

THE IMPACT OF MARITAL POWER ON RELATIONAL AGGRESSION

by

CHELSEA AMBER MADSEN

B.S., Brigham Young University, 2007

M.S., Brigham Young University, 2009

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

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## **Abstract**

Little information is available on the use of relational aggression in adult romantic relationships. In a sample of 325 married couples (650 spouses) we assessed the use of relational aggression within couples married an average of approximately 18 years to learn more about relational aggression within this population. To understand a potential motivating factor for the use of relational aggression, marital power was also examined. Finally, to learn whether or not relationship satisfaction mediates the relationship between marital power and relational aggression, relationship satisfaction was measured and was found to be a significant mediating variable. Using the actor/partner interdependence model, we found that those who were dissatisfied in their relationships, regardless of perceived marital power, were more likely to use relational aggression. Additionally, those who were satisfied in their marriage were less likely to use relational aggression. Wives participated in more relational aggression than husbands and husbands perceived themselves as having more power and were more satisfied in the marriage. Implications and suggestions for clinicians are offered.

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## **Dedication**

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my husband, Spencer, and my future children, so they know they can do anything they set their minds to, with the help of the Lord.

## Chapter 1 - Introduction

There is no question that marriage and healthy relationship functioning are important. There is substantial evidence that those who are married benefit more than those who are not married in psychological and physical health (Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001; Meyler, Stimpson, & Peek, 2007; Pilisuk & Parks, 1983; Slatcher, 2010; Wood, Goesling, & Avellar, 2007). Additionally, there are residual positive effects for happy marriages in terms of positive effects for children (Cowan, Cowan, Pruett, Pruett, & Wong, 2009) and less depressive symptoms in adults (Trombello, Schoebi, & Bradbury, 2011). As a westernized society, millions of dollars are spent each year for researching positive predictors of healthy relationship functioning and how resilience in couples can be enhanced (e.g., Fincham, Stanley & Beach, 2007). For example, the Healthy Marriage Initiative, a U.S. government funded project, spent 150 million dollars in 2005 toward supporting research on healthy marriages ([www.healthymarriageinfo.org](http://www.healthymarriageinfo.org)).

Nevertheless, divorce rates are high, ranging from 40-50% of all marriages (see, Tejada-Vera & Sutton, National Vital Statistics Report, 2010). The negative outcomes of marital instability and divorce are extensive and range from a variety of negative health, behavior problems, and insecure emotional responses in children (Cummings, Goeke-Morey, Papp, & Dukewich, 2002; Emery, 1982; Gottman & Katz, 1989), to additional mental and physical health declines in adults (e.g., Whisman, 2008).

A large number of studies have examined factors that lead to divorce or marital instability. A decade review on marital interaction by Gottman and Notarius (2000) reported findings indicating that distressed couples have more overt negative interaction in their relationship that is reciprocated, and that the negative interaction often continues throughout the

length of the relationship. Gottman (1994) also found that marital interactions with negative emotions such as contempt and disgust lead to marital instability.

Intimate partner violence [IPV] is a form of overt aggression that is either unilateral or bilateral in nature (Johnson, 1995). IPV has been shown to have many negative effects on relationship functioning (Johnson & Ferraro, 2000). As a result, IPV has appropriately received attention as a serious aspect of marital conflict and as an important predictor of marital instability.

Despite the large body of research that has been conducted on risk factors for marital instability, including negative interaction patterns and IPV, researchers have indicated that a broader look at factors leading to marital instability is needed. In fact, Bjorkqvist, Osterman, and Lagerspetz (1994) state that adults harm each other in subtle and sophisticated ways, “indeed, direct physical aggression represents only the tip of the iceberg of adult interpersonal aggression” (p. 32). This study focuses on relational aggression, which has recently been identified as a predictor of marital instability (Carroll et al., 2010; Goldstein, Chesir-Teran, & McFaul, 2008). Relational aggression is a covert form of aggression used to manipulate relationships. Therefore, this factor is unlike overt factors (e.g., negative marital interaction and IPV) that have been studied previously (Goldstein & Tisak, 2010). However, relational aggression has recently been found to be quite common, although destructive, in most marital relationships (Carroll et al., 2010). It is a behavior that has a great impact, yet only one recent study to date has measured it within the marital context.

Relational aggression is a non-physical type of aggression that is carried out by various means including manipulation, public embarrassment and love or affection withdrawal (Archer & Coyne, 2005). There are two distinct subcategories of relational aggression in romantic

relationships. These two subcategories are love withdrawal and social sabotage as explained in greater detail in chapters two and three. We use these two categories to examine relational aggression in our study. Examples of manipulating the romantic relationship by means of love withdrawal would be: “My partner gives me the silent treatment when I hurt his/her feelings in some way”, or “My partner withholds affection or sex from me when s/he is angry with me.” Similarly, some examples of social sabotage would be: “My partner has gone ‘behind my back’ and shared private information about me with other people”, or “When my partner has been angry at, or jealous of me, he/she has tried to damage my reputation by gossiping about me....” These two subcategories specifically assess forms of covert manipulation in marital relationships.

While there is extensive research on the use of relational aggression by children, adolescents and more recently emerging adults (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Goldstein, Chesir-Teran, & McFaul, 2008; Linder, Crick, & Collins, 2002; Nelson, Springer, Nelson, & Bean, 2008; Schad, Szvedo, Antonishak, Hare, & Allen, 2007; Werner & Crick, 1999), there has only been one study that investigates relational aggression in the marital context with couples that have been together for a significant amount of time (Carroll et al., 2010).

This single study of relational aggression in marriage was conducted with couples that had been married for an average of 17 years. The sample was taken from data that contained 336 married couples (672 spouses) in the first wave of an ongoing longitudinal study called the *Flourishing Families Project (FFP)*. We used the second wave of data from this project for the current study. In the first wave study, relational aggression was measured using the two subscales love withdrawal and social sabotage. The authors found that relational aggression was somewhat typical, in varying degrees, in most marital relationships. They found that both wives

and husbands were likely to use various forms of relational aggression in the relationship; however, wives were more likely to use both forms than their husbands. Furthermore, as previously mentioned, the use of relational aggression was also significantly linked to lower marital quality and marital instability (Carroll et al., 2010).

### **Focus of This Study**

This study investigates relational aggression in marriage. We know that the use of relational aggression can make the marriage fragile, but we do not know what leads to the use of relational aggression in the marital context. However, we do have some knowledge of the factors that lead to relational aggression in children and adolescents and the negative effects that follow (e.g., multiple indexes of maladjustment) (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Werner & Crick, 1999). Yet, because the use of relational aggression develops and adapts with age (i.e., Crick et al. 1999), there is much to learn about risk factors for relational aggression in marriage. In this study we hypothesize that marital power may be a predictor of relational aggression in the marital context.

While the marital power literature has not examined the use of relational aggression, there is substantial evidence that perceived lower marital power increases the use of coercive techniques (Gray-Little & Burks, 1983) in marriage. Thus, previous research has found that individuals who perceive themselves as having lower marital power are more likely to use coercive techniques. Relational aggression is a type of coercive technique. This suggests that perceived lower marital power may lead to the use of relational aggression.

There are many gender differences related to marital power and satisfaction. Previous research indicates that those who do not feel they have power in their relationship will try to gain power by various means (e.g., Gray-Little & Burks, 1983). According to a large majority of the

marital power literature, husbands typically hold the most power and make the final decisions in marital relationships (e.g., Ball, Cowan, & Cowan, 1995), whereas wives generally have less power and are ultimately more concerned with relationship functioning (Ball et al., 1995; Zipp, Prohask, & Bemiller, 2004). Either spouse, if in the lower power position may attempt to gain power by various means, and according to Komter (1989), women, who are typically in the lower power position, are more likely to use covert means to influence their partner. Therefore, the literature indicates that the person with the least amount of power in the relationship is likely to try to gain power in covert ways, or via coercive techniques (Gray-Little & Burks, 1983; Komter, 1989). Therefore, in our study we hypothesized that spouses who felt they had little power would be more likely to use a somewhat common technique in marriage in order to gain power, relational aggression.

The only substantial body of literature that concretely links aggression and marital power is found in the IPV literature (e.g., Babcock, Waltz, Jacobson, & Gottman, 1993; Sagrestano, Heavey, & Christensen, 1999; Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980). However, due to the covert nature of relational aggression, and the fact that relational aggression is a more socially acceptable type of aggression (love withdrawal and social sabotage) than IPV, the relationship between marital power and IPV may be different from the relationship between marital power and relational aggression. Additionally, we do not know if marital satisfaction, although heavily linked within the marital power literature, will be strong enough to mediate the relationship between marital power and the use of relational aggression. However, in this paper we expected that marital satisfaction would partially mediate the relationship between marital power and the use of relational aggression.

## **Theory**

Two theories are used in this study to conceptualize the use of marital power and relational aggression. The first overarching theory is systems theory (Nichols & Schwartz, 2006) and the second is the democratic exchange model (Cromwell & Olson, 1975), a model that is primarily focused on marital power, yet explains possible involvement and motivation for using relational aggression. These two theories were chosen based upon their appropriateness for explaining the potential use of power leading to relationally aggressive techniques and are further discussed in chapter two.

## **Our Study**

In this study we examined the impact of marital power on relational aggression as mediated by relationship satisfaction. We examined these relationships by using wave two of the data collected by the *Flourishing Families Project*, an ongoing longitudinal study in Seattle, Washington. This is the second wave of the data used by the Carroll et al. (2010) study, thus couples that have been married an average of 18 years. These extended relationships are a great benefit as the relational aggression literature up to this point has not studied many adults, nor has any study with the exception of Carroll et al. (2010), looked at long term, committed relationships. The sample for our study was 325 couples (650 spouses), and we analyzed their use of relational aggression by looking at love withdrawal and social sabotage. Each spouse reported their partner's use of relational aggression by reporting on their own victimization, while the perception of power and marital satisfaction was self-reported. We analyzed the data using the actor/partner interdependence model (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006).

## Hypotheses

Growing from the literature as explained in greater detail in chapter two, we have created ten hypotheses for this study.

We hypothesized that:

- 1) there would be a significant negative relationship between wives' perceived marital power and wives' relational aggression (love withdrawal and social sabotage).
- 2) there would be a significant negative relationship between husbands' perceived marital power and husbands' relational aggression (love withdrawal and social sabotage).
- 3) there would be a significant negative relationship between wives' perceived marital power and wives' marital satisfaction.
- 4) there would be a significant positive relationship between husbands' perceived marital power and husbands' marital satisfaction.
- 5) there would be a significant negative relationship between wives' marital satisfaction and wives' relational aggression (love withdrawal and social sabotage).
- 6) there would be a significant negative relationship between husbands' marital satisfaction and husbands' relational aggression (love withdrawal and social sabotage).
- 7) there would be a significant negative relationship between wives' perceived marital power and husbands' marital satisfaction.
- 8) there would be a significant negative relationship between husbands' perceived marital power and wives' marital satisfaction.
- 9) there would be a significant positive relationship between wives' perceived marital power and husbands' use of relational aggression (love withdrawal and social sabotage).
- 10) there would be a significant positive relationship between husbands' perceived marital power and wives' use of relational aggression (love withdrawal and social sabotage).

Studying relational aggression within the marital context will help us understand one prominent factor leading to marital instability. With our knowledge of the detriments associated with marital instability, and research that links relational aggression to marital instability, it is important to further examine relational aggression within this context. It is vital to understand what risk factor could increase relational aggression in order to not only limit marital instability, but also enhance healthy relationship functioning. We propose that marital power could be one of these risk factors. We also propose that marital satisfaction could mediate this relationship.

## **Chapter 2 - Literature Review**

### **Introduction – Overview of Chapter**

In this chapter we first discuss the dependent variable, relational aggression, its definition and the studies that have previously researched the variable. We will also explore the independent variable marital power, its definition, previous findings, and aspects specific to our study. Additionally, we will discuss marital satisfaction throughout the review. The theory driving this work is then presented, as well as the hypotheses.

#### ***Aggression***

Aggressive behavior has many faces and forms (Bjorkqvist et al., 1994). Historically, research on aggression has focused on overt forms, bypassing the use and observation of covert aggression. This is especially true within the context of romantic relationships. Physical aggression is simply easier to identify than covert aggression (Archer, 2004). In fact, overt aggression can be clearly identified when one individual hits or physically hurts another individual. This is considered physical aggression. However, in order to identify covert forms of aggression, a history of the individual and the relationship is usually necessary (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Thus, physical or overt aggression is typically easier to identify than covert aggression.

Additionally, societal disapproval is associated with physical aggression. Consequently, physical aggression carries the possibility of legal repercussions, whereas, covert forms of aggression are more difficult to detect, and thus, generally do not result in legal consequences (Archer & Coyne, 2005). Therefore, covert forms of aggression seem less dangerous and more private. For these reasons, the study of covert aggression in couples is usually sidestepped with greater emphasis placed upon the more immediate problem, overt or physical violence.

However, covert aggression can be incredibly damaging and create marital instability (Carroll et al., 2010). Only recently have we begun to ask how covert aggression affects the couple relationship and thus, we join in this effort to study covert forms of aggression in marriage and what could potentially activate the use of this type of aggression.

### ***Covert Forms of Aggression***

Covert aggression, in the most general sense, implies manipulation, social exclusion and deliberate ostracism (Archer, 2004). However, amidst the research on covert aggression a definitional debate arises. The debate is centered on which, of many, labels should be given to identify this form of manipulative aggression (Archer & Coyne, 2005). Three forms or labels have, in past literature, been used to define this form of behavior, namely, indirect, relational and social aggression (Bjorkqvist et al., 2001). Archer and Coyne (2005) claim that these three forms of aggression (indirect, relational and social) are, in fact, distinguishable from direct forms of aggression (e.g., physical aggression). Although they are distinct from overt forms of aggression, all three terms/forms of covert aggression, according to Archer and Coyne (2005), are intended to cause harm to another, similar to overt aggression. Thus, in order to classify which type of covert aggression is being used, it is important to regard motive behind any given behavior. However, the motive behind covert aggression is more difficult to decipher than the motive behind overt forms of aggression.

For example, a husband may say something about his wife's cooking and his words may be considered hurtful to her, yet the husband never had the intent to hurt; he was simply stating an observation. This would not be covert aggression. Whereas, a husband who wants his wife to change her cooking, may purposefully say the same thing in order to make a point that she is not cooking well with the purpose that she will change. This behavior would indicate manipulative

covert aggression. However, further classification is necessary as there are multiple terms for covert aggression (e.g., indirect, relational, social). In our study, we are only examining relational aggression, as our focus is the marital relationship (see Appendix A for information on the origins and differences between the three forms of covert aggression). We would therefore, examine cues of love withdrawal and social sabotage. Love withdrawal or social sabotage, if found, would indicate the use of relational aggression as opposed to another type of covert aggression.

### ***Definition of Relational Aggression***

Although there are slight variations in the definition of relational aggression, in the most general sense, relational aggression includes acts that are relational in nature and involve manipulating a dyadic relationship (Archer & Coyne, 2005). Furthermore, “relational aggression is defined in terms of its endpoint, which is to manipulate or disrupt relationships” (Archer & Coyne, 2005, p. 212). Manipulation of the relationship can be achieved through withdrawing love and sabotaging the partner socially (Carroll et al., 2010). This indicates that the victim and perpetrator are known to each other in relational aggression (Archer & Coyne, 2005).

Crick et al. (1999) add additional information to the expanding definition of relational aggression. They stated that relational aggression includes “behaviors that harm others through damage (or the threat of damage) to relationships or feelings of acceptance, friendship, or group inclusion. These behaviors include acts such as giving someone the ‘silent treatment’ to punish them or to get one’s own way, using social exclusion as a form of retaliation, or threatening to end a friendship (relationship) unless the friend (partner) complies with a request” (Crick et al., 1999, p. 77). For example, within a marriage, a wife may threaten her husband with divorce if he does not do what she wants, thus manipulating the relationship.

### ***Relational Aggression and Psychological Aggression***

Psychological aggression is an overarching term that includes a wide variety of non-physically aggressive acts. Relational aggression, at first assumption, seems comparable to psychological aggression; however, there are some distinct differences between the two definitions. First, the target of psychological aggression and relational aggression is frequently different. For example, psychological aggression targets thoughts, feelings and behaviors, etc. (Marshall, 1996), whereas relational aggression targets the *relationship* in various ways (e.g., direct, indirect, verbal, nonverbal) (Linder et al., 2002). Therefore, because the term psychological aggression does not specifically connote an emphasis solely on the relationship, the term is considered broader than relational aggression. Furthermore, as stated by Outlaw (2009) the purpose of psychological aggression is “to undermine the security of the victim’s own logic and reasoning” (p. 264). Whereas relational aggression attempts to manipulate a relationship, the intention is not to question the partner’s way of thinking.

Second, it is difficult to compare relational aggression to psychological aggression because there is a lack of agreement on the definition of psychological aggression. For example, Follingstad (2009) states that the problem with the term psychological aggression results from inconsistencies in how it has been defined and used throughout various studies. To highlight the confusion around defining the term psychological aggression, Follingstad, Coyne, and Gambone (2005) found 17 distinct categories of psychological abuse from a 51-item survey given to 83 college students. Several of the categories found are outside the realm of relational aggression (e.g., ‘destabilizing perceptions of reality’, or ‘required the partner to report on where they were, or to answer any questions that they were asked’), while other categories are similar to some of the measures of relational aggression (e.g., ‘threatened to leave the relationship’, or ‘deliberately withheld affection or tenderness’).

As a result, while there is some overlap between psychological and relational aggression, the focus of psychological aggression can be much broader depending on the construct used (Linder et al., 2002). Furthermore, as seen in the review of Crick et al. (1999), relational aggression has been validated empirically as a separate and distinct form of aggression. Psychological aggression therefore serves as an overarching term that could include relational aggression, yet may potentially contain many inconsistent and unrelated meanings. As a result, relational aggression is a more focused term for understanding the manipulation of a relationship.

### **Past Research on Relational Aggression**

#### ***What Do We Know About Relational Aggression and What Impact Does it Have?***

In order to fully understand the literature of relational aggression as it applies to the marital relationship, it is necessary to understand the origin of the literature. As an overview, the study of relational aggression began with examining social relationships between small children (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Crick et al., 2006; Nelson, Robinson, & Hart, 2005; Putallaz et al., 2007) and continued by examining relationships between children through middle childhood and adolescence (Crick et al., 1999; Goldstein & Tisak, 2010; Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist, & Peltonen, 1988; Schad et al., 2008; Siegel, La Greca, & Harrison, 2009; Xie, Swift, Cairns, & Cairns, 2002). Only recently has relational aggression been observed or studied in emerging adults (Bjorkqvist et al., 1994; Kaukiainen et al., 2001; Nelson et al., 2008; Werner & Crick, 1999) and more recently within adult romantic relationships (Carroll et al., 2010; Goldstein et al., 2008; Linder et al., 2002; Murray-Close, Ostrov, Nelson, Crick, & Coccaro, 2010). Furthermore, only one study to date has examined married couples that have been in long-term committed relationships (Carroll et al., 2010).

### *Early Childhood*

In the last decade, aggression exhibited in children has been one of the most widely studied adjustment problems due to its resulting negative effects (Crick et al., 2006). However, a majority of the research on this early childhood group was focused on boys and their use of physical aggression, while ignoring girls. This was done because girls are less likely to be physically aggressive (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Crick et al., 2006). As a result of the emphasis on boys' use of physical aggression, less attention was given to girls, and their potential aggressive techniques. This was the case until researchers began studying relational aggression. Once this research began, researchers recognized that girls were equally, if not more aggressive than boys, albeit through different means. This discovery changed the perception that young boys were aggressive and girls were not. Researchers learned that all children had the potential of exhibiting aggression.

There is now considerable evidence that children who use relational aggression are more likely to experience, "concurrent social, psychological, and emotional difficulties, such as peer rejection, depression and externalizing problems, than are nonrelationally aggressive children" (Werner & Crick, 1999, p. 615). Crick and Grotpeter (1995) also found that children who participate in relational aggression have significant social problems and are more often disliked than other children. As a result, observations of young children and their social relationships led to the first recognition of the detrimental effects of relational aggression on relationships (Crick et al., 1999).

Relational aggression can be seen in children as young as three years old (Crick et al., 1999). No research has been conducted on children younger than three because relational aggression techniques generally require verbal abilities. Thus, children have to advance through multiple developmental milestones before they can begin using relational aggression. Around

the age of three, children begin participating in less parallel play and more interactive play, which is enhanced by preschool and the introduction of peers. Due to the fact that children at this age are just learning social skills, their participation in relational aggression is quite simple and apparent. For example, a child may tell another child he will not go with him to the playground unless the other child gives him his toy. However, these children generally only participate in relational aggression when a problem is current, not in response to something that has previously happened, unlike older children. Thus, if the children get in a fight over a toy, one child may talk about the other child to a third party while they are still fighting over who gets the toy.

Furthermore, preschool-age children focus more on activities than pair bonds, meaning that participating in a desired activity may be more important for a child than listening to the peer and following what he or she wants the child to do (Crick et al., 1999). Thus, if the child is content playing with a doll, it may not matter that a friend threatens their relationship if she does not play outside with her. As a result, it is likely that preschool-age children are the least effective in their use of relational aggression, but their participation in such activities provides a starting point for more complex uses of relational aggression in the future (Crick et al., 1999).

The first study to look at gender differences between preschool-age boys and girls and their use of relational aggression was conducted in 1997, by Crick, Casas, and Mosher. They found, according to teacher reports and assessments, that preschool-age girls use relational aggression techniques far more than preschool-age boys. This study was replicated by Casas and Crick (1997), with a larger sample and found, once again, girls to be more relationally aggressive than boys at this age. They also found that while boys were less relationally aggressive, they were more physically aggressive. Another study conducted by Crick et al. (2006), several years

later found that girls were more relationally aggressive than boys and boys were more physically aggressive than girls (i.e., Archer, 2004; Crick and Grotpeter, 1995). However, these results do not indicate that boys never use relational aggression; it is only less frequent than their female counterparts (Crick et al., 1997).

Aggression in early childhood has primarily been studied in the peer relationship (Nelson et al., 2005). Early childhood use of aggression has been predominantly directed toward same-sex peers. Thus, girls are more relationally aggressive with other girls and boys are more physically aggressive with other boys (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Crick et al., 2006). Various researchers have attributed this gender discrepancy to the notion that girls focus more on relationships, or relational issues during social interactions than boys do (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Nelson et al., 2005). Nevertheless, the end result is that children, especially girls, as young as three years old, are potentially beginning habits of relational aggression that may develop in greater depth as they age (Crick et al., 1999).

One study (Putallaz et al., 2007), which looked at children in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade, found that controversial children were more likely to use both relational aggression and physical aggression. These results are similar to those of children in preschool. It was found that girls were more likely to use relational aggression against peers rather than physical aggression. Lastly, they looked at victimization and found that children who were rejected were most likely to be victims of relational or physical aggression (Putallaz et al., 2007). Furthermore, Crick and Grotpeter (1995) assessed the link between rejection and aggression and hypothesized that there may be a cycle of rejection and subsequent use of relational aggression. For example, if a child is rejected by his or her peers, that child may participate in relational aggression to get back at those peers. The authors claim that the association between rejection and relational aggression

may provide further insight into social adjustment difficulties in girls (Crick and Grotpeter, 1995). Furthermore, “the antics of the relationally aggressive, ... child may in fact reflect an underlying social deficit that eventually leads to substantial relationship difficulty as development proceeds” (Nelson et al., 2005, p. 131).

As children continue to develop through early childhood the same gender discrepancies were found. In a study of third grade to sixth grade children, performed by Crick and Grotpeter (1995), it was found that girls were, once again, significantly more likely to use relational aggression than boys.

The early childhood relational aggression literature describes the style of relational aggression being simple and straightforward (Crick et al., 1999). However, even though it is somewhat simple, various negative effects have been identified for those who participate in relational aggression at this age and into middle childhood. For example, peer rejection, depression, emotional difficulties and externalizing problems have all been identified as a result of relational aggression (Crick et al., 1999). The problems associated with relational aggression can begin at a young age, yet as relational aggression develops and changes with increasing age, these problems can be exaggerated (Crick et al., 1999).

### ***Middle Childhood***

The use of relational aggression begins to change in middle childhood (ages 9-12). In fact, this form of aggression becomes significantly more prevalent at age 11 for girls (Bjorkqvist et al., 1994). As children developmentally progress, they are more capable of sophisticated and complex interactions. Additionally, they begin to develop a desire for good relationships and a much greater need for acceptance from peers, especially same-sex peers. Therefore, their development impacts their ability to act socially.

With increasing cognitive abilities, children become less confrontational in their behavior and therefore use more forms of relational aggression. They do this because they can understand the complexity of the relationship (e.g., the perpetrator expects that using relational aggression will lead to the desired social outcome, and the victim knows they are being treated poorly). Unlike younger children, those in the middle childhood years are more likely to use relational aggression as tactics for revenge because of experiences that have happened in the past. However, consistent with younger children, girls are more relationally aggressive than boys (Crick et al., 1999).

The literature on children and their use of relational aggression is important as we examine those couples that use relational aggression and potential gender effects. It is possible that the use of relational aggression from a young age could become habitual. As a result, similarities could arise between findings in the early childhood literature and what we find in adult relationships.

### ***Continued Development of Relational Aggression with Increasing Age***

While a majority of the studies on relational aggression focus on younger age groups, a growing body of literature has begun looking at adolescents' and adults' use of relational aggression. This literature has shown that relational aggression is not only a form of aggression found in children, but it is a behavior that develops with age (Archer & Coyne, 2005; Bjorkqvist et al., 1994; Crick et al., 1999). Adolescents and adults, like children, continue to use confrontational and nonconfrontational or direct and indirect forms of relational aggression. For example, adults will often use variations of the 'silent treatment' and withdrawal to manipulate relationships (Crick, Werner, & Schellin, 1998).

Crick et al. (1998) examined a heterosexual undergraduate student sample and found that adolescent and adulthood relational aggression changes from primarily same-sex peers to opposite-sex peers (friendships to romantic relationships). They found that adolescents and adults would use opposite-gender associations as a means for relational aggression. Thus, the use of relational aggression becomes even more complex. In fact, harming a peer's romantic relationship was a strategy for many of the respondents. This was done by trying to influence a person's feelings of acceptance from peers of the opposite-sex rather than the same-sex.

As we continue to explore the relational aggression literature, we see that as individuals develop into adolescents and adults, there is a greater emphasis on the behaviors that indicate relational aggression such as love withdrawal and social sabotage. This is shown in a more manipulative and complex way with age. Another important factor among heterosexual young people is in the change from same-sex peers to those that are opposite-sex peers or potential romantic interests as targets of relational aggression. No previous research has examined relational aggression among homosexual young people. Therefore, the research reviewed below addresses only opposite sex romantic relationships. We will now specifically explore the literature on adolescent's use of relational aggression, emerging adult's use of relational aggression and finally, adult's use of relational aggression.

### ***Adolescents Use of Relational Aggression***

Relational aggression with adolescents is particularly important because of the shift from same-sex peers to opposite-sex peers or romantic relationships as mentioned previously. This is the case because of the social anxiety that develops at this age (Siegel et al., 2009). Adolescence is a time period where social elements are increasingly important. The 'group' or friends that an adolescent has, or does not have, can largely impact a teen's view of him or herself and the

surrounding world. Thus, when relational aggression is used against an adolescent there can be a consequential increase in social anxiety. This increase of social anxiety, in turn, increases victimization. Therefore, those who are socially anxious are easy targets for relational aggression because they are less likely to retaliate. However, repeated relational aggression victimization, for these already socially anxious individuals, makes them even more socially anxious. This becomes a vicious cycle for adolescents. This social anxiety is especially pertinent to girls because they find relational aggression to be so personal (Siegel et al., 2009). Consequently, the use of relational aggression at this age begins to define groups of peers and becomes a more successful tool for adolescents to achieve their relational goals. Relational aggression, at this stage of development, increasingly acts as a viable resource to accomplish desired outcomes within relationships.

Adolescents' views of relational aggression become more complex as they age. Teens will perceive certain aspects of relational aggression as acceptable, and other aspects as unacceptable. For example, Goldstein and Tisak (2010) found that gossip for a teen was seen as wrong, but exclusion was seen as acceptable. Thus the complexity of relational aggression continues. Throughout this developmental stage, intimacy, loyalty and self-disclosure become more important, and as such, gossiping seems more hurtful and was thus considered inappropriate by most teens. Nonetheless, the exclusion of someone else seemed like an acceptable way of achieving a social goal and may not be interpreted as a betrayal like gossiping would.

When it comes to the romantic relationships of adolescents, little attention has been given to relational aggression. However, one study by Schad et al. (2007) found a correlation between those who use relational aggression with a romantic partner and pressure from the teen's peer

group. They found that when a teen received pressure from peers, the pressure undercut the teen's autonomy and he or she was subsequently more likely to use relational aggression in romantic relationships. This is explained by teens becoming so frustrated with their own lack of autonomy that they later take it out on their romantic relationships through relational aggression. However, the most notable finding in this study was the association found between the use of relational aggression in romantic relationships and a greater likelihood for increased alcohol use and depressive symptoms. This shows, once again, the damaging effects of using relational aggression, especially for adolescents.

### ***Emerging Adults Use of Relational Aggression***

There is a growing body of relational aggression literature focusing on the time period between adolescence and adulthood, ages 18-25 (Nelson et al., 2008), known as emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000). This is an important age group due to the increased focus on romantic relationships. Whereas there is only one study that has claimed to look at emerging adults' use of relational aggression, there are several studies that claim they are currently studying adults' use of relational aggression. Since the age range of these adult studies fits within the emerging adult time frame, we include a number of studies with adult samples in the emerging adulthood section.

The single study that has reported specifically investigating emerging adults' use of relational aggression consisted of perceptions of aggressive behaviors from 134 undergraduate students. All students were asked to fill out an assessment of normative beliefs about aggressive behavior. This assessment had four questions: (1) what do most men do when they want to be hurtful or mean to another man?; (2) what do most men do when they want to be hurtful or mean to a woman?; (3) what do most women do when they want to be hurtful or mean to another

woman?; and (4) what do most women do when they want to be hurtful or mean to a man? The responses were transcribed and coded. They found, consistent with studies of younger ages, that males reported that they were more likely to be physically aggressive while females reported that they were more likely to be indirectly and directly relationally aggressive. However, this study found that females at this age were especially direct in their use of relational aggression. The authors attribute this increase in direct relational aggression to women perceiving that men prefer more direct confrontation. This was especially prevalent in opposite-sex interactions. Therefore, similar to findings on younger children, relational aggression was seen as a frequent tactic for female emerging adults. Also, the authors state that the cognitive and relational advances that are made as emerging adults allow for more aggressive options than those used at younger ages (Nelson et al., 2008).

In a different study, Werner and Crick (1999) examined 225 college students using a self-report peer-nomination instrument to assess relational aggression. The peer-nomination instrument consisted of 24-items with three subscales, namely: prosocial behavior, peer sociometric and aggressive behavior. Seven of the 24-items were specifically relationally aggressive. Furthermore, the students completed a self-report for social-psychological adjustment, specifically disordered eating patterns (EAT; Garner & Garfinkel, 1979) and life satisfaction (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffen, 1985). Finally, the last assessment was the Personality Assessment Inventory (PAI; Morey, 1991), which looked at stress, perceptions of nonsupport, depression and antisocial personality features. The results indicated that participants' use of relational aggression leads to relational disturbance (rejection or victimization), which potentially leads to a greater use of relational aggression. It becomes a negative cycle for the people involved. These negative effects are not limited only to relational

disturbance, but also negative interpersonal relationships, impulsiveness, borderline personality features, antisocial behavior and, in women, self-destructive behavior such as bulimia have also been found (Werner & Crick, 1999).

### ***Gender Differences***

The gender effects found in children and middle childhood were consistent with those found in adolescents and adulthood. These effects were that women were more likely to use relational aggression than men, even though the use of relational aggression also increases in adulthood for men (Archer & Coyne, 2005; Crick et al., 1999). Additionally, women felt that relational aggression was more wrong, more consequential and harmful than did men (Goldstein & Tisak, 2010). This could be a result of women spending more time thinking about relationships than men, much like women in romantic relationships are generally seen as the relationship caretakers (Goldstein & Tisak, 2010). Despite the harm that is felt by the use of relational aggression, women participate in this form of aggression to harm the social standing of others. Women also participate in hurtful gossip to damage the reputation of others, as well as manipulate their relationships (Archer & Coyne, 2005). Thus, women see relational aggression as being more destructive, and yet still use it to accomplish their goals.

Notwithstanding that relational aggression is primarily a female tool in relationships, men are more likely to use relational aggression as they age. Bjorkqvist et al. (1994) indicate that the increase of males' use of relational aggression with age is attributed to their past means (e.g., physical aggression) no longer being as effective. Men see physical aggression as being more dangerous with age. Physical aggression is associated with a risk of social condemnation and injury, and therefore, men's use of aggression begins to change to what appears to be a safer

form of aggression. Physical aggression thus becomes less socially acceptable and other tactics, such as relational aggression, become more attractive.

### ***Romantic Relationships***

Few studies have looked at the use of relational aggression in adult romantic relationships. As indicated earlier, all of these studies have looked at opposite sex romantic relationships. Linder et al. (2002) conducted a self-report study with 104 undergraduate and graduate students. The age range of the students was from 18 years to 30 years old. This range fits within the age range of emerging adults, even though the students are considered adults in this study. These students reported being in a romantic relationship at some point in their lives. Approximately 71% of the participants were currently in a relationship. Participants completed a self-report measure of Aggression and Victimization (Morales & Crick, 1998), as well as an Adult Romantic Relationship Questionnaire (AARQ; Brennan & Shaver, 1995) and lastly, the Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA; Armsden & Greenberg, 1987). The findings indicate equal reporting of romantic relational aggression between genders, yet men reported being victimized more often. They attributed these findings to the possibility either that women underreported their use of relational aggression in their relationships, or the tendency for men to use more relational aggression as they age. Also, the authors state that with the change in adolescence from same-sex to opposite-sex relationships there “appears to be a contextual change in relational victimization such that men experience more relational victimization once they become involved in romantic relationships” (Linder et al., 2002, p. 80).

Furthermore, Linder et al. (2002) found that the use of relational aggression, regardless of gender, in heterosexual romantic relationships, was associated with negative romantic relationship qualities (e.g., less trust, more frustration, more jealousy, clinginess in the

relationship, less likelihood of turning to their partner in times of need, feeling less secure in the relationship), as well as a lack of positive qualities (e.g., not feeling safe in the relationship). Additionally, they found that using relational aggression in romantic relationships, as well as being a victim of relational aggression, negatively affected the general relationship quality.

In another study containing 479 young adult participants, Goldstein et al. (2008) used self-report measures of aggression and social behavior (Morales 1999; Morales & Cullerton-Sen, 2000) to measure romantic relationship relational aggression and victimization. The sample was fairly young with a participant mean age of almost 20 years old. Once again the participants are considered adults, yet they fit within the range of emerging adulthood. The authors used the Normative Beliefs about Aggression Scale (NOBAGS; Huesmann & Guerra, 1997), the Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised Questionnaire (ECR; Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998), the Dating Anxiety Scale for Adolescents (DAS-A; Glickman & La Greca, 2004), the Ruminative Responses Scale (RRS; Treynor, Gonzales, & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2003), the Revised Child Anxiety and Depression Scale (RCADS; Chorpita, Yim, Moffitt, Umemoto, & Francis, 2000) and finally, a scale created for their study to look at rumination about dating relationships (based on the work of Nolan-Hoeksema, Larson, & Grayson, 1999), self-worth contingent on romantic relationships (based on the work of Crocker, Brook, Niiya, & Villacorta, 2006) and the importance of romantic relationships. The authors found that the use of relational aggression was quite common and normal in relationships. They found, consistent with Linder et al. (2002) that males were more likely to be victimized in romantic relational aggression and females were more likely to be perpetrators in heterosexual relationships. Furthermore, consistent with prior studies, several negative effects were found in relationships that incorporated a great amount of romantic relational aggression. These couples invested more of their self-worth in their

relationships, had more anxious attachment, and exhibited more anxiety and depressive symptoms. Thus the use of relational aggression within romantic relationships seemed to have many negative effects.

These findings on the use of relational aggression in emerging adults and adult heterosexual romantic relationships indicate that women use more relational aggression in romantic relationships than do men. This was gathered from the multiple reports made by men claiming victimization from relational aggression. However, because the studies conducted previously have relied on self-reporting, the results are limited. For this reason, our study looks at partner reports, meaning each individual reports on their partner's use of relational aggression and their own victimization by relational aggression. This further illuminates our understanding of the use of relational aggression and the associated gender effects.

The only study on relational aggression in marriage and the only study with a sample of adults (wives:  $M$  age = 43.44,  $SD$  = 5.54; husbands:  $M$  age = 45.32,  $SD$  = 6.23) was conducted by Carroll et al. (2010). This study assessed relational aggression using a sample of 336 married couples (672 spouses). Relational aggression was measured with two subscales (social sabotage and love withdrawal) from the Couples Relational Aggression and Victimization Scale (CRAViS) developed by Nelson and Carroll (2006). The CRAViS scale that was used was a modified version of the original Self-Report of Aggression and Victimization (SRAV) developed by Morales and Crick (1998), and extended to romantic relationships of young adults by Linder et al. (2002). Both the CRAViS and SRAV use similar items, however the original wording has been changed for the CRAViS to work for couples and to report on the partner rather than the self. Thus, they use spouse reports on perceived victimization (partner's use of social sabotage and love withdrawal). The study also included the Quality of Marriage Index (Norton, 1983) and

the RELATionship Evaluation (RELATE) questionnaire (Holman, Busby, Doxey, Klein, & Loyer-Carlson, 1997) to measure marital instability. Findings indicated that relational aggression, specifically love withdrawal and social sabotage, was somewhat typical, in varying degrees, in most marital relationships. The authors also found that wives were more likely to use relational aggression than their husbands. However, the husbands did use relational aggression. Furthermore, they found that those who used and were the recipients of relational aggression within their romantic relationships, experienced lower marital quality and greater marital instability.

This study is unique from previous studies on relational aggression due to the fact that the age of the participants is greater and the relationships are long-term, committed relationships with the average length of marriage being 17 years ( $SD=5.25$ ). Furthermore, this is the first study to measure partner reports of relational aggression rather than self-reports in romantic relationships. As a result, these findings are distinctive and illuminate our understanding of relational aggression in marital relationships. From these findings it appears that unlike physical aggression, which lessens with age, relational aggression is exhibited by both sexes throughout the life cycle. Additionally, relational aggression, specifically social sabotage and love withdrawal, is used quite frequently in these long-term relationships (Carroll et al., 2010). As a result, we are developing a new understanding of relational aggression, a form of aggression that is exhibited throughout the adult life, which negatively affects relationships.

Nonetheless, with this newfound knowledge there is still little known about these couples and what drives them to use relational aggression within their relationships. We hypothesized that the dynamic of marital power, and a couple's satisfaction or lack thereof, play key roles in the use of relational aggression in marriage.

## **Marital Power**

There is substantial evidence that the distribution of marital power has a significant effect on individual well-being and relationship functioning. Research has linked marital power to marital satisfaction in a number of studies (e.g., Ball et al., 1995; Brezsnayak & Whisman, 2004; Gray-Little, Baucom, & Hamby, 1996). Additionally, decades of research have found that those individuals who are in more egalitarian relationships are more satisfied with the relationship (Ball et al., 1995; Brezsnayak & Whisman, 2004; Gray-Little, 1982; Kemper & Reichler, 1976; Kolb & Straus, 1974; Stafford & Canary, 2006; Whisman & Jacobson, 1990). If there is a perception of shared power within the relationship, rather than one partner feeling they have more or less power, the partners have better overall adjustment and satisfaction (Gray-Little et al., 1996). However, most couples do not report their relationships as being egalitarian and when there is an imbalance of power it is the male that has the power in a majority of the cases. Only rarely does the female carry the most power in the relationship (Felmlee, 1994; Sprecher & Felmlee, 1997).

Marital power has been linked to a number of outcomes, positive and negative. Those that share power are more likely to be effective parents (Lindahl, Malik, Kaczynski, & Simons, 2004), physically healthier (Loving, Heffner, Kiecolt-Glaser, Glaser, & Malarkey, 2004), have higher levels of sexual desire (Brezsnayak & Whisman, 2004) and are less likely to experience depression (Byrne & Carr, 2000). Quinn and Davidson (1986) report that those in egalitarian marriages feel that “communication is more effective, intimacy is more deeply experienced, power is more evenly distributed, self-esteem is higher, ... and equity is more evenly balanced” (p. 121).

However, those that do not share power are more likely to be dissatisfied, exhibit psychological distress, experience lower marital quality (Voydanoff & Donnelly, 1999), and

depression (Mirowsky, 1985; Schafer & Keith, 1980). Additionally, women reported lower scores on identity when power was not shared (Larson, Hammond & Harper, 1998). Furthermore, higher perceived power by women, and lower perceived power by men, was associated with violence and the use of verbal aggression by both spouses (Sagrestano et al., 1999). Therefore, as stated previously, most couples do not report being in egalitarian relationships. Thus, the negative effects that are associated with perceived differences of power are of concern in this study. Additionally, gender differences in the relationship between marital power and relationship satisfaction are especially important to illuminate which partner may be more likely, if either, to use relational aggression in the relationship.

### ***Research on Marital Power***

A majority of the research on marital power and its effects on relationships was conducted in the 1970s and 1980s. Gray-Little and Burks (1983) did a thorough review of the literature on marital power up to that time period, which included 89 different studies. Common themes found within the studies were, first, wife-dominant relationships had the least amount of satisfaction. The second finding indicated that couples who presented as egalitarian had the highest levels of satisfaction, although husband-dominant couples were incredibly close to egalitarian couples in levels of satisfaction. The last common finding between the 89 studies was that coercive techniques, in various forms, were related to marital dissatisfaction. This finding is especially pertinent to our research on relational aggression. For example, one study asked if, “he/she might do or say something which would be unpleasant for you in return” and found that those who were ‘not-at-all satisfied’ in their relationships selected this statement the most (Raven, Centers, & Rodrigues, 1975). This question parallels our construct of relational

aggression. However, no clear definition was provided on the meaning of coercive techniques, although it is likely to have similarities with relational aggression (Gray-Little & Burks, 1983).

### ***Marital Power Definition***

There are many elements to the term marital power. Balswick and Balswick (1995) state that, “marital power is the relative ability of either spouse to influence the other” (p. 297). Most authors and researchers agree that at the core of a marital power definition is the ability to influence.

However, Rollins and Bahr (1976) point out that in understanding marital power, and even in defining the concept, it is important to keep in mind the key element, the relationship. Marital power results from an interaction of two individuals and their responses to each other, especially their ideas and goals. Therefore, while marital power deals with the ability to influence, it depends largely on the complex relationship between the couple and not just one individual.

Defining power can be difficult due to the many elements and classifications that need to be taken into account to fully understand power within the marital context. The first is the legitimization of power. Balswick and Balswick (1995) explain that the difference between legitimate and illegitimate power is that legitimate power refers to authority and illegitimate power refers to dominance. Dominance is defined as an “attempt to control others in ways that are not sanctioned by society” (Balswick & Balswick, 1995, p. 299), like physical violence. However, legitimate power is of interest to us because it is the type of power that is sanctioned by society.

Legitimate power in marriage is generally measured by resources. The resources of most importance in marriage are those that the given society value (such as education, economic

prosperity, etc.), as well as personal qualities such as self-worth and nurturing (although not as highly valued in Westernized society). Balswick and Balswick (1995) claim that those who have these resources that are valued by society are generally the most powerful people. However, those that do not have these resources will generally try to gain power in a covert way. They state, “when people lack material and personal resources, they will attempt to influence others, often in an indirect way. Men and women differ, however, in the ways they attempt to indirectly influence others” (Balswick & Balswick, 1995, p. 299). The authors indicate that men use manipulation to build themselves up and tear others down to gain power for themselves and take power from another. For women, manipulation, specifically of a spouse, is a likely possibility. This perception of power parallels the motivation for using relational aggression, to manipulate a relationship. Thus, both men and women, when in a lower power position, will try to gain power, and a way to do so is to manipulate the spouse. A tactic that is considered ‘safe’ by legal standards and is viable in manipulating a relationship is the use of relational aggression. This builds the case that those in a lower power position could potentially use relational aggression in their marriage to gain more power (Balswick & Balswick, 1995).

Another defining element and necessary classification of power is whether the power is ascribed or achieved. Ascribed power is similar to legitimate power in that it comes with the status of society. Balswick and Balswick (1995) discuss that ascribed power has historically been given to men in Westernized society. Men were assumed to have particularly valued resources that gave them power automatically. However, the most important element to the marital power is if the resource the husband has is of value to the wife, or she perceives his resources to be valuable. Therefore, a wife that highly values a good father will see a lack of that resource as powerless, or an abundance of that resource as powerful. Thus, marital power

consequently depends on the achieved status of the partner. This achieved status is gained by sharing resources that will be valued and accepted by the other partner (Balswick & Balswick, 1995).

### ***Marital Power Models***

There are several models used to explain how power is shared in marriage. The first is the traditional patriarchal model, (e.g., the power in the marriage is given to the husband). This follows traditional gender roles and prepares children to succeed in the world. This success is achieved by allowing one partner to stay home (the mother) and rear the child and give them more attention. As a result, a foundation is provided for the child to successfully achieve in the world (Balswick & Balswick, 1995).

The second model is based on resource theory. This theory simply states that there has been an evolution from marriage roles being clearly defined for each person to marriages where tasks could be decided between spouses. As a result of this evolution, decisions could be made according to the resources each spouse brought to the marriage. This model has been found to lack an ideological context, which gives potential value to the resources each spouse has (Balswick & Balswick, 1995).

The third model is the democratic exchange model. This model is the model we use for our study's purposes. This model has become the model of choice for most studies on marital power. The model acknowledges resources in marriage, but concentrates on the process of power. Cromwell and Olson (1975) distinguished three distinct, but interrelated domains of the construct 'power'; (1) power bases, (2) processes and (3) outcomes. Power bases are resources (e.g., personal and economic assets) that can be used for one partner to control the other. Power processes are how the couple interacts such as problem-solving abilities or persuasion that one

partner would use to obtain control in the relationship. Finally, power outcomes are simply who makes the decisions or determines what will happen. This model assumes that women are equal to men and both have an equal ability to have power in the relationship. Therefore, the focus of our study comes from this process approach to power. This study acknowledges that power can be held by either the man or the woman, that resources do play a part in that power, but so does the interaction and the person who ultimately gets to make the decision (Balswick & Balswick, 1995). For example, questions asked of the participants include, “My partner does not listen to me”, “My partner makes decisions that affect our family without talking to me first” or “My partner has more influence in our relationship than I do.”

### ***Gender and Power***

There are several gender differences identified in the studies on marital power. In fact, it is almost impossible not to consider gender when talking about marital power. Research on relationships in general have found that women tend to be relationship caretakers, especially when it comes to problem solving and various issues that may arise within the relationship. Men have been found to be more instrumental and these male and female differences affect marital power (Ball et al., 1995).

In marital problem-solving discussions Ball et al. (1995) found that women generally raise the issues around division of labor, which was considered an element of power. However, men were able to exercise power by not listening to the issues, or by determining the amount of emotional depth that would be used in the discussion. This led to frustration for women and a subsequent feeling of powerlessness. Furthermore, wives were more likely to agree with their husbands than husbands were to agree with their wives. Lastly, the men in the relationship were found to make the majority of the final decisions. In fact, 78% of the participants, both men and

women, claimed that the men had the final decision over the solution of the problem. Thus, there is a gender discrepancy for marital power in problem solving.

Similar to the previous study, a more recent study conducted on hidden power in marriage found analogous results. Zipp et al. (2004), found that as both partners voiced their individual opinions, it was women who would change their own opinion to fit more of their husband's than vice versa, indicating that women had less power. The wife's opinion was swayed primarily on 'male-gendered' topics such as politics and finances. However, men did not change their position even on topics that were primarily 'female-gendered' such as domestic duties. Then again, similar to the last study, the authors suggested the sway of wives opinions was due to their focus on relationships and desires to protect the relationship.

Steil (1997) conducted a review of the literature in decision-making with regards to involvement in childcare and household labor. Within this review the author found general themes and patterns. These patterns indicated that greater wives' dominance in regards to making decisions, which was rare, was associated with lower marital satisfaction for both genders. Additionally, when husbands had more dominance there was more satisfaction for husbands, but not for wives. And lastly, more egalitarianism in these decisions was associated with the highest levels of satisfaction for women. These findings were consistent with other studies' conclusions that egalitarian relationships had the highest relationship satisfaction (Kulik, 2002), while the relationships where the wife had the most power had the lowest relationship satisfaction (Gray-Little & Burks, 1983). Additionally, in relationships where there was already an imbalance in power, as Sprecher and Felmlee (1997) found, males were more likely to be the one with power.

According to the last several studies, we inferred and hypothesized that men who felt they were in the higher power position in the relationship would be more satisfied with the relationship, and subsequently, would be less likely to use coercive techniques such as relational aggression.

Interestingly, it is possible that both partners think they have equal power, but Balswick and Balswick (1995) state “if they (either partner) resort to using their resources as a means of controlling the other, the relationship is probably not equal” (p. 305). Thus, if one partner is using any other tactic to manipulate or control the other partner there is most likely an inequality of power in the relationship. Generally, the person in a lower power position would be more likely to attempt to gain power by using coercive techniques like relational aggression.

From this body of literature on gender and power, findings indicate that men tend to be in the more powerful position and hold more culturally valued resources. Therefore they are more likely to be satisfied, and thus, are less likely to use coercive techniques such as relational aggression. However, women are more likely to be in the less powerful position, which would subsequently decrease their satisfaction and increase their likelihood to use relational aggression in order to gain more power.

### ***Perception of Power***

For this study we looked at self-reports of marital power due to the common gender differences. We also did this to be consistent with previous findings that suggest marital power largely depends on individual perception. Rabin (1994) discusses power in terms of perception. He has found that marital satisfaction depends more on the perception of the equality than the actual equality. Therefore, a true look at marital power within a relationship would need to come

from the individual who is experiencing it. For this purpose, we used self-report measures for the data to understand how the individual perceives the power in their relationship.

### ***Gaining Power***

Spouses will use a variety of tools to gain power when they perceive themselves as being in the lower power position. Aida and Falbo (1991), as cited in Frieze and McHugh (1992), found couples used more influence strategies when they felt they had less power in the relationship. For this reason, there have been several studies that have examined the various ways that spouses, who are in the less powerful position, try to gain power in the relationship. For example, one study looked at the development of psychiatric symptoms and found that 84% of the couples in their study had a spouse in the lower power position that used their psychiatric symptom to gain more power and make the relationship more equal. In fact, the author states, “if, as these results suggest, symptomatic behavior in marriages in which there are significant power and exchange discrepancies represents the less powerful spouse’s attempt to equalize the power dimension and reestablish a more fair exchange system, the symptomatic spouse would be expected to ‘give up,’ ‘relinquish,’ or ‘lose’ his/her symptom if a more fair exchange and power sharing system were brought about” (Bagarozzi, 1990, p. 61).

Another method for a spouse to gain greater power in their marriage is through the withholding or giving of sex. This has traditionally been a power base (resource) for women. The sexual power takes into account the partner who desires more sex versus the person who is willing to withhold sex for more power (Atwood & Scholtz, 2005). Dallos and Dallos (1997) state, “it seems therefore quite likely that women, if they are relatively powerless in their relationship, will virtually have no choice but to ‘use’ their sexuality in an attempt to gain power” (p. 52). Sexual withholding to manipulate a relationship is also a form of relational

aggression (love withdrawal) and thus assessed in this study. Therefore if a female, for example, were to have less marital power it is possible that she would withhold sex, a form of relational aggression, in order to gain more power and feel more equal in her relationship.

Additionally, another study (Betchen, 2006) looked at male's use of sexual dissatisfaction in order to gain more power. Betchen (2006) found that even unconsciously, men might use sexual dissatisfaction with their wives, who have 'normal' sexual interest and desire, to obtain more marital power. Thus, it is possible that men will use the complaint of sexual dissatisfaction to elevate their own sense of power in the relationship.

In a more recent study, Vogel, Murphy, Werner-Wilson, Cutrona, and Seeman (2007) looked at marital power and the use of demand and withdraw behaviors as a way to gain power in relationships. The authors used the 'social structure hypothesis' to understand the play between marital power and who demands and who withdraws. The 'social structure hypothesis' states that demand and withdraw happen when there is an imbalance of power and one partner "needs the other's cooperation for resolution of the conflict [and the other] partner can achieve satisfaction without the other" (Sagrestano et al., 1999, p. 293). Thus, typically the wife will make a demand, feeling that she needs her husband's cooperation for the decision to be made (less powerful position) and the husband will withdraw because he does not need his wife's cooperation to maintain his own power. However, Vogel et al. (2007) found that spouses "may exert certain types of marital power and may exert more or less power across areas of their relationship" (p. 173). That is, the use of demand or withdraw may depend more on the area of discussion than on the overall power difference within the couple.

Komter (1989) in a qualitative study found that women were more likely to use covert means to influence their partner. The women in the study explained that when trying to

influence their partner, they would be cautious and try to change things in the relationship in a gradual way. However, this method was generally frustrating to the women because changes happened slowly. This desire to use covert methods in order to gain more influence over their partner lends to our discussion on relational aggression. It is assumed, from these findings, that women are more comfortable with covert means to influence their relationships. As such, when there is a power discrepancy, the wife may be more likely to try to bring about change in a covert way, or in a relationally aggressive way.

Men on the other hand in Komter's (1989) study were more likely to use ignoring and reasonableness with their wives. When the husband would ignore the wife nothing would need to change, much like the results of the withdrawing behavior mentioned in Vogel et al. (2007). The man was able to hold on to the power if he ignored the requests of his wife. Husbands used arguments to show their wives how irrational they were in their demands and how rational their own choice was. Husbands also tended to use more reasonableness with their wives when referring to the sexual aspect of the relationship. As such, the man would argue that his sexual needs must be fulfilled or he may need to go elsewhere, or that the couple did not have a good marriage. Not having a good marriage was especially devastating to women who were the relationship caretakers. These potential threats were generally effective. Therefore, another link to the potential use of love withdrawal or social sabotage is made in that manipulating the relationship becomes a tool to gain power.

From the literature presented, we hypothesized that the person in the less powerful position would use relational aggression to gain power. This technique has been shown to be effective from young childhood to adulthood and into romantic relationships, as shown in other studies (i.e., Carroll et al., 2010). As a result, we believed that it would be a fairly common

technique that those in lower power positions will gravitate toward in their effort of gaining more power.

### ***Marital Power and Intimate Partner Violence***

Another tool spouses can use, albeit not socially sanctioned, but believed by the perpetrator to be effective, is intimate partner violence (IPV). Marital power and IPV have been studied extensively while marital power and relational aggression have yet to be overtly linked. Since IPV is a form of aggression we explore some of the implications of power on IPV here.

Research on marital power and IPV has indicated two opposite findings, however these findings may be different due to conceptualizations of the construct (Murphy & Meyer, 1991). One finding is that men have more power and control in their relationships, and thus use violence because they can (Johnson, 1995). The second finding indicates that men are in less powerful positions, and thus use violence in order to obtain more power (Babcock, Waltz, Jacobson & Gottman, 1993; Mason & Blankenship, 1987). Straus et al. (1980) further found that those who did not feel they had any other options used physical violence to gain power. A majority of the studies looking at marital power and IPV, however, have linked a sense of lower marital power, for the male, to an increased use of IPV (Babcock et al., 1993; Sagrestano et al., 1999).

Pyke (1996), in a qualitative study, found that “violations of the traditional and submissive role [that the husband wanted the wife] to fulfill” were triggers to the husband’s rage. The author found that there were more “incidence[s] of wife abuse (based mostly on self-reports) committed by lower-status, underemployed, and unemployed husbands” (p. 539). This was similar to the findings of many other researchers (e.g., Dibble & Straus, 1980; Straus et al., 1980). For example, in a survey of 1,553 women with higher status jobs than their husbands, found that these women, more than women who had similar jobs as their husbands, were

significantly more likely to experience life-threatening violence (Hornung, McCullough, & Sugimoto, 1981). Similarly, the likelihood of violence from the husband to wife increases when the wife is making more money than her husband or has more education (Hotelling & Sugarman, 1986). All of these results indicate that when the wife has more power (resources) than her husband, it is likely that the husband, with less power, would potentially use physical means to gain more power. Thus, in our study we controlled for the husbands' and wives' ages, income and education.

In a study of marital power and IPV, Babcock et al. (1993) looked at communication patterns and power discrepancies using the democratic exchange model with power bases, processes and outcomes. The authors indicate in their foci of study that men may feel their ability to communicate in their relationship is insufficient and thus resort to physical means to obtain power in their relationships. For this reason, the authors have looked at communication, and lack thereof, as a potential indication of discrepancy in marital power and subsequent IPV. They consider communication skills as a power base (resource) and believe that if there were high communication skills between partners that problem solving would be more successful and resorting to physical violence would feel less necessary, especially for men. However, communication skills may be a source of marital power, meaning the person with the greater communication skills, which is typically the female, would also have more power. This power discrepancy for the man may motivate him to use physical aggression. This hypothesis was confirmed, indicating that when the husband did not have the level of communication skills as his wife, he felt that he was in the lower power position, and therefore, there was a greater likelihood for violence. Additionally, when both spouses lacked communication skills, they were less likely to be able to effectively handle problems and thus there was also a greater

likelihood for violence. In fact, the authors state, “when power or status discrepancies exist in a marriage and when the husband has a history of being violent, physical aggression may be the only effective mode of stopping an argument or asserting a dominant position when both he and his wife lack verbal skill” (Babcock et al., 1993, p. 48). Thus, it is apparent that a lack of communication skills and a discrepancy in marital power may perpetuate the use of physical violence within the relationship.

Another study of 42 married couples with self-report data found that a perceived discrepancy between marital power and the use of demand and withdraw during conflict were predictors of IPV. Similar to the demand and withdraw debate in the marital power literature, there is a link between demand/withdraw behavior and physical violence. As the woman demands (less powerful position), and the husband withdraws (more powerful position), this could lead to both husband and wife using violence in the relationship (Sagrestano et al., 1999). We further this link by suggesting that the person in the lower power position may demand more and instead of using physical violence, may resort to relational aggression.

Furthermore, Ehrensaft, Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Heyman, O’Leary, and Lawrence (1999) conducted a study on three groups of couples, happy nonaggressive, distressed nonaggressive and distressed aggressive. They found that in the aggressive marriages, the wives were more likely to feel that first, their husbands controlled their sense of competence and self-respect and second, that the husband was trying to control them. This may be similar to wives who resort to using relational aggression because they feel that their husbands are trying to control them, and thus, use love withdrawal or social sabotage as a way to manipulate and gain some control back in their lives.

In one article by Frieze and McHugh (1992) the authors suggest that Straus (1979) “argued that a husband that has been violent toward his wife only once causes a permanent change in the balance of marital power toward a strongly husband-dominant pattern” (p. 452). Thus, once the couple has experienced this violence, it is clear and unforgettable for many couples where the power resides, generally, with the male. Furthermore, Frieze and McHugh (1992) state “the use of violence by the husband as a power strategy was one of the best predictors of greater decision making by husbands” (p. 461). Meaning that men used violence as a way to gain power and maintain power in their relationships.

Furthermore, Frieze and McHugh (1992) found that the use of power strategies in marriage influenced who ultimately made the decisions and affected the marital satisfaction. Additionally, they found that women in these violent situations were more likely to use influence strategies, such as manipulating the relationship in a covert way (e.g., relational aggression).

Therefore, while the relationship between marital power and overt aggression (IPV) is not necessarily the same as the relationship between marital power and relational aggression, there are indications and assumptions that could potentially link the two together. Furthermore, it is possible that lower marital power could activate the use of relational aggression, and if that aggression had failed, or they did not have the communication skills or problem solving skills that were mentioned previously to use relational aggression, that IPV could result. While beyond the scope of this study, both forms of aggression could potentially be directly linked to marital power.

### ***Marital Satisfaction and IPV***

A meta-analysis conducted by Stith, Green, Smith, and Ward (2007) of 32 articles examining the relationship between IPV and marital satisfaction, found that marital satisfaction

and IPV had a significant negative relationship. Furthermore, the authors found that gender played a key role in understanding the relationship between satisfaction and IPV. Men were more likely to use violence than were women when they were dissatisfied in the relationship. The authors speculate that this could be a result of women not wanting to be violent because the male was larger, or that men see violence as an effective means when they are dissatisfied. However, the authors also stated that because most studies are cross-sectional, it is not possible to determine the direction of the relationship. It is possible that violence causes lower levels of satisfaction. It is also possible that lower levels of relationship satisfaction lead to more violence. The same patterns may exist between relationship satisfaction and relational aggression. Lower marital satisfaction may initiate the use of relational aggression or the use of relational aggression may affect the level of satisfaction in the marriage.

### **Marital Satisfaction**

Research on marital satisfaction has been included in the review of relational aggression and marital power. From the literature we can gather that those who use relational aggression have lower marital satisfaction (e.g., Carroll et al., 2010). We can also assume, from the marital power literature that the power that is exhibited in the marriage will have an effect on the satisfaction in that relationship (e.g., Brezsnyak & Whisman, 2004; Gray-Little et al., 1996). The perception of marital satisfaction can be powerful. Lips (1991) found that those who are in marriages where there is less satisfaction tend to use more coercive power with each other. Thus, those that feel less satisfied in their marriage may be more likely to use coercive techniques with each other, such as relational aggression. Furthermore, in a study conducted by Raven et al. (1975) it was also found that those who were less satisfied in their relationships were also significantly more likely than those that were satisfied, to use coercion (i.e., Frieze and

McHugh, 1992, p. 453). Thus, in this study we used marital satisfaction as a mediating variable predicting that when there is lower marital satisfaction, consistent with the previous literature, there would be a greater likelihood of spouses using relational aggression. We also predicted that those who are satisfied would be less likely to use relational aggression in their marriage.

## **Theory**

We use two theories to conceptualize this study, the first being systems theory, and the second the democratic exchange model as mentioned previously in the marital power literature review. Systems theory allows for conceptualization of the interaction between the couple and the dynamics of power and subsequent relational aggression behavior. The democratic exchange model specifically looks at the various dynamics of marital power and potential outcomes of that power, which could also include the use of relational aggression.

### ***Systems Theory***

Systems theory is used in this study as it recognizes the various parts that form the whole. Our focus of study is the marital relationship, along with the individuals and various dynamics that form that relationship, and the subsequent behaviors that follow. What may seem like an individual's behavior is often a result of the relationship (Nichols & Schwartz, 2006). As such, we use the actor/partner interdependence statistical model in order to look at the whole system more fully. Because the parts of the system are organized around each other, but function in highly interdependent ways, systems theory functions as a way to broadly understand the behavior of these couples, especially as it relates to the use of relational aggression.

The use of systems theory began in the 1940's with Ludwig von Bertalanffy and Gregory Bateson and has roots in engineering, physics and mathematics. At that time, "theoreticians began to construct models of the structure and functioning of organized mechanical and

biological units (i.e., jet engines, amoebas)” (Nichols & Schwartz, 2006, p. 91). Their discoveries led to the understanding that several possible complex parts made a complex whole. Bateson and colleagues saw the possibility and appropriateness of applying this understanding to family functioning and systems theory, for families, was born.

Systems theory suggests that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, meaning that all of the essential elements to the whole require all of the parts, and thus the mechanism cannot work with only one part (Becvar & Becvar, 2006). So it is with couples, a marital relationship is formed out of two individuals, however the whole relationship system is complex and takes into account more than the two individuals, but includes aspects like communication, aggression and problem-solving abilities.

As a result, we understand and analyze the couples in our study as interrelated and therefore, they cannot be looked at individually to understand the relationship as a whole. Several concepts of systems theory indicate that an individual’s behavior is contingent on another individual (reciprocity) thus, it is possible that power in one individual could draw forth the desire to use relational aggression in another partner in order to gain more power. However, from a systems perspective the use of relational aggression can also draw forth the attempt to gain marital power. It is assumed that relational aggression exists because marital power exists and vice versa. Furthermore, these patterns of interaction, or ‘fit’ indicate that the behavior becomes normal for the couple over time and the couple sees it as their behavioral sequence.

While it is not possible to distinguish cause from effect in a systems perspective, we offer one punctuated example. A wife could be in the lower power position and use a form of love withdrawal towards her husband (denying sex) in an attempt to gain more power. The husband could potentially become angry because of his wife’s withdrawal and reaffirm his power by

withdrawing from her demands (the more powerful position). The wife then responds with more of the same behavior. This behavior becomes a feedback loop in the relationship in that it feeds the information back into the relationship that the husband holds the power and that the wife is trying to gain or equalize power. The couple eventually recognizes this interaction as normal and, according to systems theory, is resistant to changing this pattern. Thus, the use of relational aggression becomes a functional symptomatic behavior, meaning the use of relational aggression feeds the perpetuation of an unhealthy behavior in the relationship.

This theory is used to understand the complexity and interconnectedness of the couple relationship and their possible subsequent use of relational aggression. From a systems perspective it is clear that the complexity of two individuals within a relationship that has various power dynamics may, in turn, use various methods (e.g., relational aggression) to equalize or gain more power in the relationship. Thus the couple dynamic, or the whole relationship is greater than each individual because the whole perpetuates the individual behavior (e.g., use of relational aggression), which eventually leads back to the understanding of the relationship whole.

### ***Democratic Exchange Model***

The democratic exchange model, as mentioned previously, is a model that is used in most studies examining marital power. This model, created by Cromwell and Olson (1975) looks at three distinct domains of power. The first is power bases, which are the resources available to the individual or couple. Therefore, if economic gain or the employment one spouse has is culturally valued, then these things are seen as resources. However, if the cultural value is on childrearing or emotional nurturing, these attributes can also be seen as resources. The person with the greatest resources is generally the person with the greatest power. The next domain,

which is more relational in nature, is the process domain. This domain emphasizes the couple interaction. As a result, communication and the ability to problem solve or persuade the other partner is key in this process. The third domain is power outcomes. This is the person who gets the final say, or makes the ultimate decision. Additionally, this theory is based upon equality in the ability to hold power. Thus, power is equally available to either spouse.

We use this theory to understand the power that each individual has in our study and subsequently what could motivate the use of relational aggression. Thus, if an individual in the couple has greater culturally respected resources this may affect the communication between the couple, which could ultimately affect the use of relational aggression. So, if a husband has more culturally valued resources, such as a higher paying job than his wife, it is possible that this could affect their method of communication or problem solving (power processes) and the wife could potentially use a method of relational aggression like love withdrawal to attempt to change this interaction. This love withdrawal subsequently affects the ongoing communication and the couple becomes stuck in this cycle. Additionally, the person who ultimately gets to make the decision (power basis) could then activate the desire of the other partner to use various means of gaining power such as relational aggression.

## **Hypotheses**

The hypotheses created for this study were influenced by the literature as discussed throughout this chapter. The model in Figure 1 shows the paths of these hypotheses.

- 1) We hypothesized that there would be a significant negative relationship between wives' perceived marital power and wives' relational aggression (love withdrawal and social sabotage).

- 2) We hypothesized that there would be a significant negative relationship between husbands' perceived marital power and husbands' relational aggression (love withdrawal and social sabotage).
- 3) We hypothesized that there would be a significant negative relationship between wives' perceived marital power and wives' marital satisfaction.
- 4) We hypothesized that there would be a significant positive relationship between husbands' perceived marital power and husbands' marital satisfaction.
- 5) We hypothesized that there would be a significant negative relationship between wives' marital satisfaction and wives' relational aggression (love withdrawal and social sabotage).
- 6) We hypothesized that there would be a significant negative relationship between husbands' marital satisfaction and husbands' relational aggression (love withdrawal and social sabotage).
- 7) We hypothesized that there would be a significant negative relationship between wives' perceived marital power and husbands' marital satisfaction.
- 8) We hypothesized that there would be a significant negative relationship between husbands' perceived marital power and wives' marital satisfaction.
- 9) We hypothesized that there would be a significant positive relationship between wives' perceived marital power and husbands' use of relational aggression (love withdrawal and social sabotage).
- 10) We hypothesized that there would be a significant positive relationship between husbands' perceived marital power and wives' use of relational aggression (love withdrawal and social sabotage).

## Chapter 3 - Methods

### Participants

The participants in this study came from wave two (2008) of the *Flourishing Families Project (FFP)*. The FFP is an ongoing longitudinal study conducted in a large northwestern city that looks at inner family life. The participating families were found using a national telephone survey database (Polk Directories/InfoUSA). Families that had a child between the ages of 10 and 14 at wave one were selected and contacted. Once the families had been contacted and showed interest in the study they were given the informed consent and an opportunity to ask any questions before agreeing to participate. University students were trained and sent to interview and administer questionnaires to the families that agreed to participate in the study. The questionnaire was self-administered and averaged completion in one-and-one-half hours. The data from the video segment is not reported in this study. The focus of the present study is on the in-home, self-administered 90-minute questionnaire data. Each family member participating in the study filled out a questionnaire, the parents were paid \$100 for their time and participation, and the adolescent was paid \$50.

Approximately one year after the collection of wave one data the families were recontacted. There was a 96% participation rate for the second wave of data collected (N=480 families). For this study, the second wave of data was used. Only the data that was available from both spouses and the data where both spouses respond to the measures were included.

This second wave sample contains 325 heterosexual married couples out of the 480 families interviewed (650 spouses). Approximately 155 families were single-parent households and thus were not included in our study as they did not qualify for the appropriate comparison of couple functioning. Due to the *FFP* requirement of having a child between the ages of 10 and 14

our sample of spouses were in a fairly similar age of life and marital duration (wives:  $M$  age=44.13,  $SD$ =5.54; husbands:  $M$  age=46.2,  $SD$ =6.23) with the average length of the marriage being 18 years ( $SD$  =5.25).

Eighty-eight percent of fathers and 81.5% of mothers in our sample were European American, 5.4% of fathers and 5% of mothers were African-American, and 7.1% of fathers and 13.4% of mothers were from other ethnic groups or were multiethnic. Additionally, for the two-parent families, 74% of fathers and 68.5% of mothers had a bachelor's degree or higher. The annual income for these two parent families were as follows: 9.8% made less than \$59,000 per year, 34% made between \$60,000 and \$99,000 per year, and 32% made between \$100,000 and \$139,000, and 24% made more than 140,000. Approximately 97% of the two-parent families in this sample were currently married (never divorced), thus our study is about the use of relational aggression in marriage. The cohabitating couples who were not married (3%), were not included in this study.

## **Procedure**

The participating families in the FFP were selected from Seattle, Washington, USA. As stated previously, they were recruited via a purchasable national telephone survey database called the Polk Directories/Info. This database has information gathered from telephone, magazine and Internet subscriptions. The database professes to contain information about 82 million households throughout the nation including presence and age of children. As such, the Polk Directory allowed the researchers to find the households with children in the appropriate age range (age 10 – 14). Once the families with the appropriate age child were selected, the families for the study were randomly selected from targeted census tracts. These census tracts specifically mirrored the racial and socio-economic stratification of reports in the local Seattle,

Washington school districts. Once the census tracts had been run, the remaining families were all considered eligible for study participation. The families considered eligible consisted of 692 families.

Recruitment was conducted in a multistage approach. The first contact with families was through a letter that introduced the study and an invitation to participate. The second recruitment stage was a home visit or phone call by the university trained students inviting the eligible families to participate in the study. After a family gave their consent to participate in the study, an informed consent (Appendix B, consent for wave 2 is shown), as approved by the Brigham Young University IRB, was given to the families and the interviewers made appointments to come to their home for an assessment interview. Of the 692 families that were eligible in the initial stages of the study, the researchers received a 61% response rate, which resulted in 423 families that agreed to participate in the study.

Once the families completed their in-home interview, they were asked by the interviewers if they knew two additional families that fit the criteria and would be interested in completing the study. This was done to fill any gaps in the Polk directory, as those from lower socio-economic status may not have been included in the Polk Directories because their information was based on subscriptions in various forms. The additional families (77 and 15% of the final wave one sample) that were recruited from this limited-referral approach added to the ethnic and socio-economic diversity of the sample. Additionally, as reported in other similar studies, the recruitment method was not correlated with any of the main variables in the study (Carroll et al., 2010).

The most prevalent reason for families not participating, according to the families report, was concern of the time commitment and privacy. The data that was collected is primarily

complete, meaning there was little missing data. This was accomplished by the interviewers, while still in the home and while videotaped segments were being conducted, scanned questionnaires to make sure there was no missing data or double marked data. If there was something missing, or a question double marked, the interviewer would ask the participant, at the end, to look at the questionnaire again and revisit any question that had been skipped or double marked. As a result, less than 3% of any variable was missing in the data. Appropriate steps were taken to address the missing data in the analyses.

When conducting wave one, each family was asked to provide two stable contacts that would know where the family was if they were to move or something was to happen to them. In the second wave of data each family was contacted first by letter. If they had moved, researchers then contacted the contacts that had been given to them by the family to find out where the family was living. The researchers went to great lengths to retain all wave one families. In some cases researchers followed families to Oregon, Iowa and Sweden and collected data for wave two. The second wave of data, which is the data for our study, had a 96% retention rate. Twenty families from wave one decided not to participate in wave two.

## **Measures**

The dependant variable, relational aggression was created using the husband's and wife's report on two subscales, love withdrawal and social sabotage. This was a report on their own victimization, thus their perception of their partner's perpetration of relational aggression. The independent variable, marital power, was created using husband's and wife's self report of their perception of their power in the relationship. The mediating variable, marital satisfaction was measured with the marital quality scale and a self-report of the perceived satisfaction the respondent had in the relationship.

### ***Relational Aggression***

Relational aggression was measured using two subscales from the Couples Relational Aggression and Victimization scale (CRAViS) developed by Nelson and Carroll (2006). Only these two subscales were selected and input into the FFP questionnaire because of space limitations. The CRAViS scale is a modified version of a scale developed by Morales and Crick (1998) called the Self-Report of Aggression and Victimization (SRAV) and was adapted for use in romantic relationships of young adults by Linder et al., (2002). The difference of the CRAViS scale from the SRAV scale is simply a language change for committed couples. It has also been modified to ask the participant about their partner's use of relationally aggressive behaviors.

The two subscales that are included are love withdrawal and social sabotage. These reports are based on the partner's perceived victimization by the spouse's use of relational aggression. From the first wave study, "exploratory factor analysis that included both husband and wife reports of each item confirmed the two subscales (all factor loadings were above .61 and there were no items that cross-loaded across the two constructs or across spouses)" (Carroll et al., 2010, p. 321).

The Love Withdrawal Scale is a 6-item scale that measures the degree to which husbands and wives feel their spouse withdraws affection and support from them. Love withdrawal is measured on a 7-point likert scale ranging from 1 (*not at all true*) to 7 (*very true*). Higher scales indicated higher perceived relational victimization and subsequently higher perception that their partner uses love withdrawal against them. This scale in its entirety is in Appendix C. Items include: "My partner gives me the silent treatment when I hurt his/her feelings in some way" and "My partner withholds affection or sex from me when s/he is angry with me."

The Social Sabotage Scale is a 6-item scale that measures the degree to which husbands and wives feel their spouse utilizes socially aggressive behaviors in times of conflict and

difference. Social sabotage is measured on a 7-point likert scale ranging from 1 (*not at all true*) to 7 (*very true*). Higher scales indicated higher perceived relational victimization and subsequently higher perception that their partner uses social sabotage against them. This scale in its entirety is in Appendix D. Items include: “My partner has gone ‘behind my back’ and shared private information about me with other people” and “When my partner has been angry at, or jealous of me, he/she has tried to damage my reputation by gossiping about me....”

The reliability tests for the overall scale and this sample produced a Cronbach’s Alpha of .90 for both husbands and wives. Reliability coefficients ranged from .87 to .91 for the social sabotage subscale.

### ***Marital Power***

The marital power scale was created using items and concepts from a variety of sources (i.e., Ball et al., 1995; Crosbie-Burnett, & Giles-Sims, 1991; Lindahl et al., 2004; Sagrestano et al., 1999). This scale was developed with individual items taken from select studies (see above) as the researchers felt there were no good, psychometrically tested scales available. Marital power was measured on a 5-point likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). After reverse coding selected items, higher scores indicate higher power towards partner. Items include: “I feel like I have no choice but to do what my partner wants” and “My partner tends to dominate our conversations.” This scale in its entirety is in Appendix E. This sample’s reliability produced a Cronbach’s Alpha of .92 for husbands and .92 for wives.

### ***Relationship Satisfaction***

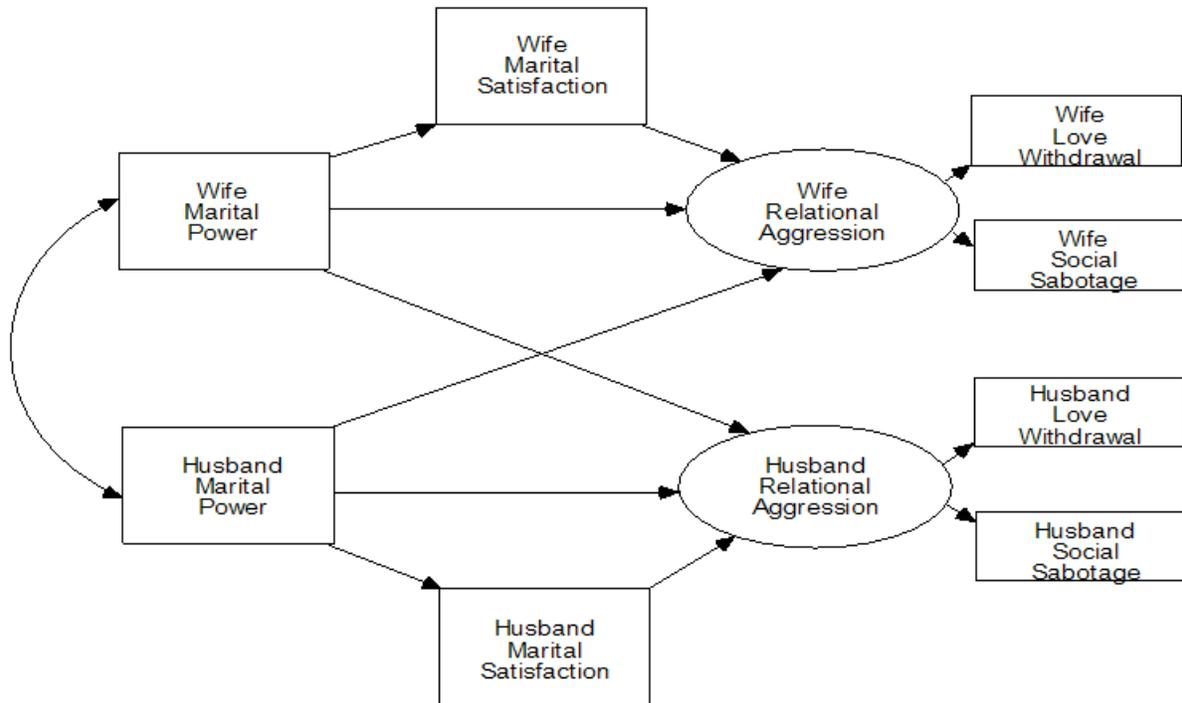
Relationship satisfaction was measured with the 6-item Marital Quality Scale, which was a modified version of the Norton Quality Marriage scale (Norton, 1983). Relationship satisfaction was measured on a 6-point likert scale for the first 5 items ranging from 1 (*very*

*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*very strongly agree*). The modification of this scale included taking out the midpoint option, which reduced the likert scale from 7 options down to 6. Items in this scale included: “My relationship with my partner makes me happy” and “My relationship with my partner is very stable.” This scale in its entirety is in Appendix F. Higher scores on the scale indicate higher perceived relationship satisfaction. Respondents were also asked about their degree of happiness in their relationship. This response was based on a 10-point likert scale ranging from 1 (*very unhappy*) to 10 (*perfectly happy*). High responses indicate extreme joy and low responses indicate extreme unhappiness in the relationship. Berg, Trost, Schneider, and Allison (2001) found reliability to be .95 (Cronbach’s Alpha Coefficient). This sample’s reliability produced a Cronbach’s Alpha of .95 for husbands and .95 for wives.

To assess the scale properties for satisfaction the item scores were added together and then divided by the number of items to obtain the respondent’s score. According to the first wave data, the “average scale scores indicated fairly high marital quality for both husbands ( $M=5.15$ ,  $SD = 0.96$ ), and wives ( $M = 5.13$ ,  $SD = 0.98$ )” (Carroll et al., 2010, p. 321).

**Figure.1 Model of Marital Power, Marital Satisfaction and Relational Aggression**

Model



Controls: Wife/Husband Age, Income and Education

### **Data Analysis**

This study's data was analyzed as couple data using the actor/partner interdependence (APIM) model (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). This model is used because the marriage relationship and the manipulation within the relationship is the focus of this study. Additionally, due to the fact that the data provides both self-report and partner-report, this model is most appropriate.

The first step of data analysis was to conduct descriptive statistics and basic frequencies in the sample, followed by examining correlations among variables. Next, confirmatory factor analysis using AMOS 17 was conducted to determine how well measured variables loaded onto the latent variables in the model. Love withdrawal and social sabotage were not split into two

separate variables because their factor loadings were both above .50. AMOS 17 was used to test the hypotheses regarding structural paths in the model. Next, since the indirect paths were statistically significant, a Sobel test was calculated to determine if the mediation was significant. Finally, fit indices were examined to determine how well the proposed model fit the actual data.

## Chapter 4 - Results

Structural Equation Modeling using AMOS (2011) was used to examine the model proposed in Figure 1. All indicators (i.e., love withdrawal and social sabotage for husband and wife) were examined to determine how well each indicator loaded on the respective latent variables. Indicators were acceptable with factor loadings of .50 or greater.

Factor loadings for husband love withdrawal and social sabotage were .70 and .81, respectively. Factor loadings for wife love withdrawal and social sabotage were .71 and .69. These results indicated appropriate factor loadings for the measured variables, and they therefore, were kept in the model.

**Table 1. Summary of First-Order Correlations Controlling for Husband Education Including Means and Standard Deviations (N=650)**

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. WMP	1								
2. HMP	.36***	1							
3. WMS	-.63***	-.48***	1						
4. HMS	-.44***	-.61***	.59***	1					
5. HLW	.63***	.35***	-.46***	-.41***	1				
6. WLW	.30***	.54***	-.32***	-.41***	.23**	1			
7. HSS	.62***	.31***	-.51***	-.42***	.50***	.29***	1		
8. WSS	.39***	.56***	-.44***	-.54***	.37***	.57***	.48***	1	
9. HE	-.16**	-.11*	.11*	.05	-.16**	-.10	-.12*	-.19*	1
<i>M</i>	2.04	2.30	5.23	5.36	2.49	2.81	1.44	1.53	4.83
<i>SD</i>	.65	.66	1.13	1.01	1.24	1.16	.78	.88	1.49

*Note.* A first-order correlations test was run for the following nine measures: Wife Marital Power (WMP), Husband Marital Power (HMP), Wife Marital Satisfaction (WMS), Husband Marital Satisfaction (HMS), Husband Love Withdrawal (HLW), Wife Love Withdrawal (WLW), Husband Social Sabotage (HSS), Wife Social Sabotage (WSS), Husband Education (HE). \*\*\*p<.001, \*\*p<.05, \*p<.01

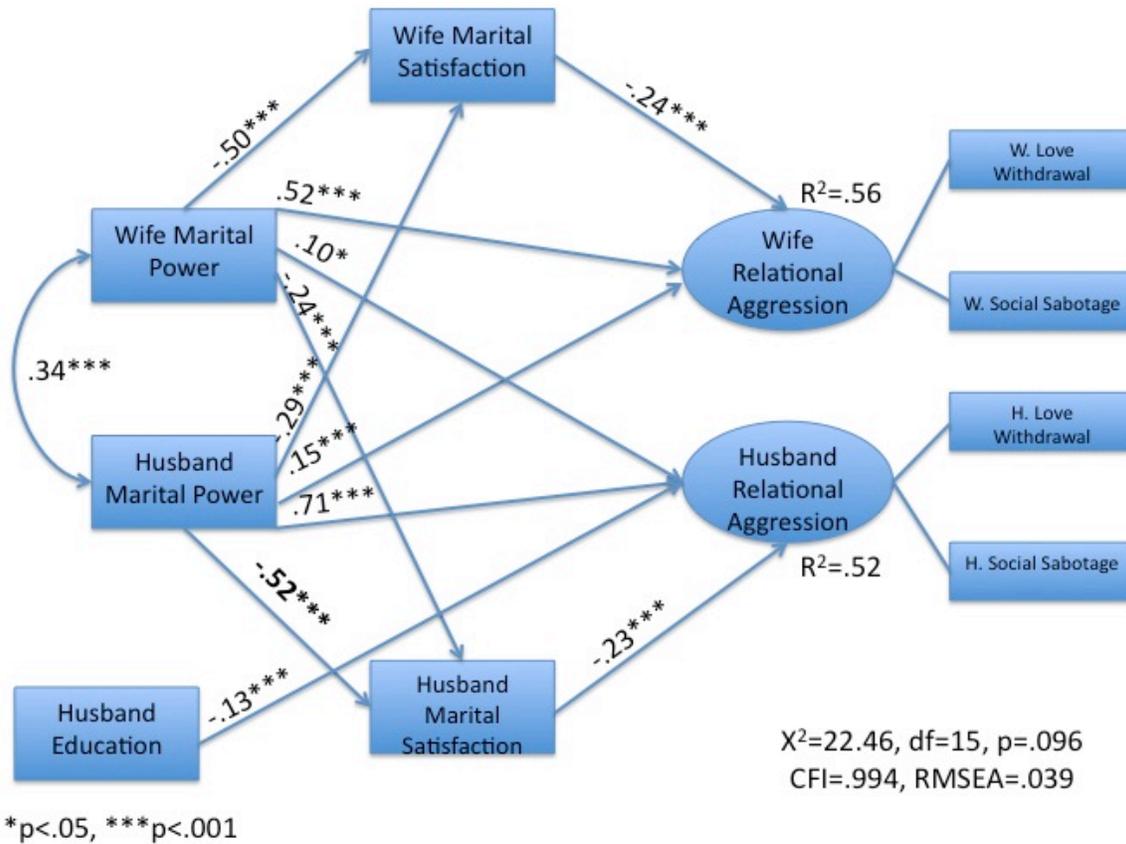
As indicated by the means in Table 1, wives tend to use more love withdrawal and social sabotage than their husbands (Love Withdrawal: Wife,  $M=2.81$ ,  $SD=1.16$ , Husband,  $M=2.49$ ,  $SD = 1.24$ ; Social Sabotage: Wife,  $M=1.53$ ,  $SD=.88$ , Husband,  $M=1.44$ ,  $SD=.78$ ). Husbands

perceive that they have more power in their relationships (Husband;  $M=2.30$ ,  $SD=.66$ , Wife;  $M=2.04$ ,  $SD=.65$ ) and are more satisfied in the relationship (Husband,  $M=5.36$ ,  $SD=1.01$ ; Wife,  $M=5.23$ ,  $SD=1.13$ ).

Results of paired t-tests showed that husbands and wives significantly differ in perceived power ( $t=-6.4$ ,  $p<.001$ ), indicating that husbands report more power in the relationship. Furthermore, relationship satisfaction differed significantly between husbands and wives ( $t=2.41$ ,  $p<.05$ ). There was a significant difference between husbands' and wives' partner reports of love withdrawal ( $t=-5.36$ ,  $p<.001$ ). This finding indicates that husbands report their wives using love withdrawal in the relationship more often than wives report their husbands using love withdrawal. Similarly, there was a significant difference between husbands' and wives' partner reports of social sabotage ( $t=-3.42$ ,  $p<.001$ ). This, as well indicates that husbands report their wives using social sabotage more often than wives report their husbands using social sabotage in the relationship.

Correlations of all the measured variables are found in Table 1. All of the variables in the model are highly correlated. For example, wife marital satisfaction is significantly negatively correlated with the use of wife love withdrawal. Analogous results are found for the husband.

**Figure 2. Structural Model Estimating the Impact of Marital Power and Marital Satisfaction on Husband and Wife Relational Aggression (Standardized Estimates shown; n = 325 couples)**



\*Note: Wife and Husband age, income and education were all entered into the model, however husband education was the only control that was significant and thus left within the model.

As shown in Figure 1, ten different hypotheses were tested. Figure 2 shows the resulting standardized beta coefficients for the respective paths related to the hypotheses. The fit of the model was good ( $X^2=22.46, df=15, p=.096$ ) as indicated by an insignificant chi square, a CFI of .994 and RMSEA of .039. The  $r^2$  for wife relational aggression was .56, and for husbands .52. The first hypothesis stated that there would be a significant negative relationship between wives' marital power and wives' relational aggression, and the second hypothesis stated that there would be a significant negative relationship between husbands' marital power and husbands'

relational aggression. Both hypotheses were rejected because the resulting Beta coefficients were positive and significant (Wives',  $B=.52, p<.001$ ; Husbands',  $B=.71, p<.001$ ). This finding is the opposite of what was hypothesized. That is, in this sample, the more power a partner had, the more they were likely to use relational aggression. The third hypothesis stated that there would be a significant negative relationship between wives' marital power and wives' marital satisfaction. This hypothesis was accepted ( $B=-.50, p<.001$ ). That is, the more power the wife reported, the less satisfied she was. The fourth hypothesis stated that there would be a significant positive relationship between husbands' marital power and husbands' marital satisfaction. This hypothesis was not supported. In fact, the findings were contrary to what was hypothesized. ( $B=-.52, p<.001$ ). That is, as with the wives, the more power the husband reported, the less satisfied he was. Hypothesis five and six stated that there would be a significant negative relationship between marital satisfaction and relational aggression for wives' and for husbands'. These two hypothesis were accepted (Wives',  $B=-.24, p<.001$ ; Husbands',  $B=-.23, p<.001$ ). For both husbands and wives, the more satisfied they were in their relationships, the less relational aggression they used. Similarly, when husbands and wives were less satisfied in the relationship, they were more likely to use relational aggression.

The remaining hypotheses looked at partner effects. Hypothesis seven was accepted. This hypothesis predicted a significant negative relationship between wives' marital power and husbands' marital satisfaction ( $B=-.24, p<.001$ ). This indicated that the more power the wife reported, the less satisfied the husband was. Hypothesis eight was also accepted and predicted similarly to hypothesis seven that there would be a significant negative relationship between husbands' marital power and wives' marital satisfaction ( $B=-.29, p<.001$ ). That is, the more power the husband reported, the less satisfied the wife was. The last two hypotheses were

related to the relationship between perceived marital power and the use of relational aggression. Hypothesis nine, predicting a significant positive relationship between wives' marital power and husbands' use of relational aggression, was accepted ( $B=.10, p<.05$ ). Lastly, hypothesis ten, which predicted a significant positive relationship between husbands' marital power and wives' use of relational aggression, was also accepted ( $B=.15, p<.001$ ). Thus, the more power the partner reported, the more likely the other partner was to use relational aggression.

Additionally, wife and husband age, income and education were used as control variables in the model. However, husband education was the only significant variable and thus the only variable included in the model ( $B=-.13, p<.001$ ). When husbands had a higher education level they used less relational aggression, this was not true for wives.

In order to test the strength of the mediation variable, marital satisfaction, the sobel method was used. Four paths were checked; the first was the wives' marital power through her marital satisfaction to her use of relational aggression. This path was significant ( $Sobel=2.52, p<.05$ ). The second path, which was also significant, was from the wives' marital power to the husbands' marital satisfaction and his use of relational aggression ( $Sobel=2.35, p<.05$ ). The third path was the husbands' marital power to the wives' marital satisfaction and her use of relational aggression which was significant ( $Sobel=3.37, p<.001$ ). Lastly, the path between husbands' marital power through his marital satisfaction to his use of relational aggression was also significant ( $Sobel=3.71, p<.001$ ). Therefore, one of the processes through which power may affect relational aggression is through its impact on marital satisfaction.

In summary, seven of the ten hypotheses were supported. The only hypotheses that were not supported were the first, second and fourth. The next chapter will offer explanations for

these findings, compare these results with previous literature and offer implications, as well as, clinical and research suggestions.

## Chapter 5 - Discussion

The aim of the present study was to answer several questions about marital power and the use of relational aggression with marital satisfaction as a mediating variable. We found, similarly to Carroll et al. (2010), that wives participate in more relational aggression (love withdrawal and social sabotage) than their husbands. However, husbands in our sample felt they had more power and were more satisfied in their relationships. Husbands reported their wives using love withdrawal and social sabotage more than wives reported their husbands using love withdrawal or social sabotage in the relationship.

Ten hypotheses were made as influenced by the literature on relational aggression, marital power and marital satisfaction. Since seven of the hypotheses were supported, we begin this chapter highlighting findings that contradicted predicted findings.

An important finding in this study, is that, contrary to the predictions in our first and second hypotheses, the more power that husbands and wives reported, the more likely they were to use relational aggression. This was contradictory to the literature that suggested that lower perceived power in the relationship will lead to a higher use of coercive techniques or influence strategies (e.g. relational aggression; Aida & Falbo, 1991; Gray-Little & Burks, 1983). We found that those with higher perceived power were more likely to use coercive techniques. Additionally, because the data is cross-sectional it is not possible to determine whether the use of relational aggression increases each partner's perception of the amount of power they have or whether the amount of power a partner perceives he or she has, increases the likelihood that he or she will use relational aggression.

We offer various possibilities for this finding. A majority of the marital power literature is dated, and therefore, it is possible that with the changing environment in marriage, the role of

marital power has also altered. Considering that the marital power literature was primarily conducted in the 1970s and 80s, it is possible that women's introduction into the workforce, and the resulting change in expectations for men and women of the role of women in society, may contribute to this change of ideal. Traditionally, men had more resource power in society because they were working and the women were at home, however once women began working they had more resource power as well. This change in society that has taken place since a majority of the marital power literature was conducted may have also changed the expectation of marriage to that of a more egalitarian relationship. This change in expectations of egalitarian relationships may have led both men and women who perceive they hold more power to use more relational aggression in the relationship, rather than using a coercive technique to gain power as the earlier literature suggests.

We can also look to the IPV literature for additional explanations for the findings that individuals with more power used more relational aggression. The IPV literature, as previously mentioned, notes a controversy. Some studies suggest that violence is used to gain power (e.g., Babcock, Waltz, Jacobson & Gottman, 1993), and other studies suggest that violence is about power and control and is used when someone feels they have more power and control because they can, and the use of violence subsequently maintains that power and control (e.g., Johnson, 1995). We predict that it is possible that relational aggression follows the same pattern. It may be that some people initially use relational aggression to gain power in the relationship, but one explanation for this rejected hypothesis is that it is also possible that those who feel they have power use relational aggression to maintain their power.

Additionally, it is possible that the measure of marital power used in this study, which includes items representing power as a resource and also power as a process, is correlated with

the measure of relational aggression, as the process aspect of marital power can appear similar to some aspects of relational aggression. Therefore, it is possible that these two measures may have some overlapping aspects affecting the outcome of the hypotheses, especially that of high perceived power leading to a greater use of relational aggression.

Also, it may be that people who have used relational aggression throughout their lives continue to do so because it becomes an effective way to get what they want in relationships. They use relational aggression to manipulate relationships and although it is unhealthy, it has worked for them in the past so they continue to use it, and the more they use relational aggression the more power they feel in the relationship. Thus, it is possible that those with perceived higher power originally received that power through manipulation techniques (i.e. relational aggression) and thus continue to use these techniques. This supposition may indicate that lower marital power was the originator to the use of relational aggression, but now 18 years into the marriage the partner has a greater sense of power in the relationship and thus continues to use the technique.

Another interesting contradictory finding we noted addressed the relationship between marital power and relationship satisfaction for husbands and wives. Although wives, as predicted, were less satisfied with their relationship when they reported more power, we expected opposite findings with husbands. The fourth hypothesis, which predicted a significant positive relationship between husbands' marital power and husbands' marital satisfaction was rejected. We found that those husbands who had more marital power were less satisfied. This finding is contrary to a vast majority of the marital power literature, which indicates that those relationships where husbands experienced more marital power were similar to those who

experienced egalitarian relationships, which had the highest marital satisfaction (Gray-Little & Burks, 1983).

Again, we offer an explanation of this finding through the potential changing perception in society that egalitarian relationships are more sought after than in the past. This study's findings of a negative relationship between the husband's perception of having the most power in the relationship and his level of satisfaction, may challenge the traditional patriarchal model of marriage, and may suggest that men may not be satisfied with holding the most power in the relationship as earlier research suggested.

The other results from this study support earlier research. As found in previous literature, both husbands' and wives' satisfaction in the relationship are related to lower use of coercive techniques such as relational aggression (e.g., Carroll et al., 2010; Lips, 1991; Frieze and McHugh, 1992). It appears that partners who are more satisfied in their relationships do not feel the need to use manipulation in the relationship. However, partners who are less satisfied in their relationships are more likely to use coercive techniques such as relational aggression.

The remaining hypotheses that looked at partner effects were all accepted. It is interesting that although both husbands and wives who perceived themselves as having more power in their relationship were less satisfied, but, as predicted, when their partners reported having more power than they did, they were also less satisfied. As found in the marital power literature, egalitarian relationships have the highest satisfaction therefore, any discrepancy in perceived level of power could lead to greater dissatisfaction for the spouses (Gray-Little & Burks, 1983).

The last two hypotheses predicted a significant positive relationship between one spouses' marital power and the other spouses' use of relational aggression. This finding

indicates that spouses who have higher perceived marital power also have spouses who use more relational aggression. Consistent with the reports of Balswick and Balswick (1995), “marital power is the relative ability of either spouse to influence the other” (p. 297), as such, spouses who have more perceived power in the relationship could potentially influence the use of coercive techniques (e.g. relational aggression) in the other spouse. For example, husbands who have wives that perceive themselves as having power in the relationship will be more likely to use love withdrawal and social sabotage with their wives and vice versa.

The accepted partner hypotheses brings to question why those that perceive themselves as having high marital power use more relational aggression, but when a spouse perceives their partner to have high marital power they too use relational aggression. We offer our explanations of the possible discrepancy through a look at the statistical analysis used in this study, as well as marital power. One of the benefits to using the APIM model while examining these hypotheses is that we are able to look at relational aggression while controlling for the spouses’ responses on power and satisfaction. For example, when we are looking at wives marital power we are controlling for the husband’s marital power. This allows us to further understand that differences between one persons perception of their own power may be different than their perception of their partners’ power. Therefore, the different perception could affect what they do when they perceive they have power in the relationship, and what they will do when they perceive their partner to have high power in the relationship.

Furthermore, there is a distinct difference between an individual’s own sense of power to define his or her boundaries and perceived power involving someone else. An individual may act differently considering his or her perceived power verses when that individual feels someone holds more power than they do in a relationship. Therefore, it is possible that in our sample, the

individual who feels he or she has high power uses relational aggression due to one of the explanations previously given, but it may also be that an individual who feels his or her partner has more power than he or she does also uses relational aggression in order to gain more power in the relationship.

Overall marital satisfaction was a significant mediating variable between marital power and the use of relational aggression. While there was a significant direct relationship between marital power and relational aggression for husbands and wives, relationship satisfaction partially mediated the relationship. Thus, while partners who perceived themselves as having a greater sense of power were more likely to use relational aggression, the more satisfied they were in the relationship the less likely they were to use relational aggression. Thus, when marital satisfaction is low, the likelihood of using relational aggression is higher. This finding is consistent with the literature on IPV and marital satisfaction, reporting a negative relationship between marital satisfaction and the use of IPV (Stith et al., 2007).

This finding is also consistent with previous research on relational aggression that shows those who use relational aggression have lower marital satisfaction (Carroll et al., 2010). Additionally, as found by Lips (1991), those who are less satisfied in their marriages are more likely to use more coercive power in their relationships. This indicates that those who are less satisfied may be more likely to use coercive techniques or relational aggression with their spouse. Similarly, those who are less satisfied in their relationships have also been found to use more coercion in their relationships (Raven et al. 1975). Therefore, marital satisfaction, consistent with previous literature, is a significant mediating variable.

## **Implications**

The findings of this study are generally consistent with previous research on marital power, marital satisfaction and relational aggression especially in the reporting of negative relationships between relationship satisfaction and relational aggression. However, the finding that husbands and wives who reported a high sense of perceived power were also less satisfied in the relationship calls into question much of the previous literature on marital power. These findings indicate that there is a need to update research on marital power in order to understand how the changing environment of marriage and the concept of power between spouses are evolving in marriage.

Additionally, we found that dissatisfaction in marriage is strongly linked to the use of relational aggression. Therefore, it is possible that the marital satisfaction, despite the perceived power in the relationship, is a prominent factor in the use of relational aggression. However, perceived marital power can affect the marital satisfaction for each spouse. Thus, additional research on the role of marital power and other variables on marital satisfaction, and how marital satisfaction impacts the use of relational aggression will be helpful in navigating the role of relational aggression in the marital relationship.

## **Implications for Future Research**

Future research should examine marital power. It is apparent that a greater understanding of marital power is vital in understanding how marital power affects marital satisfaction and the use of relational aggression. From this study's findings it appears that couples may perceive power differently from the way power was perceived in the past. However, because our study's sample came from individuals who were in middle adulthood (wives:  $M$  age=44.13,  $SD$ =5.54; husbands:  $M$  age=46.2,  $SD$ =6.23), it would be helpful to look at perceptions of power over time

using longitudinal data. In addition, more research on the role of marital power from various aged individuals would be helpful, especially because of the change in perception of marital power in the last 40 years. Future research on the current beliefs about marital power will be an important addition to understanding how marital power affects marital satisfaction.

Further detailed research on marital satisfaction and its affect on the use of relational aggression could potentially unfold the role marital satisfaction plays on the use of relational aggression in relationships. However, to understand marital satisfaction's role in relational aggression a greater understanding of relational aggression is necessary.

It is apparent from this study and previous studies conducted on relational aggression, that research on relational aggression in romantic relationships is in its infancy (Linder et al., 2002). The literature on relational aggression from early childhood through middle childhood and into adolescence has a strong foundation (Crick et al., 1999). However, the current study highlights the need for greater understanding of this phenomenon throughout the life cycle. In fact, Carroll et al. (2010) suggest the need for a theory that includes gender and development in relational aggression. This would allow further understanding of relational aggression from “toddlerhood through adult relationship development, coupling, and on into the later decades of life” (p. 328).

Previous research on relational aggression highlighted the negative impact it has on individuals and their relationships, and the high prevalence of this phenomenon. Negative individual effects have been found with every age group that has been studied (e.g., social, psychological and emotional difficulties, adjustment problems and marital instability). Additionally, in this study, relational aggression was shown to lower relationship satisfaction. It

seems clear that more research on relational aggression in adult intimate relationships is necessary.

One way to gain more information on relational aggression will be through diversifying samples for future studies. While this study contains one of the most diverse samples for relational aggression in romantic relationships, more diversity is necessary. Nelson et al. (2008) highlight this need in their findings by stating, “perceptions of norms for aggressive behavior might differ with inclusion of more diverse samples (more ethnic and religious diversity). Therefore, obtaining a more diverse sample could actually change our understanding of relational aggression” (p. 656). Carroll et al. (2010) suggest a need for more studies with samples representing lower socioeconomic status and lower education. Furthermore, Goldstein et al. (2008) recommend that future studies contain more diversity with race/ethnicity (Asian American or Native American), as well as sexual orientation (gay, lesbian and bisexual individuals). Furthermore, Carroll et al. (2010), suggest looking at couples right after marriage to see how relational aggression manifests itself at this point in transition. There are many diverse samples that need to be tested in the future to increase our understanding of this phenomenon.

Future research on relational aggression should not only include diverse samples, but should include longitudinal methodology, since most current studies are cross-sectional like this study. These are needed, “to determine developmental trajectories over time. Do partners increase their use of these strategies over time or do some partners try these strategies only to discover they do not get what they want from them and try something else” (Carroll et al., 2010, p. 327)? Furthermore, longitudinal studies would allow researchers and clinicians to recognize if relational aggression follows a similar trajectory as physical aggression, if relational aggression

dissipates or lessens with age, or if it increases with age and comfort in a relationship.

Longitudinal studies would also help us understand if relationship dissatisfaction leads to relational aggression or if relational aggression leads to relationship dissatisfaction.

In addition, a look at relational aggression in same sex relationships may expand our understanding of relational aggression. Is it possible that the increase of men's use of relational aggression as they age and become involved in romantic relationships is a result of more exposure to women's use of relational aggression and becomes learned behavior? If this is the case, does it mean that gay relationships use less relational aggression and lesbian relationships potentially use more relational aggression? A look at same sex relationships could expand the understanding of the use of relational aggression across gender in romantic relationships.

While this study has attempted to clear up some of the obscurity associated with assessment for relational aggression, further progress can be made. There is great need for solid, reliable and valid assessments that verify the true root of relational aggression, and the various types of behavior within relational aggression (Carroll et al., 2010). This study, along with only one other study (i.e., Carroll et al., 2010) has used partner reports while a majority of the other studies on relational aggression have used self-report questionnaires (e.g., Goldstein et al., 2008; Linder et al., 2002). Goldstein et al. (2008) and Linder et al. (2002) conducted studies in which self-report assessments were used for relational aggression in romantic relationships. They wondered if using partner reports would return similar negative findings. The study performed by Carroll et al. (2010) used partner reports and confirmed similar negative findings, thus indicating that both self-report and partner-report studies would report similar results. These authors, as well as the authors of this study, indicate the need for self-report and partner-report scales to be used in the same study.

Another way to increase the understanding of relational aggression could be by using new ways of gathering data, such as lab or in-home observation studies (i.e., Goldstein et al., 2008), or participant diary keeping (i.e., Nelson et al., 2008). All of these methods and new ways of gaining assessment would help fill in the gaps of missing information in relational aggression.

While more understanding of relational aggression is an important next step, it is also important to distinguish relational aggression as a distinct form of aggression in future studies. “Aggression does not necessarily need to be physical in order to have an impact” (Goldstein et al., 2008, p. 263). As mentioned previously, relational aggression has been found to be a distinct and separate type of aggression (Crick et al. 1999). However, it is important for relational aggression to be included in couple conflict studies as a distinct form of aggression, and should be a goal for future studies. In order to do this, relational aggression needs to be shown in more studies as a separate and distinct form of aggression in couples, with great negative impact. For example, Carroll et al. (2010) states, “indeed, a stronger case for including relational aggression in studies of couple conflict and aggression will be made when researchers can show that relational aggression is associated with marital outcomes over and above the variance accounted for by other types of conflict or aggression” (p. 327). Therefore, continued reference and inclusion of relational aggression in studies will potentially provide this evidence. Furthermore, adding relational aggression to physical and psychological aggression in various studies could lead to a better comprehension of aggression in relationships (Carroll et al., 2010).

In many ways future studies on relational aggression could literally change how couple conflict, aggression and communication are conceptualized. If relational aggression is a foundational component to couple conflict or communication then it has great potential for future

research and treatment. If relational aggression is the negative outcome of couple conflict or communication then treatment and tools can be provided. These tools will help people cope with these problems in a healthier, more productive way without the unhealthy and deflating effects which relational aggression provides.

Additionally, future studies may examine the prevalence of relational aggression in a more detailed manner. These studies could determine if relational aggression is a phenomenon that all marriages exhibit at some level. If so, what are the levels of relational aggression and is there a less harmful type of relational aggression? Carroll et al., (2010) asked, “are there marriages where relational aggression simply does not exist and, if so, how are they different from marriages where it does exist” (p. 327)? Therefore, understanding if relational aggression is either the root or the fruit of a couple’s problems could indicate if all couple relationships will exhibit relational aggression at some level or not (Carroll et al., 2010). This could further help to develop specific treatments. Finally, “the more we understand the nature and prevalence of aggression in the relationships... the more likely it will be that we can turn our knowledge into action and design ways to assist [individuals] as they navigate the challenges of successfully interacting with others and becoming responsible adults” (Nelson et al., 2008, p. 657).

### **Relevance for Marriage and Family Therapy**

There have been no studies to date suggesting treatment guidelines for addressing relational aggression. However, Linder et al (2002) states, “If researchers and practitioners want to understand potentially harmful behaviors within romantic relationships, relational aggression and victimization can no longer be ignored” (p. 83). The awareness of this phenomenon can provide new understanding for therapy and contains major therapeutic implications. With the findings of several studies indicating negative effects as a result of the use of, and victimization

by, relational aggression, it seems clear that family therapists need to address this issue in couples treatment.

However, clients may not come to therapy with relational aggression as a presenting problem. It would be more likely for clients to present in therapy with negative behavior such as alcohol abuse, impulsiveness, borderline personality features, bulimia (i.e., Werner & Crick, 1999), depression and couple distress. Yet, these problems could be related to relational aggression. Therefore, it is important that family therapists understand relational aggression so they can assess the problem appropriately. If future findings indicate that relational aggression is one of the foundational issues associated with marital problems, therapists should know about the phenomenon to provide the best treatment (Schad, Szvedo, Antonishak, Hare, & Allen, 2008).

In addition, greater awareness of the individual and couple factors which perpetuate the use of relational aggression can inform future treatment. Linder et al (2002) suggests that, “identifying the factors that lead to and maintain these damaging behaviors will inform clinicians and others working to improve the quality of individuals’ romantic relationships” (p. 83). Therefore, understanding these factors provides a starting point, or goal from which to begin the treatment of relational aggression and its associated symptoms. Furthermore, predictive factors could potentially indicate to the therapist a pattern of relational aggression in the relationship, which should be assessed and treated.

Therapist awareness of relational aggression in couple relationships can enhance couple treatment. Since relational aggression is a tool to manipulate relationships, the understanding that manipulation is present in a couple can inform the therapist of negative patterns present in the relationship. Comprehension of these negative patterns can help the therapist provide

effective treatment. This knowledge can inform the therapist of the importance of making messages overt and discussing the meaning behind messages of relational aggression. Therefore, helping the clients develop alternative ways to communicate important messages in a healthy way could eliminate several negative symptoms. Furthermore, a clear understanding of relational aggression and the intent to manipulate can provide the therapist with critical knowledge on how to approach treatment. Also, it can inform the therapist to directly discuss messages that are trying to be communicated to the other partner via relational aggression.

### **Limitations**

The limitations for this study are similar to many of the studies that have previously been conducted on relational aggression. First, this study was cross-sectional; therefore it is not possible to know if high levels of relational aggression lead to low levels of relationship satisfaction or if spouses who are dissatisfied use more relational aggression. Furthermore, we do not know if low perceived marital power leads to high satisfaction or if low satisfaction is indicative of high perceived marital power. Lastly, we are unsure if high perceived marital power in one spouse leads to low marital satisfaction in the other, or if satisfaction in one spouse is a result of low perceived marital power in the other. Therefore, without having longitudinal data we are unsure of the direction between the factors studied.

Second, this study is limited because it is lacking both self-report and partner-report data for relational aggression. Currently, the data is only partner-report data for relational aggression. Having both partner and self-report data would give a clearer picture of the relational aggression used in the relationship. Furthermore, data was conducted via paper/pencil only, which could limit our understanding of the relational aggression used within the relationship.

Third, while this study has a more diversified sample than most other romantic relationship relational aggression studies, the diversity could be increased. While the current study is fairly representative of a national sample in religion and race, it contains a sample that is economically more privileged and more educated than the national average and does not have a diversity of sexual orientation.

### **Conclusion**

While there is substantial literature on relational aggression in children and adolescents, the literature on relational aggression in adults and couple relationships is still in its infancy. Furthermore, there are many future directions for the continued study of relational aggression in romantic relationships. Understanding the factors that influence the use of relational aggression such as marital power and marital satisfaction facilitates a greater understanding of the manipulative technique. Additionally, understanding that marital satisfaction is a primary indicator as to whether or not relational aggression will be used in a marriage is important for clinical implications and future research.

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## **Appendix A - Origins and Differences Between Types of Covert Aggression**

Within covert aggression there are distinguishing elements to each term or label (indirect, relational, social). Some of these elements may be minor in one context, but important in another. With this being the case, it is difficult to definitively categorize all elements of covert aggression. For example, relational aggression can include the actions of ignoring, withdrawing, threatening, and gossiping. Relational aggression can be either confrontational or nonconfrontational. Therefore, relational aggression incorporates an emphasis on manipulation within a relationship. However social aggression is nonconfrontational and involves the social community (Xie et al., 2002), thus indicating that social aggression may be wider spread, but more secretive in nature. Lastly, indirect aggression can include seclusion and rejection (Feshbach, 1969). However it may also lack a clearly articulated target or victim(s) that may or may not be clearly confronted.

All three definitions (relational, social and indirect aggression) include similar meanings and acts (Archer, 2004), but each has a different emphasis. This is especially true for indirect and relational aggression. These two terms maintain considerable overlap in meaning (Archer, 2004; Archer & Coyne, 2005). Due to varying definitions cited in the literature, some authors have stated that relational aggression is simply a new identifier for indirect aggression used a decade before (i.e., Bjorkqvist et al., 2001). However, indirect and relational aggression are distinct. For example, indirect aggression can be seen as seclusion and rejection without a clearly confronted target. Whereas relational aggression, while potentially using seclusion and rejection, has a specific target in order to manipulate a relationship.

The first articles to describe covert aggression as indirect aggression were authored by Buss (1961) and Feshbach (1969). Feshbach (1969) further labeled manifestations of indirect aggression as “responses which result in pain to a stimulus person through rejecting and excluding him (p. 250).” In the covert aggression literature there are still authors that continue to use this term, primarily because it was the ‘first’ identifier of covert aggression (e.g., Bjorkqvist et al., 2001).

Despite the few differences between the two types of covert aggression (indirect and relational), one important distinction leads to our use of the term relational aggression, as opposed to indirect aggression, in this study. Originally, indirect aggression emphasized the aggressor not being known to the victim (Bjorkqvist et al., 1992). This essentially does not fit within the couple relationship because the spouse, in this context, is the aggressor. Thus, since the aggressor is known by the victim, the relational aspect of the aggression is emphasized, and therefore, “relational aggression” is the appropriate term when investigating these types of behaviors within couple interactions.

However, despite this important distinction, there is little difference between the types of behavior indirect aggression and relational aggression describe (Archer & Coyne, 2005). For example, the behaviors are similar regardless of the target being known or unknown. Crick et al. (1999) go further to say, “whereas indirect aggression focuses on the nonconfrontational nature of hostile behavior, relational aggression includes all hostile acts in which relationships are the vehicle of harm, regardless of the direct or indirect nature of the behaviors” (p. 78).

Therefore, in definitional terms, relational aggression depicts a larger scope than the term indirect aggression. This is the case because relational aggression is the only term that describes

actions that can be both covert and overt in nature. This means that the victim and perpetrator are known to each other (Archer & Coyne, 2005).

## **Appendix B - Informed Consent (wave 2)**

### **Consent to be a Research Subject**

#### **Introduction**

This study is being conducted by members of the Flourishing Families Project, with researchers from Brigham Young University. You were selected as a participant family because of your participation in the Flourishing Families project last year.

#### **Procedures**

Participation in this study involves an in-home interview that will last approximately 2 ½ hours. In this interview we will explain the study to you and give you a series of surveys for you and your child to complete. These surveys will ask you questions about your family, how you relate with each other, your family goals, and other aspects of your family life. We will begin with the informed consent and then move on to the survey questionnaires. The surveys will take approximately 1 hour and 50 minutes for parents and about 50 minutes for the child to complete. You will work on the questionnaire for 30 minutes and then we will proceed with video discussion tasks like last year. The video discussion tasks will last about 25 minutes (with the interviewer leaving the room) so we can better record your responses. Once the discussion tasks have been completed, the remainder of the time will be used to complete the questionnaires. Also, as part of your participation, we are asking that you sign a release form to provide the Flourishing Families Project with access to your child's school record information (e.g., grades, truancy, and attendance). Local school districts will only release your child's information with parental consent. Your child's school record information will remain confidential and will only be used in conjunction with the purpose of the study outlined here.

#### **Risks/Discomforts**

There are minimal risks for participation in this study. However, you may feel emotional discomfort when answering questions about personal beliefs or family interaction patterns. When participating in the video-taped activities, it is possible that you may feel uncomfortable when talking in front of others. The researchers will not be in the room during your family discussions.

## **Benefits**

There are no direct benefits to participants. However, it is hoped that through your participation researchers will learn more about family life and be able to assist educators and professionals who serve families.

## **Confidentiality**

All information provided will remain confidential and will only be reported as group data with no identifying information. All data, including questionnaires and tapes/transcriptions from the discussion activities, will be kept in a locked storage cabinet and only those directly involved with the research will have access to them. After the research is completed, the questionnaires and tapes will be destroyed.

## **Compensation**

Participants will receive a gift card or check for completing the questionnaire. Your family will receive a gift card or check totaling \$100 dollars. During the interview you may decline to answer questions; however, both partners and the child must complete at least 80% of the interview to receive the gift card or check compensation.

## **Participation**

Participation in this research study is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw at any time or refuse to participate.

## **Questions about the Research**

If you have questions regarding this study, you may contact Dr. Randal D. Day at 801-422-6415, [day@byu.edu](mailto:day@byu.edu) or Dr. Roy Bean at 801-422-2349, [roy\\_bean@byu.edu](mailto:roy_bean@byu.edu).

If you have questions you do not feel comfortable asking the researcher, you may contact Dr. Christopher Dromey, Ph.D., Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects, Brigham Young University, 133 TLRB, Provo, UT 84602, USA; [Dromey@byu.edu](mailto:Dromey@byu.edu); 801-422-6461.

## CONSENT SIGNATURES

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I have read, understood, and received a copy of the above consent and desire of my own free will to participate in this study.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

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

*Parent*

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

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

*Parent*

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## RESEARCH STATEMENT

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I have discussed the above points with the child. It is my opinion that the participant understands the risks, benefits, and procedures involved with participation in this research study.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

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

*Interviewer*

## **Appendix C - Love Withdrawal**

Variable Values:

1, 2 = Not at all true; 3, 4, 5 = Sometimes true; 6, 7 = Very true

Higher scores indicate higher perceived relational victimization

1. Ignores me when she/he is angry with me.
2. Withholds affection or sex from me when he/she is angry with me.
3. Has threatened to leave me to get me to do what she/he wants.
4. Doesn't pay attention to me when she/he is mad at me.
5. Gives me the silent treatment when I hurt his/her feelings in some way.
6. Has intentionally ignored me until I give in to his/her way about something.

## **Appendix D - Social Sabotage**

Variable Values:

1, 2 = Not at all true; 3, 4, 5 = Sometimes true; 6, 7 = Very true

Higher scores indicate higher perceived relational victimization

1. Has gone “behind my back” and shared private information about me with other people (extended family, friends, neighbors).
2. Gets other people to “take sides” with her/him and gets them upset with me too.
3. Has tried to damage my reputation by sharing negative information about me to other people (extended family, friends, neighbors).
4. Tries to embarrass me or make me look stupid in front of others.
5. Has spread negative information about me to be mean.
6. Has threatened to disclose negative information about me to others in order to get me to do things he/she wants.

## Appendix E - Marital Power

Variable Values:

1 = Strongly disagree; 2= Disagree; 3= Neutral; 4= Agree; 5= Strongly agree

1. My partner tends to discount my opinion.
2. My partner does not listen to me.
3. When I want to talk about a problem in our relationship, my partner often refuses to talk with me about it.
4. My partner tends to dominate our conversations.
5. When we do not agree on an issue, my partner gives me the cold shoulder.
6. I feel free to express my opinion about issues in our relationship.
7. My partner makes decisions that affect our family without talking to me first.
8. My partner and I talk about problems until we both agree on a solution.
9. When it comes to money, my partner's opinion usually wins out.
10. I feel like my partner tries to control me.
11. When it comes to children, my partner's opinion usually wins out.
12. It often seems my partner can get away with things in our relationship that I can never get away with.
13. I feel like I have no choice but to do what my partner wants.
14. My partner has more influence in our relationship than I do.
15. When disagreements arise in our relationship, my partner's opinion usually wins out.

## Appendix F - Relationship Satisfaction

Variable Values: 1= Very strongly disagree; 2= Strongly disagree; 3= Disagree;  
4= Agree; 5= Strongly agree; 6= Very strongly agree

1. We have a good relationship.
2. My relationship with my partner is very stable.
3. Our relationship is strong.
4. My relationship with my partner makes me happy.
5. I really feel like part of a team with my partner.

Respondents were told to rate the degree of happiness in their relationship. Responses were based on a 10-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*very unhappy*) to 10 (*perfectly happy*). The middle point, “happy,” represents the degree of happiness which most people get from relationships and is represented numerically as falling between 5 and 6. The scale gradually increases on the right side for those few who experience extreme joy in their relationships and decreases on the left side for those who are extremely unhappy.