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Stable Conflict Resolution Styles and Commitment: Their Roles
in Marital Relationship Self-Regulation

Rebecca S. Boyd

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Science

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ABSTRACT

Stable Conflict Resolution Styles and Commitment: Their Roles in Marital Relationship Self-Regulation

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Gottman's (1994a) three stable conflict resolution styles (CRSs), validating, volatile, and avoidant, are different on several dimensions, yet all are predictors of good marital satisfaction. Despite the CRSs equality in marital satisfaction and stability research, teaching couples a validating style is often explicitly more preferential in therapeutic settings. Relationship self-regulation (RSR), described as relationship "work", is also a strong predictor of relationship satisfaction. Identifying the CRS environment in a relationship that most contributes to the practice of RSR can inform clinical and couple relationship education interventions. Based on its success in improving marital satisfaction in therapeutic settings, a validating CRS was hypothesized to be more closely associated with the practice of RSR by husbands and wives compared to a volatile or avoidant style. A third variable, commitment to the relationship, characterized by a desire to stay rather than an obligation to remain, also was tested as a moderator of the relationship between stable CRSs and RSR. Data from first-married men (856) and women (1406) taking the RELATionship Evaluation (RELATE) online questionnaire was used in correlational and MANCOVA analyses to test the research questions. All three stable CRSs were found to be positively related to RSR. However, the validating style was found to be the most predictive of both RSR effort and strategies compared to the other two styles. Commitment was a moderator between CRSs and RSR for only validating and avoidant CRSs for RSR strategies but not effort. Results generally support the theoretical model tested. Implications for future research and clinical practice are discussed.

Key Words: conflict resolution styles, regulated and stable styles, commitment, relationship self-regulation.

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Introduction

Does working on improving a marital relationship sometimes require engaging in or avoiding conflict? Conflict in marriage is sometimes seen as unproductive and damaging (Gottman, 1994b). While conflict is not always destructive, this belief is grounded in some truth. While it is not inherently bad to have conflict and disagreements, research shows that the *way* a couple resolves conflict has an influence on their ability to be happy and successful in the relationship (Gottman, 1994a). Managing conflict in a productive manner is one of the central tasks in maintaining a viable relationship (Gottman, 1994a; Stanley, Markman, & Whitton, 2002) and has been shown to be highly related to relationship satisfaction and stability (Kurdek, 1995).

Because conflict is present in most relationships, researchers have worked to understand the characteristics of productive conflict types for couples who engage in more or less conflict. In a landmark marriage study, 73 couples were asked to discuss a problem area of continuing disagreement (Gottman, 1993). Four years later, the same couples answered questions about their marital satisfaction and possible relationship dissolution. From this work, they found four general ways that couples engage in conflict. These conflict resolutions styles (CRS) were labeled as validating, volatile, avoidant, and hostile. Out of the four styles, three styles—validating, volatile, and avoidant—were found to predict higher relationship satisfaction and stability (significantly lowering the occurrence of divorce) while the other conflict style—hostile—significantly predicted divorce. For this reason, the validating, volatile, and avoidant styles were labeled as stable CRSs and hostile was labeled as unstable (Gottman, 1993).

These findings (that there were actually three different CRSs that significantly predicted marital stability and satisfaction) were surprising to many people when they first emerged. At the time, the validating conflict style was seen as the ideal model for couples to manage conflict

(Gottman, 1993). What is interesting is that in therapy, therapists still encourage volatile, avoidant, and hostile couples to be more validating in their relationship, as traditional behavioral therapy places a high premium on listening, couple we-ness, and minimizing combativeness (Shapiro & Gottman, 2004, Gottman 1993). If avoidant and volatile couples still predict stable and satisfactory marriages, why has therapy not adapted to reflect that finding? If they are truly considered stable CRSs, what is it about volatile and avoidant couples that can make it more difficult for them to progress in therapy than for validating couples? One possible explanation for this gap is that while stable, avoidant and volatile couples approach change and growth in their relationships differently. For example, this study will test the relationship between the stable CRSs and another variable that measures how much a couple is willing to work in their relationship to improve it: relationship self-regulation (Halford, Lizzio, Wilson, & Occhipinti, 2007).

Relationship self-regulation (RSR) is a construct defined as the effort and strategies that each partner utilizes to sustain and improve their relationship (Halford et al., 2007). Essentially, RSR is a way to describe how much each partner is personally willing to set and meet relationship-oriented goals (Roundy, 2011). RSR has been connected with higher marital satisfaction in newly married couples (Halford et al., 2007) and was significantly predictive of marital satisfaction in a five-year longitudinal study of newly married couples (Halford, Moore, Wilson, Farrugia, & Dyer, 2004). In fact, in one study, RSR was shown to be more predictive of relationship satisfaction and stability than even good partner communication (Halford, et al., 2007).

This study seeks to understand how each CRS promotes or discourages a couple's ability to implement various strategies and effort to work on their relationship. In order to make the

argument that how a couple resolves conflict will likely influence their ability to engage in RSR, we must address that not every fight a couple has is about changes that need to be made in the marriage. However, we believe that the three stable CRSs set a tone in the relationship that may make it easier or more difficult for each partner to hear and understand what it is that their partner needs from them in order for the relationship to flourish. For example, in a validating relationship couples work as partners to listen to each other's concerns and then problem-solve together. We believe this mutual listening and understanding may contribute to both partner's ability to make and implement self-directed relationship-oriented work. Conversely, an avoidant couple's reluctance to engage in conflict may make it difficult for either partner to engage in RSR because they rarely talk about the things that are bothering them and how they think they should be addressed in the context of their relationship.

Additionally, we predict that there will be variation in how each CRS engages in RSR across subgroups. Specifically, we believe that an individual's commitment to the relationship will influence their ability to engage in RSR across each CRS. For example, do avoidant couples avoid conflict because talking about problems causes unnecessary conflict and emotional distress or because relationship changes are not that important to them and they don't wish to engage deeply with their partner frequently? This example of variation within one of the CRS subgroups leads us to believe that commitment may moderate the relationship between CRS and RSR.

Commitment has been shown to have many different domains and motivations; the most central features are loyalty, responsibility, living up to one's word, faithfulness, and trust (Hampel & Vangelisti, 2008). Repeatedly, commitment has been shown to be significantly related to relationship satisfaction and stability (e.g., Birnie, McClure, Lydon & Holmburg,

2009; Carrere, Buehlman, Gottman, Coan & Ryckstuhl, 2000; Stanley et al., 2002). We believe that the type of CRS a couple engages in will predict their engagement in RSR *in the context* of their commitment to the relationship and each other because commitment may reflect different motivations that couples have to work things out and stay together. While commitment is only one of several possible motivations to do RSR, its strong connection to relationship satisfaction and stability suggest that it will be a potent one.

Theoretical Context

Two theoretical contexts guide this study: the Sound Marital House theory that explains CRSs (Gottman, 1999) and the RSR theory (Halford, Sanders & Behrens, 1994).

Conflict Resolution Styles

The four styles of conflict resolution derive from Gottman's Sound Marital House theory (1999), which was published with all his findings six years after his work began to take shape on conflict resolution styles (1993). The theory grew out of over 20 years of research on couple interaction. From his research, he has found ways to predict divorce or marital stability, relationship satisfaction, and adaptability to childbirth and retirement. He has even created a mathematical model of marital interaction (Gottman, 1982; Gottman, 1999; Gottman, Driver & Tabares, 2002; Gottman & Levenson, 2002a; Gottman & Levenson, 2002b; Gottman, Markman & Notarius, 1977).

The Sound Marital House theory states that affect is very important in the couple relationship in predicting the stability and functionality of a marriage (Gottman, 1999). Gottman followed the conversation of a couple, where he would observe both their positive and negative affect. Not surprisingly, he found that unhappy couples exhibited negativity in their affect more frequently than positivity. One interesting part of his research was that he found that happy

couples were not without negativity, but rather they had a rich climate of positivity that occurred more often than the negativity (Gottman, 1999; Gottman et al., 2002; Gottman and Silver, 1999). Out of these early observations, balance theory was born.

Balance theory states that stable couples must have at least five positive interactions for every negative interaction (Gottman, 1993). This balance of positive and negative affect does not just take place during conflict, but it is a reflection of all of a couple's interactions with each other. The three stable styles of conflict resolution—validating, volatile, and avoidant—all found a way to adapt their conflict and everyday interactions to balance their positive and negative affect. Validating and avoidant couples are characterized by largely neutral interactions while volatile couples are characterized by large amounts of negativity balanced by large amounts of positivity at other times (Gottman, 1993). The more negative affect occurs, the more positive affect the couple needs to survive and maintain a 5:1 ratio of positive to negative affect.

While the validating marriage has implicitly been the model of an ideal couple in behavioral marital therapy (Gottman, 1993), this theoretical framework implies that there are three adaptations of conflict resolution that create overall satisfaction and stability in marriage. However, it is unknown how each of the CRSs predicts RSR, as well as how commitment may moderate the effect of variations between each stable conflict style.

Relationship Self-Regulation

The study of RSR began first with the study of individual self-regulation (Karoly, 1993). The idea of self-regulation has a long history in psychology, and the role of self-generated events in the regulation of behavior has been studied extensively (e.g., Karoly, 1993; Mahoney and Thoreson, 1974; Bandura, 2005). From this research, there has been a general acknowledgement of the interdependent nature of self-generated and external influences on behavior; while always

at the core is an assumption that individuals can regulate their own behavior (Halford et al., 2007).

When applying the theory of self-regulation to couple relationships, Halford proposed that couple RSR works as a cycle of appraisal, goal setting, and change implementation (Halford et al., 1994). This cycle begins with *appraisal*, which evaluates current relationship behaviors and the major influences on those behaviors. It continues with *goal setting*, where partners define specific and actionable goals for change based on the previous appraisal. And the cycle finishes with *implementation*, where a partner takes active steps to achieve their goals. This process is iterative and cycles back to appraisal inasmuch as the desired behavior changes were achieved (Halford et al., 2007).

Halford describes this process of RSR theoretically as a set of goals that have stemmed from an individual's meta-analysis of the relationship surrounding two domains: relationship strategies and effort (Wilson, Charker, Lizio, Halford & Kimlin, 2005). *Relationship strategies* are various behaviors used to enhance relationship satisfaction and are measured by answers to questions like "Do I make an effort to seek out ideas about what makes for an effective relationship?" and "Do I try to apply ideas about effective relationships to improve our relationship?" (Wilson et al., 2005). Strategies in RSR are more often a cognitive pursuit of understanding what would help the relationship theoretically. *Relationship effort* refers to attention and persistent attempts to enhance the relationship, measured by items such as "I tend to put off doing anything about problems in our relationship in the hope that things will get better by themselves" (negatively scored) and "If my partner does not appreciate the change efforts I am making, I tend to give up" (negatively scored) (Wilson et al., 2005). Relationship effort is

more often characterized by the actual engagement in positive relationship behaviors and more of an active element of RSR.

RSR is the belief that if couples can learn how to stop reverting to partner blaming and instead focus on own behaviors, then their ability to maintain and improve their relationship will increase (Halford et al., 1994). Research has largely agreed with this belief, arguing that RSR helps individuals and couples work toward specific, actionable goals, which helps relationships have higher levels of long-term relationship satisfaction (Halford, et al., 2007).

An important consideration is individual self-regulation's recognition of the contributions of both individual and environmental factors to goal development and execution. One may have an individual propensity to want to change and grow as a person, but the environment of the relationship and one's commitment to it makes that goal-setting process begin and ultimately flourish. While this theoretical explanation may seem more conscious, the meta-competencies and processes of individual self-regulation may also be unconscious or habitual expressions of goal-directed behavior in satisfied couples.

Review of the Literature

Conflict Resolution Styles

Gottman (1994a, 1994b, 1999) found through behavioral observation research with couples that the conflict resolution style a couple uses predicts their perceptions of satisfaction and stability in their marriage. In his research, he determined two kinds of marital types based on the domains of behavior, physiology, affect, health, marital satisfaction, and marital dissolution risk: regulated and nonregulated (Gottman, 1994a). Gottman (1994b) found that the stability of a marriage can be maintained if there are five positive interactions for every one negative interaction. In his observations, he found that some couples were much more negative

and that this ratio was violated, which led to distress and a perception that well-being was lost. If negative interactions continued to prevail, the partners felt personally attacked or out of touch with their partner, and the partners eventually perceived their relationship as severely dysfunctional. For this reason, regulated and nonregulated couples are most clearly defined by their display of positive or negative affect in all of their interactions with one another. (Gottman, 1994a, 1998; Shapiro & Gottman, 2004). In breaking down this research further, Gottman found that because of the intensity and honesty that most couples display in arguments, he could identify if marriages were regulated or not based on their conflict resolution style. He identified four different styles of CRS. Three of his subgroups fell into the regulated category, which he also identified as stable because they predicted marital stability. The fourth group fell into the unregulated category because it predicted marital satisfaction and divorce (Gottman, 1994b).

Regulated conflict resolution styles. The three subgroups that qualify as stable and regulated are validating, volatile, and avoidant (Gottman, 1994b).

Validating. A validating partner listens attentively to their partner while showing support and concern. Even when discussing difficult issues, validating partners display a lot of ease and calm. It is typical of these partners to let their partner know that they consider their opinions and emotions valid even when they don't agree with them. These couples begin their disagreements by letting each person explain their perspective on the topic. After both have been heard, the couple begins a process of trying to convince their partner of the rightness of their opinion. The discussion ends when they negotiate a compromise (Gottman, 1994b).

Because their relationships emphasize mutual respect, validators pick their battles carefully. Arguments are more like problem-solving discussions. Validating partners tend to be good friends and emphasize we-ness in their relationship; however, sometimes validating

couples turn their relationships into passionless arrangements in which romance and selfhood are sacrificed for friendship and togetherness. Couples can lose their sense of self and end up forgoing their personal development in favor of keeping the relationship strong (Gottman, 1994b).

Still, these marriages seem to be solid ones. Validating has been correlated with the highest relationship satisfaction and is often the type of conflict resolution that clinicians and educators teach in classes and therapy (Kurdek, 1995; Markman, Stanley & Blumberg, 2010).

Volatile. In contrast, volatile relationships are characterized by high emotion with extreme levels of both positive and negative behaviors; however, more positive than negative behaviors still prevail. These couples see themselves as equals and work toward a relationship that highlights and strengthens individuality (Gottman, 1994a, 1994b). A volatile couple engages in what most people think of as a “fight.” They exhibit active engagement and are not passive or withdrawn. They discuss the issue rationally and hear each other’s views; the volatile couple spends most of their time in a heated attempt to persuade each other to change their opinion. Compromise is not their style! These couples have high emotion when they disagree, but instead of evolving into something hostile in nature, their marriage remains warm and loving. In fact, these couples are characteristic of marriages that remain passionate and exciting throughout their course (Gottman, 1994b). They, like validators, do not intentionally inflict emotional pain on one another, and their extreme negative emotions are balanced by intense positive feelings as well (Gottman 1994a, 1994b).

One risk of a volatile relationship is that if a couple loses sight of the boundaries of their relationship, they could slide into a hostile marriage (an unregulated type) and lead their relationship into self-destruction (Gottman 1994b). Volatile couples seem to enjoy playfully

teasing one another, but this brand of humor can be risky. They censor few of their thoughts, and hurt feelings can inadvertently occur.

Avoidant. An avoidant CRS is characterized by someone who will not argue for their position but instead will minimize the disagreements and agree to disagree. They are conflict minimizers and make light of their differences rather than resolve them. Perhaps one reason for this is that little gets resolved in avoidant marriages when differences are aired. In their disagreements, neither partner attempts to persuade the other and they don't seek for a compromise. Solving things in these marriages means that either they ignore the difference or one partner agrees to act more like the other. However, in the process of agreeing to disagree, they reaffirm the love and satisfaction they have in their marriage overall, and they believe that the positives outweigh the majority of issues where they disagree. They do not commonly use behaviors or words intent on hurting their partner or converting their partner to their way of thinking, and so their relationship remains regulated and relatively quiet and peaceful (Gottman, 1994b).

Avoidant couples tend to have calm, pleasant lives. They display little of the intense passion that volatile couples and even validating couples do. However, this creates a potential risk, as they do not know how to address a conflict should they be forced to do so someday. If an issue comes up that is too overwhelming for couples to "agree to disagree," the issue could negatively overwhelm their interaction and the marriage could suffer. Additionally, their marriages can become lonely, as partners eventually feel their spouse doesn't really know or understand them because talk about disagreements is always shut down so quickly (Gottman, 1994b).

From the literature, it is obvious that all three regulated or stable types of CRS have their pros and cons. The differences between each of these three styles are why we think that there may be variances in the ways that each CRS uses RSR in their relationship. For example, because avoidant couples rarely continue the argument until a compromise or change is made, research shows that their ability to resolve issues is less effective than that of validating or volatile couples (Gottman, 1994b). We believe that a couple's lack of experience continuing to discuss the issue until the point that someone agrees to change or convinces the other to change will negatively impact their ability to make and implement relationship-oriented goals that would bring about desired positive change. In avoidant relationships, the discussion of issues is limited. If couples seldom talk at a deeper level about what is bothering them about their partner or the relationship, it will be harder for each partner to begin the RSR process with an appraisal (the first step of RSR) of the relationship and what is lacking. The partners may simply lack the knowledge to address the right problems and create self-directed goals for marital improvement.

We believe volatile couples may have similar problems implementing RSR, albeit for different reasons. Volatile couples run the risk of arguing about almost anything in their relationship—from large things like moving to small things like what to eat. This frequent battle about often trivial things may make it difficult for couples to hear beyond the smaller issues to understand their partner's deeper needs and real complaints. Additionally, because of the frequency of the bickering, the implicit message is “you should change” and the partner bringing up the concern may not think about how they could make changes to improve the relationship. In a volatile relationship, feeling empathy for one's partner needs is not a goal (Gottman, 1994b). Rather, “winning the debate” is their goal. For this reason, we believe volatile couples will struggle with appraising their relationships to look for needed change because their pattern

teaches them that usually when things are bad, it is because their partner is wrong, and when things are good, everything is great and highly fulfilling. For this reason, we think RSR will be more difficult for volatile couples as well.

Because validators' arguments are more like problem-solving sessions anyway (Gottman, 1994b), we believe they will be the most successful at implementing the principles of RSR into their relationship. When these couples disagree, they work hard to find a compromise and solution that works best for both parties. This willingness and practice at empathy and compromising leads us to believe that they will be the best not only at appraising their relationship and the changes needed but also at setting specific, actionable goals (the second step of RSR) to bring about change because they usually do this step with their partner in the midst of talking about the issue (Gottman, 1993; Fitzsimons & Bargh, 2003). Only when one deeply understands a partner's complaint can one engage in RSR. While most conflict suggests that someone needs to change, validating couples encourage an environment of compromise and personal responsibility to the problem.

This belief that validating couples may engage in RSR behaviors more often than volatile or avoidant couples is supported by research that showed that in a comparison of the three CRSs, validators scored higher on relationship satisfaction, stability, communication, and conflict strategies than the other two styles of couples (Holman & Jarvis, 2003). In one study, couples who self-identified as validating had the highest relationship satisfaction and stability across the three relationship types. Additionally, the validating group had the highest positive communication means and the lowest negative communication scores. These scores were significantly different from the scores of the volatile and avoidant groups (Holman & Jarvis,

2003). With validating couples scoring the highest in positive communication of the three stable CRSs, their ability to engage in RSR will likely be higher.

While Gottman (1994a, 1994b) has shown all these stable styles of CRS are related to relationship satisfaction about equally, more recent research has suggested that this may not be the case and that validating couples may actually report higher relationship qualities like positive communication, satisfaction and stability than the other two types of couples (Holman & Jarvis, 2003). To further understand the connection between these styles—especially the volatile and avoidant conflict resolution styles—and RSR will help us further understand how CRSs lead to relationship satisfaction.

Commitment

Commitment has been studied in various capacities with each analysis supporting the notion that commitment can be organized into types or groups. The first understanding of commitment was the investment model, which emerged from interdependence theory (Kelley & Thibaut 1978; Thibaut & Kelley 1959). Both the theory and the model challenged the early common assumption that satisfaction was the primary cause of stability and instead argued that commitment was a better predictor of relationship longevity (Berscheid, 1994; Clark & Reis 1988). From this early work, a definition of commitment emerged: commitment is a long-term orientation toward a relationship, including feelings of psychological attachment and intentions to persist through both good and bad times (Cox, Wexler, Rusbult & Gaines, 1997). However, this singular definition has sparked a variety of studies attempting to understand the nature of commitment.

In the literature, a number of researchers suggest a tripartite nature of commitment: personal, moral, and structural (Cox et al., 1997; Johnson, Caughlin & Huston, 1999). *Personal*

commitment (wanting to stay in a relationship), *moral commitment* (having a sense of moral obligation to follow through with one's word or promise to stay in a relationship), and *structural commitment* (believing that certain constraints such as a commitment to an occupation or children preclude the dissolution of a relationship) have all been used as constructs in understanding why one keeps their commitments in relationships (Adam & Jones, 1997; Johnson et al., 1999).

In another group of studies, research has split commitment into two constructs: personal dedication and constraint commitment (Johnson, 1978; Stanley & Markman, 1992). In this understanding, *personal dedication* is understood as the desire of an individual to maintain or improve the quality of their relationship for the joint benefit of participants. On the other hand, *constraint commitment* refers to forces that constrain individuals to maintain relationships regardless of their personal dedication to them (Stanley & Markman, 1992). This includes factors such as economic constraints, religious beliefs about divorce, and concerns about children. This construct has also been shown to have validity in several cases (Murstein & MacDonald, 1983; Rusbult, 1980, 1983; Lund, 1985).

So how can both theories above be valid? In recent research, Hampel & Vangelisti (2008) argue that partners in typical relationships do not view the features typically associated with moral and structural commitment or constraint commitment as central to their decision to stay in the relationship. They also note that to make a commitment in one of the domains mentioned above (personal, moral, or structural commitment), often the decision is weighed in relation to commitments made in other domains. For this reason, a more central understanding of commitment has emerged, which will be used for the purposes of this study; that is, the most

central features of commitment include loyalty, responsibility, living up to one's word, faithfulness, and trust (Hampel & Vangelisti, 2008).

In a large majority of studies, relationship satisfaction has been found to be related to commitment (e.g., Arriaga, 2001; Birnie et al., 2009; Carrere et al., 2000); however, most research has not yet distinguished between short-term accommodation (e.g., making promises in the midst of a conflict discussion) and sustained accommodation (e.g., following through with the promised behavior changes over time; Peetz & Kammrath, 2011). In this study, we want to see if the different types of CRS are related to RSR in different ways. However, because short-term accommodation and sustained accommodation mean very different things in a relationship, we will suggest that commitment (sustained accommodation) will moderate the relationship between CRS and RSR. This will help us test to see if within stable CRSs there is variation in commitment to the relationship and if that affects a couple's likelihood of engaging in RSR. The measure for commitment in this study more closely measures sustained accommodation and will therefore measure a couple's desire to stay together because they are happy and desire to remain in the relationship. This will help clinicians predict a couple's willingness to do RSR as well as the likelihood that they are already engaging in RSR behaviors based on the couple's CRS and commitment level.

Relationship Self-Regulation

Relationship self-regulation (RSR) was first conceptualized by Halford, Sanders, and Behrens (1994). RSR is defined as the individual work one does in a close relationship to think about, set, implement, and adjust goals that lead to relationship maintenance and improvement so that marital satisfaction may increase. This is different from other previously measured aspects of relationships in that RSR focuses on how partners successfully change their *own* behavior

within the relationship rather than focusing on the frequency of positive or negative behaviors that their partner exhibits (Halford et al., 2007).

In order to display social competence and create healthy relationships, good self-regulation skills are important (Vohs & Ciarocco, 2004). This means that while RSR is usually thought of as an individual process, researchers have documented that there is also an interpersonal dimension (Vohs & Ciarocco, 2004).

Generally, there is a documented positive association between RSR strategies, RSR effort and relationship satisfaction (Halford et al., 2007; Halford et al., 1994). Research has shown that couples who work toward specific, actionable goals to improve their relationship have significantly higher levels of long-term relationship satisfaction (Halford et al., 2007) regardless of relationship type (Shafer, Jensen, & Larson, 2012). RSR's documented connection with relationship satisfaction has been well researched in the past decade, and each study has supported the idea that RSR is a salient predictor of relationship success (Halford et al., 2007; Halford et al., 2011; Halford et al., 2004; Halford & Wilson, 2009; Wilson et al., 2005; Shafer et al., 2012; Meyer, Larson, Busby & Harper, 2012). RSR has even been shown in one study to account for 25–33% of the variance in relationship satisfaction (Wilson et al., 2005).

Strong support for RSR led Halford to the belief that in successful relationships, there is a need to teach people RSR skills rather than prescribing specific forms of relationships to which couples should conform (1994). This, too, has been supported by recent research. When RSR is taught in couple relationship education programs like Couple CARE (Halford, 2011), significant increases in marital satisfaction occur (Halford et al., 2004).

Additionally, research has found that RSR may vary by gender in that women tend to find RSR more significant to improving their relationship satisfaction than men (Shafer, James &

Larson, 2013). However, research also found that men are more likely to employ relationship effort than strategies whereas women are more likely to employ relationship strategies than effort. This suggests that men and women engage in RSR differently.

Comparisons between the effort and the strategies dimension of RSR show that *effort* seems to have a stronger and longer lasting association with relationship satisfaction. Research has shown that both strategies and effort had immediate positive effects on marital satisfaction for newlyweds, but only effort had longer-term effects past the first year of marriage (Halford et al., 2007). For this reason we explored the associations between stable CRSs and RSR effort and RSR strategies separately.

Summary and Research Questions

The validating, volatile, and avoidant CRSs are all considered stable ways to resolve conflict and interact in marriage; however, each one uses a different approach to generate similar results: good relationship stability and satisfaction. This study seeks to understand how each of these types of CRSs promote or discourage a couple's ability to do relationship work (RSR).

RSR has been shown to account for a great deal of variance in relationship satisfaction. By testing the relationship between each stable CRS and RSR, we will better understand if each CRS equally promotes self-reflection and improvement in the context of the relationship. For example, does an avoidant couple not talk about conflictual matters for very long but still work toward being more loving toward each other because of their high commitment to the marriage? With that motivation, they are more likely to engage in RSR effort. If they do not have arguments because they feel instead, that they should be working on themselves and not trying to change their partner, they seem more likely to engage in RSR strategies. While this study will not answer why couples who engage in a particular CRS employ it, it will begin to explore how

the CRSs relate to relationship work (RSR) and *if all* the stable CRSs predict RSR equally well. If the results suggest that when avoidant people restrain from arguments they engage in less RSR strategies or effort, then couples who are in avoidant relationships may be taught the dimension(s) of RSR that they lack and work on better implementing RSR effort and strategies.

In contrast, often in therapy and premarital counseling and education, a validating conflict resolution style is presented as the best way a couple can resolve conflict (e.g. Miller, Miller, Nunnally, & Wackman, 2007). Because of their comfort with problem-solving, resolving conflict, and dedication to listen to their partner's concerns, we believe that validating couples create a collaborative atmosphere in their relationship most conducive to RSR that is unlike the less collaborative atmospheres in volatile and avoidant relationships.

While validating couples consider their partner's feelings before reaching a decision, volatile couples tend to dismiss their partner's point of view and avoidant couples rarely reach a point in the argument where they hear their partner's complaints. For this reason, we believe that avoidant and volatile couples will be less likely to use RSR in their relationships. However, because avoidant and volatile couples still have stable and satisfactory relationships, we believe that if they do have significantly lower occurrence of RSR, teaching these couples to use RSR in their relationship will be a better technique than pushing them to be more validating in therapy.

The general purpose of this study was to explore the association of three different CRSs with RSR to see if couples with volatile and avoidant conflict styles are as likely to practice RSR as much as validating couples are, thereby helping to increase the scientific understanding of the nature of RSR and conflict resolution style. We also suggest a moderator in the interaction between CRS and RSR. Commitment is one of several important explanations of why a couple would want to engage in RSR regardless of their CRS, and we plan to test the differences

between couples who are highly committed to their relationships and less committed within each of the CRSs to see how it moderates their RSR.

Research Questions

Research has yet to determine the relationship between Gottman's three stable CRSs and RSR. Nor do we know if commitment moderates these relationships. This study seeks to answer the following questions: (1) How are stable CRSs (i.e., validating, volatile, and avoidant) related to RSR? (i.e. do couples from all three types of CRSs report engaging in RSR strategies?) (2) Do validating couples make more relationship effort and use more strategies than volatile or avoidant couples? (3) Does commitment moderate the relationships between stable CRSs and relationship strategies and effort? The theoretical model we tested to answer these research questions is seen in Figure 1 (pg. 49).

Methods

Sample

The sample consisted of married individuals, specifically 1,406 females and 856 males, in their first marriage who took the RELATIONSHIP Evaluation (RELATE) online between February of 2011 and August of 2013 since that is when the commitment measure was available on the RELATE survey. Frequency distributions were calculated for race, religion education level, income level relationship length, and how the respondent found the RELATE survey (Table 1). The mean age for females was 31.78 years (S.D. = 10.24), and 32.96 years (S.D. = 10.29) for males. Caucasians represented 84% of the females and 86% of the males. African Americans represented 4% of the males and 6% of the females. Two percent of the males and 3% of the females reported as Asian, and 4% of the males and females identified as Latino (S.D. = 0.918 for males and 0.973 for females). Education ranged from less than high school to a

college graduate degree. In our sample, 6% of the males and 2% females had a high school equivalency or less, 37% of males and 35% of females had some college, 8% of males and 13% of females had an associate's degree, 21% of males and 20% of females had completed their bachelor's degree, 8% of males and 13% of females had completed some graduate or professional degree, and 21% of males and 17% of females had completed their graduate or professional degree. Gross yearly income for the participants ranged from no income to more than \$300,000 per year. The median income category for females was less than \$20,000 yearly, and for males it was \$40,000 to \$59,000 yearly. In our sample, the three most common religious affiliations reported were the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS) (52% males and 53% females), Protestant (17% males and 14% females), and none (12% males and females). Individuals had been married an average of 3-5 years. For a more details on descriptive statistics see Table 1.

Most of the participants found the RELATE survey through a class instructor (25.3%), a family member (11.4%), or a therapist (9%). Participants also reported that they were directed to RELATE through a clergy (1%), friend (2.9%), web search (5%), magazine or newspaper (1.8%), or online ad (3.3%).

The length of marriage spanned from 0–3 months to 30 years for males and 0–3 months to 40 years for females ($M = 4$ years for males and females, $SD = 2.3$ years). Twenty-four percent of males and females in our sample were in their first year of marriage. The next two largest categories for males and females were 7–12 months (22% and 21 %, respectively) and 3–5 years (20% and 21%). The large majority (93%) of our sample had been married less than 10 years. In summary, this sample was primarily lower-class, Caucasian newly-marrieds with higher education.

Procedures

The data came from the RELATionship Evaluation database (RELATE, Busby, Holman & Taniguichi, 2001). RELATE is an online, 300-item questionnaire designed to assess the challenges and strengths in dating, engaged, or married relationships (see www.relate_institute.com). It assesses a wide variety of variables predictive of relationship satisfaction (Busby et al., 2001) (see Busby et al. (2001) for more details on RELATE contents and subscales and its theoretical foundation). Likert scales in RELATE demonstrate high alpha internal consistency (between 0.70 and 0.90), test-retest reliability, as well as construct validity (Busby et al., 2001). RELATE includes subscales measuring Gottman's four CRSs, RSR, and commitment.

Measures

Commitment. Commitment in marriage was assessed with a four-item subscale from RELATE (Cronbach's Alpha was 0.81 [Busby et al., 2001]). The possible scores for each item ranged from 1 to 5 using a Likert scale. Response categories included (1) Strongly Disagree, (2) Disagree, (3) It Depends, (4) Agree, and (5) Strongly Agree. Questions asked include: (1) My relationship with my partner is more important to me than almost anything else in my life. (2) I may not want to be with my partner a few years from now (reverse scored). (3) I like to think of my partner and me more in terms of "us" and "we" rather than "me" and "him/her." (4) I want this relationship to stay strong no matter what rough times we may encounter. Question 2 was reverse scored to indicate higher commitment. Total summed scores of all four items ranged from 4 to 20, with higher scores indicating greater commitment to the relationship. Scores for each person were then summed and divided by the number of items (four) to create a mean

commitment score (range = 1-5). Internal consistency was high for this measure (0.81 for men and 0.82 for women) as well as test-retest validity (0.78) (Busby et al., 2001).

Relationship self-regulation strategies and effort. In RELATE, there are two subscales for RSR with one assessing relationship strategies and another assessing relationship effort ($\alpha = .72$). These two subscales are taken from items that are in the Behavioral Self-Regulation for Effective Relationships Scale (BSRERS) (Wilson et al., 2005). The RSR effort and RSR strategies scale are moderately correlated ($r = .57$) but due to research finding that effort has a longer lasting association with relationship satisfaction than strategies we considered both aspects separately in this study (Wilson et al., 2005; Halford et al., 2007). For more detailed information on this scale's development and properties, see Wilson et al. (2005). In RELATE, participants' self-rating of their use of RSR strategies and effort were assessed by taking the sum total of each four item subscale separately and dividing the total by the four items to create the RSR variable used in the analysis. For both subscales the possible scores for each item ranged from 1 to 5 using a Likert scale. Responses categories included (1) Never True, (2) Rarely True, (3) Sometimes True, (4) Usually True, and (5) Always True. In the relationship strategies subscale, questions included the following: (1) I try to apply ideas about effective relationships to improve our relationship. (2) I actually put my intentions or plans for personal change into practice. (3) I give my partner helpful feedback on the ways he/she can help me achieve my goals. (4) If the way I'm approaching change doesn't work, I can usually think of something different to try. For the relationship effort subscale, questions included the following: (1) If things go wrong in the relationship I tend to feel powerless. (2) I tend to fall back on what is comfortable for me in relationships, rather than trying new ways of relating. (3) Even when I know what I could do differently to improve things in the relationship, I cannot seem to change

my behavior. (4) If my partner doesn't appreciate the change efforts I am making, I tend to give up. The items in the relationship effort subscale were reverse scored to control for response bias. Higher scores on both subscales indicate higher RSR in the participant, and scores may range from 4 to 20 for each subscale. These scales have shown concurrent, convergent, and construct validity as well as high internal consistency reliability in two samples of newly married couples (Busby et al., 2001).

Conflict resolution style. Conflict resolution style was assessed using one question in RELATE (Holman & Jarvis, 2003) with a response choice of one of the four empirically-validated CRS types identified by Gottman (1994a). These include Gottman's four styles: (1) Avoidant, (2) Volatile, (3) Validating, and (4) Hostile. Respondents rated themselves by placing an "x" next to the style that most closely describes them and their partner during the majority of their conflicts. The conflict resolution styles were described in the questionnaire as follows:

1. Avoidant style: I avoid conflict. I don't think there is much to be gained from getting openly angry with others. In fact, a lot of talking about emotions and difficult issues seems to make matters worse. I think that if you just relax about problems, they will have a way of working themselves out.
2. Validating style: I discuss difficult issues, but it is important for me to display a lot of self-control and to remain calm. I prefer to let others know that their opinions and emotions are valued even if they are different than mine. When arguing, I try to spend a lot of time validating others as well as trying to find a compromise.
3. Volatile: I debate and argue about issues until they are resolved. Arguing openly and strongly doesn't bother me because this is how differences are resolved. Although sometimes my arguing is intense, that is okay because I try to balance this with kind and loving expressions. I think passion and zest actually lead to a better relationship with lots of intensity, making up, laughing, and affection.
4. Hostile: I can get pretty upset when I argue. When I am upset, at times I insult my partner by using something like sarcasm or putdowns. During intense discussions, my partner finds it difficult to listen to what I am saying because I am trying to make a point. Sometimes I have intensely negative feelings toward my partner when we have a conflict.

In their research, Holman and Jarvis (2003) showed these four descriptions of CRS to measure Gottman's CRSs—they can be reliably identified using this kind of survey method, and the

measures of the four CRSs on RELATE are considered to be both valid and reliable in distinguishing relationships that had low levels of criticism, contempt, and flooding as predicted by Gottman's model (Busby & Holman, 2009). For the purposes of our study, we omitted the hostile category (considered an unregulated CRS) from our research and instead focused on the first three styles that are considered regulated.

Control Variables

RSR and commitment have been shown to vary with relationship length and type (e.g., married versus unmarried) (Halford et al., 2007; Meyer, Larson, & Busby, & Harper, 2012). Therefore, in this study we included only couples early in their first marriage and assumed that married couples are generally in more stable relationships where CRSs, RSR, and commitment have started to develop compared to those who are in other types of relationships (e.g., cohabitating, or seriously dating). The length of the marriage relationship was controlled for statistically using the following question from RELATE: "How long have you and your partner been married?" Responses were coded as follows: 0 to 3 months (1), 4 to 6 months (2), 7 to 12 months (3), 1 to 2 years (4), 3 to 5 years (5), 6 to 10 years (6), 11 to 15 years (7), 16 to 20 years (8), 21 to 30 years (9), 31 to 40 years (10), and more than 40 years (11). Values on this scale may range from 1 to 11, with higher values indicating longer relationships. Chronological age also has been shown to be positively related to RSR strategies, so we also included chronological age as a control variable to account for possible differences in RSR due to age or cohort effects (Roundy, 2011).

Religiosity has been positively correlated with commitment and so we controlled for religiosity using the RELATE Religious Orientation Scale (Johnson et al., 1999) (alpha reliability = .793). This is a four item scale that asks individuals to rate themselves on a Likert

scale from 1 (Never) to 5 (Very Often) when considering things such as “Spirituality is an important part of my life” and, “How often do you pray?” Responses were summed and ranged from 5 and 20 and were controlled for in the statistical analysis. Finally, RSR may differ by gender, so we controlled for gender in our statistical analysis by coding males in our sample as (0) and females as (1) prior to our regression analyses (Shafer et al., 2013).

Results

First, mean scores, standard deviations, and frequencies were calculated for commitment, RSR strategies, and RSR effort (Table 2). From our primary analysis we found that in general, the sample engaged in RSR strategies frequently indicating a mean report of 3.6 (range 1-5 for the summed scale; S.D. = .62). This was also true of RSR effort as the mean was 3.2 (range 1-5 for the summed scale; S.D. = .69). Because the range of answers spans from a 1 to a 5, having the mean for both the RSR strategies and the RSR effort categories above a 3 means that across the stable CRSs our sample reports engaging in RSR more frequently than not.

We ran a multiple regression analysis with the control variables entered into the equation to determine their relationship to the dependent variables of RSR effort and strategies. The regression models indicated that all the control variables were significantly related to the dependent variables in this study (range = -.035 to .119). For this reason we included them as control variables in all further analyses.

Because the dependent variables, RSR effort and strategies, were significantly correlated with each other ($r = .53$), we determined that a General Linear Multivariate Model using a Multivariate Analysis of Covariance (MANCOVA) was an appropriate statistical approach for answering the three research questions. Additionally, we found commitment was slightly correlated with RSR strategies ($r = .23, p < .001$) and RSR effort ($r = .30, p < .001$). This makes

commitment a more independent moderator variable, without hidden effects on RSR possibly skewing the analysis. The model we tested is in Figure 1. In our model, we regressed RSR strategies and RSR effort onto each of the three stable styles of RSR and then analyzed how commitment moderated that relationship by creating an interaction term of the stable CRSs and commitment.

In order to compare the stable CRSs on RSR strategies and RSR effort and to explore how commitment moderated that relationship, we ran a Multivariate Analyses of Covariance (MANCOVA). A MANCOVA was appropriate for this study because we were looking at a categorical independent variable with multiple correlated dependent and control variables, and we were interested in identifying how the mean scores on the dependent variables, RSR strategies and RSR effort, differed across the different categories of the independent variable (Bray & Maxwell, 1985; Hasse & Ellis, 1987). Religiosity, age, gender, length of relationship and commitment served as covariate variables in the MANCOVA.

In order to best identify the relationship between the stable CRSs and the two RSR variables, effort and strategies, we first conducted our analysis with the three CRSs included together to see if there was a significant difference between the CRS groups as a whole and RSR variables as well as an interaction with commitment. This was done because the original question had four responses and in order to get meaningful results of the relationship between each of the stable CRSs separately, step-down regressions must be performed later. Not keeping it grouped together at first yields p-values that are not reflective of all the variables entered together (Hosmer & Lemeshow, 2013). The results from the MANCOVA indicated that a main effect existed for the CRS variable grouped as one [$F(6, 4408) = 29.153$ $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .007$]. Additionally there was a main effect for commitment [$F(2, 2204) = 93.803$ $p < .001$,

partial $\eta^2 = .041$] as well as a statistically significant interaction between the CRS (grouped) x commitment [$F(6, 4408) = 17.132 p < .009$ partial $\eta^2 = .004$].

Because the multivariate tests were significant we next looked at the univariate results. To evaluate the effect sizes of CRSs grouped as a whole as well as commitment on the dependent variables the partial η^2 statistic was used. The univariate F -test associated with CRSs and commitment were both significant. In the test we found that the CRSs were statistically significantly related to both RSR strategies [$F(3, 2205) = 28.165 p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .013$] and RSR effort [$F(3, 2205) = 8.92 p = .031$, partial $\eta^2 = .004$]. This was also true of commitment related to RSR strategies [$F(1, 2205) = 29.28 p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .013$] and RSR effort [$F(1, 2205) = 92.19 p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .040$].

Next, because both the multivariate and univariate F -tests were significant and were unable to tell us more about the three categories of CRSs, it was appropriate to perform post-hoc tests to look at the specific differences between each couple CRS type on the dependent variables. These were performed through step-down F -tests, using a least significant difference (LSD) post-hoc comparison to control for multiple comparisons (Rao, Toutenburg, Fieger, Heumann, Nittner, & Scheid, 1999). The estimated marginal means for each CRS as well as the standard errors for the three stable CRSs on both RSR effort and RSR strategies while controlling for length of relationship, age, gender, and religiosity are presented in Table 4. To understand the differences in mean scores for each of the stable CRSs and the two sub-categories of RSR, we created a prototypical plot based on the regression equations for each significant interaction to help us understand how effectively each type of stable CRS does RSR in their relationship.

The first research question we sought to answer was how stable CRSs are related to RSR strategies and effort. The results from this study suggest that there is a significant, positive relationship between the grouped stable CRSs and the use of relationship self-regulation strategies [$F(3, 2205) = 8.615, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .013$] and effort [$F(3, 2205) = 3.04, p = .031, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .004$]. That is, both husbands and wives in their first marriage reported they significantly engage in RSR strategies and effort, thus our first research question found that there is a positive relationship between all the stable CRSs types and RSR strategies and effort. When comparing the three stable CRSs separately on RSR variables, we found that each stable CRS was significantly positively related to RSR effort [validating: $\beta = 1.85, t(923) = 9.83, p < .001$; volatile: $\beta = 1.95, t(631) = 10.2, p < .001$; avoidant: $\beta = 1.19, t(297) = 5.16, p < .001$] and RSR strategies [validating: $\beta = 2.95, t(923) = 17.52, p < .001$; volatile: $\beta = 3.26, t(631) = 19.05, p < .001$; avoidant: $\beta = 2.02, t(631) = 9.8, p < .001$] (see Table 3). However, when we examined the estimated mean scores in a pairwise comparison for RSR strategies and effort, those couples who employed a validating or volatile CRS had significantly higher mean scores than those who reported being avoidant ($p < .01$). From the estimated means we can infer that validating couples are more likely to engage in RSR strategies and RSR effort (see Table 4) than the other two types of stable CRSs. In our study, validating couples ranked first with volatile couples' mean score on RSR strategies only .053 below that of validating which was not significantly different ($p = .68$). Avoidant couples, however, were significantly lower than both validating ($p < .01$) and volatile ($p < .01$) couples on RSR strategies in a pairwise comparison analysis.

Similar differences in the estimated means existed for RSR effort. The drops from a validating style to a volatile were significant ($p < .01$) as well as the drop from a volatile style to

an avoidant one ($p < .01$). This means there was a clear hierarchy that showed validating couples engaged in significantly more RSR effort than the other stable CRSs.

For our final research question we evaluated the possible moderating effect of commitment on the stable CRSs and RSR strategies and effort. Because the relationship between the CRSs grouped together and commitment was statistically significant in the multivariate tests we used the parameter estimates to plot the simple slopes of each stable CRS moderated by commitment and its effect on the RSR sub-categories to understand better what that interaction looks like (see Figures 2 and 3). We also looked at the parameter estimates that showed that the slope changes between the stable CRSs were significantly different in a positive direction (see Table 3). This was true for both RSR effort [validating: $\beta = .24$, $t(923) = 6.65$, $p < .001$; volatile: $\beta = .182$, $t(631) = 4.84$, $p < .001$; avoidant: $\beta = .289$, $t(297) = 6.01$, $p < .001$] and RSR strategies in the validating and avoidant CRSs [validating: $\beta = .11$, $t(923) = 3.29$, $p < .001$; avoidant: $\beta = .29$, $t(297) = 5.06$, $p < .001$]. For couples who reported a volatile CRS, increasing commitment in the relationship did not have a significant effect on their ability to engage in RSR strategies [$\beta = .182$, $t(631) = 4.84$, $p = .441$]. From these graphs we found that when commitment moderated the relationship between the stable CRSs and RSR variables, the report of RSR effort was higher than the report of engaging in more RSR strategies. Additionally, in both RSR effort and strategies, avoidant was the most positively impacted by commitment suggesting that increasing commitment in avoidant people couples may cause the most significant positive increase in how much RSR they engage in. These comparisons are shown in the prototypical plots presented in figures 2 and 3.

Discussion

The general purpose of this study was to explore the associations between RSR effort and strategies in Gottman's three stable CRSs and to see if commitment to marriage improved the use of RSR in each style. This study provides preliminary answers to the questions: 1) "Are all of the CRSs that are considered stable equal in reporting to relationship work?" and 2) "Does commitment interact with these CRSs to increase the likelihood of doing relationship work?"

One of the main findings of this study was that all three stable CRSs fare well in positively relating to the two dimensions of RSR strategies and effort. Our results showed validating couples reported the highest levels of RSR compared to the avoidant and volatile couples. This fits with previous research suggesting that a validating CRS is more predictive of relationship satisfaction than other types of CRSs (Kurdek, 1995; Markman et al., 2010; Holman & Jarvis, 2003). Additionally, the stronger relationship between a validating CRS and higher RSR on both dimensions may help explain why despite there being three CRSs related to relationship satisfaction (Gottman, 1994b), a validating style is usually explicitly a preferential CRS taught and reinforced in clinical settings (Shapiro & Gottman, 2004; Gottman 1993).

While finding that a validating style is more predictive of RSR than the other two styles is important, perhaps more interesting is that employing a volatile style scored consistently closely to validating couples' scores while avoidant couples consistently were below the other two styles. We note that while the differences in reported RSR levels were small across CRSs, they are statistically significant. In our study, a volatile CRS still predicted less RSR on both the effort and strategies dimension than a validating CRS; however, both groups were more similar to each other than the avoidant group. In fact the results showed that how much the avoidant category engaged in RSR was statistically significantly lower than the validating or volatile

groups in a comparison of the differences between the CRSs. This is different from Holman and Jarvis's research (2003) that stated that the avoidant style was closer to the validating CRS and that those with a volatile CRS were below falling closest to an unregulated style. In our study, the validating and volatile groups were not significantly different from each other in RSR effort dimension; however, they were significantly different in the in the RSR strategies dimension. The avoidant group was significantly different (lower scores) from both the volatile and validating groups on both RSR dimensions. Differences from the present study and previous ones may be explained by the differences in using relationship satisfaction and RSR strategies and effort as a dependent variable. Perhaps an avoidant CRSs predicts higher levels of relationship satisfaction but a volatile CRS is more communicative and therefore more predictive of RSR, however because RSR itself is highly correlated with relationship satisfaction, further research will be needed to understand these differences more completely (Halford et al., 2004).

We speculate that avoidant people struggle more with RSR effort than RSR strategies because of the research that shows that avoidant couples' tendency to not discuss difficult issues in their relationship very deeply, and so their ability to do put more effort into the things that are lacking is affected by their relative lack of deep knowledge and empathy toward their partner's needs or what the relationship is lacking compared to validating and volatile couples (Gottman, 1994b). One thing volatile and validator styles share, in comparison, is both partners with these styles speak up assertively about changes they want in the relationship. Thus, their partner is more likely to "get it" when the other partner asks for change than the partner of an avoidant style might.

Validating and volatile couples did not have significantly different scores on RSR strategies. However, all three stable CRSs were significantly different from each other on the

dimension of RSR effort. This finding is perhaps especially important when considering the research that while RSR strategies are important, after the first year of marriage RSR effort is the larger predictor of relationship stability and success (Halford et al., 2007). In fact, research suggests that most of the RSR a couple does after the first year of marriage that will positively contribute to their stability and satisfaction will be RSR *effort* (Halford et al., 2007). Most couples in the present study had been married 3 years or more so this makes sense with our sample. This was supported in our research with our finding that length of the relationship had a significant, negative relationship with RSR strategies [$\beta = -.024, t(2227) = -3.01, p = .003$].

Our final finding that commitment significantly positively moderates the relationship between all stable CRSs on RSR effort and validating and avoidant couples on RSR strategies are similar to findings that commitment is an important factor in relationship satisfaction and stability in general (Birnie et al., 2009; Carrere et al., 2000; Stanley et al., 2002). In our study, the volatile CRS did not significantly interact with commitment to change the level of RSR strategies. We suggest that a volatile couples' RSR strategies may not impacted by commitment because volatile couples engage in conflict the most frequently because they believe that it will help the problem get resolved sooner (Gottman, 1994a; 1994b). We speculate that it is this belief that leads volatile couples to engage in RSR strategies regardless of their commitment level. Additionally, we found that even when avoidant participants reported the highest level of commitment (a 5 on our scale), based on the simple slope we plotted, their RSR was still lower compared to couples who reported a validating or volatile CRS with the lowest level of commitment (a 1 on our scale). From this we may infer that while commitment may help an avoidant couple engage in more RSR strategies, a highly committed avoidant couple still will likely report lower levels of RSR strategies than validating or volatile couples. On the RSR

effort dimension, avoidant couples were again, lower than the other two styles. Highly committed avoidant couples were able to close the gap slightly between them and highly committed validating and volatile couples, but again, they reported significantly lower RSR across both dimensions compared to the other CRSs.

We speculate that the gap between reported RSR levels for avoidant people as compared to volatile or validating at the low end of commitment is that they may not communicate as much as the other two groups because they may not be as invested in making changes in their relationship. As commitment gets higher in an avoidant relationship their RSR outcomes are similar to that of validating and volatile couples. Avoidant couples may be difficult in therapeutic settings because they are somewhat “checked out” of their relationship. At higher levels of commitment we would guess that avoidant couples don’t fight because they truly care about their partner and don’t want to stir things up for small occurrences and annoyances. Research on RSR supports this idea as individuals who participate in high levels of RSR generally have more emotional investment in their relationships and have better communication skills to deal with difficulties that arise; skills that characteristically avoidant couples are less likely to have (Halford et al., 2007; Halford et al., 2011; Halford et al., 2007; Halford & Wilson, 2009; Gottman, 1994b; Holman & Jarvis, 2003).

Limitations

The main limitation of this research was that sample was not representative of the U.S. population of couples in their first marriage. Many of the participants were recruited in a college setting so students and more highly educated people were oversampled. A disproportionate percentage (62%) of the sample was female. In addition, the sample contained a high percentage of Caucasian individuals (85%) and about 50% of the sample was affiliated with the Church of

Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS). However, research has shown there are not many differences between LDS and non-LDS married couples in terms of couple dynamics and problems (Heaton, Goodman, & Holman, 2001; Carroll, Linford, Holman, & Busby, 2000).

Another limitation is that this sample used individual reports of CRS rather than matched couple data. In order to understand how a *couple's* CRS may affect their ability to do RSR as a collective it will be important to gather this data with paired couples. Likewise, in order to get a more general picture of this concept as CRSs and RSR have never been looked at together before we decided to control for the effects of gender in the present study, but in future research it may be important to split the data into an analysis by males and females separately to assess if males and females approach RSR within the types of CRS differently.

In addition, CRS was assessed using only one self-report question about their CRS while Gottman's research on CRSs was based primarily on behavioral observations (Gottman, 1993). To further understand the relationship between CRS and RSR a third party observer may need to corroborate the individuals' CRS within the couple relationship based on more objective assessment of their CRSs.

Finally, this study did not address the differences in RSR outcomes for couples where both partners employ the same CRS as opposed to partners who employ different CRSs within the relationship. If both members of a couple self-report as volatile will they employ more RSR than a couple in which one member sees themselves as validating and the other as volatile? Further research would need to address this separation and how couples use RSR in their relationship differently.

Implications for Clinicians and Couple Educators

This research has several implications for clinical and educational settings. We found that validating and volatile couples actually engage in both RSR strategies and RSR effort while avoidant couples engage in RSR strategies. This is good for psychoeducational and clinical settings because it implies that all three types of stable CRS do RSR. However, we found that out of the three types, validating couples do both RSR effort and strategies best. We also found that commitment can help validating and avoidant couples on both RSR effort and strategies, and that it helps volatile couples do RSR effort.

Primarily, this suggests that having practitioners help couples identify their primary CRS can be beneficial in tailoring their psychoeducational needs. Since the RELATE survey (Busby et al., 2001) has been found to be a salient assessment of an individual's CRS having couples take the RELATE is an excellent way assess CRSs because it not only charts the individual's perception of their CRS but also assess the individual's perception of their partners as well (Holman & Jarvis, 2003).

When a clinical or couple educator discusses the couple's CRSs with the couple they can be specific about the strengths of their couple-conflict style and teach them how to appropriately borrow from another style when necessary. Gottman himself suggested that the stable CRSs would be most successful when they adopted practices from another style as appropriate (Gottman, 1994b). In Holman and Jarvis's research (2003) they suggest that the most good would come from a volatile or avoidant CRS borrowing from the validating style in their ability to do clear sending and give empathy to their partner. Our research would agree with that assessment as the validating CRS is most predictive of RSR strategies and effort in our sample as well.

This research further emphasizes the importance of the RSR construct in couple dynamics research, and suggests that this relationship dimension deserves further attention as a significant predictor of relationship satisfaction (Wilson et al., 2005). Relationship education programs based on RSR principles show promising results (Halford et al., 2004; Halford et al., 2001), and should be developed and studied further to maximize their effectiveness for all couple CRSs.

Most couples benefit from relationship education (Halford et al., 2001) and RSR skills training has been shown to be a helpful addition to relationship education programs because of the way it teaches partner to evaluate and work on their relationship as individuals (Halford et al., 2007; Halford et al., 2011). The three stable CRSs are a good example of relationship types that may benefit from a relationship education program that includes RSR in its curriculum. While Gottman's research has suggested that the three types of CRSs are equal in their ability to predict relationship satisfaction, this study has shown that they may not be equal in their ability to cultivate an environment conducive to RSR (Gottman, 1994b). Because research has shown that volatile and avoidant couples may be more negative in their communication than validating couples (Holman & Jarvis, 2003), teaching RSR as couple educators can help volatile and avoidant couples be aware that while it is expected that not every couple will handle conflict similarly, they can be taught RSR in their relationship and engage in a behavior that will likely increase their marital satisfaction. Further research is needed to see if teaching RSR to volatile and avoidant couples increases their relationship satisfaction and stability.

Clinicians too can use this information to expand the acceptance of volatile and avoidant couples in therapy. While previously the unspoken solution to volatile and avoidant couples in a clinical setting has been to teach them to be more validating in their relationship, the findings of

this study suggests that clinicians may help these couples learn to engage in RSR strategies and especially RSR effort and teach them a new skill instead of making them change their established CRS. We predict this approach will not only be more successful in improving their relationship (as most clients revert back to old ways after therapy), but also lead to less frustration for couples who have been resolving conflict in a volatile or avoidant manor for much of their married life (Fitzsimons & Bargh, 2003).

Conclusion

Gottman's research showed that a validating, volatile, and avoidant conflict resolution style (CRS) led to the same general outcomes of marriage stability and success; however, more recent research has disputed this, finding that there are differences in how the stable CRSs predict marital satisfaction – namely that the validating CRS predicts higher marital satisfaction, communication, and conflict strategies than the volatile and avoidant CRSs (Gottman, 1993; Holman & Jarvis, 2003). The purpose of this study was to continue the comparison of the three stable CRSs with relationship self-regulation (RSR) to further understand the differences between the regulated styles. We found that despite their stable nature, a validating style was more predictive of both RSR effort and RSR strategies and an avoidant style was significantly less predictive of both dimensions of RSR. A volatile style fell in between these two being significantly less predictive than a validating style of RSR effort but not of RSR strategies. These findings shed light on the difficulties volatile and avoidant couples may have in clinical settings listening to each other empathetically and making positive changes in the relationship as compared to validating couples. In the area of engaging in self-motivated relationship work these three styles may *not* work equally well and avoidant couples especially need to be taught to

evaluate their relationship and make changes even if they are not actively speaking and listening (validators) or arguing (volatiles) and making goals together.

Additionally, this research emphasizes the importance of couple educators and clinicians differentiating between RSR strategies and RSR effort and stressing to couples that effort is the most important RSR dimension over time as it has the most far-reaching effects in the relationship and teaching volatile and avoidant couples that they engage in RSR effort less than validating couples (Halford et al., 2007). Programs and therapy that are based on relationship self-regulation principles and increasing commitment (e.g. CoupleCARE; Halford et al., 2004) may be especially appropriate for volatile and avoidant couples who are experiencing difficulties in their relationships and are seeking therapy or education.

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Table 1.

Demographic Characteristics of Sample in Percentages

	Male (n=856)	Female (n=1406)
Mean Age (SD)	32.96 (10.29)	31.78 (10.24)
Range	18-71	18-70
Race/Ethnic Origin		
Caucasian (White)	85.7	84.4
African (Black)	3.9	6.1
Asian	1.9	2.9
Native American	0.6	0.8
Latino	3.9	4.1
Mixed/Biracial	2.3	3.1
Other	2.7	1.5
Religious Affiliation		
Catholic	8.3	10.3
Protestant	17.4	14.3
Jewish	1.4	1.6
Latter-day Saint (Mormon)	51.9	52.8
Hindu	0.5	0.2
Buddhist	0.8	0.6
Other	6.2	7.7
None	12.2	11.5
Education		
Less than high school	0.6	-
High school diploma or equivalency (GED)	5.6	2.0
Some college	36.6	35.1
Associate's degree	7.8	12.7
Bachelor's degree	20.7	19.9
Graduate or professional degree, not completed	7.5	13.0
Graduate or professional degree, completed	21.1	17.4
Income (Personal gross yearly)		
None	3.8	18.9
Under 20,000	26.8	34.6
20,000-39,999	22.4	16.8
40,000-59,999	12.8	11.1
60,000-79,999	9.3	5.1
80,000-99,999	8.0	3.7
100,000 or above	16.9	7.6

Table 1 continued.

Length of Relationship in Percentages

	Male (n=856)	Female (n=1406)
0-3 months	10.8	11.4
4-6 months	6.3	5.4
7-12 months	10.8	8.1
1-2 years	17.6	16.4
3-5 years	14.6	17.5
6-10 years	13.7	14.7
11-15 years	7.6	8.0
16-20 years	5.7	5.9
21-30 years	8.9	8.5
31-40 years	3.3	3.4
More than 40 years	0.7	0.6

Table 2.

Characteristics of Study Moderating and Dependent Variables

	Male (n=856)	Female (n=1406)	Total (n=2262)
RSR Strategies	3.53 (0.64)	3.66 (.60)	3.61 (.61)
RSR Effort	3.14 (.68)	3.18 (.70)	3.16 (.69)
<u>Commitment</u>	<u>4.55 (.64)</u>	<u>4.46 (.70)</u>	<u>4.49 (.67)</u>

Note: Values are means, with standard deviations in parentheses; for all variables, possible score range = 1-5

Table 3.

F-Test Results for RSR Strategies and RSR Effort Regressed on the Stable Conflict Resolution Styles and Moderated by Commitment Stable

Dep. Variable	B (p-value)	
	RSR Strategies	RSR Effort
Validating	2.95 (p<.001)	1.85 (p<.001)
Volatile	3.26 (p<.001)	1.95 (p<.001)
Avoidant	2.02 (p<.001)	1.19 (p<.001)
Validating Moderated by Commitment	.11 (p<.001)	.24 (p<.001)
Volatile Moderated by Commitment	.182 (p=.441)	.182 (p<.001)
Avoidant Moderated by Commitment	.29 (p<.001)	.289 (p<.001)

Note: Betas are presented unstandardized because the independent variable is categorical.

Table 4.

Estimated Means and Standard Errors (in parentheses) for the Stable Conflict Resolution Styles on RSR Strategies and RSR Effort.

Dep. Variable	Validating (N = 930)	Volatile (N = 638)	Avoidant (N = 304)
RSR Strategies	3.76 (.019)	3.70 (.022)	3.33 (.032)
RSR Effort	3.36 (.036)	3.20 (.025)	2.92 (.036)

Note: Scores on all scales can range from 1-5.

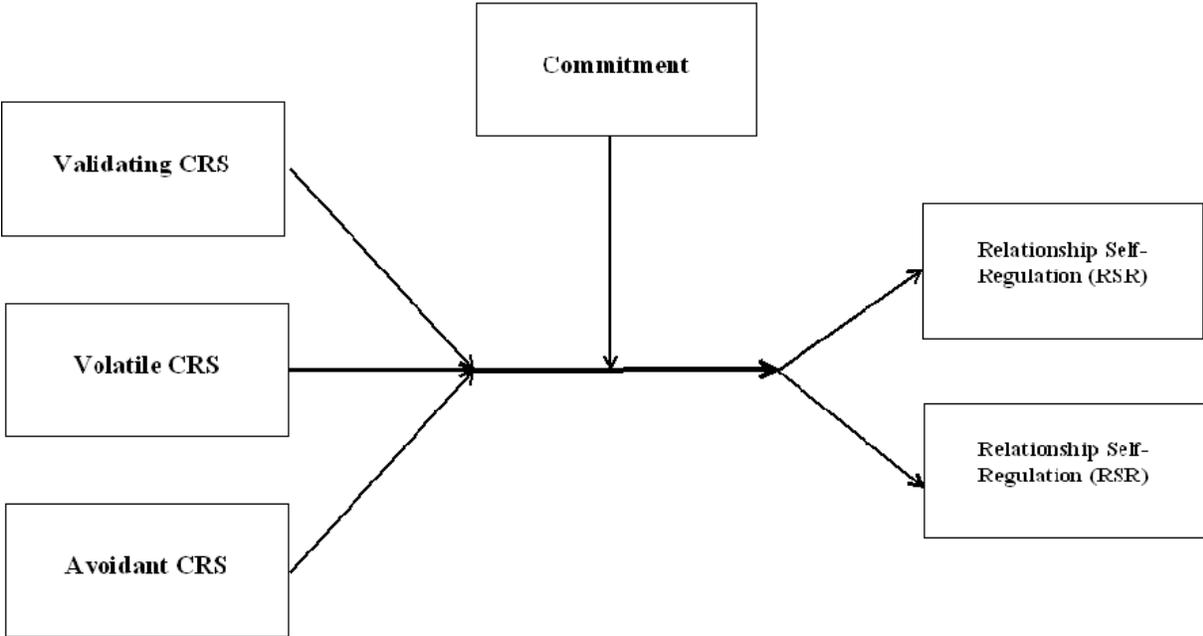


Figure 1. Model of the relationship between stable conflict resolution styles and relationship self-regulation strategies and effort as moderated by commitment.

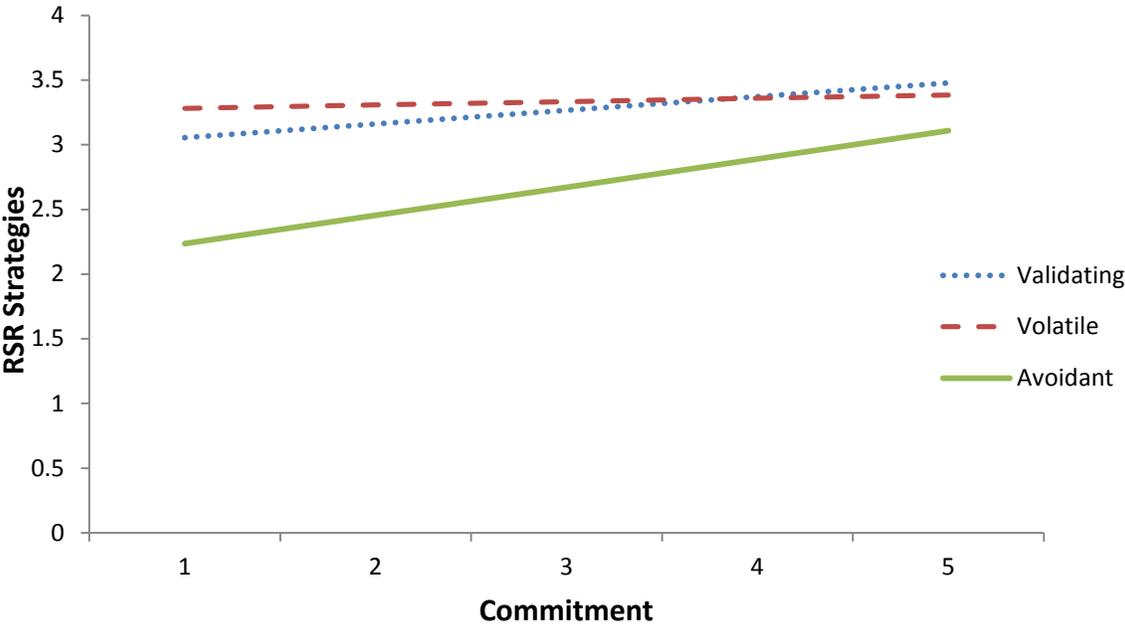


Figure 2. Moderation effect of increasing commitment on RSR strategies for the stable CRSs.

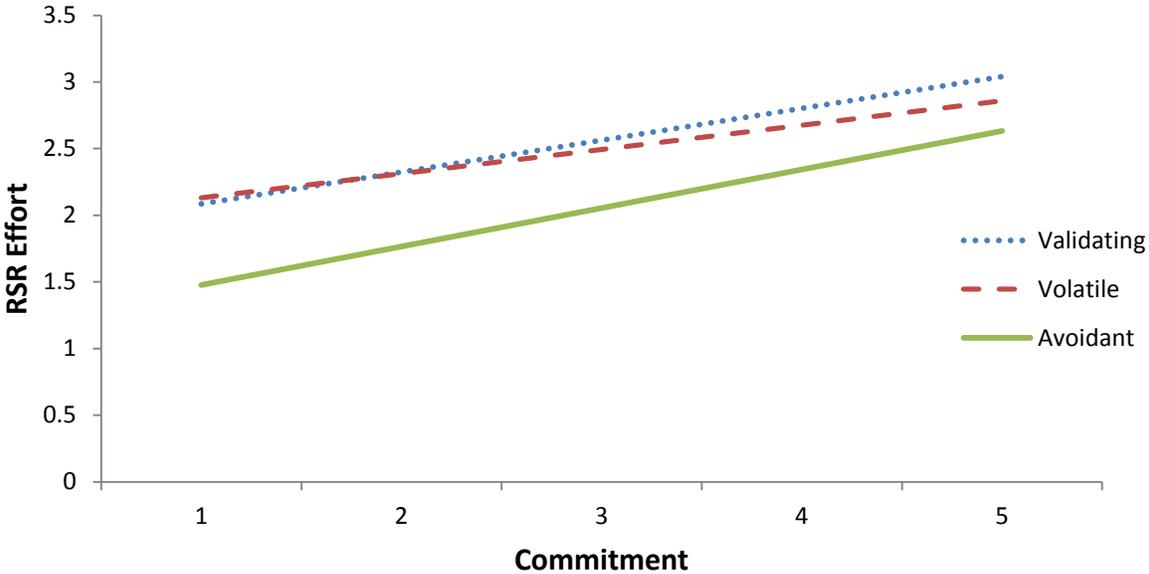


Figure 3. Moderation effect of increasing commitment on RSR effort for the stable CRSs.