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# The Relationship Between Couple Attachment and Sexual Satisfaction with Covert Relational Aggression as a Mediator: A Longitudinal Study

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The Relationship Between Couple Attachment and Sexual Satisfaction  
with Covert Relational Aggression as a Mediator:

A Longitudinal Study

Anthony A. Hughes

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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Marriage and Family Therapy

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## ABSTRACT

### The Relationship Between Couple Attachment and Sexual Satisfaction

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Using questionnaires, self report, and partner report of spouse, this longitudinal investigation examined the relationship between couple insecure attachment, covert relational aggression, and sexual satisfaction of each partner one year after their initial assessment, while controlling for sexual satisfaction at the time of our initial assessment. Findings showed that wives were more impacted by both actor and partner effects of covert relational aggression. Wives' sexual satisfaction was predicted by the increase in insecure attachment of both self and spouse through covert relational aggression. Wives insecure attachment did not cause a significant decrease in husbands' sexual satisfaction at time 2. Husbands were also impacted but to a lesser degree. An increase in husbands' insecure attachment showed a significant increase in husbands' covert relational aggression. The increase in his covert relational aggression did not, however, predict a significant decline in sexual satisfaction for husbands.

Keywords: attachment, sexual satisfaction, relational aggression, covert relational aggression

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## Introduction

Adult couple attachment impacts emotional intimacy, closeness, and security.

Attachment is, according to Johnson and Whiffen (2003), an innate motivating force. They stated “Seeking and maintaining contact with significant others is an innate, primary motivating principle in human beings across the lifespan” (Johnson & Whiffen, 2003, 5). Bowlby (1988) proposed that dependency on others is not a childhood trait that humans outgrow in time, but rather dependency is part of the human experience and is innate. Bowlby also professed that dependency is not pathological as it has previously been perceived. Attachment is important to study because it is associated with more coherent, articulated, and positive sense of self and predicts the quality of a couples’ relationship (Mikulincer, 1995; Johnson & Whiffen, 2003). When an individual is securely attached, they are capable of forming healthy relationships where they are able to be autonomous while still having the capability of becoming emotionally intimate or close.

A securely attached individual is reared within a safe haven and experiences a secure base (Johnson & Whiffen, 2003). A safe haven is accomplished by the presence of attachment figures, parents, children, spouses, and lovers. This gives an individual comfort and safety, while the absence of such engenders distress. A secure base means that individuals can explore their universe and respond to their environment and experience their world without worrying whether they have a solid foundation which to return (Johnson & Whiffen, 2003). According to Mikulincer (1997), the presence of a secure base promotes exploration and cognitive openness to new information.

The quality of marital sex is influenced by emotional bonding between the partners because it is a physical expression of love, dependency, and closeness. Through pair bonded

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sexual relating, partners are able to express their feelings for their spouse. Sex within the bond of a monogamous relationship physiologically bonds the couple together especially when both partners are securely attached to each other. With that being said, the couple is dependent upon each other to have their physical and emotional needs met by their spouse. The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between husband/wife attachment at time 1 and husband and wife sexual satisfaction one year after their initial assessment as mediated by subtle forms of covert relational aggression at time 1. More specifically, husbands' and wives' self reports of couple attachment at time 1 were used to predict his and her sexual satisfaction at time 2 while also controlling for each partner's sexual satisfaction at time 1. Partner's reports of each others' covert relational aggression at time 1 (love withdrawal, social sabotage) were used as a mediating variable. It was hypothesized that covert relational aggression fully or partially mediates the relationship between the attachment and sexual satisfaction.

Literature relating to the variables in this study, namely husband and wife sexual satisfaction as the dependent variable, husband and wife insecure attachment as the independent variable, and each partner's covert relational aggression, will be reviewed in the next section.

## Review of Literature

*Adult Attachment*

Over the years, a large body of research has identified attachment theory as an important foundation for understanding emotional and interpersonal processes occurring in one's adult life (Shaver & Hazan, 1993). This theory postulates that there is an attachment behavioral system that is organized around specific attachment figures. These attachments serve the purpose of security. Just as children seek and maintain proximity with specific attachment figures to promote security, adults seek and maintain proximity to attachment figures for a similar purpose (Bowlby, 1973; Sperling & Berman, 1994). However, adults usually seek attachment with romantic partners (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). According to Dumas, Pearson, Elgin, & McKinley (2008), individuals try to regain their desired level of proximity to their attachment figures as this attachment need becomes threatened. These internal models of attachment are formed through their experiences with others, especially significant others such as a spouse (Dumas et al., 2008). Emotional safety, trust, and intimacy are characteristic of secure adult romantic attachments, and hurt, arguing, and defensiveness are characteristic of insecure attachment in adults. Secure relationships sustain a particular degree of independence while still allowing room for one to gain emotional intimacy, trust, and safety whereas insecure relationships leave partners feeling alone, angry, and frustrated (Clymer, Ray, Trepper, & Pierce, 2006).

Insecure attachments are formed when there is an attachment rupture with one or many of a person's key attachment figures. One of two types of attachments are formed when this occurs, anxious or avoidant. Anxious/ambivalent attachments are exemplified by an incessant need to fully converge one's self with a partner or other significant attachment figure. These

relationships are also characterized by an unhealthy concern and worry about their partner's love for them (Strachman & Impett, 2009). Avoidantly attached individuals are just the opposite. They have a strong aversion to closeness and entanglement with their partners. These individuals find it difficult to trust and depend on others. They attempt to become completely autonomous emotionally. There is something entirely unnerving for these individuals about gaining emotional closeness (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Strachman & Impett, 2009). Clymer et al. (2006) purport three aggregate factors in determining the style of attachment. These are trust, felt security, and emotional/affectional bonds. By assessing these factors, our current study will be able to evaluate the change in attachment and its impact on sexual satisfaction and covert relational aggression for both husbands and wives.

The history of attachment has strong roots in the realm of child/parent relationships (Ainsworth, 1989; Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). More recently research has been conducted and compiled with regard to adult relationships (Shaver & Hazan, 1993). Shaver and Hazan (1993) found that attachment relationship types could also be found in adult romantic relationships. Furthermore, their research showed that 56% were secure, 25% were avoidant, and 19% were anxious/ambivalent. The attachment styles that are portrayed in youth are found to be similar in adult romantic relationships. These three diverse types of attachment styles differ tremendously from each other. However, the different attachment styles present themselves similarly in childhood, adolescence and in adult romantic relationships.

Shaver, Hazan, and Bradshaw (1988) summarized the similarities between child/caregiver attachment and adult romantic attachment. The results showed a compelling and logical connection between the two relationships, as well as illustrating how romantic love can be conceptualized as an attachment process of its own. Later the notion that attachment theory is

a useful and valid perspective on adult romantic relationships was replicated by Feeney & Noller (1990). This is paramount to our current study in that our measure of attachment is calculated by the attachment between spouses.

Research has revealed that adult attachment style has an impact on relationship satisfaction. In particular, research has shown consistently that secure attachment style points towards greater relationship satisfaction and relationship quality (Collins & Read, 1990; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994; Simpson, 1990; Shaver & Mikulincer, 2006a). One study found that attachment style in couples had an influence for marital satisfaction for wives but not for husbands (Fuller & Fincham, 1995). These findings allude to gender differences. Our current study will add to the present literature on adult attachment while assessing gender differences in husbands and wives.

Upon reviewing the literature on gender differences and attachment, with the exception of a few studies, there appear to be no gender differences during infancy (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Pierrehumbert et al., 2009). Gloger-Tippelt, Gomille, Konig, & Vetter (2002) found similar findings of no gender differences among preschool aged children. Gloger-Tippelt and Konig (2007) found that gender differences do exist among children of divorced parents. Boys were found to be less securely attached in divorced families than boys from non divorced families. Further research showed that socialization of males and females may play a role in attachment styles (Zahn-Waxler, Ridgeway, Denham, Usher, & Cole, 1993). Zahn-Waxler et al. (1993) maintain that females are socialized to talk about their emotions and elaborate about the causes whereas boys are socialized to hold in their emotions and be tough. In much of this research, boys were shown to express themselves aggressively, and girls expressed themselves in a pro-social and caring manner (Oppenheim, Nir, Warren, & Emde, 1997; von Klitzing, Kelsay, Emde,

Robinson, & Schmitz, 2000; von Klitzing, Stadelmann, & Perren, 2007; Sher-Censor, & Oppenheim, 2004).

### *Relational Aggression*

Overt relational aggression in couples has been researched heavily. This research has shown that domestic violence is a key factor in marital distress and divorce (Clements, Stanley, & Markman, 2004; Schumacher, & Leonard, 2005; Whitton et al., 2007). Marital researchers have only recently proposed that more subtle forms of aggression, called covert relational aggression, may have as much or more impact on the quality of a marriage as overt relational aggression. For example, Karney (2007) and Carroll, et al. (in press) suggest that including behaviors such as love withdrawal and sabotaging by talking negatively to friends about your partner will help marital scholars and researchers understand a broader range of couple conflict and how it impacts the marriage. Covert relational aggression such as love withdrawal and social sabotage may occur more broadly in marriage than does overt aggression. Yet, researchers are only beginning to investigate these two subtle forms of covert relational aggression in marriage (Carroll et al., in press).

Carroll and associates (in press) drew from the adolescent literature on covert relational aggression to hypothesize that love withdrawal and social sabotage behaviors may well be part of marital dynamics. Their study is unique in that it is one of the first studies to address relational aggression within the marital dyad. Further, Carroll et al. illustrate that covert relational aggression occurs in adult relationships as well and is not limited to children and adolescence, the age groups where covert relational aggression has been most studied. There is a need to examine how covert relational aggression, particularly love withdrawal and social sabotage, operates in marriage and how these behaviors might affect other aspects of marriage.

Carroll et al., (in press) assert the following:

To date, marital aggression has been almost exclusively studied as a dyadic phenomenon, with both self-report and observational measures targeting behaviors actively exchanged between spouses. Thus, the existing literature on couple conflict patterns can best be described as the study of overt or observable conflict. While the current emphasis on observation protocols has proven very valuable in a number of ways, this type of approach has limited scholars' understanding of how couple conflict is situated in a broader social context of relationships with children, extended family members, friends, co-workers, and others. (6)

As discussed earlier, much of the initial research in this field has addressed conflict in the terms of overt reportable physically aggressive behavior. Much of this type of behavior is seen in the male population. Males are portrayed and seen as more physically aggressive individuals than females (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). In our society, males are associated more with misconduct and antisocial behaviors than females. Subsequently, they are seen as the aggressive gender, implying that females are not. The body of research addressing the ways in which females are aggressive is beginning to grow. *Relational aggression* is a term that has been given to the way in which women inflict harm (Crick et al., 1999). Crick and her colleagues have defined relational aggression as "behaviors that harm others through damage (or the threat of damage) to relationships or feelings of acceptance, friendship, or group inclusion" (p. 77). Relational aggression can be seen in either indirect or direct relational aggression. Indirect relational aggression uses relationships to inflict harm, such as rumors or gossip. Direct relational aggression refers to actively withdrawing or confrontational behaviors such as giving

ultimatums. Direct forms of aggression are seen mostly with children and adolescence, whereas indirect forms are more characteristic of adults (Nelson, Springer, Nelson, & Bean, 2008).

However, with the expansion of scholarly studies of covert and non-observable conflictual behaviors that are typically seen more as female behaviors, there has been a shift in society's understanding of aggression. This has broadened society's understanding of this topic and shed some light on aggression across genders as well as alternate forms of aggression.

Of the limited research to date on covert relational aggression in adults, much of it is centered on emerging adulthood, 18 to 25-years-old (Carroll et al., in press). Of this research, adults engaging in acts of covert relational aggression display characteristics of loneliness, peer rejection, anxiety, depression, borderline personality, and substance abuse to name a few (Goldstein, Chesir-Teran, & McFaul, 2008). Subtle relational aggression such as love withdrawal and social sabotage and how it is illustrated in intimate couple relationships has received almost no attention in research studies.

This study will focus on two different forms of covert relational aggression: social sabotage and love withdrawal. Social sabotage is covert in that it is not observable in the interaction between spouses. Rather a partner talks to others outside of the marital relationship (e.g. friends, family members, and people at the spouse's work) to sabotage or say things that are likely to make their spouse look bad. The spouse employing social sabotage will spread rumors, gossip, share private information, or vie for others to take their side. The spouse engaging in social sabotage will attack their partner in an indirect covert manner as a way to expose their spouse, manipulate, or fight for control (Carroll et al., in press). Conversely, another type of relational aggression called love withdrawal can be observed in marital relationships. Spouses using love withdrawal will be consciously inattentive to their partner. They use such tactics as



the silent treatment or withdrawal of affection or sex as an attack on or punishment to their spouse. Both of these forms of relational aggression are subtle signs of marital struggle (Carroll et al., in press). Since there is a limited amount of research regarding relational aggression in the marital dyad, the extent to which married individuals utilize these forms of covert relational aggression is still unknown. It has been conceptualized by Carroll et al., (in press) that there is a higher prevalence of love withdrawal than social sabotage within marital relationships than overt forms of relational aggression. A recent study found that 96.2% of wives and 88.3% of husbands engage in both of these types of behaviors (Carroll et al., in press).

The literature on covert relational aggression among romantic relationships shows devastating effects on both men and women. The result of covert relational aggression has been linked to negative socioemotional adjustment (Linder et al., 2002). Antisocial and borderline personality features have been found in men and women, as well as depression for women in young adulthood (Morales & Crick, 1999; Morales & Cullerton-Sen, 2000). The current literature supports these authors claim that covert relational aggression is highly damaging to the trust and bond between spouses. As a spouse engages in relationship hindering behaviors such as found with social sabotage, the couple finds themselves at an emotional distance. Additionally, the couple will discover that they are distrusting of their spouse, as they use relational tactics like gossip and getting others to take sides against them. A spouse will subsequently find it very difficult to be vulnerable with their partner. This vulnerability may impede a person's ability to engage in a sexually satisfying relationship.

Attachment theory proposes that individuals who are insecurely attached in adult relationships will show "adult" forms of protest similar to what insecurely attached infants do. Hurt, insensitivity to one's own and the other's needs, defensiveness, blame, and counter-attack

are all behaviors that adults might exhibit when they feel insecurely attached. This study proposed that insecurely attached married partners would be more likely to use love withdrawal and social sabotage as ways to try to get their partner's attention and as a type of counter hurt for the hurt they feel as individuals. These behaviors may be one of the processes through which insecure attachment affects sexual satisfaction for both husbands and wives.

### *Sexual Satisfaction*

Marital sexual relationships have been the topic of numerous empirical studies it is therefore fundamental to understand all of the aspects of sexual satisfaction for both men and women, as they may differ by gender. Traeen (2007) reasoned that sexual satisfaction will be affected by coital frequency and the presence or lack of sexual dysfunction. A number of researchers have sought out the elements that make for a sexually satisfying relationship. Such studies have explored the physical aspects of the sexual experience, orgasm consistency, intensity, fulfillment, frequency or timing of orgasm (Darling, Davidson & Cox, 1991; Waterman & Chiauzzi, 1982). Other researchers have developed multi-item scales (Renaud, Byers, & Pan, 1997). In this study we used a combination of the discrepancy between desired frequency of intercourse and actual intercourse as well as multiple items regarding satisfaction with their sexual relationship.

One of the heavily researched aspects of a couple's sexual relationship is the relationship between a couples sexual satisfaction and overall relationship quality. Relationships where sexual desire matches that of their sexual activity have been shown to be associated with higher levels of overall relationship satisfaction (Terman, Bittenweiser, Ferguson, Johnson, & Wilson, 1938; Dunn, Croft, Hackett, 1999a). On the other hand, relationships result in lower relationship satisfaction when there is a discrepancy between sexual desire and sexual activity (Haavio-

Mannila & Kontula, 2001; Lawrance & Beyers, 1995). In our current study, we hypothesize that our research participants will be more sexually satisfied as a product of their positive relationship satisfaction (attachment).

Since men and women have very different anatomy, physiology, and psychology it is apparent that there will be gender differences in sexual satisfaction, types of sexual interaction, and frequency. The culture and society in which we live similarly plays an enormous part in shaping men's and women's views of sexuality. Gagnon and Simon (2005), claim that genders are socialized to differing social and sexual concepts. Additionally, gender differences in the nature of sexual activity seem to appear. Further research shows that females want to participate in activities that demonstrate love and intimacy, whereas males are enthusiastic to engage in sexual activities that are more focused on the arousal interaction (Hatfield, Sprecher, Pillemer, & Greenberger, 1988). However, there has been research on the national level in Finland and France to conclude that there is no gender differences in sexual satisfaction (Haavio-Mannila & Kontula, 1997; Colson, Lemaire, Pinton, Hamidi, & Klein, 2006). This research provides evidence that differences in anatomy, physiology, and psychology are not as germane as was previously understood.

There has been much research suggesting that gender differences do exist in the amount of sexual desire and actual sexual activity. The effects of such differences on the overall relationship satisfaction may differ for both men and women in terms of amount and the effects of a type of sexual behavior (Santtila et al., 2008). Buss (2000) points out that gender differences exist between men and women with regard to sexual desire. Men experience higher levels of sexual desire at all phases of the relationship (Baumeister, Catanese, & Vohs, 2001). Schmitt et al. (2003) conducted a cross-cultural survey showing that men, married or single,

consistently desired more sexual partners than women. Additionally, a survey showed that a man's ideal sexual duration of intercourse is significantly longer than the women's ideal (Miller & Byers, 2004).

A large portion of the literature on the relationship between sexual satisfaction and overall relationship satisfaction indicates that these two variables are strongly related in women (Hurlbert & Apt, 1994; Kumar & Dhyani, 1996; Apt, Hurlbert, Pierce, & White, 1996; Byers, Demmons, & Lawrance, 1998; Lawrance & Byers, 1995; Davidson & Darling, 1988; MacNeil & Byers, 2005). Sexual satisfaction was rated as one of the most important elements of marital happiness by couples (Henderson-King & Veroff, 1994; Trudel, 2002). Sexual satisfaction and frequency of intercourse were found to be positively associated with overall marital satisfaction (Morokoff & Gilliland 1993). Trudel (2002) conducted a telephone survey regarding the conjugal and sex life of men and women. This survey consisted of four variables and was administered to 996 subjects in Montreal, Canada. The variables were sexual behaviors, sexual attitudes, sexual fantasies, and marital functioning. The overall results of the study indicated that men have a more optimistic view of their marital life, while women have a more optimistic view of their sexual behavior when the variables of sexual functioning are considered. Our current study will aid in showing the variables that influence husbands and wives view of sexuality.

Unfortunately, many marriages are plagued by sexual dysfunction. Research has demonstrated that upwards to 50% of couples are experiencing sexual dysfunction (Masters & Johnson, 1970). It has been noted that this dysfunction has affected couples marital well-being (McCarthy, 2003). This association drastically impacts the quality of life experienced by the couple. The study of marital sexuality has made much headway, but the knowledge on this topic is still very limited. There is much to be discovered as to the power of sexuality and how it

influences and is influenced by different marital phenomena (Christopher & Sprecher, 2000).

It has been noted by researchers that marital satisfaction and sexual satisfaction are positively associated (Perlman & Abramson, 1982; Young, Denny, Young, & Luquis, 2000). With lower levels of sexual satisfaction, there is an associated greater probability of sexual inactivity and separation (Donnelly, 1993). There is much relationship enhancement and psycho educational curriculum available that promotes the development of sexually satisfying relationships as a way to improve the overall relationship quality (Floyd, Markman, Kelly, Blumberg, & Stanley, 1995). Yeh, Lorenz, Wickrama, Conger, & Elder (2006) conducted research on the relationship among sexual satisfaction, marital quality, and marital instability at midlife. They analyzed the longitudinal data from 283 married couples to examine the sequences among these three constructs for both husbands and wives. The results supply support for the sequence of sexual satisfaction to marital quality, sexual satisfaction to marital instability, and marital quality to marital instability. Subsequently, higher levels of sexual satisfaction were shown to produce an increase in marital quality.

Our current study will add to the existing literature on sexuality as it is still growing and there is much to be discovered and confirmed in this field. By adding to the understanding of the etiology of sexual satisfaction, our investigation can help couples to form a more sexually satisfying and martially satisfying relationship. Our investigation will additionally provide a more complete understanding of the measure of sexual satisfaction as we have included two subscales, frequency and sexual satisfaction.

This study aims to show that couple attachment is related to sexual satisfaction for both husbands and wives and those subtle forms of relational aggression, specifically love withdrawal and social sabotage, partially or fully mediate the relationship between a secure attachment and

sexual satisfaction. It is essential to know the association between couple attachment and sexual satisfaction and the research that has been conducted and studied up to this point in time. None of the published studies have used longitudinal data to study the question of whether relationship quality influences sexual satisfaction over time or whether sexual satisfaction affects relationship quality. In this study, two years of longitudinal data were used to determine how relationship quality, specifically attachment affects sexual satisfaction.

#### *Adult Attachment and Sexual Satisfaction*

The research on couple attachment and sexuality is very sparse. Hazan and Ziefman (1994) have suggested the idea of incorporating attachment, care giving, and sex. It can be concluded that they are alluding to the connection of attachment and sexual satisfaction when they address developmental stages of the relationship. They point out that the attraction phase is solicited by the sexual connection between the couple. Other subsequent phases elicit attachment through care giving. When one follows the developmental stages of the adult romantic relationship, attachment through care giving could not occur without the initial sexual connection between the couple. The researchers state “sex strengthens and maintains the emotional and psychological bond-the attachment-between two paired adults” (p. 172, 173), but these authors have not empirically studied the relationship between attachment and sexual satisfaction in marriages. Timm (1999) found that adult attachment was significantly positively related to sexual communication. Her study examined 205 married couples in rural Indiana. Questionnaires were completed and examined measuring differentiation of self, adult attachment, sexual communication, sexual satisfaction, and marital satisfaction. Her research additionally added to the existing research that sexual communication was positively related to sexual satisfaction and marital satisfaction.

Attachment theorists have proposed a relationship between couple attachment and sexual satisfaction. Feeney & Noller (2004) propose that the theory of couple attachment and sexual satisfaction focuses on the development of close affectional bonds with others through sexuality. Shaver & Mikulincer (2006b) suggest that the attachment system and the sexual system are closely related. Evolutionary theorists have also made this link (Bogaert & Sadava, 2002). Researchers argue that the bonding, intimacy, and closeness in proximity that come with a sexual encounter with a romantic partner can serve as an attachment function (Hazan & Zeifman, 1994; Schachner & Shaver, 2004). Research shows that more securely attached individuals will have more sexual satisfaction in their relationships (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). These individuals are not preoccupied with the thought of their romantic partner rejecting them or wanting to leave them, as seen with anxiously attached individuals. Because of such, they are free to explore their sexuality in emotional safety. They are not as fearful of rejection as anxiously attached persons. Securely attached individuals have the luxury of allowing oneself to become close and intimate with their romantic partner without the worry of emotional abandonment, as seen with avoidantly attached persons. Securely attached individuals tend to possess characteristics that make possible higher levels of sexual satisfaction. They are more comfortable with their sexuality, open to sexual exploration, and take pleasure in a variety of sexual exploration and activities (Feeney & Noller, 2004). Brennan & Shaver (1995) found that securely attached individuals are more likely to have sex with intimate relationship partners and the quality is more reciprocally satisfying. Subsequently, securely attached individuals are less likely to have casual or promiscuous sexual partners, sex outside of their relationship, or one-night stands (Bogaert & Sadava, 2002).

The sexual relationship of anxiously attached individuals is centered around their need to

be dependent on the approval of others. They are constantly concerned about abandonment and rejection, which shows in their sexual relationship (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Anxiously attached individuals have sex to decrease their insecurity and create closeness. They engage in sexual activities as a way to restore confidence in themselves that their partner cares about them (Davis, Shaver, Vernon, 2004; Schachner & Shaver, 2004). These individuals do not feel as if they can negotiate sexuality or make requests for sexual discussion out of fear of rejection (Impett & Peplau, 2002). Anxiously attached individuals ascribe to negative beliefs about condoms (Strachman & Impett, 2009). These beliefs serve to negate the condoms usefulness and function so that condom use is less desirable. The rationale is that they will then be physically and subsequently emotionally closer to their partner. They do not like the distance that condoms add to sexual intimacy. Anxiously attached individuals also report lower levels of orgasm, and higher levels of erotophobia (Birnbaum, 2007). Avoidantly attached individuals are less likely to engage in prolonged sexual intimacy with one partner and are therefore more likely to avoid intercourse or engage in casual sexual relationships (Brennan & Shaver, 1995; Gentzler & Kerns, 2004). These individuals report higher rates of romantic partners. Avoidantly attached individuals are also more likely to use condoms as a way to protect against closeness and intimacy (Strachman & Impett, 2009; Kline, Kline, & Oken, 1992).

Gender differences exist among anxiously attached individuals. Researchers have found that men display an aversion to sexual behavior when they are anxiously attached. They do not use sex as a means to cope with negative emotions or self-esteem (Cooper et al., 2006). This is drastically different in women. Women who are anxiously attached seek sex as a means to draw closeness with a partner. Women are more likely to have ever had sex, increased rates of infidelity, younger age of first intercourse, and having sex to boost self-esteem (Bogaert &



Sadava, 2002; Cooper et al., 2006). While dependence on one's partner and approval are sought by anxiously attached individuals, the negative effects of attachment with regard to sexuality are not present for men as they are in women.

According to theory, avoidantly attached individuals should have a strong distaste for close intimate sexual relationships. The connection and closeness that is felt in these encounters should create a great discomfort for avoidantly attached persons (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Gentzler & Kerns (2004) suggest that there are two distinct ways in which avoidant persons handle the closeness entailed in these intimate sexual encounters. First, they will try to distance themselves from any and all sexual encounters. This can be done by waiting until later in life to have sex, engaging in fewer non-coital sexual behaviors, having an increased worry for sexually transmitted diseases, and having a stronger conviction in the profit of condoms. Second, avoidantly attached individuals often participate in sexual relationships if it is void of emotional intimacy or where emotional intimacy is doubtful. These individuals may have fewer restraining attitudes in relations to sex, they may engage in sexual relations to astound peer groups instead of engaging in sexual relations to gain closeness and romantic connection and they often have a high quantity of casual unattached sexual partners (Butzer & Campbell, 2008; Gentzler & Kerns, 2004; Schachner & Shaver, 2004). While this pattern of behavior is found in both men and women, it is more commonly seen and prominent in avoidantly attached men than in avoidantly attached women (Cooper et al., 2006).

The following is a summary of the literature relevant to this study. The review of literature has shown us that adults can suffer from forms of insecure attachment as children suffer. These insecure attachments can impede relational functioning and overall happiness. Some of the behaviors that couples engage in as retaliation are hypothesized to be covert in

nature. These covert relationally aggressive behaviors manifest themselves as withdrawal of affection, rumor spreading, or getting others to take sides in a marital dispute. Moreover, it is hypothesized that these covert relationally aggressive behaviors will diminish a couple's sexual satisfaction. Sexual satisfaction may be measured by frequency, presence of dysfunction, or lack of intimate connection.

#### *Purpose Statement*

As stated earlier, the purpose of this study was to explore the relationship among couple attachment and couple sexual satisfaction one year after their initial assessment, as mediated by subtle forms of covert relational aggression. More specifically, husbands and wives self reports of attachment were used to predict the couple's sexual satisfaction measured by his and her reports of sexual satisfaction one year after their initial assessment while controlling for sexual satisfaction at the first time point. Partner's reports of each others' covert relational aggression (love withdrawal, social sabotage) at time 1 were used as a mediating variable. It was hypothesized that the covert relational aggression would be fully or partially mediating the relationship between the couple's attachment and their sexual satisfaction. Figure 1 shows the measurement and conceptual structural model which illustrates the hypothesized relationships among the variables.

The following hypotheses (shown by the paths in the model) were tested:

Actor Effects:

- 1) Insecure attachment at time 1 will be negatively related to sexual satisfaction at time 2 for both husbands and wives when controlling for sexual satisfaction at time 1 for both husbands and wives..

- 2) Insecure attachment at time 1 will be positively related to covert relational aggression at time 1 for both husbands and wives.
- 3) Covert relational aggression at time 1 will be negatively related to sexual satisfaction time 2 for both husbands and wives when controlling for sexual satisfaction at time 1 for both husbands and wives.
- 4) Covert relational aggression at time 1 will be a significant mediator between insecure attachment at time 1 and sexual satisfaction at time 2 when controlling for sexual satisfaction at time 1 for both husbands and wives.

Partner Effects:

- 5) A. Husbands' insecure attachment at time 1 will be negatively related to wives' sexual satisfaction at time 2 when controlling for wives' sexual satisfaction at time 1.  
B. Wives' insecure attachment at time 1 will be negatively related to husbands' sexual satisfaction at time 2 when controlling for husbands' sexual satisfaction at time 1.
- 6) A. Husbands' insecure attachment at time 1 will be positively related to wives' covert relational aggression at time 1.  
B. Wives' insecure attachment at time 1 will be positively related to husbands' covert relational aggression at time 1.
- 7) A. Husbands' covert relational aggression at time 1 will be negatively related to wives' sexual satisfaction at time 2 when controlling for wives' sexual satisfaction at time 1  
B. Wives' covert relational aggression at time 1 will be negatively related to husbands' sexual satisfaction at time 2 when controlling for husbands' sexual satisfaction at time 1.

*Figure 1 here*

## Method

### *Participants*

All of the participants for this study were taken from Wave I and Wave II of the *Flourishing Families Project* (FFP). The FFP is an ongoing longitudinal study of inner family life. Wave I and Wave II data were collected a year apart from each other. At both time 1 and time 2, this study involved only families with an adult romantic or couple relationship. At Wave I there were 353 couples. Of these 353 couples, 345 (97.7%) participated in time 2. Thirty-seven of the remaining 345 couples did not complete the sexual satisfaction scale. In some cases the wife or husband did not complete the scale, and in other cases items were left blank probably because of the personal nature of the questions. This left 308 married couples who were the participants in this study.

Eighty-seven and three tenths of a percent of husbands and 82.1% of wives reported being European American or Caucasian. Five and six tenths of a percent of husbands and 4.2% of wives reported being African American. One and a sixth of a percent of husbands and 4.9% of wives reported being Asian American. Six tenths of a percent of husbands and 2.9% of wives reported being Hispanic. Two and six tenths of a percent of husbands and 1.9% of wives reported that they were “mixed/biracial”. Three percent of husbands and 4% of wives reported other ethnicity. Of these 308 couples 0.0% of husbands and 1.3% of wives reported less than high school education. Six and a half percent of husbands and 4.9% of wives reported having a high school diploma. Twenty-two and four tenths of a percent of husbands and 24% of wives reported having some college. Forty and three tenths of a percent of husbands and 40.9% of wives reported having a bachelor’s degree. Eighteen and a half percent of husbands and 21.4% of wives reported having a Master’s degree. Twelve and three tenths of a percent of husbands

and 7.5% of wives reported having a professional/Ph.D degree. Seventy-seven and nine tenths of a percent of husbands and 74.7% of wives reported an income of more than \$60,000 per year, 20.2% of husbands and 23.4% of wives reported making between \$20,000 and \$60,000 per year, and 1.9% of husbands and 1.9% of wives reported an income of less than \$20,000 per year.

Husbands and wives both reported a mean of 2.36 children. Husbands reported a mean of 17.78 years of marriage and wives reported 17.91 years of marriage. The mean age for husbands at time 1 was 45.29, at time 2 the mean age for husbands was 46.34. The mean age for wives at time 1 was 43.45, at time 2 the mean age for wives was 44.50.

*Table 1 here*

#### *Procedure*

All of the participant families for the FFP were selected from a large northwestern city. Participant families were interviewed during the first eight months of 2007. A purchased national telephone survey database (Polk Directories/InfoUSA) was used as the primary recruiting apparatus. Eighty-two million households across the United States were claimed to belong to this database. This database claimed to have detailed information about each household. Included was the presence and age of children. These families in the Polk Directory were chosen from targeted census tracts parallel the socio-economic and racial stratification of reports of the local school districts. Every family with a child between ages of 10 and 14 living within the census tracts were considered eligible to participate in the FFP. Four hundred twenty-three of the 692 eligible families agreed to participate (61% response rate). Families of lower socio-economic status were under-represented due to the nature of the Polk Directory national database. This database was generated using telephone, magazine, and internet subscription reports. Referrals and fliers were employed as an attempt to more closely reflect the

demographics of the local area. The number of families recruited through these alternative means were limited ( $n = 77$ , 15%). This attempt to more accurately reflect the true local demographics was tremendously helpful in increasing the social-economic and ethnic diversity of the sample.

By using a multi-stage recruitment procedure, all families were contacted directly. This process first included a letter of introduction. The letter was sent to potentially qualified families (this first step was skipped for the 15 families who responded to fliers). Home visits and phone calls were then made to confirm eligibility as well as participant willingness to participate in the study. Following the confirmation of eligibility and consent, interviewers made an appointment to come to the family's home to conduct an assessment interview. The assessment interview included video-taped interactions (not used in current study), in addition to questionnaires that were completed in the home. The lack of time and concerns of privacy were the most frequent reasons cited by families for not wanting to participate in the study. There was very little missing data in this study. This was done by screening questionnaires for missing answers and double marking upon collection of each segment of the in-home interview.

### *Measures*

*Insecure Attachment.* The Revised Experiences in Close Relationships Questionnaire (Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000) was used to assess the quality of attachment of each partner. Participants answered nine questions using a 7-point Likert scale which ranged from 1 & 2 (*Strongly agree*) to 6 & 7 (*strongly disagree*). Possible scores range from 9 to 63. Sample items in the measure of adult attachment include, "I often worry that my partner does not really love me", "I often worry that my partner will not want to stay with me", and "I feel comfortable sharing my private thoughts and feelings with my partner". The measure includes two subscales,

related respectively to anxious or avoidant attachment. Preliminary analysis of data showed that anxious and avoidant subscales are valid measures of insecure attachment as they both significantly factor load onto the insecure attachment latent variable. The researchers were prepared to include anxious and avoidant subscales as one subscale if preliminary analysis failed to be significant. Fraley, Waller, & Brennan (2000) found the reliability to be .91 (anxiety) and .90 (avoidance). The Cronbach's Alpha coefficients for this sample were .89 (anxiety) and .70 (avoidance) for women and .88 (anxiety) and .72 (avoidance) for men. Fraley, Waller, & Brennan (2000) performed a principal components factor analysis on the Experiences in Close Relationships measure and found that the items loaded clearly into two factors with high factor loading coefficients for all of the items. It appears then that this measure has adequate validity and reliability for use in research. The husbands report on his anxious and avoidant subscales will be used to create a latent dependent variable called *husband insecure attachment time 1*, and the wives scores from corresponding subscales will be used to create a latent dependent variable called *wife insecure attachment time 1*. Indicators of insecure attachment had factor loadings of .86 (anxious) .77 (avoidant) for wives and .76 (anxious) and .87 (avoidant) for husbands.

*Covert Relational Aggression.* Relational aggression is a concept adapted by the Flourishing Families investigators from the work of Linder et al. (2002). Covert relational aggression is assessing the degree to which a couple is engaging in covert couple conflict as opposed to more heavily researched overt couple conflict. The concept of covert relational aggression is hypothesized to exist even in "good" marriages. Only recently have scholars recognized a different form of aggression among children which they have labeled "covert relational aggression". Covert relational aggression differs from other traditional forms of aggression. Behaviors such as social isolation, spreading rumors, and blackmailing are specific

examples of this newly recognized aggression. Research on covert relational aggression among children and teens is becoming more common practice. However, no research has been done studying these patterns in adult couples and parenting relationships.

A 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not at all true*) and 7 (*very true*) was used for 12 questions that the respondents answered. Questions such as “My partner has tried to damage my reputation by sharing negative information about me to other people (extended family, friends, and neighbors)”, “My partner gets other people to “take sides” with her/him and gets them upset with me too”, and “My partner withholds affection or sex from me when he/she is angry with me” were used to measure covert relational aggression between the couple. The measure has two subscales, love withdrawal and social sabotage. Possible scores for each subscale range from 6 to 42. Higher scores on these measures indicate elevated perceived relational victimization. The Cronbach’s Alpha coefficient for this sample was .88 for social sabotage and .90 for love withdrawal for men and .90 for social sabotage and .86 for love withdrawal for women. Carroll et al., (in press) found that the measure had good discriminate validity in that it was a strong predictor of distress and nondistress in marriage. It appears that this measure has adequate validity and reliability for use in research. The scores for the love withdrawal and social sabotage subscales will be used as two indicators to create a latent mediating variable called covert relational aggression for each partner in the marriage.

*Sexual Satisfaction.* For the first wave of this study, two subscales were used to measure sexual satisfaction. The first subscale contained questions concerning sexual frequency. Questions about desired frequency of sex and actual frequency were taken from the RELATE test (Busby, Holman, & Taniguchi, 2001). Sample items included “About how often do you currently have sex with your partner”, and “How often do you desire to have sexual intercourse



with your partner". Responses ranged from 0 (*never*) to 7 (*more than once a day*) on a 7-point Likert scale. The second subscale consisted of a question regarding self report of sexual satisfaction. The question was "I am satisfied with my sex life with my partner". These responses range on a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*all of the time*). The second wave of data consisted of additional questions to the second subscale of sexual satisfaction. The second wave has a four item subscale of sexual intimacy satisfaction. Sample questions include "I would like my partner to express a little more tenderness during intercourse" and "I hold back my sexual interest because my partner makes me feel uncomfortable". Responses ranged on a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*all of the time*). Sexual satisfaction in this study is defined using these two previously described subscales. The first subscale is defined as the degree to which actual frequency of sexual intercourse is in alignment with desired frequency. To determine the score related to sexual satisfaction, each person's reported actual frequency will be subtracted from their reported desired frequency. So if a husband answered 2 for current frequency (1-3 times per month), but he answered 4 (2-4 times per week) for desired frequency, his score for sexual satisfaction would be 2. Possible scores range from 0 to 7 with higher scores indicating less sexual satisfaction because the person desires to have sex more often than what occurs. RELATE is considered a reliable and valid instrument and has been used in numerous studies of marriage. In the second subscale, higher scores indicate higher levels of sexual intimacy satisfaction for each partner. Sexual satisfaction indicators for the latent variable of both husbands' and wives' sexual satisfaction for time 1 and time 2 had factor loadings between .72 and .80.

## Results

There were several steps in the analysis. First, means and standard deviations were calculated for all variables. Next, correlations between latent variables were calculated. Then factor loadings for their relevant latent variables were assessed to make sure they were satisfactory indicators of the latent variables. None of the loadings were below .50 so all of the indicators were kept in the model.

Structural Equation Modeling via AMOS 17 (2007) was used to analyze the proposed model in Figure 1. There are a few advantages in using Structural Equation Modeling. The first is that both direct and indirect pathways can be assessed when checking for correlation between variables. Second, both actor and partner effects can be analyzed. Third, measurement error can be accounted for when using Structural Equation Modeling.

### *Table 2 here*

As shown in Table 2, the means for husband and wives' sexual satisfaction were very similar (Husband:  $\bar{X} = 14.56$ ,  $SD = 2.71$ ; Wives:  $\bar{X} = 14.79$ ,  $SD = 2.91$ ). With the exception of sexual satisfaction for both time 1 and time 2, all of the husband means are above that of their wives (Husband time 1:  $\bar{X} = 4.65$ ,  $SD = 1.78$ ; Husband time 2:  $\bar{X} = 14.56$ ,  $SD = 2.71$ ; Wives time 1:  $\bar{X} = 5.10$ ,  $SD = 1.68$ ; Wives time 2:  $\bar{X} = 14.79$ ,  $SD = 2.91$ ). Wives reported that their husbands used love withdrawal more than husbands reported their wives using love withdrawal (Husband:  $\bar{X} = 17.43$ ,  $SD = 7.47$ ; Wives:  $\bar{X} = 14.75$ ,  $SD = 7.59$ ).

Table 3 shows correlations for all latent variables in the model. None of the predictor variables were highly correlated enough that they presented multi-collinearity problems. Husband and wives sexual satisfaction at time 1 was highly correlated with their spouses sexual

satisfaction at time 1 (.49\*\*\*). Similarly, husband and wives sexual satisfaction at time 2 was highly correlated with their spouses sexual satisfaction at time 2 (.36\*\*\*).

*Table 3 here*

#### *Actor Effects*

The first hypothesis regarding actor effects was confirmed in that husband and wives report of insecure attachment was significantly related to their respective reports of their time 2 sexual satisfaction (Husbands:  $\beta = -.34$ ,  $p < .001$ ; Wives:  $\beta = -.38$ ,  $p < .001$ ). As each partner's insecure attachment increases their respective sexual satisfaction decreases. The second hypothesis that insecure attachment would be positively related to covert relational aggression was confirmed for both husbands and wives ( $\beta = .28$  for husbands,  $p < .001$ ;  $\beta = .44$  for wives,  $p < .001$ ). The third hypothesis that covert relational aggression would be negatively related to sexual satisfaction at time 2 was confirmed for wives but not for husbands ( $\beta = -.09$  for husbands and  $\beta = -.24$ ,  $p < .01$  for wives). Since there was no significant relationship between husbands' covert relational aggression and husbands' sexual satisfaction at time 2, hypothesis 4 about mediation effects for husband covert relational aggression was rejected, but the hypothesis was accepted for wives as results of the Sobel test for mediation (Sobel test =  $-.39$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

#### *Partner Effects*

In terms of partner effects, hypothesis 5a which stated that husbands' insecure attachment would be negative related to wives' sexual satisfaction at time 2 was confirmed ( $\beta = -.19$ ,  $p < .01$ ), but hypothesis 5b that wives' insecure attachment would negative affect husbands' sexual satisfaction was rejected ( $\beta = -.07$ ). Hypotheses 6a and b that stated that partners' insecure attachment would be positively related to spouses' covert relational aggression was confirmed for both husbands and wives ( $\beta = .57$ ,  $p < .001$  for husbands and  $\beta = .54$  for wives,  $p < .001$ ).

Hypotheses 7a and b that partners' covert relational aggression would be negative related to spouses' sexual satisfaction were also confirmed ( $\beta = -.22$ ,  $p < .01$  for husbands sexual satisfaction and  $\beta = -.19$ ,  $p < .01$  for wives' sexual satisfaction).

*Figure 2 here*

### Discussion

All hypotheses were found to be accurate with the exception of two predictions. Husband's sexual satisfaction at time 2 did not significantly decrease with the rise in husband's covert relational aggression time 1 as proposed. Likewise, husbands sexual satisfaction at time 2 did not decrease significantly with the increase in wives insecure attachment at time 1.

#### *Actor Effects*

The hypothesis that husbands' and wives' insecure attachment would be positively related to the level of covert relational aggression they use was supported by this study for both husbands and wives. Our study allowed relational aggression to be viewed and assessed in a way that is fairly new to this field of study. Covert relational aggression was measured by having each partner report about the other's behavior. This innovative approach to relational aggression was derived from the work of Linder et al. (2002) and adapted by Carroll et al. (in press). By narrowing relational aggression to strictly covert behaviors, we were able to assess how damaging an insecure attachment is in a marital relationship. We were additionally able to see the resulting covert actions used by those that are insecurely attached to their partner. The results illustrate that one who has experienced an attachment rupture or entered the marriage with an insecure attachment style is likely to engage in a covertly aggressive manner by doing such things as getting others to take their side in a marital dispute or gossiping about their spouse.

Similarly, those couples that have a lesser degree of attachment injury and insecurity will be less likely to engage in covert relational aggression.

Our hypothesis that covert relational aggression would predict sexual satisfaction for both husbands and wives was true for wives but not for husbands. This finding shows that wives engaging in covert relational aggression are less likely to be sexually satisfied. Thus, wives appraisal of their sexual interactions is highly impacted by the amount of covert relationally aggressive behaviors that they participate in. This finding may propose that wives have a more difficult time than husbands in disconnecting from their feelings or compartmentalizing in order to have a sexually satisfying experience. Husbands interestingly, are not sexually affected by the degree of covert relational aggression that they display. Therefore, husbands can be using covert relationally aggressive behaviors towards their wives and still be sexually satisfied. This gender difference may be due to the fact that women's sexual satisfaction is more influenced by the context of the entire relationship dynamics and that men will pursue their wives sexually even when there is conflict as a way of reducing tension and anxiety in the relationship. The use of sex as a tension and stress reducer is consistent with the current literature on sex (McCarthy, 2003).

The main purpose of this investigation was to examine the relationship among insecure attachments, covert relational aggression, and sexual satisfaction one year after the couple's initial assessment. It was hypothesized that a couple's sexual satisfaction would be impacted by their insecure attachment through the mediating variable of covert relational aggression. It was a surprise that husbands' covert relational aggression was not related to husbands' sexual satisfaction at time 2. Furthermore, the wives sexual satisfaction is additionally lessened through the correlation of insecure attachment and sexual satisfaction. Simply put wives sexual

satisfaction is lessened by two means. The first is that wives sexual satisfaction may be lessened with the increase of or presence of an insecure attachment. The second is that their sexual satisfaction may be lessened with the increase of or presence of an insecure attachment, through such behaviors as gossiping or rumor spreading about their husbands (covert relational aggression). These behaviors can cause a spouse to feel a lack of trust in their partner. As explained earlier, insecure attachments leave the individual feeling unsafe to gain emotional intimacy with their partner (Clymer et al., 2006). Wives perception of sexual intimacy must be germane to this claim, resulting in an experience of dissatisfaction with their overall sexual experience. Crick et al., (1999) suggests that covert relational aggression is the way in which female adolescents inflict harm. It appears that this may be true for adult women in relationships. This gives explanation for the reason that wives perceive covert relational aggression differently than men and why it is subsequently more damaging to them in critical areas of life such as sexual intimacy. Surprisingly, husbands did not present the same result as wives. Their sexual satisfaction was impacted by their insecure attachment to their spouse. However husbands' sexual satisfaction was not impacted through their covert relational aggression as hypothesized, but instead through the simple correlation of insecure attachment and sexual satisfaction. It may be that husbands do not find covert relational aggression as damaging as wives since men are more prone to physical forms of overt relational aggression (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Another explanation could be that husbands don't engage in covert forms of relational aggression for relational purposes or at least as purposefully and consciously as women do. Additionally, husbands' experience of their sexual relationship may have less to do with trust, emotional intimacy, and safety than that of their counterparts.

*Partner Effects*

Both husbands and wives sexual satisfaction time 2 was predicted by their spouses' insecure attachment through covert relational aggression as hypothesized in this investigation. As either a husband or wife experience an increase in their insecure attachment, their covert relationally aggressive behavior increases. With this increase a subsequent decrease in their partner's sexual satisfaction at time 2 results. This is intriguing since husbands sexual satisfaction is not impacted by their own increase in covert relational aggression as noted earlier. This suggests that husbands are more aware of their partner's emotional intimacy, trust, and safety than they are of their own emotional intimacy, trust, and safety. This may be explained by husbands' insecure attachment since these forms of attachments are prone to a heightening in awareness for a partner's relationship evaluation or appraisal (Strachman & Impett, 2009).

Consistent with our hypothesis, husbands' insecure attachment did predict wives sexual satisfaction at time 2. Interestingly, wives insecure attachment did not significantly predict husbands' sexual satisfaction at time 2 as hypothesized. Husbands were therefore not as affected by their wives insecure attachment or did not allow their wives insecure attachment to impact their sexual experience. One plausible explanation is that insecurely attached men do not like to engage in prolonged sexual intimacy with a partner (Cooper et al., 2006).

*Implications for Therapy*

Many couples come to therapy in hopes of improving their sexual relationship (Basson et al., 2000; Rosing et al., 2009). The findings in this study can be used as one such tool to improve their sexual relationship and understanding. As illustrated, the sexual relationship and satisfaction thereof is impacted by subtle forms of covert relational aggression. Often times these behaviors and actions are not seen or taken into account by a spouse because they are either

unaware of their impact or they are unaware that these behaviors are taking place. Covert relational aggression can be skipped over and etiology of sexual dysfunction can go directly to the source of covert relational aggression, insecure attachments. While addressing insecure attachment proves to enhance a couple's sexual relationship (Collins & Read, 1990; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994; Simpson, 1990; Shaver & Mikulincer, 2006a), it is often helpful to educate the couple about the impact that covert relational aggression has on their sexual functioning. Communication regarding covert relational aggression can increase trust and reduce covert relational aggression among the couple relationship. Healthy couples also experience covert relational aggression from each other (Carroll et al., in press). In these instances insecure attachments are not fueling these negative behaviors. The behaviors themselves need to be addressed. A therapist can use their knowledge of the impact of covert relational aggression as a tool to educate a couple and to aid the couple in tracing sexual satisfaction to a source. Couples can then work on eliminating these destructive behaviors from their relationship to enhance their overall sexual satisfaction.

#### *Future Research*

The findings suggest a multiplicity of avenues for future research. Additional research needs to be conducted validating the findings of our current investigation. Since this is one of the first investigations to study covert relational aggression as a mediator in couple relationships, it is pertinent that additional research support these findings. Research geared towards couple covert relational aggression needs to be added to the large body of research studying overt forms of relational aggression. The psychological forms of covert relational aggression would be helpful to study in fully understanding the range of relational aggression and its impact on couple relationships. Further studies need to be conducted examining the differences in anxious and



avoidant insecure attachments and their implications for couple sexual satisfaction. The researchers hypothesize that there will be a difference in both husband and wives degree of covert relational aggression and subsequent sexual satisfaction when assessing anxious and avoidant attachment separately. In addition, further research examining the differences in husband and wives insecure attachment and its impact on covert relational aggression would aid in fully understanding gender differences in covert relational aggression among adults.

Supplementary research questions may include “Are there other covert relational aggression behaviors besides love withdrawal and social sabotage”, “What is the difference between couples who use a lot of covert relational aggression and those who do not”, “How does covert relational aggression change in time over the relationship”, “Are there couples where one partner uses covert relational aggression and the other does not”, “In intervention research do interventions designed to make attachment more secure result in improved sexual satisfaction for both men and women”, “How are children affected by their parents’ use of covert relational aggression”, “Did adults who use more covert relational aggression in their marriages also engage in covert relational aggression as adolescents”, and “What family-of-origin dynamics influence covert relational aggression”.

### *Limitations*

There were a few limitations to this study. First, Wave 1 only had one question on the subscale of sexual satisfaction where Wave 2 had four additional questions. This may have impacted the longitudinal understanding of the study. Husbands/wives sexual satisfaction at time 1 may have been inaccurately portrayed since this measure changed a little over the two different Waves. The use of Wave 2 questions to measure the subscale of sexual satisfaction would have been ideal. The demographics of this study are fairly generalizable to the entire

United States population with the exception of Latinos. This study better represents the European American and African American populations and could have benefitted from a larger sample of Latinos.

### *Conclusion*

This study shows that insecure attachments have an actor and partner effect on sexual satisfaction for wives. In addition, covert relational aggression predicts sexual satisfaction for wives. Forms of covert relational aggression appear to have more of an impact on wives than for husbands. This investigation also shows that there are actor and partner effects for husbands. However covert relational aggression does not impact husbands' sexual satisfaction as hypothesized. Wives covert relational aggression shows to have more of an impact on husbands' sexual satisfaction than husbands covert relational aggression on husbands' sexual satisfaction. Finally, wives insecure attachment does not have a significant impact on husbands' covert relational aggression as we see in husbands' insecure attachment.

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Appendix A

Adult Attachment Scale

Answer how much you agree or disagree with each statement:

Ranging from 1 & 2 = Strongly Disagree to 6 & 7 = Strongly Agree

1. I am afraid that I will lose my partner's love.
2. I often worry that my partner will not want to stay with me.
3. I often worry that my partner does really love me.
4. I often wish that my partner's feelings for me were as strong as my feelings for him or her.
5. I prefer not to show my partner how I feel deep down.
6. I feel comfortable sharing my private thoughts and feelings with my partner.
7. I find it difficult to allow myself to depend on my partner.
8. I am very comfortable being close to my partner.

Reliability (Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000):

Anxiety subscale: .91

Avoidance subscale: .90

Reliability (Flourishing Families, Wave 1):

Overall Scale: P1 = .708 (P2 = .709)

Anxiety subscale: P1 = .892 (P2 = .884)

Avoidance subscale: P1 = .700 (P2 = .723)

Fraley, R. C., Waller, N. G., & Brennan, K. A. (2000). An item response theory analysis of self-report measures of adult attachment. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 78, 350-365.

Appendix B

Covert Relational Aggression Scale

Answer how much you agreed or disagreed with statements regarding how your partner treats you when their partner is hurt or upset:

Variable Values:

1,2=Not at all true

3,4,5=Sometimes true

6,7=Very true

1. Ignores me when she/he is angry with me.
2. Withholds affection or sex from me when he/she is angry with me.
3. Has gone “behind my back” and shared private information about me with other people (extended family, friends, neighbors).
4. Has threatened to leave me to get me to do what she/he wants.
5. Doesn’t pay attention to me when she/he is mad at me.
6. Gets other people to “take sides” with her/him and gets them upset with me too.
7. Has tried to damage my reputation by sharing negative information about me to other people (extended family, friends, neighbors).
8. Tries to embarrass me or make me look stupid in front of others.
9. Has spread negative information about me to be mean.
10. Gives me the silent treatment when I hurt his/her feelings in some way.
11. Has intentionally ignored me until I give in to his/her way about something.

12. Has threatened to disclose negative information about me to others in order to get me to do things he/she wants.

Nelson, D. A., Robinson, C. C., & Hart, C. H. (2005). Relational and physical aggression of preschool-age children: Peer status linkages across informants. *Early Education and Development, 16*, 115-139.

Based on theory developed by:

Linder, J. R., Crick, N. R., & Collins, W. A. (2002). Relational aggression and victimization in young adults' romantic relationships: Associations with perceptions of parent, peer, and romantic relationship quality. *Social Development, 11*, 69-86.

Reliability: New instrument; no reliability information available.

Reliability (Flourishing Families, Wave 1): P1 = .878 (P2 = .893)



Appendix C

Sexual Satisfaction Scale

How often do you do the following:

0=Never

1=Less than once a month

2=1-3 times/month

3=About once a week

4=2-4 times/week

5=5-7 times/week

6=More than once/day

1. About how often do you currently have sex with your partner?
2. How often do you desire to have sexual intercourse with your partner?

Busby, D. M., Holman, T. B., & Taniguchi, N. (2001). RELATE: Relationship evaluation of the individual, cultural, and couple contexts. *Family Relations, 50*, 308-316.

How often do you do the following:

1=Never

2=Rarely

3=Sometimes

4=Most of the time

5=All of the time

1. I would like my partner to express a little more tenderness during intercourse.
2. One thing my partner and I don't discuss is our sexual relationship.
3. I feel our sexual activity is just routine.
4. I hold back my sexual interest because my partner makes me feel uncomfortable.

Busby, D. M., Holman, T.B., & Taniguchi, N. (2001). RELATE: Relationship evaluation of the individual, cultural, and couple contexts. *Family Relations, 50*, 308-316.

Reliability (Busby, Holman, & Taniguchi, 2001):

Marital Sexuality (Test-Retest): .86, .94 (Spanish Version)

Flourishing Families Project – Wave II Codebook

Answer how much you agree or disagree with each statement:

Ranging from 1 & 2 = Strongly Disagree to 6 & 7 = Strongly Agree

1. I am satisfied with my sex life with my partner

Reliability (Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000):

Anxiety subscale: .91

Avoidance subscale: .90

Reliability (Flourishing Families, Wave 1):

Overall Scale: P1 = .708 (P2 = .709)

Anxiety subscale: P1 = .892 (P2 = .884)

Avoidance subscale: P1 = .700 (P2 = .723)

Fraley, R. C., Waller, N. G., & Brennan, K. A. (2000). An item response theory analysis of self-report measures of adult attachment. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 78*, 350-365.

Figure 1

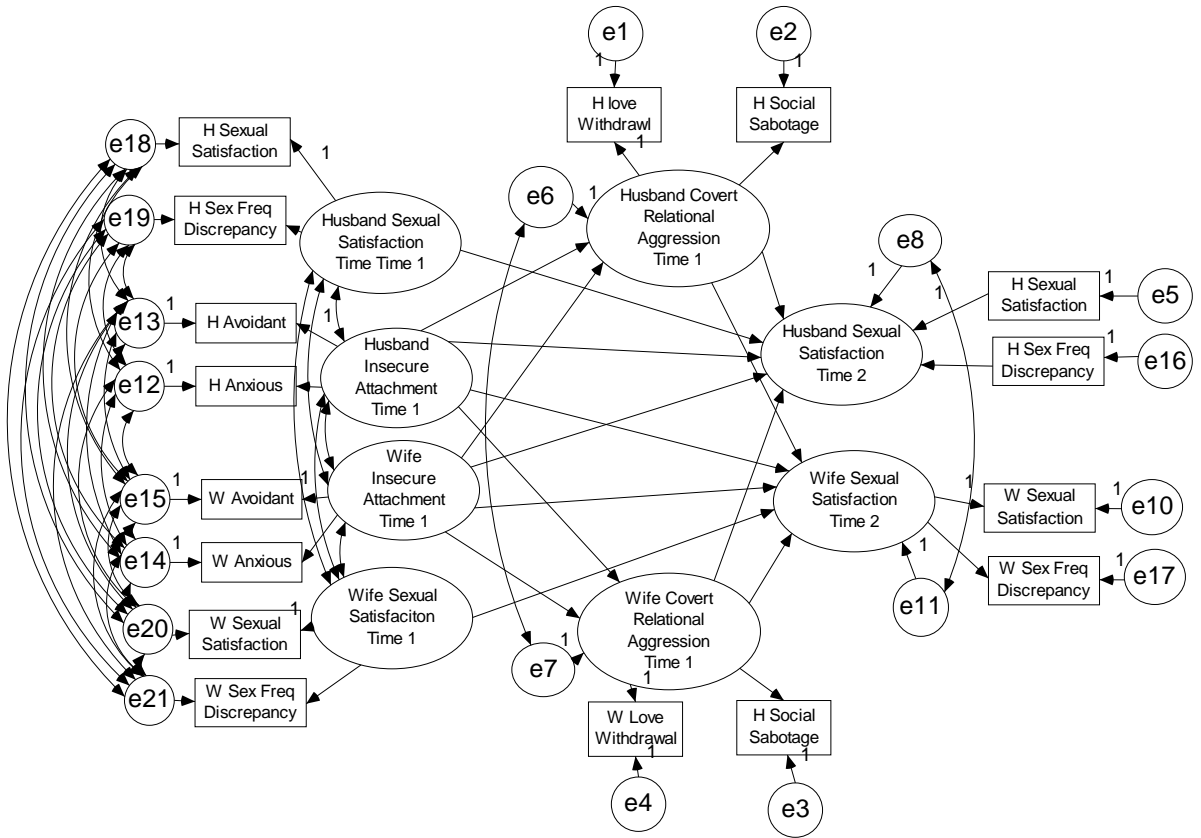
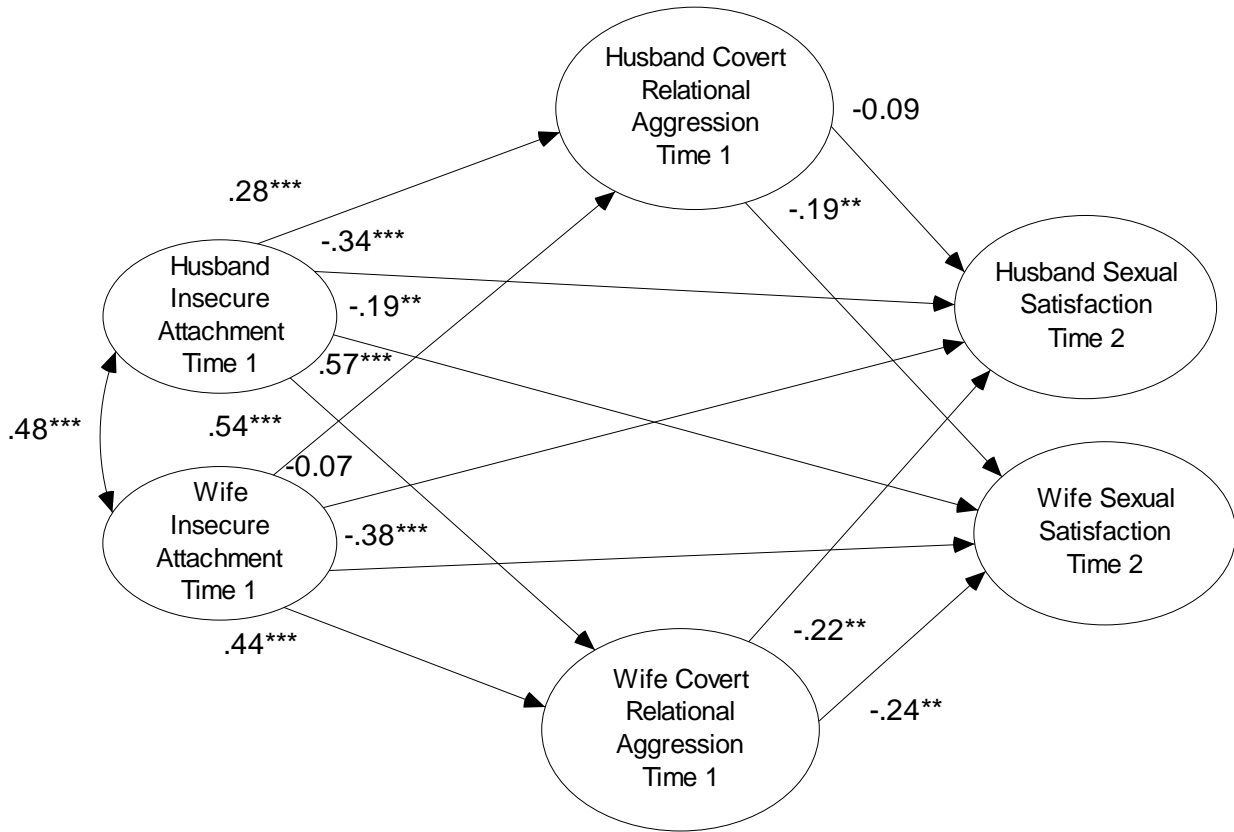


Figure 2



$\chi^2=55.34, df=42, p=.081$

$CFI=.990, RMSEA=.040$

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

Figure Captions

*Figure 1.* Two Wave Actor Partner Effects conceptual measurement and structural model with Husband and Wife Covert Relational Aggression Mediating the Relationship Between Husband and Wife Insecure Attachment and Husband and Wife Sexual Satisfaction.

*Figure 2.* SEM Results with Standardized Betas shown on structural paths. (N=308 couples)

Table 1

Table. 1. Demographic Characteristics of Sample (N=308 couples)

	Husbands		Wives	
	$\bar{X}$	(S.D) /% Range	$\bar{X}$	(S.D) /% Range
Age Time 1	45.29 (6.03)	27-62	43.45 (5.35)	27-59
Age Time 2	46.34 (5.96)	28-63	44.50 (5.65)	28-60
Length of Marriage in Years	17.78 (4.83)	2-40	17.91 (4.95)	2-40
Number of Children	2.36 ( .99)	1-6	2.36 ( .99)	1-6
Race				
Caucasian		87.3%		82.1.0%
African Am		5.6%		4.2%
Hispanic		0.6%		2.9%
Asian American		1.6%		4.9%
Multiethnic		2.6%		1.9%
Other		3.0%		4.0%
Education				
Less than H.S.		0.0%		1.3%
High School Diploma		6.5%		4.9%
Some College		22.4%		24.0%
Bachelor's Degree		40.3%		40.9%
Master's Degree		18.5%		21.4%
Professional/Ph.D Degree		12.3%		7.5%
Household Income				
Under \$20000		1.9%		1.9%
\$20,001-40,000		5.2%		7.5%
\$40,001-60,000		15.0%		15.9%
\$60,001-80,000		17.5%		17.5%
\$80,001-100,000		16.6%		19.5%
\$100,001-120,000		13.3%		13.3%
\$120,001-140,000		9.4%		5.4%
\$140,001-160,000		4.9%		5.8%
\$160,001-180,000		5.2%		4.5%
\$180,001-200,000		6.5%		6.8%
\$200,001+		1.6%		1.6%
Missing		2.9%		0.3%

Table 2

Table 2. Means, Standard Deviations, Ranges, Reliabilities, and Factor Loadings on Latent Variables for all measured variables.

Variables	Wives				Husbands					
	$\bar{X}$	(SD)	Range	$\alpha$	Fact. Load	$\bar{X}$	(SD)	Range	$\alpha$	Fact. Load
Insecure Attachment-time1										
Anxious Attachment	7.31	(4.71)	4-28	.89	.86	8.41	(5.06)	4-28	.88	.76
Avoidant Attachment	8.94	(4.53)	4-24	.70	.77	9.86	(4.83)	4-24	.72	.87
Covert Rel. Aggression-time1										
Love Withdrawal	14.75	(7.59)	6-37	.86	.78	17.43	(7.47)	6-42	.90	.74
Social Sabotage	8.36	(4.54)	6-41	.90	.73	9.49	(5.70)	6-38	.88	.81
Sexual Satisfaction-time 2										
Sexual Satisfaction	14.79	(2.91)	4-20	.76	.72	14.56	(2.71)	5-20	.71	.73
Frequency Discrepancy	.75	(.83)	0-5	na	-.69	1.24	(1.04)	0-6	na	-.75
Sexual Satisfaction-time 1										
Sexual Satisfaction	5.10	(1.68)	1-7	na	.78	4.65	(1.78)	1-7	na	.80
Frequency Discrepancy	.72	(.78)	0-3	na	-.71	1.21	(1.02)	0-6	na	-.74

Table 3

Table 3. Correlations for all Latent Variables in the Model.

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1.Husband Insecure Couple Attachment T1	1.0							
2.Wife Insecure Couple Attachment T1	.48***	1.0						
3.Husband Covert Relational Aggression T1	.51***	.65***	1.0					
4.Wife Covert Relational Aggression T1	.62***	.35***	.45***	1.0				
5.Husband Sexual Satisfaction T2	-.39***	-.15*	-.21**	-.37***	1.0			
6.Wife Sexual Satisfaction T2	-.36***	-.50***	-.41***	-.24**	.36***	1.0		
7.Husband Sexual Satisfaction T1	-.54***	-.24**	-.42***	-.27***	.45***	.39***	1.0	
8.Wife Sexual Satisfaction T1	-.42***	-.52***	-.25**	-.40***	.27***	.56***	.49***	1.0

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