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# Couple Implicit Rules for Facilitating Disclosure and Relationship Quality with Romantic Relational Aggression as a Mediator

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Couple Implicit Rules for Facilitating Disclosure and Relationship Quality  
with Romantic Relational Aggression as a Mediator

K. Nathan Meng

A dissertation submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

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## ABSTRACT

### Couple Implicit Rules for Facilitating Disclosure and Relationship Quality with Romantic Relational Aggression as a Mediator

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This study examines the association between couple implicit rules related to facilitating disclosure and marital quality with husband and wife romantic relational aggression as potential mediators. Couples (N=353 couples) who participated in the Flourishing Families Project, reported on their use of couple implicit rules related to disclosure. Results indicated that implicit rules for couple disclosure were positively related to marital quality for both husbands and wives. Those couples who reported more use of implicit rules related to disclosure were also likely to use less romantic relational aggression. In turn, both husband and wife romantic relational aggression was negatively related to their own as well as their partner's marital quality. Romantic relational aggression was a significant mediator between couple implicit rules for disclosure and marital quality for both husbands and wives. Implications for marital therapy are discussed.

Keywords: couple implicit rules, romantic relational aggression, marital quality

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## Introduction

Key factors of romantic relationship quality have been a focus of published research since the early 1900's (Robinson, 1903). The quality of marriage is an important variable to study because of its implications for physical and emotional health (Efklides, & Moaitau, 2013; Kiecolt-Glaser, & Newton, 2001; National Marriage Project, 1999; Silliman, Stanley, Coffin, Markman, & Jordan, 2002; Robles, Slatcher, Tombello, & McGinn, 2013), adult life satisfaction (Efklides & Moraitou, 2013), work productivity (Forthofer, Markman, Cox, Stanley, and Kessler, 1996), and for children's well-being (Doohan, Carrere, Siler, & Beardslee, 2009; Stapleton & Bradbury, 2012).

Family interventionists have often asserted that in order to help a family, one must first help the central parental relationship (Nichols & Tafuri, 2013; Barrows, 2009). Thousands of studies have investigated predictors of marital quality which can generally be classified into background and contextual factors, individual traits and behaviors, and couple interactional processes (Falke & Larson, 2007). Couple interactional processes that predict marital quality have included conflict management, communication, successful problem solving, secure attachment, sexual interaction, and positive affect (Bradbury, & Karney, 2004; Larson, & Holman, 1994). Early family therapists identified couple interactional processes, implicit rules, or unspoken norms, which develop from redundant daily interactions, which they theorized were related to the quality of both marital and family interaction (Minuchin, 1974; Satir, 1998). Yet, the relationship of implicit rules to marital quality has received little attention. This study makes a contribution by examining how specific couple implicit rules, those related to facilitating disclosure in the relationship, are related to overall marital quality for both wives and husbands.

In addition, it was hypothesized that one of the processes through which couple implicit rules about disclosure affects marital quality is romantic relational aggression. This type of aggression is relatively new to marital literature (Carroll, Nelson, Yorgason, Harper, Ashton, & Jensen, 2010). Romantic relational aggression can take several forms, but two important ones are love withdrawal and social sabotage. Both are behavioral strategies used to manipulate a partner into behaving in a desired way. For example, a form of love withdrawal would be a husband ignoring his wife when he is angry or when a wife threatens to withhold sex to get her way. A form of social sabotage would be when a wife threatens to disclose negative information about her husband to others in order to get him to do what she wants or a husband who gets his wife's friends to take sides with him and be mad at his wife (Hughes, Harper, Bean, & Feinauer, in press). It is likely that when couples have facilitative implicit rules for open disclosure to each other, they have less of a need to use manipulative strategies like love withdrawal and social sabotage, because they will communicate more directly to each other. The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between facilitative couple implicit rules about disclosure and marital quality with husband and wife romantic relational aggression as potential mediators..

## **Literature Review**

### **Theoretical Foundation**

The concepts of couple implicit rules about disclosure stem from the theoretical models of Minuchin (1974) and Satir (1998) who asserted that families, through day to day activities, develop rules about how to communicate with one another. Adolescent literature has identified these redundant processes as monitoring, or the way that parents monitor their adolescent children, paying attention to their daily activities or who they spend time with (Branstetter &

Furman, 2013). Specific to couples, Gottman (1999) demonstrated the need for couples to develop these rules, or shared meanings, in order to maintain a healthy relationship. This also relates to current research with couples around disclosure as they learn to share information with one another (Sprecher & Hendrick, 2004). Gottman (1999) also identified that the misunderstandings related to these conflict resolution styles were predictors of divorce and that couples would resort to other means of resolving conflict when unable to resolve issues. In a recent study, (Sandberg, Oka, & Brown, under review) showed direct paths between attachment styles, relational aggression, and increased partner violence. Concern is then raised that when couples do not create rules about disclosing information with one another during conflict, they turn to other methods that are more damaging to the relationship. In order to better help couples during times of conflict, it is important to know not only how they might resolve issues, but what fundamentals may be established to mediate conflict.

### **Marital Quality**

Numerous studies have investigated what makes a marriage work (for a review, see Gottman, & Notarius, 2000). A basic literature search of electronic databases using PsychInfo revealed more than 5,000 articles related to marital quality. The prediction or development of the ideas that contribute to marital quality is one in which researchers are much invested. Larson and Holman (1994) reviewed literature examining premarital predictors of marital quality. It was determined that items such as family of origin, individual traits, sociocultural factors i.e., age at marriage, social support, health, and homogamy, were researched predictors of later marital conflict and quality. Determining success and failure, these variables can be combined into four basic factors: individual, familial, contextual or cultural, and couple interaction processes

(Busby, Holman, & Taniguchi, 2001). The last variable, couple interaction processes, has included conflict resolution, problem solving, communication, sexual interaction, positive affect, and secure attachment. One of the specific types of couple communication processes related to marital quality is partners' personal disclosure to each other (Sprecher & Hendrick, 2004). Therefore, when couples developed unspoken implicit rules that facilitate disclosure, it is likely to increase disclosure, which in turn, is positively related to marital quality.

Couple interaction is related to a number of positive outcomes in marriage. Kiecolt-Glaser and Newton (2001) found that married people, on average, enjoy better mental and physical health. Kiecolt-Glaser and Newton (2001) also found, however, that those that are unhappily married, experience increased distress as well as poorer health than unmarried people. In a meta-analytic review, Robles, Slatcher, Trombello, and McGinn (2013) also confirmed that greater marital quality was related to better health, with mean effect sizes from  $r = .0$  to  $.21$  along with lower risk of mortality ( $r = .11$ ). In fact, researchers (Fincham & Beach, 1999; Whisman, Johnson, Daniel, & Lee, 2013) found that depression and depressive symptoms are strongly associated with marital discord. Whisman, Rhee, Hink, Boeldt, and Johnson (2013) found that life satisfaction is strongly influenced by spousal support increased positive and decreased negative affect. From these studies, it appears that being able to increase the amount of pleasant emotions and mood decreases the number of unpleasant emotions. Gordon and Baucom (2009) also showed that marital adjustment is positively associated with positive affect and negatively associated with negative affect. With marital quality becoming a predictor of mental and physical health (Panuzio, & DiLillo, 2010), it is important to understand the elements that contribute to increased quality. Spouses who report low marital quality have also reported considerable stress and reduced quality of life (Hawkins, & Booth, 2005). It is important to

understand contributors to better marital quality and mediating factors, providing for better individual outcomes. This study contributes to the literature on marital quality by examining implicit couple rules related to disclosing information about activities, time, and spending money. No other studies have examined how such implicit rules for disclosure might be associated with marital quality. The next section explores how such rules are likely to be related to marital quality.

### **Facilitative Implicit Rules about Disclosure and Marital Quality**

Often, therapists are trained to help couples understand the implicit or hidden rules that help to regulate a relationship (Minuchin, 1974). These implicit rules develop out of the the redundancy of being together and interacting in patterned ways. Of particular interest for this study was the couples' perception of implicit rules which facilitate couple disclosure within marriage. This is a concept that has been adapted from parenting research related to monitoring. It has been found that the more information that parents have about their children, the more likely children are to be successful in school as well as within the family unit (Branstetter & Furman, 2013). Similarly, the more partners in married know about how their spouses spend time, who they are with, and how they spend money, the more likely they will be to have better marital quality. Branstetter and Furman (2013) have also shown that for adolescents, the more parents are able to connect and the more information they are able to get from their child, the more likely they are to refrain from substance use and are at less of a risk of separation from the home. Whether or not children disclose information about their activities and friends to their parents is likely related to redundant daily interactions that develop implicit rules about disclosure in the family.

Monitoring is often associated with parents being able to talk more with their children, to have more open communication with them, and to have more knowledge about their child's whereabouts and friends. Monitoring has been related to fewer adolescent mental health issues (Branstetter & Furman, 2013). Adolescent's also showed that those who were being monitored more by parents, used less harmful substances, got better grades, had longer lasting relationships, and were more likely to offer more information to parents (for review see Racz & McMahon, 2011). It is important to understand that facilitative monitoring contributes to better relationship stability and better outcomes. While it may not be appropriate for marital partners to "monitor" each other in the same way parents monitor their children, implicit rules which facilitate disclosure, may have effects similar to how monitoring benefits outcomes in children.

Similar to monitoring in adolescents, Gottman, Ryan, Carrere, and Erley (2002) described implicit rules for disclosure as creating a shared meaning, where couples use basic communication skills to connect with one another about whereabouts or goals. Gottman shows that couples who disclose daily information with each other are better able to resolve conflict as it arises. Just as family implicit rules related to disclosure and monitoring regulate family functioning, similar implicit rules for sharing information regulate marriages in positive ways.

Family implicit interactional rules have been shown to be related to eating disorders and have been postulated to be related to the development of depression and oppositional behavior (Gillette, Harper, Larson Berrett, & Hardman, 2009). Feinauer, Larson and Harper (2010) found that implicit family process rules were related to both internalizing symptoms, such as depression, and externalizing symptoms, such as hostility. It stands to reason that if implicit

rules about disclosure are facilitate interaction in parenting and families, they are likely to facilitate marital relationships as well.

Implicit rules about disclosure are formed from the redundant daily interactions between partners. Through a process of mutual feedback loops, partners learn what the expectations for each other are even though they may not have talked openly about those expectations. Of specific interest in this study are those implicit rules related to disclosing information to a partner about time spent, activities with friends, and how money was spent.

According to Larson, Taggart-Reedy, and Wilson (2001), family life is organized by these rules that define and regulate individual behavior within a family or couple system. Implicit rules for disclosure are used in relationships to maintain balance and function for a couple. These rules regulate stability, communication, commitment, the allocation of resources, boundaries, relational satisfaction, decision making or marital power, and the health of the partner, etc. (Larson, et al., 2001). The appropriateness, logic, and flexibility of family rules are a vital part of both the family and individual unit to emotional health (Minuchin, 1974). Many rules are explicitly communicated and easily understood, such as curfew, chores or dating. However, implicit rules about disclosure form through repetitive couple interactions and are often unspoken. Satir (1988) asserted that: “rules contribute to relational self-definition, relational development and relational satisfaction” (p. 168). These rules could vary from basic rules about each other’s activities to rules about psychological wellbeing. Therefore, the premarital expectations and redundant patterns set the stage for an unspoken set of shared expectations about the degree to which partners share information about their friends, how they spend their time, and in early marriage, these same processes form the foundation for shared

expectations about how each spends money. Typically these expectations have not been openly talked about. Specific to facilitative implicit rules for disclosure, no published research has examined the relationship between these rules and marital quality or marital stability.

The concept of having intimate knowledge of one's partner as a predictor of successful marriage has been demonstrated in Gottman's (1999) research on love maps, or the shared psychological world of partners. Gottman (1999) found that those who were better able to describe their partner's hopes and dreams, and report on their partners friends, hobbies or where about's, had a stronger relationship which was less likely to end in separation. In therapy, based on Gottman's Sound Marital House theory, partners are directed to discover more about each other, understanding their partner's inner psychological world, worries, stresses, hopes and joys (Gottman, & Levenson, 1992). Gottman et al., (2002) proposed that the amount of "cognitive room" the individual has about the marriage, specifically, it's history, life of spouse, including the psychological world, is predictive of marital satisfaction or quality. This concept of a shared psychological world seems to be related to partners disclosing information to each other about how they spend their time, where they have been, when they will be home, and how they spend their money. As is true in Gottman's theory, it would stand to reason that couples that are able to disclose information to their partner, will also have increased awareness, connection, and transparency that would preclude the need for partners to engage in manipulative strategies to get what they want from each other.

### **Self-disclosure and Marriage**

Self-disclosure is defined as a communicative behavior of revealing information about oneself to others (Sprecher & Hendrick, 2004). Couple disclosure is a term borrowing ideas

from research supporting the idea that couples communicate and create a shared meaning, not only about their personal history, but also daily activities, similar to that of self-disclosure. Gottman et al. (2002) discusses this disclosure as having a certain amount of cognitive room about their spouse. Gottman et al. (2002) also discuss the need for creating love maps, or a map of their spouse's world in order to sustain a functional marital relationship. Disclosure within the relationship has also been shown as an act of intimacy and serves as a maintenance strategy (Sprecher, & Hendrick, 2004). Sprecher and Hendrick (2004) found that disclosure within the relationship was positively associated with love, relationship satisfaction, and relationship stability.

Several studies have investigated the relationship of disclosure and various outcomes in relationships. None of these are specifically related to implicit rules for disclosure about time spent, friends, and money, but they do show that disclosure in romantic relationships is an important consideration. Prager and Roberts (2004) proposed that when couples spend the day together, they need to learn sequences or rules about disclosure regarding how to move in and out of intimate conversation and contact. Some of these rules become automatic, while others must be discussed. Lin and Huang (2006) found that these daily sequences of self-disclosure were crucial in developing relational intimacy. Couples who are more comfortable in these forms of disclosure report fewer negative emotions and more positive communication (Forness, 2003). Tan, Overall, and Taylor (2012) also found that the more couples engage in relationship-focused disclosure, the more positive they viewed their relationship. Specifically, Mitchell, Castellani, Herrington, Joseph, Doss, and Snyder (2008) found that men's disclosure led to women's reciprocal disclosure as well as their own feelings of intimacy. They also found that women's feelings of attachment and relationship quality were predicted by their partner's

emotional self-disclosure. Others (Boker, & Laurenceau, 2006; Manne, Ostroff, Rini, Fox, Goldstein, & Grana, 2004; Raffagnino, Penzo, & Bertocci, 2012) found similar differences between husbands and wives. Several researchers (Farber, & Sohn, 2007; Laurenceau, Barrett, & Pietromonaco, 1998; Merves-Okin, Amidon, & Bernt, 1991; Waring, Schaefer, & Fry, 1994) have identified self-disclosure as an antecedent to emotional intimacy in marriage. Laurenceau, Barrett, and Pietromonaco, (1998) conceptualized that intimacy was a combination self-disclosure and couple-disclosure and proposed the need to study mediators of marital quality. Sprecher and Hendrick (2004) also found that self-disclosure was associated with personal well-being.

The studies about self-disclosure cited above have examined emotional and personal disclosures in relationships. The implicit rules in this study were related to self-disclosure about one's daily activities, spending habits, or ones friends. As has been found with broader self-disclosure, it was hypothesized that implicit rules about disclosing activities, friends, expected time of return, or monetary expenditures are likely to also be related to marital quality. It is also hypothesized that couples who disclose more to each other, would use other maladaptive means during conflict such as romantic relational aggression. Couples whose implicit rules do not encourage disclosure will likely have more difficulty resolving conflict, which in turn may be associated with marital instability. However, very little disclosure research has examined disclosure about friend, activities, time, and spending money in the marital unit, and even less has been done to examine what processes, or mediating variables, might explain the relationship between disclosure and marital quality. One of those processes might be partners' use of romantic relational aggression, a more recent concept in marital literature.

### **The Potential Role of Romantic Relational Aggression as a Mediating Variable**

Covert forms of aggression have been given three different names: indirect (Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist, & Peltonen, 1988), relational (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995), and social (Cairns, Cairns, Neckerman, Ferguson, & Garipey, 1989). Indirect aggression has been defined as a low-cost way of harming others, where social aggression is aimed at manipulating group acceptance and damaging social standing with little or no direct consequences due to its covertness (Galen & Underwood, 1997).

Romantic relational aggression can be seen as a method of communication that serves at least two purposes. It might be an attempt where the one communicating has been offended and is making indirect attempts to communicate disappointment with their partner. Such behavior might also be a manipulative, indirect way that spouses use to get each other to do what they want. Although aggressive in nature, these tend to be more covert and less direct than physical aggression. With most studies focusing on more overt forms of marital aggression, there is limited information about more covert forms of aggression, which is called romantic relational aggression in this study (Carroll et al., 2010). Current research has shown that romantic relational aggression is prevalent among emerging adults (Nelson, Springer, Nelson, & Bean, 2008). Romantic relational aggression, are strategies used covertly, which are partners' motivations to do harm to the other or to manipulate the partner into doing something. As suggested by Nelson et al. (2008), it is important to understand romantic relational and conflict in marital relationships. It is also important to understand what mediating processes romantic relational aggression might have on the relationship between implicit rules about couple disclosure and marital quality.

### **Romantic Relational Aggression**

In this study the term romantic relational aggression was used to include those behaviors that are inherent in the terms social and indirect aggression. These forms of aggression have been defined as the overall intent to cause harm by using others, spreading rumors, gossiping, and excluding others from the group or ignoring them (Archer, & Coyne, 2005). This paper contributes to the literature on marital quality by examining a relatively new variable, romantic relational aggression, as a potential mediator between implicit rules about disclosure and marital quality.

Two forms of romantic relational aggression, *love withdrawal* and *social sabotage*, were examined in this study. The use of *love withdrawal*, giving their partner the silent treatment or withdrawal of affection, is considered a more direct form of romantic relational aggression and does not often involve a third party. *Social sabotage* refers to behaviors where a spouse may indirectly harm their partner by going behind the partner's back to share private information with third parties or to recruit others to take their side in a dispute. By using these two identifiers, it is hoped to cover both direct and indirect forms of romantic relational aggression. As identified by Carroll et al. (2010), these two different forms of romantic relational aggression are reported as frequently used in marriages.

While there is a strong body of research regarding these types of relational aggression in children, adolescents, and young adults (Coyne, Archer, & Eslea, 2006; Nelson et al., 2008), very little attention has been given to romantic relational aggression in adults. Carroll et al. (2010), the only researchers who have published about love withdrawal and social sabotage in marriage, found that these forms of romantic relational aggression were related to poorer marital

outcomes. Carroll et al. (2010) also reported that the majority of husbands and wives in their study indicated they used love withdrawal and social sabotage.

In the past, research has indicated that girls were more likely than boys to use relational aggression during social interactions (Archer, 2004). In a more recent meta-analytic review, Card, Stucky, Sawalani, and Little (2008) found little gender difference in the use of indirect aggression. Carroll et al. (2010) found that in the context of marriage, women were more likely than men to use relationally aggressive tactics.

Romantic relational aggression is a communicative method used to disclose hurt or anger. Partners may use relational aggression as a means of being able to elicit a certain response or to communicate disappointment. Prager and Roberts (2004) suggested that explicitly or implicitly, couples learn certain ways of disclosing. Some become automatic, about daily events, while others are ways of dealing with conflict. Different from relationally aggressive means of dealing with conflict or hurt, this disclosure would be more similar to creating shared meaning. In Gottman and Notarius's (2000) review, they observed that the couples who were able to create shared meaning were also less likely to use maladaptive conflict resolution styles such as romantic relational aggression. It can be deduced from Gottman's theory that couples who are able to disclose more positive information to their partner, will also have increased awareness, connection, transparency, and be less likely to use methods such as social sabotage or love withdrawal as a means to communicate disappointment or elicit a specific response.

The purpose of this study was to examine the association between couple implicit process rules about disclosing how time and money is spent and activities with friends and marital quality. A secondary purpose was to explore romantic relational aggression, specifically

husband's and wife's use of love withdrawal and social sabotage, as a potential mediating variables. Figure 1 illustrates the measurement model and the hypothesized relationship between variables. The following hypotheses were tested:

### **Actor Effects Hypotheses**

1. Couple implicit process rules for disclosure will be positively related to wife marital quality.
2. Couple implicit process rules for disclosure will be positively related to husband marital quality.
3. Couple implicit process rules for disclosure will be negatively related to wife romantic relational aggression.
4. Couple implicit process rules for disclosure will be negatively related to husband romantic relational aggression.
5. Wife romantic relational aggression will be negatively related to wife marital quality.
6. Husband romantic relational aggression will be negatively related to husband marital quality.
7. Wife romantic relational aggression will significantly mediate the relationship between couple implicit rules about disclosure and wife marital quality.
8. Husband romantic relational aggression will significantly mediate the relationship between couple implicit rules about disclosure and husband marital quality.

### **Partner Effects Hypotheses**

9. Wife romantic relational aggression will be negatively related to husband marital quality.

10. Husband romantic relational aggression will be negatively related to wife marital quality.
11. Wife romantic relational aggression will significantly mediate the relationship between couple implicit rules about disclosure and husband marital quality.
12. Husband romantic relational aggression will significantly mediate the relationship between couple implicit rules about disclosure and wife marital quality.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

All of the participants for this study were taken from Wave 1 of the Flourishing Families Project, an ongoing longitudinal study of inner family life involving families with a child between the ages of 10 and 14. Participant families were primarily recruited using a purchased national telephone survey database (Polk Directories/InfoUSA). Families identified using the Polk Directory were randomly selected from 69 census tracts that overlapped with King and Snohomish Counties in the larger Seattle metropolitan area city mirroring the demographic characteristics of the 12 public school districts within these counties. While public school districts were not relevant to couple relationship studies such as this one, the larger project involved children including getting releases from parents to collect information about grades, truancy, and achievement test data. Of the 692 eligible families contacted, 423 agreed to participate (61%). Because the database was generated using telephone, magazine, and internet subscription reports families of lower socio-economic status were under-represented. So a limited number of families were recruited into the study through other means (e.g., referral, fliers;  $n = 77$ , 15%, 40 single parent and 37 two parent) making the sample 500. One hundred and forty seven of the 500 families were single parent leaving 353 two parent families at Wave 1.

Husbands' ages ranged from 28 to 62 at a mean of 45.34 years (S.D. = 6.03); wives' ages ranged in age from 28 to 60 with a mean of was 43.50 years (S.D. = 5.35). Mean length of marriage for these couples was 17.87 years, and mean number of children was 2.36. Racial demographics for husbands were 87.3% Caucasian, 5.6% African American, 1.2% Asian American, 6% Hispanic, and 5.6% mixed/biracial. Of the wives, 82.1% were Caucasian, 4.2% were African American, 4.9% were Asian American, 2.9% were Hispanic, and 5.9% were mixed/biracial. In terms of education, zero percent of husbands and 1.3% of wives reported less than high school education; 6.5% of husbands and 4.9% of wives reported a high school degree; 22.4% of husbands and 24% of wives completed some college; 40.3% of husband and 40.9% of wives held bachelor's degrees, and 30.8% of husbands and 28.9% of wives held graduate or professional degrees. Seventy-seven and nine tenths of a percent of the couples reported an annual household income of more than \$60,000.

## Measures

**Couple Implicit Rules about Disclosure.** The latent variable, *couple disclosure*, was created using the husband and wife report on the couple disclosure subscale of the *Couple Implicit Rules Profile, CIRP* (Harper, 2000) for both husband and wife.

The CIRP is an 85-item, Likert type self-report instrument that identifies both facilitative and constraining implicit couple process rules and the frequency of the occurrence of the various rules within the couple relationship. The questionnaire is designed to help identify and understand the implicit rules that couples may develop through their redundant interactions. The CIRP yields a total score and 5 subscale scores. Each partner reported his or her perceptions of couple implicit rules.

The Couple Disclosure subscale of the CIRP requires partners to respond to 6 items about unspoken rules related to disclosure with their spouse. Using a Likert type scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*Most of the time*), participants indicated how often they perceived the rule applied to their relationship, e.g. r how often the unspoken rule has operated in the last year. Items included: “Let each other know where you are going and who you are with”, “ Let your partner know when you will be home,” “Check in with your partner when you get home,” “Let you partner know where you are going,” “Make sure your partner knows your friends”, and “Do not let each other know how you spend your money (reverse scored).” A high score means more use of rules related to facilitative disclosure. Means scores of the items were used in the analysis. The  $\alpha$  coefficients for this sample were .88 for husbands and .90 for wives. The factor loadings on the latent variable were .86 for wives and .84 for husbands. A measurement model for this latent variable was analyzed and showed that the data was a good fit to the model ( $X^2 = 8.04$ ,  $df = 4$ ,  $p = .09$ ,  $CFI = .998$ ,  $RMSEA = .02$ ).

**Marital Quality.** The two latent variables, wife marital quality and husband marital quality, were created using the husbands’ and wives’ answers to items on three measures, the Norton Quality of Marriage index (Norton, 1983), marital instability from the RELATE questionnaire (Busby, Holman, Taniguchi, 2001), and attachment from the Revised Experiences in Close Relationships Questionnaire (Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000). The Norton Marital Quality Index is a six-item inventory that assesses marital satisfaction. Participants responded to 6 items using the following broadly worded items: “We have a good marriage,” “My relationship with my partner is very stable,” “Our relationship is strong,” “My relationship with my partner makes me happy,” “I really feel like part of a team with my partner,” “Degree of happiness in your relationship.” Respondents are then asked to mark a level of agreement on a scale from 1

(very strong disagreement) to 6 (very strong agreement). Items are were then summed and divided by the number of items to form a score. Scores range from 6 to 36, with higher scores representing greater satisfaction. Scores for this sample averaged high for both husbands ( $M = 5.15$ ,  $SD = 0.96$ ), and wives ( $M = 5.13$ ,  $SD = 0.98$ ). This scale also showed good reliability ( $\alpha = .97$  for both husbands' and wives' reports).

The Revised Experiences in Close Relationships Questionnaire (Fraley, et al., 2000) consists of 8 items about attachment. Using a Likert response scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*), husbands and wives answered questions such as “I am afraid that I will lose my partner’s love” (reverse scored), “I often wish that my partner’s feelings for me were as strong as my feelings for him or her” (reverse scored), and “I am very comfortable being close to my partner.” Validity studies have shown that this revised questionnaire is highly correlated with the larger original version and with measures of marital satisfaction (Fraley, et al., 2000). Alpha reliabilities for this sample were .71 for wives and .71 for husbands. The mean of the items was used in the analysis. This measure was included to provide a deeper measure of marital quality than general marital quality and marital instability.

The RELATE Instability subscale was the third indicator of the latent variable, marital quality. Using a Likert type scale ranging from 1 (Never) to 5 (*Very often*), respondents were asked to evaluate how often they think their marriage might be in trouble or how often they consider divorce or ending the relationship. The mean of items was used in the analysis. Reliability coefficients were .74 for wives and .75 for husbands. This measure was included because instability was thought to provide an even broader range of marital quality than either the general measure or the attachment measure.

Factor loadings for wife marital quality were .80 for the Norton Index, .85 for attachment, and -.80 for instability and .77, .79, and -.78 respectively. A measurement model was calculated with the two husband and wife latent variables correlated. The fit indices showed the data fit the model well ( $X^2 = 5.40$ ,  $df = 3$ ,  $p = .14$ ,  $CFI = .998$ ,  $RMSEA = .02$ ).

**Romantic Relational Aggression.** Two latent variables called wife romantic relational aggression and husband romantic relational aggression were created using two subscales from the Couples Relational Aggression and Victimization Scale (CRAViS, Nelson, & Carroll, 2006). CRAViS is meant to measure the use of love withdrawal and social sabotage in romantic relationships. Developed by Nelson and Carroll (2006) the CRAViS is a modified version of the original Self-Report of Aggression and Victimization (SRAV) measure developed by Morales and Crick (1998) and extended to romantic relationships of young adults by Linder, Crick, and Collins (2002). Language in the measure was modified to direct respondents to report with respect to their partner's relationally aggressive behavior in their marriage. Each subscale was composed of 6 items. Using a Likert type scale ranging from 1 (*not at all true*) to 7 (*Very true*), husbands and wives indicated the extent to which their partner uses love withdrawal and social sabotage. Examples of items from the love withdrawal subscale included "My partner ignores me when she/he is angry with me," "My partner gives me the silent treatment when I hurt his/her feelings in some way," and "My partner withholds affection or sex from me when he/she is angry with me." Examples of items from the social sabotage subscale included "My partner has gone behind my back and shared private information about me with other people," "My partner has spread negative information about me to be mean," and "My partner gets other people to take sides with her/him and gets them upset with me too." Reliability for love withdrawal was .86 for wives answering about their husbands and .90 for husbands answering about their wives. The

reliabilities for social sabotage were .90 for wives answering about their husbands and .88 for husbands answering about their wives. Mean scores of items were used in the analysis.

Factor loadings on each latent variable were .70 (love withdrawal) and .80 (social sabotage) for wife romantic relational aggression and .60 and .66 respectively for husbands. A measurement model with both variables correlated was calculated and indicated good fit with the data ( $X^2 = 1.04$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = .31$ ,  $CFI = 1.00$ ,  $RMSEA = .011$ ).

### **Analysis**

Structural Equation Modeling via AMOS (2012) was used to analyze the proposed model in Figure 1. This allows for examining the association between exogenous and endogenous variables. The Actor Partner Interdependence Model, APIM (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006) supports the use of both husband and wife data. The control variables of age, education, income, and the length of the relationship were also included noted in Table 1 and demonstrated in Figure 1. Structural Equation Modeling has several strengths including controlling for measurement error and simultaneously estimating both direct and indirect paths in the model (Kline, 2011).

Means, standard deviation and ranges were first computed for all measured variables. A correlation matrix of all variables was created and checked to make sure there were no problems with multi-collinearity. Lastly, Beta coefficients were examined as a test of actor and partner hypotheses, and finally, bootstrapping was examined to test the hypotheses related to wife and husband romantic relational aggression as mediating variables.

### **Results**

As shown in Table 1, the means for husband and wives' couple implicit rules for disclosure were relatively similar with Husbands  $\bar{X} = 4.02$  ( $SD = .57$ ) and wives  $\bar{X} = 4.21$  ( $SD =$

.58). Husbands also reported that wives used love withdrawal more than wives reported their husbands using love withdrawal (Husband:  $\bar{X} = 2.47$ ,  $SD = 1.25$ ; Wives:  $\bar{X} = 2.91$ ,  $SD = 1.26$ ). Husbands also reported that their wives used social sabotage more often in times of conflict  $\bar{X} = 1.40$  ( $SD = .76$ ) where wives, although very similar, reported husbands use as  $\bar{X} = 1.59$  ( $SD = .95$ ). Paired t-tests were calculated for all of the measured variables and showed that the means for wife and husband love withdrawal ( $t=5.42$ ,  $p<.01$ ) and for social sabotage ( $t=3.55$ ,  $p<.01$ ) were significantly different with wives being higher for both measures. The t-tests for gender differences for all other variables were not statistically significant. It is also noted that the only descriptor that showed significant correlation with couple implicit rules for disclosure was education ( $\beta = .16$ ,  $p<.05$ ).

Table 1 also shows the correlations for measured variables in the study. All of the correlations between the exogenous and endogenous variables were in the hypothesized directions. Implicit rules for disclosure were related to all three measures of marital quality for both wives and husbands (Wives:  $r = .31$  for Norton Index;  $r = .36$  for attachment, and  $r = -.28$  for instability; husbands:  $r = .41$  for Norton Index;  $r = .45$  for attachment, and  $r = -.40$  for instability). Implicit rules for disclosure were also negatively related to measures of romantic relational aggression for both wives and husbands. Measures of romantic relational aggression were also negatively related to measures of marital quality. (See Table 1 for specific correlations)

### **Actor Effects in APIM**

Figure 2 shows the standardized beta coefficients for all paths between variables in the model. The first two hypothesis that couple implicit rules for disclosure would be positively related to wife marital quality ( $\beta = .68$ ,  $p<.001$ ) and husband marital quality ( $\beta = .59$ ,  $p<.001$ )

were supported. Hypotheses 3 and 4 that stated that couple implicit rules for disclosure would be negatively related to wife romantic relational aggression ( $\beta = -.24, p < .001$ ) and to husband romantic relational aggression ( $\beta = -.31, p < .001$ ) were also supported. Hypotheses 5 and 6 that each partner's romantic relational aggression would be negatively related to their marital quality was supported for wives ( $\beta = -.39, p < .001$ ) and for husbands ( $\beta = -.39, p < .001$ ).

As seen in Table 2, bootstrapping showed the mediation of wife romantic relational aggression between couple implicit rules for disclosure and wife marital quality was significant which supported hypothesis 7. Bootstrapping also showed the husband romantic relational aggression significantly mediated the relationship between couple implicit rules for disclosure and husband marital quality which supported hypothesis 8.

### **Partner Effects in APIM**

In regards to the first two partner effects hypotheses (#9 and 10), both showed that the wife romantic relational aggression was negatively related to husband marital quality ( $\beta = -.47, p < .001$ ) and husband romantic relational aggression was negatively related to wife's marital quality ( $\beta = -.52, p < .001$ ).

As can be seen in Table 2, bootstrapping also showed that wife romantic relational aggression significantly mediated the relationship between couple implicit rules about disclosure and husband marital quality. Husband romantic relational aggression was also a statistically significant mediator in the relationship between implicit rules about disclosure and wife marital quality. Therefore, hypotheses 11 and 12 were also supported.

## Discussion

This study contributes to marital quality literature through the examination of two constructs that have been understudied, implicit process rules related to disclosure and romantic relational aggression. Findings indicated that implicit couple rules for disclosure about time spent, friends involved in activities, and how money is spent were positively related to marital quality for both wives and husbands. In addition, wife and husband romantic relational aggression were also negatively related to marital quality and were significant mediators of the relationship between couple implicit rules which facilitate disclosure and marital quality. Each partner's romantic relational aggression was negatively associated with their own report of marital quality (actor effect) as well as negatively associated with their partner's report of marital quality (partner effect).

The findings that implicit rules for disclosure were related to marital quality is similar to the findings of Falke and Larson (2007) reporting that remarried partners who are better able to identify implicit rules for disclosure about their relationship reported better marital quality. They recommend that it is important for married partners to become aware of family rules and roles, particularly those in a relationship with an ex-spouse.

The construct of disclosure to one's married partner about topics like spending, whereabouts, and friends appears to be related to concepts of friendship and love (psychological) maps in Gottman's Sound Marital House Theory (1999). He proposed that partners should not leave home in the morning without knowing something about their spouse's day, who they looked forward to spending time with, and what people would create stress for their spouse. As this study has shown, such disclosure is correlated with better marital quality and better stability.

The findings from this study also seem consistent with those of Prager and Roberts (2004), that couples who are better able to discover their rules about disclosure will be better able to move in and out of intimate contact and communication. They will also be better suited to deal with conflict in healthy ways rather than having to resort to manipulative strategies like love withdrawal or social sabotage. Referring back to Gordon and Baucom (2009), a couple's ability to adjust in marriage is greatly determined by positive affect, which could also be more positive conversations about what is happening in the couple's life. By doing this, the couple would also be limiting opportunity for romantic relational aggression. Couples reporting more implicit rules about couple disclosure, would have less need for the use of romantic relational aggression, as they may perceive negative interactions in a more positive light due to more positive communication.

Of interest in this study, is the finding that *both* wives and husbands use strategies of romantic relational aggression such as love withdrawal and social sabotage. Similar to Card et al., (2008) findings, men's scores were similar to those of women in this study. This means that in times of conflict, despite the correlation with decreased marital satisfaction, *both* husband and wife may choose to share hurtful information or withhold affection or sex as a means of negative communication. In a personal communication to the author, a friend stated that, "Last night, my wife posted on Facebook: Nothing is worse than slipping into a newly made bed with nice clean sheets, and having your husband's flatulence ruin the moment (She put it in coarser language)." He was mortified and felt betrayed by his wife. In this example, the spouse was engaging in social sabotage to create social pressure to manipulate her spouse. One explanation for why husbands and wives used similar levels of romantic relational aggression is the concept of

reciprocity, the idea that wives and husbands tend to reciprocate like behavior (Laurenceau, et al., 1998).

One highlight of this study is the remarkable similarity between actor and partner effects. This shows that husbands and wives were equally affected by their spouses use of romantic relational aggression, and they were similarly affected by their own use.

This study answered Laurenceau, Barrett, and Pietromonaco's (1998) call for more studies which examine mediating variables in the relationship between self-disclosure and marital quality. Although self-disclosure regarding feelings and personal information has received attention in marital literature, the type of rules about disclosure in this study were more about transparency between partners, about how and with whom one has been associating, and how money is spent. It is likely that these types of rules are related to dependability, one of the conditions necessary for creating secure attachment (Johnson, 2010). This disclosure and romantic relationship aggression are types of marital behaviors that deserve more attention in studies of couple dynamics. It stands to reason that, just as with parent monitoring (Racz & McMahon, 2011), the more interest taken in the others person's life, the more positive they will feel and reciprocally, the better they will feel.

The finding that as implicit rules about disclosure are higher, the use of romantic relational aggression decreases, are consistent with Tan et al. (2012) who identified that more disclosure during routine conversations helped to maintain relationships. The findings from this study indicate that one of the reasons such disclosure maintains relationships is because partners use less love withdrawal and social sabotage. This is consistent with the idea in marital therapy that partners being direct, clear, and open in their communication is related to better functioning

(Gottman et al., 2002; Johnson, 2010). Larson and Holman (1994), found that couples who constructed a shared view of the relationship ground rules, tended to have higher relationship quality. In a meta analysis, Jackson (2010) found that self-disclosure was predictive of marital quality and stability and that the continuation of interpersonal skills, like creating a shared meaning or developing methods of couple disclosure, may protect them from the negative interactions that lead to poor marital quality and marital instability.

Carroll et al. (2010) found that romantic relational aggression was negatively correlated to marital quality. The findings of partner effect, that a partner's use of relational aggression is related to their spouse's perception of marital quality, may also be best explained by the concept of reciprocity, where if one feels that the other is going to be relationally aggressive, then they will in turn. It may be that one process that helps couples develop shared meaning in the couple system implicit rules is reciprocity in self-disclosure. Mitchell et al. (2008) found this to be true with the use of self-disclosure, particularly for husbands who were highly likely to respond with increased disclosure when their wives initiated self-disclosure.

### **Implications for Couple Therapy and Marital Education**

One of the implications of the findings in this study should be that the more couples are creating shared meaning by having open conversations about daily activities and routines, the better their relationship will be. In conjunction with Gottman's Sound Marital House, couples should learn the importance of spending a few minutes together each day, talking about friends, who they might see that day, or what they might do. Couples who may be complaining about not having deep and intimate conversations might benefit from beginning with smaller, less crucial conversations, and building from there. Thus, therapists and marital educators should direct

couples to spend five to ten minutes per day checking in with each other, talking about daily activities. They should also be advised to leave deeper conversations for a different time. Couples should be cautioned against withholding information about spending money from each other. This may also help the couple to better understand their own implicit rules about disclosure. Their transparency about these activities will not only help their spouse to feel better about their relationship, it will also help them to feel better about it as well.

Therapists should also help couples become more aware of their implicit rules. In making such rules more explicit, couples may solidify such positive behaviors even more. Therapists could ask questions to help them initiate basic conversations about daily activities not only to create shared meaning (Gottman et al., 2002), but also to learn about the appropriateness, their personal logic behind the rule, and to create flexibility within their rules about disclosure (Minuchin, 1974). Therapist should play an active role in relational development and relational satisfaction with guided questions such as, “Please talk about who some of your friends are and why you connect with them.”

Couples who seem to be using more relationally aggressive tactics may also be struggling with not sharing enough with each other throughout the day. Therapists who intervene to help partners be more open and transparent with each other, especially where they are going, when they will be home, who they will be with, and how they spend money, will likely see romantic relational aggression decrease (Nichols, & Tafuri, 2013). This could be as simple as assigning the husband and wife to call each other during their lunch hour to talk about how their day is going, what they have planned for the day, or who they might run into or see. More complex

interventions could include helping partners express feelings and needs and getting them to acknowledge these in each other without being blaming or being judgmental (Johnson, 2010).

Marriage and family therapists can facilitate more healthy communication by supporting partners in openly discussing how love withdrawal and social sabotage affect each other and themselves. By identifying when and where couples use romantic relationally aggressive tactics, and replacing these tactics with more open communication, couples may improve conflict resolution. Couples should be directed to not share problems with those outside the marriage relationship in social settings or withhold affection to get a desired result. Therapist should direct couples to share openly specific goals and desires (Satir, 1988).

These findings also have specific implications for marriage and family therapy supervisors. Therapist should be taught how to help couples to avoid problem laden conversations (Miller, Hubble, & Duncan, 1996), and focus on establishing a stronger foundation (Gottman et al, 2002). This can be done by teaching couple's how to have small conversations each day, rather than looking for breakthrough conversations. Therapists should also be taught how to evaluate the possibility of couples using romantic relational aggression and how to help them substitute new coping behaviors that would be more beneficial for their relationships.

### **Implications for Future Research**

The findings of this study suggest several directions for future study. First, and foremost is the need to replicate this study to support its findings with different ethnic and racial groups. It is probable that cultures encourage different norms and implicit rules for disclosure in marriage. Longitudinal studies will help answer whether romantic relational aggression develops

within marriage or whether partners bring this type of aggression into their marital relationship. The couples in this study were in middle stages of marriage. Little is known about the use of love withdrawal and social sabotage in couples early in marriage or in couples in later life.

There are likely other possible mediators of couple disclosure and marital quality as well as possible antecedents. Partner personality style, presence of emotional or mental disorders such as anxiety and depression, and family-of-origin processes may influence the development of romantic relational aggression. Romantic relational aggression is a very understudied factor in marriage. There is limited understanding of the effects that this form of aggression has on a couple and even less understanding about the long-term effects. Future studies should examine differing effects of social sabotage and love withdrawal. Although not a specific goal to compare the differences between husbands and wives, it would also be important to understand what differences there are if any.

### **Limitations**

There were a few limitations with this study. First, this study was a cross-sectional study, limiting the ability to draw conclusions about causal effects between variables. Some racial groups, especially Latino and Asian-Americans were under represented so one should be cautious about generalizing findings to those groups. This study was conducted in Seattle, Washington and so it is not possible to generalize the findings to couples that live in other geographic regions. In addition, the sample in this study had higher than average education and associated higher income so the findings cannot be generalized to those in low-income groups. Another limitation of the cross sectional method in this study is the inability to determine whether romantic relational aggression leads to poorer marital quality or whether marital quality

deteriorates which then leads to increased use of romantic relational aggression. Longitudinal studies using auto regression designs will be able to answer this question.

### **Conclusion**

This study was related to two aspects of marital behavior that have received little attention, romantic relational aggression and implicit couple rules related to disclosure. Shared implicit rules for disclosure related to how time is spent, who one's friends are, and how money is spent, appear to be a process related to good marriage. When such disclosure does not exist, partners may increase their use of manipulative strategies such as love withdrawal and social sabotage. Marital therapists should be mindful of assessing and intervening in these dynamics when they see distressed couples.

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**Table 1.** Correlations, Means, and Standard Deviations for all Measured Variables (353 couples).

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
<b>1.Rules Disclosure</b>	<b>1.0</b>	.41***	.45***	-.40***	-.33***	-.34***	.08	.05	.16*	.02
<b>Marital Quality</b>										
2.Norton Index	.31***	<b>1.0</b>	.63***	-.55***	-.42***	-.41***	.06	.02	.16*	.03
3.Attachment	.36***	.59***	<b>1.0</b>	-.66***	-.38***	-.47***	.01	.02	.06	.02
4.Instability	-.28***	-.57***	-.54***	<b>1.0</b>	.37***	.48***	-.04	.04	-.12	.00
<b>Rel. Aggression</b>										
5.Love Withdraw	-.20**	-.37***	-.28***	.33***	<b>1.0</b>	.40***	.05	.05	.10	.00
6.Social Sab.	-.18**	-.39***	-.27***	.39***	.55***	<b>1.0</b>	.01	.04	.11	.06
<b>7.Age</b>	.06	-.07	.02	.01	-.10	-.11	<b>1.0</b>	.42***	.12	.08
<b>8.Rel. Length</b>	.06	-.03	.02	.01	-.06	-.04	.50***	<b>1.0</b>	.14	.04
<b>9.Education</b>	.16*	.01	.00	-.07	-.05	-.13	.31***	.31***	<b>1.0</b>	.20**
<b>10.Income</b>	.09	.02	.07	-.04	-.02	-.01	.16*	.16*	.10	<b>1.0</b>
<b>Husband <math>\bar{X}</math></b>	4.02	5.57	4.63	1.60	2.47	1.40	45.35	17.82	15.27	\$6.77K/mo
<b>Standard Dev.</b>	.57	1.02	.79	.58	1.25	.76	5.96	5.22	(2.33)	(\$8.65K)
<b>Wife <math>\bar{X}</math></b>	4.21	5.60	4.44	1.58	2.91	1.59	43.46	17.85	14.99	\$6.77K/mo
<b>Standard Dev.</b>	.58	.98	.87	.57	1.26	.95	5.37	5.24	(2.37)	(\$8.65K)

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

Note: Wive's correlations are below the diagonal, and husbands' correlations are above the diagonal.

**Table 2.** Bias Corrected Bootstrapping Mediation with Indirect Coefficients and 95% Confidence

Intervals.

	Disclosure-Wife Relational Aggression-Wife Marital Quality	Disclosure- Husband Relational Aggression- Husband Marital Quality	Disclosure-Wife Relational Aggression- Husband Marital Quality	Disclosure- Husband Relational Aggression-Wife Marital Quality
Standardized Indirect Effect Coefficient	.09**	.15***	.11***	.16***
Lower Bound of 95% CI	.9906	.9989	.9678	.9970
Upper Bound of 95% CI	.0094	.0011	.0322	.0030

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

Figure 1.

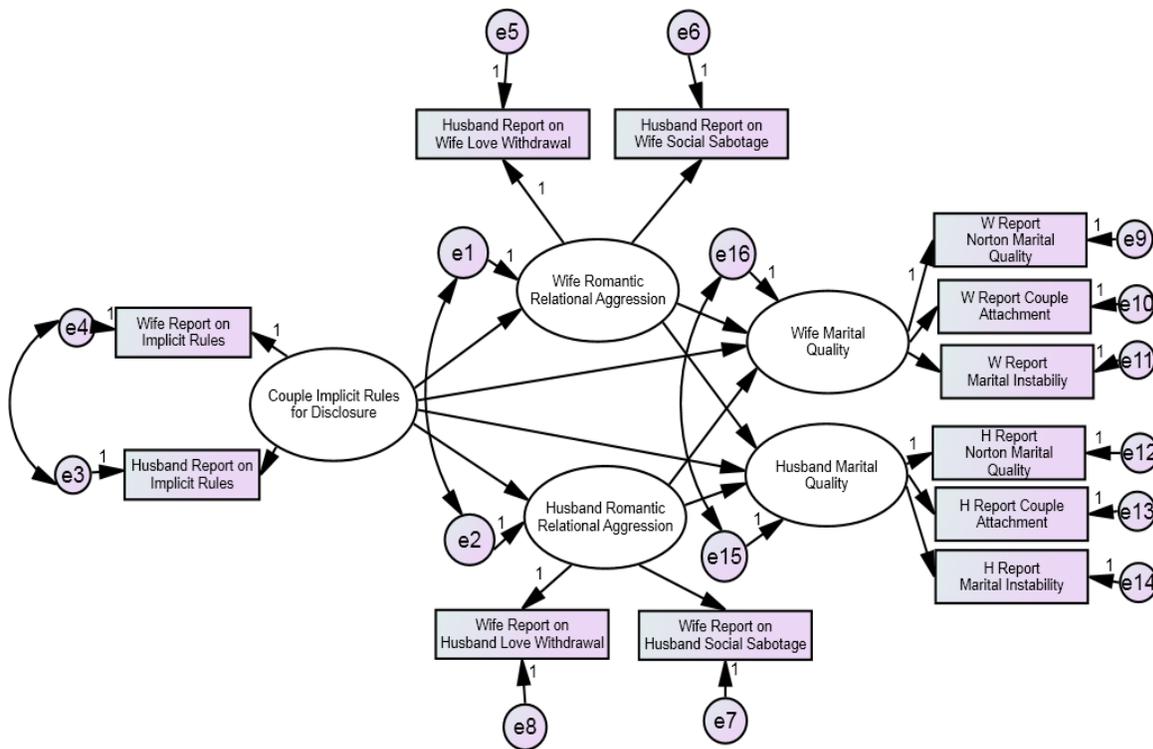


Figure 1. Measurement and Hypothesized Actor-Partner Interdependence Model with Couple Implicit Rules for Disclosure Predicting Wife and Husband Marital Quality with Wife and Husband Romantic Relational Aggression as Potential Mediating Variables.

Figure 2.

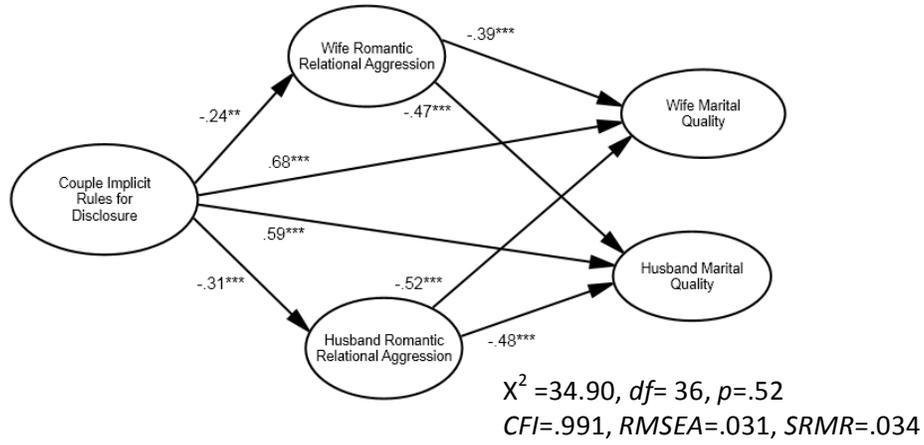


Figure 2. Actor-Partner Interdependence Model Results with Couple Implicit Rules for Disclosure Predicting Wife and Husband Marital Quality with Wife and Husband Romantic Relational Aggression as Mediating Variables (N= 353 couples).