ensuring that previous perceptions of effort guided the couple into increasing effort as they got back together. She said that she “didn’t want it to be like the first time so...he had to break out of his shell basically,” continuing that he had to “try really hard then” in order to change her perception of his effort based on past experience.

Glen voiced his experience about how previous effort history rooted in distrust from a prior breakup contributed to the reconciliation process for his relationship. He noted that he expected his partner to put in effort in order to change his perception of her effort:



Getting back together close to a year ago now, that was a challenge. Because, you know, obviously trust issues [with his partner] arose after spending that nine months apart. So it was hard getting over that. Just battling through whatever it threw at you. Because we both knew that's what we both wanted and would make us both happy. So I think that made it important [for her] to put in a lot of effort to get to that point.

Janice and Jeff both reported on their experience as a couple, where previous history with effort affected their renewal. Janice had initiated a breakup, so when they were getting back together, she felt that she had to change her partner's perception of her effort so that it was based on her present efforts and not solely on her past effort: "he wasn't completely sure if he should trust me again. That was where I was needing to try to make him feel comfortable, make him feel love, and assure him that I wasn't going anywhere." Jeff, her boyfriend, recognized that she was giving increased effort, but the fear from previous relationship history affected his perception of his partner's effort in their reconciliation: "she was giving really high effort. In the back of my mind I knew what happened from our previous relationship. So I was kinda [sic] scared and just trying to find my ground." As this and previous examples have demonstrated, these couples provided many insights about how previous demonstrations of effort affected transitions in their relationships.

### **Over-effort**

This theme emerged as participants described that at times they perceived their partners as *too* invested in the relationship, which resulted in breaking up. For some of these emerging adults, it seemed that perceived over-investment from the partner was a signal that the relationship was reaching an end point. For example, Damien reported that before he and his partner broke up, he noticed that

she was too invested in just me...for her I think it'd be better off if she tried to make new friends and have some hobbies without just wanting to be with me and just spend time together, spend time together, spend time together.

Interestingly, his partner Diane agreed, noting that preceding more than one of their breakups, there were “times when I [could] drive him crazy by caring too much.” Heath also discussed a comparable experience with relationship over-effort from his partner.

She wanted to spend a little bit more time with me and I was fine with that, but I also wanted some free time to myself too. So basically I kind of forcibly ignored her, so then that would push her to try more....And I think too much effort at that point was just—it shut it down.

They broke up afterward, with both partners explaining that it was because there was *too much* effort from her at that point in their relationship. As participants described these experiences, it became apparent that sometimes as one partner perceived *over-effort* from the other in the relationship, it led to a transition out of the relationship.

### **Themes from Research Question 3**

The third research question focused on trying to understand how perceptions of individual effort impacted relationship transitions. I sought to gain insight into how partners saw their own demonstrations of effort influencing relationship renewals, breakups, or stability. Analysis yielded the following themes: (1) *personal effort is power in transition decisions*; (2) *outside stressors*; (3) *exhaustion when effort is perceived as unbalanced*; and (4) *doubt about relationship future*. We also found another theme that provided answers to this research question. Because this theme answers questions about both self- *and* partner-perceptions, however, it will be presented as a separate finding after the themes from the third research question are presented

below. As we analyzed data to answer this question, it became clear that participant perceptions about their contributions of effort in their relationships played a major role in relationship transitions as related to these themes.

### **Personal Effort Is Power in Transition Decisions**

Regardless of whether personal effort contributions in their relationships were perceived as *high* or *low* effort, participants reported that realizing their own level of effort equated having power in making transition decisions. As partners concluded that they were (or were not) demonstrating effort in the relationship, it was easier to initiate a breakup or a renewal if they chose to do so. Recognition of one's own effort seemed to grant power in these shifts within the relationship. For example, as her relationship reconciled, Britney reported that her effort "was a little more invested then. And I said 'are we going to date or not?' and said 'I want to know'...then the following week, we became an official couple again." Hannah's experience with perceived effort as power in decision-making came as she decided to break her relationship off. She said

I didn't want it to happen and I was still willing to work together but I knew I wasn't going to force him to be in it if he didn't want to be in it....Instead I just decided to end it.

Ben reported that he perceived his own effort as low, which led him to initiate a renewal as he began to shift toward a higher effort. He said that

I knew that at that time if I don't step my game up—you know, show her that I love her—she was going to leave me because this was going to be our third break up. And I knew basically after that she's not coming back.

His perception of his own effort gave him power to initiate a decision about not breaking up as he worked on increasing his maintenance efforts. Overall, the theme *personal effort is power in*

*transition decisions* reflected participant experiences about how initiating transitions originated in perceptions of self-effort.

### **Outside Stressors**

While participants described their experiences with self-perceptions of relationship effort, it became apparent that many of them noticed outside factors contributing to their efforts in their relationships. As outside stressors built up, it seemed that individuals noted changes in their own efforts, which led to couple transitions. Outside activities vied for the attention of all participants, with every couple reporting at least some sort of experience where work or school distracted from active engagement in personal effortful behaviors in their relationships in some way. As partners reported increased individual involvement in work or school, they perceived less effort in their relationships, which often contributed to relationship problems. Heath noted that “We both have our own things where we don’t pay attention to the other person very much and the other person gets frustrated,” later divulging that he often is distracted by time spent with friends, which he views as taking away from his effort in the relationship. Ben described how work and school affects effort in his relationship, noting that effort “goes lower mainly because I focus so much on school. I’m just busy with school....I mean [school] makes [me] kind of lose interest and not wanting to put as much effort into it.” Fiona discussed a comparable experience, describing that if there are times when she is ““super busy with other commitments...more fights will come up cause, like, [I] haven’t worked on anything [in the relationship] in a while.” Kevin also voiced how outside commitments influence his relationship effort behaviors:

She coaches volleyball and I coach wrestling, so we’re both really busy.... Between school and both of us coaching it’s hard to find time to actually take her on a date...she

might not think that I'm putting on effort. We're just both so busy that we don't go on dates as much anymore.

Because most participants noted some sort of experience with outside factors such as work, school, or other commitments impacting their personal relationship effort, we determined that this was a substantial theme to be included with other themes related to perceptions of individual effortful contributions.

Participants also described the *absence* of outside factors as having an impact on individual relationship effort. When there was an absence of outside stressors, participants reported high points in relationship effort. When there were periods of time that seemed less demanding in terms of outside stress, participants experienced upticks in their relationship efforts. Britney noted that high points in effort from herself and her partner have occurred “over winter break so there's no school. I guess less stress” for herself, which she said enabled her to engage more in maintenance strategies to show her effort. Heath also described a high point in his relationship when outside stressors were less in play, during a summer break in college. He described how an *absence* of stressors led him to spend more time with his partner, and engage in more frequent and healthier communication with her, both of which he viewed as effortful maintenance strategies: “We were both really comfortable with each other and able to communicate pretty well. There weren't very many frustrations and all that. So I feel like both of us were just flowing really well.” His partner, Hannah, agreed, noting that the decreased stresses of summer have benefitted their relationship effort: “this past summer—any summers really that we've been together—I think our effort has been really good and we've been really happy,” continuing to explain that she perceives an increase in her own maintenance strategies, such as

spending quality time with her partner or engaging in small acts of kindness, when there are fewer stressors in her life.

Kevin reported that deliberately reducing outside stressors is a key in enhancing his relationship. He noted the following:

We have our own little getaways because we're both really busy.... So little trips, even if it was just like to the Omaha Zoo always just—it was just a really good, relaxing reminder that everything is okay. The stress of life is relieved. I think that is one of our keys to making our relationship work. We just take a week out of everything and spend it together.

As these emerging adults experienced an absence of stressors, they perceived heightened relationship effort that was related to non-transition.

Altogether, *outside stressors* influenced perceptions of individual relationship effort in two ways: first, being consumed with more outside stressors distracted from relationship effort; second, partners voiced that when outside stressors were less consuming, it allowed them more time/energy to input effort in their relationships by increasing maintenance strategies.

### **Exhaustion When Effort is Perceived as Unbalanced**

Several participants described that high effort and investment in maintenance behaviors led them to feel exhausted or overwhelmed because they were engaging in so many effortful contributions to the relationship. It seemed that particularly when one partner viewed their own effort as increasing the intensity or frequency of personal maintenance strategies while their partner's effort did not lead to similar actions, they reported feeling exhausted or overwhelmed. Damien described a period of time where he had made an active effort on behalf of his partner including helping with some of her family problems and attending to her after a car accident.

After this period of high personal effort, he felt that his partner never put that same amount of effort into their relationship even when those other circumstances resolved. He said, “Reaching that point, its like, why? Why am I dealing with this?....It just seemed at that point anything I'd say or do would not make a difference.” Britney discussed a similar experience, noting that she hoped her partner would increase his efforts, because she was tired of feeling like she was putting so much effort into the relationship herself while her partner was not showing as much effort. She stated

for once I just want him to be like the guy who initiates and does things and goes in for the kiss or goes in for the hug or invites me to dinner or invites me to do things. Because I'm kind of exhausted of being that person who's always doing that.

As they voiced these experiences, it became apparent that personal perceptions of unbalanced effort impacted the way that individuals engaged in effortful contributions, as those who perceived themselves as having more investment than their partners experienced exhaustion from their input efforts.

### **Doubt About Relationship Future**

One of the recurrent themes that permeated participant experiences was linked with doubts about the couple's future together as a romantic partnership. Partners that expressed doubts about the future of their relationship described that their effort often dipped as they thought about a lack of future prospects together. For example, Damien talked about how he has hesitated in putting effort into his relationship and focused on his own personal development because of his outlook about his relationship's future. He stated, “It's hard for me to invest so much time and effort into something that I don't see going however much further instead of trying to focus on myself and figure out my own self right now.” Ben experienced a similar

situation, noting that he was unsure about a future with his partner even when she saw a future together, and it drove him to disengage from effort in the relationship: “She said, ‘I want this to work out [long-term]’ and I explained to her that...I just wasn’t sure. Like I kind of want to see what else is out there. And...I tried to push her away.”

Participants also described that their thoughts about the relationship’s future sometimes directly impacted relationship transitions. As Finn described

In the past it has just been the amount of hope I see in the end goal, which would be marriage for us. So in the times where I felt that was a reasonable possibility, we got back together. I was pretty sure I wanted to be—from there on I was invested more.

Heath reported that he and his partner have discussed how their transitions have been impacted by thinking about the future. They broke up before they realized they wanted a future together, but once they thought more about the future, they reconciled.

Once you hit a certain point, if you don’t see a future with them, there’s really no point in keeping it going...eventually [we] saw a future...we’ve said to each other before, like we want to have a family and all that kind of stuff. And so, if you don’t...it’s kind of pointless to keep it going if it’s not going to go anywhere.

Participant experiences speak clearly to the theme *doubts about relationship future* being an integral factor affecting relationship effort and transitions.

### **Themes Related to Research Questions 2 & 3**

In my study, I conceptualized two distinct research questions pertaining to self-perceived and partner-perceived effort. It became evident that partners had a difficult time separating personal and partner effort as they discussed patterns of waxing and waning effort within their relationships. We referred to these patterns as *coasting and boosting*, and conceptualized that



theme as a bridge between the second and third research questions because it offered insights into both self- and partner-perception of effort related to relationship transitions. As we analyzed the data and reviewed participant responses pertaining to these patterns, it was difficult to distinguish these patterns as either solely personal or partner perceptions, but we saw this as an important finding to include nonetheless; several couples reported experiencing these patterns of increasing and decreasing effort, and we determined that it warranted inclusion in our results. In addition to the general theme *coasting and boosting*, two distinct subthemes emerged within this theme that clarified participant experience of these patterns' role in relationship transitions, and those subthemes will also be presented below.

### **Coasting and Boosting**

*Coasting and boosting* is focused on individuals' perceptions that when both self- and partner-effort in their relationship was high, they could "coast" and decrease their demonstrations of maintenance. However, once relationship effort seemed to become noticeably lacking as maintenance strategies decreased, one or both partners would often attempt to quickly remedy problematically low effort by increasing use of maintenance behaviors to demonstrate increased effort. Karen's experience provides an accurate definition of *coasting and boosting* that fit across several other participants' experiences. She noted that

during those better times, it's easy to coast. And I feel like when you get to a bad point that's when you really need to step it up. I think coasting for the most part is fine, but I think that lower effort, minimal effort is when you get in trouble.... Just when something big would happen and we'd need to try a little bit harder just to get through it. And once you'd get back up to that good point you can start coasting again.

Karen's experience showcases that in her experience, *coasting and boosting* was not only about her perception of her own effort or her perception of her partners', but about how both partners' efforts fit together. Diane's experience was similar, and she voiced that sometimes she and her partner fought when effort dropped, but then they worked to improve their relationship afterward, which created a pattern of boosted effort followed by dropped effort and so on. She said that after a rough patch,

that's when I get really serious and know that I need to change. Then things will get better after. Things always get a lot better after a fight. I know that's when we coast, and then it'll be like another big fight, and then better, and then we coast.

Hannah described her experience similarly, saying "right after the breakups, we both worked really hard then to get to where we wanted to be, and then once it got to that point we kind of let the effort go a little bit." Heath, her partner, voiced a comparable stance, explaining that

if you feel like things are solid you don't really have to do much. As long as you're with each other and you feel fine, you feel fine. Then you don't have to do a bunch of crazy things. But during those rough patches it's more important to put more effort in and try to figure it out.

Other participants noted that an increase in effort gave a boost to their use of maintenance strategies in order to prevent a breakup and maintain what they perceived as stability because there were no transitions. Ben reported that when he realized his effort was low he raised his effortful contributions to his relationship: "I didn't want to lose her, so obviously, you know, talked it out and really focused my attention on her. And obviously we're doing well now." Diane also reported an increase in her maintenance behaviors due to relationship effort increasing, as her partner was "still on the fence and so right now, I'm trying to be as good as I

can and not start anything, and try to really make things better so that he will want to stay. Because I don't want to not live together.” Collectively, participant experiences of relationship effort seemed to suggest that perceiving *coasting and boosting* in relationship effort influenced relationship transitions.

Further exploration of this theme revealed two distinct subthemes related to *coasting and boosting*. It seemed that as partners perceived mismatched levels of effort between self and partner, they would either work toward remedying those issues by increasing maintenance behaviors, or they would move toward a breakup as they felt effort reducing as maintenance behaviors decreased. Because this theme had two distinct aspects related to perceptions of effort, it is described with two separate subthemes: *boosting to stability* and *coasting to breakup*.

### **Boosting to Stability**

For several participants, perceiving a mismatch in level of effort displayed between partners resulted in noticing increased effort behaviors from their partners to maintain or strengthen relationship stability. Cady described a time when she and her partner called attention to a mismatch in displayed effort, and talked about her experience as follows:

I think he was really invested after he hit his low. He wanted to help himself to help us in that investment in our relationship because he knew that if he wasn't at his best then we couldn't be at our best.

Eddy described his experience with uneven effort leading to a boost in relationship maintenance at a time when his partner noted lower effort from him: “So she said ‘this is the last straw, I’m not going to try any more if you don’t want to try.’ That’s when I realized I should probably try because I realized that I kind of liked her.” Alexa also discussed a point in her relationship where she felt that effort was mismatched, there was a dialogue between the couple and “I know that

that really recommitted—you could just tell that he was taking life more seriously, and taking our relationship more seriously, and he put a lot more care and effort into things.” Participants who had perceived uneven effort between partners often reported that pointing out their perception led to greater effort via increased maintenance strategies to sustain the relationship and keep them together.

### **Coasting to Breakup**

In contrast to those times when perceived uneven effort between partners augmented relationship maintenance, other couples experienced times when recognizing mismatched levels of effort led to lessened relationship effort and contributed directly to a breakup. At these points, as partner effort seemed to “coast” without as much perceived effortful contributions, partners experienced breakup. Gretchen voiced her experience with this issue, acknowledging a time when her effort was high, but she felt that her partner’s was lacking:

When it [his effort] wasn’t always there...I just felt like that would really drag me down, and then things would get stressful, and then we would kind of like in the heat of a moment question if we should still even be together, and it [breaking up] finally did happen.

Aaron echoed a similar sentiment, describing a point in his relationship when his effort was high but he thought his partner was not demonstrating effort. He said

because of that I kept thinking ‘there’s gotta [*sic*] be something better.’ It just made me think that there might be someone who would respect me a little more and notice the effort that I give. I think that’s the main reason that we broke up.

Cady’s experience related to *coasting to breakup* as well, but in a slightly different way. In her experience, she recalled that as she perceived a lower demonstration of effort from her

partner, she realized that she could decrease her own effort. Then, as both partners' efforts coasted, the relationship transition began. She reported that when she attempted to have a conversation about her perceptions of low effort from her partner, it didn't go well, saying, "I was just frustrated because I was like 'Well if you're not going to treat me like this then I don't have to treat you.' So...how I was treating him in general went downhill." After this period of being "downhill", they broke off their relationship. For these couples, it seemed that recognizing mismatched effortful contributions led toward decreased relationship effort behaviors and eventually, toward breakup transitions.

Altogether, *coasting and boosting* offered insights into how both self-perceived and partner-perceived effort contributed to relationship transitions. This theme and its two subthemes represented participant experiences with relationship effort playing a role in transitions as partners purposefully engaged in maintenance behaviors to increase effort and sustain healthy, non-transitioning status, or as they decreased their maintenance behaviors and found themselves facing a breakup.

## Chapter 5 – Discussion

The purpose of this study was to gain further understanding of relationship effort and the use of maintenance behaviors as they relate to decisions about breakup and renewal in cyclical couple dating relationships in emerging adulthood. In-depth information was gathered from emerging adults who were currently experiencing cyclical relationships, thus providing rich data that captured themes relevant to the lived experience of the phenomenon of relationship effort for those in our sample.

We used an adapted version of Rusbult's (1980; 1983) investment model as the theoretical framework for our study (see Wieselquist et al., 1999). In that model, the authors proposed that partner's perceptions of each other's relationship-enhancing behaviors either build or detract from mutual dependence in the relationship. As this dependence increases or decreases, a couple's commitment to the relationship is affected in two ways: if dependence increases then commitment also increases, and if dependence decreases then partners disengage from the relationship—and likely pro-relationship behaviors—and commitment decreases. If commitment decreases to a certain point, relationships are more likely to dissolve. This occurs in a cycle, allowing for partner's perceptions of these enhancement behaviors to continually influence commitment and relationship outcomes in a series of patterns.

Our findings add support to this adapted investment model, while also expanding its applicability to cyclical couples specifically in new ways. We explored partner perceptions of enhancement behaviors related to relationship maintenance, and found that these perceptions often directly related to relationship outcomes in the form of transitions. When partners viewed mutual contributions of effort in the relationship via implementation of relationship strategies, they sensed the relationship as likely to stay together and less at risk for breaking up. In contrast,

when one or both partners perceived a lack in the other's maintenance behaviors, they often experienced a greater likelihood of transitioning out of the relationship. Just as in the theoretical framework of the adapted investment model (Wieselquist et al., 1999), couple perceptions of each other's maintenance behaviors contributed to individual sense of investment in the relationship, which led to their experiences in staying together, breaking up, or reconciling.

Our study adds to this model by applying it to cyclical couples whose relationships differ from other types of committed relationships. These couples may not actually be “together” as these investment patterns occur, which means that this adapted investment model may have implications for couples even when they are no longer together in a committed relationship. They may still be engaging in some sort of pro-relationship behaviors when broken up/in an “off” period, which means that their commitment and dependence in the relationship is still influencing their likelihood of resuming the relationship or staying together. This was the case for some couples in our study: if they were in an “off” period, mutual or individual reengagement in maintenance behaviors—and perceptions of that reengagement—resulted in a relationship renewal. It seems that our results have added support and extra insight to the theoretical framework of this adapted investment model (Wieselquist et al., 1999) by corroborating its original tenets while also expanding its applicability to cyclical couples.

In addition to our theoretical findings, this study yielded interesting results that contribute distinctly to the literature about relationship maintenance and cyclical patterns. We identified specific maintenance behaviors that cyclical emerging adult couples found particularly salient in their experiences of relationship transitions. Some of these strategies fit within previous research on relationship maintenance in general, but we have explored these behaviors in the context of cyclical relationships specifically. While the cyclical couples in our study meaningfully

experienced several forms of relationship maintenance, we were able to link those forms of maintenance to relationship transitions, which enriches the understanding of how relationship maintenance plays a specific role in couple cyclical patterns. Our participants were able to accurately recognize their own efforts and their partners' efforts, which was notable, as we had originally wondered if couples would have similar understandings of effort. These individuals perceived maintenance behaviors that were demonstrative of effort, and those perceptions impacted their decisions about relationship transitions in key ways. We suggest that there are specific maintenance strategies that are evidence of relationship effort in these couples' relationships, which provides them with useful evaluative criteria in examining their own relationships. As they evaluate their relationships, they view specific strategies as important and having an impact on whether or not they stay together.

We were also able to identify how perceptions of both partner and personal relationship effort contributed to transitions for these couples, with participants voicing specific ways that they have experienced effort playing a role in breaking up, reconciling, or staying together. Again, this is a facet of relationship maintenance literature that we have enriched, as our findings speak to effort's role in transitions and how the nature of effort—through self- and partner-perception—affects these couples' cyclical patterns. As partners noticed specific aspects of the other's efforts, they experienced divergent patterns of transition—those that perceived high partner effort were generally likely to stay together or renew, while those that perceived lower partner effort were more likely to terminate their relationship. Perceptions of personal effort also impacted relationship transitions, as participants reported that increased individual efforts were often related to non-transition. This held true in most experiences, although when there were



perceptions of mismatched effort, couples experienced different pathways to transition, which will be discussed below.

Our analysis established results pertaining to three separate research questions, and the following discussion will be presented according to research question in order to provide clarity in interpreting findings and to expound detail about our results' answers to each research question.

### **Discussion of Research Question 1 Findings**

The first research question explored couples' experiences with specific relationship maintenance behaviors that affected relationship transitions. The results from this question were the most detailed, as participants described six main types of relationship maintenance behaviors that evidenced effort in their relationship and that influenced their breakups, reconciliations, or non-transitions. Findings suggested couples found the following relationship maintenance behaviors to be the most influential of transitions, with specific themes emphasized in italics: communicating about the relationship (*relationship-focused communication*), initiating quality time together (*deliberate quality time*), keeping your partner a priority (*going out of your way for your partner*), reassuring one another of the relationship's value (*providing affirmation and reassurance of relationship value*), engaging in helpful day-to-day tasks for each other (*the little things*), and using breakups as a strategic way to improve their relationships (*purposeful maintenance breakups*). As partners engaged in these behaviors to varying degrees—including failing to engage in these maintenance strategies—they reflected that their relationships experienced transitions or maintained stability.

The most prominent finding for this question centered on couples self-disclosing and bringing up problems in their relationship, as these subthemes of *relationship-focused*

*communication* were discussed by every couple in the sample. Each couple described at least some sort of experience where they had not discussed a problem in the relationship and it led to conflict or drop in relationship happiness. For several couples, failure to discuss problems in their relationship led directly to breaking up. However, when partners were able to open up and discuss concerns about couple or partner behavior to each other, they described feeling more stable in their relationships. Many couples attributed reconciliations in their relationship to directly communicating about problems in the relationship. Once they had experienced this openness in communication, they were able to work together on resolving issue(s) and resumed their relationships. This finding fits within the context of relationship maintenance literature, as Stafford and Canary (1991) have identified *openness* as one specific category of maintenance behavior dealing with discussing relationship issues and disclosing personal desires within the context of the relationship. Further, these scholars note that couples who experience more openness report more satisfaction and stability long term. Participants seemed to echo this idea overwhelmingly, voicing that being open about relationship issues was an influential aspect of their transition experiences.

Other behaviors that seemed directly connected to transitions for these couples included action-based demonstrations of effort. Couples described self-sacrificing, prioritizing the other, spending high-quality time together, and affirming the relationship as being effortful contributions that portrayed effort meaningfully. All of these themes fit within some categories of relationship maintenance behaviors that Canary and Stafford (1991) identified, including *positivity*, *assurances*, and *sharing tasks*. First, *positivity* involves making attempts to create enjoyable time together, being romantic, asking about each other's days, and building each other up (Canary & Stafford, 1992). This category of behaviors seems related to what our participants

described as *going out of your way for your partner* and *deliberate time together*. Second, the *assurances* category involves giving compliments, talking about having a future together, and communicating faithfulness to the relationship (Canary & Stafford, 1992). Participants described the theme of *providing affirmation and reassurance of relationship value* by discussing behaviors including future-oriented conversations and affirming exchanges, which fits within the category of *assurances* that Stafford and Canary (1991) identified. Lastly, *sharing tasks* refers to equally sharing couple duties, supporting each other in daily chores, and dividing household labor equitably. This is somewhat related to what our participants described in *the little things* theme, as they reported that when assistance was provided in basic, day-to-day tasks, they felt their partners were contributing meaningfully to the relationship.

While our findings support these other findings related to relationship maintenance, they also extend this knowledge by linking relationship maintenance behaviors to transitions. Not only did participants emphasize the importance of these six specific maintenance behaviors to general relationship health, but they viewed engagement in these behaviors as central to transitions in two ways. First, use of these behaviors was experienced as preventative of future transitions in some instances. In many relationships, maintenance behaviors are viewed as undercurrents of relationship stability and satisfaction, but not necessarily as directly preventative of relationship dissolution (Stafford & Canary, 1991). It could be that because cyclical couples are more likely to feel less stable in their relationships (Halpern-Meeekin 2013a), they view what other couples view as normative maintenance strategies to be preventative of breakup rather than as sustaining healthy functioning. Second, a lack of engagement in the maintenance behaviors our couples experienced was often perceived as directly leading to breakup. Scholars have noted that cyclical partners often report breaking up to explore

alternative relationship options (Dailey et al., 2013). Perhaps our findings shed light on why alternative options are sought; if desirable maintenance behaviors are not part of one's current relationship, perhaps that individual breaks up with the current cyclical partner in search of a partner who will engage in the most meaningful types of maintenance strategies that indicate the desired level of relationship effort. It is important for future research to explore why specific maintenance strategies are more indicative of overall relationship effort than are others, and how those differences relate to relationship outcomes.

One of the most unique findings from the analysis of this research question involved the experience of one couple experiencing their breakup as a maintenance behavior. They explained their experience when one partner purposefully initiated a breakup in an attempt to repair dysfunction and resolve issues. This seems somewhat counterintuitive, as the instigator of the breakup reported breaking up with the intent of getting back together, so that the relationship could move forward more stably and avoid future breakups. Other researchers have found comparable findings, including Dailey and colleagues (2013a), who found that there were five different type of cyclical partnerships, with partners engaging in churning patterns for various reasons. One of those types was referred to as *capitalized-on-transitions*; in these relationships, partners reported that the on/off characteristic of their relationships actually facilitated positive change between partners. This category of cyclical relationship seems to share some similarity with the theme of *purposeful maintenance breakups* that we found. What was not clear for the couples in either study, however, was whether these breakups were intentional or whether they were simply a "last resort" attempt to repair. The participant in our study described her *purposeful maintenance breakup* as intentional in outcome, yet unintentional in timing; this partner was clear that the reason behind the breakup was intent to improve the relationship,

although the breakup occurred in a heat-of-the-moment exchange and did not seem to be truly intentional in timing. Thus, *purposeful maintenance breakups* occurred even though intentional maintenance breakups did not.

Since we know that often maintenance occurs while couples are broken up (Dailey et al., 2010), perhaps couples that purposefully take breaks are engaging in healthier maintenance behaviors during the breakup period than those who separate without clear intentions to reconcile. If that is the case, that could be one possible explanation behind why *purposeful maintenance breakups* are perceived to be effective and meaningful demonstrations of effort to these couples. Additionally, as Dailey and colleagues (2013b) noted, breakup and renewal patterns are not inherently bad for all couples, and for some couples can actually be advantageous. With this in mind, perhaps conceptualizing *purposeful maintenance breakups* as legitimate effort contributions in relationships is appropriate.

Although some of our findings fit within other literature about relationship maintenance, what we have added to this knowledge base is an understanding that maintenance behaviors are particularly important for two reasons. First, we found specific maintenance strategies were singled out as demonstrations of effort in couples' actual experiences. Even though there is a plethora of relationship maintenance behaviors, certain maintenance behaviors evidenced effort in their relationships more meaningfully than other types of maintenance behaviors. Second, our findings indicate that there were certain maintenance behaviors linked to relationship transition across the couples in our sample. Some of these behaviors resulted in transition when used, while others led to transition when partners did not use them enough. Collectively, our findings add to relationship maintenance literature by highlighting particularly salient maintenance behaviors

linked with couple experiences of effort and by demonstrating that certain maintenance strategies are involved in couple experiences of transitioning.

## **Discussion of Research Question 2 Findings**

The second research question explored the ways partners perceived the effort of the other, and how those perceptions affected relationship transitions. As partners described their experiences in perceiving effort from each other, it became clear that certain perceptions were clearly linked with breaking up or getting back together. In particular, there were several commonalities from participant experiences that created a clearer picture of how perception of partner effort related to transition, including the following themes (with specific themes emphasized in italics). First, when one partner perceived low effort from the other they experienced negative thoughts/feelings that led to breaking up (*perceptions of lower partner effort linked with negative thoughts/emotions*). Second, partners did not solely rely on current perceptions of partner effort when making relationship transition decisions—they also recalled previous demonstrations of effort throughout relationship history when contemplating any relationship transition (*previous history of effort*). Third, perceptions of one's partner being *too* invested in the relationship led to some relationship transitions in the form of termination (*over-effort*).

As expected, we found participant experiences that highlighted the importance of partner perception of effort within romantic relationships. As Shafer and colleagues (2014b) suggested, perception of partner's relationship effort was more significantly linked with relationship satisfaction long-term than was self-reported relationship effort. Our findings mirror their findings, but add substantial knowledge about *how* these perceptions of partner effort play a role in couple contexts, which we will discuss in more detail below. Shafer and colleagues (2014b)

also noted that perception of partner effort was associated with divorce-proneness, with those who perceived low effort from their partners more likely to report a likelihood of divorce. This finding seems particularly salient in the discussion of the present study's findings, as we also found that partner perceptions of effort were often indicative of relationship dissolution in these couples' experiences.

As these emerging adults described their experiences about how perceptions of partner effort contributed to relationship transitions, several couples discussed the importance of intentionally ensuring that a renewal would include increased relationship effort. They were able to realize that recalling the history of relationship effort helped them navigate breakups and renewals. These findings fit well with some of Dailey and colleagues' (2013b) research, in which they reported that some couples managed breakups according to an evaluation of the relationship or their partner, which seems to fit with our theme about recalling partner display of effort throughout relationship history. Dailey et al. (2013b) also found that some couples reconciled by having explicit conversations during which they set terms about their relationship moving forward and highlighted positive change in the relationship that affected desire to renew. This finding also fits well with our findings, as the participants in our study stated that they had discussions about effort and how that would play a role in reconciled relationships, as well as discussions about history of effort in the relationship, noting behavioral changes that increased likelihood of renewal. Our findings add to this previous research by specifically emphasizing relationship effort as a facet of navigating breakup and renewal, whereas other research has focused on increasing general understanding of the breakup and renewal process. With our findings about partner perceptions of effort in mind, relationship scholars can interpret cyclical

relationship transitions from a more relationally-based perspective, recognizing the importance of partner perceptions about effort in relationship transitions.

Not only do our findings support previous research suggesting that partner perception of effort is significantly related to relationship outcomes and transitions, but we expand upon those findings by shedding light upon the ways in which that takes place. Our study adds to this previous research by offering explanations for *how* and *why* perceptions of effort may contribute to breakup, based on the lived experience of cyclical couples. We found that there seems to be a sort of zone of optimal effort for these couples. As their relationships progressed, there was a natural waxing and waning in effort—however, when the effort was either above or below a specific threshold, couples adjusted their maintenance behaviors accordingly to either increase or decrease effort to reach their desired level of effort. If effort was too low and did not meet the threshold, it often led to a transition out of the relationship. If effort was too high, it also led to transitions out of the relationship, as indicated in participant experiences of *over-effort*. Partners seemed to perceive the efforts of the other as adding to, maintaining, or subtracting from the optimal zone of effort in their relationships, and transitioning patterns corresponded to how perception of partner effort coincided with perception of optimal level of couple relationship effort being maintained.

This finding builds off the previously established notion that perception of partner efforts affects relationship outcomes by offering insight into the reason that partner perceptions of effort have been linked with relationship outcomes. Perhaps individuals establish an optimal zone of effort desirable to personal preferences; then, as partners implement or reduce efforts through maintenance strategies, individuals evaluate those efforts according to their personalized schemas of optimal effort. If the threshold is crossed—too high or too low—individuals are more



or less likely to transition depending upon expectations linked to evaluating the strength and viability of the relationship. This idea adds to previous research linking partner perception of relationship effort to relationship outcome as we offer a potential insight into *why* that association between effort and outcome occurs in these relationships.

### **Discussion of Research Question 3 Findings**

The third research question aimed to explore how perceptions of personal relationship effort affected relationship transitions. Just as perceptions of partner effort were found to be tied to experiencing transitions, individuals' perceptions of their own effort were also involved in their decisions to breakup, renew, or stay together. As participants voiced their experiences, they emphasized certain shared elements experienced by a majority of couples in the sample, which made up the themes we found for the third research question, including the following explanations with themes emphasized in italics. First, participants voiced their collective experience with demonstrations of personal effort translating into relationship power; basically, participants felt that if they perceived their effort as particularly lower or higher than their partners', those perceptions called for them to make decisions about breaking up, reconciling, or staying together (*personal effort is power in transition decisions*). Second, participants described external factors on individual effort (*outside stressors*). Stressors built up and distracted from relationship effort, as individuals experienced busyness from outside activities including work, school, or other endeavors. Outside stressors also affected individual perceptions as participants noticed increases in effort when there were fewer outside demands. Third, several individuals reported feeling emotionally exhausted when they perceived their own effort as particularly higher than their partner's (*exhaustion when effort is perceived as unbalanced*). The last theme revolved around participant experiences of feeling doubts about the future of the relationship

being connected to perceptions of personal effort in the relationship (*doubt about relationship future*).

Regarding the first theme, it was interesting to see that power to make relationship decisions seemed to be somewhat based on the level of effort per partner. Participants identified that when one partner recognized his/her own personal effort as high or low in relation to partner effort, they instigated a transition in the relationship; this happened in at least five couples. As Tashiro and Frazier (2003) suggested, sometimes partners who initiate breakups may do so in attempt to avoid actively dealing with repetitive relationship problems. This viewpoint may fit with those participants who described feeling as if their high effort was too great a cost to continue the relationship, so they initiated a transition out of the relationship. It could also fit with those participants who described personal drops in effort preceding a decision to break up; perhaps their investment had dropped because of avoidance in dealing with relationship issues, so they initiated a breakup. There could be other explanations about why perceived effort granted the power to make relationship transition decisions, including that perceptions of disparate relationship maintenance leads to more relationship problems and eventual dissolution (Hawkins et al., 2007). Perhaps participants who saw their own investment as significantly different from their partners were intentionally moving toward what they saw coming next in their relationship by ending the relationship proactively instead of waiting for gradual dissolve.

Participant experience also spoke to the way in which factors outside the relationship contributed to personal effort and relationship transitions. For most couples, the more outside pressures, distractions, or events there were, the lower their input relationship effort became. Previous research has established that relationship upkeep is affected by outside stressors (Bodenmann, 1997), and our findings seem to support that conclusion, which fits within a

general understanding of healthy relationships. Specifically, our participants identified that work, school, and other endeavors often distracted from effort, and that the absence of those distractions allowed them to put forth greater effort in their relationships. It is important to understand the specific stressors these couples may encounter in order to help them anticipate how to implement effortful behaviors in the face of outside stressors.

We also found that participants voiced their experiences of feeling exhausted when they noticed their own effort to be disproportionately higher than their partners'. This fits with other research that links stress to relationship outcomes including satisfaction and dyadic well-being (Ruffieux, Nussbeck, & Bodenmann, 2014). Perhaps this finding could be linked with our other finding relating to couple discussion of relationship problems: we found that couples who experienced a lack of conversation about relationship issues were more likely to transition, and that they were less satisfied with their efforts in the relationship. It could be that partners who are exhausted from their own disproportionately high efforts are not having conversations about that issue with their partners but continuing to display high effort, which perpetuates their exhaustion until the relationship ends. Or perhaps they are having conversations, but the other partner is still not engaging in effort, which could also result in a breakup. As Stanley and Markman (1992) theorized, sometimes individuals remain engaged in dysfunctional relationships because of constraining factors that keep them in the relationship. For emerging adults in cyclical dating relationships, it could be that even though individuals may feel exhausted and perceive low effort from their partners, other constraints keep them actively engaged in the relationship despite the self-identified negativity from feeling overwhelmed due to personal efforts. Cyclical relationships are more likely to report presence of constraints in their relationships (Vennum et

al., 2013), which may perpetuate an individual being drawn back to/not leaving the relationship, even if the partner is engaged in less-than-desirable efforts.

The emerging adults in this study shared experiences about how their doubts about the long-term prospects of their relationships contributed to relationship effort linked to transitions. This result fits within the marital horizon theory of emerging adulthood established by Carroll and colleagues (2007). Their theory involves the idea that emerging adults place varying degrees of importance on marriage in their personal trajectories. Their views about marriage correspond with numerous premarital activities and behaviors, including healthy relationship behaviors and the likelihood of involvement in relationships that do or do not lead toward their intended marital trajectory. As our participants described, they experience transitions in their relationships when they have doubts about the relationship's future. It could be that if their particular relationship does/does not seem to fit within their individual marital horizon, their effort drives a transition—either breaking up with a partner that is viewed as unsuited for marriage, breaking up with someone who is *more* serious about marriage, or renewing with a previous partner who shows promise as a marriage partner. In particular, those who want marriage eventually may be more likely to break up with partners when they have doubts about their future together, as several participants explained.

### **Discussion of Additional Findings**

Throughout the analysis, it became apparent that there were other interesting findings emerging from the data related to both the second and third research questions. It seemed more appropriate to discuss those findings separately to provide clarity in presentation and interpretation.

## Coasting and Boosting

We highlighted the *coasting and boosting* theme as answering our questions about how both perceptions of partner *and* personal effort were involved in couple transitions. Our analysis revealed that rather than maintain a stable level of effort in the relationships, many individuals openly discussed finding themselves or their partners engaging in less effort and “coasting” during a period in their relationship when things were going well. Then, when effort sank to a noticeably unhealthy level, they would “boost” their efforts up again to remedy any issues stemming from the lower level of effort. This differs from research about marital effort, as Stafford and Canary (1992) suggested that for married couples, a stability of maintenance behaviors from both partners created a sense of equity that led to increased satisfaction and marital quality. Perhaps this is different for the couples in my sample because they are not married, because they are in cyclical relationships, or because they are in a different developmental period. It could be that the cyclical nature of relationship stability for these couples translates into cyclical patterns of maintenance; in contrast, it could be that cyclical patterns of maintenance *coasting and boosting* contribute to the development of transition patterns in relationships.

This finding seems particularly salient because participants linked these patterns of effort with patterns of transition. Many individuals described that boosting effort via increasing maintenance behaviors directly prevented breakups—at least in retrospect. Many others described periods of coasting as directly leading to relationship dissolution, either because a sense of apathy for relationship upkeep set in or because coasting was due to already feeling that the relationship was going to end. Perhaps emerging adults in cyclical dating relationships are not using relationship maintenance in the same ways as other couple types. One possibility could

be that these individuals conceptualize routine relationship maintenance as lying outside the range of “normal” relationship behaviors, and that deliberately engaging in maintenance strategies is actually supererogatory. This explanation seems to fit with couple experiences, as several of them reported increasing their use of somewhat common maintenance behaviors only when they wanted to improve the relationship rather than integrating those behaviors into a regular part of their relationship. Coasting behaviors also fit within that conceptualization: if these individuals view normative relationship maintenance behaviors as above and beyond what should be required to sustain their relationships, perhaps they invest less and their effort coasts as they realize that the cost of investing in “extra” behaviors outweighs the benefits of using those behaviors as a normative part of relationship upkeep. Future research could focus on understanding these up and down patterns of maintenance within cyclical dating couples by exploring the reasoning processes behind coasting and boosting in more detail.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

The discussion of these findings should be interpreted within the strengths and limitations of the research methodology used to gather, analyze, and interpret the data. One of the main limitations of this project is in regards to sample. First, sample size was small, as only ten couples were interviewed. Although that is within the range of other IPA-based studies (see Sampson et al., 2013), it is a small enough sample that generalizing results to a wider audience is imprudent. However, the point of IPA is not to find widely generalizable conclusions, but to increase the depth of understanding of a specific phenomenon via examination of the lived experience of that phenomenon from those who have firsthand experience (Smith, 1996; Smith & Osborn, 2003). Thus, using a small sample of those emerging adults who were currently involved in cyclical relationships fit well with our chosen analytical approach.

Our sample was also primarily homogenous demographically, with most participants identifying as Caucasian, all identifying as students, all currently residing in the same geographic region, and all identifying as heterosexual. Although our rationale for sampling heterosexual couples was presented, excluding LGBT relationships likely influenced our findings in significant ways. Past research has examined gay and lesbian couple relationships, finding distinctions between relationship maintenance in these couples compared to heterosexual couples (Haas & Stafford, 1998). Thus, if we had included LGBT couples in our sample, it would have presented difficulty not only in exploring *shared* lived experience among a diverse group of couples, but in drawing conclusions about these phenomena across all couples. Additionally, we may have found differences among more diverse groups of emerging adults, living in different geographic regions, and who were not all college students, which are factors that could be explored in future research. Participants were only interviewed at one time point, which limits our scope in terms of connecting findings toward future events. And because we interviewed only couples who were “together”, their perceptions of their relationship and their relationship history may vary distinctly from couples who are currently in an off period or whose relationship status is more ambiguous.

In many qualitative approaches, researchers do not attempt to completely remove bias (Patton, 2002), and IPA does call for researchers to interpret findings according to their own conceptions about the gathered data (Smith, 1996). It is important to consider that most of the data analysts including the primary investigator had firsthand experience belonging to a cyclical relationship, which likely influenced the way data was interpreted and analyzed. It could easily be that our previous experiences as members of cyclical relationships led us to identify with couples whose relationships shared similarities with our own. This could have resulted in our

emphasis of couple experiences that we also experienced or our downplaying of their experiences that did not match our own. Accordingly, it is important to recognize that the results we found have been filtered through the researchers' own experiences. However, our findings do provide specific insights and details about the phenomenon of relationship effort for these couples, which helps expand the knowledge base of these topics in meaningful ways as long as our results are interpreted in appropriate context.

Another possible limitation of this study is that the interview questions were open-ended in order to allow participant voices to guide and define findings. However, because of the open-ended nature of these interviews, there could have been several integral facets of relationship effort or cyclical relationships that were ignored. For example, only one participant explicitly mentioned sex in her relationship, which was unexpected. Perhaps if interview questions had included more specifics rather than being purposefully open, we would have found different results. In contrast, this is also a strength of our study, as we allowed participants to answer broad questions with their own information without leading them to discuss specific behaviors. It could be that our participants were able to voice those things that most accurately portray their lived experiences because we did not use overly-specific/leading questions. The open-ended nature of our interview questions also may have been a strength because we allowed participant voices to define *effort* rather than presenting them with a preconceived definition. However, this could also be a limitation, as perhaps consensus about *effort* as a construct would have yielded different answers to interview questions as participants discussed their experiences.

One strength of our study is that I, as the primary investigator, conducted all interviews when gathering data, which provided a uniformity in how interviews were conducted. I used a structured interview guide, which also ensured that all participants were asked the same



questions, thus providing a cohesive body of data for analysis. Additionally, we took precautions to ensure that data analysts were working with their biases about these topics. As scholars have recommended, all analysts used bracketing, journaling, and analyst-triangulation techniques prior to and throughout analysis in order to work with bias in healthier ways (Patton, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This meant that we kept notes of our personal biased responses to participant data as we analyzed, and discussed those with each other in order to ensure that we were appropriately reflecting participant experience in our findings and not over- or under-representing findings due to personal biases. We also used triangulation methods including discussing our findings together as analysts after completing individual analysis, and also by comparing our findings to previous research. Both of these triangulation methods are often used in qualitative research in order to help deal with researcher bias in interpreting findings (Denzin, 1978; Patton, 2002; Tracy, 2010). I also used a member checking procedure (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tracy, 2010) to increase the trustworthiness of my findings by discussing major findings with participants themselves in order to ensure that my interpretation was accurately reflecting their experiences of these phenomena. Using several credibility-of-findings techniques lent strength to our analysis and findings in this study.

### **Implications**

While taking into consideration the strengths and limitations of the present study, I found that there were some important implications that could be drawn from our findings. These implications are important for emerging adults themselves, but have particular salience for relationship practitioners including educators and clinicians, as well as relationship scholars. Both of these groups may gain insight from the implications drawn from these findings.

## **Implications for Relationship Practitioners**

As relationship educators and clinicians work with emerging adults who are in current cyclical relationships, our findings may enrich the ways they explain healthy relationships. It is important, as other scholars noted (Dailey et al., 2013b), to let emerging adults know that not all cyclical relationships are negative. Several participants reported that they felt relationship churning had helped them work through relationship problems. If practitioners can help cyclical dating partners recognize that effort is needed in any relationship, and that there are certain maintenance behaviors that may be especially meaningful demonstrations of effort in cyclical dating relationships specifically, they can guide couples toward the most useful maintenance strategies for their relationships. Practitioners may seek out assessment tools that offer insights about meaningful expressions of effort that help couples to set goals about ways to improve their effort contributions in the relationship, which has been recommended by other scholars (see Halford, 2001).

Considering our findings, it is evident that cyclical couples find valuable ways to demonstrate effort in their relationships throughout various relationship transitions. If practitioners can focus on encouraging emerging adults to use healthy relationship maintenance skills, and—more importantly—how to communicate about partner perceptions of those efforts, partners would likely benefit. Participants emphasized the role of healthy communication in their relationships, particularly as they communicated about problems in their relationship or ways that they perceive effort. Educators may benefit from teaching about healthy maintenance behaviors and healthy communication skills, which is a common aspect of curricula in relationship education programs (see Halford, 2001). Clinicians may need to intervene within current communication processes to remedy issues associated with lack of self-disclosure or

failure to discuss relationship issues—both areas highlighted by our participants—as a form of communication skill-building in couples therapy.

We found that partner perceptions of relationship effort affected transitions in several specific ways. Armed with this knowledge, practitioners can provide that information to dating partners in order to help them understand that although perceptions of individual effort matter, the ways that partners perceive each other's demonstrations of effort also impact relationship stability. Clinicians may even consider facilitating specific conversations in therapy about how perceptions of effort affect the relationship. As renowned marital clinician, John Gottman, has recommended, building communication skills and facilitating healthier communication exchanges in relationships as an important task of couples therapy (Gottman, 1999); as clinicians work with cyclical emerging adult dating relationships, they should consider directing conversations about these important topics. Educators who prepare emerging adults to have healthy maintenance behaviors including communication about relationship problems and about perceptions of partner effort may help to set these couples up for a greater likelihood of having a healthy relationship, regardless of cycling patterns.

It could also be relevant for relationship educators to begin educating about cyclical dating relationships in adolescence. Where previous literature mostly designates relationship cycling as a phenomenon for emerging adults, we found that for at least the couples in our sample, cycling behaviors with their current behaviors began in mid-adolescence around 15 or 16 years of age. Although our sample size is small and we do not intend to overgeneralize our findings, perhaps relationship educators should be aware that cyclical patterns may be developing in adolescence, and plan accordingly to educate about healthy relationship maintenance in the context of cyclical or stable relationships.

## Implications for Future Research

Several findings from this study lend well to ideas for future research. Initially, there are demographic-related factors that would be important to consider in this research, including exploration of similar phenomena within couples who are more ethnically diverse, who identify as LGBT, who are non-students, or who are not currently “together.” It would also be important to begin researching relationship cyclical couple patterns in adolescence, and to understand how relationship effort plays a role in those relationships in ways different from the role it plays for emerging adults. As previously noted, although we do not wish to overstate our results, we did find that nine of ten couples in our sample had begun their relationships as adolescents, and that early relationship transitions occurred during those teen years.

Future researchers could explore outcomes related to the use of *purposeful maintenance breakups*. Our study highlighted the significant role that this conceptualized maintenance behavior plays in cyclical relationships, and it would be important to understand more about what these intentional breaks are linked with for couples that stay together or for those that do not. Along those same lines, exploring more about effort and maintenance during an “off” period within these relationships would be important. Several of our participants described that one or the other partner engaged in some sort of maintenance behavior even after the relationship had formally ended, which often led to the couple experiencing a renewal. If researchers examined more about the factors that surround effort and maintenance that occurs while a couple is broken up, that may provide extra insight into these relationships than exploring only pre- or post-breakup maintenance strategies. It could also be important to extend this research into the marital domain. As other scholars have noted, cyclical patterns have a likelihood of continuing in long-term committed relationships such as marriage (Vennum et al., 2013), and it would be interesting

to see how perceptions of effort affect cyclical patterns for non-dating partners who cycled while they were dating.

Another interesting pathway for future research could be to explore factors related to why perceptions of low personal effort sometimes led partners to reinvest effort in the relationship and why those perceptions sometimes led partners to give up their effortful behaviors and end the relationship. We noticed that there were distinct patterns for our participants when low effort was perceived—either they increased efforts to prevent a breakup, or they reduced efforts and withdrew from the relationship. Further inquiry aimed at understanding what factors contribute to these divergent pathways among couples would provide valid and helpful information in conceptualizing couple transitions more clearly.

Previous quantitative research has focused on relationship effort as a driving force behind engaging in maintenance behaviors (see Hazelwood, 2012). In our study, however, participants did not voice a distinction between relationship effort and relationship maintenance strategies; they seemed to view engaging in relationship maintenance strategies as evidence of relationship effort. For example, rather than viewing effort as a motivator to engage in spending quality time together, participants viewed the act of spending quality time together evidence of effort. Future research may benefit from teasing apart the constructs of relationship effort and relationship maintenance strategies, as our data indicated that for these couples, they were almost indistinguishable. As research focuses more on understanding effort as a construct, it could also be important to understand if effort is defined collectively, individually, or as a combination of each partner's effort. Examining whether relationship effort is an individual construct, the sum of two partners' efforts, or a holistic couple construct could be an important area, particularly for qualitative inquiry focused on process-oriented exploration.

Participants also collectively experienced very few times when both partners were inputting low effort in the relationship. For these couples, most often effort was experienced as mutually high, or as fairly disparate—with one partner showing high effort and the other showing low effort. This conclusion raises some important directions for future research, including exploring cyclical relationships in which both partners put low effort into the relationship. What happens in those relationships to bring couples back together? What may lead to their breakups? Exploring relationships where mutually low effort between partners occurs may be a future research endeavor worth exploring.

### **Conclusion**

Emerging adult cyclical dating relationships are occurring at a high frequency, and deserve to be given attention in relationship research. In particular, examining factors that relate to couple patterns of transition seems an important task. The purpose of this study was to explore one such factor, relationship effort, and the ways that relationship effort affected the experience of relationship transitions for emerging adults who were currently involved in cyclical dating relationships. I specifically investigated research questions aimed at understanding more about which effort behaviors are most meaningful in these relationships and how partner and individual perceptions of effort influence relationship transitions. These questions were answered with an Interpretative Qualitative Analysis (Smith, 1996) approach that focused on finding common elements among the lived experiences of those emerging adults with firsthand experience of these phenomena.

Our results indicated that there were specific effort behaviors that partners found particularly meaningful that related to breaking up and getting back together. We also found that participant perceptions of individual and partner effort were experienced as key components to

making relationship transition decisions. These findings provided deeper insights into these relationships, and yielded several implications for future research and for those who work with couples in educational or clinical applied settings. Because this study was able to explore more about relationship effort within cyclical relationships in emerging adulthood, it has enhanced the way that these couples' cyclical behaviors could be conceptualized in important ways and expanded the view of these couples' patterns and the ways they maintain their relationships.

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# Appendix A - Interview Guide Materials

## Interview Guide

1. Provide participant with the informed consent paperwork, explain the purpose of the study.
2. Provide participant with the timeline worksheet and the instructions to construct a timeline of important events in his/her relationship beginning from when participants identified as a couple. Emphasize to the participant that it is necessary to include break ups and reconciliations on the timeline, as well as other important events in the relationship (provide example possibilities: things like first kiss, meeting family, moving in together, etc.).
3. After this timeline has been completed, instruct the participant to graph self and partner investment at each of the points on the timeline. Label points according to whether it is self or partner investment. Instruct participants to color code the timeline according to levels of investment from partner and from self (see Timeline Worksheet).
4. Questions to begin the interview:
  - a. What does relationship effort look like in your relationship?
  - b. What types of things might you or your partner do that shows effort? Lack of effort?
  - c. How do you know when you or your partner is engaging in high levels of effort? Low levels of effort?
5. Beginning with the earliest point in the timeline, ask questions about the process of effort at each point. Questions may include some of the following.
  - a. Tell me about a time in your relationship when both your effort was really high.
    - i. Potential follow-up questions

1. How did you know the amount of your (or your partner's) effort at this point? (get specific details about behaviors, words, events, and other contextual and personal factors)
  2. Why is the effort you indicated (from yourself or from your partner) at this point not any higher?
  3. Why is the effort you indicated (from yourself or from your partner) at this point not any lower?
- b. Tell me about a time in your relationship when both your effort was really low.
- i. Potential follow-up questions (same as above)
- c. Tell me about a time in your relationship when one of your effort was much higher/lower than the other's.
- i. Potential follow-up questions (same as above)
- d. At which points of your timeline do you think relationship effort was the most important? Why?
- i. At which points of your timeline do you think relationship effort was the least important? Why?
- e. In your opinion, how did your partner show effort to you in the most meaningful ways?
- f. How did your partner show lack of effort, in your opinion, in ways that were important to you?
- g. If you could go back in time and change anything about the effort that either of you put in at any point, what would you change (if anything)?
- h. Why did you decide to break up (at one point in the timeline, ask for each break up)?

i. Why did you decide to get back together (at this point in the timeline, ask for each renewal)?

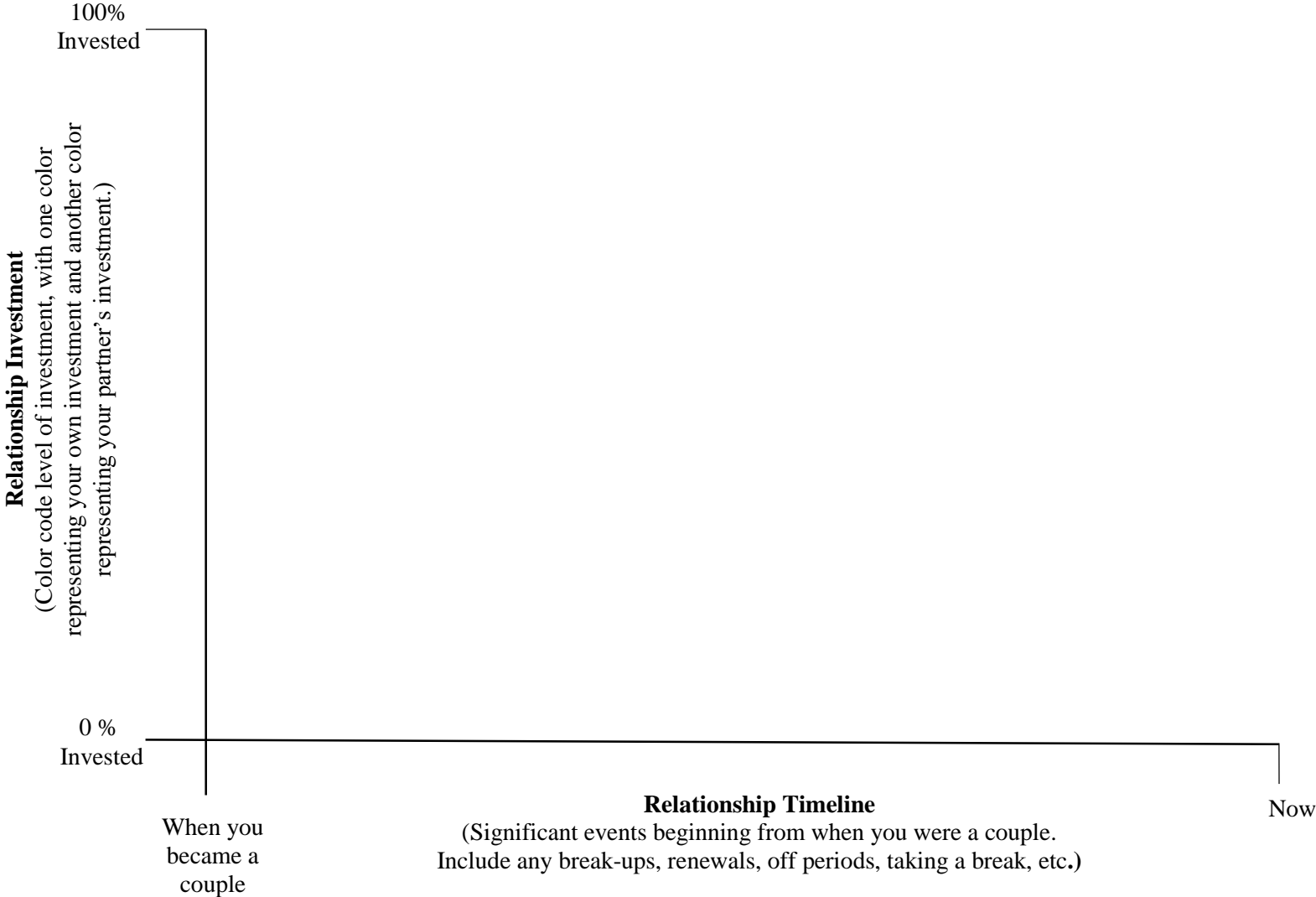
j. What conversations did you have, if any, about the amount of effort either of you were putting into the relationship?

i. What types of things changed, if anything, as a result of these conversations?

k. If you could give advice about relationship effort to other couples, what would you say?



Relationship Timeline Worksheet



## Appendix B - Table of Themes and Supporting Quotes

**Table B-1**

*Themes and Example Supporting Quotes*

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Research Question 1

Does relationship effort in specific maintenance behaviors differentially contribute to decisions about relationship transitions?

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*Relationship-focused  
Communication*

“I think communication is one of the key things. And definitely intimate communication where you can sit down together and talk about yourselves and have deeper conversations instead of being always on the go. You need to slow down and talk about things that you actually need to talk about.”

*Self-disclosure  
(subtheme)*

“When I use my words to express what I’m feeling—I don’t like to talk about myself a whole bunch. I don’t like to talk a whole bunch period. So when I actually do tell her what’s on my heart or what’s on my mind, she always gets happy.”

*Openness about  
Relationship Issues  
(subtheme)*

“The second time we broke up...throughout the whole time he hadn’t told me that I was doing all those things. So, like, I had no idea that I was making him feel that certain way. He never told me. But if he had told me I wouldn’t have pressured him to do all those things or wouldn’t have asked to do all those things. I obviously would have been—would have backed off. But he never told me until one day he just snapped. And he just told me we were done.”

*Deliberate Quality Time*

“If you plan out something it shows that you care. That’s a huge thing, like you took the time to think about what your partner likes, what kind of food or whatever you plan to do. If they plan it out, you feel special because they care about you and they’re taking the time to do something for you.”

*Going Out of Your Way for Your  
Partner*

“We are always looking for the best interest of the other person. Like for her, she really likes her music and stuff. She loves to be in choir. I am tone deaf and could really care less about music. But I know she cares about it so I will support her and go to her concerts or listen to her and everything. I’ll support her. On the other hand I’m a big nerd and I love to play video games. And she actually

says, ‘Yeah, go play X-box or go do this. You deserve a little time.’ And it’s like ‘Well, thank you.’”

*Providing Affirmation and Reassurance of Relationship Value*

“Last spring we signed the lease for the house we live at together now, which really showed me that he was serious about us because signing the lease with me and living with me, was a pretty big deal.”

*The Little Things*

“I always notice her doing little things. She’ll go and make me cookies or I’ll just be sitting there and I—I like to have my head scratched or my back scratched and she’ll just reach over, if she’s playing on her phone and do that. Just the little things I notice. She’s always smiling, she always asks me about my day.”

*Purposeful Maintenance Breakups*

“I just wanted a break to see how I felt, how he reacted, if anything changed. I pretty much planned on getting back together. It wasn’t that I hated him or didn’t want to continue it, but I thought that was the easiest way to get change.”

Research Question 2

How does perception of partner relationship effort affect cyclical couple relationship transitions?

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*Perceptions of Low Partner Effort Linked with Negative Thoughts/Emotions*

“It’s like, kind of stressful and a little bit annoying when you seem like you’re pulling more of the weight and they’re just kind of laying back and going with whatever.”

*Previous History of Effort*

“We didn’t want it to be like the first time so we both had to try hard. Like I tried not to be too overbearing and he had to break out of his shell basically. So we both had to try really hard then.”

*Over-effort*

“She wanted to spend a little bit more time with me and I was fine with that, but I also wanted some free time to myself too. So basically I kind of forcibly ignored her, so then that would push her to try more....And I think too much effort at that point was just—it shut it down.”

Research Question 3

How does perception of individual relationship effort affect cyclical couple relationship transitions?

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*Personal Effort is Power in Transition Decisions*

“I didn’t want it to happen and I was still willing to work together but I knew I wasn’t going to force him to

be in it if he didn't want to be in it....Instead I just decided to end it.”

*Outside Stressors*

“She coaches volleyball and I coach wrestling, so we're both really busy....Between school and both of us coaching it's hard to find time to actually take her on a date...she might not think that I'm putting on effort. We're just both so busy that we don't go on dates as much anymore.

*Exhaustion When Effort Is Perceived as Unbalanced*

“For once I just want him to be like the guy who initiates and does things and goes in for the kiss or goes in for the hug or invites me to dinner or invites me to do things. Because I'm kind of exhausted of being that person who's always doing that.”

*Doubt About Relationship Future*

“Once you hit a certain point, if you don't see a future with them, there's really no point in keeping it going...eventually [we] saw a future...we've said to each other before, like we want to have a family and all that kind of stuff. And so, if you don't...it's kind of pointless to keep it going if it's not going to go anywhere.”

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Results pertaining to Research Questions 2 & 3

*Coasting and Boosting*

“During those better times, it's easy to coast. And I feel like when you get to a bad point that's when you really need to step it up. I think coasting for the most part is fine, but I think that lower effort, minimal effort is when you get in trouble.... Just when something big would happen and we'd need to try a little bit harder just to get through it. And once you'd get back up to that good point you can start coasting again.”

*Boosting to Stability (subtheme)*

“She said ‘this is the last straw, I'm not going to try any more if you don't want to try.’ That's when I realized I should probably try because I realized that I kind of liked her.”

*Coasting to Breakup (subtheme)*

“When it [his effort] wasn't always there...I just felt like that would really drag me down, and then things would get stressful, and then we would kind of like in the heat of a moment question if we should still even be together, and it [breaking up] finally did happen.”

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