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Romantic conflict: A problematic integration

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Romantic Conflict: A Problematic Integration

(TITLE)

BY

Alyssa Obradovich

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Running Head: ROMANTIC CONFLICT

Alyssa Obradovich

Romantic Conflict: A Problematic Integration

Eastern Illinois University

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Abstract

Though conflict is to be expected in most romantic relationships, research determines the amount of conflict within a relationship is likely to peak in the dissolution phase. Ending relationships is rarely easy, and the experience can be wrought with mixed emotions and uncertainty. Problematic integration theory offers a perspective that specifically deals with uncertainty and ambivalence but has yet to be applied to romantic conflict. This thesis examines uncertainty in conflict within the dissolution phase of romantic relationships. This perspective offers a more holistic view of how couples negotiate uncertainty in dissolving conflicts.

To my mother, Pamela Buzuvis Obradovich; the first teacher I ever met

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*Chapter 1**Introduction*

There are few certainties in life, but one is that all romantic relationships eventually come to an end, voluntarily or involuntarily. Baxter (1982) asserts, “the breaking up of a relationship is a phenomenon known to most and dreaded by all” (p. 223). Although the ending of a relationship may be certain, the experience of it can be quite the opposite. The dissolution of romantic relationships is not only associated with high levels of uncertainty, but also with a spike in conflict between relational partners. Within the field of communication, uncertainty is not an ignored concept. A great deal of communication research is dedicated to our understanding of uncertainty, conflict, and romantic relationships. However a study of how we negotiate uncertainty in conflict during the dissolution of a romantic relationship has not yet been undertaken.

Though the integration of these three phenomena may be under-examined within the field of communication, it is not to imply humans have an aversion to love, conflict, and breakups. We watch them on television and in movies, read about them in books and magazines, and even experience them for ourselves. So much of our media space as well as our cognitive space is occupied with the creation and dissolution of romantic relationships. Ever since my third grade boyfriend and I ended our playground romance, many of my subsequent conversations with friends and family have been about the dissolution of romantic relationships. I have rationalized and irrationalized the endings of relationships, and though there was not much conflict during my third grade break-up, my relationships since then have steadily gained more occasions of conflict and increasingly complicated dissolutions.

In a pilot study, I met Erin and John, a couple who had recently ended their relationship. Conflict was not uncommon to these two individuals in the initial stages of their relationship. Causes for conflict early on were attributed to the couple's lack of privacy, as Erin and John were both living with their parents. After a year of dating, they both decided that living together would get them both out of their current living situations, as well as improve their relationship by increasing their privacy. Erin had reservations about cohabitating with John due to their frequent disagreements, but thought that their issues would decrease if their families were not so involved in their everyday interaction. John assumed that the elimination of going back and forth between two houses would lessen their disagreements and make him more comfortable by spending time in their home, rather than Erin's family home.

Though moving in together did significantly decrease their conflicts about family and privacy, it did not decrease their overall frequency of disagreements. With every conflict, Erin and John pondered what would become of their relationship. It was unclear to Erin how much longer their relationship could withstand the frequent arguments, as the disagreements steadily became more intense. As the conflicts increased, so did Erin's uncertainty about the relationship. Ending her relationship with John was much more complicated than breaking an emotional bond; it also included changing her living situation, financial stability and investments, and access to her work commute. The uncertainty Erin had about the relationship permeated many other areas in her life.

Though unintentional, moving in with John had impacted the stability of her friendships. Moving farther away from her friends decreased the accessibility she had to seeing them on a regular basis. Not only had physical interaction lessened, so did all

communication with friends. With John sharing her living space, she felt unable to share her feelings with friends via telephone or other electronic means because John was sure to overhear or discover her feelings. Erin felt so disconnected from her friends; she wondered if she and John broke up, would her friends be willing to reestablish a diminished relationship? Not only was Erin uncertain about her future with John, she was unsure if a future without him would include reconnecting with her friends.

John's experience was similar to Erin's. He had picked their new location based on his proximity to work, and his friends. Knowing that he could not afford to live in their home without Erin's contribution made the future of their relationship unclear. Though John did not want the relationship to end, he could not live with the constant arguments with Erin. His ideal solution was for Erin to stop initiating conflicts with him, and the relationship would improve, but based on their experience together, it was not likely to happen. When John began to contemplate what would happen to him without Erin, he realized that all the furniture and most everything else in their home was Erin's and her leaving meant he would be left with very few belongings. Aside from material possessions, John's uncertainty lay in what would become of his living situation, as he felt he had nowhere to go.

One of the aspects of being with Erin that John enjoyed most was their shared social network. Most of John's friends were married or living together, and with Erin, he felt more included and accepted in his group of friends. Ending a relationship with Erin meant he would go back to being the "single guy" in his group of friends. Being part of a couple gave John privilege in his social circle that he felt he would lose if his relationship with Erin ended. Initially, John assumed that living with Erin would lead into marriage

based on his friends' experiences, and often mentioned the possibility of marriage in his and Erin's future. As conflicts continued to increase, John saw Erin grow visibly unhappy. Her reaction to him and their relationship made him seriously question his initial thoughts of marriage and contributed to his uncertainty, not only about their future together or apart, but also of relationships in general.

The case of John and Erin posits a relational dissolution laden with conflict and uncertainty. After speaking with both partners during a pilot study, it became clear that conflict as well as uncertainty created tension in not only their relationship with one another, but also the decision to end their relationship. Asking John and Erin to disclose communication patterns and interactions with one another helped identify the role that uncertainty played in their conflicts, relationship, and ultimately the decision to end their relationship.

As previously mentioned, communication research is rich with explanations of uncertainty and how individuals navigate through it, but mostly offers steps we take to reduce uncertainty. John and Erin's experience with uncertainty did not produce behaviors to reduce uncertainty; in contrast, they avoided reducing uncertainty because they presumed the end results of reducing their uncertainty were not favorable to either partner.

To further understand John and Erin's case and similar experiences from other former couples, Babrow's (1992) Problematic Integration theory will provide a lens to examine couples' experiences with uncertainty in conflict. By assuming this perspective, we can offer a more holistic understanding of romantic conflict, uncertainty, and the dissolution of relationships. In the following sections, conflict and more specifically

romantic conflict will be discussed in greater detail as well as reviewing relevant literature on uncertainty before moving to an elaboration of Problematic Integration theory.

Conflict

Attitudes toward conflict are heavily influenced by the relationship we have with the other party involved. It seems less stressful, even easy, to engage in conflict with a customer service representative regarding an errant charge on our cable bill. However, when it comes to disagreeing with someone close to us, we may be more apprehensive to assert our opinions, which we assume will trigger a conflict. There is much more at risk when conflicting with someone with whom we have a lasting relationship compared to a person we most likely will not see again. Abigail and Cahn (2011) acknowledge a significant difference between conflict with a stranger compared to conflict with an acquaintance or friend. The authors define interpersonal conflict as

A problematic situation with the following unique characteristics: the conflicting parties are interdependent, they have the perception that they seek incompatible goals or outcomes or they favor incompatible means to the same ends, the perceived incompatibility has the potential to adversely affect the relationship leaving emotion residues if not addressed, and there is a sense of urgency about the need to resolve the difference (p.4).

Key to Abigail and Cahn's (2011) definition is that both parties are interdependent. There is an established relationship that is at risk when goals are ill aligned. Many of the negative associations individuals attach to conflict come from the risk it brings to relationships and the association conflict has with dissolution of relationships. Though conflict has negative connotations, conflict is not necessarily a negative experience (Abigail & Cahn, 2011; Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2006; Borisoff & Victor, 1989). Altman and Taylor (1973) assert in some instances conflict can strengthen interpersonal

relationships because areas of discord are clarified and reconciliation often sets the stage for new and more intimate growth by increasing trust, eliminating uncertainty and affirming the basic value of the relationship.

Even so, conflict is often a difficult process associated with anger, argument, and distress among other unpleasant experiences. Roloff and Soule (2002) describe conflict as “inevitable”, which suggests it will occur whether we want it to or not (p. 475). Research finds that the more intimate a relationship, the more likely conflict is to transpire (Altman & Taylor, 1973). Arguably, the most intimate interpersonal relationship, and thus the most conflictual, is one of a romantic nature.

The more intimate a relationship, the more knowledgeable partners are about one another, which increases the probability that knowledge of incompatibilities will arise (Altman & Taylor, 1973). Braiker and Kelley (1979) outline four levels of conflict: concrete behaviors, relational rules and norms, personality traits, and metaconflict. Each of these levels provides a significant source of conflict for intimate partners, who typically spend more time together and experience incompatibilities at each level with greater consequence. Within these levels, the topics that cause couples conflict are much more extensive, varying in importance based on the values of each partner. Guerrero et al. (2002) note that conflict and emotion are inherently connected. Thus, whichever level of conflict a couple experiences, emotions may be a complicating factor.

Argyle and Furnham (1983) look at the closeness of relationships and the frequency of conflict. Of all defined relationships, spouses report the closest relationships as well as the most occurrences of conflict. Coser (1956) also suggests “a conflict is more radical and more passionate when it arises out of close relationships” (p. 71). Intimate

partners may also withhold complaints in order to prevent damage to the relationship. This avoidance often leads to an intense eruption of conflict (Cosser, 1956).

Though there are a number of reasons why romantic conflict, in particular, should be studied, the most salient are that (1) there are more conflicts in a romantic relationship (compared to other interpersonal relationships), which produces more instances of conflict to examine. For instance, most romantic couples have less than ten disagreements per week with 1 or 2 per month being particularly unpleasant (Canary et al., 1995). And (2) romantic conflict can be a complicated, complex experience that is difficult to navigate as the issues that cause interdependent parties significant conflict are rarely superficial; they are often deeply seated in the relationship. It can have significant emotional, psychological, and physical effects, which not only impact the individual but also are likely to spill over to other realms of his/her life. For example, the stress associated with romantic conflict, and marital conflict in particular, is a significant risk factor for both depression and functional impairment (Choi & Marks, 2008). Conflict management behaviors have also been linked to relational (dis)satisfaction and ultimately relational success/ failure (Cramer, 2002; Segrin, Hanzal, & Domschke, 2009).

Relational (Dis)satisfaction

Communication behavior is central to couples' perceptions of relational satisfaction, and conflict behaviors in particular contribute to overall communication patterns and relational satisfaction. Gottman (1998) finds that stable, happy couples can more effectively engage in repair attempts when conflict begins to turn negative compared to unstable, unhappy couples. Though happy couples versus unhappy couples are difficult to define, Gottman (1999) relates communication processes between couples

as an effective predictor of relational satisfaction. If couples are engaging in negative affect reciprocity, or “the increased probability that a person’s emotions will be negative (anger, belligerence, sadness, contempt and so on) right after his or her partner has exhibited negativity” (p. 37), they are less likely to experience relational satisfaction and are less effective at repair attempts during conflict.

Relational Dissolution

Though conflict is to be expected in relationships, high levels of conflict can be detrimental and often lead to dissolution (Guerrero et al., 2007). Relational dissolution is an experience rife with conflict, particularly significant conflicts, which may be the cause of the relationship ending or a consequence of it. Lloyd and Cate (1985) note the sharp increase of conflict as partners consider relationship termination or actually dissolve the relationship. Kitson and Morgan (1990) find dissolution to be a stressful, unpleasant process for most couples. Along with the increase of significant conflicts, Honeycutt et al. (1992) found an increase in various forms of aversive communication such as arguing about little things, criticizing one another, sarcastic comments, and verbally fighting.

Duck (2007; Duck & Wood, 2006) provides an additional means for examining relational dissolution by describing a five-stage sequence of dissolution: intrapsychic processes, dyadic processes, social support, grave-dressing processes, and resurrection processes. The intrapsychic process consists of relational partners considering alternatives to their current relationship. If relational partners decide staying together is not in their best interest, the second phase ensues. The dyadic phase involves the breaking down of patterns, rules, and rituals that make up the relational culture (Duck, 2007). In the third phase of Duck’s model (social support) relational partners look to friends and

family for support while engaging in face-saving practices and self-serving accounts of the breakup. After partners gain support from family and friends, the fourth phase is the grave dressing process. Here, partners assign meaning to the breakup by making sense of what happened and accept the ending to their relationships. The fifth and final phase of Duck's model is the resurrection process. In this process, former relational partners consider themselves single again and move on with their lives.

Duck's (2007) model of relational dissolution offers a structured way to look at breakups as a process. Though not every breakup experiences the five phases in that exact order, the model is helpful to keep in mind when considering how individuals discuss their breakup experience because it can help gauge how far people are in the process.

Duck (2007) notes, particularly in his social support phase of the model, and Guerrero et al.(2007) agree that the dissolution of relationships often includes the dissolutions of not only emotional involvement, but webs of friendship networks, families, identities, memories, etc., which all contribute to the difficulty of relationship dissolution. The dissolution of a relationship, along with the dissolution of social networks, suggest that in significant conflicts we can expect particularly troublesome uncertainties that likely influence people's behaviors. However, research currently has not examined this phenomenon in detail.

Conflict Styles and Behaviors

According to Siegart and Stamp (1994), the way partners manage conflict is a better predictor of relational satisfaction than is the experience of conflict itself. Siegart and Stamp (1994) examined the outcome of couples' "first big fight," a significant

occurrence in a relationship. Couples that stayed together after the first big fight reported a gain in understanding of one another as well confidence in their collective problem solving abilities. In contrast, couples that ended their relationships after the first big fight had felt confused or uncertain about the relationship. Study participants also reported discovering negative information about their partners and many felt that future interactions would be tense and uncomfortable. More than anything else, the way partners perceived and handled conflict predicted whether their first big fight would signal the end of their relationship or a stronger beginning.

More specifically, conflict styles and behaviors in romantic relationships are connected to relational satisfaction and to relational outcomes (Caughlin & Vangelisti, 2006). Managing conflict between relational partners is heavily influenced by individual conflict styles. The term “conflict style” refers to “a patterned response to conflict situations” (McCorkle & Reese, 2010). Styles are a relatively stable aspect of an individual’s personality and have been found to remain consistent across various conflict situations (Gormly et al., 1972). Styles vary between two dimensions, assertiveness, (the degree to which the style attempts to satisfy self concern) and cooperativeness (the degree to which the style attempts to satisfy concern for the other). Assertiveness and cooperativeness (concern for self and others) yield five conflict styles, which serve as ways individuals typically respond to conflict (Blake & Mouton, 1964).

Blake and Mouton (1964) articulate five distinct conflict styles that have been used to measure individuals’ interest in assertiveness (concern for self) and cooperativeness (concern for other). The five styles, listed from lowest to highest concern for self, are: avoidance of the conflict, accommodation to the other’s desires, compromise

(engaging in give and take), competition (focusing on one's own desires/goals to the exclusion of the other's), and collaboration (seeking a win-win situation for both partners) (McCorkle & Reese, 2010).

Conflict style demonstrates a relatively stable personality trait, which frequently influences an individual's behaviors within conflict. However, the cause for individuals' conflict management behaviors or tactics cannot be so easily reduced to a single explanation. For instance, research by Gottman and his colleagues (Gottman, 1979, 1994, Gottman & Levenson, 1992, Gottman & Silver, 1994) indicates that, across relationships and individual conflict styles, certain behaviors are used more frequently in troubled relationships and are indicators of impending relational demise. Behaviors generally range from avoidance to empathic and open communication to the more extreme and negative tactics, which Gottman terms the four horsemen of the apocalypse: criticism, defensiveness, contempt and stonewalling (Gottman & Silver, 1994). The significant increase in negative conflict behaviors near the demise of a relationship indicates there are other factors at play beyond the simple influence of one's conflict style. Further research is necessary to explore other possible precursors to conflict behavior during significant relationship-ending conflicts.

As mentioned, one's choice of conflict management behaviors are a significant predictor of relational outcomes. The factors influencing one's choice of behaviors have not been fully explicated in existing literature. One's conflict style, cultural orientation, self construal, and other personality factors, including one's disposition to forgive, have all been linked to conflict management behaviors (Rizkalla, Wertheim, & Hodgson,

2008; Oetzel & Ting Toomey, 2003). Yet for all the focus on individual-level factors, one factor that has not been examined is the experience of uncertainty.

Uncertainty

Various discussions of uncertainty as it relates to interpersonal relationships are explored within current literature. Berger and Calabrese (1975) describe uncertainty as a negative experience that needs to be decreased before a relationship can move forward. Uncertainty reduction theory suggests that intimacy in relationships increases as uncertainty decreases (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). Yet other perspectives have challenged Berger and Calabrese's notions of uncertainty, asserting that uncertainty does not always have to be a negative experience in relationships, it can have considerable benefits to the development of intimacy (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Brashers, 2001). Uncertainty can promote closeness by sparking information seeking communication habits about each partner (Baxter & Wilmot, 1984; Berger & Bradac, 1982). Though uncertainty can have positive or negative effects, both perspectives assume that we strive to reduce uncertainty when confronted with it. Alternatively, Babrow (2001) suggests that when uncertainty arises, we do not always use information seeking tactics to reduce it, instead we may intentionally remain uncertain to avoid concluding that a situation will have negative impact.

Brashers (2007) maintains that uncertainty is a major part of our lives and can affect how and when we communicate. Though we deal with uncertainty in all interpersonal relationships (e.g. initial interaction, Berger & Calabrese, 1975; health communication, Afifi & Weiner, 2004), romantic relationships especially, are seasoned with uncertainty (Afifi & Burgoon, 1998). Knobloch & Solomon (1998) define relational

uncertainty as the degree of confidence partners have in an interpersonal relationship. Relational uncertainty includes doubts about the self, each other, and the relationship. Knobloch & Solomon (1999) describe relational uncertainty as relevant to intimacy, which makes it especially applicable to romantic relationships specifically.

Knobloch, Miller, & Carpenter (2007) acknowledge that relational uncertainty creates increased turmoil in the relationship and can be threatening to the survival of the relationship. Theiss et al. (2009) suggest relational uncertainty may “intensify emotional, cognitive, and communicative reactions to relationship circumstances” (p. 590). Mentioning increased turmoil within the relationship suggests conflict may increase as relational uncertainty is negotiated yet, surprisingly, the inclusion of conflict within the discussion regarding relational uncertainty is overlooked in current research.

Conflict specifically generates a great deal of uncertainty for a number of reasons. The act of conflict itself is wrought with uncertainty because we rarely know when it will occur or how it will end. Abigail and Cahn (2011) express, “It’s rare that we can make an appointment for a conflict” (p. 219). Conflict is embedded in our daily lives and cannot be easily predicted. Beyond this, partners may not know how to make sense of one another’s goals, motives, or behaviors (Abigail & Cahn, 2011). Not only can individuals be unsure of the motivations for a partner’s behavior, they may also feel uncertain about how their partner perceives their own behavior.

Uncertainty may be a particularly significant factor in determining conflict behaviors because, as Babrow (1992) notes, uncertainty is both an intrapersonal and social phenomenon. While it may begin intrapersonally, it quickly becomes a social experience as our personal uncertainties are shared with or introduced to others and, in

turn, others share their concerns with us. Moreover, communication is the most central mechanism for coping with uncertainty (for example as we seek information or assurance from others). Thus while existing research on factors such as cultural orientation and predisposition to forgive can help explain an individual's behavioral style within conflict, they do not account for the dynamic interplay that occurs between conflicting parties as both partners experience and attempt to cope with their own and the other's uncertainties. Such concerns may have a strong influence on partners' communication tactics and behaviors within conflict.

The amount of uncertainty that romantic conflict brings, most notably in the dissolution of relationships, as well as the apprehension individuals approach it with, calls for further examination. In particular this study will examine how the behaviors of romantic partners in significant conflict (defined for the purposes of this study as conflict during the stage of relationship dissolution) are affected by their experience of and attempts to cope with uncertainty.

Theoretical Lens: Problematic Integration Theory

Problematic Integration (PI) theory can be used to illuminate understanding of conflict communication within dissolving romantic relationships. As evidenced through this review of literature, conflict can be conceptualized in numerous ways and via several existing models. However, PI theory highlights features of conflict that are potentially significant yet remain understudied. In particular, PI theory examines uncertainty.

The complexity of conflict calls for an examination utilizing a theory that can grapple with uncertain, highly value-laden occasions. When deciding to engage in conflict, we first make evaluative decisions (i.e. decisions related to how we value the

topic or occurrence). For example, during a conflict we may ask ourselves: is this topic worth disagreeing over?, how much do I care about this topic?, and how will this conflict affect my relationship? These questions warrant an evaluative response. In other words, we associate the answers with good, bad, or neutral feelings and proceed accordingly. At its core then, PI explores the interrelations between beliefs and evaluations (Babrow, 2007).

More generally, PI is based on two basic assumptions about human beings. The first is that, “humans form probabilistic orientations to their world” (Babrow, 2007, p. 183). This means that humans associate an object or thought with another object or thought. The term object can refer to anything; person, place, event, idea etc. When we come into contact with an object, we assess its characteristics by questioning; what is it, what caused it, and how will it behave. Babrow (2007) specifically uses the term “probabilistic orientation” to reinforce the uncertainty of human knowledge. Though we can expect events, such as the sun rising tomorrow, we do not know that for sure. We can make assumptions such as waking up in the morning, or walking down the street without fear but we know that these assumptions are not guaranteed.

The second assumption Babrow (2007) maintains within PI is that “humans form evaluative orientations to concrete and abstract features of their world” (p. 184). Similarly to the probabilistic orientations, evaluative orientations include people making assessments about objects, but instead of merely picking out characteristics of objects, we make value judgments based on our beliefs of good, bad, or neutral. Together, these two assumptions form the foundation of PI which is; “People form probabilistic and

evaluative orientations to concrete and abstract features of their world” (Babrow, 2007, p.184).

PI builds on its foundation by claiming that probabilistic and evaluative orientations are integrated in experience (Babrow, 1992). Babrow (2007) describes a two-fold meaning of integration. In part, integration means that expectations and evaluations related to any object are interdependent. The value we assign to objects is related to the probability of the outcome. For example, we may choose not to participate in an event because the likely outcome is not worth the effort. Integration also refers to influence that evaluation can have on a perceived or actual probability of obtaining our desires. Babrow (2007) equates the second part of integration with “wishful thinking” and the positive outlook humans tend to have when evaluating outcomes of a personal nature. For example, we tend to think that we are less likely than others to experience negative events.

The concept of integration applies to more than just the probabilistic and evaluative orientations surrounding a single object. Orientations apply to larger complex systems of knowledge, feelings, and behavior. Orientations about one subject area simultaneously affect attitudes towards other areas. For example, Babrow (2007) asserts that an individual’s value of education affects the type of career he/she pursues and the people he/she chooses to befriend. Babrow (2007) explains:

Probabilistic and evaluative orientations to any given object of thought or perception do not simply arise at the same time but largely independently of one another. Rather they are integrated in various significant ways. Such orientations to any one object or issue influence one another, and they both shape and are

shaped by encompassing systems of beliefs, values, intentions, plans and ongoing action (p. 186).

Orientations are based on personal experience and values while recognizing that knowledge is uncertain. The “problematic” part of PI occurs because probabilities and evaluations influence one another and they can make one another change. In the case of a romantic relationship, when one partner initiates a break-up, this shift could cause the other partner (or both) to view the relationship as more precious than before and stimulate optimism about wanting to work out the problems. On the other hand, the initiation of a break-up from one partner can cause the other to become defensive and view the relationship as less desirable than previously thought. This new evaluation of the relationship is drastically different than it once was.

Though Erin had mixed feelings about her relationship with John, she remained in a relationship with him because she assumed he wanted to stay together. When John expressed that he too was having mixed feelings, Erin’s value of the relationship significantly decreased, and thus the dissolution of their relationship ensued. John’s disclosure of mixed emotions destabilized how Erin not only how felt about continuing the relationship, but also how she felt about John. Along with navigating through John’s admittance of mixed feelings, Erin considered if her friends and family would be there to support her after she had grown distant from them while prioritizing John. The dissolution of her relationship with John, led her to question if the relationships with her friends and family were still intact.

Babrow (2007) illuminates how the change in one orientation destabilizes another. In short, problematic integration is the difficulty we experience when

probabilistic and evaluative orientations to a particular object (person, event, idea, etc...) destabilize one another and unsettle orientations to related objects.

Orientations are integrated in experience and become problematic in four central forms: (a) uncertainty, (b) ambivalence, (c) diverging values and probabilities, and (d) impossibility (Babrow, 2001). Within a problematic integration, the forms are not independent of one another, rather they can evolve from one to another. Bradac (2001) further explains, "there are four ways in which the integration of probability and evaluation can be problematic: (a) probability can be ambiguous; (b) evaluations can conflict, in which case the evaluator will be ambivalent; (c) probability and evaluation can diverge; and (d) an outcome may be impossible (or inevitable) (pp. 461-462).

In the case of conflict, perceived impossibility of settling a dispute can be reframed into ambiguity ("We're better off apart, but I also want to stay together"), which can then morph into uncertainty, ("What happens if we never resolve the conflict?"). Chaining among the four forms is common as individuals can experience conflicting emotions. These forms are embedded in romantic conflict as, for example, conflict occurs when two interdependent partners' values diverge (Roloff & Soule, 2002). On a macro level, Babrow (2001) claims that knowledge is uncertain, and our orientations are made with that in mind. Yet on a micro level, the awareness of uncertainty is heightened. We may choose to avoid conflict because of the inherent uncertainty conflict brings. We draw on prior experience, which may have led us to believe that conflict in a romantic relationship results in the dissolution of that relationship.

The four forms of PI can be applied to romantic conflict in a very practical way, yet PI theory has been utilized most by health communication scholars. The theory lends

itself to individuals' management of uncertainty in highly value laden and stressful situations such as serious illness or end of life decision making (Polk, 2005). The connection to health communication lies in the human response of avoiding information or altering probabilistic and evaluative assessments to health conditions (Dennis et al., 2008). For example, Babrow and Kline's (2008) research looks at women engaging in breast self-examinations and how patients engaged in altering both probabilistic ("Maybe the test is wrong") and evaluative ("This challenge will make me stronger") assessments.

Polk's (2005) research looks specifically at the uncertainty associated with caregivers of family members with Alzheimer's Dementia (AD). AD as a whole is saturated with uncertainty; causes, prevention and a cure for the disease are all uncertain. Caregivers' experience with an ailing family member is wrought with ambiguity and uncertainty. When coping with AD, the caregiver's role is to keep the family member comfortable by increasing pleasurable experiences. The caregiver bases pleasurable experiences on what the patient had previously enjoyed before the onset of AD. Probabilistic and evaluative orientations are assessed based on past experience, but problematic integrations occur when previous pleasurable activities are no longer pleasurable because of AD. When a caregiver encourages the patient to engage in a once pleasurable activity, such as watching a movie, and the activity results in discomfort for the patient, ambiguity then plagues the caregiver. Caregivers report ambiguity after a situation like the one described occurs, and each day thereafter is approached with uncertainty because orientations must be reconstructed.

PI lends itself to health communication because of the inherent uncertainty and ambiguity associated with illness. Yet, health is not the only area of communication that

deals with uncertainty and ambivalence. PI has also been applied to questions of identity, specifically in adolescent Chinese Americans. Shi and Babrow (2007) assess the inconsistencies of identity that arise in young Chinese Americans who live a bicultural experience. Though PI is birthed as an individual psychological process, it is also a communication phenomenon because we learn about “the world and its evaluative meanings through communication” (Shi & Babrow, 2007, p. 323). Shi and Babrow (2007) also maintain that communication can be a coping resource for those experiencing problematic integration.

Study participants were all first generation Chinese Americans who were born in the United States to Chinese immigrants. Though the participants were socialized in an English speaking world, their tie to Chinese culture and language was privileged at home. Problematic integration occurred when participants assessed their own identity as uncertain. Though no identity is stable, the participants’ identity is particularly unstable as they live in a constant state of question, Chinese or American?

This study illuminates the “chaining” across forms of uncertainty, ambivalence, diverging values and probabilities and impossibility when participants discuss their relationship with a bicultural identity. PI demonstrates how participants chain across meanings in order to search for solutions to “integrative dilemmas” (Shi & Babrow, 2007, p. 333). Each form presents different questions that need to be addressed in order to reach some sort of explanation for problematic integration. The chaining across forms poses a variety of concerns that can lead to a more holistic understanding of the dilemma.

Uncertainty is a phenomenon that permeates most life experiences. Health problems can understandably conjure feeling of uncertainty and ambivalence, but even

something as personal as identity can summon instances of divergence and impossibility. The experience of romantic conflict is no exception; the forms of PI can be found there as well.

Problematic Integration (PI) theory can be used to illuminate understanding of conflict communication within romantic relationships. PI theory highlights features of conflict that are significant yet understudied. Conflict scholars acknowledge the influence of uncertainty on conflict communication, but uncertainty and related struggles have remained relatively underexamined in current conflict literature.

PI is particularly well-suited to grapple with conflict because of the changing nature of both values and probabilities during the experience of conflict. Though probabilistic and evaluative orientations are prone to change in any situation, they can change drastically when propelled by conflict. Throughout the conflict process, we are assessing and reassessing what is most valuable to us. Goals change and evolve from the prospective goals we have before the conflict, to the transactional goals we discover during the conflict and the retrospective goals we acquire after the conflict is over (Wilmot & Hocker, 2000).

Probabilistic and evaluative orientations to conflict can become problematic based on our experiences. According to Babrow (1992) we approach situations with predetermined or initial probabilistic and evaluative orientations. Conflict is no exception. We approach conflict with preconceived expectations and orientations based on experience. For example, we may avoid conflict because we perceive conflict as harmful to a relationship or we may approach conflict with intensity and defensiveness, expecting a fight (in either case, assigning a strong probability to negatively evaluated

outcomes). We engage in or avoid conflict with these expectations, and when these expectations are compromised by actual and unexpected outcomes or responses from our partner, our orientations are problematized. Thus PI and conflict are intrinsically related. Bradac (2001) describes the problematic relationship between probability and evaluation as one that “produces cognitive conflict or tension” (p. 461).

Conflict in and of itself is full of problematic integration. When it happens we can indentify it, and assign value to it. Even as children, we know which conflicts with our parents we want to pursue in order for us to achieve the personal victory we desire, and which conflicts will not end in favorable outcomes for us. When we conflict with another person, we know there are some issues we are willing to concede, and others we value enough to stand our ground and engage in. But not all of our positions are crystal clear. We struggle with the amount of value we assign issues and our values are ever changing. PI acknowledges and thrives on an uncertain world and allows individuals to be inconsistent, constantly negotiating values. Conflict is an exceptionally personal occurrence that asks us to not only articulate our values, but to defend them when confronted, which can be difficult to do because values are often unstable.

PI gives us tools to better understand the complexity of conflict communication. Babrow (2001) states PI “arises for both speaker and hearer of acts such as threats, complaints and criticism,” all of which are directly related to conflict (p. 555). By applying PI to romantic conflict, our understanding of conflict as well as PI will be deepened. Examining the intertwining of individuals’ evaluative and probabilistic orientations to the world around them gives us a fuller understanding of romantic conflict by offering a multi-layered analysis of the values and probabilities associated with

conflict responses but also the relationship itself, from the perspectives of both partners. Most specifically, this study will examine how the experience of PI, with its various and chaining forms and foci, influences romantic conflict communication behaviors.

*Chapter 2**Methodological Approach*

Qualitative methods enable a researcher to observe data from a variety of perspectives and interpret the findings in a way that quantitative research does not warrant. The complexity of communication as a phenomenon demands tools for the researcher to capture lived experience in a way that can only be unearthed using qualitative research (Keyton, 2001). The field of qualitative research does not privilege any one method; rather it is often a site for the use of multiple methods and approaches (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

Phenomenological research methods are employed by researchers to better understand the meaning of lived experiences and/or environments (Anderson, 2009; Keyton, 2001). As Anderson (2009) states, “phenomenology leads to the description of an essential structure for what and how people experience a phenomenon” (pp.11-12). As this study looks at conflict as a phenomenon, phenomenological methods can inquire how individuals experience conflict, specifically uncertainty in conflict within the context of their romantic relationships.

Anderson (2009) suggests a phenomenological approach when looking at PI related to work conflict among hospital-based nurses and physicians. Once nurses were interviewed in their work environment, the interviews were read for significant statements relevant to the phenomenon and grouped into meaning units or themes. Themes help the researcher to interpret findings and link them to the subject being studied (Anderson, 2009; Byrne, 2001). Anderson (2009) notes that using a phenomenological approach “enabled the illumination of commonly occurring

experiences and themes based on the experiences described in participant interviews” (p. 12). The current study is interested in individuals’ experiences with uncertainty in conflict through interviews, thus a phenomenological methodological approach is assumed.

Method

In order to examine how the behaviors of romantic partners in significant conflict are affected by their experience of and attempts to cope with uncertainty and related problematics, I have chosen a case study approach. Miles and Huberman (1994) define a case “as a phenomenon...occurring in a bounded context. The case is, in effect, your unit of analysis” (p.25). When examining a particular case or cases, researchers seek out both what is common and what is unique about the area of study. Uniqueness of cases is often pervasive, extending to “the nature of the case, historical background, physical setting, other contexts including economic, political, legal, and aesthetic, other cases through which this cases is recognized, and those informants through whom the case can be known” (Stake, 1994, p. 238). Considering these factors, cases can be very unique or common or fall somewhere in between. Though, neither one is necessarily preferred, the uniqueness of cases must be addressed if the case study is being connected to a grander generalization about the population as a whole (Campbell, 1975).

Taking a (multiple) case study approach is preferred because behavior is patterned (Stake, 1994). Getting to know the participants and their interaction with one another in each case can help clarify understanding and identify behavior patterns in conflict communication as well as non-conflict communication. Case studies also offer the benefit of in-depth study and comparison of uniquely experienced phenomena. In the case of

romantic couples in conflict, extended time spent with participants is key in understanding how partners deal with uncertainty in their relationship and the role uncertainty plays within conflict and/or the dissolution of the relationship. Due to the uniqueness of individual cases, a multiple case study approach ensures that one particular case is not an anomaly (Stake, 1994). Moreover, multiple cases “offer the researcher an even deeper understanding of processes and outcomes of cases, the chance to test hypotheses, and a good picture of locally grounded causality” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 26). Multiple cases can garner a more holistic view of uncertainty in romantic relationships as opposed to one particular couple’s experience. Using a multiple case study approach generates more breadth of concepts and adds to the validity of a study (Grela & Gandoar, 1999).

The term “case study” is ambiguous; it can refer to a host of different approaches and it is the responsibility of the researcher to construct clear definitions of what constitutes a case and how it will be studied. For this study, in-depth semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with participants to investigate the role of uncertainty in romantic conflict. Interviewing is a preferred method because of the freedom it allows both the researcher and participants to develop questions and answers in a more holistic way. Though semi-structured interviews include an initial direction, as the name would suggest, the researcher is not bound by a formal structured interview format that does not allow for deviation from established interview questions. A semi-structured approach allows the researcher the ability to ask follow up questions and/or ask participants to further elaborate on answers they have shared. Lindlof and Taylor (2002) define this process as using an interview guide as a opposed to a more formal

interview schedule. The interview guide consists of “topics and questions that the interviewer can ask in different ways for different participants” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, 195).

Additionally, Lindlof and Taylor (2002) anticipate different participants responding to different styles of interview questions and a semi-structured approach can better accommodate participants. A semi-structured interview allows the conversation between researcher and participant to grow organically. Though there is an established starting point, there are no established constraints where the interview must end. This approach warrants the development of answers by participants as well as potentially unintended findings by the researcher due to the liberty participants can exercise based on the breadth and depth of their responses.

Interviews also call for a commitment from the researcher that is unique to this method. Relationships between researcher and participants do not always have to be established solely for the purpose of data collection, however, in-depth interviews do not function on that principle. The goal of interviewing is to understand a participant’s experience; thus, it becomes paramount to establish rapport with participants (Fontana & Frey, 1994). This particular study demands participants to disclose information about romantic conflict, a considerably personal topic. Not only must the conflict(s) itself be disclosed but also the contextualization of the situation and overall communication patterns between (former) romantic partners, which can only be solicited through increased trust between participants and researcher.

Gaining the trust of participants is essential to a researcher’s success insofar as the loss of trust can result in the end of a study (Fontana & Frey, 1994). Building trust in any

relationship can be challenging, and the researcher/participants relationship is no exception. The researcher may have to disclose personal information or similar measures as needed for the participant to feel comfortable sharing private information. The establishment of close rapport between researcher and participants can “open doors to more informed research” (Fontana & Frey, 1994, p. 367).

Aside from fostering trust, Lindlof and Taylor (2002) call for a reflection of the researcher’s role and identity. The dual role of the interviewer as a participant and as an observer can be balanced by recognizing and understanding the experiences of the participants while keeping the goals of the interview in mind.

Drawbacks of in-depth interviews stem from participants’ willingness to disclose enough information for the researcher to draw conclusions. While the researcher has little control of what information the participants share, the questions the researcher asks are integral to the participants’ responses and must be carefully constructed.

Guiding the interviews is the Retrospective Interview Technique (RIT) (Huston, Surra, Fitzgerald & Cate, 1981). Huston et al. designed RIT as a way to help individuals “reconstruct in a time-ordered fashion, those events and circumstances that led up to their marriage” (p. 61). RIT asks participants to graph and discuss the changes that occurred over time in some aspect of their relationships (see Olson & Golish, 2002). The original study that utilized RIT examined the probability of unmarried couples’ likelihood to marry and produced three trajectories to marriage (Huston, et al., 1981).

RIT has since been used in a number of studies to capture relational and organizational processes, such as romantic relationship development (Baxter & Bullis, 1986), post-divorce relational changes (Graham, 1997), and patterns of verbal aggression

in romantic conflict (Olson & Golish, 2002). RIT allows researchers to develop a visual representation of a specific phenomenon to capture how that phenomenon changes over time, and to examine how it is experienced differently between individuals or couples (Baxter & Bullis, 1986; Graham, 1997; Huston et al., 1981, Olson & Golish, 2002). Specifically, using RIT asks participants to identify and plot turning points in their relationships during a specified period of time. Bullis and Bach (1989) elaborate,

The graphs provide a tool through which interviewees are able to envision their relationship over time. Since they take on the role of filling in the graphs, they typically become quite actively involved in creating a final graph which is the best possible representation of their relationships (p. 278).

Olson and Golish (2002) assert that in general, “RIT is an interactive and phenomenological method, grounded in that participant’s lived experiences (p. 185). The method highlights the importance of insider perspective and attempts to understand the richness of a particular phenomenon (Denzin, 1989). RIT is a visual “sense-making tool employed as a means of revealing the participants’ symbolic worlds” (Graham, 1997, p. 357). Participants assume responsibility for the construction of the graph and are frequently asked if the final product accurately reflects their memory of the situation, being allowed to make changes if necessary.

The graph used in RIT is made up of the ordinate axis measuring level of commitment and length of relationship on the abscissa axis. Starting at the beginning of the relationship, participants plot turning points of the relationship (e.g. first fights, saying “I love you,” etc.) and relate them to level of commitment they had for their partner at the corresponding time (Baxter & Pittman, 2001). RIT in its original use measured the turning points leading up to couples deciding to marry. Because the scope of the current study is uncertainty in conflict, modifications must be made to better suit

the parameters of the study. Instead of asking participants to identify turning points leading to marriage, participants will instead identify conflicts they recall being particularly significant throughout the relationship as well as times of relational uncertainty.

A retrospective examination of turning points, or in this case, significant conflicts and times of uncertainty, provides an opportunity to isolate important events in which an individual attached considerable meaning to a particular conflict. By chronologically mapping out significant conflicts and times of uncertainty, participants can discuss both individual occasions of conflict and uncertainty as well as a comprehensive description of patterns of conflict throughout the duration of the relationship.

The mapping out of significant conflicts and times of relational uncertainty is used as a tool for participants to have a visual account of their former relationship. RIT is used as a conversation starter, not a method guiding analysis. The intent is to not draw conclusions based on the map alone, as previous studies utilizing RIT have done, but instead to orient participants in thinking about their former romantic relationships in a way that will encourage a holistic recollection of conflict and uncertainty.

In-depth interviews (see Appendix A question list) incorporated with RIT creates a semi-structured method where participants can recall poignant relational times the study calls for, and then discuss them at length with the researcher. The goal of incorporating both methods is to contextualize the duration of the relationship for the researcher if the participant does not discuss conflicts in chronological order. The visual account may also encourage participants to discuss conflicts in some sort of order; however, the researcher

will not mandate order of discussion, rather only ask for clarification and/or contextualization when necessary.

As with any method, there are limitations involved with RIT. To begin, it is a retrospective approach, which is contingent on participants' ability to recall past events in enough detail to base a study on. Baxter and Pittman (2001) noted that relational partners did not always identify the same events as turning points in the relationship and only used events that both partners noted as a part of the analysis.

The analysis of the interviews is informed by existing research, which calls for a technique that allows for such an approach. Gill (2009) proposes an abductive analysis when the researcher begins with "concepts or themes derived from existing literature" (p. 10). An abductive approach to data analysis permits the researcher to "add to, clarify, revise, or in other ways further illuminate the suggested themes based on ideas and interpretations that emerge from the data" (Gill, 2009, p. 10). Accordingly, in this study concepts from PI theory are used as initial guidelines on which to base data analysis.

Similar to Anderson's (2009) analysis of qualitative interviews regarding conflict and problematic integration, interviews will be read for significant discussion relevant to conflict (the phenomenon being studied) and grouped into themes informed by PI theory. Themes help the researcher interpret findings and link them to the subject being studied (uncertainty) (Anderson, 2009).

Procedures

This study, consisting of in-depth interviews, was conducted with three former couples (defined as being either divorced or separated). Each of the three couple relationships forms a case; communication patterns that existed within the relationship,

significant conflicts across the relationship with particular attention to conflicts near the demise of the relationship, and related uncertainties and problematics will be considered for each case.

There is no lack of difficulty in identifying characteristics of what constitutes a significant romantic relationship. Meaningful relationships cannot simply be defined by duration or any other one characteristic, especially by an outsider. Romantic relationships are a complex construction of a host of variables that are in constant tension with one another. Pearson, Child and Carmon (2010) indentified committed couples by marriage or cohabitation for the practicality of their study. Pearson, Child and Carmon's (2010) definition is used in the current study as a base for population identification. Additionally couples' relationships must have lasted at least two years to ensure enough instances of conflict within the duration of the relationship.

Participant couples were solicited through word of mouth. Initial exchanges consisted of informed consent, and the assurance of confidentiality by concealing names and/or other identifying features. Each participant engaged in an in-depth exchange to complete RIT graphs and to discuss relational history, romantic conflict, and the role uncertainty played in the dissolution of the relationship; participants also provided insight into communication patterns throughout the duration of the relationship in non-conflict times to provide context and a deeper understanding of how the relationship functioned. After I achieved a comprehensive understanding of the relationship itself, and specifically conflict and uncertainty within the relationship, the participants had fulfilled their involvement in the study.

Focusing the study on former couples enabled participants to talk candidly and openly about significant conflicts and patterns of conflict that ultimately resulted in the demise of their relationship. Former couples also were able to more easily identify conflicts that led to dissolution because couples often do not recognize when they are heading towards dissolution in the midst of the process (Roloff & Soule, 2002). The boundedness of a former relationship made the task of pinpointing specific instances of uncertainty in conflicts that led to dissolution more feasible for both participants and the researcher.

In a pilot study, the population consisted of current couples, which proved to be a major drawback when participants were asked to discuss conflict in depth. Participants were hesitant to discuss situations in which their partners could be perceived as a “bad person.” Using a retrospective approach with former couples helped to alleviate the pressure of ensuring their relational partner is perceived in a positive, though potentially unrealistic light.

Baxter and Pittman (2001) note that bringing couples together to co-create a collaborative turning point graph while using RIT would have provided a more inclusive relational history as partners could discuss mutual turning points. However, working with former couples did not provide such a luxury to bring couples together to co-construct and recall significant conflicts and times of increased relational uncertainty on the RIT graph, taking into consideration the former couples were not willing to participate together.

Participants

Jay (age 32) and Lydia (age 28) were the first of the three couples interviewed. They met through mutual friends soon after Jay completed an eight-year commitment to the military and was back to civilian life in his hometown. It was Jay's adjustment period that influenced their decision to cohabitate. Being back in his parents' house for the first time in nearly a decade, Lydia recalls Jay spending a great deal of time at her house to escape family stress. As occasional overnight stays became more common, Lydia does not remember any specific discussion about deciding to live together. Sharing a home evolved from time spent together versus deciding to take that step together in their relationship. Their lack of communication influenced assumptions that Lydia had. She was under the impression by Jay moving in with her that their relationship was headed toward marriage and children, two things she valued highly. After years of negotiating through future relational goals, the couple could not agree on a future that made both of them happy.

The second couple interviewed was Rick (age 30) and Jill (age 26). Their nine year relationship began while Jill was a senior in high school. Their relationship sustained difficult times such as attending college at two different schools and infidelity. Yet throughout, the couple seemed committed to one another. Unlike Jay and Lydia, Rick and Jill consciously decided to move in together five years into their relationship. Rick was able to purchase a house that Jill shared with him. After 9 years, their relationship was stagnant and trust issues were deeply rooted without resolve. Jill thought the relationship would eventually lead to marriage, but Rick did not deem marriage necessary. The

relationship ended with difficulty as both Rick and Jill were strongly connected to each other's family and social networks.

The third couple interviewed has a much different story than the first two. Rachel (age 27) was bartending when Brian (age 29) stopped in for a cocktail. Eight short months later, the couple was married with a child on the way. Though both individuals recall falling in love quickly and deciding that marriage was the best decision for them at the time, the stress of a new family eventually settled in. Rachel went from working full time and being financially independent to relying solely on Brian for support while staying at home with a newborn. Brian was clear about his commitment to his family, implying that it was Rachel who initiated the separation. Though Rachel agreed that marriage was the right decision at the time for her new family, she never fully adjusted to life as a homemaker.

Getting to know these three couples provided insight into the complexities of romantic relationships. As the interviews transpired, the relationships among the couples progressively became more complex, yielding rich examples of PI and how/if participants negotiated through.

By examining uncertainty and related problematics in romantic conflict behavior, we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of why the experience can be so difficult to navigate. Using PI as a lens offers a perspective of romantic conflict that has not yet been explored. PI is a theory that can grapple with complex situations such as the uncertainty inherently involved in romantic conflict. This research will contribute to scholarship in uncertainty, conflict, and close personal relationships.

Chapter 3
Analysis

Interviews with six individuals discussing their experience with romantic conflict, more specifically conflict in the dissolution of the relationship, yielded interesting findings which can be better understood by applying PI theory. Consistent with the current literature, the dissolution of a romantic relationship is a complex severing of emotional connections and social ties. Most participants found the ending of their relationships a stressful time of articulating and negotiating values. While the main focus of the study was to better understand how uncertainty in particular functions in conflict, all four forms of PI were evident in participant experiences. The four primary forms of PI, uncertainty, ambivalence, divergence, and impossibility, will be discussed along with a layering of ambivalence and divergence different than current literature's notions of chaining was uncovered through participant anecdotes.

Uncertainty

Uncertainty in relationships is common, and within this study, participants expressed uncertainty within conflict. When questioned about uncertainty in relation to conflict, all six participants expressed a considerable difference between significant conflict issues and petty conflicts. Areas of significant conflict included future goals (such as marriage and children), religion, trust, and relational roles (independent/shared responsibilities). Insignificant conflicts were not as well articulated, but included more day-to-day situations such as household chores or jovial subjects like baseball.

Insignificant conflict did not affect participants' certainty about their relationships. Yet, significant conflicts seemed to heighten levels of uncertainty about the

relationship. It was within conflict that significant relational issues had a tendency to arise among participants. When participants were asked about “significant conflicts”, the phrase was intentionally left ambiguous in order for participants to ascribe their own meaning to what they defined as a “significant conflict.” Ultimately participants defined significant conflicts as reoccurring issues that led to relational dissolution. Though some “insignificant” conflicts remained at a superficial level, it was common for a disagreement regarding weekend plans, for example, to chain into a conflict about lack of trust between partners. Somewhat trivial topics could chain into deeply seated relational insecurities, and because couples are already in conflict they could feel more empowered to bring up topics of contention. For example, knowing that a discussion of marriage would initiate a significant conflict, a partner may choose to avoid it. However if they are engaged in conflict about a different issue, it seems easier to bring up marriage because there is already a conflict established. Though there are various uncertainties in relationships, the most prominent found in this study was how long the relationship would last. All participants expressed that while they were highly committed to their partners, at some point in the relationship, underlying issues brought on by conflict undermined certainty and commitment.

Jay and Lydia were not married, but cohabited during most of their three year relationship. Both pointed to religion and future goals as the source of tension in their relationship. Lydia states, “But when we’d talk about having children and he said he didn’t want to raise them in any denomination at all, no baptism, nothing, surprised me big time.”

Lydia, who was surprised about Jay's lack of interest in religion, felt that while in conflict about religion with him, their future together was uncertain. She discloses, "I didn't know if I could stay with someone who not only doesn't believe in God, but doesn't even seem to respect the fact that I do". When asked if Jay's feelings about Christianity influenced the way she talked with him, she responded,

Absolutely. After having the same argument about this topic several times, and us not getting anywhere, I would just shut down. After a while, it just upset me too much to hear him talk about it... I think in my heart I knew I didn't want to have kids with a man who didn't care about religion, but I didn't want to think about it.

Babrow (1995) notes that PI concerning one topic typically gives rise to related concerns. In Lydia's case, her concerns about Jay's lack of religion influenced her feelings about having children with him. Additionally, we see the centrality of communication to the experience of PI in this example. It was Jay's expression of his feelings about religion that ultimately created these concerns for Lydia.

While he mentioned the same topics of tension in his interview that Lydia did, Jay's uncertainty about his relationship with Lydia occurred differently than his former partner. When asked about fear and concern during a conflict about religion Jay responded,

I was just concerned that the fighting over the same thing over and over again would never stop. I don't want to spend all my time fighting over something that I wasn't going to change my mind about. What I really wanted was for her to stop talking to me about it.

It was not a future with someone who held different religious beliefs that made Jay experience uncertainty; it was metaconflict that made him question his commitment to Lydia. For Jay, it was not the issues themselves that made him uncertain about his relationship with Lydia. It was the way she approached and engaged in conflict with him.

In other words, it was not what they were disagreeing about, but how she behaved within those disagreements. Throughout Jay's interview, he often mentioned how much Lydia would initiate conflict with him. He stated,

I know what sets her off and I could always tell by the way she was sitting or the look like she's pouting that she was upset and wanted me to ask her why. But I knew if I asked, a fight would start. This happened all the time and I didn't want to fight all the time. I got to a point where I didn't want to be in a relationship if this is how it was going to be.

Jay's experience demonstrates that relational uncertainty does not solely occur as a result of issues that couples disagree over, but as a result of conflict itself. Jay implies it was the way Lydia continually behaved in conflict that heightened his uncertainty concerning their relationship until he felt the relationship was no longer worth continuing.

Rick and Jill also experienced uncertainty throughout their nine year relationship. Five years in, Rick purchased a house that Jill subsequently moved into for the duration of the relationship. Early in their relationship, Jill heard a rumor of Rick's infidelity, a topic that sourced the majority of relational problems throughout the remainder of their time together. Jill recalls,

When she told me what she heard about Rick, I didn't know how to react. I wasn't even sure if I wanted to confront Rick about it. [Why?] Because I wasn't sure if it was true or not, and as long as I didn't ask him, he couldn't tell me it was true. I was scared that he wouldn't tell me what I wanted to hear, so I was better off not knowing the truth.

Jill's avoidance of confronting Rick about his rumored infidelity is reminiscent of "hopeful uncertainty" (Gill, 2009, p.19). Babrow and Kline (2009) discuss the complexities of uncertainty and the desire some individuals have to remain uncertain. As long as Jill remained uncertain of the truth, she could continue hoping the rumor was not true. It was wishful thinking that led Jill to avoid confrontation with Rick.

Rick also discussed this particular conflict as a highly uncertain time in his relationship with Jill. Rick offers,

Well, it's never an easy conversation to have with your girlfriend. So I avoided talking about it because I didn't know how she would react. Will she break up with me, will she cry, will she scream at me? Those were all questions that I couldn't answer. It made sense to me at the time to just try to not talk about it.

Rick's avoidance of confrontation with Jill can also be construed as hopeful uncertainty. As long as Rick avoided talking about the rumor, he could be hopeful that his relationship with Jill could remain unchanged.

Both Rick and Jill's uncertainty about each other's potential responses in regard to "the rumor" led them to avoid the subject in exchange for wishful thinking. Avoiding conflict during highly uncertain times was a pattern for Rick and Jill. It is in Jill's nature to not talk about things that upset her, and Rick's response was to not upset her more by asking what was wrong.

Avoiding conflict in uncertain relational times continued throughout Rick and Jill's relationship. During the dissolution stage of their relationship, Jill noted that conflict occurred intrapersonally; instead of a verbal conflict with Rick, Jill internalized her conflicting thoughts regarding Rick's behavior and her relationship with him.

He would make comments about never wanting to get married. Or when I'd try to talk to him about selling the house, and buying a house we both owned, he would say something like, 'That doesn't make sense' or 'We're fine here'. And when he'd say those things, instead of telling him how much it bothered me or that I was hurt by it, I would keep it bottled up. But I would constantly think about how much longer I could be with someone who didn't seem to want what I wanted.

Unlike the other former couples, who noted a more gradual rise in conflict in the final month or months, Rick and Jill's dissolution was capstoned with only a few days of interpersonal conflict. Jill recalled severe conflict avoidance toward the ending of her and

Rick's nine-year relationship. Uncertain of what would happen if she engaged conflict, Jill's apprehension and avoidance resulted in a few final days of concentrated conflict during which her relationship ended.

Avoidance as it relates to uncertainty warrants further discussion. As noted previously, Jill's avoidance was a result of wishful thinking; as long as she remained uncertain about how Rick would react and whether Rick had been unfaithful, she could hope for a positive outcome. Lydia also experienced wishful thinking when Jay first disclosed his aversion to marriage and children. She indicated by avoiding discussion of the topic, she could hope that Jay would eventually change his mind on the subject.

As Lydia and Jill hoped for marriage and children in their futures, Rachel and Brian were negotiating through marital dissolution and the affect it had on their son. As Brian talked about his relationship with Rachel, it was clear that he hoped for reconciliation. By being a good father to Nathan and avoiding conflict with Rachel, Brian implied that he was hopeful his marriage could be salvaged. In Brian's case, wishful thinking influenced his decision to avoid conflict with Rachel. However, wishful thinking is certainly not the only reason participants avoided conflict with their partners. Most other answers related to the subject or situation not being "worth" fighting over.

Lydia, Jay, Jill and Rick's break-ups were all influenced by different views of marriage and children. Both couples' uncertainties heightened toward the end of their relationships when they were negotiating future plans. Though Rachel and Brian, the final participants, experienced some uncertainty in their dissolution phase, it was the beginning of their relationship where uncertainty was at its highest. Within the first eight months of Rachel and Brian's whirlwind beginning, they were married with a baby on the

way. When asked to recall their first big conflict, both Rachel and Brian recalled the day they found out Rachel was pregnant. Brian remembers,

When I came home that day, I could tell by the look on her face that something wasn't right. I didn't know what it was, and I couldn't think of anything that I had done to upset her. But when she told me she was pregnant, a million thoughts went through my head. I didn't know what to say to her. I waited for some reaction out of her so I knew how to respond.

Though the previous excerpt is not indicative of a traditional conflict, it was the first time Brian and Rachel had to discuss a life altering decision. When asked about the first major conflict they experienced, they both cited the day that Rachel discovered she was pregnant. Brian and Rachel both equated the first major conflict with their first stressful situation together. Rachel and Brian expressed their concern regarding how a child would impact their young relationship. Rachel said, "After I found out and told Brian, he was really supportive of whatever I decided, but I knew either way, our relationship would change forever". Rachel was asked if she discussed her decision to have a baby with Brian; she responded,

Absolutely! Brian heard every thought that I had. Finding out I was pregnant was such a shock to me that I had to talk it out with him. Before Nathan [their son] I made all my decisions by myself, but deciding to become a parent was too difficult to decide without talking to Brian about it.

Brian was asked how the stress of deciding to have a child impacted the way he engaged in conflict with Rachel. He answered,

We never fought about having a baby. Don't get me wrong, we were both stressed and would sometimes snap about little things, but any discussions about having a child were done calmly. Same with getting married. Sure I had thoughts about if we were moving too quickly, and if these were the right decisions, I'm sure Rachel did too. But once we got married, I was committed to her and to Nathan. I had doubts about what kind of father I'd be, but I didn't take marriage lightly, so after that I didn't have any doubts about our relationship.

Brian's uncertainty about having a child with Rachel ended when they decided to get married. Brian's description of marriage implies that he viewed the commitment as a means to an end of relational uncertainty. Regardless of what the future held, he assumed that he would continue to stay married to Rachel. Yet it seems that Brian's uncertainty regarding fatherhood overshadowed concerns he may have had about his relationship with Rachel. Brian disclosed that he wondered if he and Rachel were "moving too quickly," which suggests that uncertainty about his relationship existed. Brian's view of marriage aided in his suppression of relational uncertainties with Rachel by replacing it with concerns about fatherhood. Rachel and Brian's experience with uncertainty was much different compared to the other participants. Relational uncertainty took a backseat to their fears concerning raising a child, which we could still argue is closely related to relational uncertainty, whereas the other couples did not have a child to consider.

Ambivalence

The presence of ambivalence in the dissolution stage of these relationships was overwhelming. Having conflicting thoughts and feelings simultaneously was most prevalent when participants were discussing their experience with deciding to terminate the relationship. When Lydia accepted that Jay did not want to have children she expressed,

What do you do when you find out your boyfriend of three years doesn't want kids? Do you stay with him because you love him and he makes you happy and just hope that someday he changes his mind? Or do you leave and hope to find someone who does want kids? And its not like I could talk to him about that. At that point I was really torn.

Jill echoed Lydia's feelings about being torn; "I had been with him for nine years, our relationship just worked. We started dating when I was 17; he was all I'd ever known. I

loved him and wanted to be with him but at the same time I thought of all the things I could do without him”.

Feelings of ambivalence about one’s relationship were influenced by the presence of conflict. Jill was asked if her commitment to Rick changed from when they were not in conflict to when they were. She responded,

My commitment to him did not change, but we were good, I was so happy. But then he’d say something to piss me off and I wondered how I could ever stay with a guy like that. But then in the next breath he’d say something to make me laugh and I knew exactly why I stayed with him for so long.

Jill’s rapid emotional change is an example of latent ambivalence. Latent ambivalence occurs when participants do not recognize or do not acknowledge their expression of ambivalence. Gill (2009) defines vacillation as a type of latent ambivalence, indicated by a swift switch within the same story. In Jill’s narrative, she expressed that she remained committed to Rick even in conflict, but quickly changed her story when she actually reflected on how she felt about him within conflict. She does not acknowledge she had opposing thoughts, but her response demonstrates vacillating back and forth. Jill’s rapid changes of feelings were not an anomaly. Lydia and Rachel also expressed similar sentiments regarding their change in feelings about the relationship when they were not in conflict with their partners to when they were.

Rick and Jay both describe their mixed feelings in terms of investment, wondering if they should hold on to an “investment” or cut their losses and move on. Both men seemed to negotiate through ambivalence by focusing on the “return” of their investment. When Jay was asked how he worked out his mixed feelings about the relationship, he claimed, “For a while I just stuck it out because I didn’t want to waste

three years”. Rick similarly stated “It wasn’t worth it to me to end a nine year relationship”.

Noticing how Rick and Jay describe their experiences as investments mirrors key principles of social exchange theory. Social exchange literature maintains that people are “motivated to maximize rewards and minimize costs” of dyadic relationships (Ferrara & Levine, 2009, p. 191). Thibaut and Kelley (1959) theorize that people are interdependent to the extent that they can control the amount of rewards and costs of a relationship. Stemming from social exchange, Rusbult’s (1980) investment model of commitment is better suited for married couples/committed partners because they are considered more permanent than other relationships (Thibaut and Kelley, 1959). Rusbult (1980) specifies three predictions regarding the investment model; first, relational stability is most directly determined by feelings of commitment, second, relational satisfaction is determined by stability and commitment, and finally, relational investment is also a contributing factor to the continuation of a relationship. Ferrara and Levine (2009) cite investment as a reason why people stay in relationships when they are unhappy. Rusbult (1980) finds that commitment increases over time because as resources put into the relationship accumulate, the cost of withdrawing from the relationship increases.

Ferrara and Levine (2009) look specifically at betrayal in relationships using the investment model to explain why a person may not end a relationship, even after betrayal. Rick and Jay specifically mention investment as a reason to remain in a relationship, even though they disagreed on relational goals with their partners. Jay and Rick used their relational investments as ways to remedy their uncertainty and ambivalence regarding their relationships. In their situations, uncertainty and ambivalence were not considered

to be costly enough to end a relationship; their investments were more beneficial than the cost of uncertainty.

Once he got married, Brian claimed his mixed emotions were gone. Rachel on the other hand, while committed to raising her son with Brian, expressed ambivalence about her relationship with him:

My whole life changed so fast. I went from working full time to staying at home with a newborn, solely relying on Brian for financial support. I really love staying at home with Nathan, and was really surprised how much I liked being a housewife, but at the same time I missed my independence and I guess blamed Brian for that. And I think that came out when we were fighting.

Rachel's ambivalence impacted the way she engaged in conflict, as she attributed blame to Brian for her mixed feelings about her newly changed life. Before Rachel and Brian became parents and Rachel still had financial independence, the problems that subsequently arose were non-existent. It was after the couple decided it best for Rachel to stay home with their son that Rachel changed her conflict behavior because she held Brian accountable for her newly changed life.

Divergence

Gill (2009) describes divergence as occurring when “something that is highly (positively) valued is unlikely to occur or when something very negatively valued is likely to occur” (p. 7). For example, if the relationship were highly valued, but unlikely to survive, individuals would experience diverging values and probabilities. Within this study, it was clear among all the participants that their relationships were highly valued during most of the duration.

Divergence was extremely evident in participant descriptions of the dissolution phase of their relationships. As a highly valued relationship was coming to an end,

tensions between partners, and between each individuals' values and probabilities, were high and influenced the way partners engaged in conflict with one another.

Brian and Rachel's experience with divergence differed greatly from the other two couples because of the inclusion of their son. While Rachel's feelings changed about her marriage to Brian, she still wanted to maintain a relationship with Brian so they could continue to raise their son together. Rachel expressed,

Deciding to separate from Brian was extremely hard, because its not just us to think about it. A lot more thought goes into ending a marriage than breaking up with your boyfriend you know? On the one hand, I'm ending a relationship with my husband, but at the same time I still need to carry on a relationship with my son's father.

Here we see divergence as Rachel (who is simultaneously experiencing ambivalence – positively evaluating Brian as the father of her son but negatively evaluating him as her romantic partner) struggles with ending one aspect of a valued relationship while attempting to maintain another aspect of it, which could entail stress and strain. Rachel's experience with divergence is unlike that of the other couples because of the addition of her son and the multi-dimensional relationship with Brian. As she described in her interview, she separated her romantic relationship with Brian from the relationship she wanted to maintain with him as a co-parent. Rachel's experience is more complex than simply chaining among forms of PI, more specifically between ambivalence and divergence. Her experience warrants further analysis.

Divergent Ambivalence

Brian and Rachel's relationship demonstrates PI in a different way than current literature describes. More than simply chaining among forms, Brian and Rachel's experience reveals a layering of forms. Rachel was re-evaluating her relationship with

Brian as her romantic partner, but at the same time re-negotiating her relationship with him as her son's father. She continued to value her relationship with Brian as a co-parent, but did not anticipate a positive outcome with Brian as her romantic partner. The complexity of their relationship calls for a more complex discussion of PI. Rachel felt that separating from Brian would be best, but at the same time wanted to continue a relationship with him, essentially valuing part of her relationship with him while letting part of it go. While experiencing ambivalence, she also experienced divergence. Though Rachel and Brian were both in agreement that it was Rachel who initiated their separation, Brian did experience similar divergent ambivalence. He stated,

In any relationship before Rachel, breaking up seems really easy. You don't have to see each other anymore and it's easier to convince yourself that you don't care about them. But with Rachel it wasn't like that at all. Even though I was really upset that she wanted to separate, I couldn't not see her, or not have a relationship with her. She's Nathan's mother, and will always be my family. Though we're not together, I still am committed to her by being a good father to Nathan.

Brian's comparison of his separation from Rachel to previous break-ups highlights how having a child heightens the values of his relationship with Rachel and further contributes to PI. Based on Brian's past experiences he was inclined to break all ties in the ending of a relationship, but because he is committed to raising a child with Rachel, his break up behavior had to be re-negotiated. Brian and Rachel's distinction between their feelings about each other as romantic partners versus their newly negotiated relationship as strictly co-parents demonstrates divergent ambivalence.

The layering of PI forms differs from chaining between forms in two ways; first forms are experienced simultaneously as Rachel experienced ambivalence and divergence. Second the layered forms influence one another as Rachel was ambivalent

about her divergence by wanting to maintain a relationship with her son's father whom she cared about, but also wanted to end a relationship with her husband.

Ambivalence and divergence are not the only forms of PI that can be layered. In many ways, Rachel also experienced divergent uncertainty. For example, though Rachel valued her relationship with Brian and did not foresee a positive ending, she was uncertain of her romantic future with Brian. The layering (versus chaining) better allows for inconsistencies in behavior as well as contradictions. For instance, though Rachel decided to dissolve her romantic relationship with Brian, she disclosed in the interview that she was not yet comfortable considering discussing the possibility of divorce. More generally, human behavior does not always demonstrate clear linear logic as the concept of chaining assumes. Instead, as demonstrated by these findings, individuals may simultaneously experience many forms of PI and those forms interact with one another. For example, Rachel's uncertainty about her relationship at the same time that she experiences divergence about the relationship may further tip the scales in favor of dissolution. In contrast, if Rachel were to have been truly certain about her commitment in that relationship, her feelings of divergence (seeing that a highly valued relationship is headed in the wrong direction) may have caused her to engage in different behaviors – attempting to save the relationship rather than leading down the path to dissolution.

Impossibility

The form of PI most associated with conflict at the end of a romantic relationship is impossibility. All three participating couples' relationships dissolved because of some sort of perceived impossibility. For example, Lydia experienced impossibility about having children with Jay as something she highly valued was no longer an option.

Impossibility was the most overt form of PI that was negotiated through conflict. All participants expressed that impossibility of furthering their relationship with their partners was experienced within conflict.

When Lydia discussed future relational goals with Jay, he stood firm in his conviction to not have children. Hurt by his unwillingness to negotiate, Lydia recalled a number of occasions discussing children with Jay.

Lydia: Every time one of our friends would have a baby, I would try to ease into a conversation about children. It would always turn into a fight. I did think that maybe he would change his mind the longer we were together, but I finally realized that he was not going to change. I could deal with the fact that he didn't agree with religion and he didn't want to get married, but not about kids. I wanted children and to keep having the same fight over and over again was just not worth it.

Lydia's realization that Jay would never share her feelings about having children led her to believe that terminating the relationship was the best option for her.

Rick and Jill's nine years together ended with intense conflict over the future of their relationship. Rick felt that their inability to trust one another ultimately led to their demise. He said, "After having the same fight for nearly our entire relationship, I knew that we would never trust each other. I mean if she couldn't trust me by now, there was no way she ever would".

Rick and Jill, along with Jay and Lydia all expressed impossibility overtly. For these two couples their impossibility was negotiated through conflict and ultimately remedied by terminating their romantic involvement. Brian and Rachel, true to form, differed in their experience with impossibility. Nothing in Brian's interview suggests he ever experienced impossibility. In Brian's final statement of his interview he states,

She'll always be in my life, and I'm committed to her as Nathan's father. Though we're not together right now and I guess you could say I'm not exactly certain

where our relationship as a couple will end up, but I am certain that my commitment to our family is strong.

Brian's PI experiences brought him full circle to wishful thinking; continuing a relationship with Rachel was never an impossibility. Rachel, on the other hand, did not echo Brian's experience:

I really can't recall a certain fight that made me know that it was time for us to separate. We never really fought. I guess at the end of the day, we just got married too quickly and he never fully understood how much my life changed. We are just too different to ever make things work. But he is a great dad and I'm happy he is Nathan's father.

Though Rachel did feel that a romantic relationship with Brian could not continue, impossibility was not experienced in conflict specifically, instead it was experienced as a culmination of their entire relationship.

As was evidence in the way uncertainty affected participants' behavior (frequently leading to avoidance), impossibility also affected how individuals communicate with one another. Jay and Lydia both recall an intense spike in conflict toward the ending of their relationship. Not only did Jay and Lydia disagree on the future of their relationship regarding marriage and children, Jay's memory of the dissolution phase was filled with conflict over more trivial issues.

Jay: Before we actually broke up, she became really nit-picky with me. Like if I made dinner, she would make comments that I didn't get the right salad dressing, whereas she never really did that before. So I started doing things to piss her off.

Interviewer: Why did you intentionally piss her off?

Jay: It just became a game for me. It was just a way to keep myself entertained because she seemed so angry with me all the time.

Jay's behavior demonstrates how recognizing that the relationship was headed toward dissolution affected the way he engaged with Lydia. While the relationship was strong, Jay did not seek to "piss off" Lydia, but once he believed there was no way he and Lydia

would stay together, his behavior changed. Jay's change in behavior is not an anomaly; Jill also expressed a similar change in behavior while experiencing impossibility.

Throughout Jill and Rick's nine year relationship, Jill confessed that she did not always share her feelings with Rick when she was upset, thus preferring to avoid conflict rather than engage in it. However, in the dissolution phase, Jill became more vocal about how she was feeling.

Interviewer: Why did your behavior change toward the end of the relationship?

Jill: I just came to a point where I didn't care anymore. Like before, I would bite my tongue to avoid a fight, but at that time, I just let everything out.

Interviewer: Do you think that is why you had more arguments toward the end?

Jill: Yes, 100%. Throughout our entire relationship, I did my best to end fights, but at that point, I just didn't care to stop them anymore.

As Jill decided she did not want to continue a relationship with Rick, her willingness to engage in conflict increased. Rick and Lydia also recognized changes in their respective partners' behavior in the final phase of the relationship where impossibility is identified. Jill and Jay's experience with impossibility and the subsequent change in conflict behaviors suggests that impossibility is a significant form of PI in relation to conflict.

Chapter 4
Conclusions

Conflict of any sort can be a challenging experience and difficult for partners to negotiate. Conflict with a romantic partner is that much more complex as relational stakes are heightened. Looking specifically at the role uncertainty and other problematics play within romantic conflict can help us better understand, and engage in, the experience. Discussing encounters with conflict with three former couples helped to tease out the nuances of what happens when couples disagree.

Romantic relationships and conflict within them have been theorized in many ways (e.g. Braiker & Kelley, 1979; Duck, 1997; Gottman, 1979) and while all models offer value in conceptualizing this phenomena, uncertainty as it relates to romantic conflict has not been previously addressed. Applying PI not only addresses uncertainty, but the three remaining forms (ambivalence, divergence, and impossibility) are all pertinent to how couples experience conflict. Moreover, as was evident in the analysis of data for this project, how people value their relationships has a significant influence on conflict behaviors and outcomes. Divergent values also play an important role in the dissolution of relationships. Thus PI theory, which focuses heavily on value orientations, provides an important yet previously unrecognized way of understanding conflict behavior. Though elements of the existing theoretical models were evident in the data, PI offers the most holistic view of romantic conflict and how individuals negotiate through it. Future research would benefit from additional examination of how PI theory can further illuminate previous models. For example, future studies might examine how the experience of PI influences each phase of Duck's model.

Summary of findings

Disagreements are extremely common in romantic relationships. Many are dismissed as trivial and inconsequential of damage to the relationship. However, as demonstrated by participants, many trivial disagreements stem from larger relational issues, which then can evolve into significant conflicts. Though insignificant conflicts can be dismissed without much effort, significant conflicts can place more strain on a relationship.

Asking former couples to discuss significant conflicts they had with one another yielded interesting findings regarding the role uncertainty plays in conflict. Dealing with uncertainty in conflict was handled with trepidation as participants were unsure how their partner would respond. Overwhelmingly, uncertainty in conflict led to avoidance. By avoiding conflict when unsure how partners would react or what relational implications would be, participants eliminated a potentially negative experience with their partner. In the form of uncertainty, PI was remedied by avoiding potentially negative outcomes with one's partner. Avoidance was also demonstrated when the conflict was not "worth" it to the couple.

Conflict avoidance as a result of uncertainty had no immediate detriment to the relationships of the participants. On a few occasions, participants even expressed that avoiding more trivial conflicts could solve problems because avoidance led to reassessing the worth of the conflict and ultimately deeming the issue "not worth it" (bringing to life the colloquialism "pick your battles"). However, avoiding significant conflict as a result of uncertainty did have consequences at a later time in the relationship. For example,

Lydia's avoidance of discussions regarding marriage and children with Jay led her to wishful thinking that Jay would eventually change his mind.

Uncertain about her future with Jay, Lydia opted for wishful thinking as a way to remedy PI. Lydia's experience with uncertainty was congruent with Babrow's (2001) assertion that individuals do not always want to reduce uncertainty. By Lydia choosing to cope with her uncertainty rather than reduce it, her conflict behaviors were impacted.

Uncertainty was not the only form of PI that demonstrated clear patterns. As couples began to experience PI in the form of impossibility, patterns of "letting it all out" were evident across the sample. Jill and Rick both utilized avoidance as a way to deal with conflict throughout their nine year relationship. Yet, as they recognized the impossibility of the relationship continuing, the couple's conflict behavior changed. PI in the form of impossibility was managed by engaging in behavior/conversation that would lead to conflict, whereas before impossibility was experienced, the couple would have tried not to engage in conflict. Thus their intrapersonal feelings of impossibility were manifest in behaviors that increased and intensified relational conflict, ultimately bringing about the demise of the relationship (similar to a self-fulfilling prophecy).

Recognizing impossibility punctuated a major behavioral shift for Jill and Rick. In her interview Jill described her typical docile demeanor and her dislike of arguing with Rick. Rick's tendency to escalate conflicts influenced the way Jill responded to him. Prior to the dissolution phase of their relationship she would resist matching Rick's escalating tone to defuse a potentially heated conversation. Yet, once the couple entered the dissolution phase and perceived impossibility, Jill did not deem it necessary to continue to avoid or mend conflict with Rick. In their case, it came down to "not caring

anymore”, or caring less about the consequences of conflict. Earlier in the relationship Jill avoided conflict to assure her relationship stayed intact, but once the relationship no longer seemed salvageable, her approach changed. Experiencing impossibility influenced Jill to change her approach to conflict and more easily engage with Rick.

Lydia, Jay, Jill and Rick all experienced “letting it all out” while perceiving impossibility to some extent. For these two couples, letting it all out came with some degree of certainty. They had all foreseen an ending as inevitable, and had no obligation to continue contact once the relationship was over. Brian and Rachel behaved differently while experiencing impossibility because their relationship had to continue for their son.

Rachel and Brian’s relationship demonstrated PI in a different way than the other participants. Negotiating through a separation from a romantic partner while maintaining a relationship with a co-parent was more than mere chaining among forms of PI. Rachel felt that separating from Brian would be best while simultaneously wanting to continue a relationship with him. Rachel valued one part of her overall relationship with Brian while letting another part go. In this example, Rachel experienced divergent ambivalence by experiencing two contradicting emotions while also reassessing a relationship she once valued highly.

Theoretical Implications

The layering of PI, as discussed above with the example of divergent ambivalence, is a concept not previously explored in research on Problematic Integration theory but one which should be examined further in the future. It is likely, for example, that individuals may experience uncertainty about their divergence or ambivalence about their uncertainty. Further understanding how such layered concerns manifest in

individuals' coping and communication would add significantly to the literature and provide a more dynamic view of the experience of PI.

Additionally, evident in participant anecdotes were ways in which PI theory and Social Exchange Theory could inform one another. Ferrara and Levine (2009) explains that people are "motivated to maximize rewards and minimize costs" of dyadic relationships (p. 191). Ferrara and Levine (2009) also find investment to be a reason why people stay in relationships when they are unhappy. Rick and Jay specifically mentioned investment as a reason to remain in a relationship, even though they disagreed on relational goals with their partners. Jay and Rick used their relational investments as ways to manage their uncertainty and ambivalence regarding their relationships. In their situations, uncertainty and ambivalence were not considered to be costly enough to end a relationship; their investments were more beneficial than the cost of uncertainty.

Pairing PI and Social Exchange theories offers a deeper understanding of the implications of relational investment. While social exchange theorists see one's investment as reason not to end a relationship, in the current study, investment is seen as a coping mechanism to manage ambivalence. When experiencing ambivalence regarding a relationship, investment can be used as a reason to focus on a more positive outcome such as staying together rather than concentrating on reasons to end the relationship. PI also contributes to our understanding of social exchange theory. For example, while social exchange theorists have not specifically discussed the influence of values and probabilities on partners' cost-benefit analyses, it is clear that probabilistic and evaluative orientations would have an effect. In other words, partners determining if the cost to be in a relationship is outweighed by the benefits are influenced by their probabilistic and

evaluative orientations, which are the foundation of PI theory. Forms of PI, in particular uncertainty and ambivalence (e.g. being unsure of a relationship's future or having mixed feelings about the relationship) could have a significant effect on one's cost benefit analysis. Ultimately, the experience of significant uncertainty or ambivalence regarding a relationship could throw one's entire cost-benefit analysis into question. Thus PI theory seems to offer an important and practical caveat to the theoretical claims made by social exchange theorists. Future research pairing PI and social exchange theories could further examine the theoretical and practical implications of the experience of uncertainty and ambivalence on one's relational cost-benefit analysis.

Limitations and Future Research

The current study had many limitations that prevent any generalizations from being constructed. The small sample size allowed a unique insight into three former couples' experience with conflict and dissolution, but did not allow conclusions to be made for all couples experiencing conflict within the dissolution phase. Also the demographics of the study were homogeneous as all the couples were white, heterosexual, (upper) middle class, and between the ages of 25-32.

The relationship statuses of Jay, Lydia, Jill and Rick were very similar, as they were both unmarried, cohabitating and without children. Relational goals, concerns and conflict patterns were comparable enough between the two couples to warrant further studies with participants in similar relationships as the two mentioned. On the other hand, Rachel and Brian's experience was much different than the other participants.

The most significant difference between Rachel and Brian and the other coupled participants was the addition of their son Nathan. Even after their relationship with each

other as married partners dissolved, their relationship as co-parents remained intact. Though Rachel and Brian's relationship was perhaps the most intriguing because of the complexities, conclusions that could be drawn about PI in separated parents are limited because they are the sole representation of parents in this study. The complexities of Rachel and Brian's relationship suggest there is more research to be done with separated parents and their experience with PI in conflict.

Aside from the small sample size, interviews with participants varied from one to the next. The interviews progressively became longer, more comfortable, and yielded more pertinent information. After reflecting on the experience, it became evident that my skills as a researcher were gradually improving. Yet as interviews improved, the initial interviews lacked the depth of the later ones. More probing questions could have been asked of the first interviewees in order to gain a deeper understanding of specific conflict behaviors and patterns among the couples. Though analysis was done on the data collected, the varying quality of the data limited the study. Even with limitations, the complexity of romantic conflict and the ability PI theory has to grapple with inconsistencies warrant further exploration.

Future studies should seek to discover how PI about conflict behaviors themselves influences subsequent conflict. Interviews for this study focused on how relational uncertainties (about topics such as marriage and children) influence conflict behaviors but did not examine in detail how uncertainties and other concerns related specifically to managing conflict itself affect individuals' attempts to cope and communicate with their partners. Samples sizes should also be larger to allow generalizations to be made. Further exploring conflict through PI can offer a deeper and more nuanced understanding of

conflict communication and behavior which in turn can help us better engage in and negotiate through conflict.

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Appendix A
Interview Questions

Why did you specify these conflicts as significant?

How did the initial conflicts influence your behavior in subsequent conflicts?

Can you give me an example of something you said? Can you give me an example of something you did?

Were you able to predict your partner's behaviors as the relationship proceeded?

What behaviors (could specify verbal or nonverbal) did you look for or notice when you thought there was or might be conflict between you and your partner?

Were there any behaviors that indicated your partner might be upset with you? If so, what?

Were there any times you were unsure whether or not your partner was upset with you?

What verbal and/or nonverbal behaviors made you think this? Were you correct? :

What behaviors did you exhibit when you were upset with your partner? Was he/she able to pick up on those?

How did their behavior influence yours?

What was the nature of these conflicts?

Were there conflicts that were reoccurring?

When did this conflict start for you? When did your partner realize there was a conflict?

How did you feel while conflicts were occurring?

What was this conflict about?

How did you feel before/during/after the conflict? How do you think your partner felt?

What was most important to you/what were your goals during this conflict?

What do you believe was most important to your partner?

How did you try to achieve those goals? How did your partner try to achieve his/her goals?

Did your goals change during the conflict? Did your behaviors change? How so? Why? In response to what?

How do you think your feelings influenced your behavior (or how did the feelings you were experiencing affect how you acted during the conflict)?

What were your fears or concerns during this conflict?

How did you feel about the relationship before/during/after this conflict?

What did you feel unsure of?

How did your relationship change over the time period that you were together? How did your feelings change? Did you act differently toward each other as time progressed?

Did you ever find yourself having mixed feelings about your relationship? about your partner? What made you feel this way? Did these feelings affect how you acted toward your partner?

How did you feel about the relationship when you were not conflicting with your partner?

Do you feel that conflict increased towards the end of the relationship? Why?

From your perspective, why did you break up? Who initiated the break-up? How did you feel during the break-up? How did you act when communicating with your partner about breaking up? What did you communicate about during the break up? What did you avoid?

Do you feel that conflict was a part of the reason why the relationship dissolved?