An examination of conflict in developing relationships

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AN EXAMINATION OF CONFLICT IN
DEVELOPING RELATIONSHIPS

by

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Bachelor of Science
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
1996

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

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ABSTRACT

An Examination of Conflict in Developing Relationships

by

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Conflict is an unavoidable component of interpersonal relationships. The manner in which relational partners manage conflict is likely to change over the developmental course of the relationship. Additionally, the masculine or feminine attitudes an individual holds at the time of conflict impact the type of conflict strategy he or she will employ.

A review of literature demonstrated a need for research in the area of gender communication and conflict. This thesis explored how conflict behaviors and degree of relational intimacy are mediated by masculine and feminine attitudes. Survey research was conducted to determine if males and females reported significantly different masculine and feminine attitudes at the time of conflict and to determine if the degree of relational intimacy affected one’s preferred conflict management strategy.

Results showed no difference between men and women and no difference
between less developed and more developed relationships. Rather, it was found that men and women in less developed relationships show stronger androgynous attitudes at the time of conflict than masculine or feminine attitudes. Findings indicated the need for further investigation of androgyny and its influence on relational development.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ...................................................................................................................................... iii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ........................................................................................................... vi

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION ................................................................................................. 1
  Relational Stage Models ................................................................................................... 3
  Conflict in Relationships ................................................................................................. 9
  Verbal Behavior .............................................................................................................. 15
  Nonverbal Behavior ........................................................................................................ 24
  Conclusion ......................................................................................................................... 28

CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGY .................................................................................................. 32
  Sample ................................................................................................................................. 32
  Instrument ......................................................................................................................... 32

CHAPTER 3: RESULTS ................................................................................................................ 37
  Demographics ..................................................................................................................... 38
  Reliabilities ......................................................................................................................... 39
  t-test for Equality of Means ............................................................................................... 40
  Correlations ......................................................................................................................... 42

CHAPTER 4: DISCUSSION ........................................................................................................ 47

APPENDIX I: INSTRUMENT ...................................................................................................... 53

APPENDIX II: HUMAN SUBJECTS PROTOCOL ................................................................... 65

REFERENCES ................................................................................................................................. 67

VITA .................................................................................................................................................. 73
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Conflict is a part of everyday life. It is inextricably linked to the experience of human interaction and may best be understood through communication. Wood (1982) noted that "communication constitutes human relationships. It is through talk that persons define themselves and their relationships and through talk that definitions once entered into are revised over the life of a relationship" (p. 75). Changes over relationship definitions are likely to precipitate conflict as couples come to learn about each other and create expectations for the relationship. As a relationship germinates, individuals get to know about each others' opinions, attitudes, backgrounds, and vulnerabilities by sharing information. Information may also be gleaned about the other through an arduous process of trial and error in which participants gain knowledge about the partner by violating his or her expectations and dealing with the consequences that follow. Research suggests when individuals previously unknown to one another become acquainted they engage in a fairly predictable pattern of self-disclosure. The initial topics prospective partners discuss tend to be superficial and neutral in nature (Knapp & Vangelisti, 1996; Wood, 1982). Beginning stages of a relationship are plagued by uncertainty and doubt which only begin to dissipate after mutual regard and a degree of
commonality have been established. Research has shown that "communication in relationships developing toward greater intimacy may also reflect more options in the way a given idea or feeling is presented" (Knapp, Ellis & Williams, 1980, p. 266). Consequently, relationships which have achieved greater levels of intimacy may not experience conflict in the same manner as their less mature counterparts as couples may have a larger repertoire for expressing their feelings. The effects of conflict on mature relationships may not be as detrimental since the couple has most likely agreed upon rules for managing and expressing conflict.

The purpose of this thesis was to examine the link between conflict behaviors and degree of relational intimacy. It was hypothesized that the longer individuals are in a relationship the better equipped they are to deal with the inevitability of conflict because of the idiosyncratic rules and norms they have devised for their relationship. Conversely, couples in the early stages of a relationship may hold stereotypic attitudes of how men and women should behave in conflict since they have not achieved consensus or agreement on the roles each person is to perform. Although the vast majority of studies reveal the impact of gender on communication is not significant, conflict has not been looked at extensively as a mediating factor (Canary & Hause, 1993). Cupach and Canary (1995) argued when the conflict variable is considered in relation to sex differences that, "...given the conceptual correspondence between sex stereotypes and general approaches to managing conflict, it is possible that conflict is one domain of behavior wherein sex differences remain robust" (p. 234). Yet, it is also possible that these sex differences diminish over time. The study of conflict according to intimacy level is important since research demonstrates that couples able to constructively negotiate conflict decrease the
incidence of it (Lloyd & Cate, 1985). Interpersonal relationships are essential for the health and psychological well-being of humans; effective conflict management may allow individuals greater enjoyment of their relationships thereby further increasing the benefits of human interaction.

Relational Stage Models

Researchers have long sought to explain general principles that guide relationships while simultaneously accounting for the unique interactions that arise between individual couples. Examples of this include research on dialectic processes (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996), couple types (Fitzpatrick, 1988), and self-disclosure (Altman & Taylor, 1994). A number of models have been advanced to explain the communication behaviors characteristic of couples at different stages in their relationships. The following section reviews several stage models in order to explicate how communication has been conceptualized in terms of relationship development.

Wood (1982) coined the term relational culture to demarcate progressions made in intimacy development. She defined relational culture as a unique and "... private world constructed and sustained by partners in a relationship. Relational culture arises out of communication and becomes an increasingly central influence on individual partners' ways of knowing, being, and acting in relation to each other and the outside world" (p. 75). Thus, the culture each couple forms is unique and serves to affect behavior within and outside of the given relationship. As relationships develop, relational culture allows individuals to define themselves in terms of the relationship and make changes to their identity. Wood claims relational culture constitutes the hallmark of
intimacy. She identifies seven states which signal relationship building and maintenance. These states generally correspond with those proposed by Knapp and Vangelisti (1996). Individuals comprise the first state. In this state, people ascertain the qualities they find appealing in a potential partner and assess their goals for intimacy. The second state is invitational communication. Here, partners interact for the first time and communicate in order to reduce uncertainty; these exchanges are informational and superficial. In state three, explorational communication, partners attempt to discover if they are similar enough to share a relational culture. State four, intensifying, occurs when individuals determine if they share enough similarities to combine their separate worlds and create a joint identity. This is accomplished by regarding one’s partner as distinct from others in one’s social world and agreeing upon a term to describe the intensity of the bond. Partners then self-disclose a variety of information to each other, not all of which is favorable. Finally, the couple engages in role-taking in order to share the experiences of the other. Wood asserts that role playing and self-disclosure are critical to developing a shared culture. State five is revising communication. In this state, partners acknowledge each other’s flaws, refine and agree on the roles that each will play and decide to what extent to dedicate themselves to the future of the relationship. If this state is managed by both partners, communication functions to “clarify perceived problems or sought changes, to negotiate exchanges between partners for ‘fair rules,’ to resolve conflicts in interests, preferences and to provide feedback on attempts to enact revisions in rules and roles” (p. 80). State six, bonding communication, consists of a public or private event in which the partners promise their lives to one another and settle on a joint identity. Navigating communication is the seventh state. It
entails adapting to inevitable changes in the relationship and maintaining relational functioning by using communication to redefine and renegotiate relational culture. This state is the only one not accounted for in Knapp and Vangelisti’s model.

Knapp and Vangelisti (1996) developed a model of interaction in relationships which characterizes the stages of communication behaviors typical of couples from their initial meeting through relationship termination. Their model is primarily representative of the behaviors that occur between heterosexual couples who voluntarily pursue a relationship with one another and it focuses on the couple to the exclusion of their larger social network. Classifying communication stages in this model requires assessment of the frequency of behavior and the perceptions of the participants. Knapp and Vangelisti (1996) concede that their stages overlap; thus, in order to identify the stage a couple belongs to one must consider “the proportion of one type of communication behavior to another. This proportion may be the frequency with which certain communication acts occur, or proportion may be determined by the relative weight given to certain acts by the participants” (p. 33). These authors also claim that observable behaviors and the perceptions of the individuals involved help to constitute an interaction stage.

The five stages of coming together will be reviewed here so as to illustrate the differences in behaviors that might be expected of couples as their relationships progress. **Initiating** is the first interaction stage. It is characterized by attempts to open the channels of communication and to reduce uncertainty about the other interactant. Participants use impression management strategies to appear likeable to the other person. This stage is similar to Wood’s (1982) first two states, individuals and invitational communication, since it involves attending to the other person and making
communication attempts. The experimenting stage occurs once individuals have begun to communicate and begin to seek previously unknown information. Knapp and Vangelisti note that people in this stage usually wish to discover the other person’s name, rank and serial number; the relationship is casual and commitments to it are limited. Most relationships settle at this stage. This stage corresponds with Wood’s explorational communication as the information gained by partners determines whether they have enough in common to share a relational culture. The intensifying stage is indicated when partners become aware of their closeness and reveal personal information to one another; they become vulnerable by letting the other know the extent of their investment in the relationship. The following verbal behaviors denote an intensifying relationship: informal forms of address, use of the pronoun “we”, exchange of gifts and development of private language, use of verbal shortcuts relating to past experiences, frank communication about partner commitment to one another, and partners help each other discover their individual identities. Partners are also able to substitute nonverbal actions for words. When intensifying, couples face the precarious task of combining their personalities while continuing to learn about one another at the same time. One can imagine the difficulties dealing with conflict would present at this stage. Wood’s state of the same name reflects a similar increase in intimacy marked by partners’ creation of a joint identity.

The integrating stage is marked by a seeming convergence of the partners’ personalities. Partners at this stage believe their relationship is unique. They begin to be regarded as one unit in their social circles and exchange objects such as rings or pictures to reflect their pairing. Knapp and Vangelisti (1996) also cite the following behaviors as
indicative of this stage: physical intimacy and penetration of body parts, increased empathy and ability to predict the other’s behavior, claiming common property, and routinization of schedules and body rhythms. Couples may use an object or person outside of the relationship to solidify its functioning. For example, a couples’ love of hiking may cement their commitment to the relationship. The empathy component in this stage signals Wood’s (1982) revising communication state since empathy is required for partners to engage in role-taking and decide which roles each person should perform. Finally, the researchers refer to bonding as “the institutionalization of the relationship” (p. 40). It may occur at any relationship stage and is characterized by a public event involving a contract. Consequently, communication between the partners often involves discussion of promises made in the contract. This stage is distinguished from the others because it has the potential to alter the dynamics of the relationship as it makes the union difficult to dissolve and provides a framework against which to judge the actions of the partner. The bonding communication state proposed by Wood is defined in the same manner as this stage.

Knapp and Vangelisti (1996) designate guidelines explaining movement through the aforementioned stages. The authors note that individuals may move relatively quickly through the early stages and that “highly personal information, characteristic of the more intimate stages, comes out slowly and acts as a governing agent” (p. 57) determining whether the couple will move on to the next stage. Further, they state movement is generally systematic and sequential since information gained in one stage is often required to progress to the next. Movement may be forward, backward or within the same stage but it is always to a new place. This last tenet attests to the irreversible
nature of communication indicating couples can never truly start over once a certain level of intimacy has been achieved.

These models provide a useful framework for understanding the transitory characteristics of communication through relationship progression but fail to consider the role of conflict in relational development. As those in developing relationships acquire greater knowledge of the other through communication, it would follow that their expanded understanding would have implications for conflict management. Knapp and Vangelisti (1996) alluded to this point when they stated “people interested in developing a positive relationship generally avoid conflict (which might elicit high costs or simply provide no reward) until their relationship has a sufficient reward reservoir to manage such conflict” (p. 56). Thus, in order for conflict to be salient in a relationship, the partners must be at a stage where the benefits of being in the relationship outweigh the costs or where the relationship is rewarding in and of itself. Research has suggested sex differences may be prominent in men’s and women’s conflict behaviors (Cupach & Canary, 1995). Couples in a marginally intimate relationship who are unaccustomed and unequipped to manage conflict may be inclined to adopt stereotypical attitudes toward the sexes when conflict arises since they do not have the history to develop a unique set of rules for their relationship. Conversely, more intimate relationships will likely manage conflict in a manner which relies less on stereotypic attitudes because these couples have developed their own unique relational culture, increased their interdependence, and withdrawn from the social world. Relational models of communication provide valuable information about behaviors indicated by relational stage which can be viewed as the degree of intimacy between partners. However, since
stage models are descriptive instead of prescriptive, no measure exists for classifying individuals into stages on the basis of their behaviors. Consequently, other measures must be used in order to determine the degree of intimacy in relationships (e.g., Fitzpatrick & Winke, 1979; Knapp et al., 1980; Lloyd & Cate, 1985).

Conflict and Relationships

Not every person or every couple manages conflict in the same way. While certain individuals may regard conflict as something to be avoided, others may thrive on problematic interactions. How one approaches conflict is likely to be affected by situational factors, personal disposition, and degree of interdependence with involved parties (Graziano, Campbell & Hair, 1996; Sternberg & Soriano, 1984; Witteman, 1992). Communication researchers have defined intimacy as "intellectual, emotional, and/or physical closeness" (Adler, Rosenfeld, Towne & Proctor II, 1998, p. 424). Relational conflict has been described as the presence of incompatible goals between partners which results in fewer mutual rewards for the involved parties (Rolloff, 1987). The present study sought to determine in what manner the degree of intimacy in a relationship would affect the partners’ ability to manage conflict. Research demonstrates that relationships suffer when individuals avoid discussing conflict. Furthermore, constructive behaviors tend to improve conflict outcomes whereas destructive behaviors accomplish the opposite (Cloven & Rolloff, 1991). Communicating effectively in conjunction with using constructive conflict management strategies assists couples in achieving greater satisfaction in their relationships.

Witteman’s (1988) research demonstrates that the conflict strategies partners
employ have the ability to indicate their satisfaction with the relationship and their feelings toward their partner. The author examined the relationship between conflictual communication and perception. Subjects in this study consisted of male and female college students who were instructed to reflect on an interpersonal problem they had experienced and how they reacted to it. Subjects were given an instrument to assess how they conceptualized the problem in terms of comparison of the problem to others which had occurred in the relationship, recognition of the nature of the problem-related goal, awareness of uncertainty about the problem situation, attribution of cause for the problem, and arousal of feelings for the other person. They also completed an instrument designed to classify their communication style as integrative, distributive, avoidant or indirect. According to the author, integrative communication “involves messages exhibiting high initiation, high search, and low negative affect” whereas distributive communication “represents messages classified as high initiation, low search, and high negative affect” (Witteman, 1992, p. 258). Talking openly about one’s feelings in a conflict and seeking information on the partner’s stance is an example of integrative behavior. Examples of distributive behavior include insulting, blaming, threatening, and showing negative feelings toward one’s partner.

Results of Witteman’s 1988 study showed distributive communication was strongly related to negative feelings for the partner whereas integrative communication was related to perceptions of relationship uniqueness. Integrative communication was positively related to perceptions of uniqueness, goal importance, goal mutuality, and causal attributions to the environment. These factors are indicative of highly committed relationships. It is understandable that couples who have integrated their lives will share
common goals which both partners deem important and that their relationship will function more smoothly if they blame the source of conflict in their relationship on external factors. Conversely, distributive communication related positively to negative feelings for the other and causal attributions to the other. Thus, engaging in this type of communication causes an individual to feel that his or her partner is responsible for the conflict and to become affectively negative toward him or her. A developing relationship may be prone to experiencing distributive behaviors since the partners are uncertain about the other’s commitment to the relationship and since norms for dealing with conflict are in the process of being negotiated.

While the integrative and distributive conflict styles are comprised of characteristics strongly indicative of relationship stage, indirect and avoidant styles do not seem as stringently aligned to a certain intimacy level. Yet it is likely these styles are favored by persons in relationships of negligible intimacy because of the uncertainty component apparent in each style. Indirect communication showed positive associations with perceptions of other and relationship uncertainty, causal attributions to the relationship and environment, and negative feelings for the other. Avoidant communication was positively associated with causal attributions to the relationship and uncertainty about the other, the relationship and the goal-path. Respondents in Witteman’s study reported a significant decrease in how much they valued the relationship after the problem arose, illustrating the detrimental impact conflict can exert on relationships. It was also found that “people tend to avoid gathering information rather than seeking information when they perceive high levels of problem-related uncertainty” (Witteman, 1988, p. 353). This finding points to the developmental stage of
the relationship. Couples with a history of managing problems will be less likely to avoid conflict but the opposite behavior can be expected of intensifying couples who possess minimal relational history.

A study exploring the link between attributions, conflict strategies and competence outcomes found that partners agree most on perceptions of distributive behaviors followed by perceptions of avoidant behaviors and integrative behaviors, making distributive acts more salient to conflict management (Canary & Spitzberg, 1990). Indeed, research has shown the presence of destructive acts have a greater impact on couple functioning than constructive ones and that the attributions one makes about his or her partner's conflict style, destructive or constructive, affects the health of the participants and overall relationship satisfaction (Rusbult, Johnson & Morrow, 1986). Canary and Spitzberg (1989) found when one is enacting a conflict behavior his or her partner makes a judgement of competence based on that behavior. Accordingly, subjects viewed their partners as more competent when they used integrative tactics and less competent when viewed as using distributive or avoidant tactics. These findings are important considering the strong associations between competence judgements and relational quality and intimacy. Additionally, in studies subjects reported feeling more successful at achieving their goals when employing integrative behaviors (Canary & Spitzberg, 1990). Thus, the destructive consequences of distributive behaviors extend beyond the conflict episode into other facets of the relationship. Integrative behaviors, in contrast, enable both the actor and partner to feel better about the relationship and each other.

Gender differences may also be a factor inherent in conflict management.
Canary, Cunningham and Cody (1988) sought to determine the impact of goals, gender and locus of control on interpersonal conflict. Their review of literature indicated that women tend to be aggressive in familiar contexts. This was supported by results of the study which showed that "females more frequently than males used distributive behaviors over a wide range of routine goals such as seeking help from another and enforcing obligation" (p. 441). Men were found to use denial more than women. The authors speculate one reason for this finding is that males attempt to control the conversation by claiming that the problems females want to discuss do not exist. Another reason may be that men are less confrontational than women. Women have been found to employ less neglectful behaviors in problem-solving and engage in more constructive problem-solving behaviors by trying to talk about problems to improve the relationship or by remaining confident the relationship will improve (Rusbult et al., 1986). Conversely, self-report measures have indicated men are more verbally aggressive than women and that men and women both perceive men in general as more argumentative and verbally aggressive than women in general (Nicotera & Rancer, 1994). Perhaps the efforts made by women to maintain the relationship are viewed as distributive when the male rebuffs the female’s attempts to rectify the problematic situation but the female persists, indicating perception is an important part of conflict.

Research conducted by Fitzpatrick and Winke (1979) revealed the conflict strategies employed by couples differed according to perceptions of commitment to the relationship. Their study explored the conflict tactics participants reported using with their closest same-sex friend and closest opposite-sex friend. When reporting on the latter category, subjects classified the relationship as married, engaged, exclusively
involved with this individual, seriously involved with this individual more than others, or only casually involved with this individual. Relationship satisfaction was also assessed for the two friendships. Those who reported being only casually involved with a member of the opposite sex also reported using the tactics of nonnegotiation and manipulation the most frequently and were the least likely to use emotional appeals or empathetic understanding. Results showed that married persons use emotional appeals and personal rejection more than the other relationship groups. Interestingly, the exclusively or seriously involved groups used empathetic understanding more than the casually dating or married couples. In terms of relational satisfaction, it was discovered dissatisfied couples tended to employ nonnegotiation and empathetic understanding but rarely used manipulation. These findings led the authors to conclude persons in more committed relationships need not be as preoccupied with relationship termination as their less committed counterparts and thus have greater freedom to utilize "spontaneous and emotionally toned" conflict strategies since partners are confident of their dedication to one another. Conversely, in the less committed relationships, "cohesiveness of the partners is still being negotiated. As a result, they are more inclined to utilize conflict avoidance strategies. Undoubtedly, it would be too risky for them to employ the more open conflict strategies of the firmly committed" (p. 10). Results of this study clearly confirm the assertion made here that conflict management styles are a function of relational intimacy.
Verbal Behavior

Discerning among intimate stages of relationships may prove profitable to understanding the link between intimacy and conflict. Studies have shown the conflict that occurs in these stages may serve as a primary indicator of how the relationship will fare over time. Couples unable to negotiate conflict in their intensifying relationships may be more susceptible to forming unhealthy patterns of arguing and may possibly face relationship termination. The assertion that “the experience of conflict in romantic relationships may have different effects for different couples” (Lloyd & Cate, 1985, p. 184) points to the existence of a relational culture established by couples in order to create rules of acceptable and unacceptable behaviors in their shared world. The following section reviews the verbal behaviors men and women engage in and the effect these behaviors have on relationships.

A number of studies have examined how the relational term one assigns to his or her partner impacts the communication exchange. Hecht (1984) asserted that communicators adapt their messages according to the relational label they bestow upon their partner. Noting the association between relational satisfaction and intimacy, he sought to determine whether the label given to one’s partner impacted one’s satisfaction with the communication exchange. He interrupted people engaged in conversation on college campuses and asked for an evaluation of the interaction. Respondents were asked to identify their interaction partner as an acquaintance, friend or best friend. Results indicated the label given to one’s partner played a role in the structure of the conversation that took place and the degree of satisfying communication reported, although neither relationship was as strong as expected. Those in intimate relationships
reported that partner involvement and a relaxed atmosphere were important factors for communication satisfaction. Control of conversational topics proved more important to subjects in relationships of shorter duration whereas subjects in longer term relationships were more concerned with self-presentation and participation. This finding corresponds with the relational stage models which would predict short-term relational partners strive to find common interests through conversation but long-term relational partners pride themselves on knowledge of and involvement with the other.

Knapp et al. (1980) examined the link between relationship terms and perceptions of communication behavior. The authors sought to determine the communication actions subjects would view as typical of a lover, best friend, friend, pal, colleague, and acquaintance. The research sample consisted of over one thousand people of various ages who were recruited from eight locations in the United States. Each participant was given two relational terms to ponder and then instructed to complete questionnaires assessing perceptions of the likelihood that certain communication behaviors would occur with the persons of said relational status. Results of the study were factor analyzed resulting in three dimensions: communication personalness, synchrony, and difficulty. Interestingly, all participants felt communication with females was more personal than with males, and male/female relationships were seen as more personal than same sex relationships. The authors note this finding may support sex role stereotypes which suggest that women tend to be warm and affectionate and that relationships between men and women are usually romantic. Regarding relational terms, it was found that communication was perceived as less synchronous and personal as the relationship term decreased in intimacy (from lover through acquaintance). This finding indicates that the
more intimate the relationship, the more one expects communication with his or her partner to flow smoothly and include personal disclosures. Subjects under twenty-two years of age reported perceiving more personalness and synchrony as relationships became more intimate than was perceived by the older age groups. Additionally, those who were never married perceived more personal communication with friends whereas married individuals perceived personal communication to occur with individuals occupying more intimate terms such as lover and best friend. This finding led the authors to contend "there is no substitute for relationship history when judging the personalness of communication" as the shared experiences of the partners constitute the perceived depth and intimacy of communication (p. 276). No significant findings emerged for the difficult dimension which represented awkwardness in communication. However, introducing a measure to assess perceptions of conflict could potentially make difficulty a more salient dimension in these relationships.

The preceding studies complement each other by showing that the perception one holds of a relationship, as reflected by the relational label, and the qualities associated with it correspond to the satisfaction reported in actual conversations with persons given a certain label. More specifically, in combination these studies reveal that labels reflecting greater intimacy indicate more satisfaction in the communication exchange and perceptions of a more synchronous and disclosive interaction. Thus, the perceived amount of intimacy in a relationship has empirically verifiable consequences for communication.

Researchers have also explored the influence of relational stages on conflict behaviors. A study conducted by Lloyd and Cate (1985) examined the progression of
conflict in relationships which were at one time serious but had resulted in termination. This study assessed levels of conflict, love, maintenance, and ambivalence across the following five relational stages: casual, couple, committed, uncertain about the future of the relationship and certain the relationship would end. In their review of literature, the authors stated “conflict in romantic relationships is developmental, in that the nature of the attributions concerning the origins of conflict changes as the relationship changes in commitment level” (p. 180). The literature also indicated a tendency for conflict to increase when couples move from dating casually to becoming more serious but to level off when couples progress from seriously dating to marriage. The researchers interviewed subjects whose relationships had ended within the past year. Results of this study confirmed that conflict is experienced differently by couples in various relational stages. For individuals whose relationships had terminated, conflict increased between the serious dating and commitment stages. Consequently, Lloyd and Cate posited that couples who experience greater conflict as the relationship progresses may fail to negotiate relational definitions and as a result view themselves as incompatible. Also interesting was the observation that “the degree to which the partners engaged in self-disclosure and discussions about the quality of their relationship was associated with the degree to which the partners engaged in conflict over the relationship as well” (p. 189). These results illustrate the volatile nature of self-disclosure and metacommunicative messages in intensifying relationships.

Self-disclosure allows partners to know each other better; yet, this knowledge may lead to unforeseen problems and perceived incompatible goals. Since couples at the intensifying or couple stage (marked by self-disclosure) have not committed themselves
fully to the relationship, it follows that they would discuss the quality of the relationship to determine if their pairing was to continue. Analysis of gender differences revealed that females perceived more conflict in the relationship than did males at the levels of uncertain about the future of the relationship and certain the relationship would end. It was also found when experiencing uncertainty about the future of the relationship, men reported a high level of ambivalence and conflict. Accordingly, it seems that women and men perceive a disproportionate amount of turmoil when faced with relationship uncertainty or dissolution and that men are more likely to take a tentative stance toward conflict which could potentially alter the behaviors of both sexes. The researchers discovered “each of the dimensions of love, maintenance and ambivalence changes in relation to conflict from the stages of casually dating to being certain that the relationship would end” (p. 187) indicating conflict influences one’s commitment to and feelings toward the relationship.

In a similar study, newlywed couples completed an instrument assessing the love, ambivalence, conflict and maintenance behaviors they experienced while dating their partner casually, dating seriously and intending to get married. Two years after marriage, subject couples responded to the same measures again and were also evaluated for their marital satisfaction and adjustment. Results showed “couples who experience conflict before marriage tend to continue to fight once they are married” (Kelly, Huston & Cate, 1985, p. 171). The amount of conflict before marriage impacted the wives’ satisfaction after marriage; however, this was not true for husbands. This finding further illustrates men and women may perceive the occurrence and effects of conflict differently. Additionally, it was found that “conflict and problem-solving activities are
positively related early in the relationship; later on, couples who experience a lot of conflict, if anything, engage in less maintenance or problem-solving activity” (p. 174). Couples in less developed relationships may strive to manage conflict but if they do not do so effectively and the relationship continues, satisfaction with the partner seems to be sacrificed in the long run. Overall, conflict and maintenance behaviors proved more important to relationships over time than did love or ambivalence.

Burleson, Kunkel, and Birch (1994) explored the link between similarity of communication values and attraction in romantically involved heterosexual partners. Data from this study revealed that “partners who evaluate affectively oriented communication skills similarly tend to be more attracted to one another and more satisfied with their dating relationship” (p. 268). The category of affectively oriented communication skills included conflict management, comforting, ego support, and regulative skill. As such, those subjects who evaluated their partner’s conflict management skills as similar to their own were happier with their relationships and more attracted to their partners. In fact, conflict management skill was the one variable significantly related to all satisfaction and attraction items. This finding demonstrates the importance of effective conflict negotiation to the well-being of relationships.

Additionally, it was found that individuals who had been dating for longer periods of time reported feeling more committed to the relationship. Similarity in communication skills evaluations was not significantly related to relationship length. Therefore, the authors concluded “although similarity in communication values cannot be used to predict whether people will date each other, it can be used to predict how happy they will be dating each other” (p. 269). Considering the developmental stage of the couples who
participated in this study may have contributed to the usefulness of the findings as the importance of communication values is likely to change as couples become increasingly interdependent.

The methods couples use to maintain their relationships and manage conflict may be more indicative of how they behave in a problematic situation than stereotypic sex role behaviors depending on the degree of intimacy in such relationships. Millar and Rogers (1976) state intimacy “is crucial to defining more individualized versus more role-bound relationships” (p. 93). They claim intimacy results when individuals become dependent on one another to confirm their self concepts. Burggraf and Sillars (1987) observed that “marriage provides a climate in which conventional sex role behavior may be abandoned” (p. 278). These researchers classified married subjects according to Fitzpatrick’s couple types and then analyzed the communication between the couples for conflict and sex stereotypic behaviors. Results failed to support any significant link between sex role behaviors and couple type. The employment of reciprocal conflict behaviors by couples made potential sex-typed behaviors immaterial. Yet, it is important to note the role relational development played in this study. Subjects had reached the bonded stage and classifying them by marital type further indicates they had forged somewhat unique interaction patterns in their relationships. It is doubtful the findings of this study are applicable to less developmentally advanced couples who are still experimenting with their roles in the relationship.

A study of influence tactics in intimate relationships revealed the degree of dependence one has on a relationship may influence the conflict behaviors that individual employs. The study found sex and sex role orientation were not related to the
use of strong tactics (bullying and autocracy) but were related to the use of weak tactics (manipulation and supplication). Findings also indicated that heterosexual women were seen as employing supplication and manipulation when more committed and dependent on the relationship than their partner. In contrast, heterosexual men were perceived as using the bargaining tactic more when they were less committed to the relationship (Howard, Blumstein & Schwartz, 1986). Thus, the amount of dependence one has on a relationship may affect how he or she reacts in situations involving conflict, determining what tactics will be used to get one’s own way. Furthermore, if weak tactics are seen as feminine, men may be reluctant to use them particularly at the beginning of a relationship causing a stereotypical division in the actions of men and women.

Studies have shown that when men or women deviate from expected sex role behaviors, they are judged harshly by observers. In a study on perceptions of verbal aggression and argumentative behaviors by Infante, Rancer and Jordan (1996), subjects judged interactions between females as more verbally aggressive than identical exchanges by males. Argumentativeness, a constructive behavior, involves attacking a person’s position on an issue. Conversely, verbal aggressiveness is a destructive behavior which involves attacking a person’s self-concept rather than the subject of the argument. Thus, the authors concluded when females communicate in an aggressive, destructive fashion they may be seen as less constructive and less argumentative than men because they risk violating social norms which dictate women behave nonaggressively. Similarly, Berryman-Fink and Brunner (1987) found sex differences in conflict situations. Their subjects claimed to use different conflict management styles when their conflict interaction was with a man versus a woman. Male and female
subjects reported using the accommodating style significantly more when in conflict with a female. Overall, men were found to be more competitive in conflict whereas women were more likely to compromise.

Tannen (1996) theorized the difference between male and female verbal communication in terms of report-talk and rapport-talk. The primary difference between these styles is that the former seeks status whereas the latter seeks connection. The author contends men feel comfortable speaking in public situations but women are more at ease speaking in private settings. Thus, women use rapport-talk which provides "a way of establishing connections and negotiating relationships. Emphasis is placed on displaying similarities and matching experiences" (p. 69). Men, on the other hand, use report-talk which allows them to "preserve independence and negotiate and maintain status in a hierarchical social order. This is done by exhibiting knowledge and skill and by holding center stage through verbal performance such as storytelling, joking or imparting information" (p. 70). Tannen claims misunderstandings occur between the sexes when they fail to realize they have different objectives when they speak. Consequently, conflict in interpersonal relationships may be a product of men’s and women’s different styles of talk.

Differences in male and female verbal communication may contribute to relational conflict. This section has shown the conflict management strategies used by partners impacts their satisfaction with the relationship over time. In sum, research findings illustrate female communication is generally considered to be personal, accommodating, and geared toward maintaining relationships. Results on male communication are not as clearly defined as research indicates men tend to be agentic,
withdrawn and ambivalent but can also be verbally aggressive. Yet, studies have also revealed these sex differences are susceptible to change in the context of intimate relationships; a possibility which needs to be explored further.

Nonverbal Behavior

Nonverbal communication comprises a large part of the relational part of the message. What one says may not always be as important as how the person expresses himself or herself nonverbally. Consequently, it is crucial to understand how nonverbal communication affects message transmission and relationship interaction. Sex differences emerge more consistently in studies of nonverbal communication than is true of its verbal counterpart. This may be due in part to the unintentional nature of most nonverbal behavior. Research demonstrates when verbal and nonverbal messages contradict each other the nonverbal message is considered the most believable. The following section reviews how men and women use nonverbal behavior to communicate with their relational partners.

Nonverbal communication can complement or contradict the verbal message. Studies illustrate vocalic expressions facilitate understanding between partners. Sillars, Pike, Jones, and Murphy (1984) conducted a two-part study in which they asked couples to report on the communication and understanding in their marriages. Data demonstrated that individuals believe their partners share their feelings much more than they actually do. The authors speculate this is because spouses judge their partner's feelings on the most immediate information available to them which is their own feelings. Results also showed "paralinguistic expression was more consistently associated with understanding
than was verbal disclosure” possibly owing to nonverbal primacy (p. 342). This was especially true for negative vocalic expressions as they are the least likely to be misunderstood. Perceptions of agreement were found to impact marital satisfaction; actual agreement was not. Findings also indicated that communication impacts understanding by making partners aware of their differing perceptions. Thus, communication promotes understanding by allowing intimates to perceive where their attitudes diverge. Interestingly, couples easily discern expressions of negative affect which complements earlier findings that distributive behaviors are salient in conflict.

The fact that men and women engage in different nonverbal behaviors may be due in part to socialization. Tucker and Friedman (1993) explored expressive communication and gender. Subjects completed a variety of questionnaires including the Affective Communication Test (ACT), which measures emotional expressivity and were videotaped during their first encounter with the researchers. Subjects were also videotaped while posing happiness, sadness and anger emotions and while describing a past emotional experience. Results showed that women who were rated as highly expressive on the ACT were perceived as friendly, dominant and tended to have an aggressive/hostile personality. These women also looked angry/disgusted when discussing past experiences that involved happiness or sadness. The authors speculate these findings may indicate one way women respond to the oppression hypothesis which asserts that women behave in a nonverbally unthreatening fashion (e.g. smiling or not expressing anger) so as not to upset men who have more power and authority in society. Consequently, while some women may become unassertive due to their socialization, others may react to their oppressive circumstances in the opposite manner by becoming
In contrast to relatively unexpressive males, highly expressive males were rated as looking less angry/disgusted when discussing happy or sad past experiences. The only similarity found across gender was that high ACT scores related significantly to extroversion for both males and females. Socialization also accounts for male nonverbal behaviors. A study of how emotions are communicated through facial expression found “during the unobserved viewing of emotionally stimulating materials men tend to suppress more than do women the expression of pleasantness, disgust, distress, fear and anger” (Wagner, Buck & Winterbotham, 1993, p. 50). The authors cite socialization as the reason for male emotional inhibition and find interest may be expressed in the place of these suppressed emotions.

Who touches whom, the gender of the participants, and the type of relationship they are involved in all serve to define the messages sent by touch. Guerrero and Andersen (1994) conducted a study to assess the differences and similarities of touch attitudes and behaviors among dating and married couples. The authors proposed “relationship stage may affect who initiates touch and help explain why some studies find sex differences in touch initiation while others do not” (p. 141). Relational stage was measured according to the following categories: the beginning or casually dating stage, the intermediate or seriously dating stage and the married stage. Results confirmed gender differences in touch; women reported avoiding touch from males more than males reported avoiding touch from females. Interestingly, relationship stage affected how men and women use touch. Women initiated touch most when they were married and least when dating casually. Men showed the opposite pattern. It was also found that “the matching of touch behavior appears to increase as a relationship
develops, with the magnitude of correlations between partners greater for marrieds than for either serious or casual daters” (p. 147). The authors attribute high levels of matching touch behaviors to the “unique combination of stability and intimacy” created by couples and evidenced as the relationship progresses. This finding clearly invokes the notion of relational culture. Seriously dating couples were found to engage in the greatest frequency of touch, possibly in order to become more intimate. This study demonstrates men and women use touch to achieve and reflect relational intimacy.

In a similar study on male and female touch, Hall and Veccia (1990) found dyads composed of males touched less than female dyads and mixed-sex dyads touched more overall than same-sex dyads. Other sex differences were also uncovered: men intentionally touched women with their hand more often than the reverse occurred. Males were significantly more likely to put an arm around a female; conversely, females showed a greater tendency to link arms with a male. Moreover, in the under thirty age group men are more likely to touch women but women are more likely to touch men in the thirty and over age group. The authors attribute this finding to level of relational development rather than age. They contend that “sex roles may permit (even require) visible gestures of possession or being in charge by males in less developed relationships; or perhaps females in such relationships touch less in an effort to appear noncommittal or not too forward” but as the relationship develops women may take the more assertive role and use possessive touches (p. 1161). Thus, as relationships become more intimate the increase in female touch may also signal a move toward greater equality within the couple evidenced by a change away from stereotypic male/female behaviors.

The preceding studies illustrate that, like verbal behavior, nonverbal behavior

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reflects the degree of intimacy between partners and displays conflict or cohesiveness in the relationship. Also in common with the findings on verbal behavior, it seems when women fail to engage in nonverbal behaviors typically expected of their sex they are subjected to negative social sanctions. Yet, in the context of a developed relationship one may not be as put upon to enact the stereotypical behaviors of his or her sex.

Conclusion

Verbal and nonverbal communication are used to control exchanges and can reflect increases or decreases in relational involvement. Verbally, relational involvement is generally communicated by intimacy labels. Nonverbally, touch can be used to indicate the degree of familiarity between partners. In her summary of gender differences in language and nonverbal communication, Peplau (1983) concluded that “men do more verbal interrupting, claim greater personal space, initiate more touching, and are poorer at decoding nonverbal communication” (p. 243). This literature review has shown that females tend to communicate more personally than men in order to sustain relational functioning. Men tend to be more concerned with status and control in their communication. Sex-role and gender-role research denotes the stereotypical behaviors in which men and women from the United States typically engage.

Golombok and Fivush (1994) defined gender stereotypes as “a set of beliefs about what it means to be male or female. Gender stereotypes include information about physical appearance, attitudes and interests, psychological traits, social relations and occupations” (p. 17). These stereotypes dictate appropriate and inappropriate behaviors for men and women within a certain culture. Golombok and Fivush note even though not
all stereotypes are true of actual male and female behavior, they are influential in their ability to define socially desirable behavior. Katz (1986) noted "gender is an extremely prominent cue for both self-definition and societal reaction and becomes so very early in life" (p. 22). Research has shown individuals vary on the extent to which they view the concepts of masculinity and femininity as important to their overall self-concepts and sex-typed individuals process information in a different manner than their counterparts. Thus, strongly sex-typed persons may approach conflict differently than less sex-typed persons. Men tend to be stereotyped as agentive, instrumental, strong, independent, forceful, aggressive, outspoken and intellectual. Women, on the other hand, are usually stereotyped as emotional, weak, trusting, affectionate, compassionate, warm, gentle, kind, considerate and creative. Androgynous individuals are those men or women who possess a large amount of both masculine and feminine traits. The adjectives provided here represent a sample of the multitude of terms used to describe the sexes. It should be noted that the qualities society attributes to men are valued more highly than those attributed to women (Golombok & Fivush, 1994). According to stereotypic sex-role behaviors, men would likely employ distributive conflict behaviors since this style is marked by aggression and women would likely employ integrative conflict behaviors since this style is marked by concern for the relationship. Yet in an established relationship men and women may not feel as compelled to enact behaviors associated with their assigned sex-role. Studies have also shown that the male stereotype is more rigid than the female stereotype; thus, women are allowed to engage in a wider range of behaviors than men without the threat of impropriety and may exhibit a wider variety of behaviors throughout the course of a given relationship.
Sex-role orientation has been found to impact couple functioning. Juni and Grimm (1994) explored the link between marital satisfaction and gender-role. Results indicate that in terms of affective communication and time together, androgynous couples fare better than gender-role congruent couples and traditional couples (masculine-male and feminine-female) who may have less of a desire for these factors since they have the potential to challenge the status quo. These authors also found androgynous couples tended to be more troubled than sex-typed couples especially where child-related issues were concerned and wives are more dependent on gender-role certainty for marital satisfaction than are husbands. Research suggests that gender stereotypes are not changing as quickly as was previously thought. A longitudinal study showed unmarried men failed to change their stereotypes over a five year period. Conversely, men who remained married over the course of the study and women of all ages showed a decline in stereotyping over time. This finding points to the fact that relationship development may impact one's reliance on stereotypes, a fact that may be particularly true for men (Golombok & Fivush, 1994).

There is evidence to suggest that the communication styles of both sexes may be mediated by situational factors, personal dispositions and relational development. The present study focused on this last factor as it relates to conflict in communication. Research shows “as partners negotiate differences in interests, norms and roles, they relay important information to each other about their relationship” (Lloyd & Cate, 1985, p. 180). Such information may not be readily available in relationships in which only a minimal amount of negotiation has occurred. Cupach and Canary (1995) assert “...the influence of the sex stereotype on behavior likely diminishes in the context of
interpersonal relationships as such relationships become more close and intimate” (p. 248). Thus, it is reasonable to assume how individuals react to conflict in the relationship changes over time, possibly becoming less stereotypical and more innovative as the relationship progresses. Research has been accused of contributing to the perpetuation of stereotypes (Putnam, 1982); yet, it is known that stereotypes exist in the absence of other, more complete information. This is why individuals may subscribe to sex stereotypes more at the beginning of the relationship before the couple withdraws from the social world and while the couple is still guided and or affected by social standards for behavior. Integrative behaviors are promoted when one has knowledge of the partner and perceives common goals. Conversely, distributive behaviors are marked by uncertainty, a component which is indicative of less developed relationships (Cloven & Roloff, 1991). The preceding argument leads to the following hypotheses:

H1. There will be more attitude differentiation between men and women on measures of respondent’s attitudes about themselves at the time of conflict.

H2. Less developed relationships will result in stronger attitudes toward masculine and feminine characteristics at the time of conflict.

H3. Distributive conflict strategies will be more likely to occur in less developed relationships and less likely to occur in more developed relationships.

H4. Integrative conflict strategies will be more likely to occur in more developed relationships and less likely to occur in less developed relationships.
CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY

Sample

Subjects were recruited on the basis of convenience from communication classes at the University of Nevada Las Vegas. One hundred and sixty-three surveys were returned to the researcher by individuals claiming to be involved in a romantic relationship.

Instrument

Although it is important to acknowledge that relationship development is constituted by the interaction of a dyad, when assessing conflict measuring the perceptions of one partner may prove more useful than examining the perceptions of the couple. When analyzing conflict in terms of relational development, considering the partners’ agreement of conflict may convolute the question and still does not disqualify the subjective feelings of the individual respondent. Alberts (1989) confirmed that couples perform the majority of their arguments in private. This finding provides support for relying on self-report measures since couples most often experience conflict in times and places where the researcher would not be welcome.

Subjects were asked to report on an interpersonal conflict situation that they were
presently experiencing or had recently experienced with a romantic partner and to indicate their initial reaction to the problem. Witteman’s 1988 survey provided the measures used to assess individual conflict styles. Witteman analyzed conflict styles along the dimensions of integrative, distributive, avoidant and indirect; this study, however, only assessed subjects’ use of the first two dimensions. Subjects indicated how likely they were to use the behavior by circling the appropriate item on a scale from 1 (“Never or almost never true”) to 7 (“Always or almost always true”). The integrative scale was composed of the following items: (a) I shared with the other my feelings and thoughts about the problem (SHARED); (b) I shared with the other how the problem might be mutually resolved (RESOLVED); (c) I asked the other about his/her feelings and thoughts about the problem (FEELINGS); (d) I asked the other how the problem might be mutually resolved (MUTUALLY). These items were added together using the SPSS COMPUTE function. The scale created (INTEGRAT) was assessed for reliability using the RELIABILITY function which computes Alpha. Alpha and other descriptions of this scale are found in the Results section. The distributive scale contained the following items: (a) I threatened the other (THREAT2); (b) I threatened to end the conversation (THREATEN); (c) I cussed at the other (CUSSED); (d) I demanded the other person change his/her behavior or attitudes (DEMAND); (e) I insulted the other (INSULTED). These items were added together using the SPSS COMPUTE function. The scale created (DISTRIBU) was assessed for reliability using the RELIABILITY function which computes Alpha. Alpha and other descriptions of this scale are found in the Results section.

Bem’s (1974) Sex-Role Inventory (BRSI) was employed to determine the degree
to which the respondent’s attitudes are sex-typed. The BRSI “characterizes a person as masculine, feminine, or androgynous as a function of the difference between his or her endorsement of masculine and feminine personality characteristics” (p. 156). The measure consists of twenty masculine, feminine and neutral adjectives for a total of sixty items. For purposes of this study, five items (which had little to do with conflict) were eliminated from each category for a total of forty-five items. Subjects were instructed to indicate their endorsement of a particular adjective during the time of the conflict by circling the appropriate item on a scale from 1 (“Never or almost never true”) to 7 (“Always or almost always true”). The masculine scale was composed of the following items: (a) self-reliant (SELFRELY); (b) defends own beliefs (BELIEFS); (c) independent (INDEPEND); (d) assertive (ASSERTIV); (e) strong (STRONG); (f) forceful (FORCEFUL); (g) analytical (ANALYTIC); (h) makes decisions easily (DECISION); (i) self-sufficient (SELFSUF); (j) dominant (DOMINANT); (k) willing to take a stand (WILLING); (l) aggressive (AGGRESIV); (m) individualistic (INDIVID); (n) competitive (COMPETE). These items were added together using the SPSS COMPUTE function. The scale created (MASCULIN) was assessed for reliability using the RELIABILITY function which computes Alpha. Alpha and other descriptions of this scale are found in the Results section. The feminine scale consisted of the following items: (a) yielding (YIELDING); (b) shy (SHY); (c) affectionate (AFFECTN); (d) flatterable (FLATTER); (e) loyal (LOYAL); (f) sympathetic (SYMPATHY), (g) sensitive to the needs of others (SENSITIV); (h) understanding (UNERSND); (i) compassionate (COMPASSN); (j) eager to soothe hurt feelings (SOOTHE); (k) soft spoken (SOFTSPKN); (l) warm (WARM), (m) tender (TENDER); (n) does not use harsh
language (HARSH). These items were added together using the SPSS COMPUTE function. The scale created (ANDROGNO) was assessed for reliability using the RELIABILITY function which computes Alpha. Alpha and other descriptions of this scale are found in the Results section. Finally, the androgynous or neutral scale consisted of: (a) moody (MOODY); (b) conscientious (CONSCINT); (c) theatrical (THEATRIC); (d) unpredictable (UNPREDCT); (e) reliable (RELIABLE); (f) jealous (JEALOUS); (g) truthful (TRUTHFUL); (h) secretive (SECRETIV); (i) sincere (SINCERE); (j) solemn (SOLEMN); (k) inefficient (INEFFICN); (l) adaptable (ADAPT); (m) unsystematic (UNSYSTEM); (n) tactful (TACTFUL). These items were added together using the SPSS COMPUTE function. The scale created (FEMININE) was assessed for reliability using the RELIABILITY function which computes Alpha. Alpha and other descriptions of this scale are found in the Results section.

The survey also included two questions about how much the relationship was valued before and after the problem arose where 1 equaled not value at all and 7 equaled value very much. A scale developed by Fitzpatrick and Winke (1979) was used to determine the degree of intimacy between partners. This scale allows respondents to report the intensity of their romantic relationships according to the following five categories: (a) 1 = only casually involved with this individual; (b) 2 = seriously involved with this individual; (c) 3 = exclusively involved with this individual; (d) 4 = engaged; and (e) 5 = married. The survey concluded with six demographic items. Subjects indicated their sex and their partner’s sex by circling 1 = male or 2 = female. Length of relationship was categorized with a value assigned to one of the following six categories: (a) 1 = 3 months or less; (b) 2 = 4-6 months; (c) 3 = 6-12 months; (d) 4 = 13-24 months;
(e) 5 = 25-36 months; and (f) 6 = 37 months or longer. Highest level of education completed was categorized into five groups: (a) 1 = high school; (b) 2 = some college; (c) 3 = college degree; (d) 4 = some graduate school; and (e) 5 = graduate degree or higher. Race was classified as: (a) 1 = Caucasian; (b) 2 = African American; (c) 3 = Hispanic; (d) 4 = Asian American; and (e) 5 = other. Finally, age was categorized with a value assigned to one of the following seven categories: (a) 1 = 17-20 years; (b) 2 = 21-24 years; (c) 3 = 25-28 years; (d) 4 = 25-28 years; (e) 5 = 33-36 years; (f) 6 = 37-40 years; and (g) 7 = 41 or more years.

Overall, the Conflict Survey contained 65 questions: 14 conflict items, 42 BRSI items, two relational and six demographic items. The data collected from the 163 subjects were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) computer software program.
CHAPTER 3

RESULTS

In this section the results are summarized into four areas. The first area addressed is demographics of the sample, then reliabilities of the scales, followed by t-test results for Hypothesis 1, and, finally correlated results for Hypotheses 2, 3, and 4.

Hypothesis 1 predicted that there would be more attitude differentiation between men and women on measures of the respondent's attitudes about themselves at the time of conflict. Hypothesis 2 predicted less developed relationships would result in stronger attitudes toward masculine and feminine characteristics at the time of conflict. Hypothesis 3 predicted distributive conflict strategies would be more likely to occur in less developed relationships and less likely to occur in more developed relationships. Conversely, Hypothesis 4 predicted integrative conflict would be more likely to occur in more developed relationships and less likely to occur in less developed relationships.

In order to support Hypothesis 1, the pattern of results should reveal that males and females report significantly different means on either the masculine or feminine scale at the time of conflict. In order to support Hypothesis 2, the pattern of results should reveal that men and women in relationships of shorter duration or in relationships described as less intimate should show higher ratings on the masculine and feminine
scales than those subjects in longer, more intimate relationships. In order to support Hypothesis 3, the pattern of results should reveal that subjects in relationships described as less intimate (casual through exclusive) or of a shorter duration (less than 12 months) should report higher ratings on the distributive scale whereas subjects in a relationship described as more intimate (engaged or married) or of a longer duration (over 12 months) should report lower ratings on the distributive scale. In order to support Hypothesis 4, the pattern of results should reveal that subjects in relationships described as more intimate (engaged or married) or of a longer duration (over 12 months) should report higher ratings on the integrative scale whereas subjects in relationships described as less intimate (casual, serious or exclusive) or of a shorter duration (less than 12 months) should report lower ratings on the integrative scale.

Demographics

Approximately equal numbers of males (51.5%) and females (48.5%) comprised the sample (N = 163). The age of the respondents was as follows: 17-20 years (41.1%), 21-24 years (33.7%), 25-28 years (8.0%), 29-32 years (4.9%), 33-36 years (3.7%), 37-40 years (2.5%), and 41 or more years (5.5%). The majority of respondents (69.3%) reported having completed “some college” education. Caucasians accounted for the largest portion of the sample (68.1%), followed by African Americans (9.2%), Asian Americans (8.0%), individuals who classified themselves as “other” (7.4%) and Hispanics (6.1%). The majority of participants claimed to be “only casually involved” (28.8%) with their partner, closely followed by the “exclusively involved” (27.0%), and then those who were “married” (18.4%), “seriously involved” (17.8%), and “engaged”
(6.1%). The length of relationship variable was distributed as follows: 3 months or less (17.2%), 4-6 months (14.7%), 6-12 months (12.3%), 13-24 months (16.6%), 25-36 months (13.5%), and 37 months or longer (25.2%).

Reliabilities

The two conflict scales (INTEGRAT and DISTRIBU) were found to be reliable. The integrative conflict scale (INTEGRAT) had an alpha reliability of .76 and a range from seven (least likely to use integrative tactics) to twenty-eight (most likely to use integrative tactics). The distributive scale (DISTRIBU) had an alpha reliability of .76 and a range from four (least likely to use distributive tactics) to twenty-eight (most likely to use distributive tactics). In terms of the Bem Sex-Role Inventory, the masculine scale (MASCULIN) had an alpha reliability of .83 and a range from forty-four (least likely to possess masculine attitudes at the time of conflict) to ninety-eight (most likely to possess masculine attitudes at the time of conflict). The feminine scale (FEMININE) had an alpha reliability of .84 and a range from seventy-two (least likely to possess feminine attitudes at the time of conflict) to ninety-one (most likely to possess feminine attitudes at the time of conflict). The androgynous (ANDROGNO) scale was the only scale which was not found to be reliable with an alpha of .51; this scale ranged from forty-two (least likely to possess androgynous characteristics) to eighty-seven (most likely to possess androgynous characteristics).
t-test for Equality of Means

Hypothesis 1 stated there would be more attitude differentiation between men and women on measures of respondents' attitudes about themselves at the time of conflict. The sex (male/female) of the respondent was the independent grouping variable. The t-test determined if there were significant differences between men and women in their masculine, feminine and androgynous attitudes at the time of conflict (see Table 1). On the feminine scale (FEMININE) females had a mean score of 63.75; men had a mean score of 64.92 ($t= .579$, $df=155$, $p=.563$). On the masculine scale (MASCULIN), females had a mean of 70.32 while males had a mean score of 68.90 ($t= -.745$, $df=155$, $p=.458$). On the androgynous scale (ANDROGNO) females had a mean score of 61.64 and males had a mean score of 60.52 ($t= -.840$, $df=151$, $p=.402$). This indicated that overall, males reported that they possessed more feminine characteristics at the time of conflict than did females and females reported that they possessed more masculine characteristics at the time of conflict than did men; although these differences were not significant.

Additionally, females reported possessing more androgynous characteristics than did men, but only by a small margin. These results showed that there was no significant attitude differentiation between men and women. Thus, Hypothesis 1 was not supported.
<table>
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<th>Women</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>p</th>
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Correlations

Hypotheses 2, 3, and 4 were assessed using a Pearson Correlation. The Pearson Product Moment Correlation assessed the relationship among the independent variables (length of relationship and degree of intimacy) and dependent variables (integrative and distributive conflict behaviors). The correlations for both men and women (see Table 2) showed a weak but significant negative relationship between the length of relationship and subjects' reported androgynous characteristics at the time of conflict ($r = -.196, p = .016$). Similarly, a weak but significant negative relationship was found between the level of intimacy between partners' and subjects' reported use androgynous characteristics at the time of conflict ($r = -.208, p = .010$). A correlation analysis was also performed on men only and women only. There was not a significant correlation between the length of relationship and men's (see Table 3) reported androgynous attitudes at the time of conflict ($r = -.194, p = .085$) or for level of intimacy and men's reported androgynous attitudes ($r = -.133, p = .241$). There was not a significant correlation between the length of relationship and women's (see Table 4) reported androgynous attitudes ($r = -.220, p = .063$). However, there was a moderately significant negative relationship between level of intimacy and women's reported androgynous attitudes ($r = -.310, p = .009$) revealing that women in less developed relationships possess more androgynous attitudes at the time of conflict than their more seriously involved counterparts. Overall, these results indicate that men and women in less developed relationships show stronger androgynous attitudes at the time of conflict. Thus, Hypothesis 2 was not supported since it addressed only masculine and feminine attitudes and did not account for androgynous attitudes.
### Table 2

**Pearson Correlation for Men’s and Women’s Attitudes and Conflict Strategies**

<table>
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<tr>
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**Note.** *Significance at p<.05, **Significance at p<.01

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Hypothesis 3 tested the relationship between the use of distributive conflict strategies and relational development. The analysis found no significant correlation between distributive strategies and length of the relationship ($r=.099, p=.214$) or between distributive strategies and degree of intimacy ($r=-.066, p=.935$). Hypothesis 4 tested the relationship between the use of integrative conflict strategies and relational development. The analysis found no significant correlation between integrative strategies and length of relationship ($r=.129, p=.102$) or between integrative strategies and degree of intimacy ($r=.138, p=.084$). Thus, Hypothesis 3 and 4 were not confirmed.

However, some interesting findings did emerge. For example, a moderately significant negative relationship was found between feminine attitudes and distributive behaviors ($r=.423, p=.000$) and a moderately significant positive relationship was found between masculine attitudes and distributive behaviors ($r=.248, p=.002$) for both men and women at the time of conflict. This shows that those men and women who hold more feminine attitudes will be less likely to engage in destructive conflict styles at the time of conflict whereas those men and women who hold more masculine attitudes at the time of conflict will be more likely to engage in destructive conflict styles.
Table 3

**Pearson Correlation for Men's Attitudes and Conflict Strategies**

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*Note.* *Significance at p<.05; **Significance at p<.01*
Table 4

**Pearson Correlation for Women's Attitudes and Conflict Strategies**

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*Note.* *Significance at p<.05;**Significance at p<.01
CHAPTER 4

DISCUSSION

This study examined the link between conflict behaviors and degree of relational intimacy. It also looked at the attitudes men and women adopt at the time of conflict. Conflict has not been looked at extensively as a mediating factor on gender and communication (Canary & Hause, 1993). This study attempted to address the issue of sex differences in conflictual communication. Based on the literature, four hypotheses were advanced. Hypothesis 1 predicted that there would be more attitude differentiation between men and women on measures of the respondent’s attitudes about themselves at the time of conflict. Hypothesis 2 predicted less developed relationships would result in stronger attitudes toward masculine and feminine characteristics at the time of conflict. Hypothesis 3 predicted distributive conflict strategies would be more likely to occur in less developed relationships and less likely to occur in more developed relationships. Conversely, Hypothesis 4 predicted integrative conflict strategies would be more likely to occur in more developed relationships and less likely to occur in less developed relationships.

The results demonstrated no support for these hypotheses. The lack of difference between men and women and between less developed and more developed relationships
could have been limited by the size or composition of the study population or the nature of the survey instrument. The lack of difference between men’s and women’s reported possession of masculine, feminine, and androgynous attitudes at the time of conflict could be attributed to the adjectives selected from the Bem Sex-Role Inventory (1974). These adjectives may not have represented feelings males and females have at the time of conflict. Another possibility explaining the lack of difference between couples in different relational stages is that masculine attitudes are considered more indicative of conflict than are feminine attitudes leading all individuals to report having more masculine attitudes at the time of conflict. This statement is supported, in part, by the finding that both men and women had higher mean scores on the masculine scale than on the feminine scale.

A self-serving bias may be implicated on the conflict scales as indicated by the finding that men and women reported using nearly twice as many integrative strategies as distributive strategies. Thus, men and women may have underreported their use of distributive strategies since these behaviors are not considered socially appropriate and may have overreported their use of integrative strategies since these behaviors are viewed favorably and facilitate conflict resolution.

Although the hypotheses advanced in this study were not supported, some interesting findings did emerge. For example, men had a higher mean score on the feminine scale than did women and women had a higher mean score on the masculine scale than did men. These differences were not significant; however, this finding may point to the possibility that men and women adopt attitudes typically expected of the opposite sex at the time of conflict. This finding also provides support for the assertion
made by Canary et al. (1988) that women tend to be aggressive in familiar contexts. The romantic relationships subjects in this study reported on would constitute such a context and may provide a familiar climate in which women feel less constrained by social norms dictating that women not express anger. Familiar contexts might also supply an arena in which men do not feel as compelled to assume an aggressive role.

Results of the study also showed a significant negative relationship between feminine attitudes and distributive strategies and a significant positive relationship between masculine attitudes and distributive strategies for men and women at the time of conflict. This reveals that those men and women who hold more feminine attitudes at the time of conflict will be less likely to engage in destructive conflict strategies whereas those men and women who hold more masculine attitudes at the time of conflict will be more likely to engage in destructive conflict styles. Consequently, it seems that even though there was no correlation between masculine and feminine attitudes and relational development these attitudes may impact the type of conflict style the individual chooses to employ. Additionally, masculine and feminine attitudes may be a relatively stable product of the individual's personality rather than a variable susceptible to situational changes. In order for this assertion to be assessed, research would need to know the masculine and feminine attitudes held by the individual before the time of conflict. The individual would then need to be asked his or her attitudes at the time of conflict; thus, providing the researcher with two scores which could be examined for significant changes in masculine and feminine attitudes prior to conflict and during conflict. A lack of significance would indicate the static nature of these attitudes.

The most surprising findings were those dealing with androgynous attitudes at the
time of conflict. Results showed a significantly negative relationship between measures which assessed level of relational development (length of relationship and relational stage) and men’s and women’s reported androgynous attitudes at the time of conflict. This finding nearly contradicts Hypothesis 2; thus, it was found that men and women in less developed relationships show stronger androgynous attitudes at the time of conflict than masculine or feminine attitudes. A significantly negative relationship also emerged between relational stage and women’s reported androgynous attitudes indicating that women in less developed relationships possess more androgynous attitudes at the time of conflict than women in more developed relationships. This calls for further investigation of androgyny and its influence on relationship development. It may be that individuals in more developed relationships possess more masculine and feminine attitudes since these characteristics complement each other. Yet, it does not appear that men necessarily hold masculine attitudes while women hold feminine attitudes. On the contrary, as shown by the mean scores, females may tend to hold masculine attitudes in conflict whereas men may tend to hold feminine attitudes in conflict. Thus, one can speculate that the key difference between less developed and more developed relationships during conflict lies in the complementary behavioral styles employed by couples in more intimate relationships. Cupach and Canary (1995) contended that sex stereotypes would not exert a great influence on behavior in more intimate relationships. These findings qualify this contention in several ways. First of all, by revealing that men and women in less developed relationships possess more androgynous attitudes it is suggested that sex stereotypes may not influence the behaviors enacted by these couples. In fact, androgyny may be a factor which helps to comprise the uncertainty indicative of less developed relationships.
relationships. Additionally, in order to ascertain whether sex stereotypes impact behavior in more intimate relationships, it may be necessary to assess the masculine, feminine, and androgynous attitudes of the involved partners.

As previously noted, androgynous individuals are those men and women who possess a large amount of both masculine and feminine traits. Research has confirmed that society places a higher value on attributes classified as masculine than on attributes classified as feminine (Golombok & Fivush, 1994). Consequently, one might be inclined to think that androgyne presents a happy medium in which both masculine and feminine traits are allowable. Yet radical feminists would argue the virtues of androgyne. Believing that masculine and feminine psychological traits arise from biology, radical feminists challenge the "biological status quo" which results in masculine men and feminine females (Tong, 1989). They claim that biology, in conjunction with society, serve to subordinate women and that androgyne will not rectify this problem if feminine traits continue to be considered inferior. Thus, a move toward androgyne may not be a move toward equality between the sexes without redefinition of social roles.

In conclusion, relational development was not found to significantly impact conflict in intimate relationships but it should not be discounted entirely as a mediating factor. This study sought to address previously unanswered questions regarding sex differences in conflictual communication. In accordance with the majority of studies involving communication and gender, it was found that no significant differences exist in men's and women's expression of conflict to their relational partners. It would be advisable for future studies in this area to consider the perceptions of both partners and to assess relational satisfaction. Attitude differentiation between partners may prove
valuable to resolving conflicts. Thus, future research should also consider the developing role of androgyny in society and the impact it has on interpersonal relationships.
APPENDIX I

INSTRUMENT
Hello, my name is Amy Wagner. I'm a graduate student at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas and I'm conducting a research study for the School of Communication. I would appreciate your assistance in the completion of my research project. Participation entails answering the questions on the attached survey. Completion of this survey will take approximately ten minutes and the only cost to you will be your time; there are no other risks involved. This study seeks to determine how men and women manage conflict in romantic relationships. Results of this research may bring new insights as to how conflict is expressed and how it may be effectively managed in the context of these relationships. Involvement in this study is voluntary and any personal information obtained will be kept completely anonymous. Subjects may withdraw at any time. Any questions about the rights of research subjects can be directed to Dr. Lawrence Mullen 895-3274 or to the Office of Sponsored Programs 895-1357.
CONFLICT SURVEY

**Instructions:** Please take a little time to isolate one conflict that you are presently experiencing or have recently experienced with the person with whom you are romantically involved. Then indicate your initial reaction to the problem by responding to the items below. Circle the number that best describes how you feel you behaved in the conflict situation.

1. I shared with the other my feelings and thoughts about the problem
   - 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
   - Never true or almost never true
   - Always true or almost always true

2. I did not say anything about the problem
   - 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
   - Never true or almost never true
   - Always true or almost always true

3. I threatened to end the conversation.
   - 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
   - Never true or almost never true
   - Always true or almost always true

4. I shared with the other how the problem might be mutually resolved.
   - 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
   - Never true or almost never true
   - Always true or almost always true

5. I cussed at the other.
   - 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
   - Never true or almost never true
   - Always true or almost always true

GO ON TO THE NEXT PAGE
6. I put the other in a good mood before I discussed the problem with him/her.

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7. I asked the other about his/her feelings and thoughts about the problem.

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8. I changed the topic of discussion away from the issue of the problem.

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9. I demanded the other person change his/her behavior or attitudes.

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10. I threatened the other.

    | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
    |---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
    | Never true or almost never true |
    | Always true or almost always true |

11. I avoided talking to the other about the problem and had negative feelings for the other because of the problem.

    | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
    |---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
    | Never true or almost never true |
    | Always true or almost always true |

12. I asked the other how the problem might be mutually resolved.

    | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
    |---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
    | Never true or almost never true |
    | Always true or almost always true |

GO ON TO THE NEXT PAGE
13. I waited until the other was in a good mood before I discussed the problem.

1   2   3   4   5   6   7
1  Never true or 2  Almost never true 3  Always true or 4  almost always true 5  6  7  almost always true

14. I insulted the other.

1   2   3   4   5   6   7
1  Never true or 2  Almost never true 3  Always true or 4  almost always true 5  6  7  almost always true

In the following section please indicate how you would describe yourself at the time of the conflict. Indicate your response by circling the number that best represents your feelings.

1. Self-reliant

1   2   3   4   5   6   7
1  Never true or 2  Almost never true 3  Always true or 4  almost always true 5  6  7  almost always true

2. Yielding

1   2   3   4   5   6   7
1  Never true or 2  Almost never true 3  Always true or 4  almost always true 5  6  7  almost always true

3. Moody

1   2   3   4   5   6   7
1  Never true or 2  Almost never true 3  Always true or 4  almost always true 5  6  7  almost always true

4. Defends own beliefs

1   2   3   4   5   6   7
1  Never true or 2  Almost never true 3  Always true or 4  almost always true 5  6  7  almost always true
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<td>11. Flatterable</td>
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12. Unpredictable

1. Never true or almost never true
2. 3. 4. 5. 6. 7. Always true or almost always true

13. Strong personality

1. Never true or almost never true
2. 3. 4. 5. 6. 7. Always true or almost always true

14. Loyal

1. Never true or almost never true
2. 3. 4. 5. 6. 7. Always true or almost always true

15. Reliable

1. Never true or almost never true
2. 3. 4. 5. 6. 7. Always true or almost always true

16. Forceful

1. Never true or almost never true
2. 3. 4. 5. 6. 7. Always true or almost always true

17. Sympathetic

1. Never true or almost never true
2. 3. 4. 5. 6. 7. Always true or almost always true

18. Jealous

1. Never true or almost never true
2. 3. 4. 5. 6. 7. Always true or almost always true
19. Analytical

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20. Sensitive to the needs of others

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21. Truthful

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22. Makes decisions easily

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23. Understanding

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24. Secretive

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25. Self-sufficient

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40. Competitive

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41. Does not use harsh language

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42. Tactful

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43. How much did you value the relationship before the problem arose?

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<td>Not value at all</td>
<td>Value very much</td>
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44. How much do you value the relationship now?

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45. How would you describe the relationship with your partner? (Please circle one)

1. Only casually involved with this individual
2. Seriously involved with this individual
3. Exclusively involved with this individual
4. Engaged
5. Married

46. What is your sex? (Please circle one)

1. Male
2. Female

GO ON TO THE NEXT PAGE
47. What is the sex of your partner? (Please circle one)

1. Male
2. Female

48. How long have you and your present partner been involved? (Please circle one)

1. 3 months or less
2. 4 - 6 months
3. 6 - 12 months
4. 13 - 24 months
5. 25 - 36 months
6. 37 months or longer

49. What is the highest level of education you have completed? (Please circle one)

1. High School
2. Some College
3. College Degree
4. Some Graduate School
5. Graduate Degree or higher

49. What is your race? (Please circle one)

1. Caucasian
2. African American
3. Hispanic
4. Asian American
5. Other

50. How old are you?

1. 17 - 20 years
2. 21 - 24 years
3. 25 - 28 years
4. 29 - 32 years
5. 33 - 36 years
6. 37 - 40 years
7. 41 or more years
DATE: May 20, 1998

TO: Amy Wagner
M/S 5007 (COS)

FROM: Dr. William E. Schulze, Director
Office of Sponsored Programs (X1357)

RE: Status of Human Subject Protocol Entitled:
"An Examination of Conflict in Developing Relationships"
OSP #381s0598-038e

The protocol for the project referenced above has been reviewed by the Office of Sponsored Programs and it has been determined that it meets the criteria for exemption from full review by the UNLV human subjects Institutional Review Board. This protocol is approved for a period of one year from the date of this notification and work on the project may proceed.

Should the use of human subjects described in this protocol continue beyond a year from the date of this notification, it will be necessary to request an extension.

If you have any questions regarding this information, please contact Marsha Green in the Office of Sponsored Programs at 895-1357.

cc: L. Mullen (COS-507)
OSP File
REFERENCES


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VITA

Hank Greenspun School of Communication
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Amy Elisabeth Wagner

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Henderson, NV 89014

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University Nevada, Las Vegas

Special Honors and Awards:
Gold Key National Honor Society

Thesis Title: An Exploration of Conflict in Developing Relationships

Thesis Examination Committee:
Chairperson, Dr. Lawrence Mullen, Ph.D.
Committee Member, Dr. Anthony Ferri, Ph.D.
Committee Member, Dr. Richard Jensen, Ph.D.
Graduate Faculty Representative, Dr. Bradley Rothermel, Ph.D.