Conflict, Negative Emotion, and Reports of Partners’ Relationship Maintenance in Same-Sex Couples

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The literature on relationship maintenance has focused primarily on the beneficial outcomes of maintenance, and, as a result, little is known about relational processes that may interfere with reports of partners’ maintenance. The authors examine how daily conflict influences individuals’ reports of their partners’ maintenance, and how a constructive communication style buffers this influence by reducing negative emotion on conflict days. In a daily diary study of 98 same-sex couples in romantic relationships, they found that the negative association between conflict and reports of a partner’s relationship maintenance was mediated by negative emotion. That is, there was an indirect effect by which daily conflict was associated with higher levels of daily negative emotion, which was associated with reports of lower levels of partners’ relationship maintenance. This indirect effect was moderated by couples’ overall level of constructive communication such that higher levels diminished the degree to which couples experienced negative emotion on days with episodes of relational conflict. The authors discuss results in the context of interpersonal theory and provide implications for clinicians and practitioners.

Keywords: relationship maintenance, conflict, negative emotion, constructive communication, couples

The study of romantic relationships centers upon the analysis of relational features that promote or hinder successful relationship development. Researchers have identified relationship maintenance as an essential component of healthy relationships defined as the cognitive and behavioral efforts that partners put forth to promote the continuation, stability, or health of the relationship (Dindia & Canary, 1993). A recent meta-analysis (Ogolsky & Bowers, 2013) confirmed that five factors of maintenance (i.e., positivity, openness, assurances, social networks, and sharing tasks) identified in previous work (Canary & Stafford, 1992; Stafford & Canary, 1991) were related to relationship quality in a number of important ways. Maintenance was associated with several positive relationship outcomes, including, satisfaction, commitment, control mutuality, love, and liking. Furthermore, these data revealed that individuals’ reports of partners’ maintenance predicted relationship quality more strongly than individuals’ self-enacted maintenance behaviors. Thus, for the benefits of maintenance to operate fully in a relationship, individuals must recognize the maintenance efforts that their partners are putting forth. Until recently, the literature on relationship maintenance, however, has focused on the beneficial correlates of maintenance, and as a result, little is known about relational processes that may interfere with reports of partners’ maintenance (Canary, Stafford, & Semic, 2002; Ogolsky, 2009).

One area ripe with potential is relationship conflict because the link between the manner in which partners handle conflict and relationship quality and stability has been well established (for reviews, see Amato, 2010; Driver, Tabares, Shapiro, & Gottman, 2002; Karney & Bradbury, 1995). More specifically, the constructive or destructive patterns of partners’ cognitive activity (e.g., thought patterns, expectations, and attributions), behavioral exchanges, and negative emotional reactivity surrounding the management of their conflict play critical roles in the prediction of relationship distress versus success over time (e.g., Clements, Stanley, & Markman, 2004; Durtschi, Fincham, Cui, Lorenz, & Conger, 2011; Gottman & Levenson, 1992; Gottman et al., 2003; Levenson, Carstensen, & Gottman, 1994). Yet to our knowledge, no research has examined how the management of conflict may influence reports of partners’ maintenance.

Identifying the relational processes that influence reports of partners’ maintenance affords researchers a greater understanding of how maintenance promotes relationship satisfaction and stability, and may be implemented into interventions designed to prevent dissatisfaction and dissolution (e.g., PREP; Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 2010). Needless to say, the far-reaching and well documented consequences of relationship distress and dissolution that include individual distress for partners (Liu & Umberson, 2008) and negative effects for children over the life course (Amato & Sobolewski, 2001; for a review, see Amato, 2010) provide sufficient reason for exploring the processes that interfere with reports of maintenance. Thus, the goals of this article are to elucidate how daily relationship conflict influences individuals’ reports of partners’ maintenance and to explore how a constructive
communication style may moderate this influence by reducing or preventing the negativity of emotions on days with conflict.

**Relationship Maintenance**

Relationship maintenance serves to promote the continuation, stability, and/or health of relationships by means of targeted cognitive and behavioral efforts (Dindia & Canary, 1993). These efforts can be classified as strategic (i.e., done explicitly to maintain the relationship) or routine (i.e., everyday activities that may implicitly serve a maintaining function; Dainton & Stafford, 1993). The research on relationship maintenance is predicated on the idea that romantic partners must actively work to facilitate positive relationship development. Relationship maintenance is clearly a multifaceted construct that includes a number of strategies important to relationship functioning such as positivity (the degree to which a partner is cheerful and positive), openness (self-disclosure and relational conversation), assurances (behaviors that focus on commitment or faithfulness), social networks (the use of friends and affiliations for relationship development), and sharing tasks (the equality of tasks that a couple might face; Stafford & Canary, 1991).

Relationship maintenance provides unique information about a relationship because it indicates adaptability and responsiveness to relationship changes. That is, relationship maintenance strategies promote commitment (Ogolsky, 2009) and assist in repairing relationships in distress (Dindia & Baxter, 1987). Moreover, reports of relationship maintenance are related to higher relationship satisfaction and other positive relational variables (e.g., love; Ogolsky & Bowers, 2013). Despite the robustness of these findings, there is considerable variability in reports of relationship maintenance both within and between couples. In fact, reports of relationship maintenance have been shown to vary on a daily basis (Ogolsky, 2009). Given the tremendous variability in reports of maintenance, it is important to understand the processes that may influence these reports.

**Relationship Conflict, Reports of Partners’ Maintenance, and Negative Emotion**

Conflict is a relational process that may influence individuals’ reports of their partners’ maintenance. As interdependence theory posits, due to the fact that partners’ outcomes are intertwined, when relationship conflict occurs, an individual’s sequence of behavior (i.e., intrachain sequence) is interrupted by the partner, and individuals’ expectations may be violated triggering physiological arousal and a variety of negative emotions (Berscheid, 2002). For example, individuals may feel anxious, sad, or angry depending on how they interpret their partners’ behavior and intentions (Caughlin, Scott, & Miller, 2009; Feeney, 2004; Fincham, Bradbury, & Grych, 1990). Thus, negative emotions engendered by conflict may be associated with reports of partners’ maintenance and play a collective role in interfering with reports of partners’ maintenance.

Although the way that negative emotion is associated with reports of partners’ behavior is unknown, we argue that the literature from several disparate areas provides some guidance as to the underlying processes that may be operating. For example, *sentiment override* refers to the process by which individuals’ reports and evaluations of their partners’ behavior are colored by their overall affect toward the partner rather than their partners’ current behaviors (Weiss, 1980). Individuals with negative sentiment override interpret their partners’ neutral or positive behavior in negative ways. Empirical findings support this association in that spouses in distressed marriages reported their partners’ pleasurable behavior at a lower hourly rate than spouses in nondistressed marriages; however, trained in-home observers rated pleasurable behaviors at equivalent frequencies for the two groups (Robinson & Price, 1980). These data suggest that the overall negative affect that characterized these distressed marriages influenced individuals’ reports of their partners’ behavior such that spouses whose marriages were characterized by higher levels of negative sentiment either failed to notice some of the pleasurable behaviors or mislabeled these behaviors as negative. Thus, on days with conflict, negative sentiment override is one process that may influence individuals’ reports of their partner’s maintenance attempts.

Another explanation of how negative emotions may influence reports of partners’ maintenance behavior is based on the idea that when an individual reaches an extreme point of arousal, multiple cognitive functions break down. A large body of evidence shows that when physiological arousal during conflict reaches the level of alarm or defense in response to a “blend of strong emotions” (Gottman, 1999, p. 79), referred to as the fight or flight syndrome, or diffuse physiological arousal (i.e., DPA), individuals experience extreme limitations in their ability to process information, take in new information, use active listening, engage in effective problem solving, and apply a sense of humor to conflict situations (for a review, see Gottman, 2011). The breakdown of these cognitive functions may extend beyond the immediate conflict episode to affect the assessment of subsequent behavior and may make it less likely that individuals report maintenance attempts by their partners. In addition, intense negative arousal and affective reactions over periods of time result in the experience of escalating negative emotions (Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998). Taken together, these data show that negative emotionality on days with conflict plays an important role in shaping individuals’ reports of partners’ behavior. Thus, we predict that the occurrence of conflict will have a negative effect on individuals’ reports of partners’ maintenance (H1), and that this effect will be mediated by individuals’ negative emotions (H2).

Although we have argued that the existing literature supports a model in which negative emotion mediates the association between conflict and reports of partners’ maintenance, the correlational nature of past findings does not rule out the possibility of several other plausible models. For example, it is possible that conflict mediates the association between negative emotion and reports of partners’ maintenance. A reverse model may also be possible whereby reports of partners’ maintenance is associated with negative emotion, which is, in turn, associated with conflict. To provide a more stringent analysis of the interrelation between conflict, negative emotion, and reports of partners’ maintenance, we test each of these alternative models in addition to the primary hypotheses. We also note a third plausible model is that partners actually engage in less maintenance when they experience negative emotions. Given the past meta-analytic findings that perceptions of relational maintenance were more strongly related to relational outcomes than enacted maintenance (see Ogolsky & Bowers, 2013), we focused exclusively on perceptions of partners’
maintenanc. Thus, a test of this third model was beyond the scope of this study.

**Communication Style as a Moderator**

A large body of research has shown that the way in which conflict is handled, particularly the communication behaviors that relationship partners exchange, is linked to the experience of emotion surrounding conflict (Driver et al., 2012; Fruzzetti & Iverson, 2004; Levenson & Gottman, 1983; Levenson et al., 1994; Markman, Renick, Floyd, Stanley, & Clements, 1993). Individuals who exhibit a more constructive communication style experience less intense negative affect surrounding conflict. A constructive communication style includes partners engaging in greater problem-solving initiation and techniques, more perspective taking, gentler start-up (i.e., softer and less harsh initiation of conflict discussions), fewer negative behaviors (i.e., criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling), and less negative escalation (e.g., one partner responds to the other’s negative behavior with a more negative behavior; Markman et al., 1993).

Constructive communication styles are believed to be linked to less negativity and better emotional management surrounding conflict, in part, because partners behave in ways that validate the others’ perspective; that is, they demonstrate acceptance without attempts to change how the other feels (Fruzzetti & Iverson, 2004). For example, experimental data revealed that individuals who received validating messages during a stressful task exhibited a reduced stress response over time evidenced by lower levels of negative affect, heart rate, and skin conductance. Those who received invalidating messages, however, displayed a prolonged stress response that increased across the length of the stressful task (Shenk & Fruzzetti, 2011). These data imply that communication styles that include mutual expression of feelings that are validated by partners will reduce individuals’ negative emotional reactivity across the course of the conflict, and thus, result in greater reports of partners’ maintenance behaviors following conflict. In other words, a constructive communication style should buffer the negative impact of conflict on reports of partners’ maintenance because a constructive communication style serves to diminish the negative emotions surrounding conflict. Thus, we predict communication style will moderate the indirect effect of conflict on reports of partners’ maintenance via negative emotion (H3).

**Maintenance and Conflict in Same-Sex Relationships**

A growing body of research suggests that in many respects, relationship functioning operates similarly for same- and different-sex couples (Kurdek, 2004, 2006). For example, sexual satisfaction predicts relationship well-being similarly for women across couple type (Holmberg, Blair, & Phillips, 2010). Attachment insecurity, both of individuals and their partners, was related to poor relationship functioning (i.e., satisfaction, commitment, trust, communication, and problem intensity) in ways similar to different-sex couples (Mohr, Seltelman, & Fassinger, 2013). Further, social support from a partner both directly and indirectly (i.e., buffering the effect of stress) affects relationship quality across couple type (Graham & Barnow, 2013). Despite these similarities, however, careful examination of these data reveal ways in which the unique contextual factors same-sex couples face subtly affect relationship functioning. For example, whereas social support received from family members benefited relationship quality of different-sex couples, family support was unrelated to relationship quality in same-sex couples and friend support and relationship quality differed across couple type (Graham & Barnow, 2013).

The social and cultural context is important for how conflict and relationship maintenance behaviors are connected and moderated by conflict management styles. Many same-sex couples face numerous challenging contextual factors including (a) minority stress, or internalized homophobia coupled with an expectation of experiencing discrimination, rejection, and violence related to sexual orientation (Meyer, 1995, 2003; Otis, Rostosky, Riggle, & Hamrin, 2006); (b) fewer social norms and greater relationship ambiguity governing their relationships (Green & Mitchell, 2008; Patterson, Ciabattari, & Schwartz, 1999); and (c) the lack of universal legal recognition of their unions or marriages, which affects individuals’ perceptions of the legitimacy of unions and barriers to relationship dissolution (Fingerhut & Maisel, 2010; Lannatti, 2007).

When the cultural context is less supportive for establishing and maintaining satisfying close relationships, partners need to turn to each other for support in handling the fluctuations of relational processes. Same-sex couples are likely to be in such a position because they may not be supported by their families of origin or others (Green & Mitchell, 2008; Kurdek, 2004, 2006; Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007). Instead, they may turn to their peers, developing strong “families of choice” (Dewaele, Cox, Van den Bergh, & Vincke, 2011), or partners for social support (Graham & Barnow, 2013; Kurdek, 1991, 2004, 2006) as these individuals may be more likely than family members to understand the unique experiences of same-sex couples and consequently, be better equipped to provide adequate social support (e.g., matching the provision to the specific type needs of individuals; Graham & Barnow, 2013). Thus, the way that same-sex couples’ closest relationships function is extremely salient. It is in this context that the way in which conflict is handled has its greatest power to disrupt relationship functioning. For these reasons, it is important to explore the effects of conflict on the relationship maintenance process in same-sex couples.

Although the majority of studies on maintenance have focused on heterosexual relationships, a few studies have examined maintenance in same-sex relationships (Gutierrez, 2004; Haas & Stafford, 2005; Ogolsky, 2009). For example, greater commitment predicted increases in maintenance behaviors for relationships of longer length (Ogolsky, 2009). Haas and Stafford (2005) found that partners in same-sex relationships used similar maintenance strategies as heterosexual married partners, particularly shared tasks (Haas & Stafford, 2005). Moreover, higher relationship quality was associated with greater openness and shared tasks (Gutierrez, 2004). No study to date, however, has explored the factors that may interfere with reports of maintenance among same-sex couples. This study will address the paucity of research that examines maintenance processes in same-sex couples.

**Method**

**Sample**

We sampled 98 same-sex couples (N = 196) of which, 39 couples were male and 59 were female. The individuals ranged in age from 18 to 60 with an average age of approximately 33 years.
(M = 33.10, SD = 12.68). The majority (83%) of the sample was White and the majority of individuals (96%) characterized their relationship as seriously dating rather than casually dating (4%), and 80% reported currently living with their partner. The sample was highly educated with 94% having at least some college education. Length of relationships varied from 1 to 30 years with an average of approximately 5 years (M = 5.17, SD = 7.97).

Procedure

All procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board and participants provided informed consent prior to beginning the study. We recruited couples via email from organizations nationwide that support same-sex couples. Organizations included but were not limited to campus clubs, online newsletters, electronic list services, support groups, and social groups. We instructed participants to access the study’s website if interested in participating. Eligible participants were at least 18 years of age and in a relationship. Qualified participants were asked to provide their partner’s email address at which time research staff emailed instructions and a unique ID number. A total of 118 individuals contacted the website and were eligible for participation; however, 20 of the participants either failed to provide their partner’s email address or had a partner who was unwilling or unable to participate. Thus, these individuals were not included in the study.

We collected data via an Internet-based system designed for our study. Participants entered their unique ID number and password to access the survey, and we instructed each partner in the couple to complete all parts of the survey individually. After login, each participant filled out an initial questionnaire containing demographic information and several relational scales. Following the completion of the initial questionnaire, we instructed participants to log on to the website at the same time for each of 14 consecutive days to complete a daily measures questionnaire. The daily measures were the same each day and consisted of a series of measures designed to capture the events that took place over the last 24 hours. A total of 71% of the sample completed the entire 14-day diary, and 85% completed at least seven of the 14 days resulting in a total of 2,439 days of data. Each subject was paid $20 at the completion of the study.

Measures

Daily reports of relationship maintenance. To examine daily reports of maintenance behaviors, we used Ogolsky’s (2009) measure, which is a 20-item scale that was generated in a sample of same-sex couples. Each participant was asked to assess whether their partner had engaged in each of the listed maintenance activities (e.g., “My partner was fun to be with;” “My partner listened carefully to what I had to say;” “My partner was optimistic and cheerful”) using a dichotomous scale (0 = no, 1 = yes). The items were summed to create a total daily score for each day (α = .98 in this sample).

Daily conflict. To assess daily conflict, we used the first stem question from the Daily Inventory of Stressful Events (DISE; Almeida, Wethington, & Kessler, 2002). The DISE is a semistructured interview that contains seven stem questions regarding the occurrence of stressful events within various relational contexts.

For the current study, the first question was adapted to capture relationship specific conflict and read, “In the past 24 hours, did you have an argument or disagreement with your partner?” Participants completed this question each day by indicating whether or not a conflict with their partner had occurred (0 = no, 1 = yes).

Daily negative emotion. We assessed daily negative emotion with the three-item Negative Feelings Scale (Ridley, Ogolsky, Payne, Totenhagen, & Cat, 2008). This scale measures the degree of negative feelings of anger, anxiety, and sadness over the course of the day (e.g., How anxious did you feel in the last 24 hours?). Participants responded on a 5-point, Likert-type scale ranging from 0 (not at all) to 4 (very strongly) to each item on each day (α = .77 in this sample). We calculated the daily negative emotion score with the average of the three items.

Constructive communication. To measure constructive communication, we administered the Communication Patterns Questionnaire (CPQ; Christensen & Sullaway, 1984) at the first time point as part of the initial questionnaire. The CPQ is a 35-item measure that assesses stable communication patterns among dyads during three stages of conflict: when a conflict arises (stage 1), during an argument or discussion of some relationship problem (stage 2), and after an argument or discussion of some relationship problem (stage 3). Participants responded to each item on a 9-point, Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (very unlikely) to 9 (very likely) as part of the initial questionnaire. The CPQ has been used to examine a wide variety of communication patterns but of principal interest in our study was an absolute measure of constructive communication. Following the original scoring procedures, we created the constructive communication subscale by subtracting the three verbal aggression items (blame, threat, and aggression) in Stage 1 from the three mutual problem-solving items (discussion, expression, and negotiation) in Stage 2 (Christensen & Sullaway, 1984). We calculated the average score across partners because constructive communication was conceptualized as a stable, couple-level variable and because partners’ scores on the CPQ were highly correlated, r(96) = .89, p < .001. To afford more clarity in the interpretation, we grand mean centered the scale for analysis (M = 0.00; SD = 8.22; range = −28.47 to 9.53; α = .80 in this sample).

Covariates. We included four covariates in our analyses: age, gender, relationship length, and relationship satisfaction. Age was reported in years and gender was dummy coded (0 = female, 1 = male). Relationship length was measured in years and averaged across partner reports. We assessed daily relationship satisfaction by asking participants, “How satisfied were you with your partner in the last 24 hours?” Participants responded on a 5-point, Likert-type scale ranging from 0 (not at all) to 4 (very strongly) on each day.

Results

Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations are presented in Table 1. Given the nonindependence inherent in these data, bivariate correlations are presented for descriptive purposes only because they include multiple sources of variance. On average, both male and female participants reported a conflict with their partner on one out of every 5 days (470 total conflicts). Report of partner relationship maintenance was negatively correlated with conflict and negative emotion and positively correlated with constructive
communication. We hypothesized that daily relational conflict would be negatively related to daily partners’ reports of relationship maintenance, but that this effect would be mediated by the presence of daily negative emotion. We further hypothesized that differences in the direct and indirect effects of conflict would be explained by a couple’s overall level of constructive communication (i.e., a moderated mediation). Because our data were nested (repeated assessments of partners within couples), we followed the procedures for multilevel mediation (and moderated mediation) specified by Bauer, Preacher, and Gil (2006). Multilevel modeling is necessary because traditional approaches for testing mediation assume that the causal effects are fixed (vs. random) across Level 2 units. To test the first hypothesis, we used a model known as 1→1→1 mediation, so named because all three paths are specified at Level 1, and thus may have random effects (i.e., variability across Level 2 units).

To test our initial model, the Level 1 equations were as follows:

\[
\text{Negative Emotion}_{ij} = d_{ij} + a_j(\text{Conflict}_{ij}) + e_{ij} \\
\text{Report of Maintenance}_{ij} = d_{ij} + b_j(\text{Negative emotion}_{ij}) + c_j(\text{Conflict}_{ij}) + e_{wij}
\]

where \(d_{ij}\) and \(d_{ij}\) are the intercepts, \(a_j\) is the path from daily conflict to daily negative emotion, \(b_j\) is the path from daily negative emotion to daily report of relationship maintenance, and \(c_j\) is the direct path from daily conflict to daily report of relationship maintenance. We estimated random effects for each of the coefficients, which were allowed to covary, and we specified the residual variance structure as advocated by Bauer and colleagues (2006). We included age, relationship satisfaction, relationship length, and gender as covariates in all models. We also specified a model that tested whether gender and/or relationship satisfaction moderated any of the three pathways. Neither gender nor relationship satisfaction moderated any of the pathways so we removed these interactions from the final models. To handle missing data, we estimated models using the restricted maximum likelihood algorithm, which provides unbiased estimates of the complete data given the incomplete data (Bryk & Raudenbush, 1992).

The results of our first model are shown in Table 2. The pathway of daily conflict to daily negative emotion \((a_j)\) was positive and significantly differed from zero. The pathways to daily reports of relationship maintenance \((b_j\) and \(c_j\), respectively) were negative and significantly differed from zero. In addition, daily relationship satisfaction was positively related to daily reports of partner maintenance and negatively associated with daily negative emotion. We also found a gender difference in that male couples reported fewer partner maintenance behaviors than female couples.

Although we hypothesized same-day effects, one of the recommendations for testing mediation models is that the variables are assessed in a temporal sequence. Thus, we wanted to test for the presence of lagged effects. To do so, we specified the same model as above with one modification. We lagged conflict by 1 day so that we could examine the effects of conflict experienced on Day 1 with subsequent negative emotion and reports of partners’ maintenance on Day 2, while still testing for same-day effects. The results of the analysis showed that neither of the lagged effects was significant, whereas the same-day effects remained significant and in the same direction as the original model. Moreover, the lagged model showed significantly worse model fit than the original model (-2 log-likelihood = 12,019.29; \(\chi^2(1) = 2,714.55, p < .001\)).

We also wanted to test the possibility of two other plausible models before moving on to the next step in the analysis. We ran each model two times using the same approach as above; one including only same-day effects and one including both lagged and same-day effects. The first alternative model examined whether daily conflict mediated the association between daily negative emotion and daily reports of partners’ maintenance including all of the same covariates as the model presented in Table 2. Both the same-day (-2 log-likelihood = 12,244.34; \(\chi^2(1) = 2,939.60, p < .001\)) and the lagged (-2 log-likelihood = 11,758.30; \(\chi^2(1) = 2,453.56, p < .001\)) models fit the data significantly worse than our original model. We next specified a reverse model in which daily negative emotion mediated the association between daily reports of partner relationship maintenance and daily conflict with all of the same covariates. The same-day (-2 log-likelihood = 12,923.73; \(\chi^2(1) = 3,618.99, p < .001\)) and lagged (-2 log-likelihood = 14,333.92; \(\chi^2(1) = 5,029.18, p < .001\)) models both reduced model fit significantly. Given the significant decrease in model fit for each of the alternative models, we retained our original model and proceeded to the next step of the analysis.

Although indirect effects were originally calculated in a stepwise approach (e.g., Baron & Kenny, 1986), current recommen-
values equal to the grand mean, 1
interval (Bauer et al., 2006). We conditioned the indirect paths at
significance of the conditional indirect effect or calculate a confidence
indirect paths at meaningful values of the moderating variable,
testing moderated mediation is to condition one or both of the
direct effect, it follows that the indirect effect should also vary
as a function of the moderator. The recommended approach for
testing moderated mediation is to condition one or both of the
indirect paths at meaningful values of the moderating variable,
calculate the conditional indirect effect, and then test the signifi-
cance of the conditional indirect effect or calculate a confidence
interval (Bauer et al., 2006). We conditioned the indirect paths at
values equal to the grand mean, 1 SD above, and 1 SD below the
grand mean level of constructive communication (Aiken & West,

Hypothesis 3 stated that the indirect effect of daily conflict on
daily reports of partner relationship maintenance through daily
negative emotion would differ as a function of overall constructive
communication. The conditional indirect effect was significant
at 1SD below the grand mean −1.47 (SE = 0.18; 95% CI
[−1.83, −1.14]), the grand mean −1.14 (SE = 0.17; 95%
CI = −1.47, −0.80), and 1 SD above the mean −0.80 (SE = 0.16;

| Table 2 |
|---|---|---|
| Fixed and Random Effect Estimates for the Meditational Model Predicting Reports of Partner Relationship Maintenance |
| Effect | Estimate | SE | p |
| Intercept negative emotion, d_n | .89 | .07 | <.001 |
| Gender | .26 | .16 | .10 |
| Relationship length | −.01 | .01 | .57 |
| Age | −.01 | .02 | .84 |
| Relationship satisfaction | −.59 | .04 | <.001 |
| Intercept report of partner relationship maintenance, d_m | 16.31 | .21 | <.001 |
| Gender | −1.64 | .37 | <.001 |
| Relationship length | −.01 | .03 | .80 |
| Age | −.01 | .02 | .79 |
| Relationship satisfaction | 1.85 | .09 | <.001 |
| Conflict → negative emotion, a_i | 1.94 | .16 | <.001 |
| Negative emotion → report of partner relationship maintenance, b_j | −.70 | .07 | <.001 |
| Conflicted report of partner relationship maintenance, c_i | −.61 | .29 | .01 |
| σ^2 | 7.33 | 2.71 | <.001 |
| σ^2_m | .84 | .92 | <.001 |
| Model deviance (−2 log-likelihood) | 9304.74 |

Note. All coefficients are unstandardized.

dations suggest that these effects be tested with the product of the
unstandardized paths and tested for significance by means of
bootstrapping a 95% confidence interval (CI; see Preacher &
Hayes, 2004). Thus, the average indirect effect is a function of the
product of the unstandardized a and b path estimates and the
covariance between the random effects of these two estimates.
The average total effect is a function of the average indirect effect
and the unstandardized c path estimate. Using these formulae and
bootstrapping with 1,000 resamples, we estimated the average
indirect effect of daily conflict on daily reports of relationship
maintenance as −1.27 (SE = 0.18; 95% CI = −1.62, −0.93) and
the average total effect as −1.88 (SE = 0.17; 95% CI = −2.22, −1.55). Thus, approximately 68% of the total effect of
daily conflict on daily reports of partner relationship mainte-
nance was mediated by daily negative emotion. Moreover, the
sizable standard errors in the average indirect and total effects
suggest that there was meaningful variability across couples.

To assess the differences in the strength of these effects, we
specified a moderated mediation model by adding couples’ overall
communication pattern to the Level 2 model. We first tested for
moderation of the direct paths. Constructive communication sign-
ificantly moderated the a path (B = 0.33, SE = .17, p < .05), but
not the b (B = 0.01, SE = .02, p < .94) or ‘c’ (B = 0.01, SE = .03, p = .89) paths. To probe this interaction, we examined daily
conflict as a predictor of daily negative emotion at the mean, 1 SD
above, and 1 SD below the mean levels of overall constructive
communication (see Figure 1). Given the significant moderation of
the direct effect, it follows that the indirect effect should also vary
as a function of the moderator. The recommended approach for
testing moderated mediation is to condition one or both of the
indirect paths at meaningful values of the moderating variable,
calculate the conditional indirect effect, and then test the signifi-
cance of the conditional indirect effect or calculate a confidence
interval (Bauer et al., 2006). We conditioned the indirect paths at
values equal to the grand mean, 1 SD above, and 1 SD below the

Figure 1. Conflict predicting negative emotion as a function of constructive communication.
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pret both neutral and in some cases, positive behavior of partners
interactions with partners negatively colors their interpretation of
ride. That is, individuals’ pervasive negative affect in conflicted
levels of constructive communication were associated with a
weak association between negative emotion and partner’ percep-
tions of maintenance behaviors.

Interpersonal theory posits that conflict occurs when differences
between partners interfere with or disrupt behavior (Kelley, 1979).
As a result of this disruption, partners experience increases in
negative arousal and negative emotion (e.g., anger, anxiety, sad-
ness, hurt; Caughlin et al., 2009) surrounding conflict (Berscheid,
2002). Individuals’ specific cognitions and emotions surrounding
conflict depend heavily on their interpretations of partners’ behav-
ior and motives and are believed to shape subsequent attention to
or interpretation of partners’ behavior and motives (Caughlin et al.,
2009). Our data show that greater negative emotionality experi-
enced on days with episodes of conflict is associated with indi-
viduals’ reports of partners’ maintenance. The literature suggests
three plausible explanations for this association.
The first possibility is that conflict that is consistently managed
poorly creates a situation that promotes negative sentiment over-
ride. That is, individuals’ pervasive negative affect in conflicted
interactions with partners negatively colors their interpretation of
partners’ behavior, regardless of the actual behavior that occurs.
For example, individuals with negative sentiment override inter-
pret both neutral and in some cases, positive behavior of partners
(i.e., as measured by objective observers) as negative (Robinson &
Price, 1980). Thus, negative sentiment override operates such that
individuals enter conflicted interactions with negative expectations
(i.e., of partners’ behavior and intentions as well as the interac-
tion), individuals’ negative affect and arousal prior to interactions
reflects this anticipation of negativity, and individuals perceive
partners’ behavior surrounding conflict in ways consistent with
this anticipated negativity (Fincham, Garnier, Gano-Phillips, &
Osborne, 1995; Levenson & Gottman, 1983, 1985). Although this
past work focuses on how negative sentiment influences conflict
behavior specifically, we contend that the same rationale would
apply to our findings in that negative sentiment override may
influence individuals’ reports of partners’ daily maintenance. Al-
though we were unable to test this explanation directly, we tested
whether relationship satisfaction moderated any of the analytic
pathways and found no significant effects suggesting that negative
emotion operates similarly regardless of the specific relational
climate.

Thus, a more plausible explanation for why negative emotion
influences reports of partners’ maintenance is that negative phys-
iological arousal breaks down cognitive functions, which inhibits
individuals from noticing or attending to partners’ positive behav-
ior. Individuals overwhelmed by physiological arousal and nega-
tive emotion surrounding a conflict are unable to process new
information, think creatively, problem solve, or use humor in
problem discussions (Gottman, 2011). Thus, in the interactions
surrounding and following conflict, individuals with more arousal
and negative emotionality may fail to notice, attend to, recognize,
or label partners’ behavior as maintenance.

A third plausible explanation is that on days with negative
emotion, partners actually perform less maintenance. Although
findings from a meta-analysis showed that perceptions of rela-
tional maintenance were more strongly related to relational out-
comes than enacted maintenance (see Ogolsky & Bowers, 2013),
it is nonetheless possible that individuals may perform less main-
tenance on days with conflict or negative emotion. Because of
limitations of our data, however, we were unable to perform direct
tests of individuals’ enactment of maintenance or physiological
responses so we recommend that future research examine which of
these mechanisms may be at play. Our results clearly indicate that
episodes of conflict are associated with a negative emotional cli-
mate that hampers reports of a partner’s relationship mainte-
nance. This negative emotional climate, however, differed as a
function of communication style.

A large body of research shows that the manner in which
conflict is managed, or a couple’s style of communication, is
linked to the emotional experiences of partners. Characterized by
more positive behavioral and cognitive conditions surrounding
conflict, a constructive communication style serves to limit the
psychological arousal and negative emotionality of conflict (Gott-
man et al., 1998; Markman et al., 1993; Shenk & Fruzzetti, 2011).
Couples with less negative arousal and emotionality surrounding
conflict are better equipped to recognize each others’ attempts at
humor, for example, as well as other positive behaviors. Our data
add to this body of research by showing that the couple’s degree of
constructive communication moderated the indirect effect of nega-
tive emotion on reports of partners’ maintenance. Although we
were unable to test this association longitudinally, given the pleth-
ora of studies that demonstrate reports of partners’ maintenance
are related to relationship quality and stability, it is crucial to
identify mechanisms of interference in order to intervene.

Our results suggest that interventions aimed at preventing rela-
tionship distress need to focus on improving communication skills
surrounding conflict (e.g., PREP programs teach communication
skills), and more specifically, these communication skills should
include techniques for improving emotional management. Our data
support and extend the body of literature on conflict and emotion
(e.g., Fruzzetti, 2006; Gottman, 1999; Markman et al., 2010; Siegel,
2010) by identifying a new piece of the puzzle, that is, on
days with conflict, negative emotion is associated with fewer
reports of partners’ maintenance behaviors but the effect of nega-
tive emotion is buffered by a more constructive communication
style. Furthermore, our data suggest that interventions could benefit from a stronger emphasis on teaching individuals to practice attending to partners’ positive behavior. In our study, the routine tasks of maintenance, because they are often subtle, may be viewed as neutral (rather than positive) behaviors unless partners are actively working to create positive sentiment override. That is, partners must apply conscious effort toward developing a positive (vs. negative) mindset, in order to perceive their partners’ positive behaviors.

The need to manage conflict constructively with regard to noticing partners’ positive behaviors may be particularly salient for same-sex couples who rely heavily on partners for social support and face unique challenges. It is unclear, however, if our findings reflect a universal pattern of conflict processes, one that corresponds to a growing body of literature directly examining processes in same- and different-sex samples (e.g., Kurdek, 2004, 2006), or is a pattern unique to same-sex couples. Future studies should test these hypotheses with a sample of different-sex couples.

As with all studies, we had several limitations that warrant consideration. Our analyses lend stronger support for our predicted model than two alternative models: that (a) daily conflict mediates the association between daily negative emotion and daily reports of partners’ maintenance behaviors, and (b) daily negative emotion mediates the association between daily reports of partner relationship maintenance and daily conflict. Given the correlational nature of these data, however, causal explanations cannot be ruled out entirely. Despite examining cross-lagged models, our final models were based upon concurrent data, which can bias tests of mediation. We also used a single item to measure conflict and relationship satisfaction. Limitations of single-item measures have been documented but we chose to include this measure in order to limit participant burden in an intensive repeated measures design. Our measure of relationship maintenance focused on individuals’ reports of partners’ maintenance rather than one’s own enactment, which limited our ability to test for differences between self and partner reports and may be biased by the reporter. This limitation of the data also precluded us from ruling out the possibility that on days with conflict, partners enacted fewer maintenance behaviors. We measured negative emotion for the whole day rather than in response to a specific conflict, which limited our ability to determine the temporal sequence. The sample in the study consisted exclusively of same-sex couples who were primarily European American and highly educated, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to those who are demographically similar. We studied participants over a relatively short period of time, which may have limited our ability to capture infrequent events. Lastly, several of our measures relied upon the same reporter, which may have limited our ability to test for differences between self and partner reports and may be biased by the reporter. This limitation of the data also precluded us from ruling out the possibility that on days with conflict, partners enacted fewer maintenance behaviors. We measured negative emotion for the whole day rather than in response to a specific conflict, which limited our ability to determine the temporal sequence. The sample in the study consisted exclusively of same-sex couples who were primarily European American and highly educated, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to those who are demographically similar. We studied participants over a relatively short period of time, which may have limited our ability to capture infrequent events. Lastly, several of our measures relied upon the same reporter, which may have resulted in shared method variance. Despite the limitations, our study is the first that identifies mechanisms that interfere with reports of partners’ maintenance and highlights the skills critical to coordinated relationship maintenance.

References


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