

NEGOTIATING CHALLENGES IN RELATIONSHIPS: A GOALS AND PLANS BASED  
APPROACH TO MESSAGE PRODUCTION DURING CONFLICTUAL DISCUSSIONS  
BETWEEN DATING PARTNERS

by

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(Under the Direction of Jennifer A. Samp)

ABSTRACT

This project examines the effects of planning condition, plan flexibility, planning persistence, task type, and perceived empathic accuracy on resolution of conflictual discussions between intimates. Eighty-two romantically-linked “dating” couples from a southeastern university participated in two conflictual discussion tasks, one discussion specifically concerned a relational issue, while the other was a non-relational problem-solving discussion. As predicted, individuals were more likely to resolve the non-relational conflict discussion, further, the predicted association between empathic accuracy and conflict resolution was observed. Surprisingly, plan flexibility did not differ according to task type and was not a significant predictor of planning persistence. Also, counter to predictions, the opportunity to explicitly plan for an interaction did not influence conflict resolution or one’s perceived empathic accuracy. Finally, perceived empathic accuracy scores did not differ according to task type. Implications for message production and interpersonal conflict research are discussed.

INDEX WORDS: Romantic Relationships, Conflict, Goals, Planning, Message Production

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## DEDICATION

To the memory of my grandfather, the man who inspired and encouraged me in all aspects of life. He taught me that nothing is achieved without hard work and dedication. He was a source of constant love, joy, and motivation in my life. This thesis reflects what can be achieved when someone has a strong family foundation, grounded by a loving man of integrity. To my papa, Beverly Taylor Daniel.

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## **Chapter 1: Factors Impacting Message Production During Potentially Conflictual Interactions between Dating Partners**

Romantic relationships provide a variety of benefits to participants, such as companionship, security, and social support. Yet as partners become more interdependent, conflict inevitably occurs. Research indicates that conflict takes place approximately twice per week in established romantic relationships (Canary, Cupach, & Serpe, 2001). Scholars suggest that conflict arises out of the realization that relational partners possess goals that are important, yet incompatible with one another (Canary, 2003; Deutsch, 1973; Keck & Samp, 2007).

Explanations of message production commonly locate goals, and the planning of how to satisfy goals, as integral to most communication behavior including the content of verbal messages (Berger, 1997; Dillard, 1997; Dillard, Segrin, & Harden, 1989; Wilson, 2002). While most message production research has focused on how an individual's goal influences his or her own communicative behavior, Keck and Samp (2007), observed that a relational partner's behavior during conflict discussions influences an individual's pursuit of subsequent goals during an interaction. Therefore, it is important to consider the influence of the communication partner in the message production process, particularly in close relational contexts.

Message production processes have been examined in several relationally-relevant contexts such as compliance gaining (Dillard, 1997), relational transgressions (Samp & Monahan, 2009a; Samp & Solomon, 1999; 2005), and conflict (Keck & Samp, 2007). However, message production research centered on close relationship issues is plagued by the justifiable criticism that most studies focus solely on discussions about relationship problems, thereby

confounding the potentially problematic dynamics of a relationship with the discussion of a problematic relational issue. Further, although the importance of plans for communication behavior is widely embraced by message production scholars (Berger, 1997; Dillard, 1997; Wilson, 2002), scant research has examined the nature of plans for interactions between close relational partners. Thus, I sought to extend theoretical perspectives on message production and conflict behavior to consider how romantically-linked individuals communicatively manage relational issues that are typically conflictual, along with difficult decisions not related to their relationship. Specifically, this thesis sought to address three concerns that have emerged from prior research on message production. First, in order to elucidate the potential importance of planning processes in the relational context, I consider the effects of explicit planning on intentions for and perceptions about the management of conflict between relationship partners. Second, in response to criticism that message production research focused on close relationships naturally drives participants to focus on relationship issues (see Keck & Samp, 2007), this thesis examines planning related to situations where individuals are faced with a relationship issue and a non-relationship problem-solving task. Finally, given research suggesting that a partner's behavior influences an individual's message production processes (Keck & Samp, 2007), this thesis sought to explore the degree to which perceptions about a partner may influence message production, as revealed through judgments of perceived empathic accuracy. Then, I present a study that considered the influence of planning conversation task type and perceived empathic accuracy on the perceived resolution of conflicts by romantic partners. To begin, I first consider the nature of goals, as related to planning processes and communication behavior.

### **Goals: The Catalyst for Message Production**

Message production scholars locate goals as the source of most communication behavior (Dillard, 1997; Keck & Samp, 2007; Samp, 2009; Wilson, 2002). Goals reflect an individual's desired end state: what he or she wishes to be, gain, or employ in the future (e.g.: convince a partner of one's position, maintain a relationship, flatter one's partner, etc.; Berger, 1995; 2007; Dillard et al., 1989; Samp & Solomon, 1998). A goal-based perspective is relevant to the context of romantic relationship conflict because conflict situations often require the management of various self- and partner-desires, as well as relational concerns as communicators seek to manage relational problems (Keck & Samp, 2007).

Dillard's Goals-Plans-Actions (GPA) model (1990; Dillard et al., 1989) articulates that the desire to alter a conversational partner's behavior initiates cognitive processes geared towards the creation of plans that guide actions and messages designed to facilitate change. Of course, changing the behaviors of another is not the only goal that can exist during an interaction, particularly in the close relationship context. For example, Samp (Samp & Solomon, 1998; 1999; 2005) observed that individuals may pursue goals that are focused on relationship maintenance, making a partner feel better about oneself, or establishing one's independence. Thus in close relational contexts, communicators may intend to pursue a variety of objectives, ranging from relational- to self-oriented, all of which implicate goals and planning processes in behavior (Samp, 2009).

### **Planning Effectiveness in Goal Pursuit During Conflict Discussions**

Plans specify the means by which to achieve one's goals via communication (Berger, 1995; Hample, Gordy, Sellie, Wright, & Zanolta, 2008; Johnson & Roloff, 2000). Berger (1995) suggested that there are several things which take place during the planning process including

determining sequences of action, anticipating outcomes, adjusting outcomes according to anticipated results, and realizing plans in actions. Given the assumption that the creation of plans for future interaction guides individuals' conversation content and directs the course of the interaction, which is essential when presented with challenging interpersonal situations, such as romantic relationship conflicts (Canary, 2003; Keck & Samp, 2007).

Planning can take place either "offline" in anticipation of an event or "online" during an interaction (Berger, 1995; 2007). Online planning may be the result of the enactment of "canned plans" that may be automatically activated whenever a particular goal is presented (Berger, 2007). Online planning may also be facilitated by changes in the direction of a conversation, particularly due to a conversational partner's rejection of one's plan (Keck & Samp, 2007).

In contrast, offline planning is a deliberate and conscious process that occurs prior to an interaction. Offline planning has been found to increase task performance. For example, Battman (1989) observed that individuals who were required to organize client calls in the most efficient order produced more efficient routes when able to plan prior to engaging in the task. However, few studies have considered the implications of planning for interactions between close others. When planning in relational contexts has been considered, the relative effectiveness of conversational outcomes was not addressed. For instance, Berger and Bell (1988) studied individuals' creation of plans for acquiring a date. Yet, these plans were not implemented, they were merely examined as to their potential effectiveness and their relationship to social loneliness (Berger & Bell, 1988). Therefore, I seek to expand upon existing research to examine the creation and execution of plans in conjunction with goals for both a particular, novel task that is unconnected to the relationship and a conflict discussion concerning a relational issue. Previous research on planning effectiveness has characterized successful implementation of

plans in a variety of ways (i.e., efficiency of routes, potential for acquiring a date), while interpersonal conflict research has investigated the influence of goals on the resolution of conflictual interactions (Keck & Samp, 2007; Samp & Miller, 2006; Samp & Solomon, 1998). Here, I endeavor to combine goals, plans, and conflict research by equating successful planning with conflict resolution.

The research reviewed thus far suggests that offline planning may influence the ability to satisfy a task related concern (Battman, 1989; Berger & Bell, 1988). Thus enabling individuals to enact the strategies generated during the offline planning process will allow for a more adequate assessment of planning effectiveness during a conflictual discussion. Based on this information concerning planning and instrumental goals combined with research concerning interpersonal conflict, I predict:

*H1*: Individuals who plan prior to a conflict interaction will be more likely to resolve a conflict discussion with a romantic partner than those who do not plan prior to the conversation.

Individuals in a conflict interaction may also benefit from generating plans for an interaction ahead of time because of its potential to reduce participants' cognitive load and provide message alternatives for the interaction. Offline planning makes an individual aware or conscious of the actions to be taken in order to achieve a particular goal such as to resolve a romantic relationship conflict. In turn, this awareness may generate a commitment and strong focus on the plans created offline. The production of plans prior to interaction allows for a conscious awareness rather than the daily, unconscious utilization of plans.

Plans are assumed to be arranged hierarchically; with more concrete plan elements (e.g., changes in speech rate and vocal intensity) placed at the base with more abstract plan

components (e.g., changes in message content, sequencing of message) at the upper portion of the hierarchy (Berger, 2007). The initiation of abstract changes filter down through the lower levels of the hierarchy requiring additional changes (Berger, 2007). Conversely, concrete alterations only require a change to a plan particular aspect, allowing for all other elements to be performed exactly as before (Berger, 1997; 2007). Therefore when met with the perceived failure of one's intentions, concrete changes (e.g., speech rate and vocal intensity) are assumed to take place first, while abstract changes (e.g., altering central argument) tend to take place once the concrete alterations have been applied yet unsuccessful.

The assumption that individuals will be more likely to make concrete changes before abstract changes is derived from the supposition that individuals are "cognitive misers" such that they desire to employ the lowest amount of cognitive effort possible along with possessing a cognitive system that has significant processing limitations. The implementation of abstract or high level changes places greater demands on these scarce resources; therefore the initial change of concrete rather than abstract elements is an unconscious choice based on one's processing ability (Berger & Jordan, 1992; Knowlton & Berger, 1997). For example, Berger, Knowlton, and Abrahams (1996) conducted a study where participants gave walking directions to a confederate. Individuals were met with message failure requesting one of the following: 1) change in speech rate, 2) addition of landmarks, and 3) change in walking route. They investigated the relationship between abstractness of request and speech onset latency, the delay of initial speaking. They found that the more abstract the plan changes one needed to make, the greater the speech onset latency, supporting the hierarchy principle (Berger, 2007).

Greene (1984) posited that one way to reduce the cognitive load experienced *during* an interaction is to have alternate messages available *before* the interaction (Greene, 1984).

Knowlton and Berger (1997) examined the effects of generating multiple plan alternatives prior to being placed in a social interaction situation. Before engaging in the interaction, participants were instructed to generate instructions for either: (a) a single route to a specific location or (b) three different routes for reaching the same destination. Participants then provided directions to a confederate who asked them for an alternate route to be given for a variety of reasons (e.g. not enough landmarks, unfamiliarity with the initial route etc.). A significant main effect was observed for the number of routes planned before the interaction on nonverbal features of speech. In particular, individuals who only created one message prior to the interaction had greater onset latencies of speaking than those who created three messages. Further, when individuals only made one plan prior to the interaction, they also demonstrated less adaptability in changing plans than those who created three plans. When no alternatives were readily available, individuals became fixated on the plan made prior to the interaction and rarely deviated from this plan during the conversation (Knowlton & Berger, 1997). These results suggest that while generating a plan offline is useful to guide initial messages, communicators faced with resistance from another will benefit from the generation of multiple or flexible plans prior to the interaction.

Though offline planning has the potential to prepare communicators for contingencies that occur during interaction, Knowlton and Berger (1997) found that inflexibility of plans could be detrimental to goal achievement by creating a fixation on the plan generated. Flexibility is considered to be the number of alternative message plans that could be implemented during the course of the interaction, if and when the individual is met with message or goal failure. For example, when presented with romantic relationship conflict concerning a partner's lack of punctuality, one could either generate a plan with one distinct action (i.e. Tell my partner that I

feel disrespected when they are late) or multiple message plans and actions (i.e. Tell my partner that I feel disrespected when they are late, If he/she argues an unawareness of my expectations, tell my partner that I am willing to wait 15 to 20 minutes beyond the specified time of his/her arrival, If he/she argues that I am sometimes late as well, tell my partner that together we can explicitly discuss both of our expectations for arrival times.)

By generating a plan, individuals are more likely to be aware of the steps necessary for goal attainment. An increased flexibility of these plans allows for better adaptation during the discussion, therefore enabling continued pursuit of their planned intentions. Alternatively, individuals who generate inflexible plans may become fixated and unable to adapt when met with message or goal failure potentially leading to the abandonment of previously determined actions or intentions for the interaction.

*H2:* Individuals who create more flexible plans will be more persistent in the pursuit of planning intentions during the interaction than those who create less flexible plans.

### **Task Type Influence on Conflictual Interactions**

The ability to generate flexible plans offline may also be influenced by a communicator's prior experience discussing the topic. Berger (2007) argued that individuals faced with familiar or repeated discussions about a topic sometimes enact efficient "canned plans", yet these familiar plans may inhibit conflict resolution. Serial argument research also suggests that individuals in a familiar situation may only access previously used plans without generating novel ones, decreasing the resolvability of the discussion (Berger, 2007, Johnson & Roloff, 1998; 2000). The nature of romantic relationships makes them particularly susceptible to serial arguments. Romantic relationships tend to be characterized by frequent interaction, interdependence, high levels of self-disclosure, and a desire to navigate intrinsic relationship rules (Bevan, Finan, &



Kaminsky, 2008; Johnson & Roloff, 1998). Individuals in romantic relationships often become caught in cycles of communicating about the same relationship issue in the same way, time and time again, with no distinct start or end (see Bevan, Hale, & Williams, 2004; Malis & Roloff, 2006, Miller & Roloff, 2007, Roloff & Ifert, 2001; Roloff, 2009). When couples find discussing a conflict is not helpful in resolving the conflict or beneficial to the relationship, they may declare the topic as ‘taboo’, not to be discussed in the future (Roloff & Ifert, 1998; 2001; Roloff, 2009). Members of the couple then continue to relate to one another in the same way, demonstrating the inflexibility of their communication.

Individuals in serial argument discussions have also been found to have particular goals associated with these arguments. Bevan, Hale, and Williams (2004) found that four of the most prevalent goals in a serial argument include resolution or mutual understanding, fighting simply to argue, determining relational status or future, and asserting dominance in the relationship. Individuals may then have similar goals in a range of interactions, thus the communicative behaviors enacted may be parallel. Individuals faced with a familiar conflict discussion may rely more heavily on the perceptions and scripts that regularly accompany the particular conflict discussion (Johnson & Roloff, 1998; 2000). In turn, individuals presented with a novel situation may be *more* flexible in their plans than those in familiar conflictual situations that have previously held perceptions associated with the discussion.

*H3: Individuals will create more flexible plans in the non-relational problem-solving task than the relational conflict discussion.*

Additionally, I argue that the nature of planning processes and the content of plans may be a function of the type of conversational task. Prior research implies that message production processes may vary according to whether or not the relationship is inherent in the topic of

discussion. For example, Hample (2005) advocated that arguments focused on *public* issues are different than arguments on *private* topics. Public issues include those that are not relationally relevant such as politics and global warming, while private issues are tied specifically to an individual's relationship with a conversational partner such as household chores and the status of the relationship. Additionally, research on serial arguments indicates that individuals may believe that some arguments in their relationship are irresolvable (Johnson & Roloff, 1998; 2000; Miller & Roloff, 2007, Roloff, 2009). As such, individuals in romantic relationships often end conflict discussions before a resolution has been reached (Benoit & Benoit, 1987; Bevan, Hale, & Williams, 2004). Consequently, individuals in conflict about a relational issue may be *less* likely to resolve the conflict than those discussing a topic extraneous to the relationship, because of the nature of a conflict discussion about a relationally-relevant subject (private vs. public) as a potential serial argument. Thus:

*H4:* With regard to perceived conflict resolution, individuals will be *more* likely to resolve a non-relational problem-solving task than a relational conflict discussion.

### **The Influence of Perceived Empathic Accuracy in the Production of Communication Behaviors During Interpersonal Conflict**

Information about a partner's thoughts and behaviors during conflict influence a communicator's subsequent behavior (Keck & Samp, 2007). Scholars argue that an accurate understanding of one's partner's perceptions is important for close-relationship maintenance and growth, particularly when partners are faced with uncertain and/or difficult relational situations (Harvey & Omarzu, 1997; Simpson, Ickes, & Orina, 2003; Thomas & Fletcher, 1997). The ability to accurately deduce the specific content of one's partner's thoughts and feelings reflects *empathic accuracy* (Bissonette, Rusbult, & Kilpatrick, 1997; Ickes, 1993; Thomas & Fletcher,

1997). Being empathically accurate involves both an awareness and understanding of the inner states of one's partner on a moment-to-moment basis. Thus, empathic accuracy is the outcome of successful engagement of empathy (Thomas & Fletcher, 1997). This concept has been studied in numerous contexts including initial encounters with strangers and marital conflict (Bissonette et al., 1997; Ickes & Simpson, 1997; Sillars, Koerner, & Fitzpatrick, 2005).

I argue that empathic accuracy can also be linked to the process of message production. To create a successful message and have a specific goal for the interaction, an individual must interpret the situation according to their partner's actions and their accurate perception of their partner's thoughts and feelings (Burlison & Planalp, 2000; Greene, 1997). Interaction goals may be centered on the needs of the individual, the relationship, or one's partner (Bissonette et al., 1997; Dillard et al., 1989; Keck & Samp, 2007). Empathic accuracy allows for individuals within the interaction to 'transform' their focus or motivation from one of self-interest to partner- or relationship-interest (Bissonette et al., 1997). Thus, empathic accuracy can be used to investigate and analyze inter-subject understanding and misunderstanding including the effects these outcomes may have on the relationships being studied regardless of the interaction context (Sillars et al., 2005).

Traditional assessments of empathic accuracy are characterized by partners recalling their own thoughts and feelings as well as predicting their partner's thoughts and feelings at specific points of the interaction. Though this assessment is important, so too is the perception of how empathically accurate an individual is, independent of his or her partner's reports. Samp (2006) has observed that individuals' judgments about the dynamics of their relationship with a romantic partner impact message production processes. These independent assessments may then influence message production in conflictual interactions when determining perceptions of

empathic accuracy of one's partner. Therefore, the concept of *perceived empathic accuracy* is introduced here to capture how an individual's perception of one's partner's empathic accuracy and one's perception of understanding his or her partner influences relational conflict.

I suggest that individuals who are sensitive to a relational partner's perspective may be able to utilize moments that facilitate additional thought about one's own and a partner's perspective. Plans provide the specific means by which individuals achieve his or her communicative goals (Berger, 1995; Hample et al., 2008; Johnson & Roloff, 2000). Berger and Jordan (1992) found that the plans individuals utilize to achieve a specific goal have a serious impact on how individuals understand the actions of others (Berger & Jordan, 1992). An accurate understanding of one's partner's perceptions can therefore aid goal attainment in a variety of situations and has been found to enhance relationships, especially in the context of romantic relationship conflict (Bissonette et al., 1997; Ickes & Simpson, 1997). By taking the time to construct plans, individuals could be able to better predict and interpret their partner's actions. Thus, I hypothesize:

*H5: Individuals who plan prior to an interaction will be perceive themselves and their partners to be more empathically accurate than those who do not plan prior to the interaction.*

Sometimes the experience of conflict encourages the enactment of destructive relational behaviors that deviate from how a person normally relates to a partner (Canary et al., 2001; Sillars, Pike, Jones, & Redmon, 1983). However, conflict is not always a negative experience. Relational conflicts can mark a time for partners to focus on the needs of their relationship and the benefits of staying together. Sometimes to desire to maintain a relationship in the face of discord is facilitated by an awareness of a partner's needs in the relationship. Bissonette and

colleagues (1997) implied that a certain level of contemplative understanding of a conflict situation and a conversational partner's perceptions about the conflict could guard against the use of destructive behaviors that often result in the non-resolution of conflicts. In other words, while many people are often predisposed to focus on their own interests, when individuals are able to relate to and understand a partner's perspective, they may be able to better adapt to the unique demands of a particular situation involving the partner. In such circumstances, the empathic individual may be more likely to utilize behaviors that recognize the importance of a partner, and ultimately, be more likely to resolve a relational conflict. While such a claim is speculative with regard to dating partners, prior research in different relational contexts supports our perspective. For example, in an examination of married partners, Bissonette et al. (1997) observed that even when controlling for level of commitment, empathic accuracy was positively associated with accommodative behavior. Further, individuals with a highly committed partner were more likely to be empathically accurate and thus be more successful in understanding their partner's perspective. Considering these findings about the potential association between empathic accuracy, commitment, and conflict, it seems likely that individuals who are perceived as empathically accurate will be more likely attuned to the concerns of their partner and maintenance of the relationship, therefore, increasing the potential of resolving the conflict, regardless of task type. Formally:

*H6: As perceived empathic accuracy increases, the likelihood of perceived conflict resolution increases.*

Finally, empathic accuracy about a partner may be more easily attained during a conflictual interaction that has been discussed in the past. In contrast, a novel conversational, problem-solving event presented to relational partners may hamper an individual's ability to

accurately predict how a partner will respond during a discussion about the issue. Therefore, it is proposed:

*H7: Individuals will report higher levels of perceived empathic accuracy with regard to a relational conflict discussion compared to a non-relational problem-solving task.*

### **Summary**

This chapter explored the various elements that impact message production during potentially conflictual interactions between dating partners including the planning process and perceived empathic accuracy. It is predicted that individuals who have the opportunity to plan prior to the interaction will be more successful in resolving conflict and be more accurate in understanding their partner's perspective. Of those who plan, those who generate more flexible plans should be more persistent in pursuing interaction goals. Also, it is suggested that perceived empathic accuracy will be related to conflict situations such that the higher the level of perceived empathic accuracy and understanding of one's partner the greater the likelihood of conflict resolution. Finally, it is proposed that individuals will be more likely to resolve the hypothetical, negotiation task, but will report higher levels of perceived empathic accuracy in a conflict about a relational issue. The next chapter turns to review the study designed to assess these predictions.

## Chapter 2: Method

### Participants

Eighty-two romantically involved “dating” couples ( $N = 83$  females, 81 males; age:  $M = 20.60$ ,  $SD = 2.24$ , range: 18-32 years) from a large southeastern university participated in this study. Participants were recruited from students currently enrolled in basic communication courses at the University of Georgia and received either course or extra credit in exchange for participation. A requirement of participation was that an individual bring a romantic or “dating” partner to the study. The relationship did not have to be classified as serious, but it was to be a romantic or “dating” relationship as determined by participants.

### Procedures

Using a quasi-experimental, design, participants completed two conversation tasks (2: a relational conflict discussion and a non-relational problem-solving task) and were assigned to a planning condition (2: plan or not plan for the conversations). Couples were brought into the lab and completed an informed consent process. A researcher read the consent form and participants signed the forms to indicate their willingness to proceed. The couple was then separated to first complete measures for another study.

Next, participants were instructed about their first conversational task; this reflected one of the two conversational tasks of focus in this study: relational conflict discussion or non-relational problem-solving task. The researchers randomly determined the order of conversational task. Dyads were also randomly assigned to planning condition (plan versus not plan). Couples assigned to the planning condition were provided with a lined sheet of paper and

were instructed to generate a plan for what they would say in the upcoming discussion. For the non-relational problem-solving task, participants listed some recent conflicts in their relationship to help guide the eventual selection of the topic for the relational problem discussion. Once reunited, couples reviewed both participants' conflict lists with a researcher and were guided to choose a topic for discussion. When this topic was chosen, individuals were again placed in separate rooms to complete measures for another study. Upon completion of the measures, the couple was reunited for the conflict discussion.

Once reunited, regardless of task type, the researcher instructed the couple that they had 10 minutes to discuss the topic and try to reach a resolution. Once the conversation was complete, the researcher returned to separate the couple to watch the videotaped interaction. Participants individually completed the perceived empathic accuracy measure once the entire tape was reviewed. These procedures were repeated for the other discussion. Upon the completion of both conversation tasks and corresponding measures, participants were debriefed by a researcher and thanked for their participation. Participation took an average of one and a half to two hours.

**Conversation tasks.** In order to isolate planning processes and judgments related to conflictual discussions between relational partners, each couple completed two conversational tasks: one on a (1) a relational and potentially-conflictual topic and (2) a non-relational problem-solving exercise extraneous to the relationship. These tasks could be considered judgmental and intellectual tasks, respectively (McGrath, 1984; Strauss, 1999). Judgmental tasks frequently do not have a single, demonstrative resolution because they are tied to individual experiences and perspectives, whereas intellectual tasks are often defined by a single, specific response that resolves the conflict (Cornelius & Boos, 2003; Laughlin, Hatch, Silver, & Boh, 2006). This



project utilizes these two conflictual discussion tasks in an attempt to remove the relationship as an influential element, considering the romantic relationship is not inherent in the topic of the intellectual task. Prior message production research focused on discussions between intimate partners has focused only on interactions about a relationship issue (e.g., real-life conflict discussion), therefore making issues related to the relationship potentially inherent in the topic of conversation (Keck & Samp, 2007). By presenting all couples with the same non-relational problem-solving task, this project breaks new ground by offering a comparison of couples' relational discussions versus the nature of the communication generated during a relatively neutral, intellectual discussion. In order to better isolate the comparison of message production processes across task types, a common instrumental goal was provided for the participants. Assigning an instrumental goal is common in message production research (see Dillard et al., 1989; Hample, 2005; Samp & Monahan, 2009b).

Participants were randomly assigned to the order of the two conversation tasks (relational conflict discussion first,  $n = 82$ ; non-relational problem-solving task first,  $n = 80$ ) (see Appendix A). The nature of the relational conflict discussion was structured according to procedures specified by the Marital Agendas Protocol (Notarius & Vanzetti, 1983) used by Samp (Samp & Solomon, 2005; Samp & Humphreys, 2007; Samp & Monahan, 2009a; 2009b). The non-relational problem-solving task was drawn from one created to examine organizational behavior (Lewicki, Bowen, Hall, & Hall, 1988) and utilized by Graziano, Jensen-Campbell, and Hair (1996). This task was selected to be far removed from any issue of discussion that may inadvertently prime relationship-relevant issues amongst the participants. Thus, this discussion task allowed for the *opportunity* for dyads to discuss relationship dynamics, but such choices were not directed by the discussion task itself.

**Planning condition.** Couples were randomly assigned to the planning condition (planning condition,  $n = 84$ , no planning,  $n = 80$ ). Of the couples assigned to the planning condition ( $n = 42$ ), the individual members were presented with instructions about planning their interaction prior to both discussion tasks and individually generated a plan for the subsequent discussion. For the relational conflict discussion, the planning form was given after the couples had chosen a topic for discussion. The couples were then separated to complete the planning form individually. For the non-relational problem-solving task, participants planned once they had familiarized themselves with their task role. Participants kept the role sheet with them during completion of the planning form for reference. Participants were given the following instructions and a space to write their response for both tasks:

Before you start the conversation, please give us some insight into what you are planning to say and what you hope to accomplish on the lines below.

The researcher collected the planning description immediately upon completion.

### **Data Processing**

**Plans.** To fully process the information given my participants, their planning statements were unitized by two independent coders into *conceptual action units* (CAUs), that reflect clauses that depict a single action where each unit was assessed according to its content (Berger, 2007; Miller & Samp, 2007;). Unitization was acceptable (Guetzkow's  $U = .04$ ; Guetzkow, 1950). These CAUs were later utilized in measuring plan flexibility and persistence as will be discussed further.

**Conversation tasks.** Couple's videotaped interactions were also examined and divided according to the turns taken by each participant for each task. Information contained in the conversational turns was then used to assess persistence in planning intention. A coder viewed

the videotaped interaction to determine whether or not the individual was following the actions previously laid out in their planning statement. The measurement for each variable will be delineated below.

### **Independent Variables**

**Planning.** Half of the couples ( $n = 42$ ) were assigned to complete a description about their plans for the interaction before the conversation. Of those couples assigned to the planning condition, both members individually generated plans prior to both tasks.

**Task type.** Couples completed two conversations that are here referred to as “task type.” The order in which these tasks were completed was randomly assigned along with the planning condition.

### **Dependent Measures**

Both preceding and following the conversation tasks, participants completed measures designed to evaluate a variety of factors that could potentially influence one’s communicative management of conflict. These measures assessed: *perceived conflict resolution*, *persistence of planning intention*, *plan flexibility*, and *perceived empathic accuracy*. Each measure is described in detail below.

**Perceived conflict resolution.** After reviewing the tape of an interaction, participants indicated if they thought the conflict achieved resolution via a single item, “I consider this issue to be resolved,” on a 5-point, Likert-type scale (1 = not at all, 5 = very much so; relational conflict discussion  $M = 2.91$ ,  $SD = 1.37$ ; non-relational problem-solving task  $M = 3.99$ ,  $SD = 1.43$ ). One sample t-tests comparing each task type with the measure of perceived conflict resolution compared to the scale midpoint on resolution ( $= 3$ ) indicated that for the non-relational problem solving task, on average participants judged this as a topic that was resolvable,  $t(153) = 8.62$ ,  $p < .001$ . However, one-sample t-tests concerning the resolvability of the relational conflict

discussion indicated that judgments of resolvability were not significantly different from the scale midpoint,  $t(161) = 0.80, p = .42, ns$ .

**Persistence in planning intention.** The degree to which an individual was judged to be persistent in pursuing their planning intention was assessed using a coder's analysis of participants' plans. After unitization, the coder determined whether the individual was continuing to pursue the planning intention by viewing the videotaped interactions. A composite score was then assigned to each participant according to the proportion of persistent conversation turns to the total number of turns within the conversation for each conversation task. Thus, if a participant continued to pursue their planning intention for five of the 20 conversation turns, they were assigned a score of 0.25 for persistence in planning intention (relational conflict discussion,  $M = 0.23, SD = .13$ , non-relational problem-solving task,  $M = 0.24, SD = 0.13$ ).

**Plan flexibility.** An individual's ability to include a variety of potential variations, options, or scenarios within the pursuit of a particular plan is indicative of plan flexibility (Berger, 2007). Several independent coders were utilized to assess the plans generated by participants according to this criterion. One set of coders separated the plans generated according to the conceptual action units, the differing actions that the individual proposed to be enacted during the discussion (Guetzkow's  $U = .04$ , Guetzkow, 1950). Once the plan was broken down according to the conceptual action units, another set of coders determined the number of distinct, unique, or independent thought units. This second set of coders then verified the number of distinct and independent conceptual action units identified by the previous coder and assign a ratio score for plan flexibility ( $K = 0.67$ , Bakeman & Gottman, 1986). This ratio reflects the number of distinct and independent CAUs to the total number of CAUs in the plan. Thus, the

assignment of greater numbers indicates greater plan flexibility (relational conflict discussion,  $M = 0.93$ ,  $SD = .11$ , non-relational problem-solving task,  $M = 0.93$ ,  $SD = 0.11$ ).

**Perceived empathic accuracy.** Individuals' level of perceived empathic accuracy was measured using items adapted from Sillars' (1989) and Marangoni, Garcia, Ickes, & Teng's (1995) measures of empathic accuracy. After viewing the entire videotaped conversation and completing items for another project, participants completed a 6-item measure on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = not at all to 5 = very much so; e.g.: "I feel I really understood my partner's perspective"; "I felt that my partner and I were on 'the same page' during our discussion, see Appendix B). Individuals' levels of perceived empathic accuracy was determined by summing the scores for each item and dividing by the number of items to create an average empathic accuracy; this was done for the data for each conversational task. Higher numbers indicate a greater level of the perceived empathic accuracy. This measure was sufficiently reliable (relational conflict discussion  $\alpha = .76$ , non-relational problem-solving task  $\alpha = .75$ ). Perceived empathic accuracy scores were also divided according to perceptions of *one's self* (relational conflict discussion  $\alpha = .58$ ,  $M = 3.88$ ,  $SD = .87$ ; non-relational problem-solving task  $\alpha = .70$ ,  $M = 3.90$ ,  $SD = .94$ ) (i.e., "I feel like I really understood my partner's perspective." and "I tried hard to see my partner's side of the issue."), and perceptions of *one's partner* for each task type (relational conflict discussion  $\alpha = .87$ ,  $M = 3.50$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ; non-relational problem-solving task  $\alpha = .83$ ,  $M = 3.70$ ,  $SD = 1.06$ ) (i.e., "My partner really tried to understand my perspective.", "I think my partner really understood my perspective.", and "I felt my partner and I were on 'the same page' during our discussion".) Difference scores for each task type were also computed according to the difference between perceptions of one's self and one's partner (relational conflict discussion,  $M = .38$ ,  $SD = .99$ ; non-relational problem-solving task,  $M = .20$ ,  $SD = .78$ ).

**Summary**

This chapter explained the research design for this thesis along with providing an overview of the data collection process and the procedures each participant completed. An understanding of the measurement of the independent variables, planning and task type, and the dependent measures perceived conflict resolution, persistence in planning intention, plan flexibility, and perceived empathic accuracy was provided. The following chapter presents the results of the hypotheses tests conducted for this project.

## Chapter 3: Results

### Planning, Task Type, and Resolution

Hypotheses 1 and 4 were examined with a 2 (planning condition: plan vs. no plan) x 2 (task order: relational conflict discussion first vs. non-relational problem-solving task first) x 2 (task type: relational conflict discussion vs. non-relational problem-solving task) repeated measures analysis of variance where planning condition and task order were between-subjects and task type was within-subjects with a couple code enter as a covariate. The dependent variable was perceived conflict resolution.

*H1* advanced that individuals who plan prior to the conflict interaction will be more likely to resolve the conflict than those who do not plan prior to the conversation. Multivariate analyses indicated that the interaction between task type and planning condition was significant, Wilk's  $\Lambda = .97$ ,  $F(1, 145) = 5.07$ ,  $p = .03$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .03$ . Further examination of the interaction indicated that for the relational conflict discussion, planning condition did not differentially influence conflict resolution,  $t(160) = 1.05$ ,  $p = .30$ , *ns*. However, the effect of planning condition was observed for the non-relational problem-solving task,  $t(152) = 2.82$ ,  $p = .01$ . Individuals in the non-relational problem-solving task were found to be more likely to resolve the conflict when they did *not* plan prior to the conversation ( $M = 4.32$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ) than when planning prior to the conversation ( $M = 3.68$ ,  $SD = 1.52$ ). Given that this pattern is contrary to predictions, and due to no significant differences in planning for the relational conflict interaction, *H1* did not receive support.

*H4* stated that task type would be associated with perceived resolution, such that individuals will be more likely to resolve the non-relational problem-solving task than the relational conflict discussion. Analyses indicated no significant univariate main effect for planning condition,  $F(1, 145) = 2.03, p = .19, ns$ ; or a main effect for task order,  $F(1, 145) = 1.36, p = .24, ns$ . The multivariate main effect for task type also was not significant, Wilk's  $\Lambda = .98, F(1, 145) = 2.55, p = .11, ns$ . Yet, multivariate analyses indicated an interaction of task type and couple code, Wilk's  $\Lambda = .97, F(1, 145) = 5.13, p = .03, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .03$ , such that individuals were more likely to report that a non-relational problem-solving task was resolved ( $M = 4.00, SD = 1.43$ ) compared to their perceptions about the resolution of the relational conflict discussion ( $M = 2.86, SD = 1.38$ ). No other two or three-way interactions were significant. These results support *H4* such that individuals were more likely to resolve the non-relational problem-solving task than the relational conflict discussion, which was also influenced by couple effects.

### **Plan Flexibility and Persistence in Planning Intention**

*H2* stated that individuals who create more flexible plans will be more persistent in the pursuit of planning intentions during the interaction than those who create less flexible plans. Two regression analyses examined this hypothesis, one for each task type. Persistence in planning intention was entered as the dependent variable with the couple code entered in the first step, task order entered in the second step, and plan flexibility in the third step of the analysis.

**Relational conflict discussion.** Couple number,  $\beta = -.19$ , was not significantly associated with persistence in planning intention,  $R = .19, R^2\Delta = .04, ns$ , nor was task order,  $\beta = -.18, R = .26, R^2\Delta = .03, ns$ . Contrary to predictions, plan flexibility,  $\beta = -.17$ , was also *not* significantly associated with persistence in planning intention,  $R = .31, R^2\Delta = .03, ns$ .



**Non-relational problem-solving task.** Again, neither couple number,  $\beta = .13$ ,  $R = .13$ ,  $R^2\Delta = .02$ , *ns*, nor task order,  $\beta = .22$ , was significantly associated with persistence in planning intention,  $R = .25$ ,  $R^2\Delta = .05$ , *ns*. Additionally, plan flexibility,  $\beta = -.08$ , was *not* significantly associated with persistence in planning intention,  $R = .26$ ,  $R^2\Delta = .01$ , *ns*. Therefore, *H2* was not supported with regard to either conversational task as plan flexibility was not significantly associated with persistence in planning intention for either task.

### **Plan Flexibility and Task Type**

*H3* asserted that individuals will create *more* flexible plans in the non-relational problem-solving task than the relational conflict discussion. This hypothesis was examined using a 2 (task type: relational conflict discussion vs. non-relational problem-solving task) x 2 (task order: relational conflict discussion first vs. non-relational problem-solving task first) repeated measures analysis of variance with task type within-subjects and task order between subjects with a couple code entered as a covariate. The dependent measure was plan flexibility. The multivariate main effect for task type was not significant, Wilk's  $\Lambda = 1.00$   $F(1, 71) = .03$ ,  $p = .87$ , *ns*. There no significant interaction of task type and couple number Wilk's  $\Lambda = 1.00$   $F(1, 71) = .02$ ,  $p = .90$ , *ns*, nor a significant interaction of task type and couple number, Wilk's  $\Lambda = .99$   $F(1, 71) = 1.06$ ,  $p = .31$ , *ns*. Therefore, *H3* was not supported, as flexibility of plans did not differ based on task type.

### **Planning and Perceived Empathic Accuracy**

*H5* stated that individuals who plan prior to an interaction will be perceived to be more empathically accurate than those who do not plan prior to the interaction. This hypothesis was examined using a 2 (planning condition: plan vs. no plan) x 2 (task order: relational first vs. non-relational first) x 2 (task type: relational conflict discussion vs. non-relational problem-solving

task) repeated measures analysis of variance with planning and task order between-subjects, task type within-subjects, and couple code entered as a covariate. The dependent measure was perceived empathic accuracy. The multivariate main effect for task type was *not* significant, Wilk's  $\Lambda = 1.00$ ,  $F(1, 145) = .05$ ,  $p = .83$ , *ns*. Yet, there was significant interaction of task type and task order, Wilk's  $\Lambda = .96$ ,  $F(1, 145) = 5.70$ ,  $p = .02$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .04$ , however, further analyses did not reveal a significant pattern of task order differences on empathic accuracy for the relational conflict discussion,  $t(158) = 1.29$ ,  $p = .20$ , *ns* (relational first:  $M = 3.49$ ,  $SD = .65$ ; non-relational first:  $M = 3.34$ ,  $SD = .82$ ) or the non-relational problem-solving task,  $t(150) = 1.69$ ,  $p = .09$ , *ns* (relational first:  $M = 3.48$ ,  $SD = .80$ ; non-relational first:  $M = 3.68$ ,  $SD = .69$ ). No other two or three way interactions were found to be significant. Thus, while the interaction of task type and task order has a significant influence on perceived empathic accuracy, these results do not provide support for *H5*.

### **Perceived Empathic Accuracy and Conflict Resolution**

Hypothesis 6 advanced that as perceived empathic accuracy increases, the likelihood of conflict resolution increases. Two regression analyses were conducted to examine this hypothesis, one for each task type. Conflict resolution was entered as the dependent variable with couple code entered in the first step, planning condition and task order in the second step, and perceived empathic accuracy in the third step of the analysis. In addition, for the negotiation task, the interaction between planning condition, task order, and perceived empathic accuracy was entered as a fourth step, as planning condition and task order were found to be significant indicators of perceived empathic accuracy for the non-relational problem-solving task but not for the relational conflict discussion.

**Relational conflict discussion.** Neither couple number,  $\beta = -.09$ ,  $R = .09$ ,  $R^2\Delta = .01$ , *ns*, nor task order,  $\beta = .05$ , nor planning condition,  $\beta = -.07$  was significantly associated with conflict resolution,  $R = .12$ ,  $R^2\Delta = .01$ , *ns*. However, perceived empathic accuracy,  $\beta = .69$ , was positively associated with conflict resolution  $R = .69$ ,  $R^2\Delta = .46$ ,  $p < .001$ .

**Non-relational problem-solving task.** There was a main effect for couple number on task resolution  $\beta = .22$ ,  $R = .22$ ,  $R^2\Delta = .05$ ,  $p = .01$ , as well as a main effect for, planning condition,  $\beta = .21$ , and task order,  $\beta = .06$ .  $R = .31$ ,  $R^2\Delta = .05$ ,  $p = .03$ . However, further analyses did not reveal a significant pattern of task order differences on perceived conflict resolution for the non-relational problem-solving task,  $t(150) = .45$ ,  $p = .65$ , *ns* (relational first:  $M = 3.93$ ,  $SD = 1.51$ ; non-relational first:  $M = 4.04$ ,  $SD = 1.37$ ). Additionally, perceived empathic accuracy,  $\beta = .53$ , was also significantly associated with conflict resolution  $R = .60$ ,  $R^2\Delta = .27$ ,  $p < .001$ . Taken together, all variables account for approximately 37 percent of the variance of conflict resolution for the non-relational problem-solving task. Yet, the interaction between planning condition and perceived empathic accuracy did not significantly influence conflict resolution,  $\beta = -.38$ ,  $R = .58$ ,  $R^2\Delta = .004$ , *ns*. There were no significant three or four way interactions. In total, *H6* received support with regard to both conversational tasks.

### **Perceived Empathic Accuracy and Task Type**

Hypothesis 7 stated that individuals will report higher levels of perceived empathic accuracy for the relational conflict discussion than the non-relational problem-solving task. To test this hypothesis several paired samples *t*-test were conducted. First, a comparison was conducted using items associated with one's perception of their own empathic accuracy for each task. Task type difference was not significant,  $t(151) = .28$ ,  $p = .78$ , *ns*. Next, an individual's perception of the partner's empathic accuracy for the relational conflict discussion was compared

to the corresponding items for the non-relational problem-solving task. Once again, the difference was not significant,  $t(151) = 1.75, p = .08, ns$ . Third, the difference between an individual's perception of their own empathic accuracy and their partner's empathic accuracy for the relational conflict discussion was compared to the difference between perceptions of one's self and one's partner for the non-relational problem-solving task. There was no significant difference between the difference scores for the relational conflict discussion and the non-relational problem-solving task,  $t(151) = 1.85, p = .07, ns$ . Finally, the difference in overall perceived empathic accuracy for the two tasks was not significant,  $t(151) = 1.79, p = .08, ns$ . Since no differences were found between the task types for any of the four comparisons,  $H7$  was not supported.

## **Chapter 4: Discussion**

This project sought to elucidate the influence of the planning process, plan flexibility, persistence in planning intentions and perceived empathic accuracy on the perceived resolution of conflictual discussions by romantically-linked individuals. We used two tasks, one in which the romantic relationship was inherent in the topic of discussion and a problem-solving task extraneous to the relationship, in an effort to address the criticism that message production research on close relationships tends to focus specifically on relationship issues. Individuals were found to be more likely to resolve the non-relational problem-solving task than the relational conflict discussion, particularly when not planning prior to the interaction. With regard to perceived empathic accuracy, task type and order influenced levels of perceived empathic accuracy such that individuals reported slightly higher scores as a result of engagement in the non-relational problem-solving task. Yet, planning was not found to be a significant predictor. Perceived empathic accuracy was also positively associated with conflict resolution for both task types. Plan flexibility did not differ according to the topic of discussion and did not influence persistence in planning intentions.

### **Planning and Conflict Resolution**

Contrary to predictions, planning before a conversation was not associated with a greater likelihood of conflict resolution. In fact, for the non-relational problem-solving task, those who did not plan prior to the interaction were more likely to resolve the conflict compared to those who were assigned to plan beforehand. This pattern of results reflects one of the drawbacks of offline planning. Knowlton and Berger (1997) found that individuals who only generated one

plan prior to an interaction became fixated on the plan and rarely deviated from it during the conversation. In turn, the assignment to plan beforehand in this study may have induced a similar plan fixation effect that inhibited participants from adapting to new information presented by a partner during the non-relational problem-solving task, whereas individuals who did *not* plan prior to discussion may have been better able to adapt to and compromise with their partner to resolve the conflict.

In contrast, individuals in the relational conflict discussion were not influenced by the ability to plan or not plan prior to the conversation and were also *less* likely to resolve the conflict than the non-relational problem-solving task. This may be result of several factors. First, research on serial arguments indicates that individuals view some problems in their romantic relationships to be irresolvable (Johnson & Roloff, 1998; 2000; Miller & Roloff, 2007; Roloff, 2009). Serial argument research also suggests that individuals in close relationships become caught in cycles of communicating about the same relationship issue in the same way, time and time again (see Bevan, Hale, & Williams, 2004; Malis & Roloff, 2006, Miller & Roloff, 2007, Roloff, 2009). In turn, individuals engaged in serial arguments often rely on scripts that accompany a particular conflict discussion (Johnson & Roloff, 1998; 2000). The relational conflict discussions were directed to be serial disagreements; therefore when instructed to create a plan for the relational conflict discussion, individuals may have unconsciously generated a plan for message production that follows the typical progression of the serial argument. If this is the case, our results suggest that such plans or maps for engaging in the same conflictual discussion are not effective in initiating conflict resolution.

Additionally, the familiarity difference in task type may have influenced participants, leading those in a familiar discussion such as the relational conflict discussion to have more

plans available prior to the interaction than those in the non-relational problem-solving task who had no familiarity with the topic even if these plans were not documented by the participant in their planning form. Though the amount of actual plans may have differed more than the manipulation indicates, the ability to plan prior to the interaction still did not positively influence conflict resolution. Considering this lack of significant findings, it is possible that previous research may overstate the positive influence of offline planning, particularly in romantic relationship conflict situations.

Considering that the encouragement to engage in explicit planning processes did not encourage conflict resolution, innovative steps may need to be taken by individuals seeking to resolve serial arguments. In particular, to potentially break the cycle of negative communication, individuals may need to transform their communicative approach by focusing on a partner's point of view to break a cycle of serial arguments. Scholars have frequently advocated that the road to effective conflict management is paved by focusing on the partner's perspective. However, based on the extensive body of research reported by as Christensen and Jacobsen (2000), effective relational change cannot come from the one partner who perceives that the relationship needs work, instead both partners must work to achieve change within the relationship. According to Christiansen and Jacobsen (2000) changes within the relationships should be motivated by a change in one's self rather than one's partner while also focusing on acceptance of one's partner. They suggest that partners initiate changes in the relationship by approaching the situation in novel way (e.g., taking constructive action rather than complaining or criticizing), which in turn can lead to changes in one's partner. Both partners must participate in the effort in order to be successful. Therefore in future research concerning romantic

relationship conflict, it will be beneficial for the participants to focus on novel changes in one's own behavior and acceptance of one's partner.

Given the results of this project, it may be important to more carefully consider conflict styles research (Thomas, 1992). Thomas' research (1992) posits that the employment of collaboration can lead to "superior conflict outcomes" (pp. 271) including open exchange of information. By encouraging participants to exercise specific tactics characteristic of a collaborative approach to conflict (i.e. ask partner to disclose information, take personal responsibility for actions, and generate new and creative solutions) could be one of the keys to overcoming the detrimental cycle of serial argumentation.

### **Plan Flexibility and Persistence in Planning Intention**

Plan flexibility relates to the portion of independent thought units available in a plan for an interaction. Flexibility of plans has been found in the past to increase an individual's adaptability during an interaction because of the variety of scenarios generated prior to interaction. Contrary to predictions, the degree of flexibility was not significantly different according to task type. For the relational conflict discussion, individuals may have generated very flexible plans after realizing they would be communicating about one topic for ten minutes. This length of time is consistent with previous interaction studies (e.g., Creasey, 2002; Gottman, Levenson, & Woodin, 2001) yet may be quite a bit longer than they traditionally communicate about a single topic. This potential increase in relational conflict discussion plan flexibility would then dissipate the difference between the two tasks.

Additionally, flexibility was not significantly associated with persistence in planning intentions. Therefore the level of flexibility of the plans did not influence whether or not individuals adhered to their plans during the interaction. This could be due to the relatively low



level of persistence for both conversation tasks (relational conflict discussion,  $M = 0.23$ ,  $SD = 0.13$ ; non-relational problem-solving task,  $M = 0.23$ ,  $SD = 0.14$ ). Individuals were not very persistent across the board. This could be the result of having plans that were to inquire information from one's partner (e.g., "How do you think I can do better?", "How are the oranges going to benefit him?"). This inquiry may lead one away from their original plan if new information was uncovered that was not accounted for in an initial plan for the interaction. Flexibility and persistence may also be distinct concepts that are not related to one another demonstrating the need for further inquiry into the relationship between plan flexibility and persistence of planning intention. It could be advantageous in the future to expand upon the idea of flexibility and persistence by examining factors other than simply plans, especially considering the absence of planning influence in this particular study. Examining elements of the actual conversations between romantic partners for both discussion tasks could elucidate the relevance of flexibility and persistence in future research.

### **Perceived Empathic Accuracy**

Perception of empathic accuracy relates to an individual's perception of one's partner's empathic accuracy and one's perception of understanding his or her partner. The results of this investigation indicated that regardless of conversational task, empathic accuracy was positively associated with perceived conflict resolution. Our results are consistent with research highlighting the benefits of empathic accuracy in attaining situational goals (Bissonette et al., 1997; Ickes & Simpson, 1997). Previous research of marital partners in conflictual situations has also found that empathic accuracy leads to accommodative behaviors (Bissonette et al., 1997), allowing individuals to work with their partner and resolve the conflict. Therefore, individuals in conflictual situations should consciously strive to understand their partner's side of the issue,

especially the thoughts and feelings associated with the topic. These findings imply that a perception of accurate understanding of one's partner will enhance individuals' successful management of conflictual situations. Also, the connection between empathic accuracy, accommodative behavior, and conflict resolution reinforces previous research on romantic relationship conflict stating the benefits of using integrative communication tactics (Canary, 2003; Canary & Cupach, 1988; Caughlin & Vangelisti, 2006; Keck & Samp, 2007). Integrative tactics reflect the use of cooperative skills, often by an individual's disclosing information and asking a partner to do the same (Keck & Samp, 2007). These integrative tactics can lead to the resolution of conflict and a better understanding of one's partner if utilized during the conflict discussion.

Additionally, previous research concerning planning behavior indicates that the ability to plan prior to an interaction can have a considerable impact on how individuals understand the actions of others (Berger & Jordan, 1992). Yet contrary to Berger and Jordan (1992) planning behavior was not associated with perceived empathic accuracy in this thesis. The lack of significant findings for planning may be due in part to the ineffectiveness of planning, the nature of conflict and the types of tasks presented to the participants. Perhaps generating plans is not sufficient to combat the serial argument nature of the relational conflict discussion. Though planning should aid in understanding one's partner, the repetitive nature of the relational conflict discussion may inhibit inter-subject understanding. Empathic accuracy requires a certain level of motivation to understand one's partner (Bissonette, et al., 1997), which may be absent in the relational conflict as it has been discussed multiple times. Additionally, the non-relational problem-solving task may also inhibit motivation to understand one's partner as it was hypothetical, and the participants were assigned to a specific fictional role. The unfamiliar and

perhaps unrealistic nature of this role may have inhibited participants' abilities and motivation to predict and understand a partner's behavior regardless of planning condition (Burlison & Planalp, 2000; Greene, 1997).

These findings indicate that planning for a relational conflict discussion is no more helpful in resolving the conflict or understanding one's self and one's partner than not planning at all. This may reflect the lack of motivation or effort put forth by individuals in the planning process and the potential lack of knowledge concerning how to successfully manage conflict. If provided with specific tactics shown to be successful in managing conflict, individuals could potentially implement these skills in their offline planning and subsequently in the conflictual interaction. These skills could also enhance the success of the planning process in the non-relational problem-solving task, potentially combating the problem of plan fixation.

### **Couple Effects and Conflict Resolution**

Finally, it is also important to highlight the situations in which there were significant couple effects. A significant interaction of task type and couple number was discovered for conflict resolution. Specifically, a significant couple effect was found for the resolution of the non-relational problem-solving task. The lack of a significant couple effect on the resolution of the relational-conflict discussion further bolsters the idea that individuals engaged in romantic relationship conflict concerning a relationally-relevant topic have more difficulty in resolving the conflict due to the potential serial argument nature of the discussion whereas working together as a couple to solve a problem unrelated to the relationship may be more easily attainable because of the removability of relational influences, such as serial argumentation, that may hinder conflict resolution.

Overall, this research discovered that the use of two task types could result in different outcomes such that those in the non-relational problem-solving task were more likely to resolve the conflict than those in a relational conflict discussion. This could be the result of the relational conflict discussion being a serial argument between the members of the couple, potentially being seen as irresolvable by the couple limiting the positive effect of the planning process and plan implementation. Conversely, those in the non-relational problem-solving task were more likely to resolve when *not* planning, because of the potential negative result of the planning process leading to plan fixation and lack of adaptability when presented with new information. Additionally, plan flexibility was unrelated to conflict resolution and persistence in planning intention, displaying a need for future inquiry into this element of the plans. Finally, the findings regarding perceived empathic accuracy reaffirm the benefits of understanding one's partner. Yet, planning did not affect this level of understanding, most likely due to the nature of the tasks. Considering these results and their implications, it is necessary to identify the limitations of this research along with the course for continuing exploration into these particular areas.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

This study sought to assess perceived empathic accuracy in a rather innovative fashion—through perceptions regarding self and partner judgments of empathy. Though the measure of empathic accuracy was found to be reliable, a different measure of empathic accuracy may need to be used in the future. Rather than looking at the perception of empathic accuracy, in the future I may utilize a moment-to-moment, stop-tape procedure that is traditionally used as it may prove to be more advantageous for uncovering differences in the enactment of empathic accuracy according to both task type and planning condition. It may also be the case the empathic accuracy is more of a personality trait than a factor that could be influenced by planning

condition. Future research should be conducted in order to fully examine the concept of empathic accuracy in relation to interpersonal conflict and the planning process.

In the future, it could also be advantageous to include additional measures with regards to plan flexibility and persistence in planning intention. By examining aspects of the actual interactions between the members of the romantic couple, greater insight could be gained as to the flexibility and persistence of the individuals within the interaction. For example, speech onset latencies of individuals after a partner's response to a question could elucidate the effect of plan generation on flexibility within the conversation as well as plan flexibility's effect on message production. Also, there may be additional factors that influence adherence to a previously generated plan. Research suggests that the presentation of potential failings of an offline plan coupled with the ability to revise the plan may lead to a more successful implementation of the planning process (Berger, 2005). The specificity of the plans could also be assessed considering previous research indicates that less specific arguments are more fluent during conversations and better able to adapt to message failure (Knowlton & Berger, 1997). Measurement and analysis of these other factors should be included in the future to see if these results could be expanded upon.

Regarding perceived conflict resolution, it would be advantageous in the future to include a measure of perceived resolvability of each conflictual discussion topic generated by the individual members of the couple. I would also like to include the approximate number of times a topic has been discussed in the past. These measures could be used to better understand the serial argument nature of romantic relationship conflict topics while giving a point of reference for the resolution of the conflict within the laboratory setting.

This investigation also sought to build upon prior planning research by instructing participants to enact plans generated offline.

Though I reasoned that putting the plans into action would provide a more complete assessment of the influence of plans on various factors including perceived conflict resolution and perceived empathic accuracy, I did not find compelling support for this premise. It is therefore essential that future research replicate the offline planning process and enactment to shed more light as to its influence on elements of interpersonal conflict.

It is also important to note, that these findings contrasting a relational conflict discussion and a non-relational problem-solving task expand upon traditional message production research concerning close relationship issues. There is limited research conducted incorporating relational conflict discussions. Additionally, previous studies using relational conflict discussions have focused on varied participant groups such as engaged or married couples (e.g. Creasey, 2002; Gottman, Levenson, & Woodin, 2001; Sanders, Halford, & Brehens, 1999), adolescent couples (Harper & Welsh, 2007) or a combination of romantic and friendship couples (Keck & Samp, 2007). These studies have examined a variety of areas including non-verbal expressions, parental divorce status, and self-silencing (e.g., Gottman, Levenson, & Woodin, 2001; Harper & Welsh, 2007; Sanders, Halford, & Brehens, 1999) yet few examine the specific aspects of message production investigated here (e.g., the planning processing, perceived empathic accuracy), and none use a combination of relational conflict discussions and non-relational problem-solving tasks. On the other hand, previous message production research has included problem-solving tasks and compliance gaining encounters much like the non-relational problem-solving task utilized for this project (Dillard, 1990; Graziano, Jensen-Campbell, & Hair, 1996; Samp & Solomon, 2005; Wilson, 2002). Though message production studies include an intellectual task,

participants are not in a relationship and instead are typically unknown to one another. Therefore, this project bridges the gap between the limited research utilizing relational conflict discussions and the message production research employing intellectual tasks.

This inclusion of varied task types was found to significantly effect conflict resolution and perceived empathic accuracy demonstrating the benefits of using two different task types. Although the use of two tasks was productive, there are some limitations associated with each. The potential unrealistic or improbable nature of the non-relational problem-solving task may prevent participants from being motivated to resolve the discussion or take the task seriously. Also, this task has one specific answer that resolves the task, limiting participant creativity and ability to compromise or collaborate, which may lead to conflict resolution in a more flexible task. Additionally, discussing a relationally-relevant topic may be difficult for some individuals who are not as open to discussing private topics. Therefore, this may prevent participants from engaging with a partner in a natural way.

The aim of the study was to include two tasks, one a relationally-relevant conflict discussion and the other a non-relationally relevant problem-solving task, in an attempt to combat the traditional criticism of message production research concerning romantic relationship couples that the conversation will be driven by relational issues. The attempt to address this criticism may have led me to choose a non-relational problem-solving task that was too far removed from the relationship that a comparison of the interactions may be somewhat problematic. These tasks vary on a few dimensions. Individuals in the relational-conflict discussion could have a much higher level of motivation to resolve a conflict that pertains directly to one's relationship than the non-relational problem-solving task, which is almost completely removed from the relationship. This also brings about the issue of personal relevance.

These tasks vary according to the level of personal applicability inherent in the topics such that one is taken specifically from a relational issue generated by the members of the couple, while the other is completely removed from any personal relevance by assigning a fictional role to each member of the couple. By endeavoring to combat the a criticism of message production research, I may have chosen tasks which differed not only with regard the relational inherence of the topic, but also level of motivation and personal relevance. In the future, it would be advantageous to replicate this research using a different non-relational problem-solving discussion that also includes aspects that would enhance a participant's motivation to solve the conflict and understand his or her partner while also being relevant to both members of the couple in some way.

Additionally, future research could also include an examination of various individual difference factors that have been found to influence romantic relationship conflict such as attachment styles (Creasey, 2002), family of origin (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002), conflict locus of control (Canary, Cody, & Marston, 1987; Canary, Cunningham, & Cody; 1988), and level of agreeableness (Graziano, Jensen-Campbell, & Hair, 1996). Inclusion of these individual difference factors could provide further insight into the reasons for variation of responses to the two types of conflict discussions. Knowledge of these individual differences could also create greater understanding of the basis for perceived empathic accuracy. Including a measure of individual difference factors which may influence planning behavior would also allow for a better understanding of the effect of planning on conflict resolution, plan flexibility, and persistence in planning condition. For example, some of these individual difference factors may include need for cognition (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982) and dogmatism (Ehrlich, 1961).



Incorporating individual difference factors in future research will build upon both prior romantic relationship research and the findings of this study.

## **Conclusions**

This thesis project incorporated two conflictual conversation tasks, in an effort to more fully understand the relationship between the plans, plan flexibility, persistence in planning intention, perceived conflict resolution, and perceived empathic accuracy in contexts concerning both a relationally-relevant topic and one extraneous to the relationship. Through the use of romantic relationship conflictual discussions, the planning process including plan flexibility and persistence of planning intentions were essentially not related to any other factor measured. Yet, task type did produce varying effects in some conditions and did understanding of one's self and one's partner within the conflictual discussion.

Conflict resolution was predicted by task type such that individuals were more likely to resolve the non-relational problem-solving task than the relational conflict discussion indicating the detrimental effects of serial argumentation. Individuals engaged in serial arguments concerning a relationally-relevant topic appear unable to break the traditional cycle of communication and resolve the relational conflict discussion. Perceived empathic accuracy was also positively associated with conflict resolution supporting the benefits of understanding one's self and partner when engaged in conflict. Finally, planning condition was only found to be a significant indicator of conflict resolution when individuals in the non-relational problem-solving task did *not* plan prior to the interaction, while plan flexibility was consistent across task types and was *not* associated with persistence of planning intention. The seemingly ineffective nature of planning behavior points to both the drawbacks of offline planning and negative effect of serial argumentation. These findings suggest that individual's in conflict situations should strive

to understand their partner and transform traditional communicative approaches to conflict by incorporating novel tactics that focus on a collaborative effort by both romantic relationship partners.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Relational Conflict Discussion**

Prior to the relational conflict discussion, respondents received the following instructions for generating a list of the most recent disagreements that potentially could be chosen as the topic of discussion. Each participant received the same form and generated a list individually in a separate room from their partner as to minimize the influence their partner may have had on their list of topics for discussion. The instructions were as follows:

For most of us, having a disagreement with someone is nearly an everyday occurrence. A lot of the time, we have disagreements about the same issues again and again. We are interested in those disagreements that you have had with your dating partner that are serial, in that they have occurred more than once.

We would like you to think about some of the serial disagreements that you have had with your dating partner over the last 3 months. In particular, we would like you to focus on 5 of the most important disagreements that you have discussed, but will likely discuss again. Please describe each of the five disagreements below:

Participants then listed the topic of the disagreements, indicated the number of times they had discussed the issue, and specified the last time the couple discussed that particular issue. Once this was completed, the couple was reunited. Then, each participant was given the opportunity to review the list his or her partner generated. The researcher then encouraged the couple to come to a conclusion as to what topic that would like to discuss and which they

believed could be discussed for the full 10 minutes. Once the couple had chosen the topic, they were given 10 minutes to discuss the topic, which was videotaped.

### **Non-relational Problem-solving Task**

Before individuals engaged in the non-relational problem-solving discussion, respondents were presented with the following instructions for their role in the task. Each participant received a different role, which was randomly assigned to the participants. The introduction to the task was the same across roles. In separate rooms, the participants received their role. Once they completed the reading and familiarizing themselves, the partners were reunited and instructed to try to resolve the issue. If the issue was resolved in a manner that the researcher deemed appropriate, then the discussion was concluded before the ten minute discussion limit was reached. The instructions were as follows:

**Introduction.** In many interpersonal relationships it is not always possible for individuals to work independently as they pursue their individual goals. Often we find ourselves in situations where we must obtain the cooperation of other people, even though the other people's ultimate objectives may be different from our own. This will be your task in the present exercise.

**Role of Dr. Roland.** You are Dr. P.W. Roland. You work as a research biologist for a pharmaceutical firm. The firm is under contract with the government to do research on methods to combat enemy uses of biological warfare.

Recently several World War II experimental nerve gas bombs were moved from the U.S. to a small island just off the U.S. coast in the Pacific. In the process of transporting them, one of the bombs developed a leak. The leak is presently controlled by government scientists who believe that the gas will permeate the bomb chambers within two weeks. They know of no method preventing the gas from getting into the atmosphere

and spreading to other islands, and very likely to the West Coast as well. If this occurs, it is likely that several thousand people will incur serious brain damage or die.

You've developed a synthetic vapor, which will neutralize the nerve gas if it is injected into the bomb chamber before the gas leaks out. The vapor is made with a chemical taken from the rind of the Ugli orange, a very rare fruit. Unfortunately, only 4,000 of these oranges were produced this season.

You've been informed, on good evidence that a Mr. R. H. Cardoza, a fruit exporter in South America, is in possession of 3,000 Ugli oranges. The chemicals from the rinds of this number of oranges would be sufficient to neutralize the gas if the serum is developed and injected efficiently. You have also been informed that the rinds of these oranges are in good condition.

You have also been informed that Dr. J.W. Jones is also urgently seeking purchase of Ugli oranges and he is aware of Mr. Cardoza's possession of the 3,000 available. Dr. Jones works for a firm with which your firm is highly competitive. There is a great deal of industrial espionage in the pharmaceutical industry. Over the years, your firm and Dr. Jones' have sued each other for violation of industrial espionage laws and infringement of patent rights several times. Litigation on two suits is still in process.

The federal government has asked your firm for assistance. You've been authorized by your firm to approach Mr. Cardoza to purchase the 3,000 Ugli oranges. You have been told he will sell them to the highest bidder. Your firm has authorized you to bid as high as \$250,000 to obtain the rind of the oranges.

Before approaching Mr. Cardoza, you have decided to talk to Dr. Jones to influence him so that he will not prevent you from purchasing the oranges.

**Role of Dr. Jones.** You are Dr. John W. Jones, a biological research scientist employed by a pharmaceutical firm. You have recently developed a synthetic chemical useful for curing and preventing Rudosen. Rudosen is a disease contracted by pregnant women. If not caught in the first four weeks of pregnancy, the disease cause serious brain, eye, and ear damage to the unborn child. Recently there has been an outbreak of Rudosen in your state and several thousand women have contracted the disease. You have found, with volunteer patients, that your recently developed synthetic serum cures Rudosen in the early stages. Unfortunately, the serum is made from the juice of the Ugli orange which is a very rare fruit. Only a small quantity (approximately 4,000) of these oranges was produced last season. No additional Ugli oranges will be available until next season, which will be too late to cure the present Rudosen victims.

You've demonstrated that your synthetic serum is in no way harmful to pregnant women. Consequently, there are no side effects. The Food and Drug Administration has approved of the production and distribution of the serum as a cure for Rudosen.

Unfortunately, the present outbreak was unexpected and your firm had not planned on having the compound serum available for six months. Your firm holds the patent on the synthetic serum and is expected to be a highly profitable product when it is generally available to the public.

You have recently been informed, on good evidence that Mr. R. H. Cardoza, a South American fruit exporter, is in possession of 3,000 Ugli oranges in good condition. If you could obtain the juice of all 3,000, you would be able to both cure present victims and provide sufficient inoculation for the remaining pregnant women in the state. No other state currently has a Rudosen threat.

You have recently been informed that Dr. P. W. Roland is also urgently seeking Ugli oranges and is also aware of Mr. Cardoza's possession of the 3,000 available. Dr. Roland is employed by a competing pharmaceutical firm. He has been working on biological warfare research for the past several years. There is a great deal of industrial espionage in the pharmaceutical industry. Over the past several years, Dr. Roland's firm and yours have sued each other for infringement of patent rights and espionage law violations several times.

You've been authorized by your firm to approach Mr. Cardoza to purchase the 3,000 Ugli oranges. You have been told he will sell them to the highest bidder. Your firm has authorized you to bid as high as \$250,000 to obtain the juice of the 3,000 available oranges.

## Appendix B

### Perceived Empathic Accuracy

Now that you have reviewed the entire tape of your conversation, please complete these final measures:

For the following items use this scale:

- |   | 1          | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5            |
|---|------------|---|---|---|--------------|
|   | Not At All |   |   |   | Very Much So |
| 1. I feel like I really understood my partner's perspective .....                             | 1          | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5            |
| 2. My partner really tried to understand my perspective .....                                 | 1          | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5            |
| 3. I tried hard to see my partner's side of the issue.....                                    | 1          | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5            |
| 4. I think my partner really understood my perspective .....                                  | 1          | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5            |
| 5. I think my partner and I wanted different things to happen during<br>this discussion ..... | 1          | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5            |
| 6. I felt that my partner and I were on "the same page"<br>during our discussion .....        | 1          | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5            |