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**What Precludes the Chilling Effect?  
The Role of Power Dynamics in Mitigating Complaints and Conflict**

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**What Precludes the Chilling Effect?**  
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## **Dedication**

To the friends of the family, bonus parents, and teachers who taught a first-generation college student the value of an education, inspiring inner confidence and illuminating the path to knowledge of the world as well as my own capabilities.

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## **Abstract**

### **What Precludes the Chilling Effect? The Role of Power Dynamics in Mitigating Complaints and Conflict**

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This study included respondents who are in romantic relationships. The purpose of this study was to extend an important line of research on the chilling effect, a type of conflict avoidance, by attempting to identify a missing chilling effect in the form of a lack of irritations. This study assessed how dependence power and punitive power relates to complaints, conflict, the chilling effect, and a missing chilling effect. An additional goal was to demonstrate the possibility that there may be individual-level factors may play a role so moderating variables were included of optimism, self-control, and communal orientation. Key findings indicated punitive power playing a large role, but punitive power played a role in predicting outcomes when in interaction with the other variables. The interaction of dependence power, punitive power and communal strength resulted in the greatest chilling effect. The interaction of the two forms of power associated with less self-control resulted in greatest missing chilling effect. Findings indicate the importance of individual-level factors when studying this type of relationship phenomena.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Conflict is a natural and frequent aspect of close relationships (Hocker & Wilmot, 2018). Close relationships tend to involve interdependence, finite resources, and other factors that serve as a natural part of living in proximity to others. This is especially salient with regards to intimate partners where relationships tend to be more voluntary compared to work or familial relationships, and contain different factors such as intimacy and romantic love (Samp & Solomon, 2001). In these relationships with higher commitment, there is an increase in the likelihood that people will confront one another about complaints within the relationship (Roloff & Solomon, 2002).

Given the intrinsic nature of interdependence in close relationships, the definition of conflict employed in this study is that conflict is dependent on the perception that goals are incompatible. Conflict necessarily contains a struggle over decision-making power (Hocker & Wilmot, 2018). If what a partner did or said had no impact or bother the other person then “a person who is not dependent upon another—that is, who has no special interest in what the other does—has no conflict with that other person” (Braiker & Kelley, 1979, p. 137).

One perspective on the construct of conflict that is central to this study is that understanding the particular context of power dynamics is core to being able to adequately analyze any kind of conflict (Hocker & Wilmot, 2018; Solomon & Roloff, 2019). Judging whether a particular behavior or cognitive activity is adaptive or maladaptive may depend on the context of a power imbalance. As such, an imbalance of power might impact being able to identify conflict patterns, the nature of a relationship, and the effects on individuals in context.

For the stated reasons in the paragraph above, conflict itself is treated in this study in a neutral manner. Additionally, the varied research on conflict gives good reason to treat conflict itself in an objective manner, and that the impacts on relational outcomes seems to be more tied to context and ways in which conflict is managed (or not). For example, although conflict in the short-term is associated with a decline in relational satisfaction, managing conflict promotes

overall satisfaction, understanding, trust, and intimacy (Braiker & Kelley, 1979). There are some conflict topics that are negatively associated with relationship satisfaction and others that are positively associated (Meyer & Sledge, 2022). Although some couples might find conflict avoidance preferable (Pike & Sillars, 1985), the avoidance of conflict can also be negatively associated with relationship satisfaction. In one example, newlywed couples using conflict avoidance reported less relational happiness than those who did not have as much avoidant attitudes or beliefs about conflict (Crohan, 1992).

Additionally, there are conflicting views regarding the impacts of conflict on a relationship. On one hand, perhaps contrary to belief, some research suggests that the frequency of conflict may not be as associated with relational harm as much as behavior that is a reaction to conflict such as contempt, stonewalling, and criticism (Gottman, 1993). In another study, Driver and Gottman (2004) found that couples who maintained positive affect, humor, and positive regard for each other appear to be associated with being able to better weather conflict. However, a wholesale embrace of conflict may be problematic as some people who viewed fighting as a positive activity might be more desensitized to recognizing not just their own but also others' aggression (Aloia & Solomon, 2015). Conflict associated with aggression and contempt is associated with long-term relational harm more than conflict associated with positive regard (Gottman & Levenson, 2000).

Perhaps an integrated perspective could interpret either extreme as consequential. The frequency of conflict, however, does not appear to predict worse individual and relational outcomes as much as whether a partner believes that they can resolve conflict in their relationship (Malis & Roloff, 2006). Furthermore, attitudes towards conflict are important in terms of being able to understand whether conflict should be avoided altogether. Those who hold the belief that disagreements are resolvable appear to experience more marital happiness than those who do not (Crohan, 1992). The same study found a similar relationship exists for those who hold the belief that conflict should not be avoided, and that it is healthier to work through conflict. Varying views

seem to demonstrate that there could be conditions where conflict avoidance is beneficial. However, there are also situations where avoiding conflict could be seen as necessary in terms of keeping oneself safe, like situations where there may be the presence or threat of aggression.

A vast majority of people in relationships experience, at a minimum, episodic verbal aggression in their romantic relationships (Malik, Sorenson, & Aneshensel, 1997). However, a intimate partner violence (IPV) impacts almost one in four women (23.2%) and one in seven men (13.9%; Smith et al., 2017). There are some included in the IPV population that experience behavior intended to control, monitor, and/or threaten their partner (Kelly & Johnson, 2008; Smith et al., 2017; Stark, 2013), called *coercive control* (Stark, 2007), or alternatively, termed *intimate terrorism* (Johnson, 2006; Johnson, 2008). It would be difficult to understand a more covert and pervasive pattern of coercive behavior without considering power and/or control, which is especially key in understanding risk assessments for interpersonal violence (Myhill & Hohl, 2019). Regardless of the frequency of compliance-gaining behavior, the literature suggests that there need only be a minimal amount of communication that can constitute sufficient threat for gaining compliance (Stark, 2013). Hence, although complaints are very common, there are many cited reasons why people withhold irritations and complaints to avoid conflict (Aloia & Solomon, 2013; Roloff & Solomon, 2002). The threat of aggression and/or the presence of coercive control might be some of these reasons.

A lack of conflict or voiced complaints might generally suggest a peaceful, high-quality relationship of compatible partners. Yet, considering the above points, a lack of conflict and complaints could also be the result of the presence of a coercive or controlling partner. One of the most important pieces of information to reiterate is that there may be very minimal amounts of aggression experienced in the context of a highly controlled relational environment (Johnson, 2006, 2008; Stark, 2013). This illustrates that there may be situational and structural factors that

create an imbalance of power that could have an impact on whether complaints are expressed (Samp & Solomon, 2001). As explained by Roloff and Cloven (1990):

If true, then one partner might control the dynamics of a relationship without having to *overtly* exert influence; his or her behavior and proclivities are rarely, if ever, challenged. Hence, there is a chilling effect on the expression of grievances. *This form of control may be the most efficient form of power [emphasis added]*. If a person is never confronted, then more overt and potentially costlier (cf. Folger & Poole, 1984) forms of control become unnecessary. (p. 50)

The current study thus explored what impact different forms of power have on conflict and complaints, with an explicit focus on factors that may inhibit formulating complaints entirely. In other words, due to the fact that there has been much work to advance the understanding of withholding complaints, the critical component of this study is whether complaints are even recognized or observable under these kinds of circumstances.

Roloff and Cloven (1990) established a line of groundbreaking research that fundamentally changed our understanding of the role of power in terms of conflict avoidance in interpersonal relationships: the *chilling effect*. The chilling effect refers to a specific form of topic avoidance, especially regarding complaints regarding controlling behavior. Prior to this work, the chilling effect was implied but not explored in interpersonal communication. Decades of research has extended this work related to the chilling effect as it relates to perceived resolvability of conflict, the threat of aggression, attributions for negative behavior, and mental discounting such as appraising problems as less severe (Aloia & Worley, 2019; Cloven & Roloff, 1993; Cloven & Roloff, 1994; Makoul & Roloff, 1998; Roloff & Solomon, 2002; Samp & Solomon, 2001; Solomon, Knobloch & Fitzpatrick, 2004; Solomon & Samp, 1998; Worley, 2016; Worley & Aloia, 2018; Worley & Samp, 2016; Worley & Samp, 2018). These areas of research contribute to understanding forces at play that obviate the expression of complaints due to controlling behavior

that might otherwise be a source of conflict difficult to resolve. Due to structural issues related to power dynamics, conflict might be intractable in some close relationships.

This study sought to explore a conundrum. Complaints should be a basis of conflict, but an absence of unvoiced complaints (i.e., not recognizing aversive behaviors when they are present) makes it difficult to study conflict avoidance and the chilling effect. Cloven and Roloff (1993) examined the threat of aggression as a deterrent to expressing complaints (i.e., a positive relationship of the chilling effect and threat of aggression). The authors issued a call to explore questions related to learned helplessness as a direction for future research. This is an important line of research in understanding covert and insidious underlying power dynamics of what may appear to be a relationship that seldom experiences conflict. An issue with studying power is that attempting to study motive is made very difficult by the likelihood that it may not be recognized. Thus, given the past work on the chilling effect and power dynamics, the main focus of this study is whether a power imbalance contributes to an absence of the chilling effect. Specifically, does the presence of a particular power imbalance lead to not just a lack of conflict or withholding of complaints (i.e., the chilling effect), but the inability for the partner with less power to even articulate or recognize complaints? In other words, under certain power dynamics, partners under coercive control or a threat of aggression might not realize they may otherwise have complaints.

Consequently, a critical aspect of this study is to examine whether there are cognitive mechanisms like the role of motivated reasoning at play that may be able to circumvent the process of recognizing and addressing aversive behaviors others might consider problematic, dysfunctional, or even abusive. To satisfy the conditions for conflict expression, it would seem as though a person would need to be sufficiently aware to recognize a violation of reasonable relationship expectations (e.g., being able to recognize a lack of respect), capable enough to attempt to voice complaints, and motivated to resolve conflict.



If there is a kind of motivated reasoning related to being dependent on the relationship, then this kind of phenomena may impede conflict resolution. Cloven and Roloff (1990) speak to this possibility explicitly in their discussion:

Perhaps partners with superior alternatives exert control through their indifference (e.g., lack of affection, excessive independence, minimal respect, and interest in other romantic involvements), rather than through more direct or even indirect power tactics (cf. Folger & Poole, 1984). If their superior perceived alternatives to lead to the chilling effect, they do not have to act in a controlling fashion. *Their relational counterparts have persuaded themselves* [emphasis added]. (p. 72)

Recognizing and articulating one's own individual needs are a critical aspect of a relationship (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004). For example, there are some dynamics like codependent dynamics in families with substance abuse where spouses and children have a difficult time articulating their own needs when another family member's issues fill the space (Hocker & Wilmot, 2018). This assertion, paired with the definition of conflict as incompatible goals, there would necessarily be conditions that would need to be satisfied for not just pursuing confrontation, but be able to experience dissonance usually borne out of a violated expectation. If there are individual or relational factors that might influence the recognition of one's own needs in a power-imbalanced relationship, then there may not be the recognition of complaints to withhold.

This study is intended to extend the work of the chilling effect (Cloven & Roloff, 1993, 1994; Roloff & Cloven, 1990) as well as related work on the role of power on the chilling effect (Samp & Solomon, 2001; Solomon, Knobloch, & Fitzpatrick, 2004; Solomon & Samp, 1998; Worley & Samp, 2013) in understanding how two forms of power (i.e., dependence and punitive) interact with the perception of complaints and the expression of conflict. Specifically, one question is whether a combination of high dependence power and higher punitive power is related to a lack of conflict as well as a lack of complaints. Further, another question is whether motivated

reasoning functions as a means to achieve relational maintenance goals. Individual and relational moderating variables (e.g., general optimism, communal strength) may have additional explanatory value for understanding an absence of complaints and conflict. The findings of the current study could have important implications in terms of a better understanding of risk factors within relationships, and the potential for protective factors in coping with relational threat or harm.

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW AND RATIONALE**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The sections in this literature review are intended to shed a light on the complexities underlying the study of power dynamics and an absence of complaints and conflict. The literature review begins with a section on why it is difficult to study an absence of communication in general. The next section on reactions to conflict literature aids in understanding different individual responses to conflict whether it be the experience of being desensitized to aggression, suppressing one's own reactions, or behavioral responses such as escalation or accommodation. Those areas of literature serve as a foundation to understand the complexities underlying the chilling effect and this study's assessment of the potential absence of complaints and conflict amidst a power imbalance. More specific to the current hypotheses and research questions, research on two different forms of power based on exchange theories are explored to better understand the chilling effect. Then, the next two sections explore motivated reasoning as a potentially maladaptive relational maintenance behavior which provide rationale to explore moderating factors (i.e., positivism, self-control, and communal orientation) that may be related to the perception of complaints and the expression of conflict. The last section explains the theoretical foundations to understanding the chilling effect, Cloven and Roloff's (1993) call for future research into factors related to the idea of learned helplessness, and how this study is intended as an exploration of relational and individual factors that may be tied to an absence of complaints where a chilling effect would be expected.

### **Under the Surface: The Difficulty of Identifying an Absence of Communication**

In general, studying communication that is either indirect or absent entirely is a challenging endeavor. Decades of research have explored *withholding* complaints; however, taking this a step further, this study intended to shed light on factors that may foster an absence of complaints to voice. There is an abundance of fruitful lines of research to inform this approach. Types of

communicative avoidance and absence that inform this study are family secrets (Afifi, Olson & Armstrong, 2005; Vangelisti, 1994), the silent treatment (Andersen et al., 1995; Guerrero et al., 1995), stonewalling (Gottman, 1993), and indirect nonverbal cues (Pruitt, 1971; Wall, 1985), all of which demonstrate that silence can speak volumes. However, rather than reporting a *withholding* of complaints, what may be even more difficult is to identify the reported *absence* of complaints.

An absence of conflict avoidance (due to unrecognized dissatisfactions) may be important, but difficult to see. For example, Hocker and Wilmot (2018) emphasize that people commonly cite harmful escalatory spirals in conflict literature; but just as importantly, there are avoidance spirals that also constitute destructive conflict interaction: “Whereas escalatory spirals are characterized by *overt* and *implied* expression of the conflict, avoidance spirals demonstrate *covert* expression” (p. 33). If this area of conflict is harder to see, it may be even harder to address as the factors that perpetuate it are also difficult to recognize.

If an area of conflict is sufficiently resistant to change, a couple may make the topic taboo, effectively taking the topic off the table (Miller, Roloff, & Malis, 2007). A topic can become taboo when a partner perceived that attempts to change the partner or the situation are futile (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985; Cloven & Roloff, 1994; Johnson & Roloff, 2000). If the topic is viewed as unimportant (e.g., political views that have no bearing on the relationship), it is more likely that the topic is declared taboo explicitly (Roloff & Ifert, 1998), implying there may be also taboo topics that have sufficient reason to be understood implicitly. If the topic is viewed as having credible potential for relational harm, it is more likely to be a tacit agreement; in other words, one person may signal through indirect communication such as hints or threatening non-verbal cues (Pruitt, 1971; Wall, 1985) that a topic should be avoided.

Complaints related to power are some of the most difficult issues to resolve (Miller, Roloff, & Malis, 2007). Based on the assumptions laid out in this section, it seems plausible to suggest

that there may be relationships where issues related to power and control may not be recognized as such if there is an adequate motive to shield oneself from information that would complicate the stability of the relationship. If this is the case, it might be very difficult to resolve a problem that is not voiced let alone identified. A helpful exemplar is an area of research on motivated inaccuracy, a biased tendency to be less accurate in interpretation of interpersonal interactions if there is sufficient reason (Ickes & Simpson, 2001; Schweinle, Ickes, & Bernstein, 2002; Simpson, Ickes, & Blackstone, 1995). Bias in this context can refer to the likeliness of inferring rejection or criticism. For example, if an aggressive person wants to believe that someone is criticizing or rejecting them, they will be biased towards interpreting it as so (Schweinle, Ickes, & Bernstein, 2002). This seems to go both ways though in that those couples who are exceptionally close as well as those who are more insecure are found to be less accurate in interpreting a partner's thoughts and feelings (Simpson et al., 1995). As such, it is possible that partners in relationships with a power imbalance may be biased in their interpretation of their partner's thoughts and feelings to protect the relationship or oneself (Ickes & Simpson, 2001; Simpson et al., 1995). For example, those who attribute more power to their partner rates problems as less severe (Solomon & Samp, 1998).

Similar to how conflict is conceptualized in this study, exercising power can be treated with neutrality as well. A more powerful person in the relationship is not necessarily an intrinsic threat. One sign of a satisfying relationship is the perception of mutual influence. For example, an influential and charismatic person can still have the capacity to prioritize and balance their needs and that of their partner, and also still allow for mutual influence so partners perceive efficacy and personal power in the relationship (Hocker & Wilmot, 2018; Solomon & Roloff, 2019). Additionally, there is a category of personal power related to being prosocial that is associated with a sense of personal responsibility for others (McClelland, Solomon & Roloff, 2019). As such, this study takes on an assumption that if there is a power imbalance that results in someone

withholding complaints, there are other factors concurrently at play. In other words, the imbalance of power is consequential if there is a perception that a partner has more power over them, or if there is a motive to exert (whether it be overt or covert) power over the other person at their expense in pursuing power for its own sake. In a relational context, one way to understand this would be the mutuality of *both/and power* (where both parties are empowered) as opposed to *either/or power*, which is considered to be a power dynamic that is mutually exclusive, competitive, and intrinsically zero-sum (Fletcher, 1999; Hocker & Wilmot, 2018).

Underlying an imbalance of power is that it may be intrinsically resistant to resolution, whether or not either partner is aware of these processes or gives voice to it. Issues related to a power imbalance are seen as key factors in intractable conflict (Miller, Roloff & Malis, 2007), such as fighting over decision-making power about resources like who has the money and who gets to spend it. If one person in the relationship seeks control of the other person, a power struggle could ensue, of which the other person's resistance to attempts to influence the interaction may likely be intrinsically thwarted to maintain control. Whether or not the less powerful partner is aware, attempts to address a conflict rooted in power could likely be intractable should the more powerful partner wield that power, and/or whether the less powerful partner perceives a threat for attempting to exert influence. Considering this, a less powerful partner would likely have less complaints or conflict to self-report if there are external and internal factors that promote motivated reasoning that would shield oneself from perceiving another's behavior that many would judge as violating expectations of interpersonal relationships. Violated expectations is a condition necessary to perceive complaints let alone articulate them in the form of conflict.

In sum, although it is expected that relational partners have at least some complaints, even in the most satisfying relationships, cognitive processes related to motivated reasoning in a context of dysfunctional power imbalance likely obviate complaints and conflict. Hence, although it is difficult to assess an absence of a communicative behavior, this study assessed the frequency of

conflict and reported complaints; a reported lack of conflict or complaints that could be voiced (e.g., when aversive behaviors are present) was expected to reflect the outcomes of this power imbalance.

### **Managing Responses to Conflict and Aggression**

This section will review areas of literature that are pertinent to understanding the approach for this study. The first part illuminates the variety of factors that help to understand that there are many different responses to and coping with conflict and aggression, and then the second part connects the responses to relational maintenance behavior that may serve as a means of understanding the absence of the chilling effect.

#### ***Context matters: Varying views on conflict and aggression***

Conflict is quite common in daily life. Though the dynamics may be different in romantic relationships versus involuntary relationships (e.g., siblings), aggression is very common and ranges in intensity from unwelcome teasing to more obvious forms of violence. Verbal aggression is very common, and although it is seen as aversive and harmful, as much as 90% of men and women have admitted engaging in it with their partners (Malik et al., 1997). Aggression can impact the recipient in a variety of ways including anger, depression, distress, and anxiety (Block, Block, & Morrison, 1981; Cummings, Davies, & Simpson, 1994; Porter & O’Leary, 1980). Aggression tends to feed into more aggression in some situations and can escalate mutual aggression (Infante & Rancer, 1996). Though the suppression of anger, and thus aggression, may be able to help a relationship (Rolloff & Ifert, 2000), it can also be associated with relational dissatisfaction, rumination, and distress (Afifi et al., 2009).

Underneath the generalizations of the literature, there is wide variability in the response to conflict and aggression both on intrapersonal and interpersonal levels. There is literature pertaining to conflict and aggression that can aid in the understanding relational and individual factors that

may inhibit or encourage the expression of emotions related to conflict. These factors range from individual traits and qualities or characteristics of the relationship. The combination of these factors may provide insights into the presence and absence of aggression and conflict. The divergence of these areas of research seem to point to the need to understand relational context, immediate versus long-term goals, and whether positive outcomes for the relationship are at the continual expense of one of the partner's individual needs.

A core assumption of this study is that the occurrence of conflict is not, in and of itself, harmful. The assumption is that conflict resolution and the responses to or lack of conflict can provide insight into foundational dynamics of power in some romantic relationships. For individuals who grew up in a house with low amounts of verbal aggression, suppression is associated with better physiological outcomes; those who grew up with high amounts of verbal aggression appear to have a much different experience of verbal suppression as suppression tends to be related to those with moderate and low amounts of verbal aggression (Aloia & Solomon, 2016). The presence of verbal aggression has an inverse relationship with distress suggesting a kind of desensitization to verbal aggression (Aloia & Solomon, 2013, 2016; Aloia & Worley, 2019). Yet, even low amounts of verbal aggression appear to create a longer state of distress for those unaccustomed to aggression than those who experienced high amounts of verbal aggression (Aloia & Solomon, 2016).

The experience of conflict can vary in other ways. For example, it takes time for some people to recover from conflict (Aloia & Solomon, 2016), whereas others believe conflict is positive and find that it is a means by which they manage their own anger (Aloia & Solomon, 2016; Spielberger et al., 1991), and may even feel relieved or satisfied after releasing their anger (Martin et al., 2010). For example, when some men believe their anger was provoked, those who released their anger recovered faster from conflict than those who repressed their anger (Lai & Linden, 1992). Expressing frustration is associated with mitigating conflict escalation (Infante,



1995), and is seen as a way to reduce tension (Bushman, Baumeister, & Phillips, 2001). Infante (1995) found that expressing frustration helped to regulate conflict escalation and prevent the occurrence of physical violence. From these areas of literature, it seems that for some individuals expressing anger is functional, and helps them to achieve instrumental goals (deTurck, 1987).

However, there can also be negative experiences with expressing frustration and anger. Some senders feel guilty about expressing verbal aggression if it is associated with a concern for harming others (Frodi, Macauley, & Thome, 1977). Further, even if there is the same level of frustration or anger, women may suppress the emotions and more likely to experience regret for expressing verbal aggression for fears of retaliation (Eagly & Steffen, 1986). Additionally, it may be difficult to measure as accommodating or placating may start inside the individual's mind, like mental discounting such as attributing one's own behavior as self-blame, or minimizing the severity of aversive behavior (Brashers, Neidig, & Goldsmith, 2004; Doherty, 1981a).

The effects of conflict avoidance also depend on the context. Avoidance is one way to maintain distance or decrease interdependence (Hocker & Wilmot, 2018). The avoidance of voicing concerns may be considered a short-term relational maintenance strategy to avoid conflict (Leo et al., 2019), or to sacrifice one's own needs or goals in service of the other person or relationship (Rusbult & Verette, 1991; Van Lange, et al., 1997). An example of this are crisis situations or life transitions that necessitate one partner subverting their needs temporarily. This could result in shielding a partner in need from either distressing information or asserting individual needs, also known in the stress and coping literature as *protective buffering* (Coyne & Smith, 1991; Suls et al., 1997). Protective buffering may or may not be harmful depending on how long the situation persists (Leo et al., 2019), or on how adaptive and flexible a relational or familial system is to accommodate new circumstances (Donovan-Kicken & Caughlin, 2011; Helgeson, 2018). A partner may accommodate aversive behavior or avoid bringing up distressing topics in the short-term if their partner is judged to be unequipped to manage it (Coyne & Smith, 1991;

Dailey & Palomares, 2004; Donovan-Kicken & Caughlin, 2011; Suls, 1997). However, topic avoidance may be associated with distress for both the sender and receiver (Donovan-Kicken & Caughlin, 2011) as an afflicted partner could experience distress if the buffering partner is withdrawn (Pistrang & Barker, 1995), and either partner may be at risk of depression if either cannot confide in one another (Harrison, Maguire, & Pitceathly, 1995). People may cope by internalizing the conflict by playing down an issue, or blaming themselves for it (Doherty, 1981a). Mental health related to unresolved issues are tied to pessimism, hopelessness, fear, and behavior such as substance abuse, psychological and physical abuse (Murphy & O'Farrell, 1994).

Overall, these areas of literature suggest that context matters. Related to the purposes of this study, a certain behavior such as accommodating may be viewed favorably as exercising self-control, which is associated with positive relational outcomes (Pronk et al., 2019; Stafford, 2020) in the context of balanced relationships. Yet, in the context of a power-imbalanced relationship, accommodating the partner (i.e., continually yielding to the partner) may be judged as tolerating abusive behavior. The point here is that behaviors regarding conflict management can only be judged as adaptive or maladaptive depending on other relationship dynamics (e.g., power) and whether relational outcomes are considered beneficial for both partners and not at expense of one.

### ***Context matters: understanding the role of relational maintenance behavior***

Relational maintenance is a broad concept in interpersonal communication and refers to the strategies and routine behaviors associated with maintaining a relationship (Canary & Dainton, 2006; Canary & Stafford, 1994; Dindia & Canary, 1993). However, underneath this concept are various definitions, behaviors, and strategies that constitute the term. Four definitions of relational maintenance are as follows: 1) maintaining a relationship to keep it existing, 2) maintaining a relationship to keep it in a desired state, 3) maintaining a relationship to keep it a certain way in terms of features, 4) maintaining a relationship in terms of repairing and restoring it to a desired state (Canary & Dainton, 2006; Canary & Stafford, 1994; Dindia & Canary, 1993). Canary and

Stafford (1994) revised their definition of relational maintenance to include non-interactive components (e.g., cognitions and intrapersonal factors). Additionally, not all relational maintenance is strategic as relational maintenance as it can be routine (Canary & Stafford, 1994). As such, more recent research (e.g., Stafford, 2011) refers to *behavior* as opposed to *strategies*.

Maintaining relationships in the public mind might be perceived as intentional, proactive behavior; however it is not necessarily strategic (Dainton & Stafford, 1993), nor is it voluntary or involuntary (Canary & Dainton, 2003). Additionally, maintenance may not even be carried out communicatively as maintenance behavior is also associated with cognitions and societal concepts (e.g., collectivism; Canary & Dainton, 2006; Canary & Yum, 2016; Stafford, 2005). This line of research aids in the understanding of how carrying out relational maintenance behavior may involve less visible or overt strategies employed in the process of the managing, easing, or coping with conflict. Relevant to this area of study, outsiders might not understand how relational maintenance behaviors can contribute to or perpetuate power-imbalanced relational dynamics.

Literature on relational maintenance behaviors typically includes prosocial behaviors related to openness, assurances, positivity, shared tasks, and social network activities (Canary & Stafford, 1992; Stafford & Canary, 1991); and even the term *relational maintenance* may imply positivity to a passing observer. Later work added conflict management and advice as additional relational maintenance activities (Stafford, Dainton, & Haas, 2000; Leo et al., 2019). In general, research has found that behavior related to prosocial relational maintenance predicts relational satisfaction, liking, and stability (Canary & Yum, 2016). Stafford (2003) asserted that relational maintenance behavior could also include humor, small talk, affection, mediated communication, and antisocial behavior.

More recent research has assessed the role of antisocial and negative maintenance behaviors (Dainton & Gross, 2008), yet research in this area has been limited compared to positive maintenance behaviors (Goodboy & Bolkan, 2011; Goodboy, Myers, & Members of Investigating

Communication, 2010). Negative or anti-social maintenance behaviors refer to a set of undesirable behaviors (Dainton, Goodboy, Borzea, & Goldman, 2017; Dainton & Gross, 2008): 1) inducing jealousy; 2) avoidance (a broad category which could include overt acts like topic avoidance, but also mental or physical avoidance); 3) surveillance; 4) infidelity (which includes flirting strategically); 5) destructive conflict (e.g., verbal aggression, controlling behavior); and 6) allowing control which could include behavior like submitting to the other partner to dictate activities in free time and making decisions unilaterally (Dainton & Gross, 2008). Although often viewed as destructive, these behaviors can nevertheless be function in terms of the goal of maintaining the relationship.

Relationships will commonly contain isolated elements of negative relational maintenance behaviors. In general, there is a reasonable amount of consensus by scholars that there is a greater use of negative relational maintenance behaviors amongst dissatisfied couples (Goodboy & Bolkan, 2011). Using more negative relational maintenance activities is associated with less respect, liking, satisfaction, commitment, and *control mutuality* (i.e., mutual agreement of relational control; Goodboy et al., 2010; Stafford, 2003; Stafford & Canary, 1991, 2006). As such, a pattern of non-prosocial maintenance behaviors could potentially deteriorate relationships, or at least hinder relationship progression (Guerrero, Andersen, & Afifi, 2017).

Like the previous terms employed in this study, relational maintenance may be best viewed objectively to understand that it may depend on context to understand whether or not relational maintenance behavior is dysfunctional or maladaptive. The dark side of interpersonal communication shows that classifying behaviors is not always straightforward as simply positive behaviors (light) and negative (dark; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2013). For example, there can be positive relational maintenance behaviors used in service of self-interest, and short-term negative relational maintenance strategies may be in service of long-term relational goals (Leo et al., 2019). Additionally, avoidant behaviors to mitigate conflict may be beneficial in the short-term (Leo et

al., 2019), or inducing jealousy might prompt renewed commitment in the other partner. However, and more specific to the current study, placating aggressive behavior may arguably be a behavior related to both relational maintenance and threat mitigation, as placating, conciliatory and accommodating behaviors are common responses to aggressive, abusive, and pathological behavior (Fischer, Baucom, & Cohen, 2016; Holtzworth-Munroe, 2000; Holtzworth-Munroe & Hutchinson, 1993; Holtzworth-Munroe & Stuart, 1994).

Additionally, there are other forms of cognitive and psychological processes related to relational maintenance behavior. The theory of uncertainty management posits that avoidance serves as a buffer from information that may be distressing or overwhelming to know, which may include avoiding information about their own relationship (Brashers, 2004, 2007). There are various forms of this represented in the literature such as selective attention (Ratneshwar, Warlop, Mick, & Seeger, 1997), selective ignoring, and direct information avoidance (Mishel, 1988). Additionally, people may even be motivated to promote uncertainty (Brashers, 2007), which is related to the research mentioned above on empathic accuracy (Ickes, 1997; Ickes, 2001; Simpson, Oriña, & Ickes, 2003) where *motivated inaccuracy* was found to play a role in protecting oneself and the relationship from distress (Ickes & Simpson, 2001; Simpson et al., 1995). Similar to motivated inaccuracy is motivated reasoning. Brashers et al. (2000) uses an example of hearing negative information about a potential suitor; the response might be to keep looking for positive information until the point where one has gathered some pieces of positive information to confirm a desired perception. This kind of confirmation bias could likely serve as a motivational aid in a relational maintenance process, in the form of the justification to remain in a valued relationship.

The research supports a similar, but more general, cognitive process in relationships. For example, positive illusions, or being generous in attributions regarding disappointing behavior of a partner, is generally associated with better relational outcomes (Le et al., 2010; Miller & Rempel, 2004; Murray & Holmes, 1997). One study attempting to understand positive illusions employed

the analogy of rose-tinted glasses to explain their findings that relational satisfaction had a positive association with the partner's perception of facial appearance (Penton-Voak, Rowe & Williams, 2007). These concepts imply that a kind of benevolent self-deception is commonly deployed in close relationships. As such, if one is in a mutually healthy and satisfying relationship, these kinds of cognitions can be helpful in looking for reasons to see each other in a positive light. To invoke the sentiments of the oft-covered song "The Best" by Bonnie Tyler, one is motivated to do so if their partner is "simply the best, better than all of the rest" (Tyler, 1983, 1:02).

However, in some relationships this behavior may come at the expense of the person who may have to continue to give charitable attributions for aversive behavior, or where someone could be cognitively discounting their experience at their own risk. In other words, what one may consider as harmless, benign, or even helpful cognitive distortions in one relationship may be more consequential in more extreme situations or states of anxiety where negative emotions can create distortions in judgment of their partner's behavior (Mikulincer, Shaver, & Pereg, 2003), or when it could be at one's expense to overlook behavior that may constitute a threat of harm or loss. In plain terms, the partner appears to be talking themselves into staying in what seems to be a problematic relationship. And in relationships where more extreme control and other aversive behaviors are exercised, commonly deployed cognitions such as generous attributions, mental discounting, and selective attention may serve to maintain the relationship, but likely benefitting the more powerful partner's own self-interests rather than the well-being of the disempowered partner.

Taken together, these areas of research show that a lack of understanding of one's own general motivated cognitions can confound the ability to see the chilling effect or the absence of the chilling effect, in part perhaps because it is quite common to employ generous attributions to one's relational partner and these efforts are often beneficial to relationships. In a similar vein, there is a common belief that people should be willing to accommodate and make sacrifices in

relationships. Understanding that maintenance activities are considered so routine and beneficial to be almost synonymous or requisite with being in a relationship masks the potential for maintenance to be seen as harmful to some partners. And this might factor into the chilling effect: a more powerful partner may put their less powerful partner in a situation that requires the less powerful partner to continuously accommodate and sacrifice to be able to remain in a valued relationship.

### **The Role of Power in the Absence of an Expected Chilling effect: Interdependence Explanations**

This section will provide an overview of the theories and research that help to understand the foundations of the chilling effect, research on the chilling effect, the quandary of where it is missing, and the kinds and areas of research that may be able to illuminate the areas of potential explanatory mechanisms.

#### ***Interdependence theory***

A theoretical viewpoint critical to understanding the decision to withhold complaints is interdependence theory (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) in addition to later work that employs the investment model (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993; Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003). These theories collectively emphasize the role of rewards and costs to understand relational dynamics. The perception of which one believes that their outcomes are better in the relationship than what they can get elsewhere in the form of an alternative would result in the degree of which one is dependent on the relationship (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993). In more plain terms, if they think they can do better than their current partner, they may be less dependent on the relationship, but may feel the opposite if they think their partner can do better than oneself. Important to the current study, those with greater dependence or less power is more likely to withhold complaints (Cloven & Roloff, 1993).

There are several types of power, but two are the focus of this study: dependence power and punitive power (Lawler & Bacharach, 1987). *Dependence power* pertains to a perceived lack of alternatives to attain relational rewards. It is also a power imbalance rooted in perceiving that one's partner may not be as invested or satisfied with the relationship. Another way of describing this form of power is the *principle of least interest*, in which the person who is least committed has more power in the relationship (Sprecher, Schmeeckle, & Felmlee, 2006). *Punitive power* simply refers to the power one partner has to control the other by being able to create negative outcomes and is based on the perception of a credible threat of harm (Lawler & Bacharach, 1987). Both forms of power are associated with rating problems in the relationship as less severe (Samp & Solomon, 2001; Solomon & Samp, 1998).

In terms of punitive power, studies have found that a partner is less likely to express complaints regarding controlling behavior if they perceive a threat of aggressive behavior or that they will be punished (Cloven & Roloff, 1993; Solomon, Knobloch, & Fitzpatrick, 2004; Solomon & Samp, 1998). These impacts are magnified by those who fear conflict and for those who perceive their partner to be less dependent on the relationship (Solomon et al., 2004). There are understandable reasons for feeling fearful as aggressive responses are more likely when one partner challenges controlling behavior (Coleman & Straus, 1986), and conflict is more common when issues surrounding controlling behavior are salient (Coleman & Straus, 1986; Stets & Straus, 1990). Additionally, there is an association with inhibited assertiveness of the other and short-term compliance when one partner exhibits aggressive behavior (Turner, Layton, & Simons, 1975) or its potential use (Ellsworth, Carlsmith, & Henson, 1972). Interestingly, there were no significant sex differences in the Cloven and Roloff study (1993), which meant that both males and females were equally subject to the chilling effect.

Dependence power, in general, has far-reaching consequences for relationships. Mutual dependence, or a balance of power, is associated with more positivity, feelings of security,



stability, less reliance on record-keeping behaviors, and less use of coercive and threatening behavior (Baumeister et al., 1993; Drigotas et al., 1999; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003). Conversely, a partner who is less dependent on the relationship tends to have more control over resources (“calls the shots”) and can decide whether to mete out rewards. As such, “the more dependent partner has less say in decision making, carries the greater burden of interaction costs (is more likely to accommodate, sacrifice), and is more vulnerable to possible abandonment” (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003, p. 364). This additionally exemplifies how it may not take much to induce the chilling effect, or motivated reasoning to not to think about it, especially over time.

Given the structural aspects of an imbalance of dependence, it is understandable how the less dependent person is stuck in a reinforcing dynamic in which inhibiting complaints perpetuates the power disparity (Cupach, 2007; Roloff & Cloven, 1990). However, if the less powerful person values the relationship, does not perceive better alternatives, and is dependent on their partner, cognitions may serve as an internal buffer to maintain an illusion of personal control. It seems possible that a sense of internal agency may provide the means of internal maintenance of the relationship.

### ***The chilling effect and its potential absence***

As discussed above, the chilling effect is a specific type of topic avoidance related to withholding complaints, especially as it relates to controlling behavior (Cloven & Roloff, 1993; Roloff & Cloven, 1990; Roloff & Solomon, 2002). The chilling effect is associated with a more dependent partner withholding complaints for fear of loss or harm, as well as either an increase of relational costs and an interruption of rewards (Cloven & Roloff, 1993), especially if there is a more powerful partner who has more control over costs and rewards (Blau, 1964). Specifically, the original study found that there was a higher association of withheld complaints when inhibited by a fear of conflict escalation, and the association was greater if there was a relationship involving one partner with low commitment and greater alternatives (Roloff & Cloven, 1990). Cloven and

Roloff (1993) found the chilling effect in dating partners associated with anticipation of symbolic or physical aggression (i.e., punitive power), but it was amplified with the interaction of dependence. However, though there is some association and interaction effects with punitive power, the chilling effect seems to be more significantly associated with an imbalance of commitment and dependence (Solomon & Roloff, 2019).

In the first study of the chilling effect, Roloff and Cloven (1990) concluded with the possibility that, especially in cases where the chilling effect may be related to the more powerful partner's indifference than controlling behavior, the less powerful partner may be persuading themselves into withholding complaints. The possible consequences of these kinds of findings and possible dynamics is that the less powerful partner may easily second-guess themselves if there is nothing overt on which to base a reality check. If the partner is sufficiently committed, then they would engage in normative commitment behaviors such as selective attention as well as positive and generous attributions.

As mentioned before, the chilling effect specifically refers to controlling behavior. Controlling behavior is a distinct risk factor of harm independent of the presence of physical violence in relationships that happen to be characterized by a pattern of power and control. Dutton and Goodman (2005) state that coercive control does not require a threat of harm or loss to be carried out, only that the belief that a consequence is possible to establish control or obtain compliance-gaining behavior from another. In other words, for the purposes of this study, the threat must be understood as paying the price of noncompliance.

Cloven and Roloff (1993) examined the impacts of aggression on the chilling effect. The study found that the chilling effect was more pronounced for individuals who tended to fear conflict because they anticipated physical or symbolic aggression from their partner they perceived as less dependent on the relationship. Previous research had found that punitive or coercive power is tied to accommodating partners who fear the other might take away resources or respond

aggressively (Bacharach & Lawler, 1981; Roloff & Cloven, 1990; Rusbult et al., 1991). Coercive threat is necessitated by perceiving that the threat is credible and that the partner is capable of carrying out the threat (Cloven & Roloff, 1993; Hocker & Wilmot, 2018; Tedeschi et al., 1972). In a study of abused women, half reported attempts to reduce aggressive episodes by avoiding topics that may provoke their aggressor, particularly with more severe abuse (Gelles & Straus, 1988). Other studies found that accommodating behaviors may have been rational as a short-term strategy given that conflict surrounding controlling behavior, independence, and decision-making are tied to aggression when the aggressor perceives a challenge to their dominance (Cloven & Roloff, 1993; Coleman & Straus, 1990; Follingstad, 1988; Stets & Priog-Good, 1987; Stets & Straus, 1990).

In the original study of the chilling effect, a deviation was observed by Roloff and Cloven (1990) that an aspect of the interdependence model, perceived quality of one's partner alternatives, did not have the expected association with complaints regarding controlling behavior. The intention of the current study was to ascertain whether a certain level or interaction of the two forms of power are associated with the ability to articulate complaints. It seems plausible that controlling behavior exists even when it is not revealed in research reliant on self-reporting. For example, two people in the Roloff and Cloven (1990) study reported no complaints, which is notable for the arguments asserted in the current study.

What this study attempts to do is to create a way to capture the absence of the chilling effect. As mentioned earlier, it is not easy nor straightforward to identify and adequately capture the absence of a form of topic avoidance. To achieve this, the study design includes several dimensions of which to calculate the absence of an expected chilling effect. The calculation and methodology are described below. The definition for the chilling effect used here is that the respondent reports the presence of aversive behavior, it bothers the respondent, but they do not

express it to their partner. The absent chilling effect, then, would be the presence of aversive behaviors (known to bother others), but that the respondent reports as not bothering them.

Previous studies used hypothetical relationship problems (e.g., Solomon & Samp, 1998) and self-reporting of specific complaints (e.g., Cloven & Roloff, 1993). Learning from previous research methods, this study attempted to circumvent several previous issues by asking the respondent to report on the frequency of behaviors that are commonly characterized as aversive. Ten areas of behavior were established from a review of the literature on social allergens, annoyances, and aversive interpersonal behaviors (Buss, 1989; Cunningham, et al., 2005; Kowalski, 2001; Ter Laak et al., 2003) such as condescending behavior, neglectful behavior, and self-centered behavior. Asking first about the mere frequency of the specific behaviors displayed by their partner first is helpful in creating a means of comparison. For each set of behavior, questions then gauged the respondent's level of irritation with their partner's behavior, expression of irritation, and whether it resulted in conflict. From those four questions across ten areas of behavior, level of irritations (i.e., complaints), conflict resulting from irritants, unexpressed irritations (i.e., chilling effect), and a lack of irritations (i.e., missing chilling effect) could be quantified.

Unlike previous studies in this literature review, what makes this method of questioning distinct is that the missing chilling effect via a lack of unexpressed irritants is accomplished by the built-in assumption that certain aversive behaviors are generally harmful—aversive behaviors that would bother most—do not bother some respondents (i.e., those hypothesized to be subject to both forms of power). Given these assumptions, the hypotheses of this study are whether the punitive power and/or the dependence power that a respondent reports being subject to in their relationship has an impact on felt irritations, conflict, unexpressed irritations, and a lack of irritations (based on the presence of aversive behaviors exhibited by their partner):

*H1: Dependence power of the respondent's partner will be: a) negatively related to the number of complaints reported in their relationships, b) negatively related to the frequency of conflict respondents perceive in their relationships, c) positively related to the number of irritants reported but not expressed to their partner, and d) positively related to a higher discrepancy of aversive behaviors reported and resulting irritations.*

*H2: Punitive power of the respondent's partner will be: a) negatively related to the number of complaints reported in their relationships, b) negatively related to the frequency of conflict respondents perceive in their relationships, c) positively related to the number of irritants reported but not expressed to their partner, and d) positively related to a higher discrepancy between aversive behaviors reported and resulting irritations.*

Some of the many important contributions of Cloven and Roloff's study (1993) is that those who are subject to the chilling effect may not be reflected in traditional indicators such as commitment and alternatives (i.e., dependence power). One example is that testing aggressive potential and punitive power is important even if it is not as strong of an association as other indicators as it still has an impact on other factors. In other words, though there may be some deterrence due to threat of harm, the threat of being abandoned may be greater. Another interesting contribution of that study is that symbolic aggression, even when taking into account punitive power, was still very powerful. As such, if the partner of the respondent experiences both forms of power from their partner (dependent and punitive), then arguably this could result in the least amount of complaints and conflict.

*H3: Dependent and punitive power will interact in predicting these outcomes, such that the combination of higher dependence and higher punitive power will be associated with: a) the least complaints reported in the relationship, b) the least frequent conflict, c) a greater number of unexpressed irritants, and d) a higher discrepancy between aversive behaviors reported and resulting irritations.*

There has been a proliferation of research in the last three decades on the chilling effect. These areas of research assist with a breadth of understanding as there has been a broad exploration of potential factors related to (but not limited to) individual dispositions, cognitions, dyadic interaction, gender effects, and familial dynamics. Individual factors include, for example, conflict avoidance (Cloven & Roloff, 1993), taking conflict personally (Aloia & Worley, 2019), and rejection sensitivity (Worley & Samp, 2018). Interpersonal factors include family of origin (Aloia & Solomon, 2013, 2015), perceived efficacy and resolvability (Afifi, Olson, & Armstrong, 2005; Makoul & Roloff, 1998), dyadic effects such as taboo topics (Roloff & Ifert, 1998), and familial dynamics (Afifi, Olson, & Armstrong, 2005; Aloia & Solomon, 2015; Aloia & Worley, 2019). Taken together, these insights speak to the need to account for a constellation of individual and interpersonal factors at play. This particular study attempts to identify individual factors that impact the absence of expression and perception of complaints (i.e., an absence that would preclude the ability to observe a chilling effect).

Relevant to the goals and research questions of this study, Cloven and Roloff (1993) concluded that the chilling effect could potentially provide insights to the learned helplessness model. They mention having reservations about the model of learned helplessness, stating that their data might suggest limitations to the learned helplessness model, but that perhaps the chilling effect is a precursor to it. However, the authors also mention that avoidance is not necessarily learned helplessness as there are other factors involved in deciding not to confront one's partner. Hence, they also suggested assessing relational and personal circumstances that might yield different reasons for not voicing complaints.

### **Coping with Imbalanced Relationships and Relational Maintenance**

This section of the literature review aims to aid in the understanding of how internal maintenance activities to downplay complaints serve as coping mechanisms for the uncertainties imbued, and the intrinsically accompanying stress involved, in maintaining a power-imbalanced

relationship. For example, Solomon et al. (2004) found limited evidence of the chilling effect in married populations, likely because with time the less powerful partner may be even more likely to rationalize and minimize grievances (Solomon & Samp, 1998). These kinds of findings make Cloven and Roloff's (1993) suggestion that the chilling effect may be a precursor to the idea of learned helplessness intuitive, especially due to the fact that the less powerful partner fails to assert themselves in their relationship. Due to the inability to fully know a respondent's circumstances, a perspective of nonvoluntary dependence may be a more apt term that better incorporates the construct of power (Rusbult & Martz, 1995; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003) in its many forms (e.g., social, economic, etc.). This may be particularly salient from an interdependence perspective where the less powerful partner (legitimately or illegitimately) perceives no viable alternatives to the more powerful partner. To unpack these ideas in relation to this study, the next section reviews literature regarding the internalization of conflict and motivated reasoning as explanations for a lack of complaints.

### ***Relational maintenance activities: internalizing conflict***

Following Cloven and Roloff's (1993) original study, research assessed the role of power on mechanisms that influenced conflict avoidance such as downplaying the severity of issues (Cloven & Roloff, 1994; Samp & Solomon, 2001; Solomon & Samp, 1998). In a way, this could be viewed as both a factor that influences the chilling effect and a means of coping. Downplaying an issue and a fear of consequences together influence avoiding confrontation (Cloven & Roloff, 1994). Solomon and Samp (1998) introduce their study with compelling arguments that there are a variety of reasons why someone would be motivated to adjust problem appraisals as it relates to how people manage problems in their relationships. Taking into account appraisals of problem severity is essential to understanding conflict management (Fincham, Bradbury & Scott, 1990). If one is attempting to manage problems in the relationship with limits to their own power to influence, it makes sense that one would turn inside to minimize the dissonance that problem

severity presents: “In other words, merely acknowledging problems as serious creates a difficult and even hazardous situation for powerless individuals” (Solomon & Samp, 1998, p. 193). These authors state that those with powerful partners can avoid a dilemma by simply discounting the problem. Avoiding conflict may very well be an effective short-term strategy to avoid aggression, and internalizing the conflict may be an effective means of altering the perception of an experience.

In related literature, Hocker and Wilmot (1985) found that in certain situations people may downgrade their requests if anticipating a negative response. Roloff and Cloven (1990) further point out that this is an important covert process (maybe imperceptible to outside observers). This hits straight to the heart of conflict avoidance and is the essence of the chilling effect. In imagined interactions research, Honeycutt and Bryan (2011) found that although imagined interactions helped as a kind of rehearsal for a difficult conversation, in some cases the imagined interaction resulted in the participant talking themselves out of the future conversation, with the effect magnified in situations of perceived threat (Honeycutt, 2003). And there are very real risks: people who are less dependent are likely more willing to terminate a relationship (Rusbult, Zembrodt, & Gunn, 1982), and as mentioned before, complaints about controlling behavior are commonly associated with violent episodes (Gelles & Straus, 1988; Stets & Straus, 1990). Additionally, there may be an incentive to avoid thinking about an unresolved issue or airing it out as the perceived threat an unresolvable argument poses is associated with distress stemming from relational uncertainty (Carr, Schrod, & Ledbetter, 2012; Morrison & Schrod, 2017).

Under these assumptions, being subject to controlling behavior that is perceived as a risk of harm makes accommodating behavior a rational choice at least in the short-term. If there is non-voluntary dependence (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003), then accommodation as a long-term strategy may make sense as a necessity to maintain the relationship given that previous work has found that survivors report giving into demands that they knew were unreasonable due to threats to abandon them (Follingstad et al., 1988). Cloven and Roloff (1993) suggested that individuals who are



subject to the chilling effect are essentially forfeiting their ability to influence the relationship; however, refraining from conflict about their partner's controlling behavior may be enacted as a means of coping. As such, this study aims to understand what individual factors may play a role in mitigating problems internally as a necessary means of relational maintenance. Additionally, in some extreme cases, internalizing the conflict may even be a survival mechanism so as not to tip off their aggressor; and coping mechanisms, such as blaming oneself or external circumstances, potentially provide a feeling of control.

The stress and coping literature explicate how appraisal works in terms of managing potential stressors. Pearlin and Schooler (1978) state that one of the most common forms of coping is reframing by modifying the meaning of the issue, and is especially more likely when the outcome cannot be changed. Anticipating negative outcomes is associated with an inclination to withhold complaints (Makoul & Roloff, 1998). This is with merit, as despite some literature suggesting people can change an imbalanced relationship or head it off at an early stage (Cloven & Roloff, 1993), it is not clear in the literature what kind of communication someone can carry out that can effectively change their partner's aggressive, controlling behavior. In situations where there may be a feeling or very real situation of powerlessness, it is common to cope by reframing the situation positively, blaming oneself, or seeking social support from others (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989).

In a review of the stress and coping literature, Lazarus (2000) emphasized the importance of understanding that coping mechanisms which seem maladaptive, immature, or even pathological to others could actually be considered adaptive in a threatening context (Lazarus, 1983). If the issue is related to power and the powerful partner does not wish to resolve the issue, then there could be some forms of denial and self-deception that could prevent the less powerful partner from having an expectation to be violated; and hence, with no expectation violated, there

would be no complaints to withhold. Lazarus (2000) explains what mounting a mental defense could look like:

There is a growing conviction that a large proportion of human appraisals occur without self-awareness of the factors that influence the emotion process. Defense is one of these factors. It cannot be effective if the defending person is fully aware of the process and its motivation (p. 671).

As mentioned in the introduction, the definition of conflict employed in this study (i.e., goal frustration) is intrinsically necessary to perceive a dissonance of violated expectations. Without recognizing needs and expectations, it would be more difficult to understand the impacts of a power imbalance if it were measured on the basis on the perception of withholding complaints. An uncertainty of goals and goal inferences is maintained by contextual ambiguity (Palomares, 2008), so then a question arises in this context as to whether or not a state of ambiguity is intended by either partner.

Attempting to understand the role of ambiguity can be aided by uncertainty theories such as problematic integration theory (Babrow, 2001) and uncertainty management (Brashers, Goldsmith, & Hsieh, 2002). An overall contribution of the work related to the uncertainty theories is that it helps to understand that there could be a motivation to resist reducing uncertainty, but to also increase motivated ambiguity (Palomares, 2008). An example of motivated uncertainty could be a partner who does not want to know about their spouse's affair for fear of familial repercussions or a major change of the dynamics of a valued relationship. Taken together, an irresolvable topic may be made ambiguous if both parties have a goal of maintaining the relationship. This could perhaps aid the process of holding a motivated false belief; if the truth were recognized or acknowledged, it may reveal a state of dissonance regarding fundamental beliefs about the relationship. In other words, if one partner wants to maintain a relationship, dissonance may be obviated by internal adjustments to one's individual goals by shielding oneself from information

or clarity regarding fundamental problems with the relationship. In short, these processes suggest a means of coping with a difficult situation.

This literature has been referred to elsewhere in the paper, however to connect to the next section, it is worth reiterating the literature that discusses that the chilling effect in terms of the role of power on problem severity (Samp & Solomon, 2001; Solomon & Samp, 1998). Both dependence and punitive power were related to more benign attributions as well as the ratings of hypothetical problems. Why this is especially salient is that not expressing any complaints and the cognitive activities like mental discounting (e.g., downplaying problems, blaming external circumstances) may happen at times in any relationship in moderation, but Solomon and Roloff (2019) are clear that these kinds of activities serve as a critical need in terms of maintaining certain kinds of relationships.

### ***Motivated reasoning as internal relational maintenance***

In a review of literature pertaining to power and interpersonal communication, Solomon and Roloff (2019) clearly state that in the context of an imbalance of power, conflict avoidance through intrapersonal activities mentioned here, is the means by which a less powerful partner maintains their relationship with a more powerful partner. Solomon et al. (2004) stated that relational maintenance may be the motive that connects dependence power to conflict avoidance. Based on that assertion, Cupach (2007) speculates that in more established relationships (where dependence power does not appear to have as much influence as more established relationships), commitment would normally be associated with expressing complaints. However, in less stable situations, the highly committed individual would likely choose not to communicate about problematic issues as a means to maintain the relationship (Rusbult et al., 1994). Continuing to cope with the attendant effects of the intrinsic instability of a power-imbalanced relationship (especially if there are any elements of potentially non-voluntary dependence) would appear to serve as relational maintenance in this context.

Previous research asserts that the less powerful partner is likely to be placed with the emotional burdens of the relationship in general (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003) and likely to be more willing to make sacrifices in the relationship and accommodate their partner. This puts the less powerful partner in a tricky position as any dissonance related to a power imbalance likely exists as an intrinsically fundamental problem if it is at a less powerful partner's expense. As mentioned previously, if the imbalance was openly acknowledged, it may be impossible to resolve, and it would likely be at the less powerful partner's expense if the high-powered partner has the specific interaction goal of hurt partner/benefit self (Bevan, 2014).

Given these arguments, it seems plausible to assume that it would be difficult to identify a power struggle if one partner is able to more easily suppress their frustration than others and placate their partner's aggression. This would seem to be especially so if that same partner does not see the point in voicing dissent to an issue that would otherwise be difficult, if not intractable, conflict (e.g., Miller, Roloff, & Malis, 2007). The argument in this study is that there are cognitive mechanisms that may be at play to help ease dissonance to help in subsisting in the relationship, likely related to internal, unconscious coping mechanisms by the less powerful partner (Lazarus, 2000; e.g., self-control and relational maintenance activities like accommodation).

Denial as a defense mechanism, and even the idea of defense mechanism and its problematic nature, is cited as one of the most challenging aspects in the stress and coping literature (Lazarus, 2000). Denial may be more developed as a concept in the self-deception literature as it is cited as one of three ways one can define self-deception (Chance & Norton, 2015). Self-deception also contains two other definitions related to these processes, holding a false belief as one, and holding a motivated false belief in the context of dissonance as another (Chance & Norton, 2015). All of these definitions point to possible motivated reasoning as making it difficult to acknowledge potentially relationship-threatening information (e.g., realizing one's partner will always be unresponsive and inattentive to one's needs). Perceived resolvability has more of an

association with relational satisfaction than the frequency of conflict; as such, there are several factors that may be related to motivated reasoning in creating a narrative that one's relationship is stable if one has negative attitudes towards conflict (Crohan, 1992; Hocker & Wilmot, 2018).

Another speculation is that there may be a kind of cognitive attempt at reverse engineering (i.e., seeing what you want to see) in terms of framing the relationship as good despite the circumstances. Similar to downward comparisons and positive illusions common to romantic relationships in general, it is helpful to believe one's partner and relationship are superior in terms of regular relational maintenance. However, it may be more pronounced in working one's way backwards in terms of conducting oneself as in a satisfying, conflict-free relationship, perhaps with hopes of a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. There is a logic to giving the partner the benefit of the doubt in terms of long-term interests of the relationship because continuing to attempt to enhance the relationship is associated with more positive outcomes (Le et al., 2010), and with a committed partner, facilitative behavior could lead to a more coordinated pattern of behavior (Knobloch & Solomon, 2004). In other words, prosocial, positive maintenance behavior in mutually committed relationships is associated with more positive outcomes. However, in the context of a pervasive imbalance, the same behavior patterns could be maladaptive and costly for the less powerful individual.

If the less powerful partner does not want to think about their partner's commitment and lack of relational maintenance, then perhaps there are particular, compensating, cognitive maintenance activities at work to maintain their own commitment. For example, more dependent partners are more likely to participate in positive illusions as well as derogate, or even wholly ignore, possible alternatives (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003). In a more extreme example, Jacobson and Gottman (1998) found that if an abused partner held up an overly optimistic narrative of a kind of "dream" relationship, they were more likely to be satisfied and more likely to attribute problems of the relationship on issues like stress and substance abuse (Byrne & Arias, 1997), of which

external attributions also has a positive association with satisfaction. Additionally, they have found that those in relationships with highly controlling partners still report usual levels of satisfaction (Jacobson & Gottman, 1998). If this is a general dynamic in imbalanced relationships, then satisfaction may have no real explanatory value, and may even serve to confound findings. Additionally, the intrapersonal activities of being willing to sacrifice and accommodate are on its own associated with relational satisfaction, and as such, potentially independent of power dynamics and relational context (Ogolsky, et al., 2017). For these reasons, relational satisfaction will not be measured in this study. Additionally, there may be individual-level factors that are overlooked, like those with dispositions pertaining to making the best of any situation and hoping that things will get better with time. Cognitive activities to maintain a valued relationship may be helpful in a context of mutual commitment and growth; however, in an imbalanced context, these same activities may serve as survival defense mechanisms in coping with the threat of loss and/or harm.

To reiterate, the broader point is that it is difficult to judge motivated reasoning as it may be dependent on context to be able to judge whether or not the individual is carrying out otherwise common relational maintenance behavior at their own expense. In other words, these kind of otherwise harmless cognitive distortions in one relationship may be more consequential in more extreme situations or states of anxiety where negative emotions can create distortions in judgment of their partner's behavior (Mikulincer, Shaver, & Pereg, 2003), or when it could be at one's expense to overlook behavior that may constitute a threat of harm or loss. Taken together, these areas of research contribute to understanding that lack of context can confound the ability to see the chilling effect (or the absence of a recognized chilling effect), in part perhaps because it is quite common as a cognitive relational maintenance activity to employ generous attributions to the behavior of one's relational partner.

## **The Absence of the Expected Chilling Effect: Focusing on the Individual in Context**

This paper has reviewed areas of literature that aids understanding in what may perpetuate the lack of conditions necessary for complaints and conflict to exist, the basis upon which its absence would preclude the chilling effect. One of the underlying assumptions of this paper is that there are personality traits and dispositional coping styles, especially in the context of threat, that are fairly consistent across situations (Carver & Scheier, 1994). Typically, concepts related to hardiness (e.g., locus of control) and resilience (e.g., optimism) are put in relief by contrasting those qualities with the image of the helpless victim (e.g., Kobasa, 1979). However, what if concepts related to hardiness, resilience, and healthy coping mechanisms are helping someone to cope and maintain an unhealthy relationship? Stated differently, what if the less powerful person is successfully managing their own mental health amidst hardship, but they just happen to be stuck (mentally and/or physically) in a relationship that their efforts to maintain the relationship just happen to be at their own expense? An extension of this logic would be that what is commonly thought of as resilience factors may actually function as risk factors, if these are the same necessary mechanisms less powerful partners use to cope with the threats inherent in a power-imbalanced relationship.

As mentioned before, traditional outcomes like depression and relational satisfaction may not have the same explanatory value due to optimists making the best of situations so it may be difficult to find signs of discontent as a means of being able to tease out meaningful insights. With this line of research, it may be helpful to view in terms of how people tend to cope well with uncontrollable events, from the vantage point of the participant. As such, rather than assigning these mechanisms as learned helplessness, these behaviors could be considered survival mechanisms to cope with constant threat involve strategies typically only viewed as helpful short-term (e.g., protective buffering). Thoits (2006) points out that even though people may be in adverse circumstances (of their own volition or not), there are some people who are able to maintain their own well-being and mental health regardless:

What I am suggesting, however, is that, due to an insistence on verifying social causation and a widely shared view of mental illness as a social problem, stress investigators inadvertently (1) have underestimated the degree to which individuals actively construct their lives to be on balance more satisfying and rewarding than painful, (2) have missed opportunities to understand the social origins of personal strengths or resilience, (3) have overlooked important questions about how stress-buffering processes actually work, and (4) have impeded their own ability to explain negative outcomes more precisely. In short, because stress researchers have not looked closely at processes of selection or reverse causality, they have skipped over important theoretical and empirical problems that might help them understand how mental *health* is retained and enhanced by the vast majority of individuals, who, the data inevitably show, do *not* break down when stressors occur or accumulate (Bonanno 2004). (p. 311)

This quote implies that there are some people who are able to maintain their own well-being regardless of circumstances. There are also some people who in light of uncontrollable situations focus on where they can control circumstances, employing coping mechanisms such as compensatory coping, the tendency to find other sources of gratification or support (Thoits, 2016).

These variables are hypothesized to be related to how an individual copes with adverse circumstances specific to the context of coping with and maintaining a power-imbalanced relationship. Given the arguments presented in this section as rationale, this study will deploy measures of individual factors such as dispositional coping style (optimism), partner-specific relational orientation (communal strength), and a factor related to relational and individual restraint (self-control). These factors might reveal when the absence of the chilling effect is more probable. Again, all three of these are considered to be function in general, yet might be dysfunctional in the context of imbalanced relationships.



### ***Optimism in context***

Optimism may be one of the most examined aspects of stress and coping literature, contains critical aspects of the field of positive psychology, and has impacts on stress and coping models (Glanz & Schwartz, 2008). Optimism is also related to resilience in that it is seen as a protective factor even in times of adversity (Carver, Scheier, & Segerstrom, 2010). As mentioned earlier, it is quite common to employ positive illusions in relationships. However, it is in context of a power imbalance that creates the conditions upon which this effect can be taken to the extreme at one's own expense to maintain a valued relationship. Whether or not optimism is unrealistic, having a tendency towards optimism may inherently be a bias towards interpreting events positively (Curbow et al., 1993). As such, optimism may play a role in terms of a positive bias that serves as a means of sustaining oneself, as well as managing and coping with a power-imbalanced relationship. The following hypotheses pertain to optimism and the presence of complaints and conflict.

*H4: The interactive effects of punitive and dependence power will be moderated by optimism, such that the combination of higher dependence, higher punitive power, and higher optimism will be associated with: a) the fewest complaints reported in the relationship, b) the least frequent conflict, c) a higher number of unexpressed irritants, and d) a higher discrepancy between aversive behaviors reported and the resulting irritations.*

In sum, as it relates to the next section on self-control, optimism plays a crucial role in goal-motivated behavior and self-regulation, as explained by Armor and Taylor (1998):

On one hand, evidence suggests that there are benefits to being optimistic, with favorable expectations facilitating the attainment of favorable outcomes; but there is also evidence that people's specific predictions tend to be unrealistically optimistic, which if acted upon unchecked would seem to render people vulnerable to a variety of negative outcomes ranging from disappointment to endangerment. Taken together, the results from studies of specific expectations provide considerable substance to Lewin's (1948) paradox--that the

key to the effective self-regulation of behavior, affect, and well-being involves the interplay of optimistic expectations and the demands of reality. (p. 310)

These processes appear related to the kinds of coping mechanisms suggested by Lazarus (2000) regarding a normal response of psychologically adjusting to threat. In the face of reality, it may be necessary to have excessive amounts of optimism to be able to regulate and cope with a threat of harm (punitive threat) or loss (dependence threat). It would seem that in the face of adverse circumstances, a certain level of optimism may be necessary to motivate oneself to cope and continue to carry out the work of maintaining a power-imbalanced relationship with a more powerful other.

### *Self-control*

Self-control is associated with self-regulation as it relates to delayed gratification, impulse control, and regulation of moods and thoughts. Self-control has stood out as a trait tied to a breadth of good outcomes including weight control, less substance abuse, and better academic performance (Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004). In terms of interpersonal relationships, those with self-control tend to be able to forgive, empathize, and resist aggressive responses (Kong et al., 2020). In terms of stress, coping, and dispositional optimism, self-control is tied to psychological adjustment, active coping, and less distress (Glanz & Schwartz, 2008; Taylor et al., 1997). High self-control is also related to positive relationship behavior:

High self-control should make people better, more desirable relationship partners and could contribute to relationship success in a variety of ways. Self-control could contribute directly to harmonious interactions, such as when people refrain from saying hurtful things on impulse. (Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004, p. 279)

Given this study's goal of challenging modern-day interpretations of learned helplessness, instead of being a helpless victim of circumstance, there is another possibility that to be able to continue to carry out what is usually short-term maintenance behaviors like accommodation and protective

buffering, continuing to make sacrifices for the good of the relationship and the partner could arguably take an inordinate amount of self-control. In this context, because this trait is associated with controlling impulses and mood regulation, hypotheses for this study related to self-control are:

*H5: The interactive effects of punitive and dependence power will be moderated by self-control such that the combination of higher dependence, higher punitive power, and higher self-control will be associated with: a) the fewest complaints reported in the relationship, b) the least frequent conflict, c) a higher number of unexpressed irritants, and d) a higher discrepancy between aversive behaviors reported and resulting irritations.*

Like optimism, an argument for this study is that these are related to dispositional coping styles that may be resistant to context. A question of this study is whether the less powerful partner's positive behaviors are serving to maintain the power-imbalanced relationship by mitigating conflict. In other words, if the less powerful partner is more relationally-oriented than self-interested, then goal behavior may be driven more towards maintaining the relationship, as addressed in the next section on communal orientation.

### ***Communal orientation and communal strength***

A communal orientation refers to a feeling of obligation to meet the needs of one's relational partner (Bello et al., 2008), and communal strength is the means of which to measure its strength (Mills et al., 2004). Important to understanding this motive is that this would be carried out without regard for reciprocation (Clark & Mills, 1979; Mills & Clark, 1982). An explicit component of communal strength is that one would more positively interpret their partner's messages so as to minimize distress (Mills et al., 2004). Inversely, those who score lower on a communal orientation would be more likely to interpret a partner's messages more negatively (Bello et al., 2008). Communal strength is positively associated with relational satisfaction (Bello

et al., 2008; Mills et al., 2004), which given its existence as an individual characteristic, is another reason relational satisfaction would not be employed this study as an outcome variable.

Within the context of being communally-oriented, if there is a power imbalance and an inability to articulate complaints or engage in conflict for fear of retaliation or perceived futility, one may find oneself in a situation to placate the partner at one's expense. Based off the research on communal strength mentioned above, there also appears to be a predisposition to interpret a partner's messages positively. In the context of an equalitarian relationship, positive interpretation would normally be interpreted as a helpful trait, however an assumption would likely be that normally this would be reciprocal. However, the reality could make the partner who is communally-oriented positively interpret their partner's messages incorrectly, and if so, could potentially be biased in a power-imbalanced relational context. In other words, they may find themselves biased and mismatched with a more empowered, self-interested partner.

These assumptions are the basis for the argument of this paper that if messages are perpetually interpreted as positive based on someone's relational orientation, there would be an expectation that there would be less violated expectations, of which there would be no basis for complaints to be present, which are the conditions necessary for conflict (i.e., frustrated goals) to occur. Similar to the factors mentioned with regard to optimism and self-control, communal orientation and communal strength are typically considered to yield positive outcomes. However, in situations of a power imbalance, this same orientation may put the person at risk. As such, the following hypotheses relate to communal strength and presence of complaints and conflict.

*H6: The interactive effect of punitive and dependence power will be moderated by communal strength, such that the combination of higher dependence, higher punitive power, and higher communal strength will be associated with: a) the fewest complaints reported in the relationship, b) the least frequent conflict, c) a higher number of unexpressed irritations, and d) a higher discrepancy between aversive behaviors reported and resulting irritations.*

In sum, this study will assess the relationship of two forms of power with regard to the presence of complaints and conflict. Additionally, individual factors that could identify the contexts in which partners might be particularly unlikely to have or voice complaints are assessed. The overarching rationale for this study is that issues of power need to be explicitly and adequately tended to in being able to understand the level of functionality of relational maintenance behaviors, the potential dark side of positive relational maintenance behaviors, and the need to further study the kind of cognitive activities and individual differences involved in relational maintenance.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODS

### PARTICIPANTS

The 294 participants in this study were drawn from two sources: a survey system available to the general public, Amazon MTurk ( $n = 199$ ; 67.7%), and a student population at a large southwestern university ( $n = 95$ ; 32.3%). Although the survey was completed by 637 respondents between both samples, 343 participants were removed (53.8% of the sample) mostly due to either attention checks or responding that their data should not be used ( $n = 169$ ; 49.2%), due to duplicates discovered ( $n = 84$ , 24.4%), nonsensical or disingenuous responses (e.g., all responses were '7's;  $n = 67$ , 19.5%), and surveys that had too much missing data to include ( $n = 23$ , 6.7%). The whole sample consisted of 159 females (54.1%), 129 males (43.9%), five who chose not to disclose their gender (1.7%), and one who identified as non-binary (0.34%). Participants of the two samples had an age ranging from 18 to 66, with an average age of 32.10 years ( $SD = 11.49$ ). The majority of the participants (73.8%) were Caucasian or White, with other ethnicities including Asian or Pacific Islander (7.5%), Latinx (7.1%), Black or African American (6.1%), and 14 other respondents who reported multiple ethnicities (4.8%).

Both surveys required the respondents to be currently involved in a romantic relationship. The student survey did not specify a relationship length, however the MTurk survey required respondents to be in a relationship at least six months. The student survey involved undergraduate students currently enrolled in a course in the communication studies department. The general population study required respondents to be 18 years or older and residing within the United States. The relationship lengths ranged from 2.5 months to 48 years ( $SD = 8.11$ ), with an average relationship length of 6.32 years, and a median relationship length of 2.90 years.

### PROCEDURE

Following the approval of the Institutional Review Board (see Appendix A), the survey was distributed to both a college student sample, as well as one more representative of a general

population. The study was advertised as a survey regarding conflict in interpersonal relationships. The student respondents were recruited via the departmental survey system, and a more general population sample were recruited on Amazon's Mechanical Turk (mTurk).

All respondents received a link that directed them to a Qualtrics survey. The Qualtrics survey provided the consent form, and the survey included four main sections. The first section included questions regarding demographic information (e.g., sex, age, sexual orientation, and relationship duration). The second section assessed measures to calculate dependence power. The third section contained questions regarding their perception of the frequency of conflict and amount of complaints in their relationship. The fourth section was a longer section that assessed irritations regarding their partner's behavior using ten areas of aversive behaviors. The fifth section contained questions regarding how their partner responds to complaints regarding their behavior to measure punitive power. The last section assessed the moderating factors of a respondent's level of optimism, self-control, and communal strength. Average completion time was about 15 minutes.

## **MEASURES**

### **Independent Variables**

*Dependence power (dependence on the relationship).* Dependence means that the respondent is being subject to more dependence on the relationship than their partner. Modifying previous computations of this variable (e.g., Samp & Solomon, 1998; Worley, 2017), dependence was assessed with four components: the respondent's own level of commitment to their relationship, their perception of their partner's level of commitment, the respondent's perceived alternative options to the relationship, and their perception of their partner's alternatives.

On a 6-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 6 = *strongly agree*), respondents answered questions regarding their own and their partner's commitment: 1) "I would like this relationship to last a long time," 2) "I am very attached to my partner," 3) "I am very committed to my partner,"

4) “My partner would like this relationship to last a long time,” 5) “My partner is very attached to me,” 6) “My partner is very committed to me.” The items pertaining to the respondent’s perception of their alternatives and their partner’s alternatives included: 1) “My alternatives to our relationship are quite appealing,” 2) “All things considered, my alternatives to our relationship are much better than ours,” 3) “If our relationship was to end today, it would be very easy for me to find a new relationship just as good or better,” 4) “My partner’s alternatives to our relationship are quite appealing,” 5) “All things considered, my partner’s alternatives to our relationship are much better than ours,” 6) “If our relationship was to end today, it would be very easy for my partner to find a new relationship just as good or better”. Items were averaged to create overall scores. Cronbach reliability estimates were high: own commitment ( $\alpha = .82$ ;  $M = 5.16$ ,  $SD = .87$ ), partner commitment ( $\alpha = .83$ ;  $M = 5.23$ ,  $SD = .86$ ), own alternatives ( $\alpha = .88$ ;  $M = 3.83$ ,  $SD = 1.54$ ), and partner alternatives ( $\alpha = .90$ ;  $M = 3.77$ ,  $SD = 1.54$ ). Items within each subscale were averaged.

To compute dependence on the partner, the alternatives scores were inversed so that higher scores indicated lower alternatives. Then the commitment and reversed alternatives scores were summed for each partner (i.e., self commitment + self lack of alternatives,  $M = 8.99$ ,  $SD = 2.08$ , Range = 3.33 to 12.00; partner commitment + partner lack of alternatives,  $M = 9.00$ ,  $SD = 2.01$ , Range = 5.00 to 12.00). These scores give a general assessment of how much each partner is dependent on the relationship. Finally, the difference between the self and partner scores were computed (i.e., self – partner). Thus, higher (or positive) scores indicate that the participant is more dependent on the relationship relative to the partner; lower or negative scores reflect the partner is more dependent relative to the participant; and scores around zero reflect relatively equal dependence ( $M = -.01$ ,  $SD = 1.40$ ; range = -5.67 to 5.33). Being subject to a higher dependence would mean that the respondent perceives their partner to be less committed than them and has better relational alternatives.



*Partner punitive power.* Punitive power involves a perceived threat of punishment, which could include physical and/or symbolic aggression, but the physical aggression items were not included. On a 6-point Likert-type scale (1 = *would never happen*; 6 = *would definitely happen*) for anticipated symbolic aggression, participants were asked to what degree expressing an irritation to a partner would cause the partner to: (1) insult or swear at the respondent; (2) sulk and/or refuse to talk about it; (3) stomp out of the room, house, or yard; (4) do or say something to spite the respondent; (5) threaten to break off the relationship; (6) become cold or less affectionate; (7) throw, smash, hit, or kick something (Straus et al., 1996). To isolate most problematic responses usually considered outside of common social norms, only three items were used to reflect punitive power character attacks like insulting the respondent (Item 1), a willingness to issue threats (Item 5), and destructive, physical acts like property damage (Item 7). The alpha reliability found for the respondent's report of their experience of their partner's behavior was .88; and the three items were summed to create an overall score ( $M = 7.83$ ;  $SD = 4.53$ , Range = 3.00 to 18.00).

Because these two power variables were on different scales and because they would be used in interactions, standardized versions of these variables (z-scores) were used in the analyses.

## **Moderators**

*Optimism.* Dispositional optimism is frequently measured by the Life Orientation Test (LOT; Scheier & Carver, 1985), followed by the revised version selected for this study, the Life Orientation Test Revised (LOT-R; Scheier et al., 1994). Two studies employing the LOT-R have found internal reliability ranging from .80 (Chiesi, et al.) to .83 (Segerstrom et al., 2011). On a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*), 10 items from the LOT-R include items tapping optimism and pessimism such as: "In uncertain times, I usually expect the best" (optimism), "I rarely count on good things happening to me" (pessimism), and a couple of filler items (e.g., "It's easy for me to relax"). The full measure with the instructions to participants is included in Appendix B. Scoring the LOT-R involves the sum of the scores of each sub-scale, and

the total scale is calculated by adding the optimism sum to an inverted (reverse-scored) pessimism sum (the filler questions are excluded). A relatively recent study concluded this unidimensional calculation is valid (Segerstrom 2011). Higher scores in the calculated average indicate greater optimism. The alpha reliability found for the respondent's level of general optimism was .75 ( $M = 3.39$ ;  $SD = 0.64$ ).

*Self-control.* Self-control in this context is intended to capture a kind of interpersonal restraint from acting aggressively in social interactions. The selected measure was 10 items from the Self-Control Scale (Tangney et al., 2004). The Self-Control Scale is a common measure of self-control, and is generally associated with positive psychological and emotional outcomes such as increased impulse control, healthy interpersonal relationships, and being emotionally well-adjusted (Manapat et al., 2021; Tangney, et al., 2004). Items were assessed on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *not at all*; 5 = *very much*). The alpha reliability found for the respondent's level of self-control was .92, and the average was computed to create an overall score of self-control ( $M = 2.80$ ;  $SD = 0.93$ ).

*Communal strength.* Communal strength is a measure of a person's communal orientation. A measure was developed and validated by Mills and colleagues (2004), with internal reliabilities of .83 to .95, and a later study found internal reliability to be .90 (Bello et al., 2008). On a scale of 0-10 (0 = *not at all*; 10 = *extremely*), the measure includes 10 items such as: "How high a priority for you is meeting the needs of [partner name]?" and "How happy do you feel when doing something helps [partner name]?" (Mills et al., 2004). The full measure with the instructions to participants is included in Appendix D. Items were averaged so that higher scores indicate higher communal strength. The alpha reliability found for the respondent's level of communal strength was .77 ( $M = 3.67$ ;  $SD = 0.64$ ).

## Dependent Variables

The section of the survey on aversive behaviors was used to create the four dependent variables, which will be detailed out by variable below. The ten aversive behaviors were created from research on “upset elicitors” (Buss, 1989), annoyances (Buss, 1989; Ter Laak et al., 2003), social allergens (Cunningham, et al., 2005), and aversive interpersonal behaviors (Kowalski, 2001). The ten aversive behaviors were identified by unpacking all of the factors identified by the aforementioned research, and compiling categories that could capture as much of the factors as possible: jealous and possessive behavior, condescending behavior, neglectful or rejecting behavior, unfaithful behavior, physically self-absorbed or self-centered behavior, moody behavior, disheveled behaviors, and substance abuse (see Appendix E to see the descriptions to the participants for each behavior). To note, previous research employed an open-ended question asking participants to list their complaints (e.g., Cloven & Roloff, 1993), however this question did not appear to be reliable as there were missing or unintelligible answers.

Four questions were asked for each of the 10 behaviors: 1) “How often does your partner act like this?” 2) “When you partner acts like this how much does this bother you?”, 3) “When your partner acts like this, how often do you tell them this bothers you?”, and 4) “When your partner acts like this, how often does it lead to a conflict between you two?” All four items were assessed on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *never*; 5 = *all the time*).

*Level of complaints and irritants.* Participants’ responses to the second item (i.e., how much the partner’s behavior bothered them) were summed across the ten questions to create an overall score for level of irritants ( $M = 28.64$ ,  $SD = 9.79$ , range = 10 – 50). Higher scores indicate they were more bothered by their partner’s aversive behaviors. Although it was not anticipated that the participants would be similarly bothered by the various behaviors, Cronbach’s estimate of reliability was .88 across the 10 behaviors.

*Frequency of conflict.* Participants’ responses to the fourth item regarding the ten aversive behaviors (i.e., how often does the partner’s aversive behavior leads to a conflict) were summed

across the ten areas of behavior ( $M = 26.49$ ,  $SD = 10.82$ , range = 10 – 49). Higher scores indicate the participants reported more conflict stemming from the partner's aversive behaviors. Again, although it was not anticipated that the participants would see all of the behaviors as resulting in conflict similarly, Cronbach's estimate of reliability was .93 across the 10 behaviors.

*Unexpressed irritants (i.e., chilling effect).* This measure was achieved by using two items regarding the aversive behaviors pertaining to how much a behavior bothers the respondent compared to how often the respondent tells their partner it bothers them. The variable was computed by taking the differences (i.e., how much it bothers them – how much they express it). The discrepancy scores were averaged to create an overall composite across the 10 behaviors ( $M = 0.02$ ,  $SD = 0.51$ , range = -1.6 – 2.00). Higher scores indicate more unexpressed irritations.

*Lack of irritants in the presence of irritants (i.e., missing chilling effect).* This measure was also achieved by using two items regarding the aversive behaviors pertaining to how much the partner displayed the behavior compared to how often it bothered them. Although the respondent may not notice some behaviors (particularly if the assumptions put forth in this study are true), ten different areas of specific behaviors were included in hopes of capturing some self-reporting of the partner's aversive behaviors. The instructions asked the respondent to answer questions about how much their partner's behavior bothered them. This was phrased as neutral as possible, but the respondent answered an open-ended question regarding complaints in the previous section, so it is possible that their mindset could have been impacted by this. The discrepancy between the frequency of aversive behaviors and how much it bothered the respondent was computed (i.e., frequency – level of irritation). The discrepancy scores were averaged to create an overall composite across the 10 behaviors ( $M = -0.29$ ,  $SD = 0.71$ , range = -3.30 – 1.20). Higher scores indicate a greater missing chilling effect; in other words, a greater score indicates that the partner frequently displayed many behaviors that are commonly considered to be aversive but that the respondent did not perceive them as such.

## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

### PRELIMINARY ANALYSES

Because data were collected from two samples, potential differences by sub-sample were explored. A chi-square test was conducted with the categorical variable of sex, and it was found to be significant ( $\chi^2 = 34.97$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .001$ ). There were more females in the college student sample (81.1%) than in the MTurk sample (44.4%). For the remaining variables,  $t$ -test were conducted. There were significant differences found for eight of the 11 variables. See Table 1.

*Table 1. Variables by sample.*

	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	Student Mean	Mturk Mean	Range
Age	-16.73	290	< .001	20.52	37.70	18 – 66
Length	-7.31	288	< .001	1.64	8.52	0 – 48
Dependence Power	-1.09	291	.276	-0.14	0.05	-5.67 – 5.33
Punitive Power	-7.86	291	< .001	5.10	9.14	3 – 18
Complaints	-3.41	291	< .001	25.87	29.97	10 – 50
Conflict	-6.33	291	< .001	21.06	29.09	10 – 49
Unexpressed Irritations	1.99	291	.048	0.11	-0.02	-1.60 – 2.00
Lack of irritations	-5.87	291	< .001	-0.62	-0.13	-33 – 12
Optimism	-0.82	291	.412	2.66	2.88	1 – 5
Self-control	-1.86	291	.064	3.94	3.55	1 – 5
Communal Orientation	5.11	291	< .001	3.45	3.41	1 – 5

Correlations among the variables are presented in Table 2 with some of the key takeaways mentioned here. Being subject to dependence power was positively correlated with communal strength, but negatively correlated with optimism. Being subject to punitive power was negatively correlated with communal strength, but positively related to self-control. Self-control was negatively correlated with the other moderators of optimism and communal strength, which were positively correlated with each other. Both complaints and conflict were positively correlated to self-control, and negatively correlated with communal strength. The chilling effect was only

correlated with a few variables, but the lack of a chilling effect was positively correlated with all of the demographic variables and negatively correlated to one of the moderators, communal strength.

Given the sample differences, correlations for each sub-sample are also provided in Table 3. In addition, to the sample differences, the correlations overall show that males reported less chilling effect but more of the missing chilling effect than did females; additionally, male students reported less complaints than did female students. Age was positively associated with all of the dependent variables except the chilling effect, and the correlations with the sub-samples shows this is primarily true for the MTurk participants, which makes sense in that there was a greater range of age for this subsample. Relationship length was only related (positively) to the missing chilling effect.

## **MAIN ANALYSES**

Hierarchical linear regressions were conducted for all the main analyses using JASP (JASP Team, 2022). Sample, age, sex, and relationship length were included as control variables as all of these showed some associations with the dependent variables. Each of the four dependent variables was assessed separately. In addition, because the samples showed differences, the full sample was assessed first and then each sub-sample was assessed separately. The whole sample results are presented first for each dependent variable followed by the student and MTurk samples.

First, to test H1, H2, and H3, a series of regressions tested the two power variables and their interaction. Step 1 assessed the control variables (i.e., sex, age, relationship length, and

Table 2. Intercorrelations among variables: Full sample.

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1. Sex	—												
2. Age	.30**	—											
3. Relationship Length	.17**	.64**	—										
4. Sample	.35**	.70**	.40**	—									
5. Dependence power	.01	.03	.04	.06	—								
6. Punitive power	.16**	.27**	.09	.42**	-.02	—							
7. Level of complaints	-.06	.13*	-.02	.20**	-.02	.61**	—						
8. Level of conflict	0.1	.20**	.04	.35**	-.02	.74**	.83**	—					
9. Unexpressed irritants	-.18**	-.07	-.04	-.12*	-.07	-.06	.19**	-.09	—				
10. Lack of irritants	.36**	.20**	.12*	.33**	-.04	.24**	-.36**	.06	-.31**	—			
11. Optimism	.01	.11	.03	.05	-.17**	-.09	-.09	-.10	-.04	-.03	—		
12. Self-control	.01	.02	-.06	.11	.01	.59**	.50**	.58**	-.08	.12	-.20**	—	
13. Communal strength	-.21**	-.12*	-.02	-.29**	.22**	-.44**	-.25**	-.42**	.06	-.31**	.28**	-.28**	—

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ . For Sex, 1 = female, 2 = male.

Table 3. Intercorrelations among variables: student sample (bottom left) and MTurk sample (top right)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Sex	—	.30**	.17**	.01	.16**	-.06	0.10	-0.18**	0.36**	0.10	.01	-.21**
2. Age	.06	—	.64**	.03	.27**	.13*	.20**	-.07	.20**	.11	.02	-.12
3. Relationship Length	.03	.56**	—	.04	.09	-.02	.04	-.04	.12	.03	-.06	-.02
4. Dependence power	-.05	-.03	.03	—	-.02	-.02	-.02	-.07	-.04	-.17**	.01	.22**
5. Punitive power	0	-.06	-.11	-.04	—	.61**	.74**	-.06	.24**	-.09	.59**	-.44**
6. Level of complaints	-.15**	-.02	-.13	-.07	.67**	—	.83**	.19**	-.36**	-.09	.50**	-.25**
7. Level of conflict	-.03	-.09	-.13	-.05	.75**	.84**	—	-.09	.06	-.10	.58**	-.42**
8. Chilling effect	-.18**	.04	.01	-.03	-.08	.19**	-.13	—	-.31**	-.04	-.08	.06
9. Lack of chilling effect	.32**	-.07	-.01	-.06	.14**	-.31**	.1	-.41**	—	-.03	.12*	.31**
10. Optimism	.14	.12	.02	-.19**	-.21**	-.19**	-.22**	.02	.02	—	-.20	.28**
11. Self-control	-.07	-.08	-.13	-.02	.73**	.63**	.71**	-.09	.11	-.32**	—	-.28**
12. Communal strength	-.10	.17*	.12	.17*	-.49**	-.36**	-.49**	.08	-.25**	.37**	-.41**	—

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ . For Sex, 1 = female, 2 = male.



sample), Step 2 included the main effects of the power variables, and Step 3 included their interaction.

Next, a series of hierarchical linear regressions assessed H4, H5, and H6 regarding the potential moderating effects of optimism, self-control, and communal strength. Step 1 assessed potential control variables (sex, age, relationship length, and sample), the two power variables and a moderator were entered on Step 2 to test main effects, and Step 3 included all 2-way interactions between the two power variables and the moderator. Step 4 tested the 3-way interaction. The moderators were centered before creating the interaction terms with the standardized power variables. Significant interactions and those that approached significance ( $p < .10$ ) were decomposed by graphing low and high levels of the moderators (i.e., one *SD* above and below the mean).

#### **LEVEL OF COMPLAINTS (H1A-6A)**

*Full sample.* In testing H1a-H3a, Step 1 results (not reported in a table) revealed that sex ( $B = -2.82, t = -2.32, p = .021$ ), sample ( $B = 4.72, t = 2.74, p = .007$ ), and length of relationship ( $B = -0.19, t = -2.00, p = .046$ ) were significantly associated with complaints, but age was not ( $B = 0.09, t = 1.10, p = .274$ ). Step 2 results with the two power variables reveal that neither H1a nor H2a are supported, but for different reasons. H1a was not supported due to a lack of significance ( $B = -0.01, \beta = -0.00, t = -0.02, p = .984$ ). H2a demonstrates that being subject to punitive power was significantly associated with the level of complaints ( $B = 6.25, \beta = 0.64, t = 12.56, p < .001$ ), but in the opposite of the hypothesized direction; the more punitive power the partner demonstrated, the more complaints the participant reported. Step 3 regarding the association between an interaction of the two powers and complaints revealed a lack of support for H3a ( $B = .31, \beta = 0.03, t = 0.58, p = .562$ ).

The hierarchical regression results regarding the moderating variables (H4-6a) are contained in Table 4 below. The table reveals that punitive power continued to be significant in each of the three models even when including the moderating variable. The only main effect for a moderator was self-control; the more self-control the participant reported, the more complaints they reported. No 3-way interactions emerged; as such, H4a-H6a were not supported.

*Table 4: Results for Complaints with the Full Sample*

Predictors	Model with Optimism			Model with Self-Control			Model with Communal Strength		
	B	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	B	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	B	$\beta$	<i>t</i>
<b>Step 2</b>									
Dependence	-0.04	-0.01	-0.10	-0.05	-0.01	-0.11	0.02	0.00	0.04
Power									
Punitive Power	6.22	0.634	12.28**	5.01	0.51	8.12**	6.21	0.63	11.60**
Moderator	-0.32	-0.02	-0.44	2.01	0.19	3.28**	-0.18	-0.01	-0.22
$\Delta R^2$	.33			.36			.34		
<b>Step 3</b>									
Dependence x Punitive	0.40	0.04	0.73	0.43	0.04	0.71	0.20	0.02	0.37
Dependence x Moderator	0.37	0.03	0.62	-0.11	-0.01	-0.15	-1.21	-0.08	-1.67
Punitive x Moderator	1.38	0.08	1.45	0.02	0.00	0.03	0.66	0.04	0.60
$\Delta R^2$	.01			.00			.00		
<b>Step 4</b>									
3-way interaction	-1.29	-0.08	-1.54	1.19	0.09	1.66	-0.18	-0.01	-0.19
$\Delta R^2$	.01			.01			.00		

*Note.*  $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ . The  $R$ -squared change is based on increases from the previous model; for Step 2, the  $R$ -square change is based on the model with only the control variables.

*Student sample.* Unlike the whole sample, Step 1 revealed that none of the demographic variables were significantly associated with complaints ( $t_s < \pm 0.73$ ,  $p_s > .466$ ). In testing H1-H3a, Step 2 results reveal that H1a was not supported as dependence on the relationship did not predict complaints ( $B = 0.53$ ,  $\beta = 0.06$ ,  $t = 0.61$ ,  $p = .545$ ), and H2a was also not supported because the association between being subject to punitive

power and complaints was in the opposite direction from the prediction ( $B = 3.14$ ,  $\beta = 0.36$ ,  $t = 3.55$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Step 3 of the regression analysis did not find a significant interaction of the two forms of power, so H3a was not supported ( $B = -0.64$ ,  $\beta = -0.10$ ,  $t = -0.85$ ,  $p = .399$ ).

The hierarchal regression results regarding the moderating variables (H4-6a) are contained in Table 5 below. Step 2 showed no main effects for the moderators. For Step 3 and Step 4, there were no 2-way or 3-way interactions. As such, H4a-H6a were not supported.

*Table 5: Results for Complaints with the Student Sample*

Predictors	Model with Optimism			Model with Self-Control			Model with Communal Strength		
	B	$\beta$	$t$	B	$\beta$	$t$	B	$\beta$	$t$
<b>Step 2</b>									
Dependence Power	0.63	0.07	0.72	0.52	0.06	0.59	0.09	0.01	0.09
Punitive Power	3.05	0.35	3.41**	3.08	0.35	3.40**	3.09	0.36	3.51**
Moderator	1.01	0.08	0.76	0.41	0.04	0.37	1.85	0.13	1.20
$\Delta R^2$	.13			.13			.14		
<b>Step 3</b>									
Dependence x Punitive	-0.86	-0.13	-1.10	-0.67	-0.10	-0.73	-0.40	-0.06	-0.44
Dependence x Moderator	1.52	0.12	1.10	-0.18	-0.02	-0.12	-1.81	-0.13	-1.17
Punitive x Moderator	-2.08	-0.16	-1.37	-0.49	-0.05	-0.37	-0.48	-.03	-0.23
$\Delta R^2$	.03			.01			.02		
<b>Step 4</b>									
3-way interaction	-0.49	-0.04	-0.29	0.70	0.11	0.63	-0.25	-0.02	-0.181
$\Delta R^2$	.00			.00			.00		

Note.  $p < .05$ ,  $**p < .01$ . The  $R$ -squared change is based on increases from the previous model; for Step 2, the  $R$ -square change is based on the model with only the control variables.

*MTurk sample.* Similar to the whole sample, Step 1 results for this sample revealed that the demographic variables of sex ( $B = -3.06$ ,  $t = -2.15$ ,  $p = .033$ ) and relationship length ( $B = -0.19$ ,  $t = -1.99$ ,  $p = .048$ ) were significantly associated with level of complaints, but

age was not significant ( $B = 0.09, t = 1.00, p = .318$ ). Step 2 results similarly revealed that H1a was not supported as dependence on the relationship did not predict complaints ( $B = -0.42, \beta = -0.04, t = -0.79, p = .428$ ), and H2a was also not supported as the association of experiencing punitive power and complaints was in the opposite direction as predicted ( $B = 6.61, \beta = 0.66, t = 12.49, p < .001$ ). Step 3 also showed no significant interaction between the two power variables ( $B = 0.94, \beta = 0.09, t = 1.53, p = .127$ ), thus again not supporting H3a.

The hierarchical regression results regarding the moderating variables (H4a-6a) are contained in Table 6 below. The table reveals that being subject to punitive power was significant in each of the three models like the other the two samples; and similar to the whole sample, the only moderator with significance was the positive association between self-control and level of complaints. However, unlike the whole and student samples, two significant 2-way interactions emerged: the interaction of the two forms of power, and the interaction of punitive power and optimism. The 3-way interaction with optimism also approached significance.

The decomposed interaction of the two power variables (see Figure 1) demonstrates that, contrary to H3a, those who were subject to high punitive power and who were also more dependent had the *most* complaints, and those who were more dependent and experienced low punitive power had the least complaints. The other decomposed interaction shows that the slopes for the association between punitive power and optimism were positive, but the slope was steeper for those who had higher optimism such that those who were more optimistic that were subject to punitive power had more complaints (see Figure 2). For the 3-way interaction (see Figure 3), while there was some slight variation in the number of complaints based on the different combinations of the power variables and optimism, this figure additionally highlights the predominant role of punitive power.

Table 6: Results for Complaints with the MTurk Sample

Predictors	Model with Optimism			Model with Self-Control			Model with Communal Strength		
	B	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	B	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	B	$\beta$	<i>t</i>
<b>Step 2</b>									
Dependence Power	-0.52	-0.05	-0.97	-0.44	-0.04	-0.87	-0.32	-0.03	-0.60
Punitive Power	6.49	0.65	11.95**	4.54	0.45	6.06**	6.29	0.63	10.34**
Moderator	-0.87	-0.05	-0.96	2.94	0.28	3.78**	-1.09	-0.07	-1.06
$\Delta R^2$	.44			.47			.44		
<b>Step 3</b>									
Dependence x Punitive	1.30	0.12	2.11*	1.13	0.11	1.71	0.66	0.06	1.05
Dependence x Moderator	0.186	0.02	0.29	-0.37	-0.03	-0.48	-0.43	-0.03	-0.54
Punitive x Moderator	3.35	0.22	3.10**	-0.37	-0.03	-0.57	2.21	0.13	1.70
$\Delta R^2$	.03			.01			.01		
<b>Step 4</b>									
3-way interaction	-1.55	-0.14	-1.68 <sup>m</sup>	1.17	0.09	1.54	-0.31	-0.02	-0.28
$\Delta R^2$	.01			0.006			.00		

Note. <sup>m</sup> $p = .095$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $**p < .01$ . The  $R$ -squared change is based on increases from the previous model; for Step 2, the  $R$ -square change is based on the model with only the control variables.

Figure 1. Dependence X Punitive Power: MTurk Sample

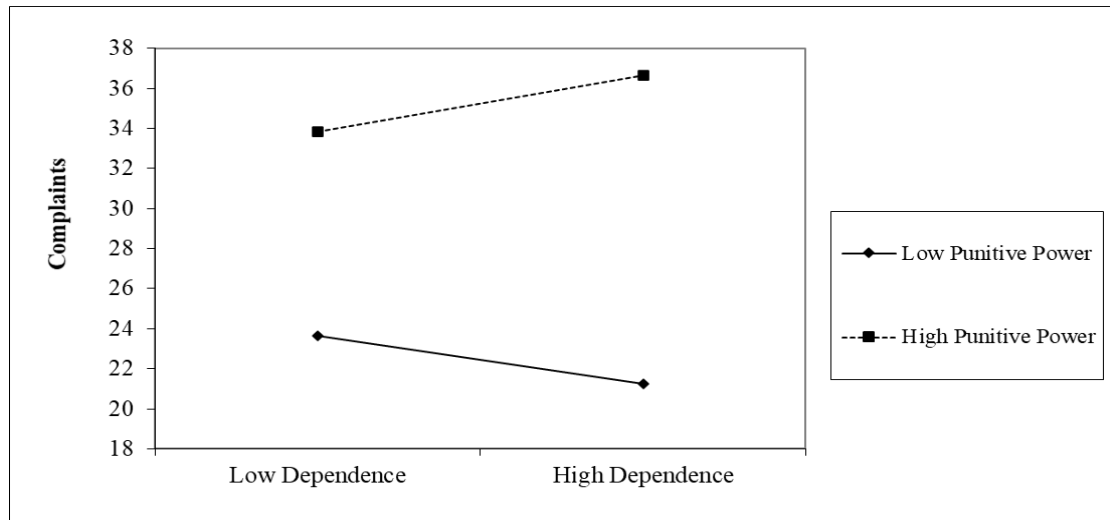


Figure 2. Punitive Power X Optimism: MTurk Sample

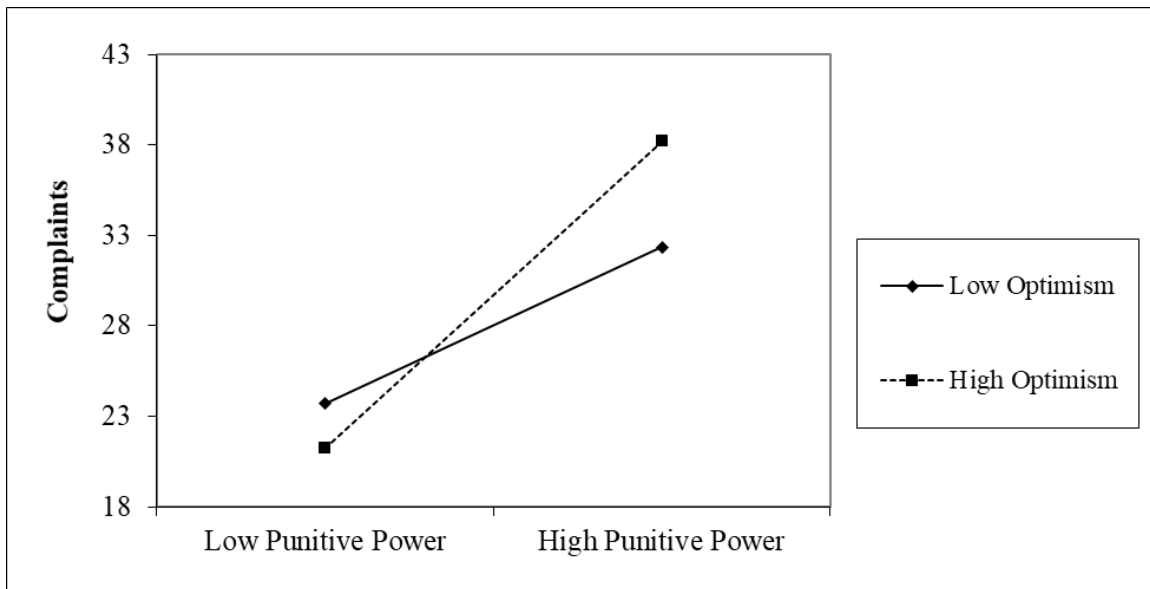
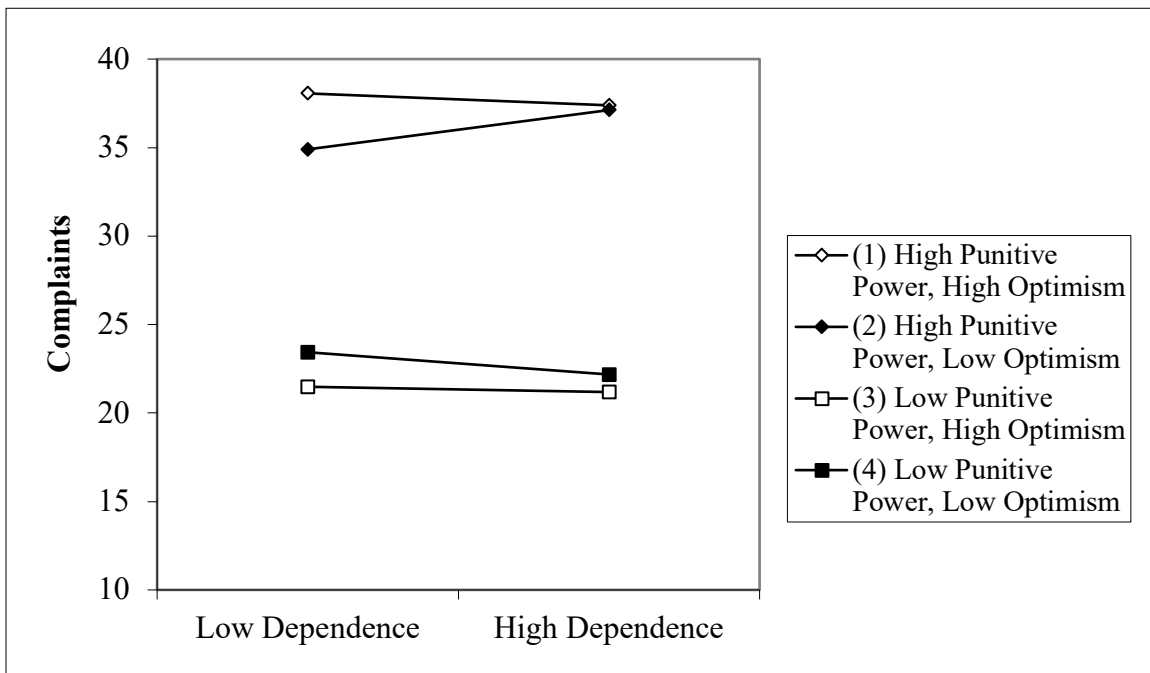


Figure 3. Dependence x Punitive Power X Optimism: MTurk Sample



*Summary.* Being subject to punitive power emerged in both the full sample and sub-samples as being positively associated with the level of complaints (which was a predicted relationship, but not in the direction hypothesized). However, dependence on the relationship was still involved in an interaction with punitive power in predicting complaints within the MTurk sample when controlling for optimism (higher forms of both powers were associated with the most complaints). Optimism also strengthened the role of punitive power in predicting a greater level of complaints. Self-control was also positively associated with the number of complaints with the full and MTurk sample, but not with the student sample.

The results for optimism and self-control may both seem counterintuitive. Some may view complaints as inherently negative and that self-control would help with withholding negative thoughts, but another perspective is that self-control may help facilitate complaints to be expressed constructively. With regards to optimism, some may believe that people who expect things to turn out well may think the best of their partner, but an alternative perspective could be that higher amounts of optimism could potentially create a situation of violated expectations (e.g., a recognition that dynamics in the relationship could be better). In other words, if aversive behaviors are present, complaints could be the product of intrinsically violated relationship ideals.

#### **FREQUENCY OF CONFLICT (H1B-6B)**

*Full sample.* In testing H1b-H3b, Step 1 results (not reported in a table) reveal that the sample was significantly associated with frequency of conflict ( $B = 9.40, t = 5.12, p < .001$ ), but not length of relationship ( $B = -0.15, t = -1.52, p = .131$ ), age ( $B = -0.01, t = -0.09, p = .925$ ), or sex ( $B = -0.42, t = -0.32, p = .021$ ). Step 2 results with the two power variables reveal that neither H1b nor H2b was supported, but for different reasons. H1b

was not supported due to a lack of significance ( $B = -0.18$ ,  $\beta = -0.02$ ,  $t = -0.42$ ,  $p = .674$ ). H2b demonstrates that being subject to punitive power was significantly associated with the level of conflict ( $B = 7.79$ ,  $\beta = 0.72$ ,  $t = 16.47$ ,  $p < .001$ ), but the opposite of the hypothesized direction; the more punitive power the partner demonstrated, the more conflict the participant reported. Step 3 regarding the association between an interaction of the two powers and conflict revealed a lack of support for H3b ( $B = 0.55$ ,  $\beta = 0.04$ ,  $t = 1.08$ ,  $p = .281$ ).

*Table 7: Results for Frequency of Conflict with the Full Sample*

Predictors	Model with Optimism			Model with Self-Control			Model with Communal Strength		
	B	$\beta$	$t$	B	$\beta$	$t$	B	$\beta$	$t$
<b>Step 2</b>									
Dependence Power	-0.25	-0.02	-0.56	-0.24	-0.02	-0.57	0.12	0.01	0.27
Punitive Power	7.73	0.71	16.21**	6.15	0.57	10.67**	7.30	0.67	14.53**
Moderator	-0.65	-0.04	-0.94	2.67	0.23	4.67*	-2.12	-0.13	-2.71**
$\Delta R^2$	.43			.46			.44		
<b>Step 3</b>									
Dependence x Punitive	0.50	0.04	0.96	0.84	0.07	1.50	0.32	0.03	0.63
Dependence x Moderator	0.58	0.04	1.02	-0.45	-0.03	-0.69	-1.35	-0.08	-2.00*
Punitive x Moderator	0.37	0.02	0.41	-0.25	-0.02	-0.48	0.18	0.01	0.17
$\Delta R^2$	.00			.00			.01		
<b>Step 4</b>									
3-way interaction	-0.25	-0.02	-0.31	0.76	0.05	1.14	0.07	0.00	0.08
$\Delta R^2$	.00			.00			.00		

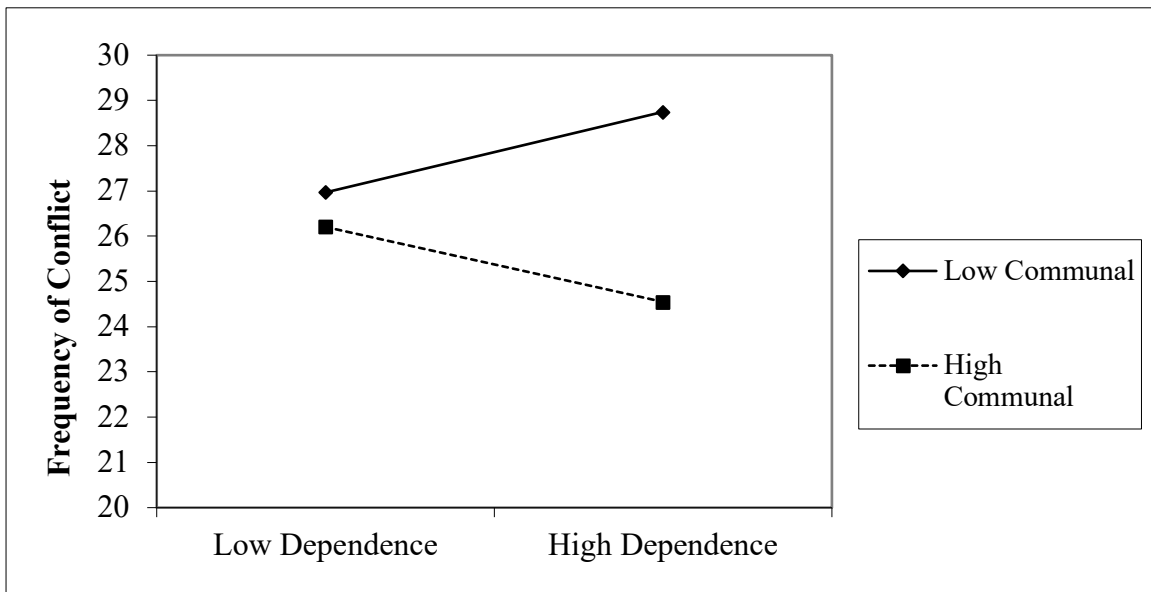
Note.  $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ . The  $R$ -squared change is based on increases from the previous model; for Step 2, the  $R$ -square change is based on the model with only the control variables.

The hierarchal regression results regarding the moderating variables (H4-6b) are presented in Table 7 below. The table reveals that punitive power continued to be significant in each of the three models even when including the moderating variable. There



were main effects for two of the moderators: self-control and communal strength. Communal strength was negatively associated with conflict as predicted, but counter-intuitively, the more the respondent reported self-control, the more conflict they reported. Step 3 revealed one 2-way interaction for dependence and communal strength (see Figure 4) such that someone who had high communal strength reported less conflict if they were more dependent on the relationship. Conversely, those who were not as other-oriented reported more conflict if they were more dependent on the relationship. There were no other 2-way or 3-way interactions as hypothesized. As such, H4b-5b were not supported and H6b received partial support.

Figure 4. Dependence X Communal Strength: Full Sample



*Student sample.* Unlike the whole sample, Step 1 revealed that none of the demographic variables were significantly associated with frequency of conflict ( $t_s < \pm 0.82$ ,  $p_s > .415$ ). In testing H1-3b, Step 2 results revealed that H1b was not supported as dependence on the relationship did not predict conflict ( $B = -0.27$ ,  $\beta = -0.04$ ,  $t = -0.37$ ,  $p = .715$ ), and H2b was also not supported because the association between partner punitive

power and conflict was in the opposite direction from the prediction ( $B = 3.53$ ,  $\beta = 0.46$ ,  $t = 4.76$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Step 3 of the regression analysis did not find a significant interaction of the two forms of power so H3b was not supported ( $B = -0.08$ ,  $\beta = -0.01$ ,  $t = -0.12$ ,  $p = .905$ ).

*Table 8: Results for Frequency of Conflict with the Student Sample*

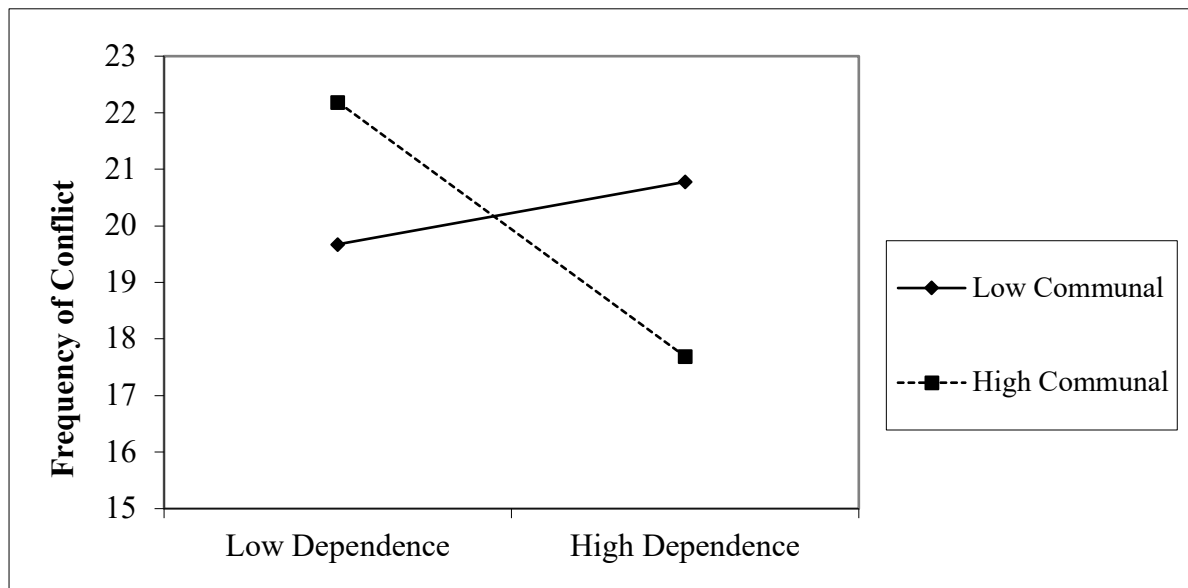
Predictors	Model with Optimism			Model with Self-Control			Model with Communal Strength		
	B	$\beta$	$t$	B	$\beta$	$t$	B	$\beta$	$t$
<b>Step 2</b>									
Dependence	-0.20	-0.03	-0.03	-0.28	-0.04	-0.39	-0.30	-0.48	-0.37
Power									
Punitive	3.47	0.45	4.62**	3.43	0.44	4.53**	3.53	0.46	4.73**
Power									
Moderator	0.67	0.06	-0.60	0.63	0.07	0.69	0.12	0.01	0.09
$\Delta R^2$	.22			.22			.19		
<b>Step 3</b>									
Dependence x	-0.22	-0.04	-0.33	0.23	0.04	0.30	0.02	0.00	0.03
Punitive									
Dependence x	0.74	0.07	0.63	-1.21	-0.11	-0.93	-2.26	-0.19	-1.74 <sup>m</sup>
Moderator									
Punitive x	-1.50	-0.13	-1.17	-0.55	-0.06	-0.49	0.12	0.01	0.07
Moderator									
$\Delta R^2$	.01			.01			.02		
<b>Step 4</b>									
3-way	-1.33	-0.13	-0.91	0.102	0.101	0.60	0.80	0.09	0.71
interaction									
$\Delta R^2$	.01			.00			.01		

Note. <sup>m</sup> $p = .086$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $**p < .01$ . The  $R$ -squared change is based on increases from the previous model; for Step 2, the  $R$ -square change is based on the model with only the control variables.

The hierarchal regression results regarding the moderating variables (H4-6b) are contained in Table 8 below. The table reveals that partner punitive power continued to be significant in each of the three models even when including the moderating variable. For Step 3, no 2-way interactions were significant but the interaction between dependence and communal strength approached significance. The decomposed interaction (see Figure 5) demonstrated that those who experienced low dependence on the relationship and high

communal strength reported the most conflict, whereas those who experienced high dependence on the relationship and high communal strength reported the least conflict (as was the case in the whole sample). In Step 4, no 3-way interactions were significant. As such, H4b-H5b were not supported. But the dependence and communal strength interaction provides some support for H6b in how certain combinations of power and individual characteristics might lead to less expressions of irritations that result in conflict.

Figure 5. *Dependence X Communal Strength: Student Sample*



*MTurk sample.* Unlike the whole sample, Step 1 revealed that none of the demographic variables were associated with frequency of conflict ( $t_s < \pm 1.42, p_s > .157$ ). Step 2 results similarly revealed that H1b was not supported as dependence on the relationship did not predict conflict ( $B = -0.17, \beta = -0.02, t = -0.33, p = .655$ ), and H2b was also not supported as the association of partner punitive power and conflict was in the opposite direction as predicted ( $B = 8.35, \beta = 0.75, t = 12.49, p < .001$ ); the more the participants experienced punitive responses from the partner, the more conflict they

reported. Step 3 also showed no significant interaction between the two power variables ( $B = 0.48$ ,  $\beta = 0.04$ ,  $t = 0.78$ ,  $p = .435$ ), thus again not supporting H3b.

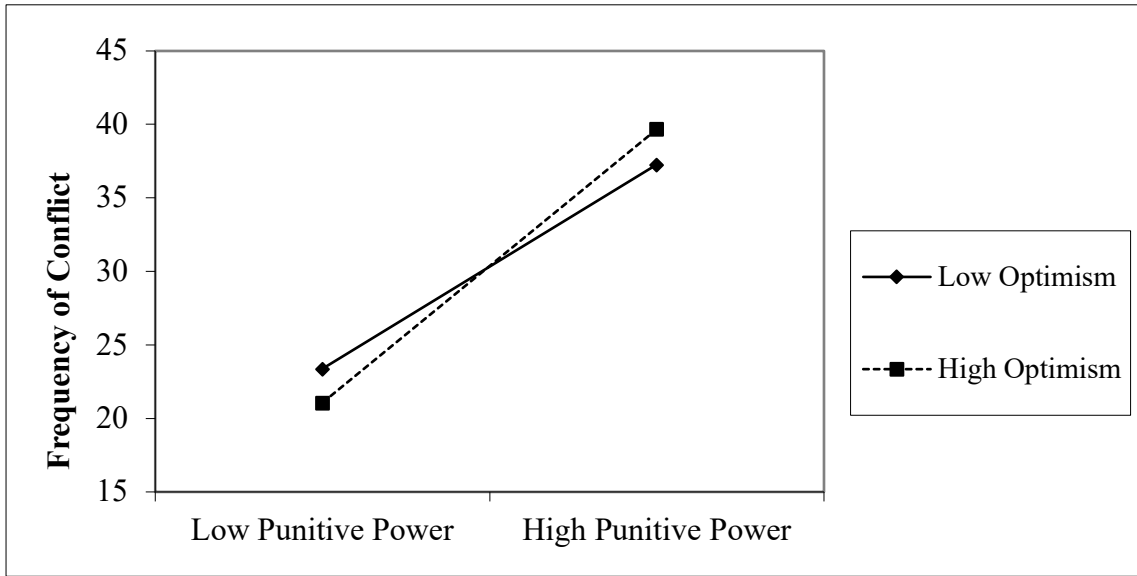
The hierarchal regression results regarding the moderating variables (H4-6b) are contained in Table 9 below. The table reveals that partner punitive power continued to be significant in each of the three models even when including the moderating variables. There were main effects for two of the moderators: self-control and communal strength. As reflected in the whole sample, communal strength was negatively associated with conflict, but the more the respondent reported self-control, the more conflict they reported. In Step 3, one 2-way interaction approached significance: punitive power by optimism. Similar to number of complaints, the decomposed interaction (see Figure 6) showed that

*Table 9: Results for Frequency of Conflict with the MTurk Sample*

Predictors	Model with Optimism			Model with Self-Control			Model with Communal Strength		
	B	$\beta$	$t$	B	$\beta$	$t$	B	$\beta$	$t$
<b>Step 2</b>									
Dependence Power	-0.30	-0.03	-0.56	-0.20	-0.02	-0.41	0.09	0.01	0.17
Punitive Power	8.19	0.74	15.12**	5.60	0.50	7.71**	7.48	0.67	12.55**
Moderator	-1.14	-0.06	-1.27	3.89	0.34	5.15**	-2.98	-0.16	-2.95**
$\Delta R^2$	.40			.45			.41		
<b>Step 3</b>									
Dependence x Punitive	0.63	0.05	1.00	0.76	0.06	1.18	0.15	0.01	0.25
Dependence x Moderator	0.68	0.05	1.05	-0.51	-0.04	-0.70	-0.34	-0.02	-0.43
Punitive x Moderator	1.90	0.11	1.72 <sup>m</sup>	-0.98	-0.07	-1.56	1.50	0.08	1.17
$\Delta R^2$	.01			.01			.00		
<b>Step 4</b>									
3-way interaction	-.041	-0.03	-0.44	0.59	0.04	0.80	-.43	-0.03	-0.39
$\Delta R^2$	.00			.00			.00		

Note. <sup>m</sup> $p = .087$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $**p < .01$ . The  $R$ -squared change is based on increases from the previous model; for Step 2, the  $R$ -square change is based on the model with only the control variables.

Figure 6. Punitive Power x Optimism: MTurk Sample



slopes were positive for both high and low optimism, but those who experienced higher partner punitive power and higher optimism reported more conflict whereas those who lower punitive power and higher optimism reported the least conflict. For Step 4, there were no 3-way interactions. As such, H4b-6b were not supported.

*Summary.* The results of this section were somewhat similar to that of the complaints section, which in part is also explained by the method of measurement as well as the strong correlation between the two variables ( $r = .83$ ). Similarly, partner punitive power also emerged as strongly involved with complaints as well with a positive association for both the full sample and the two subsamples (i.e., a relationship was revealed but not in the direction hypothesized). Like complaints, self-control was positively associated with conflict for the full sample and the MTurk subsample, but not the student subsample. Again, as argued in the literature review and the rationale, conflict is arguably not inherently negative. As such, the presence of self-control may facilitate healthy discussions amidst conflict. Conversely, communal strength was negatively associated

with conflict for the full and MTurk subsample, but not with the student subsample. Additionally, dependence power interacted with communal strength in that those who scored high on both measures reported the least conflict. These findings with communal strength seem more intuitive in that perhaps those who are other-oriented may engage in less conflict when they are more dependent on the relationship. And finally, similar to the complaints section, optimism strengthened partner punitive power in predicting more conflict.

#### **UNEXPRESSED IRRITANTS (CHILLING EFFECT; H1c-6c)**

*Full sample.* In testing H1c-H3c, Step 1 results (not reported in a table) revealed that sex was significantly associated with unexpressed irritants ( $B = -0.18, t = -2.80, p = .006$ ), but not significant for length of the relationship ( $B = -0.00, t = -0.24, p = .812$ ), age ( $B = 0.00, t = 0.70, p = .484$ ), or the sample ( $B = -0.11, t = -1.16, p = .248$ ). Step 2 results with the two power variables revealed a lack of support for unexpressed irritants and dependence on the relationship ( $B = -0.03, t = -1.13, p = .258$ ), as well as punitive power ( $B = -0.01, t = -0.24, p = .811$ ). As such, neither H1c nor H2c were supported. Step 3 regarding the association between an interaction of the two powers and unexpressed irritants revealed a lack of support for H3c as well ( $B = 0.02, \beta = 0.04, t = 0.66, p = .510$ ).

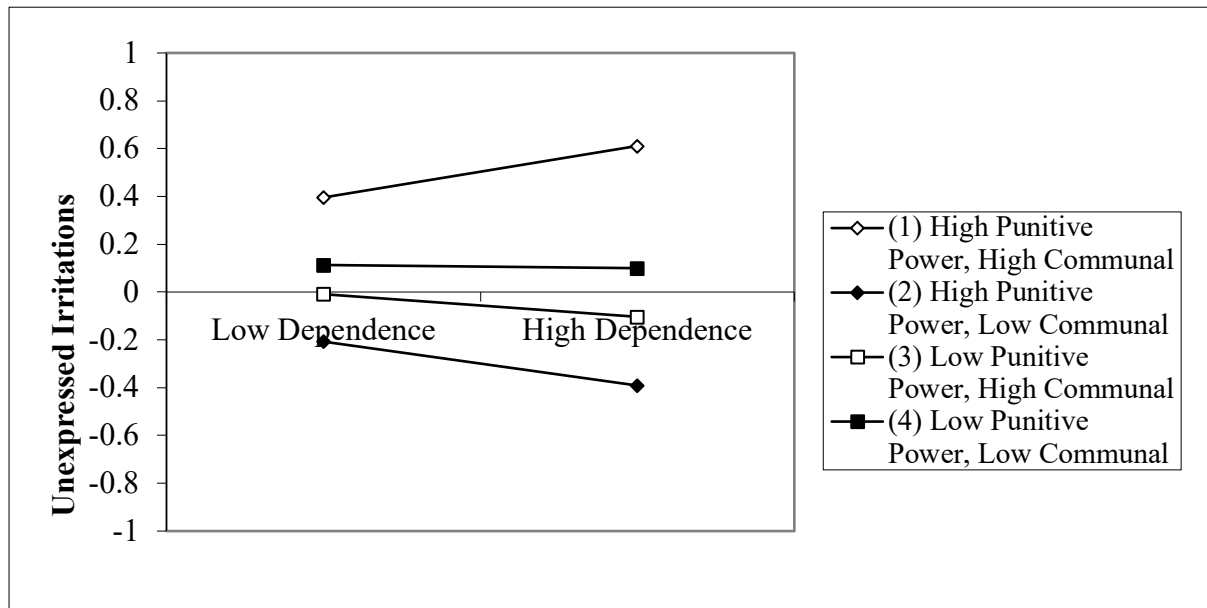
The hierarchical regression results regarding the moderating variables (H4c-6c) are contained in Table 10 below. Step 2 revealed no significant main effects and Step 3 revealed no 2-way interactions. However, Step 4 revealed one 3-way interaction with communal strength. The decomposed interaction of the two power variables and communal strength (see Figure 7) demonstrated that those who experienced the combination of high dependence on the relationship, high partner punitive power, and high communal strength reported a greater chilling effect—being subjected to both forms of power and possessing

Table 10: Results for Unexpressed Irritations with the Full Sample

Predictors	Model with Optimism			Model with Self-Control			Model with Communal Strength		
	B	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	B	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	B	$\beta$	<i>t</i>
<b>Step 2</b>									
Dependence Power	-0.04	-0.07	-1.24	-0.03	-0.064	-1.10	-0.04	-0.07	-1.19
Punitive Power	-0.01	-0.02	-0.32	0.03	0.05	0.63	-0.00	-0.01	-0.08
Moderator	-0.03	-0.04	-0.63	-0.06	-0.10	-1.34	0.02	0.03	0.39
$\Delta R^2$	.01			.01			.00		
<b>Step 3</b>									
Dependence x Punitive	0.03	0.05	0.86	0.03	0.05	0.73	0.02	0.03	0.44
Dependence x Moderator	-0.03	-0.05	-0.82	-0.02	-0.03	-0.41	0.05	0.07	1.13
Punitive x Moderator	0.05	0.05	0.73	-0.01	-0.01	-0.20	0.12	0.12	1.61
$\Delta R^2$	.01			.00			.02		
<b>Step 4</b>									
3-way interaction	-0.08	0.10	-1.42	-0.01	-0.02	-0.27	0.19	0.21	3.08**
$\Delta R^2$	.00			.00			.03		

Note.  $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ . The  $R$ -squared change is based on increases from the previous model; for Step 2, the  $R$ -square change is based on the model with only the control variables.

Figure 7. Dependence X Punitive Power X Communal Strength: Full Sample



higher amounts of communal strength were associated with more unexpressed irritants. Those with the combination of high dependence power, high punitive power, but low communal strength reported the least chilling effect. All other combinations had a moderate level of the chilling effect. Thus, although H4c-5c were not supported, H6c was supported.

*Student sample.* Unlike the whole sample, Step 1 revealed that none of the demographic variables were significantly associated with unexpressed irritants ( $t_s < +/- 1.03$ ,  $p_s > .307$ ). In testing H1c-2c, Step 2 results reveal that H1c was not supported as dependence on the relationship did not predict unexpressed irritants ( $B = -0.05$ ,  $\beta = -0.12$ ,  $t = -1.12$ ,  $p = .265$ ). However, H2c was supported as Step 2 revealed a significant association of partner punitive power and unexpressed irritants ( $B = 0.11$ ,  $\beta = 0.24$ ,  $t =$

*Table 11: Results for Unexpressed Irritations with the Student Sample*

Predictors	Model with Optimism			Model with Self-Control			Model with Communal Strength		
	B	$\beta$	$t$	B	$\beta$	$t$	B	$\beta$	$t$
<b>Step 2</b>									
Dependence Power	-0.07	-0.15	-1.47	-0.05	-0.11	-1.10	-0.04	-0.09	-0.83
Punitive Power	0.13	0.27	2.59*	0.12	0.25	2.29**	0.11	0.24	2.28*
Moderator	-.016	-0.23	-2.19*	-0.03	-0.04	-0.41	-0.04	-0.06	-0.50
$\Delta R^2$	.12			.07			.07		
<b>Step 3</b>									
Dependence x Punitive	0.01	0.02	0.13	-0.01	-0.01	-0.09	0.05	0.15	1.08
Dependence x Moderator	0.02	0.04	0.31	-0.02	-0.03	-0.24	-0.07	-0.10	-0.84
Punitive x Moderator	-0.07	-0.10	-0.90	-0.12	-0.21	-1.69 <sup>m</sup>	-0.14	-0.16	-1.23
$\Delta R^2$	.01			.03			.02		
<b>Step 4</b>									
3-way interaction	0.02	0.10	0.16	0.03	0.08	0.43	0.13	0.25	1.82
$\Delta R^2$	.00			.00			.04		

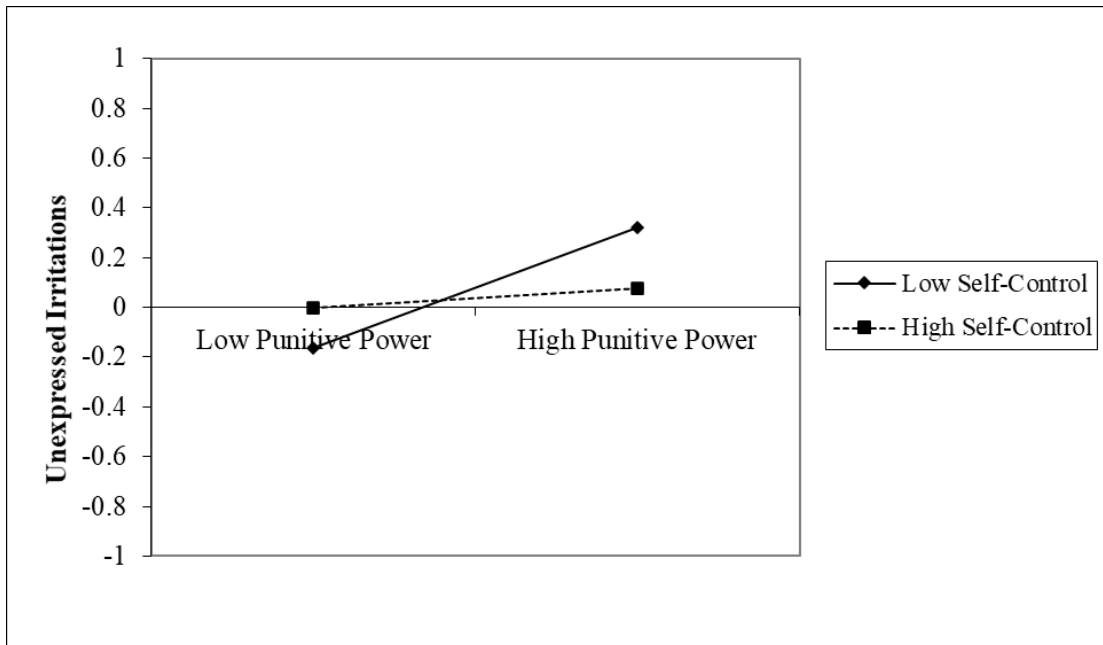
Note. <sup>m</sup> $p = .096$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $**p < .01$ . The  $R$ -squared change is based on increases from the previous model; for Step 2, the  $R$ -square change is based on the model with only the control variables.



2.27,  $p = .026$ ). Step 3 of the regression analysis did not find a significant interaction of the two forms of power so H3c was not supported ( $B = 0.02$ ,  $\beta = 0.05$ ,  $t = 0.45$ ,  $p = .651$ ).

The hierarchal regression results regarding the moderating variables (H4c-6c) are contained in Table 11. The table reveals that partner punitive power was significant in each of the three models in Step 2. There was a main effect for one of the moderators; the more the respondent reported optimism, the more unexpressed irritants were present. For Step 3 and Step 4 there were no 2-way or 3-way significant interactions, but one 2-way interaction approached significance. Decomposing this interaction (see Figure 8) showed that the combination of higher partner punitive power and lower self-control was associated with the most unexpressed irritations. As such, H4c-6c were not supported.

Figure 8. *Punitive Power X Self-Control: Student Sample*



*MTurk sample.* Similar to the whole sample, Step 1 results for this sample revealed significant associations between unexpressed irritants and participant sex ( $B = -0.20$ ,  $t = -$

2.71,  $p = .007$ ), but not age ( $B = 0.00$ ,  $t = 0.70$ ,  $p = .487$ ) or relationship length ( $B = -6.36$ ,  $t = -0.13$ ,  $p = .899$ ). Step 2 results revealed that H1c was not supported as dependence on the relationship did not predict the presence of unexpressed complaints ( $B = -0.02$ ,  $\beta = -0.04$ ,  $t = -0.50$ ,  $p = .615$ ), and H2c was also not supported as the association of partner punitive power and unexpressed irritants was insignificant ( $B = -0.04$ ,  $\beta = -0.08$ ,  $t = -1.14$ ,  $p = .255$ ). Step 3 also showed no significant interaction between the two power variables ( $B = 0.06$ ,  $\beta = 0.10$ ,  $t = 1.26$ ,  $p = .210$ ), thus again not supporting H3c.

The hierarchal regression results regarding the moderating variables (H4c-6c) are contained in Table 12 below. Step 2 revealed no main effects for the power variables or the moderators. Step 3 revealed no significant 2-way interactions, but the interaction

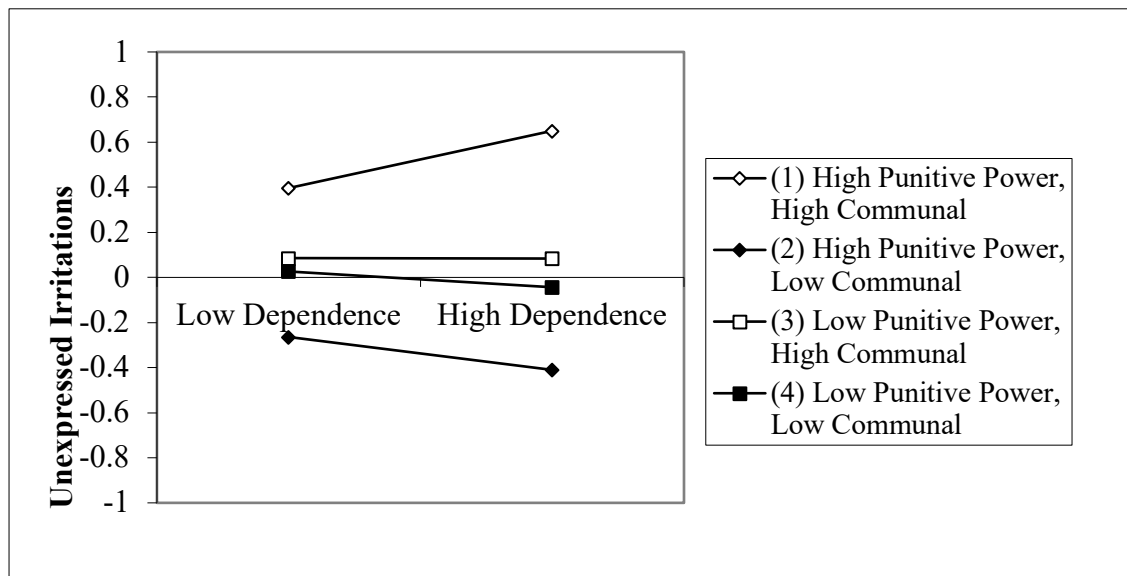
*Table 12: Results for Unexpressed Irritations with the MTurk Sample*

Predictors	Model with Optimism			Model with Self-Control			Model with Communal Strength		
	B	$\beta$	$t$	B	$\beta$	$t$	B	$\beta$	$t$
<b>Step 2</b>									
Dependence	-0.02	-0.03	-0.43	-0.02	-0.04	-0.49	-0.02	-0.04	-0.55
Power									
Punitive	-0.21	-0.08	-1.04	-0.01	-.02	-0.15	-0.04	-0.07	-0.82
Power									
Moderator	0.02	0.02	0.33	-0.05	-0.09	-0.86	0.03	0.03	0.35
$\Delta R^2$	.01			.01			.01		
<b>Step 3</b>									
Dependence x Punitive	0.06	0.11	1.43	0.05	0.09	1.05	0.05	0.09	1.18
Dependence x Moderator	-0.04	-0.06	-0.80	0.01	0.01	0.10	0.10	0.13	1.82 <sup>m</sup>
Punitive x Moderator	0.04	0.06	0.56	0.04	0.06	0.87	0.13	0.15	1.38
$\Delta R^2$	.01			.01			.04		
<b>Step 4</b>									
3-way interaction	-0.05	-0.09	-0.74	-0.04	-0.06	-0.70	0.14	0.17	1.77 <sup>m</sup>
$\Delta R^2$	.00			.00			.02		

Note. <sup>m</sup> $p < .079$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $**p < .01$ . The  $R$ -squared change is based on increases from the previous model; for Step 2, the  $R$ -square change is based on the model with only the control variables.

between dependence and communal strength approached significance. Step 4 also revealed one 3-way interaction that approached significance for communal strength. Because the 2-way interaction is subsumed by the 3-way, only the 3-way interaction is described. Similar to the full sample, the decomposed interaction (see Figure 9) demonstrated that those who experienced the combination of high dependence on the relationship, high partner punitive power, and high communal strength reported a greater chilling effect (i.e., they did not express behaviors that bothered them). Those with the combination of high dependence, high partner punitive power, and low communal strength reported the least chilling effect. All other combinations had more moderate levels of the chilling effect. As such, H4c and H5c were not supported, but H6c was supported.

*Figure 9: Dependence X Punitive Power X Communal Strength: MTurk Sample*



*Summary.* The full sample revealed support for the hypothesis regarding the two forms of power and communal strength (H6c), perhaps driven more by the MTurk subsample. Possessing high communal strength while being subject to both partner

punitive power and dependence on the relationship resulted in the greatest chilling effect. Conversely, being subject to both forms of power, but being less other-oriented resulted in the lowest chilling effect. These opposing effects for low and high levels of communal strength in the presence of both high dependence and punitive power is notable. Perhaps being other-oriented makes a person less inclined to express complaints, and being less other-oriented helps in facilitating its expression when the respondent is subject to both forms of power.

These relationships were not found in the student population, but the student sample still had interactions where being subject to punitive power was associated with the chilling effect. However, with the student sample, optimism was also negatively associated with the chilling effect.

#### **PRESENCE OF AVERSIVE BEHAVIORS BUT A LACK OF IRRITANTS (ABSENCE OF CHILLING EFFECT; H1D-6D)**

*Full sample.* In testing H1d-H3d, Step 1 results (not reported in a table) revealed that sex ( $B = 0.42, t = 5.03, p < .001$ ) and sample ( $B = 0.46, t = 3.88, p < .001$ ) were significantly associated with a lack of irritants, but age ( $B = -0.01, t = -1.33, p = .185$ ) and relationship length ( $B = 0.00, t = 0.44, p = .660$ ) were not. Step 2 results revealed that H1d was not supported as dependence on the relationship did not predict the missing chilling effect ( $B = -0.04, t = -0.98, p = .328$ ). However, H2d was supported as partner punitive power did predict a greater chilling effect ( $B = 0.09, t = 2.06, p = .040$ ). Step 3 showed no significant interaction between the two power variables ( $B = 0.02, \beta = 0.03, t = 0.51, p = .609$ ), thus again not supporting H3d.

The hierarchical regression results regarding the moderating variables (H4d-6d) are contained in Table 13 below. The table reveals that partner punitive power approached

significance in the model with optimism; the more punitive power experienced, the more participants lacked irritations. The only main effect for a moderator was communal strength; the more communal strength the participant reported, the less likely there was a missing chilling effect (i.e., the greater likelihood of a lack of irritants reported in spite of aversive behaviors present).

*Table 13: Results for Absence of Irritations with the Full Sample*

Predictors	Model with Optimism			Model with Self-Control			Model with Communal Strength		
	B	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	B	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	B	$\beta$	<i>t</i>
<b>Step 2</b>									
Dependence	-0.44	-0.06	-1.14	-0.38	-0.05	-1.00	-0.10	-0.01	-0.25
Power									
Punitive Power	0.81	0.11	1.91 <sup>m</sup>	0.66	0.09	1.24	0.40	0.06	0.91
Moderator	-0.61	-0.06	-1.00	0.33	0.04	0.63	-1.96	-0.18	-2.84**
$\Delta R^2$	.02			.02			.04		
<b>Step 3</b>									
Dependence x Punitive	0.21	0.03	0.45	0.09	0.01	0.18	0.15	0.02	0.32
Dependence x Moderator	-0.89	-0.10	-1.77 <sup>m</sup>	0.40	0.04	0.66	0.10	0.01	0.16
Punitive x Moderator	-1.08	-0.09	-1.34	-0.93	0.11	-1.86 <sup>m</sup>	-0.79	-0.06	-0.87
$\Delta R^2$	.02			.00			.00		
<b>Step 4</b>									
3-way interaction	1.02	0.09	1.44	-1.09	-0.11	-1.79 <sup>m</sup>	-0.01	-0.00	-0.02
$\Delta R^2$	.01			.01			.00		

*Note.* <sup>m</sup> $p < .078$ ,  $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ . The *R*-squared change is based on increases from the previous model; for Step 2, the *R*-square change is based on the model with only the control variables.

Steps 3 and 4 showed two 2-way interactions and a 3-way interaction that approached significance. The decomposed 2-way interaction for dependence on the relationship and optimism (see Figure 10) showed that those who experienced high dependence and high optimism had the least missing chilling effect as compared to the other combinations. Because the 3-way interaction for self-control subsumes the other 2-way interaction, only the 3-way is described. The decomposed 3-way interaction (see

Figure 10. Dependence X Optimism: Full Sample

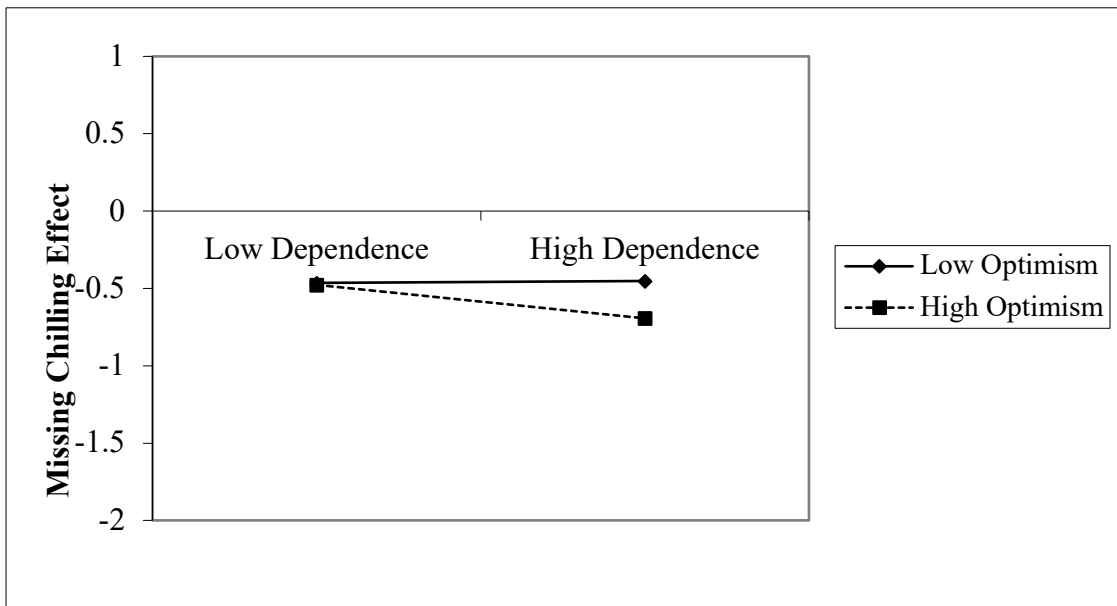


Figure 11. Dependence X Punitive Power X Self-Control: Full Sample

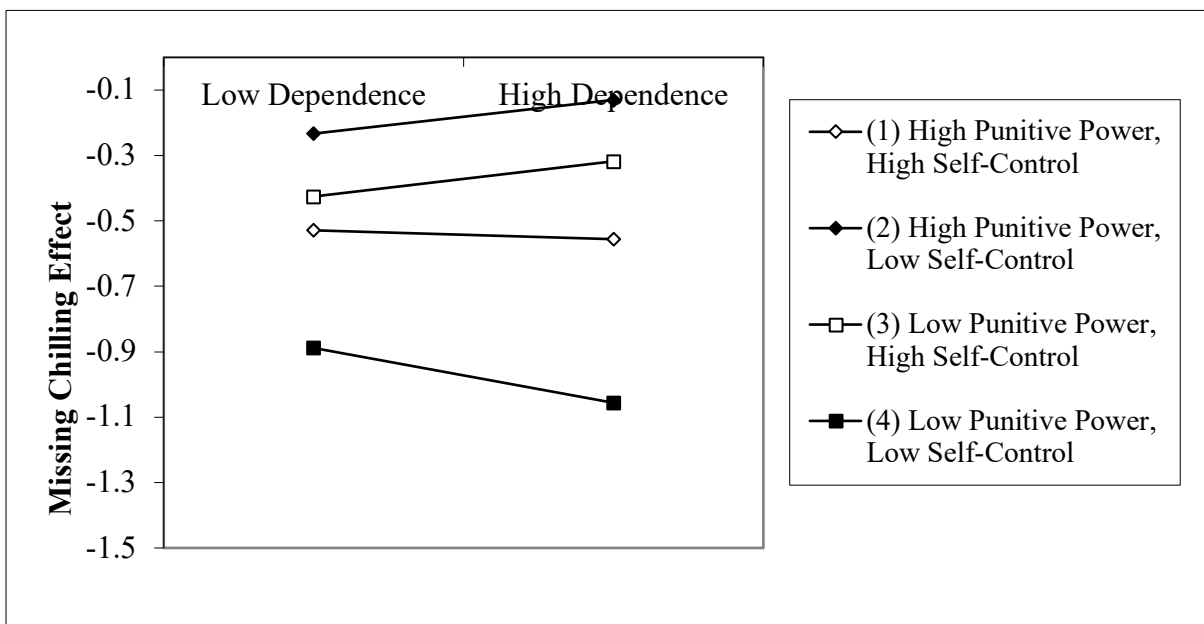


Figure 11) demonstrated that those with the combination of experiencing high dependence on the relationship, high partner punitive power, and low self-control reported the highest missing chilling effect. Those experiencing high dependence, low punitive power, and low self-control reported the least. No other 2-way or 3-way interactions emerged; as such, H4d-H6d were not supported.

*Table 14: Results for Absence of Irritations with the Student Sample*

Predictors	Model with Optimism			Model with Self-Control			Model with Communal Strength		
	B	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	B	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	B	$\beta$	<i>t</i>
<b>Step 2</b>									
Dependence	-0.73	-0.10	-0.96	-0.55	-0.08	-0.71	0.00	0.00	0.00
Power									
Punitive	0.65	0.09	0.84	0.45	0.06	0.57	0.53	0.07	0.70
Power									
Moderator	-1.88	-0.18	-1.64	0.19	0.02	0.20	-2.28	-0.20	-1.70 <sup>m</sup>
$\Delta R^2$	.04			.01			.04		
<b>Step 3</b>									
Dependence x	0.63	0.12	0.95	0.32	0.06	0.40	0.88	0.16	1.12
Punitive									
Dependence x	-2.46	-0.24	-2.08*	0.21	0.02	0.16	0.06	0.01	0.05
Moderator									
Punitive x	0.44	0.04	0.34	-0.99	-0.11	-0.86	-1.64	-0.12	-0.93
Moderator									
$\Delta R^2$	.05			.02			.02		
<b>Step 4</b>									
3-way	0.35	0.04	0.24	-0.90	-0.17	-0.92	0.05	0.01	0.04
interaction									
$\Delta R^2$	.00			.01			.00		

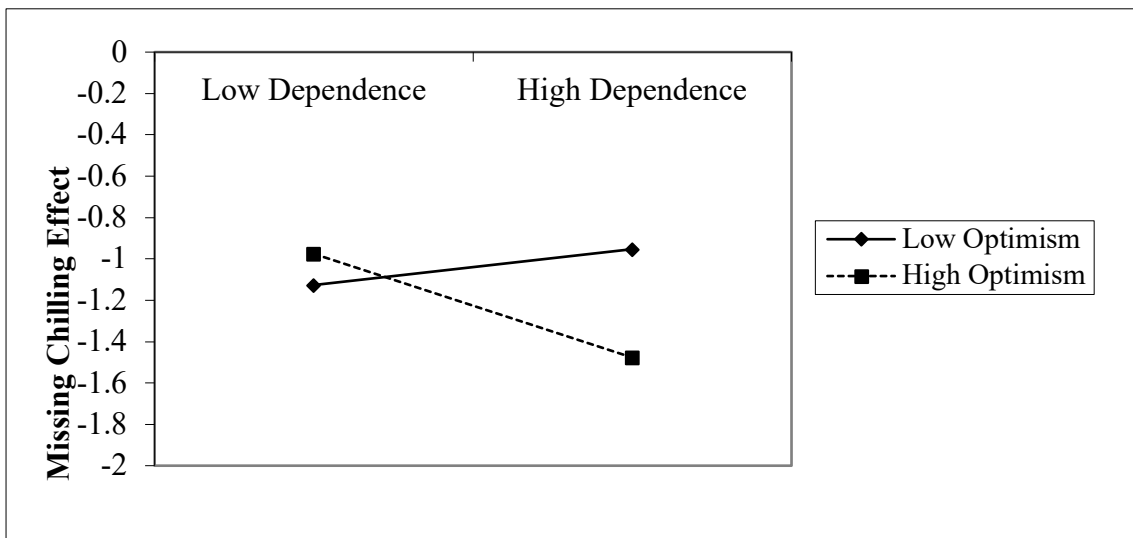
Note. <sup>m</sup>*p* = .087, *p* < .05, \*\**p* < .01. The *R*-squared change is based on increases from the previous model; for Step 2, the *R*-square change is based on the model with only the control variables.

*Student sample.* Unlike the whole sample, Step 1 revealed none of the demographic variables were significantly associated with a lack of irritants ( $t_s < \pm 1.46$ ,  $p_s > .147$ ). Step 2 results revealed that H1d was not supported as dependence on the relationship did not predict a lack of irritants ( $B = -0.05$ ,  $\beta = -0.08$ ,  $t = -0.71$ ,  $p = .480$ ), and H2d was also not supported as the association of partner punitive power and a lack of irritants was

insignificant ( $B = 0.05$ ,  $\beta = 0.08$ ,  $t = 0.62$ ,  $p = .536$ ). Step 3 also showed no significant interaction between the two power variables ( $B = 0.06$ ,  $\beta = 0.07$ ,  $t = 0.84$ ,  $p = .405$ ), thus again not supporting H3d.

The hierarchical regression results regarding the moderating variables (H4d-6d) are contained in Table 14. For Step 2 there were no significant main effects, but communal strength approached significance; communal strength was negatively associated with the missing chilling effect. For Step 3, one 2-way interaction emerged for dependence on the relationship and optimism. The decomposed interaction demonstrated that those who experienced high partner punitive power and low optimism reported the greatest missing chilling effect, whereas those with higher dependence and higher optimism had the lowest missing chilling effect (see Figure 12). In other words, if the respondent was more dependent but less optimistic, the more likely there will be a lack of irritants in spite of aversive behaviors present. For Step 4 there were no 3-way interactions. As such, H4d-H6d were not supported.

*Figure 12: Dependence X Optimism: Student Sample*





*MTurk sample.* Similar to the whole sample, Step 1 results for this sample revealed that lack of irritants was predicted by participant sex ( $B = 0.44, t = 4.92, p < .001$ ) but not age ( $B = -0.01, t = -1.40, p = .163$ ) or relationship length ( $B = 0.00, t = 0.53, p = .595$ ). Step 2 results revealed that H1d was not supported as dependence on the relationship did not predict the missing chilling effect ( $B = -0.03, t = -0.65, p = .515$ ). However, H2d was supported as partner punitive power did predict a greater chilling effect ( $B = 0.09, t = 2.12, p = .035$ ). Step 3 showed no significant interaction between the two power variables ( $B = -0.02, \beta = -0.03, t = -0.35, p = .724$ ), thus again not supporting H3d.

*Table 15: Results for Absence of Irritations with the MTurk Sample*

Predictors	Model with Optimism			Model with Self-Control			Model with Communal Strength		
	B	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	B	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	B	$\beta$	<i>t</i>
<b>Step 2</b>									
Dependence Power	-0.28	-0.04	-0.63	-0.29	-0.05	-0.66	-0.12	-0.02	-0.03
Punitive Power	0.93	0.14	2.07*	0.63	0.10	0.98	0.38	0.06	0.77
Moderator	0.05	0.01	0.07	0.42	0.06	0.63	-1.87	-0.18	-2.21*
$\Delta R^2$	.02			.03			.04		
<b>Step 3</b>									
Dependence x Punitive	-0.31	-0.05	-0.60	-0.33	-0.05	-0.58	-0.23	-0.03	-0.45
Dependence x Moderator	-0.49	-0.07	-0.90	0.47	0.06	0.72	-0.23	-0.02	-0.34
Punitive x Moderator	-1.75	-0.18	-1.90 <sup>m</sup>	-1.04	-0.13	-1.88 <sup>m</sup>	-0.85	-0.08	-0.79
$\Delta R^2$	.02			.02			.01		
<b>Step 4</b>									
3-way interaction	1.23	0.17	1.57	-1.12	-0.14	-1.72 <sup>m</sup>	-0.43	-0.04	-0.46
$\Delta R^2$	.01			.01			.00		

Note. <sup>m</sup> $p < .087$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $**p < .01$ . The *R*-squared change is based on increases from the previous model; for Step 2, the *R*-square change is based on the model with only the control variables.

The hierarchal regression results regarding the moderating variables (H4d-6d) are contained in Table 15. In Step 2, punitive power was significant in one of the models when

controlling for optimism; the more punitive power they experienced from the partner, the more participant reports reflected a missing chilling effect. The only moderator with significance was communal strength; the more communal strength, the less participant reports reflected a missing chilling effect. For Step 3, two 2-way interactions approached significance for partner punitive power and the moderators. Similar to the full sample, the decomposed 2-way interaction for punitive power and optimism (see Figure 13) demonstrated that those who experienced high punitive power and low optimism reported the greatest missing chilling effect; all other combinations reflected less of a missing chilling effect.

Because the 3-way interaction that approached significance for self-control in Step 4 subsumes the other 2-way interaction that approached significance, only the 3-way interaction is described. The decomposed interaction (see Figure 14) demonstrates that those who experienced high punitive power from their partner, low dependence on the

*Figure 13: Punitive Power X Optimism: MTurk Sample*

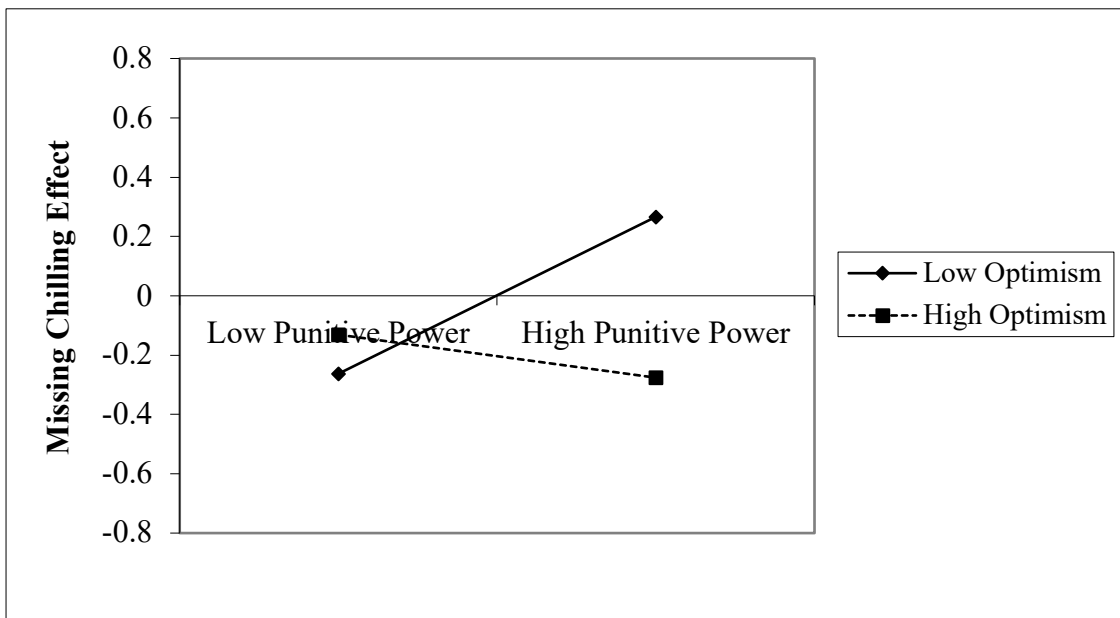
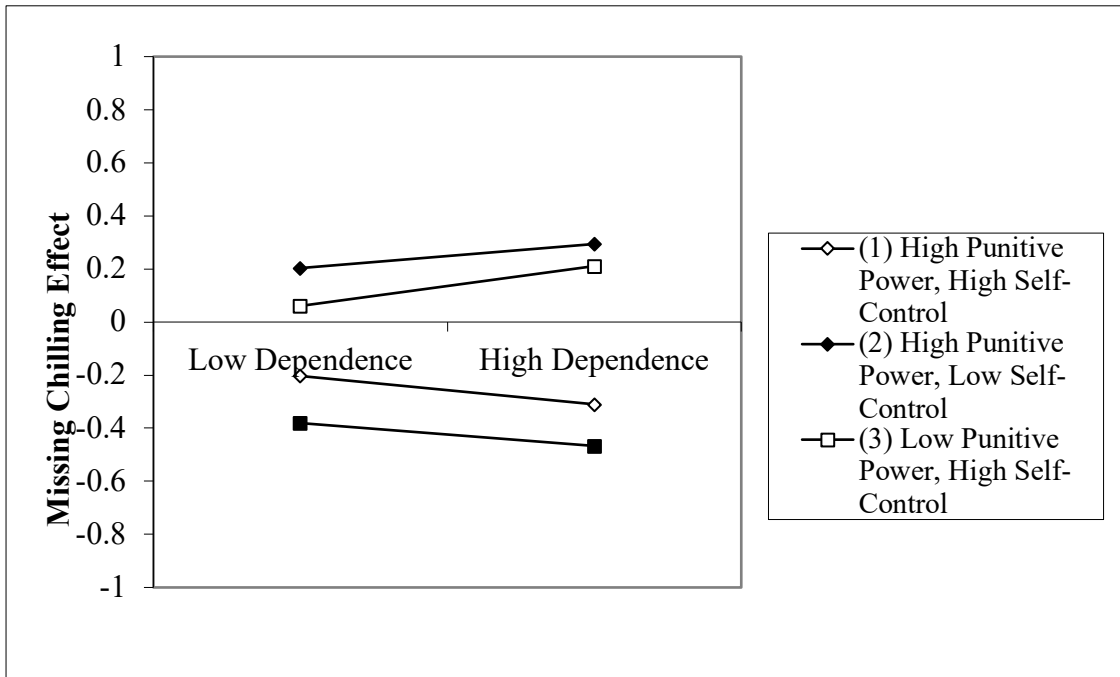


Figure 14: Dependence X Punitive Power X Self-Control: MTurk Sample



relationship, and low self-control reported the greatest missing chilling effect; those who experienced high dependence, low punitive power, and low self-control reported the least missing chilling effect. All other combinations had relatively moderate levels of the missing chilling effect. Given the collective of findings, H4d-6d were not supported.

*Summary.* Partner punitive power appeared to play a role with regards to the missing chilling effect. Punitive power was positively associated with the missing chilling effect when controlling for optimism in the MTurk subsample. However, punitive power also interacted with optimism with the same subsample such that those who were less optimistic and also subject to punitive power experienced the greatest missing chilling effect. For the student sample, optimism interacted with dependence on the relationship; but in this subsample, highly optimistic students who were more subject to dependence power had the lowest missing chilling effect. Similar to the reflections in the previous

summaries, perhaps optimism functions as unexpected violations of relationship ideals and an efficacy in resolving aversive behaviors in the relationship.

Another unexpected finding is that communal strength was negatively associated with the missing chilling effect with the whole sample and the MTurk subsample. Similarly, in the whole sample and MTurk subsample, self-control unexpectedly emerged as having a 3-way interaction as hypothesized; however, an unexpected interaction pattern emerged in the decomposed slopes as the two forms of power combined with low self-control was associated with the greatest missing chilling effect. Conversely, the combination of being more subject to dependence power but low partner punitive power resulted in the least missing chilling effect with those who scored low on self-control. Perhaps self-control may be functioning in terms of self-regulation in some contexts where lower self-control is a feeling of a lack of efficacy in other relational contexts (e.g., power imbalances). If so, then perhaps the 3-way interaction with low self-control could be attributed to not being able to put the mental energy into articulating complaints, or instead of self-regulating, internalizing the punitive or aversive behaviors rather than externalize blame onto their partner.

## **CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION**

This study assessed the relationship between two forms of romantic partner power with regards to the presence of complaints and conflict, but also unexpressed irritations (i.e., chilling effect), and a lack of irritations where aversive behaviors are present (i.e., missing chilling effect). Individual-level factors were also explored to assess whether typically positive traits, when in the context of the partner having more power, may lead to less complaints and conflict. Complaints are typically a basis of conflict, but if there is an absence of complaints, it is very difficult to study the presence of conflict avoidance and what its causes might be. The research on the chilling effect points to the role that different forms of power have on a person's ability to minimize issues. The aim of this study was to explore whether a power imbalance might be intense enough to desensitize one to aversive behaviors. A critical component of the design of this study was to ask questions designed in a way to indirectly assess for whether irritants are withheld, but a step further to assess whether behavior commonly thought to be aversive does not register as irritating to the respondent.

This chapter will include key findings in relation to the hypotheses, but also overall insights and additional findings from the analysis related to the study's research questions and area of inquiry. Lastly, this chapter will cite both general and specific limitations not mentioned in the results chapter.

## OVERVIEW OF THE FINDINGS

In general, the vast majority of hypotheses were not supported, though each variable was involved in some main effect or interaction effect outside of what was hypothesized. Dependence power did not play a large role in predicting the outcomes; however, there were a couple of main effects and interactions that justify its continued inclusion in subsequent studies.

More specifically, although strong patterns did not emerge, there were some analyses that supported or partially supported the hypotheses. First, the positive association between punitive power and the missing chilling effect (H2d) was supported in both the full sample and the MTurk subsample. Punitive power was also positively associated with the missing chilling effect in the full and primarily the MTurk sample. In addition, the main effect of communal orientation showed a negative association with frequency of conflict, which supports the general idea that those who are more willing to sacrifice for their partner are less willing to voice irritants in a way that creates conflict. More generally, more support for the hypotheses stemmed from the inclusion of communal strength as a moderator. Communal orientation interacted with dependence to predict frequency of conflict (H6b) such that the combination of high dependence and high communal orientation was associated with the least conflict. Further, the 3-way interaction for the chilling effect was significant in the full sample and primarily driven by the MTurk sample (H6c) in which the combination of high dependence, high punitive power, and high communal orientation resulted in the greatest chilling effect. As such, the variables that emerged as best supporting the hypotheses were punitive power and communal strength.

Punitive power was also, counter to hypotheses, positively related to the number of complaints and frequency of conflict. As such, the role of punitive power may be more nuanced in how it is associated with this related set of dependent variables. Further, as suggested in the results, optimism and self-control operated in ways counter to the hypotheses. In general, optimism, as measured in the current project, might reflect efficacy rather than blind faith in their partner. In addition, self-control might be functioning similar to optimism in that an efficacy element of self-control may be necessary to articulate complaints and engage in conflict. For example, the self-regulatory aspects of self-control may help with articulating complaints and engaging in conflict constructively.

Both the results that support the hypotheses as well as these additional findings will be discussed more below in sections that highlight the power dynamics and the individual characteristics proposed to moderate their effects.

### **THE ROLE OF DEPENDENCE POWER**

Overall, in the sample and subsamples included in this study, punitive power played a more prominent role as compared to dependence power. Many of the hypotheses relied on a core assumption that dependence power might have a larger role to play. For example, research has shown that dependence power plays a role in withholding communication about problematic events (Samp & Solomon, 2001) and that dependence can amplify the chilling effect when combined with symbolic aggression (Cloven & Roloff (1993). The majority of the hypotheses relied on the interaction of the two forms of power, with that interaction serving as a foundation for the hypotheses incorporating individual

characteristics as moderators. The impacts of dependence power in previous studies simply did not emerge in a similar manner in this study.

Specifically, research reviewed earlier revealed that imbalanced power dynamics is associated with rating problems in one's relationship as less severe (Samp & Solomon, 2001). If there is a real threat of harm, then there is a possibility of denying the issues at hand as well (Lazarus, 2000). As such, one interpretation of why dependence power did not emerge could be the sheer strength of the mind's ability to rationalize, minimize, and deny unfortunate issues. Given that the dependence measure was based on self and partner commitment and perceived alternatives, perhaps the respondent could defensively discount their own commitment, or project confidence regarding alternatives. Additionally, there could be a social desirability component to project outward confidence. Solomon and Samp (1998) made an argument at the end of their study on the impacts of discounting the severity of hypothetical problems where they speculated that there could possibly be a kind of pre-emptive chilling effect. As such, continued attempts at clever research design may be necessary to capture what factors may obviate what may otherwise be a chilling effect for others in the face of anticipated symbolic aggression. Further inquiry will likely necessitate a breadth and/or depth of sample populations, which will be expanded upon in the next chapter.

The other possibility regarding dependence power's lack of significance is that there may be very few people who are subject to the receiving end of the specific dynamics of interest here. In other words, there simply may not be a common prevalence of people impacted by the complexity of the dynamics hypothesized in this study. Additionally, there



is always the possibility of self-selection bias, due to the voluntary nature of both survey solicitations. There are several potential reasons why people may choose not to fill out a survey where the topic is interpersonal conflict. Perhaps if there is a significant amount of powerlessness, someone feels like they do not want to dwell on problematic aspects of a relationship. Alternatively, someone may be predisposed to conflict aversion entirely, or believe it is not a problem in their relationship so judge the inquiry to be irrelevant.

However, the role of dependence power was not entirely insignificant. Dependence power was correlated with communal strength and optimism. Specifically, dependence power had a positive association with communal strength, which on its face makes sense, as those who are more dependent are likely more oriented towards one's relationship than focused on oneself. The other is a more unexpected result in that dependence power has a negative association with optimism. This might be a spurious association, but one interpretation of this relationship is that perhaps optimists are generally confident about their alternatives or about what they uniquely offer their partner (i.e., akin to self-esteem in believing they are "a catch").

Additionally, though dependence did not emerge as a strong predictor of the (in)expression of irritants, dependence power was still involved in several 2-way and 3-way interaction that approached significance. For example, the interaction of the two forms of power regarding complaints with the MTurk sample showed that those who were subject to more punitive power had more complaints if they were also subject to perceiving that they were more dependent on their relationship. Earlier work has demonstrated that symbolic and physical forms of aggression might yield different interactions with

dependence (Cloven & Roloff, 1993); thus, it would be helpful if future research could assess whether the additional perceived threat of physical abuse would change the nature of this outcome. Additionally unexpected was that those who were not subject to punitive power (i.e., low punitive power) were the ones who had less complaints the more dependent they were on their relationship. On its face, it makes sense that one may have less complaints if someone is more dependent, but it is interesting that low punitive power combined with higher dependence resulted in the least complaints. If displays of punitive power can be considered as aversive themselves, then perhaps these respondents felt there were fewer aversive behaviors present in general and dependence power further minimized the recognition of them.

A more predictable interaction resulted between dependence power and communal strength for the frequency of conflict stemming from aversive behavior. The trend across the interactions for both the whole sample and the student subsample was that the combination of high dependence and high communal strength was related to the least conflict. It makes logical sense that there would be less conflict with someone who is more other-oriented as well as more dependent on the relationship than their partner is on them. Communal strength also combined with dependence power and punitive power in a 3-way interaction in the full sample where all three together in high amounts led to the most amount of unexpressed irritations regarding aversive behaviors (i.e., greater chilling effect). For two of the dependent variables then, communal strength and dependence seemed to strengthen each other.

Although not supporting the hypotheses, dependence also interacted with optimism in predicting the missing chilling effect (for both the whole sample and the student sample). The combination of high dependence and high optimism was associated with the lowest missing chilling effect—the other three combinations were equally higher. As such, those who were more confident about positive outcomes were more likely to see their partners' aversive behaviors as irritating when they were also more dependent. Perhaps those who are optimistic and also dependent (i.e., need to make the relationship work) are focused more on achieving positive outcomes for the relationship.

Overall, hopefully the arguments laid out in this study justify further inquiry of power imbalances and dependence power with a randomized, general sample and particular populations of interest such as populations who may be intrinsically more vulnerable to nonvoluntary forms of dependence. Future inquiries could also explore alternative measures of dependence power or include other forms of power not included in this study to test in combination along with other individual characteristic variables.

### **THE ROLE OF PUNITIVE POWER**

As compared to dependence, punitive power emerged as a consistently significant independent variable on its own. Punitive power was highly correlated with the moderators of optimism and communal strength over the whole sample and correlated with over half of the variables in the student and MTurk samples. The main effect of punitive power was also significant (in all three samples) in all the analyses regarding number of complaints and frequency of conflict as well as for students' chilling effect (unexpressed irritants). Punitive power simply has a lot to do with complaints and conflict (but opposite of what

was hypothesized); further, punitive power was also associated with minimized irritants when combined with factors like communal strength. As such, these findings justify the inclusion of individual factors in combination with relational dynamics in future research.

One of the most interesting findings stems from comparing the findings for the various dependent variables. When analyzing the insights from the correlation matrix, a pattern emerged amongst all three samples with punitive power. Across the whole sample, punitive power was highly associated with complaints and conflict. Yet, it was curiously not associated with the chilling effect (i.e., unexpressed irritations). Furthermore, this makes the positive correlation of punitive power and the lack of a chilling effect ( $r = .24$ ,  $p < .001$ ) very interesting. If there is both punitive partner power (i.e., someone is subject to abusive behavior) and aversive behavior, but they are not bothered by it, this presents a conundrum. More research is needed to determine if these seemingly inconsistent results would emerge with other measures of punitive power and the missing chilling effect. Yet, the presence of internal conflict or a lack of internal consistency could provide some explanatory value. In other words, there may be a distinct process of illogical consistency rather than a logical inconsistency. For example, Lazarus (2000) speaks of denial in the face of a credible threat as a common coping mechanism (e.g., the threat of losing an important relationship). Behavior that appears puzzling to outsiders may be explained by something exceptional that is not visible or openly or easily acknowledged. Admittedly, this potential explanation borders on speculation due to the cognitive nature of these claims. However, this point is made as it is worth mentioning that the work of others in the field of communication have methods of exploring phenomena that could be used in

pursuing this speculation in future research, such as the work of Honeycutt (e.g., Honeycutt, 2003; Honeycutt & Bryan, 2011) on imagined interactions.

Additionally, future research could parse out these findings by examining the potential for different typologies of individuals, relationship types, or aversive behaviors. For example, there are some sources of conflict that are positively associated with satisfaction, and some that have a negative association; as such, certain behaviors might prompt more irritations or conflict stemming from the aversive behavior than others. Additionally, given that complaints and conflict were strongly correlated with punitive power, perhaps future research can create a typology of those who score higher on conflict and complaints as compared to those who may score higher on either chilling effect or a missing chilling effect. Punitive power might have a different effect on these different types in a variety of relational dynamics and outcomes.

Beyond the bivariate correlations, punitive power's positive association with complaints (H2a) conflict (H2b) in the main analyses is perhaps not surprising given that the items used to measure punitive power are intrinsically problematic as social allergens, annoyances, and aversive interpersonal behaviors (Buss, 1989; Cunningham, et al., 2005; Kowalski, 2001; Ter Laak et al., 2003). What the findings for these two dependent variables suggest is that punitive power (i.e., as measured by the more severe behaviors such as swearing at the respondent or throwing or hitting something) represents a larger pattern of aversive behaviors. In other words, these behaviors to measure punitive power are themselves aversive behaviors. Further, the samples included here generally appear to identify these behaviors as aversive. As such, the hypotheses stated here might be better

supported if this study was of a clinical population. Moreover, it would be helpful if future research replicated this study with both overt and covert measures of punitive power.

There was support, however, for punitive power when it comes to this study's measure of the chilling effect (i.e., unexpressed irritations, H2c) and the missing chilling effect (i.e., lack of irritations in the presence of aversive behaviors, H2d). These findings reveal one of the contributions of this study in support of including both a chilling effect and a lack of chilling effect in various populations. The hypothesis proposing that punitive power would be positively associated with the chilling effect was supported only in the student population (and not in the whole sample or MTurk sample). In a precisely opposite situation, the whole sample and MTurk showed a (positive) main effect of punitive power on the missing chilling effect, but not with the student sample.

One reason that this is a major contribution is that it supports some of the potential limitations cited in earlier research that found limited evidence of the chilling effect in the married population (Solomon et al., 2004). On the one hand, the current findings align with not finding the chilling effect in more long-term relationships. On the other hand, the supported hypothesis for the full and MTurk subsample regarding the association between punitive power and the missing chilling effect may help provide tangible support to another piece of the puzzle regarding the lack of chilling effect in an older, potentially more established population. In other words, the missing chilling effect might be more prevalent in long-term relationships, whereas the chilling effect might be found more in newly established relationships. In essence, chronically experiencing punitive power might desensitize individuals to aversive behaviors.

## MODERATORS

Although none of the hypotheses regarding the moderators of optimism (H4a-H4d) and self-control (H5a-H5d) were supported, certain findings regarding communal orientation supported the hypotheses. The three-way interaction between dependence power, punitive power, and communal orientation on the chilling effect (H6c) was supported in the overall sample. Further, given that this three-way interaction approached significance in the MTurk sample but was not significant in the student sample, this finding may pertain more to adults in longer relationships than college students. The interaction is pronounced (see Figure 7) as unexpressed irritants are relatively moderate for those with low punitive power regardless of dependence; yet, the slope for those higher in communal orientation and higher punitive power was positive (unexpressed irritants increases with more dependence) but the slope for those lower in communal orientation (and high punitive power) was negative. In other words, communal orientation seemed to drive this 3-way interaction; for those experiencing both high dependence and punitive power, having high communal strength was associated with the greatest chilling effect whereas having low communal strength was related to the least chilling effect. These findings seem to justify the continued exploration of communal orientation in combination with other factors in subsequent studies.

Another three-way interaction that approached significance is worth mentioning regarding the missing chilling effect and self-control in the whole sample and in the MTurk sample (tested in H5d). The trend of this analysis suggests that, counter to the hypothesis, those more dependent, subject to more punitive power, and had *less* self-control were the

most likely to experience the missing chilling effect. Hence, the missing chilling effect may be experienced more by those who are less able to exercise self-control when in the context of both dependence and punitive power.

One potential explanation is that if one possesses low efficacy (low control), such as a lack of perceived resolvability in some potential sources of relational conflict (e.g., Roloff & Ifert, 1998), it may be difficult to find the energy and motivation to care about what the partner is doing. Motivational aspects could come into play in terms of motivated accuracy could play a role in terms of self-protection (e.g., Simpson, Ickes, & Blackstone). If one feels trapped with little options, especially with the presence of a credible threat one hopes to avoid, it could be cognitively less taxing to accept the situation. As such, if one perceives less control in general, especially if there is a strain on one's cognitive and emotional resources (e.g., incoming punitive behavior), they might minimize the importance of aversive behaviors to the point where these potentially abusive behaviors are not irritating them.

Several interesting results also emerged for the proposed moderator of optimism. First, the interaction of punitive power and optimism revealed an unexpected pattern regarding complaints for the MTurk sample (Figure 2). For those reporting less punitive power, those who were less optimistic had slightly more complaints than those who were more optimistic, but both groups were relatively low in number of complaints. However, the situation flipped for those reporting higher punitive power such that those who were more optimistic had considerably more complaints than those who were less optimistic. This is notable in that this would not normally be the case based on common views of



optimism. One perspective is that optimists may have a higher expectation of relationships and the rewards they can reap in a relationship, so when punitive power occurs, it may present dissonance to their beliefs independent of this relational context. Previous studies have also identified a kind of optimistic bias with regards to outcome expectancies, with differences between dispositional optimism (stable across situations; Scheier & Carver, 1988) and situated optimism (Armor & Taylor, 1998). The current work might have captured a dispositional optimism whereas situated optimism might yield different results. Additionally, future research could explore whether there are different results with the inclusion of distinct measures of dispositional optimism and situated optimism as a means of comparison.

Optimists are also defined as having a cognitive disposition towards expecting better outcomes, however in some cases, beneficial outcomes are also dependent on perceiving support of their partner (Srivastava, et al., 2006). The previously cited study found optimists engaged in conflict and that, on average, both partners perceived their partner's conflict engagement constructive. Future research could also include whether punitive power makes a difference in whether the conflict optimists engage in can make a difference between constructive and destructive conflict.

Optimism also interacted with dependence power such that those who were more dependent and optimistic were *less* likely to have the missing chilling effect (Figure 10). Perhaps optimism operates in terms of believing that any complaints or conflict can be worked out. A person may be optimistic they can influence their partner with regards to managing their aversive behaviors. A chilling effect presumes the idea that there is a

perceived threat of some kind of conflict or adverse consequence of which to want to hold on to one's complaints. However, if a person sees the best in people, and believes things will all work out, then perhaps it would make sense that there would be less of a basis for the not seeing aversive behaviors as irritating, especially when punitive power is factored out (i.e., this analysis included punitive power, but it did not moderate this association).

Perhaps the association of optimism with more complaints and conflict as well as less chilling effect presumes possessing efficacy in a relationship. Efficacy has been found to be associated with persistence in interpersonal problem-solving (Doherty, 1981b), which might provide some explanation of the findings. However, when compared to related concepts, optimism appears to be less self-directed (Rand, 2017) and more focused on outcome expectancies (e.g., Scheier & Carver, 1985), whereas efficacy is more inwardly focused on belief in one's own abilities to influence a situation (efficacy is also seen as the opposite of learned helplessness, e.g., Doherty, 1981b). Presumably expressing complaints and conflict involve some level of hope of influencing the situation in interest of positive outcomes. Hope is another related concept to optimism, but like efficacy, it is tied to beliefs that are more self-focused instead of outcome expectancies (Rand, 2017). Future research could potentially include hope, self-efficacy, and optimism to ascertain which concepts facilitate the recognition of irritants as well as their absence.

Related to efficacy, Cloven and Roloff (1993) cited the idea that the chilling effect could be a precursor to learned helplessness. In the time of that publication, learned helplessness was the way of trying to understand behavior that appears to be a state of helplessness. Research has also helped advance the understanding of how people would

have a difficult time feeling efficacious when there is a campaign of personal attacks and degradation against them, especially when there is a threat of harm or loss. Overall, the findings on the three moderators provided some interesting information on how certain individual-level factors could play a role on this kind of relational phenomena. Communal orientation best captured how individual characteristics presumed to be beneficial could, in the context of power imbalances, have adverse effects on partners with less power. Optimism and self-control, however, seemed to generally tap into efficacy which operated in different ways than predicted.

#### **ADDITIONAL FINDINGS**

Though the majority of the hypotheses were unsupported, several additional interactions and correlations make noteworthy contributions to the goals and research questions of this study. What will be included here is a discussion of the findings that did not fit into the hypotheses or additional associations that were not hypothesized. These can still aid in the understanding of how these variables operate together.

A statistical relationship was also revealed with conflict in terms of main effects with self-control. The more self-control reported, the more conflict was reported as well (in the full and MTurk samples). Perhaps partners exercise self-control to engage in conflict respectfully from their side of the situation. Perhaps exercising self-control is the self-regulation to speak up, whether or not the end result aligns with their goals. If so, as argued in the line of reasoning presented in this study, this may be their way of carrying out relational maintenance whether or not it is effective.

Aside from the interactions, there were sample differences amongst the correlations worth mentioning. In particular, sex or gender appears to be related to both the chilling effect as well as its absence. Males reported more of a missing chilling effect than did females. This bore out in the whole sample as well as when it was broken out amongst the two samples. Conversely, females reported more of a chilling effect than did males. Without more specific research on a missing chilling effect, it is difficult to put these findings into context. Additionally, these sex differences are difficult to generalize as neither physical aggression nor the threat of it was assessed in this study, and the findings may be different in populations where physical abuse is present. This could be related to how a subsample of married males who anticipated physical aggression experienced the chilling effect (Solomon et al., 2004). Cloven and Roloff (1993) also found that there was more of a chilling effect with males (in a student sample) if they reported that their partner was less committed to the relationship. However, their earlier work did not find significant sex differences in that both sexes responded similarly to punitive power specifically (Roloff and Cloven, 1990), and later work similarly found no sex differences with power imbalances and problem severity (Samp & Solomon, 2001).

To note, the previous literature did not seem to demonstrate significant associations with sex differences with regards to female susceptibility to the chilling effect. Additionally, as mentioned, the sex differences mentioned were based more subsets of the male population as Cloven and Roloff (1993) saw it more with males who perceived their partner as less committed and Solomon et al. (2004) with a subset who anticipated physical aggression. As such, this study provides rationale for future research to continue to explore

the chilling effect and its absence, potential sex differences, as well as the inclusion of anticipated physical aggression or coercive threats present if measuring actual physical aggression is not possible or feasible.

One of the contributions of this study is that it has subsamples from the general population as well as a student sample as a means of comparison to each other as well as the whole sample. This is helpful in figuring out what may be general relationship phenomena that traverses samples, but also how the two samples differ. Though some things seem to change with age, the chilling effect appears to be structurally more stable with very few correlates with demographic variables as compared to the missing chilling effect. Hopefully future research on the chilling effect compared to the missing chilling effect can include more measures of nonvoluntary forms of dependence (e.g., limited alternative housing options, no access to transportation, or legally obligated to share custody) which older populations might be more likely to experience to examine whether those forms of dependence function differently from the dependence measured here.

Additionally, some insights from the correlations help with understanding how the moderators might operate differently in the two samples. For example, for the missing chilling effect, communal orientation was negatively associated with the missing chilling effect in the student population, but the older population had a positive association.

Differences aside, there appeared to be much in common as well. The most notable similarities are the relatively equal means between the two subsample with regards to dependence power and self-control; and sample differences in optimism only approached significance. Additionally, punitive power across full sample and subsamples

demonstrated an increased likelihood of complaints and conflict. Sustained research analyzing similarities and differences in various population samples may contribute not only to the literature of interpersonal conflict, but perhaps also the areas of research on optimism, communal orientation, and self-control.

#### **ADDITIONAL LIMITATIONS**

There are several limitations to consider. In general, self-report questionnaires inevitably have issues of social desirability. For example, some may report they have quality alternatives, but in reality, be operating from fear they may not. Further, this study takes the perspective of one partner, and the constructs that factor into dependence power, alternatives, and commitment could be manipulated or shaped by the more powerful partner.

Another limitation is the measures employed. Not only is it potentially difficult for respondents to be able to answer questions related to these phenomena, the measures used might also not have adequately captured the nuances and complexities of the constructs employed in this study. Researchers are continuing to strive to adequately capture the construct of power, especially its more covert manifestations and pervasive patterns like coercive control (Myhill & Hohl, 2019).

In reflecting on the two forms of power employed in this study, the punitive power items are more indicative of overt acts of punishment rather than manipulative or more subtle forms of emotional and psychological abuse. Simply put, perhaps the way punitive power is measured in this study is obvious enough to understand in terms of the perception

of cause and effect. In other words, if the acts are overt like someone screaming in your face, it would make sense to respond in the future in a way to simply avoid that problematic behavior or minimize its importance (e.g., Cloven & Roloff, 1993). In contrast, dependence power may be more difficult to measure due to its abstract nature (e.g., through perceptions of relationship factors like their partner's and their own commitment, satisfaction, and alternatives). Though perception very much matters in this area of research, from a measurement perspective, dependence power questions are more open to interpretation than whether an overt act did or did not happen.

This may be particularly salient with populations, unlike college students, where partners may be dependent for many reasons, including nonvoluntary forms of dependence (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003), like extreme financial barriers to leaving or being socially ostracized or even being ex-communicated by one's family. Similarly, Solomon et al. (2004) also cited that "tangible items" could complicate the issues explored in this study and may have led to some of the issues of a lack of findings regarding the chilling effect in their study of married couples. On the other hand, although punitive power did emerge as a significant variable, perhaps its measurement could be improved by attempting to measure more subtle and nuanced tactics. One strategy employed in this study design was to attempt to understand dynamics through more indirect measures, but perhaps future research could include both overt and covert or abstract forms of both types of power. Future studies could also take into account other tangible (nonvoluntary) forms of dependence, but perhaps tangible factors where a respondent feels dependent on the relationship (e.g., their partner's income) or interdependent (e.g., parenting and childcare)

and other questions regarding more overt forms of power could be positioned at the end of the survey.

There are potential limitations with the measurement of the dependent variables as well. This study was exploratory in the attempts to create an alternative way to measure unexpressed irritations as well as when there is an absence of irritants when they may be expected in forms of aversive behaviors. As mentioned, attempts to employ the original methodology was difficult due to being unable to require students to answer, as well as the MTurk sample containing unintelligible responses for the open-ended portion. This made it difficult to extend the original work without being able to employ the same methodology. Given the real limitations stated in the sample issues, hopefully future research can either find a way to more reliably recreate the original methodology of quantifying open-ended responses.

There is also a limitation in that there is a potential for differences in the reasons why there were a lack of irritants that was not captured in this study. For example, this study does not capture why there may be a lack of irritations expressed such as having tried in the past and been unsuccessful. Additionally, this study did not ask questions regarding why irritations may be withheld or why it does not bother them. Hopefully future research can include questions regarding previous complaint and conflict patterns as well as the motives involved in complaint and conflict expression.

The measures of the moderators may have had some limitations as well. The findings for communal strength aligned with the hypotheses, but as discussed above, other two moderators revealed unexpected and counter-intuitive results. The association of



optimism with complaints and conflict could potentially be explained by violations of relational expectations; however, optimism seems to be a large construct and perhaps there are different kinds of optimists. The real puzzling moderator was self-control. Though some potential explanations could be made regarding the need for self-control in articulating complaints and conflict constructively, one limitation could be that the items were a selection from a longer scale; further, the interpersonal items included were all reverse-coded so there were no positive items of which to capture those positively-framed aspects of self-control. Another explanation is that there could be a negativity bias not just in the measure of selected items, but also perhaps respondents who are subject to both forms of power may be hard on themselves and believe they lack self-control where others outside the relationship would maybe not necessarily judge them as lacking in self-control. Lastly, although previous research on the two constructions of self-control and optimism commonly yielded moderate correlations, more recent research has found them less correlated than previous thought, and that they can be complementary but are distinct (Carver, 2014).

Additionally, as suggested above, there may be some distinct effects with those who have experienced physical violence or coercive control that were not measured here. In the future, more use of measures specific to coercive and controlling behaviors, as well as the respondent's experience of these kinds of behaviors (e.g., items pertaining to their perception of mild to severe fears) should be included in assessing both the overt and covert forms of punitive power.

In terms of data quality, the data ultimately used in the analyses appeared reliable; however, many entries were removed due to irregularities, repetitive responses (e.g., all ‘7’s), missed attention checks, and an honesty question for those who responded to a question about whether their data should be used. Each subsample came with its own challenges. Some student data were excluded from the analyses due to substantial missing data. The MTurk sample did not have this same issue as “worker” ratings are tied to the quality of their responses; yet, unfortunately, it was clear that many had stock responses and many responses in the open-ended data were simply unintelligible or nonsensical. After accounting for these errors and irregularities, only 46.2% of a sizable sample of 637 could be analyzed. As such the power of the analyses is relatively lower than initially sought. Also, differences between the results of the two samples could potentially be attributed to smaller sample size, especially given that the student sample given was half the size of the MTurk sample.

Although randomizing sections and items were employed where possible, it is also possible that there were issues regarding order effects, especially given the nature of this study. For example, there were multiple questions about conflict before the section on aversive behaviors so there may be some effects with regard to the respondents’ mindset.

In addition, numerous analyses were conducted (i.e., 12 regressions were conducted for each sample) thus increasing Type I error. Main and interactive effects that approached significance were explored to determine if patterns emerged. As such, some of the findings discussed might be due to chance. The current findings need to be substantiated by additional research with larger samples.

Lastly, this study is also correlational and the direction of causality cannot be established. A lack of conflict or complaints might lead to different power levels in the relationship, or the effects might be reciprocal. Longitudinal research tracking new relationships over time would help in identifying how behaviors lead to power imbalances, which might then lead to (not) voicing complaints. Longitudinal research could also assess if and how the moderators change based on dynamics in the relationship (e.g., if low-power partners increase in optimism in the face of threat from the high-power partner). Dyadic data would be equally beneficial to obtain measures of dependence and punitive power that accounted not just for the one partner but both.

## **CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION**

This chapter will discuss future directions while also reflecting on the value and contributions of this research in academic, applied, and public contexts.

A primary contribution of this study is extending the important line of research on the chilling effect by demonstrating the possibility that there may be unexpected factors that undermine both respondents' and researchers' ability to examine this complicated kind of avoidance and absence of conflict. An explicit goal was to challenge an assumption that minimal fighting is good, and that it may be warranted to consider an absence of conflict or complaints as a potential risk factor. Unfortunately, this study did not result in strong evidence supporting this argument. However, this research question persists and hopefully the arguments made through the study rationale and certain findings warrant the continuation of this line of inquiry. It is with great hopes that this will aid this area of literature, promote this line of research in other disciplines, and encourage more research on these insidious ties to aggression and interpersonal issues related to one partner excessively wielding power over another.

Another contribution is that this project could contribute to a richer and deeper understanding of positive psychology and resilience factors. To state it plainly: what if the proclivities of "helpless victims" still able to make a good life for themselves regardless of the circumstances betray them in a relational context with partners who enact abusive and aversive behaviors? In technical terms: are the same factors we think of as resilience factors are also potential risk factors? This is an interesting question for those who pit the idea of

helpless victims against those who have the qualities and characteristics of hardness (e.g., Kobasa, 1979) as they may be one in the same.

In addition, identifying that punitive power is associated with the chilling effect (H2c) in the student sample but that punitive power is correlated with the missing chilling effect (H2d) in the more general population (i.e., MTurk sample) is a helpful contribution. The comparison of the two samples supports the lineage of the chilling effect literature demonstrating some support for the claims that people who have been together, such as married couples, may not have as much of the chilling effect.

Methodologically, this study also advances the investigation of power imbalances by illuminating the presence of something difficult to demonstrate: an absence of avoidance by measuring generally-accepted aversive behaviors of the respondent's partner that were not perceived as aversive. Additionally, the design of this study involved the creation of a new way to study the chilling effect, based on several different studies of behaviors that the public generally considers aversive, irritating, or even social allergens.

#### **FUTURE THEORETICAL DIRECTIONS**

The lack of support for the hypotheses of this study is lamentable. Nevertheless, fortunately there are other interactions and associations that provide support for the arguments and line of reasoning presented in this study. The direction of future research that seems most important after reviewing the literature is assessing these dynamics and different typologies of abuse in the very specific context of nonvoluntary dependence in both a general population, as well as those experiencing different forms of abuse, such as

patterns of high conflict as opposed to the chilling effect (or lack thereof). In other words, from a theoretical perspective, there may be justification to focus more on the investment model rather than interdependence. Recall that the current measure of dependence power used only self and partner commitment and perceived alternatives. Interdependence theory is still a crucial aspect of this puzzle; however, the investment model may be helpful in subsequent studies. Focus could be placed on other related constructs such as investment size (i.e., what would be lost if the relationship dissolved). For example, Leahy (2000) examined resistance to change in romantic relationships and found that sunk costs factored into how a person computes current alternatives based on previous commitment and investment of time and energy into the relationship.

Future research could also further unpack dependence power. Dependence power is typically envisioned as a relational dynamic regarding how respondents rate their and their partner's satisfaction, commitment, and alternatives. This study modeled this kind of research. However, previous research suggests that those in more imbalanced relationships had less quality economic opportunities and were heavily invested in tangible ways (e.g., Rusbult & Martz, 1995). In other words, dependence power is a large construct and there are other factors that can play a large role than cannot be ignored. This study has demonstrated how the differences in the samples point to different impacts, such as the student subsample's relationship with the chilling effect, and the MTurk's subsample's relationship with the missing chilling effect. The MTurk sample here has demonstrated that there is simply just more depth to these dynamics than the student population. The sample differences alone warrant reaching out to a general population sample and procure the

funds necessary to do so. This research can certainly help students, however; the complexities presented in both the rationale and findings point to how these issues run deep, and there appears to be more complexities in a more general sample.

Additionally, if the role of punitive power changes over time, as proposed based on the MTurk findings regarding the missing chilling effect, complaints and conflict may decrease over time. A longitudinal study following couples over time would be needed to further test the findings of this study. This would also address the Cloven and Roloff (1993) claim for the potential for the chilling effect to develop over time, which Solomon and Samp (1998) referred to as a pre-emptive chilling effect, as well as the limited evidence of the chilling effect in the married population (Solomon et al., 2004). For example, a longitudinal study could follow couples to see if their conflict patterns change while also following whether power shifts over time.

Perhaps future research can also take a closer look at the types of irritations. One research question that occurs from this insight is whether there are some irritations that are more likely to be articulated and expressed (e.g., overt acts, or acts widely considered aversive), and/or not aware of other, perhaps more serious aversive behaviors that constitute abusive behavior, or less overt behaviors that are not on the respondent's radar.

Additionally, to be able to really serve the public with this research, the vulnerable and hard-to-reach populations need to be accessed to be able to know whether they are being continually harmed by both the relationship and a lack of understanding by the outside world. As such, it could be considered not just potentially efficacious but also conscientious as a researcher in this area to explore the impacts of nonvoluntary forms of

dependence to extend this area of research in a way that serves the general public. Rusbult and Van Lange (2003) have already advanced the literature to make strong claims on how nonvoluntary forms of dependence necessarily complicates interpersonal communication research and relationship studies. Nonvoluntary forms of dependence might not emerge in the student population as compared to the rest of the population as older adults are more likely to have other forms of interdependence like housing, transportation, and child-rearing. There simply needs to be more resources to support the line of reasoning presented here, but with more inclusion of nonvoluntary forms of dependence. In sum, findings regarding interpersonal relationships and conflict from student populations cannot be generalized to broader population, and the research would be woefully incomplete without testing other populations of interest.

One insight that revealed itself in reflecting on the overall picture of these findings is that the two forms of power seem to be functioning differently. Researchers interested in furthering this line of inquiry may consider how these (and other) forms of power have different impacts on outcome variables. Additionally, the individual-level variables seemed to change the impact of dependence power in that the moderating variables enhanced or suppressed the effects of dependence power. Hopefully future research continues to examine the combination of constructs including variables that are conceptually similar to the moderators included in this study (e.g., hope, self-efficacy, and other forms of self-regulation) as well as potential subtypes of these variables (situated optimism vs. trait optimism).



## **FUTURE APPLIED CONTRIBUTIONS**

For decades, power has been recognized as necessary to understand conflict adequately (e.g., Wilmot & Hocker, 1990); however, the chilling effect and its unexpected absence is especially necessary in expanding a deeper and richer understanding of the impacts of power. Additionally, some of the puzzling results regarding complaints and conflict can be aided by having a better understanding of how to assess constructive versus destructive conflict patterns. To do so, understanding and measuring different forms of power continues to be an ongoing need, as well as understanding individual-level factors that are stable or situational. Both forms of power could encompass many different behaviors, tactics, and impacts. Additionally, there are many forms of power, and this study only measured and analyzed two. However, the findings of this study do seem to support the continued assessment of these two particular forms of power. Furthermore, it is hoped the findings on the chilling effect and the missing chilling effect can promote the use of assessing issues of power when conflict is absent to understand what may be going on below the surface in relationships.

More specifically, these findings could aid practitioners who seek out research insights for application of their services such as helping survivors and couples. For example, to ensure safety and high-quality services, these insights would have an impact on those who treat couples together, to speak to the acute need to have a robust understanding in appropriately and adeptly attending to issues of power in all of its forms. As mentioned in the literature review, power imbalances are tied to some of the most intractable forms of conflict (Miller et al., 2007). However, how are practitioners able

to know whether they are dealing with power imbalances, physical aggression, or coercion until they actually speak to the clients? Interpersonal violence researchers and advocates have been more recently challenging the use of couples counseling in situations where abusive behaviors are present, which can put survivors at risk of further harm when returning home if unvoiced problems were revealed in the therapist's office.

A screening protocol used in discernment counseling could be useful in this regard. Discernment counseling is a form of counseling that is commonly carried out when a couple is openly considering divorce (Doherty & Harris, 2017). Discernment counseling is employed to make sure both partners are on the same page and ready and willing to work out their problems before any issues are actually put onto the table. Yet, before discernment counseling is enacted, a screening protocol is used to assess for interpersonal violence risk as well as the presence of coercion (Doherty et al., 2016). At every part of the process, safety comes first. Part of keeping clients safe involves getting every couple accustomed to being separated before any information is shared in each other's presence (Bray, 2019) such as separate surveys or interviews (Doherty et al., 2016). Perhaps this discernment counseling protocol can be used more broadly as a pre-counseling step in the process to analyze power imbalances, as well as quietly and discreetly assess for risk factors of controlling behavior and abuse (including non-physical forms). Counselors would then be in a better position to decide whether counseling makes sense after adequately assessing for the possibility of intractable conflict, power imbalances, and coercive and controlling behaviors.

## **FINAL THOUGHTS**

Conflict is commonly and erroneously equated with abuse. We may indeed find abuse where conflict is not present. The public needs to understand these differences. Practitioners need to know so that they are not causing unintentional harm. Social networks need to know so friends and families recognize different patterns and understand when people need to leave abusive situations, even when the abuse is not physical.

Additionally, we need to see that relational context is not necessarily equally created by both partners. As such, there may not be a particular type of person who is particularly susceptible to being in a relationship with another who enacts aversive and abusive behavior. Since most times power imbalances do not happen overnight, it is possible that anyone could be subject to aversive behaviors, especially when entering the relationship at a younger age, before being subject to nonvoluntary forms of dependence. For example, one of the most common onsets of abuse is around the time of pregnancy (Brownridge et al., 2011). This is a turbulent time for couples in general, but particularly a most vulnerable time emotionally, mentally, and naturally involves an above average dependence on others. Dependence is not, in and of itself, a negative state of affairs; yet, this is why context matters—a combination of factors might put someone at risk of harm.

Additionally, too often those harmed are blamed for their situation. To not understand their behavior is failing to understand the individual in context. Hopefully studies such as this help to challenge assumptions about people who are experiencing a power imbalance. Additionally, an overarching goal of this project was to challenge the assumptions people make about those who are subjected to abusive or aversive behavior.

Those who are capable of maintaining a relationship with someone who enacts punitive and aversive behaviors may just be inherently capable of maintaining relationships in general. As argued above, characteristics that are typically touted as beneficial to relationships (e.g., communal orientation) might, in the context of power imbalances, be detrimental to individuals' well-being.

The chilling effect is generally viewed as one of the most important contributions to the field of interpersonal conflict. The research is difficult, necessitates clever research designs, and is a vital piece to in understanding the subtleties, nuances, complexities, gradual progression, and (at times) covert nature of aversive behaviors and power imbalances. This area of inquiry is undeniably difficult to study. However, the results are enriching and can undoubtedly help advance the field of interpersonal conflict and romantic relationships.

## APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL

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The University of Texas at Austin

Office of Research Support & Compliance  
Institutional Review Board  
P.O. Box 7426, Campus Code A3200  
Austin, Texas 78713  
T: 512-232-1543 F: 512-471-8873  
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### EXEMPT DETERMINATION

November 19, 2020

FWA # 00002030

Rene Dailey  
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+1 512 471 4867  
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Dear Rene Dailey:

On 11/19/2020, the IRB reviewed the following submission:

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Special Determinations:	Students / Employees
Title:	Perception of Complaints and Conflict in Romantic Relationships
Investigator:	Rene Dailey
IRB ID:	STUDY00000391
Funding:	None
Grant ID:	None
IND, IDE, or HDE:	None
Approval Date:	11/19/2020
Documents Reviewed:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Chelsea Brass CITI Completion Nov 2020.pdf, Category: Other;</li><li>• Consent Form FINAL revised.pdf, Category: Consent Form;</li><li>• Exempt IRB Protocol, Category: IRB Protocol;</li><li>• Recruitment Post, Category: Recruitment Materials;</li><li>• Survey for Study, Category: Other;</li></ul>

The IRB determined that this protocol meets the criteria for exemption from IRB review under 45 CFR 46.104 (2)(ii) Tests, surveys, interviews, or observation (low risk).



The University of Texas at Austin

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[www.research.utexas.edu/ors](http://www.research.utexas.edu/ors)

In conducting this protocol you are required to follow the requirements listed in HRP-103  
- INVESTIGATOR MANUAL.

Ongoing IRB review and approval by this organization is not required. This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. Modifications that involve a change in PI, increase risk, or otherwise affect the exempt category or the criteria for exempt determination must be submitted as a modification. Investigators are strongly encouraged to contact the IRB staff to describe any changes prior to submitting an amendment.

If you have any questions, contact the RSC by phone at 512 -232-1543 or via e-mail at [irb@austin.utexas.edu](mailto:irb@austin.utexas.edu).

Sincerely,

Institutional Review Board

University of Texas at Austin

cc:

Rene Dailey (PI), Chelsea Brass (Primary Contact)

**APPENDIX B: LIFE ORIENTATION TEST REVISED (SCHEIER, CARVER, & BRIDGES, 1994)**

*Please be as honest and accurate as you can throughout. Try not to let your response to one statement influence your responses to other statements. There are no “correct” or “incorrect” answers. Answer according to your own feelings, rather than how you think “most people” would answer.*

1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*

1. In uncertain times, I usually expect the best.
2. It's easy for me to relax. [filler]
3. If something can go wrong for me, it will. [R]
4. I'm always optimistic about my future.
5. I enjoy my friends a lot. [filler]
6. It's important for me to keep busy. [filler]
7. I hardly ever expect things to go my way. [R]
8. I don't get upset too easily. [filler]
9. I rarely count on good things happening to me. [R]
10. Overall, I expect more good things to happen to me than bad.

[R] indicates reverse-scored items

APPENDIX C: SELECTED ITEMS FROM SELF-CONTROL SCALE (TANGNEY ET AL., 2004)

*Using the scale below, please indicate how much the following statements reflect how you typically behave with people close to you.*

- 1) I say inappropriate things. [R]
- 2) I have trouble saying no. [R]
- 3) I blurt out whatever is on my mind. [R]
- 4) People would describe me as impulsive. [R]
- 5) I get carried away with my feelings. [R]
- 6) I'd be better off if I stopped to think before acting. [R]
- 7) Sometimes I can't stop myself from doing something, even if I know its wrong. [R]
- 8) I often think without thinking through all the alternatives. [R]
- 9) I lose my temper too easily. [R]
- 10) I often interrupt people. [R]

[R] indicates reverse-scored items



**APPENDIX D: COMMUNAL STRENGTH (MILLS ET AL., 2004)**

*Keeping your partner in mind, please answer the following questions on a scale from 0 (not at all) to 10 (extremely). Your answers will remain confidential.*

1. How far would you be willing to go to visit your partner?
2. How happy do you feel when doing something that helps your partner?
3. How large a benefit would you be likely to give your partner?
4. How large a cost would you incur to meet a need of your partner?
5. How readily can you put the needs of your partner out of your thoughts? [R]
6. How high a priority for you is meeting the needs of your partner?
7. How reluctant would you be to sacrifice for your partner? [R]
8. How much would you be willing to give up to benefit your partner?
9. How far would you go out of your way to do something for your partner?
10. How easily could you accept not helping your partner? [R]

\*[R] indicates reverse-scored items

## APPENDIX E: AVERSIVE BEHAVIORS

*INSTRUCTIONS: Please answer the questions about 10 areas of your partner's behavior to the best of your ability and as honestly as possible. These questions are about how much your partner's behaviors bother you, so try not to discount your own feelings. It's OK if they appear mild compared to other examples included. The examples provided are just that – you may have your own examples of your partner's behaviors and it is OK to think of your own when answering these questions: How often does your partner act like this? When your partner acts like this how much does this bother you? When your partner acts like this, how often do you tell them this bothers you? When your partner acts like this, how often does it lead to a conflict between you two?*

- Possessive and jealous behaviors may include demanding too much of your attention or time, or acting jealous such as making comments around someone who they see as a threat.
- Condescending behaviors might include overlooking your opinions, your partner acting like they are better than you, making you feel inferior, or nonverbal communication such as a condescending tone.
- Neglectful or rejecting behaviors may include not spending enough time with you, withholding or not expressing affection, not expressing their own emotions, ignoring your feelings, being unreliable or not returning text messages or calls.
- Unfaithful behaviors may include lying about being intimate with someone else, being intimate with other people without your consent, or other behaviors that would be considered inappropriate in your committed relationship.
- Self-centered behaviors may include being physically self-absorbed like excessively fussing with their appearance excessively, talking about themselves, or acting in a selfish manner without regard for your feelings or needs.
- Moody behaviors may include (but not limited to) acting moody around your friends and family, grumpy behavior such as being mean, or sulking for an excessive period of time.
- Disheveled behaviors may include dressing poorly or inappropriately, not taking care of themselves, like improper hygiene or grooming.
- Behaviors related to substance abuse and neglect may include drinking too much alcohol in general, getting embarrassingly drunk, or smoking substances excessively.
- Behaviors regarding your appearance could include direct insults of your appearance, but also more subtle ones like excessive questions about what you eat, what you wear, or making comparisons to make you feel inferior like commenting on the appealing qualities of another person.
- Inconsiderate behaviors may include not including you in important decisions, yelling at you, acting rude in company (example: interrupting or belching), looking at their phone during dinner, not calling when running late, or teasing you in a way that you do not like.

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