

Do Red Flags Point the Way?

Early Warnings and Later Conflict in Singles' Relationships

by

Cami Porter

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Graduate Supervisory Committee:

F. Scott Christopher, Chair  
Masumi Iida  
Laura Guerrero

ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

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## ABSTRACT

The goal of the present study was to test for links between experiences of red flags in initial interactions with romantic partners and later styles of relational conflict. Red flags are negative qualities or traits displayed by a potential romantic partner that trigger warnings in singles of possible future negative experiences if a romantic relationship develops. I focused on five red flags (*displayed a lack of interest, evidenced narcissistic-like behavior, was too sexual, too possessive, or drank too much*) and three conflict styles (*mutual constructive style, demand/withdraw style, mutual avoidance style*) in the current study. The 155 unmarried male undergraduates and the 504 unmarried female undergraduates were asked to refer back to their most recent dating partner when completing these relationship measures. The red flag measures, therefore, were measured using a retrospective approach. After controlling for whether the singles were still in their relationships and the sex of the participants, regression analyses revealed that recalling that one's partner showed a lack of interest in initial interactions were significantly and positively associated with a demand/withdraw and mutual avoidant conflict style. Results also showed that recalling that one's partner was too possessive in initial interactions was significantly and negatively associated with a mutual constructive conflict style, and positively related to partner demand/I withdraw and mutual avoidant conflict styles. Finally, recalling that their partner drank too much in a first interaction was negatively linked to later reports of engaging in a mutually constructive conflict style. This study provides insight into an area of research that has not been previously studied.

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

One of the most significant events in adults' lives is establishing a romantic relationship. Given this significance, social scientists have investigated how romantic relationships develop. This area of research describes the processes involved as singles are attracted to one another and form romantic pairings. Research on mate selection and adult romantic relationships has found that specific traits are desirable in a potential romantic partner. For instance, physical attractiveness as well as similarities in personality, values, and goals are just a few of the characteristics that form the basis of romantic attraction (Surra et al, 2006).

Most of the research on premarital romantic relationships examines how singles choose partners, how they develop their relationships, and how these relationships end. All of these areas of research are important, but in order to have a full understanding of romantic relationships, researchers need to address the association between first experiences with a romantic interest who displays costly behaviors on the one hand, and later relational experiences with that individual on the other hand. The unanswered question is whether initial costs are linked to future interactions with a partner.

To that end, the goal of this study was to test for links between experiences of red flags in initial interactions with partners and later relational conflict in the relationship. Red flags are negative qualities or traits displayed by a potential romantic partner that trigger warnings in singles of the possible future negative experiences if a romantic relationship develops. This study is important because if red flags displayed in initial

interactions are associated with later dysfunctional styles of conflict, singles can be taught to be more cautious when evaluating potential partners and to recognize the risk of overlooking the behaviors linked to red flags when choosing to continue to develop a relationship.

The importance of testing for links between initial and later experiences is supported by the work of Marek, Knapp, and Wanzer (2004). These scholars explored the effects of initial interactions on roommate relationships and found an association between first impressions and future approaches to conflict. Their research indicated that positive interactions among roommates increased positive first impressions, and that this in turn was related to later communication patterns (Marek et al, 2004). More specifically, positive first impressions resulted in roommates engaging in constructive styles of conflict (Marek et al, 2004). These findings suggest that red flags displayed during initial interactions in romantic relationships may be related to later relational conflict.

In the present study, undergraduate singles completed an online survey. They were initially presented measures of different red flags and told to think back to their initial interactions with their most recent dating partner. From there, they rated whether they experienced the indicators of different red flags, and whether this triggered a warning for them. They then completed a series of relationship measures focused on their most recent dating experience that included measures of styles of relational conflict; specifically measures of a mutual constructive conflict style, a demand-withdraw conflict style, and a mutual avoidance conflict style.



## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

There are a number of theories focused on romantic relationship development (Christensen & Sullaway, 1984; Lloyd & Cate, 1985; Surra & Hughs, 1997), with each offering an explanation for why individuals are attracted to certain characteristics in a potential partner more than other characteristics. In addition, these theories share the assumption that in choosing a mate “strategic choices are made, consciously or unconsciously, to maximize some entity, match, or balance” (Buss, & Schmitt, 1993, p. 205). In other words, men and women typically seek romantic partners who possess qualities that increase the likelihood of the relationship persisting long-term. The process of attraction, and finding mates who are close to ideal partners, is associated with the initial stages of forming romantic relationships.

Another critical assumption of mate selection theories is that initial interactions affect later interactions (i.e., Lloyd & Cate, 1985). Lloyd and Cate (1985), for example, showed that early attributions about one’s dating partner were related to the eventual ending of relationships. The ways in which romantic partners evaluate their early relationship experiences, therefore, potentially affect later conditions of the relationship. In other words, early experiences in relationships have a reach into what relationships will be like after the initial stages of meeting someone new. Beyond research on developmental turning points in singles’ relationships, (Lloyd & Cate, 1985; Surra & Hughs, 1997; Baxter & Bullis, 1986) where commitment either increases or decreases, the assumption that romantic partners’ evaluation of their earlier relationship experiences affects later relationship conditions remains largely untested. Specifically, the body of

research on romantic relationships is lacking evidence for how initial interactions are related to positive and negative relational experiences such as different forms of conflict.

### **Social Exchange & Predictive Outcome Theory**

*Social Exchange Theory.* The links between warning signs in the early stages of a relationship and future conflict may be best understood by using a social exchange perspective. This theory focuses on the interactions between individuals involved in a romantic pairings and looks at what each partner is getting out of and contributing into the relationship. According to Homans, one of the initial scholarly influences on exchange theory, the most basic assumption of exchange theory is that people engage in rewarding behaviors and cease behaviors that have high costs (Delaney, 2005). Homans assumed that one could explain interactions by looking at the rewards and costs that lead people to certain actions.

Applying a social exchange perspective to romantic relationships assumes the occurrence of both costs and rewards within romantic partnerships. For example, Sedikides, Oliver, and Campbell (1994) examined factors related to positive and negative contributions to romantic relationships. Examples of exchanges that led to positive or rewarding outcomes in partnerships included partners behaving in social and pleasant ways with one another and living lives that included an array of activities. Alternatively, suspiciousness, jealousy, and substance abuse were examples of negative or costly influences on relationships (Sedikides et al., 1994).

Thus from a Social Exchange perspective, the interactions between singles in initial stages of romantic development would potentially contain both rewards (positive interactions) as well as costs (negative interaction; Sullaway & Christensen, 1983).

Relationship development would move forward when positive interactions outweigh negative interactions. However, potential partners may behave in ways or have characteristics that warn of possible future rewards and costs within the context of initial interactions. Positive and negative interactions during early relationships development, therefore, form the basis of predicting future positive and negative experiences. This conceptualization is the foundation of Predicted Outcome Value Theory.

*Predicted Outcome Value Theory.* Sunnafrank (1986) applied the concepts of rewards and costs to initial relationship interactions when he developed Predicted Outcome Value (POV) Theory. Sunnafrank asserted that relationship development is driven by the positive and negative impressions that are formed during initial interactions (Marek, Knapp, Wanzer, 2004). He posited that based on these initial interactions, individuals forecast what perspective partners will be like and how they will behave in the future (Sunnafrank, & Ramirez, 2004).

Singles, therefore, identify costs or warning signs of possible future costs during initial interactions but continue to interact with someone they are initially attracted to because initial and forecasted rewards outweigh initial and forecasted costs. For example, initial rewards in first interactions between singles might include learning about one another and sharing experiences (Sunnafrank & Ramirez, 2004). This may lead to a forecast of future rewards such as high relationship satisfaction. On the other hand, initial costs may include criticism or being treated in undesirable ways. This may lead to a prediction of low relational satisfaction and increased chances of relationship dissolution.

Thus according to Predicted Outcome Value Theory, initial interactions among singles operate as a screening stage for potential future relationships (Sunnafrank & Ramirez, 2004). Yet, what will actually occur in the future is unknown, and the singles in initial interactions do not know one another well if at all. Initial interactions, therefore, include levels of uncertainty. In order to reduce uncertainty, singles look for information that will allow them to predict future costs and rewards to identify the likelihood of a potential relationship. They rely on the information gathered in the initial interactions to make predictions and thereby reduce uncertainty. Based on early positive and negative experiences with potential partners, singles decide whether to continue pursuing a relationship or to end further interactions. If singles choose to continue interactions with potential partners, they will likely engage in conversations that are rewarding and avoid conversations that are costly. In other words, if singles predict higher future rewards than costs, they will likely behave in ways to increase positive experiences and decrease negative experiences as the relationship develops.

Predictive Outcome Value Theory is relevant to the present study. As singles interact with each other during these initial stages of relationship development, potential partners may display negative qualities or red flags that warn of future costs to the relationship. Although red flags represent costs, if singles also experience positive interactions, and predict more future rewards than costs based on their initial interactions, they will likely continue to develop the relationship. However, this does not preclude the possibility that initial behaviors that are costly will be associated styles of conflict that emerge as the relationship progresses.

## **Red Flags**

Red flags or “warnings” are undesirable characteristics revealed in prospective partners during initial interactions that warn singles of future costs if their interactions continue (Christopher, Porter, McKenney, Poulsen, & Osborne, 2014). Examples of initial interactions include conversing for the first time, having a first date, meeting at a social event or gathering, and other initial contacts that facilitate getting to know a person who is a romantic interest. Christopher and his colleagues’ (2013) identified specific red flags or behaviors that singles use to judge prospective partners in these initial interactions. By design, these researchers focused on singles who experienced these warnings and ended their initial interactions with a potential partner even though they were attracted to them. Over a series of three studies, Christopher et al. found that initial interactions ended when the other single *displayed a lack of interest, evidenced narcissistic-like behavior, or was too sexual, too possessive, or drank too much*. These five red flags represented sizable costs to the singles; significant enough that the individuals’ ended further interactions when they encountered them.

*Identifying red flags.* To identify these red flags, Christopher and colleagues (2014) first had singles describe instances where they were initially attracted to someone but ended the interaction after actually interacting with the person. They then content analyzed these descriptions for specific behaviors in prospective partners that the singles identified. This resulted in 88 items that described behaviors or characteristics that caused alarms or triggered warnings with singles such that they ended first interactions.

In their next study, Christopher and colleagues similarly asked singles to think of an instance where they were initially attracted to someone but ended the interaction after

interacting with the person. Singles then rated whether the perspective partner displayed each behavior, and whether it raised a red flag or warning for them. Principal component analysis of the items focused on whether the behavior resulted in a warning revealed six components (Lack of Interest, Narcissistic Like Behavior, Too Sexual, Too Possessive, Drank Too Much, Poor Presentation) that Christopher et al. (2013) identified as red flags.

A third study successfully used confirmatory factor analysis to validate this factor structure. Only the first five of the red flags were included in the present study. The red flag poor presentation was not included because the characteristics of poor presentation include only physical qualities of a perspective partner. For example, partners displaying the red flag poor presentation possessed qualities such as smelling bad and having sweaty hands. For the purpose of my study, I only included red flags that were identified during initial interactions by behavioral traits that may be linked to future conflict styles. There was a poor conceptual fit between poor presentation in initial interactions and later relational conflict.

*Red flags and later relationship experiences.* By design, Christopher et al.'s (2014) research focused solely on instances when initial interactions lead singles to avoid future interactions. Participants across the three studies were instructed to focus on instances where they were attracted to another person, interacted with that person, but then ended the interaction because of internal warnings that resulted. Research can add to the understanding of red flags in relationship development by addressing instances when singles continued interactions with other singles after experiencing red flags during initial interactions. After all, the question remains whether initial experiences with these red flags are related to later relational experiences in areas such as conflict style.

If red flags are associated with later relational experiences such as styles of conflict, identifying the costs these initial experiences represent would help clarify the link between red flags in initial interactions and later poor relational outcomes. For example, the red flag “a lack of interest” includes singles who flirt with others, touch others, and ignore the perspective partner during initial interactions. Individuals who show a lack of interest towards a perspective partner portray the attitude that they do not care what the other person thinks, does, or feels.

I posit that if a single continues to show signs of not being interested during the development of a relationship, this could contribute to future dysfunctional conflict. No research to date has examined the role of lack of interest in a partner specifically, or how it relates to relational outcomes, but partners who are so self-absorbed may be more likely to avoid conflict, or will be unlikely to acknowledge their partners’ concerns, or value their partners’ opinions when conflicts do occur. Not acknowledging a partner’s concerns has been linked with poor conflict outcomes (Campbell, 1999).

Similar to showing a lack of interest, individuals who display narcissistic-like behaviors during initial interactions are apt to behave selfishly and will be overly concerned with their own feelings relative to a partner’s feelings while in a relationship. Narcissistic-like actions typified in the red flag research includes individuals acting as if they were the center of the world, bragging about themselves, being cocky, and not asking questions about the other single during initial conversations. Individuals showing narcissistic-like behaviors would likely lack motivation to address romantic partners’ needs. Instead, they would be more focused on self-concern.

Narcissistic-like qualities found in a partner potentially represent later costs to singles because these qualities may be linked to negative conflict styles during future interactions. If a romantic relationship forms and conflict arises, partners with narcissistic-like qualities may display anger, dominance, and carelessness, especially if they are not achieving the relational outcomes they want (Campbell et al., 2002). Displays of narcissistic-like behavior in initial interactions, therefore, may lead to engaging in future forms of dysfunctional conflict. Research exists to support this reasoning.

Campbell, Foster, and Finkel's (2002) research, for example, revealed poor relational outcomes for individuals possessing narcissistic traits because of their lack of empathy towards their partners. Studies have additionally found that those with narcissistic-like characteristics are less likely to forgive and more likely to act out of self-interest during conflicts than are those who lack these characteristics, making them less likely to work through conflict in a mutually-constructive manner (e.g., Exline et al., 2004). Similar research from Cohan and Kleinbaum (2002) addressed the relationship between narcissistic-like qualities and conflict. Essentially, individuals lacking the skills to express empathy towards others exhibited conflict behaviors associated with negative communication styles. These findings demonstrate that partners who are more self-focused and lack empathy are more likely to handle conflict poorly.

"Too sexual," another red flag identified by Christopher et al.'s (2014), was evidenced by behaviors such as pressuring a perspective partner to have sex, coming on very strong, touching inappropriately, and talking about sex too much in initial interactions. These early warning signs may be forecasts of costs to relationships if a



romantic relationship evolves because such behaviors have been linked to poor relational outcomes. For example, pressuring partners to have sex is sign of sexual aggression (Christopher & Pflieger, 2007), and engaging in sexual aggression has been linked to unconstructive approaches to conflicts such as being verbally and physically aggressive towards a relational partner (Christopher & Kisler, 2012; Murphy & Smith, 2009). A number of the behaviors that are a part of this red flag, therefore, have been linked to poor conflict styles in previous research.

The red flag “possessiveness” includes singles who display signs of becoming overly obsessive, are too controlling, and show signs of becoming jealous. Perspective partners who were too possessive engaged in behaviors such as physically blocking the other single and getting too physically close. Here again, these may signs of future poor relational outcomes. According to Roberts (2005), for instance, a partner who is jealous during a romantic relationship may later stalk their former partner and become physically violent if the relationship ends. Dutton, (1998), also found a link between jealousy and interpersonal violence. Moreover, possessiveness is associated with physical violence in other studies (Christopher & Loyd, 2000; Murphy & Smith, 2009). This research supports the position that this red flag is associated with dysfunctional conflict styles.

Taking shot after shot of alcohol, trying to get a partner drunk, and continuing to drink in an initial interaction are qualities of a partner displaying the red flag of drinking too much. These behaviors are characteristic of someone who engages in binge drinking and potentially abuses alcohol. Research exists that such behaviors are linked to poor relational outcomes. For example, Fischer et al. (2005) found that partners who binge drink were more apt to have negative conversations, increased disagreements, and poor

relationship quality when compared to those who did not binge (Fischer et al., 2005). In addition, Logan, Leukefeld, and Walker's (2000), Brewster's (2000), and Roberts' (2005) research reveals that excessive use of alcohol is associated with interpersonal violence and stalking. Similarly, Klostermann and Fasl-Stewart's (2006) found a link between alcohol consumption and aggression. Taylor and Chermack's (1993) work revealed some of the possible dynamics behind this link. They found that increase in conflict was paired with one or both partners consuming alcohol. Conflicts with the related hostile behaviors then escalated as did the increased chance of interpersonal violence. This research collectively suggests that drinking too much in an initial interaction may be associated with later negative conflict styles.

*Sex differences in red flags.* Christopher and his colleagues (2013) explored the differences between single men and women for how salient red flags were during initial interactions. They found that men rated the red flag of lack of interest as more salient than women. There was also a trend for women to rate the red flag of too sexual as more salient than men. This suggests that men find it more costly than women when a potential partner does not show interest, but women find it more costly than men when a potential partner is too sexual with them.

*Summary.* Currently there is no research on the association between red flags and relational quality, but prior research does suggest some of the traits and behaviors characteristic of red flags are related to negative relational outcomes, especially when considering dysfunctional styles of conflict. For example, individuals ignoring a perspective partner and displaying other traits characteristic of the red flag lack of interest may later display a lack of empathy during conflicts or avoid conflicts altogether.

Similarly narcissistic-like behaviors such as acting as one is the center of the world, is associated with dysfunctional forms of conflict because partners displaying this behavior will be overly concerned with their own feelings instead of considering their partners feelings as well. Similar support for a link between the other red flags and conflict style exists.

## **Conflict**

Conceptually, conflict in romantic relationships is the opposition in disputes between partners that result in disagreements (Miller, 2012). Conflict in romantic relationships is inevitable; any relationship whether romantic or non-romantic will have some form of conflict. Couples vary in the way they communicate with each other during these conflicts. Couples usually have small disagreements during the initial stages of relationships, but as relationships evolve advanced conflicts will likely arise due to differences in thoughts, beliefs, and relational goals.

Unfortunately, some approaches to conflict can cause stress on the relationship and can lead to romantic partners dissolving their relationship. Other styles of conflict can be beneficial and add to positive developments in romantic relationships as well as contribute to relationship satisfaction (Heaven, Smith, Prabhakar, Abraham, & Mete, 2006). For this reason, researchers have focused on different forms or styles of conflict, and how these conflict styles relate to relational experiences. Looking at how partner's deal with relational problems helps social scientists understand how each style is associated with relationship quality.

For instance, Caughlin and Vangelisti (2006) in their review pointed to how styles of conflict are associated with outcomes of romantic relationships such as relational

satisfaction. In other words, satisfaction levels of the relationship vary depending on which form of conflict couples utilized when issues arise. Likewise, these patterns of conflict are related to other relationship outcomes, suggesting that positive styles of conflict increase chances of relationships continuing, and negative styles of conflict increase the chances of romantic dissolutions (Caughlin & Vangelisti, 2006).

Sillars, Canary, and Tafoya's (2004) research illustrated that conflicts will inevitably occur in romantic relationships, but what is most important is how couples handle conflict. For instance, research indicates that partners resolve issues within the romantic partnership by engaging in direct or indirect communication styles (Vliert & Euwema, 1994). The behaviors partners engage in while managing their conflict oftentimes determines if the conflict fosters relationship development or damages it.

For example, Kilmann and Thomas (1975) identified five styles of conflict that couples employ to resolve their conflicts. A competitive conflict style involves a direct approach to conflict, this approach includes instances when partners do not acknowledge the other partners perspectives, which reduces the likelihood of partners working together to solve their issues. This style of conflict may induce aggressive behaviors that can threaten the state of the romantic relationship. A relatively effective, direct approach to conflict is compromise. Partners who compromise when issues arise find ways to cooperate and negotiate so that each partner's needs can be met (La Valley & Guerrero, 2010).

Another conflict style identified by Kilmann and Thomas (1975) is an accommodating style, this conflict style involves partners addressing the needs of their partner beyond their own needs. Partners using an accommodating style focus

specifically on how to repair the relationship during conflicts. Alternatively, when both partners in a romantic relationship ignore their conflicts and avoid issues they are using an indirect approach to managing conflict. This style of conflict may have negative effects on the relationship because partners do not actively express their feelings to one another when issues arise. The last conflict style identified by Kilmann and Thomas (1975) was collaboration. Couples who collaborate during conflicts approach their conflict in productive ways such as creating goals to find solutions to their problems (Sillars et al, 2004).

The reviews of Caughlin and Vangelisti (2006) as well as Kilmann and Thomas (1975) show that there are a number of different approaches to conflict. However, I focused on Christensen and Sullaway's (1984), three main conflict styles in the present study: Mutual constructive, demand-withdraw, and mutual avoidance. As reviewed, conflicts are not necessarily bad for relationships. In fact, conflicts can help relationships develop when couples discuss issues in healthy ways (Campbell, 2005). For instance, a mutual constructive conflict style is evidenced by partners discussing problems in positive ways that foster positive relationship outcomes (Christenson & Sullaway, 1984). In this style of conflict, partners express their feelings to each other and suggest possible solutions. Furthermore, each partner acknowledges the other partner's viewpoint. Therefore, after such exchanges are completed, both partners feel the other partner has understood his or her position and conclude that the problem has been solved. Couples using this form of communication during conflicts have more functional ways of handling conflicts and have more positive relational outcomes, such as increases in relationship satisfaction (Christenson & Sullaway, 1984). This conflict style results in

partners resolving conflicts by sharing feelings and discussing issues within the relationship (Heaven et al., 2006). Through mutual constructive conflicts, partners see relationships as more satisfying compared to other forms of conflicts, and therefore it enhances the development of their relationships.

When conflicts are managed constructively using a mutually constructive style, romantic relationships can mature and couples become closer (DeGenova, 2008). Furthermore, mutual constructive conflicts help less serious conflicts be resolved smoothly (Rice, 1999). Additionally, constructive conflict can include forgiveness, which by itself enhances relational intimacy (Fincham, Stanley, & Beach, 2007; Knox & Schacht, 2008). Researchers have yet to find sex differences in the use of this type of conflict (Caughlin & Vangelisti, 2006). Both men and women appear equally likely to engage in mutual constructive conflict.

A dysfunctional conflict style in romantic relationships involves demand-withdraw conflict (Christensen & Sullaway, 1984). In demand-withdraw conflicts, one partner tries to discuss an issue while the other partner avoids the discussion. Similarly, one partner nags and demand things while the other partner becomes silent and avoids discussing things further (Caughlin & Vangelisti, 2006). This type of conflict style also involves one partner criticizing while the other partner defends (Heaven et al., 2006; Christenson & Sullaway, 1984 ). These opposing patterns of interaction can cause additional conflicts between partners and typically lead to dissatisfaction in romantic relationships. .

Demand/withdraw conflict has been studied extensively by social scientists because of the harmful effects this type of conflict has on relationships. There is

agreement that this type of conflict is related to relational satisfaction (Caughlin & Huston, 2002), however studies differ as to whether demand/withdraw increases or decreases satisfaction. Although equivocal findings exist, the majority of the research to date suggests that demand/withdraw is a poor way of handling conflict and can actually intensify couples' conflict further (Eldridge & Christenson, 2002). According to Eldridge and Christensen (2002), men demanding and women withdrawing in spousal relationships has been linked to abuse. Thus, the demand-withdraw conflict style is one of the least likely to foster positive relationship development.

There are numerous studies that look at sex differences in the pattern of demand/withdraw as related to relational satisfaction. Research by Christenson and Heavey (1990), and Gottman and Krokoff (1989) reveals associations between demand/withdraw conflicts and relational satisfaction, but only when one partner is withdrawing. For example according to Christenson and Heavey (1990), there is a decrease in satisfaction only when husbands withdraw during conflicts and wives demand. Wives' demanding did cause issues in the relationship, but their demanding behavior was not linked to marital dissatisfaction, instead it was linked to other issues within the relationship. On the other hand, Gottman and Krokoff (1989) observed a decrease in marital satisfaction, but only when wives withdrew. The research did not indicate how the other partner was behaving while withdrawing was occurred, but it did describe the conflicts as negative interactions and examined types of problem-solving communication.

Although these studies looked at marital relationships, it is possible that these results extend to dating relationships. Although inconsistencies exist, research generally

suggests sex differences exist in this conflict style with women more apt to demand and men more apt to withdraw. For example, Christenson et al. (2006) found women tend to more frequently be on the demand side than men, while men tend to withdraw more often. Denton and Burlison (2007) suggests this occurs because women are more verbal in their dissatisfactions within the relationship.

According to Afifi and Joseph (2009), one of the reasons these sex differences occur is because women are encouraged to express their emotions through communication, and men are encouraged to be more autonomous. Additionally, women tend to relate expressing their feelings to feeling more intimate with and close to their partner, which makes them more likely to be on the demanding side. Although women are typically on the demanding side, it oftentimes depends on who is most concerned with the issue. The partner desiring change in the relationship increases the likelihood of being on the demanding side (Caughlin & Scott, 2010), but even then women are still more likely to be demanders because they are more likely than men to desire change (Holley, Strum, & Levenson, 2010).

Research on demand/withdraw conflict is important because most of the research establishes that demand/withdraw patterns of conflict are negatively related to relational satisfaction (Christensen & Heavey, 1990). Although differences exist, much of the research reveals that demand/withdraw conflict can decrease relationship satisfaction and stability (Baucom et al., 2011). This is not surprising as partners involved in demand/withdraw conflicts can feel misunderstood during conflicts and do not feel a sense of closeness that usually occurs when issues are communicated constructively, thus decreasing satisfaction in the relationship (Weger, 2005).



The last form of conflict style identified by Christensen and Sullaway (1984) is mutual avoidance. This form of conflict occurs when both partners avoid conflicts and withhold feelings about issues within the relationship (Heaven et al., 2006). In this form of conflict, both partners withdraw from each other with neither partner giving in to the other after the conflict occurs. If the partners begin discussing a problematic issue, both usually withdraw from each other, and neither partner shows signs of intimacy after the discussion (Christenson & Sullaway, 1984).

The literature varies when addressing relational satisfaction in relationships when couples engage in mutual avoidant conflict. Unlike the other two conflict styles, research on mutual avoidance does not clearly indicate whether this form of conflict style is linked to positive or negative relational outcomes (Caughlin & Vagelisti, 2006). In other words, some studies suggest this form of conflict increases satisfaction in relationships, whereas other studies find decreases in relational satisfaction when mutual avoidant conflict occurs. For instance, couples may avoid conflict to maintain a positive emotional climate in the relationship or to avoid an issue not seen as particularly important (Cloven & Roloff, 1993; Roloff & Ifert, 2000; Sillars, Pike, Jones, & Redmon 1983). In other words, couples “pick their battles,” and avoid conflicts by letting small things go. Some researchers identify this as a cooperative way of handling conflict (Roberts, 2000). In these instances it may be beneficial to the relationship, only if partners agree that a specific issue will cause unnecessary conflict by talking about it (Caughlin & Golish, 2002).

On the other hand, Caughlin and Vagelisti’s (2006) review suggests that partners’ relationship satisfaction may suffer if couples mutually avoid conflict. Mutually

avoidant conflict can involve unproductive ways of handling conflict and does not provide a setting where couples experience openness and use discussions as a way to strengthen their relationships (Parks, 1982). In fact, Golish (2000) offers empirical evidence suggesting that avoiding conflicts increases dissatisfaction in many relationships. Avoiding important topics poses problems because avoiding issues may increase the likelihood of later conflict as problems are not resolved (Bowman, 1990). The lack of communication may also cause couples to eventually withdraw from each other and lose intimacy in their relationship. Overall, when both individuals in a relationship avoid problems there is a greater chance of dissatisfaction and losing important bonds, which then decreases the stability a relationship is presumed to have.

Sex differences in mutual avoidance have emerged in the literature. For example Afifi, Joseph, and Aldeis (2011) examined conflicts in dating partners and found that women's but not men's avoidance during couples' conversations of issues predicted relational dissatisfaction for both partners. In addition, both men and women avoided conflict if they were already dissatisfied in the relationship, (Afifi et al., 2011). However, when both partners avoided conflicts in relationships that were not considered satisfying, women were more dissatisfied than men (Afifi, McManus, Steuber, & Coho, 2009).

### *Summary*

Research on conflict styles indicates a link between relational satisfaction and conflict styles. Overall, mutual constructive conflict style has been found to be positively related to relational satisfaction. On the other hand, research focused on demand/withdrawal identifies this type of conflict as counterproductive decreases in satisfaction in the long run. Finally, mutual avoidance is similar to demand/withdraw, as

scholars have found it related to dissatisfaction in relationships, but some research suggests avoiding issues can actually help relationships avoid unnecessary conflict. Since issues always arise in romantic relationships it is important for couples to understand which conflict style has the best outcomes when discussing important issues. For the purpose of this study, instead of examining dyadic interactions during conflicts between romantic partners I measured the use of conflict styles by having only one partner report on his or her relational experiences. Although studying conflict at the dyadic level is the optimal approach, using individual reports is frequently used by researchers.

Sex differences have also emerged with patterns of conflict. Miller (2012), discovered women are more likely to demand discussions of issues while men are more likely to withdraw from discussions. Others have found similar sex differences (Heavey, Christensen, & Malamuth, 1995). This research suggests that the sex difference is explained by who wants change (more often the woman) and who likes the status quo (more often the man). However, Klinetob and Smith's (1996) results indicate that the partner who wants change in the relationship will likely demand change, and the partner who is satisfied with the status quo will withdraw. This relationship was not dependent on the sex of the partners involved. In other words, partners who are concerned about an issue will more likely demand to talk about the issue regardless of their sex. Sex differences have not typically emerged in research focused on the other two forms of conflict, mutually constructive conflict and mutual avoidance.

## Hypotheses

In my research, I tested the assumption that early relational interactions influence later interactions based on participants' retrospective reports. My research also tested whether red flags identified during early relational interactions were associated with forms of conflict in later interactions. Specifically, I tested the following hypotheses with one caveat. Although a longitudinal design would be ideal for testing the hypothesis, participants in the present study were asked to recall initial interactions. This then limited the degree to which the actual links between early and later relational experiences could be tested.

H1: The red flag lack of interest in initial interactions is (a) negatively related to the extent to which singles use the mutual constructive conflict style and (b) positively related to the extent to which singles use the demand-withdraw conflict style.

H2: The red flag narcissism is (a) negatively related to the extent to which singles use the mutual constructive conflict style and (b) positively related to the extent to which singles use the demand-withdraw conflict style.

H3: The red flag too sexual is (a) negatively related to the extent to which singles use the mutual constructive conflict style and (b) positively related to the extent to which singles use the demand-withdraw conflict style.

H4: The red flag too possessive is (a) negatively related to the extent to which singles use the mutual constructive conflict style and (b) positively related to the extent to which singles use the demand-withdraw conflict style.

H5: The red flag drank too much is (a) negatively related to the extent to which singles use the mutual constructive conflict style and (b) positively related to the extent to which singles use the demand-withdraw conflict style.

Given that there are equivocal findings about the association between mutual avoidance and relationship health, the following Research Question was explored.

RQ1: How are the red flags of (a) lack of interest, (b) narcissism, (c) too sexual, (d) too possessive, and (e) drank too much related to the extent to which singles use the mutual avoidance conflict style?

Given that there are sex differences in the saliency of some of the red flags, and given that sex differences exist in conflict patterns, a second Research Question was explored.

RQ2: Are there interactions between Sex and the red flags of (a) lack of interest, (b) narcissistic-like behaviors, (c) too sexual, (d) too possessive, and (e) drank too much that are associated with the extent to which singles use mutual constructive, mutual avoidance, demand withdraw conflict styles?

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

#### *Participants*

The participants for the larger study included 831 undergraduate students, 188 men and 641 women from a southwestern university. Additionally, there were 2 students who did not identify as a man or woman. Only single individuals who had never been married were selected for the present study. After dropping married ( $n = 161$ ) and divorced students ( $n = 1$ ), the final sample used in the analysis consisted of 155 unmarried men and 504 unmarried women who were either currently in a dating relationship or could recall their last dating relationship. The mean age of the respondents was 23.5 ( $SD = 5.3$ ). The final sample included 59.5% Euro-American (White), 7.9% African-American, 19% Hispanic/Latino, 6.7% Asian-Pacific Islander, and 2.8% Native American; the remaining 4.1% classified themselves as “other.”

Participants were asked to refer back to their most recent dating partner when completing the relationship measures. Participants were also asked to identify the relationship status that best described their most recent dating partner, and whether or not they were still with this partner. Somewhat more than half of the participants, 58.7%, in the sample for this study were still in a relationship with their most recent dating partner; 41.3% were no longer dating their most recent partner. The results were varied when participants reported the relationship status that best described their relationship. Only a few, 8%, were not in a committed relationship with this person and could date others, 13% were not in a committed relationship with this person but did not date others, 4% felt committed to the other person but could date others, 42% agreed to only date one

another, 22% were cohabiting but not engaged, 5% were engaged but not cohabiting, and 6% were cohabiting and engaged.

### *Procedures*

Participants were recruited from undergraduate courses in traditional and online family studies courses by offering them extra credit. Students were asked to volunteer to participate in a study “about romantic relationships,” and were told that we were interested in their experiences with their most recent dating partner – even if they were no longer seeing that person. The online survey was accompanied by a cover letter stating that their participation was voluntary, and their responses would be anonymous. Participants were also told that they could withdraw from the study at any time, and there would be no penalty if they chose to do so. The students had to be 18 years or older to complete the study.

Individuals first completed the red flag measure, focusing on their most recent dating partner even if they were no longer seeing that person. The red flag measure asked students to think about what first attracted them to their most recent dating partner, how the two of them interacted, what thoughts they had, and how the other person behaved. Next, participants answered a number of relationship focused measures. This included the conflict styles measure as well as a question about the status of their relationship. Finally, participants responded to a series of demographic questions. Completion of the survey took between 30 to 45 minutes.

### *Measures*

*Red Flags.* The dependent variable red flags was measured with Christopher and colleagues (2014) Red Flag Scale. This scale included 45 questions about respondents’

most recent dating partner and directed them to “Please take a minute to once again think about what first attracted you to this person, how the two of you interacted, what thoughts you had, and how this person behaved.” Respondents then answered two questions asked for each red flag descriptor: (a) “Does this describe this person?” and “Did this trigger a red flag or an alarm for you?” Likert responses for the first question ranged from (1) “Does not at all describe this person” to (7) “Absolutely describes this person.” The Likert responses for the second question ranged from (1) “Definitely did not trigger a red flag” to (7) “Definitely triggered a red flag.” The two question format was used to clarify whether a behavior occurred from whether it was a red flag for the participants.

The red flag *lack of interest* was measured by 9 items ( $\alpha = .90$ ) (from Christopher *et al.*, 2014) such as “This person didn’t care that I was paying attention to him/her.” and “This individual began to flirt with someone else.” The red flag *narcissistic-like behaviors* was measured by 9 items ( $\alpha = .95$ ) such as “This person was full of him/her self.” and “This person was very pompous.” The red flag *too sexual* was measured by 9 items ( $\alpha = .92$ ) such as “This person talked about sex too much.” and “This person asked too much about my sexuality.” The red flag *too possessive* was measured by 8 items ( $\alpha = .90$ ) such as “This person became overly obsessive about me” and “This person showed signs of becoming jealous.” The red flag *drank too much* was measured by 6 items ( $\alpha = .91$ ) such as “This person tried to get me drunk.” and “This person did not stop drinking.” Each of the five scales were scored by calculating the mean response (see Table 1, for descriptive statistics; see Appendix B for a complete list of the items in each measure).



*Communication Patterns Questionnaire (CPQ)*. The communication patterns questionnaire developed by Christensen and Sullaway (1984) measured how partners use each of three styles of conflict. Mutually constructive conflict style was measured by 8 items ( $\alpha = .83$ ) such as “Both members try to discuss the problem” and “Both members suggest possible solutions and compromises.”

In the CPQ, total demand-withdraw conflict style was measured by using 6 items. I used this to form two measures with 3 items for each, “I demand/Partner Withdraws” (for men  $\alpha = .65$ ; for women  $\alpha = .71$ ) and “Partner demands/I Withdraw” (for men  $\alpha = .61$ ; for women  $\alpha = .60$ ). This was possible because the specific items in this particular measure were sex typed (e.g., Man criticizes while woman defends herself). Items were chosen to reflect the sex of the respondent such that higher scores reflect the fact that: (a) the participant was more apt to demand while the participant’s partner was more apt to withdraw (I demand/Partner withdraws); or (b) the participant was more apt to withdraw while the participant’s partner was more apt to demand (I withdraw/Partner demands). An example of “I demand/Partner withdraws” for male participants includes: “Man tries to start a discussion while partner tries to avoid a discussion” and for female participants “Woman nags and demands while partner withdraws, becomes silent, or refuses to discuss the matter further.”

The measure of mutual avoidance conflict style consisted of 7 items ( $\alpha = .70$ ) and included items that asked: “To what extent both partners avoided discussing the problem?” and “How likely was it for both partners to try discussing the problem?” Each item was rated on a Likert scale that ranged from (1) “very unlikely” to (9) “very likely.”

After reverse coding appropriate items, each of the three scales were scored by calculating the mean response.

*Sex.* Participants indicated if they were a man (coded as a 1) a woman (coded as a 2) or whether they did not identify themselves as a man or a woman (eliminated from the sample).

*Relationship Status.* Participants were asked “Are you still in a relationship with this person?” to assess their relationship status in the relationship. Responses were either Yes (coded as a 1) or No (coded as a 2).

## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS

#### *Analysis Strategy*

I took several steps to test the hypotheses and address the research questions. To evaluate whether Relationship Status should be included as a covariate in the analyses, I performed a cross tabulation to see if the proportion of men and women who remained in their relationships were different and conducted t-tests to see if there were Sex differences for the conflict styles. I also examined the correlations between the variables in the study to evaluate their associations. In addition, I evaluated the correlations between the independent variables to assess collinearity issues. Correlations above .70 can indicate that multi-collinearity could be an issue in the regression analysis that followed (Tabachnick & Fidell, 1989). Tolerance tests were additionally used to assess problems with collinearity.

To test the hypotheses and research question, I performed three hierarchical regressions; one for each of the conflict style variables which served as the dependent variables in these analyses. I used *Relationship Status* (whether the participant was still dating the identified partner) and *Sex* (man or woman) as covariates in each of the regressions to control for their contribution to the variance. Prior to conducting the regressions, however, I first centered *Sex* and the five red flag measures around each of their grand means. Following this, I created interaction terms between *Sex* and the red flag measures by multiplying the centered measures together. I then used SPSS to calculate the three regressions using the same four steps in each regression. I entered *Relationship Status* in block one as a control. I entered *Sex* into the regressions as block

two. The five red flag measures were then entered as block three. Finally, the interaction terms between *Sex* and the red flags were entered in block four of the regression. The sample included a small number of gays and lesbians that I included in the tests for the mutual constructive conflict style, and mutual avoidant conflict style. However, they were not included for the I demand/ Partner withdraw and Partner demand/I withdraw conflict style tests as the wording of the items referred specifically to the role of either the man or the woman in this style of conflict.

### *Preliminary Analyses*

The 2 X 2 (*Sex X Relationship Status*) cross tabulation showed that a differential proportion of men as compared to women remained in their relationships ( $\chi^2 = 23.57, p = .0001$ ). Forty-two percent of men were still in a relationship at the time of the survey while 58% were not. In comparison, 64% of the women were still in a relationship at the time of the survey while 36% were not.

Pearson's correlations were run between the variables in the study. The correlation analyses showed that *Lack of Interest*, *Narcissist-Like Behaviors*, *Too Sexual*, *Too Possessive*, and *Drank Too Much*, were negatively correlated to a *Mutual Constructive* conflict style, and positively correlated to *I Demand/Partner Withdraw*, *Partner Demand/I Withdraw* and *Mutual Avoidant* conflict styles (see Table 2, Appendix A). However, the associations between these red flags and the conflict styles reflected small effect sizes with the exceptions of the association between *Partner Demand/I Withdraw* and *Lack of Interest*, as well as *Partner Demand/I Withdraw* and *Too Possessive* which were at the threshold for medium effect size.

The t-tests that examined *Sex* differences for the four conflict styles revealed significant mean differences. There was a significant difference for *Mutual Constructive* conflict,  $t(643) = -3.01, p = .003$ , with women ( $M = 6.04, SD = 2.02$ ) scoring on average higher than men ( $M = 5.48, SD = 2.02$ ). However, men ( $M = 10.45, SD = 1.25$ ) on average were significantly higher than women ( $M = 10.10, SD = 1.29$ ) on *Mutual Avoidance*,  $t(652) = 3.00, p = .003$ . Men ( $M = 3.99, SD = 1.10$ ) on average were also significantly higher than women ( $M = 3.21, SD = 1.96$ ) for *Partner Demand/I Withdraw*,  $t(655) = 4.31, p = .0001$ . However, there was no mean *Sex* difference for *I Demand/Partner Withdraw*, men ( $M = 3.99, SD = 2.03$ ), men ( $M = 3.22, SD = 1.96$ ),  $t(655) = -.02, p = \text{n.s.}$ .

The correlational analysis between the red flag measures showed that *Narcissist-Like Behaviors* and *Too Sexual* were strongly correlated,  $r = .72$ , as was *Too Sexual* and *Too Possessive*  $r = .72$ . This raised the issue of possible problems with collinearity. However, tolerance tests in the regressions that followed were above the .10 level indicating that collinearity was not a problem.

#### *Primary Analyses*

*Mutual Constructive Conflict Style.* A hierarchical regression (see Table 5, Appendix A) was computed for *Mutual Constructive* conflict style. In the first block, *Relationship Status* was a negative and significant predictor of the mutually constructive conflict style ( $F(1, 562) = 102.29, p = .0001; R^2 = .15$ ). Individuals who broke up reported using a mutually constructive conflict style less than individuals who were still together. Adding *Sex* to the regression in the second block was not predictive ( $F(1, 561) = 1.38, p = .24$ ) of a *Mutually Constructive* conflict style. Adding the five red flags to the

regression in the third block significantly increased the amount of variance explained ( $R^2$  change = .19;  $F(5, 556) = 5.89, p = .0001$ ). The red flag of *Too Possessive* was significantly ( $p = .03$ ) and negatively related to the mutually constructive conflict style. In addition, the red flag *Drank Too Much* was significantly ( $p = .008$ ) and negatively related to the mutually constructive conflict style. The interaction terms, added as the fourth block in the equation, were not predictive of a Mutually Constructive conflict style.

These results indicate that individuals still in a relationship with their partner were more likely to report using a mutually constructive conflict style. Additionally, in support of the hypotheses, those participants who rated their partners as displaying signs of being too possessive and drinking too much in their initial interactions were less likely to report a mutually constructive conflict style later in their relationships (Hypothesis 4a, 5a).

*I Demand/Partner Withdraw Conflict Style.* A hierarchical regression (see Table 6, Appendix A) was computed for *I Demand/Partner Withdraw* conflict style. In the first block, *Relationship Status* was a positive and significant predictor of the I Demand/Partner Withdraw conflict style ( $F(1, 572) = 8.84, p = .003; R^2 = .02$ ). Individuals who broke up reported using a I demand/partner withdraw conflict style more than individuals who are still together. However, this did not account for a large amount of the variance. *Sex* was not significant a predictor ( $F(1, 571) = .055, p = .82$ ) of a I demand/Partner withdraw conflict style. Adding the red flags to the regression in the third block significantly increased the amount of variance explained ( $R^2$  change = .06;  $F(5, 566) = 5.28, p = .0001$ ). The red flag of *Lack of Interest* was significantly ( $p = .0001$ ) and positively related to the *I Demand/Partner Withdraw* conflict style. The interaction

terms, added as the fourth block in the equation, were not predictive. Thus in support of the hypothesis, those participants who rated their partner as showing signs of a lack of interest in their initial interactions were more likely to report a “I demand/partner withdraw” conflict style later in their relationship (Hypothesis 1b).

*Partner Demands/I Withdraw Conflict Style.* A hierarchical regression (see Table 7, Appendix A) was computed for *Partner Demands/I Withdraw* conflict style. In the first block, *Relationship Status* was a positive and significant predictor ( $F(1, 564) = 15.94, p = .0001; R^2 = .03$ ). Individuals who broke up were more likely than individuals who are still together to report using a *Partner Demands/I Withdraw* conflict style. *Relationship Status*, however, only predicted a small amount of the variance.

In the second block *Sex* was a significant a predictor ( $R^2$  change = .04;  $F(1, 563) = 9.82, p = .002$ ). These results indicate that men ( $M = 3.99$ ) were more likely than women ( $M = 3.22$ ) to report that they withdrew when their partners demanded during their conflicts. Adding the red flags to the regression in the third block significantly increased the amount of variance explained ( $R^2$  change = .12;  $F(5, 558) = 9.56, p = .0001$ ). The red flag of *Lack of Interest* was significantly ( $p = .003$ ) and positively related to the *Partner Demand/ I Withdraw* conflict style. Additionally, the red flag *Too Possessive* was significantly ( $p = .001$ ) and positively related to the *Partner Demand/I Withdraw* conflict style. The interaction terms, added as the fourth block in the equation, were not predictive. Thus in support of the hypothesis, those participants who rated their partner as showing signs a lack of interest and too possessive in their initial interactions were more likely to report a “Partner demand/I withdrew” conflict style later in their relationship (Hypothesis 1b, 4b).

*Mutual Avoidance Conflict.* A hierarchical regression (see Table 8, Appendix XX) was computed for the *Mutual Avoidance* conflict style. In the first block, *Relationship Status* was a positive and significant predictor of the mutual avoidance conflict style ( $F(1, 570) = 71.78, p = .0001; R^2 = .11$ ). In the second block, *Sex* was not a significant predictor of the mutual avoidance conflict style ( $F(1, 569) = 1.35, p = .25$ ). Adding the red flags to the regression in the third block significantly increased the amount of variance explained ( $R^2$  change = .17;  $F(5, 564) = 7.01, p = .0001$ ). The red flag of *Lack of Interest* was significantly ( $p = .007$ ) and positively related to the *Mutual Avoidance* conflict style. In addition, the red flag *Too Possessive* was significantly ( $p = .011$ ) and positively related to the *Mutual Avoidance* conflict style. The interaction terms, added as the fourth block in the equation, were not predictive.

These results indicate that individuals who broke up were more likely than individuals who are still together to report using a mutual avoidant conflict style. This analyses additionally indicated that those participants who rated their partners as displaying signs of being too possessive, and showing a lack of interest in their initial interactions, were more likely to report a mutually avoidant conflict style later in their relationships (Hypothesis RQ1a, RQ1d). . Both red flags were a significant predictor of mutual avoidant conflict style.



## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

Establishing a romantic relationship is one of the more significant events in the lives of single adults. Due to this significance, social scientists have investigated different qualities of romantic pairings. Two of these areas of investigation are relevant to the present study, examining initial encounters and engaging in conflict. More specifically, the purpose of this study was to test for an association between experiences of red flags, or warnings of potential future relational costs, in initial romantic interactions and later styles of conflict with a partner. This area of research is important because if the red flags displayed in initial interactions are associated with later dysfunctional styles of conflict, singles can be taught to be more cautious when evaluating potential partners and to recognize the risk of overlooking the behaviors linked to red flags when choosing to continue to develop a relationship.

#### **Red flags and conflict style.**

In general, the findings showed a level of support for some of the hypotheses and the ability to address the first research question when considering the red flags of showing a lack of interest and being too possessive, and to a lesser extent for drinking too much. Focusing first on the red flag of lack of interest, the results revealed that after controlling for relationship status (together or not) and sex of the participant, recalling that one's partner showed a lack of interest in an initial interaction was associated with respondents' increased use of a demand-withdraw conflict style in their most recent dating relationship (Hypothesis 1b). Moreover, this was true when considering respondents' reports of both "I demand/Partner withdraws" and "Partner demands/I

withdraw.” The results also provided insight into the first research question (RQ1a). Again after controlling for relationship status and sex, singles in this study who recalled that their partners showed a lack of interest in their initial interactions showed an increased use of a mutually avoidant conflict style later in their relationships. Support for the hypotheses for this red flag was not uniform. The hypothesis of an association between lack of interest and mutual constructive conflict style (Hypothesis 1a) was not supported.

Thus, singles who recalled instances with a previous partner who ignored them, texted others, and/or flirted with other individuals during initial interactions reported less constructive conflict styles later in their relationship. In order to better understand the styles of conflict used later in the relationship, it is important to first discuss why individuals chose to continue to develop a relationship with someone who showed signs of a lack of interest. According to Positive Outcome Theory (Sannafrank, 1986), it is likely that even though a lack of interest may warn singles of future relational costs, there were other traits or characteristics that resulted in participants looking past this red flag. Singles in the present study may have focused on rewarding traits such as physical attractiveness, social status, and seeing the person as close to one’s ideal on certain traits (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Fletcher et al, 2004) and found that these rewarding traits outweighed the potential costs suggested by the red flag lack of interest. These traits in particular may play a role given research that suggests singles often place a high value on them (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). In other words, those who identified rewarding traits during initial interactions may look past negative characteristics if they assume the rewarding traits will increase as the relationship progresses (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). In

addition, an initial assessment of more rewards than costs in the initial interaction may have resulted in the singles in the present study engaging in conversations that were rewarding and avoiding conversations that were costly (Sunnafrank & Ramirez, 2004). This in turn would lead them to continue to predict more rewards than costs in the future and offers a perspective on why individuals would continue to develop a relationship with a partner who also initially showed a lack of interest.

The fact that the present study found an association between recalling that one's partner showed an initial lack of interest, and later experiencing dysfunctional conflict, is in line with previous research linking early and later relational experiences. For instance, Lloyd and Cate (1985) found that attributions formed early in the relationship were related to later interactions. Moreover, it suggests that initial experiences with a disinterested partner are related to how that individual manages conflict as a relationship develops. For example, a partner lacking interest during initial interactions may also lack interest in discussing problems that arise. These partners may be more inclined to withdraw from conflicts when the singles in the present study demanded discussion of an issue. This in turn may contribute to a pattern of demand/withdraw in conflict interaction. Thus, when the partners believe there is an issue that needs to be addressed, the singles in the present study reported that they withdrew from it. In the long term, this pattern of demand/withdraw may lead to both partners avoiding conflict issues. Support for this possible explanation exists in the present study that revealed links between potential partners showing a lack of interest in initial interactions and later reports of experiencing a mutually avoidant conflict style, as well as the correlations between the two demand/withdraw patterns and mutual avoidance conflict styles. It would be

beneficial for future research to test these possible explanations in a longitudinal research design.

The findings showed a similar level of overall support for the hypotheses and research question related to the red flag of being too possessive. After controlling for relationships status and sex, singles in the present study who recalled that their partners displayed signs of being too possessive were less likely to engage in a mutually constructive conflict style in their relationships (Hypothesis 4a). There was also partial support for the hypothesis related to using a demand/withdraw style of conflict (Hypothesis 4b). Those singles who recalled that their partner showed signs of being too possessive in their initial interactions were more likely to report experiencing a “Partner demand/ I withdraw” conflict style later in their relationship. The results also addressed the first research question (RQ1d). Those singles who recalled their partners as displaying signs of being too possessive in their initial interactions were more likely to engage in a mutually avoidant conflict style later in their relationships. Support for the hypotheses related to this red flag was not uniform. The test of the hypothesis for the “I demand- Partner Withdraw” conflict style (Hypothesis 4b) was not supported.

Before discussing these findings, it is important to first address why the singles in the present study would build a relationship with a potential partner who showed signs of being too possessive in an initial interaction. One possible explanation for this comes from Felmlee’s (Felmlee, 1995; Felmlee, 2001) concept of fatal attractions. According to Felmlee, a fatal attraction occurs when a single finds a particular trait or behavior in a potential partner initially attractive but is later disillusioned by this same trait or behavior.

Applying this concept to the present study, the singles may have initially interpreted signs of possessiveness, jealousy, and obsessiveness as rewards instead of costs. These behaviors may have contributed to them feeling special, liked and valued by a potential partner who showed them a significant amount of attention. Thus, even though other behaviors captured by this red flag, such as being controlling and aggressive, may have been experienced as costs, the singles in the study likely identified more overall rewards than overall costs during their initial interactions. In addition, they ultimately forecasted more rewards than costs thereby continuing to interact and build a relationship with that person (Sullaway & Christenson, 1983; Sunnafrank, 1986). The fact that these traits were connected with later experiences with dysfunctional conflict styles suggests that ultimately these attractions become costs. Felmlee's (2001) research supports this reasoning. She found one pattern of fatal attraction involves a shift from initially finding a partner caring, attentive, and persistent to finding the same partner jealous and controlling later in the relationship. Moreover, she found that extreme qualities, which could describe some of the behaviors in this red flag, were more likely to become fatal attractions than more common qualities.

Turning to the findings related to conflict styles, the analyses revealed that singles who recalled that their partner displayed signs of possessiveness during initial interactions reported that they engaged in less mutually constructive conflicts later in their relationships. According to Christenson and Sullaway (1984) mutual constructive conflicts are evidence by partners discussing conflicts in positive ways. However, if the partner who showed signs of possessiveness continues to behave aggressively and controlling during conflicts later in the relationship, it is unlikely that the singles in this

study would be able to find positive ways to manage conflict such as discussing their feelings and suggesting solutions with such a partner. In fact, the findings suggest that singles who recall their partner as being initially too possessive also see their partner as demanding during conflict while they withdraw. Possessive partners may criticize their partner (Caughlin & Vangelisti, 1984) and become aggressive, thus frightening their partner. A Partner demand/ I withdraw style of conflict may even intensify couples conflict and potentially escalate to physical abuse, specifically in relationships where the man demands and the woman withdraws (Eldridge & Christenson, 2002; Murphy & Smith, 2009). This pattern of demand/withdraw may also be linked to eventually avoiding conflict in the relationship as the singles in this study attempted to avoid conflict that could result in costly outcomes. Again, this is suggested by the finding in the present study link between this red flag and mutual avoidance, and the positive correlation between mutual avoidance and Partner demand/ I withdraw conflict styles.

There was also support for the hypothesis (5a) that the red flag of drinking too much was negatively related to the extent to which singles in the study used a mutually constructive conflict style. In other words, after controlling for relationship status and sex, those singles who recalled that their dating partner drank too much during initial interactions were also less likely to report a mutually constructive conflict style in their relationship. Individuals who drink too much are more likely to be aggressive, and are more apt to engage in arguments, or have negative conversations that decrease relational quality (Brewster, 2000; Fisher et al., 2005; Logan et al., 2000; Roberts, 2005). These negative characteristics are related to dysfunctional ways of handling conflicts (Klostermann & Fasl-Stewart, 2006) and are not representative of approaches reflected in

a mutually constructive conflict style. It is therefore not that surprising that this red flag is negatively related to a mutually constructive conflict style.

This was the only support for the hypotheses related to drinking too much. The hypothesis (5b) related to a demand/withdraw style of conflict was not supported for this red flag. Nor did the analysis answer the research question (RQ1e) related to the extent to which a mutual avoidance style of conflict was associated with drinking too much. Similarly, there was no support for the hypotheses nor ability to address the first research question related to the red flags of narcissistic-like behavior (Hypotheses 2a, 2b, RQ1b) and being too sexual (Hypothesis 3a, 3b, RQ1c). In addition no relationship was found for the Sex by red flag interactions for the conflict styles (RQ2).

Explaining negative findings is always a challenge. These red flags could have played a deciding role in whether singles in the relationship stayed with a partner beyond that of conflict. For instance, experiencing a partner who was narcissistic-like may have been sufficient by itself for singles to end the relationship and therefore was unrelated or weakly to the conflict styles the singles in the study engaged in. In other words, these may have proven to be strong enough costs that continuing to pursue the relationship was not seen as desirable. Other variables not accounted for in the analysis may have played a role as well. For instance, friends may have advised the participants to end the relationship early in its formation because the partner was overly sexual or very self-center.

Finally, the lack of findings may have been a result of testing the ability of these red flags to predict conflict within the same block as the other red flags. The bivariate correlations suggested a relationship between narcissistic-like traits and the conflict styles

and the same was true for too sexual. However, including all of red flags in the block provided a more rigorous test of their association to the conflict styles and their association to styles of conflict. They may not be related when examined with this level of rigor.

### **Relationship status, Sex and Conflict styles**

The analyses from the present study showed differences in each of the conflict styles when comparing those who ended their relationships and those who were still together. For instance, singles who broke up were less likely than individuals who were still together to report using a mutually constructive conflict style. Romantic relationships that include less constructive styles of conflict may be more likely to end because conflicts are not resolved and partners do not understand each other's viewpoints. Couples are more satisfied in their relationships when they can work through their problems because they develop a sense of closeness and their relationship can mature (De Geneva, 2008). Positive relationship outcomes are less likely to occur if partners do not discuss and work through their problems (Christenson & Sullaway, 1984) and conflicts that are not solved in romantic relationships may decrease levels of intimacy and increase chances of the relationship ending (Rice, 1999).

Furthermore, singles in the study who broke up were more likely than those who were still together to report using both forms of the demand/withdraw conflict style although this did not account for a large amount of the variance for either style of conflict. It is possible that singles were more likely to break up because conflicts were handled unconstructively or that singles recalled their relationship as being more negative because the relationship ended. The demand/withdraw conflict style oftentimes



intensifies couples' conflicts (Eldridge & Christenson, 2002) and one or both partners may feel misunderstood. This in turn could lead partners to distance themselves from each other and lose feelings of closeness that healthy relationships need (Weger, 2005). Ultimately, singles reporting both forms of the demand/withdraw conflict style may have broken up because issues were never properly addressed and worked through causing instability in the relationship and decreases in satisfaction (Baucom et al., 2011).

Additionally those who broke up were more likely than singles who were still together to report mutual avoidant conflict style. These relationships may have ended because a mutual avoidant conflict style involves both partners avoiding important issues when they arise. Avoiding conflicts may decrease levels of satisfaction in the relationship because important feelings are withheld (Caughlin & Vanelisti, 2006; Golish, 2000). Additionally, when conflicts are avoided couples do not get to experience the sense of closeness that occurs when conflicts are resolved (Parks, 1982). Couples may break up when troubles occur in the relationship because they lack important bonds that usually develop when conflicts are managed constructively.

Finally, a single sex difference in use of conflict styles emerged from the analyses. Men were more likely than women to report a Partner demand/I withdraw conflict style. This finding is in line with existing research. Previous studies suggest that women are more likely to demand while men are more likely to withdraw (Christenson et al., 2006) because women are encouraged to express their emotions more so than men (Denton & Burleson, 2007). Furthermore, women often relate communication and expressions of feelings with levels of intimacy (Afifi & Joseph, 2009).

## **Limitations**

Several limitations exist with this study. First, the method by which data was collected was through a nonrandom, convenience sample. Caution must be used when interpreting the findings because the results are based on a small sample of college students. Additionally, this study includes a limited number of men drawn from social science courses. There may have been a selection bias because of the type of courses the sample was drawn from. In fact, the sample was recruited from social science classes meeting general education requirements. Although such classes contain students from different disciplines, only certain types of students may be drawn to social science classes that focus on family, child development, or sociology. Results may have differed if a random sampling of college students had been used. Moreover, another sample limitation was that gays/lesbians were not included in the demand/withdraw analyses. This further limits the ability to generalize the findings of the study.

An additional limitation of the present research is that there may be other possible variables operating that influenced the association between red flags and conflict. For instance, it may be that singles' attachment styles or individuals' relational history may play a role. Attachment research has shown that singles show preference towards partners who confirm their expectations of what a relationship will be like (Holmes & Johnson, 2009). Individuals who have had a history of negative relationship experiences, and have developed one of the insecure attachment styles as a result, will seek partners who will confirm their expectations of what the relationship will be like. They may be drawn towards singles who display particular red flags. Anxiously attached individuals, for example, may be drawn towards someone who displays a lack of interest or

narcissistic like behaviors. Attachment style may then also be related to the conflict that occurs in the relationship (Caughlin & Vangelisti, 1984). Not including other variables that play a role in the association between red flags and conflict potentially biases the results.

Yet another limitation for the present study was the use of retrospective data. Participants were asked to respond to the red flag measures by recalling their initial interactions with their most recent dating partner. Participants may have recalled actual events differently after time had passed. This could also be true because of certain positive or negative relationship experiences. For example, singles in the study who had broke up with their most recent dating partner may have rated their partner higher on a particular red flag measure as because the behaviors described coincided with their explanation for their break-up.

Finally, there were two limitations related to how conflict was measured in the present study. First, I studied conflict from an individual perspective when it is best to use a dyadic approach as evidenced by the existing observation literature. Next, this research only included three forms of conflict when other forms of conflict exist. Including other forms of conflict would give a more complete understanding of the links between red flags and styles of conflicts.

### **Future Research**

Although the present study adds to the understanding of the role of conflict in romantic relationships it would be beneficial to do longitudinal study to identify what occurs over time as romantic relationships develop. For instance, a weekly diary method could be used to track initial with later relational experiences. It would also be valuable

for future research in this area of study to gather a larger sample of participants that encompasses both males and females in different geographical areas that are not only students but also individuals not enrolled in school. In addition, addressing the possible role of other variables such as attachment style should be considered. This would give a more complete understanding of initial interactions and later conflict because participants would be thinking about conflicts presently in their relationship instead of in the past.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, this study provides insight into an area of research that has not been previously studied. For example, singles in the present study who recalled that their partner showed signs of a lack of interest in initial interactions reported engaging in demand/withdraw and mutually avoidant conflict styles later in their relationship. Similarly, singles who recalled their partner being too possessive during initial interactions were less likely to engage in a mutually constructive conflict style, a productive approach to conflict, and more likely to report experiencing a “Partner demand/I withdraw” and mutual avoidance conflict style, both unproductive approaches to conflict. Although there are limitations to this research, these findings suggest that initial interactions play a role in later relational outcomes and that this warrants future investigation by researchers.

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## APPENDIX A

### RED FLAGS

**Question 1 for each item:** *Does this describe this person*

**Likert Response Scale for Question 1:** 1 (*Does not at all describe how I viewed this person*) to 7 (*Completely described this person*).

**Question 2 for each item:** *Did this trigger a red flag or an alarm for you*

**Likert Response Scale for Question:2** 1 (*Did not trigger a red flag or an alarm for me*) to 7 (*Completely triggered a red flag or an alarm for me*).

**Note:** *Analysis will only be done on responses to Question 2*

### **Lack of interest**

This person ignored me.

This person was touching other girls/guys while we were talking.

This person told stories about leading people on.

This person talked about getting into relationships s/he didn't really like.

This individual began to flirt with someone else.

This person mentioned that they were dating someone else.

This person didn't care that I was paying attention to him/her.

S/he was texting others while we were talking.

This individual began to talk trash about others s/he had dated.

### **Narcissism**

This person was cocky.

This individual was a jerk.

This person did not try to get to know me.

This individual did not ask any questions about me.

This individual bragged too much about him/her self.

This person was very full of him/her self.

This person was very pompous.

This person only talked about him/her self.

This person was acting like s/he was the center of the world.

### **Drank too much**

This person drank too much.

This person was drunk.

This person did not stop drinking.

S/he was taking shot after shot, and got drunk like in a minute.

This person tried to get me drunk.

This person changed once s/he began drinking.

### **Too sexual**

This person joked too much about sexual things.

This person talked about sex too much.

This person asked too much about my sexuality.

This person was just interested in sex.

This person spent a lot of time just looking me up and down.

This person pressured me to have sex.

This individual tried to get too physically close to me.

This person touched me in inappropriate ways.

This person came on very strong.

### **Too possessive**

This person became possessive.

This person became overly obsessive about me.

This person showed signs of becoming jealous.

This person physically blocked me in so I could not leave.

This person frightened me.

This person was very aggressive.

This person did not take no for an answer.

This person was too controlling.

**Poor presentation** *(Not included in the thesis)*

This person had body odor.

This person had bad breath.

This person smelled bad.

This individual had sweaty hands.

APPENDIX B  
COMMUNICATIONS PATTERNS

*Instructions: Please rate each item on a scale as you think about this relationship*

*Likert response scale: 1 (Very unlikely) to 9 (Very likely)*

**Mutual Constructive**

Both of us try to discuss the problem.

Both of us express our feelings to each other.

Both of us suggest possible solutions and compromises.

Both of us feel each other has understood the other person's position.

Both of us feel that the problem has been solved.

**Demand/Withdraw**

*For men demanding & women withdrawing*

Man tries to start a discussion, while Woman tries to avoid a discussion.

Man nags and demands while Woman withdraws, becomes silent, or refuses to discuss the matter further.

Man criticizes while Woman defends herself.

*For women demanding and men withdrawing*

Woman tries to start a discussion, while Man tries to avoid a discussion.

Woman nags and demands while Man withdraws, becomes silent, or refuses to discuss the matter further.

Woman criticizes while Man defends himself.

**Mutual Avoidance**

Both of us avoid discussing the problem.

Both of us withdraw from each other after the discussion

Neither partner is giving to the other after the discussion.



Table 1  
*Mean, Standard Deviation, of Variables*

Variable	Mean	SD
Narcissism	1.79	1.30
Lack of Interest	1.91	1.31
Too Sexual	1.58	1.08
Too Possessive	1.80	1.24
Too Drunk	1.67	1.27
Mutual Constructive	5.91	2.03
Mutual Avoidant	10.18	1.29
I Demand – Partner	3.99	2.17
Withdraw		

Table 2

*Intercorrelations Among Study Variables*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Narcissism	-								
2. Lack of Interest	.697**	-							
3. Too Sexual	.715**	-.666**	-						
4. Too Possessive	.666**	.593**	.716**	-					
5. Too Drunk	.579**	.622**	.614**	.563**	-				
6. Mutual Constructive	-.273**	-.251**	-.238**	-.305**	-.240**	-			
7. Mutual Avoidant	.278**	.314**	.258**	.308**	.239**	-.475**	-		
8. I Demand - Partner Withdraw	.183**	.236**	.171**	.162**	.153**	-.231**	.414**	-	
9. Partner Demand - I Withdraw	.231**	.302**	.267**	.327**	.231**	-.177**	.342**	.417**	-

\*\* Correlation is significant at  $p < 0.01$  level

Table 3

*Means for Red Flag vs. Sex and Relationship Status*

Red Flag	Sex		Relationship Status	
	Male	Female	Together	Broken Up
Narcissism	2.10	1.78	1.53	2.35
Lack of Interest	2.34	1.85	1.70	2.50
Too Sexual	1.80	1.58	1.38	2.00
Too Possessive	2.21	1.74	1.65	2.30
Too Drunk	1.89	1.64	1.53	2.00

Table 4

*Hierarchical Regression Analysis: Mutual Constructive Conflict*

Variable	R <sup>2</sup>	B	β	P
Block 1				
Relationship Status	.15	-1.60	.39	.00**
Block 2 – Sex				
	.16	0.22	.05	.24
Block 3 – Red Flags				
	.20			
Narcissism		-0.10	-.06	.33
Lack of Interest		-0.02	-.01	.86
Too Sexual		0.18	.09	.15
Too Possessive		-0.22	-.13	.03*
Too Drunk		-0.23	-.14	.01*
Block 4 – Interactions				
	.11			
Gender X Narcissism		-0.09	-.05	.39
Gender X Lack of Interest		-0.03	-.02	.74
Gender X Too Sexual		0.16	.08	.21
Gender X Too Possessive		-0.23	-.13	.03*
Gender X Too Drunk		-0.22	-.13	.02*

\* Correlation is significant at  $p < 0.05$  level

\*\* Correlation is significant at  $p < 0.01$  level

Table 5

*Hierarchical Regression Analysis: I Demand – Partner Withdraw Conflict*

Variable	R <sup>2</sup>	B	β	P
Block 1				
Relationship Status	.02	.55	.12	.00**
Block 2 – Sex				
	.02	.05	.01	.82
Block 3 – Red Flags				
	.06			
Narcissism		.05	.03	.68
Lack of Interest		.38	.23	.00**
Too Sexual		-.02	-.01	.87
Too Possessive		-.05	-.02	.69
Too Drunk		-.00	-.00	.99
Block 4 – Interactions				
	.07			
Gender X Narcissism		.04	.02	.72
Gender X Lack of Interest		.40	.23	.00**
Gender X Too Sexual		-.02	-.01	.92
Gender X Too Possessive		-.02	-.01	.88
Gender X Too Drunk		.01	.01	.93

\* Correlation is significant at  $p < 0.05$  level

\*\* Correlation is significant at  $p < 0.01$  level

Table 6

*Hierarchical Regression Analysis: Partner Demands – I Withdraw Conflict*

Variable	R <sup>2</sup>	B	β	P
Block 1				
Relationship Status	.03	2.0	.17	.00**
Block 2 – Sex				
	.04	-1.8	-.13	.00**
Block 3 – Red Flags				
	.12			
Narcissism		-.47	-.10	.13
Lack of Interest		.82	.18	.00**
Too Sexual		.18	.03	.63
Too Possessive		.97	.20	.00**
Too Drunk		.01	.00	.97
Block 4 – Interactions				
	.13			
Gender X Narcissism		-.42	-.09	.18
Gender X Lack of Interest		.80	.18	.00**
Gender X Too Sexual		.13	.02	.73
Gender X Too Possessive		1.08	.22	.00**
Gender X Too Drunk		.10	.02	.70

\* Correlation is significant at  $p < 0.05$  level

\*\* Correlation is significant at  $p < 0.01$  level

Table 7

*Hierarchical Regression Analysis: Mutual Avoidant Conflict*

Variable	R <sup>2</sup>	B	β	P
Block 1				
Relationship Status	.11	.85	.33	.00**
Block 2 – Sex				
	.11	-.14	-.05	.25
Block 3 – Red Flags				
	.27			
Narcissism		-.05	-.05	.47
Lack of Interest		.15	.16	.01*
Too Sexual		-.08	-.06	.33
Too Possessive		.16	.15	.01*
Too Drunk		.07	.07	.18
Block 4 – Interactions				
	.17			
Gender X Narcissism		-.05	-.05	.44
Gender X Lack of Interest		.16	.16	.01*
Gender X Too Sexual		-.08	-.06	.34
Gender X Too Possessive		.17	.16	.01*
Gender X Too Drunk		.08	.07	.17

\* Correlation is significant at  $p < 0.05$  level

\*\* Correlation is significant at  $p < 0.01$  level