Romantic Relationship (In)Stability and Dissolution: Dyadic Longitudinal Analysis

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Purpose

This grant aims to address romantic relationship science surrounding relationship transitions and diversity in relationships. More specifically, the primary objective is to understand the change that occurs between partners in both intact and broken up romantic relationships. This study includes three primary aims: (1) We seek to identify which characteristics of diverse romantic relationships are associated with stability or instability via examination of both partners, (2) We aim to describe and assess the breakup experience for both partners, and (3) We aim to evaluate the longitudinal impact of ongoing relationship characteristics or breakups on the mental health and emotional well-being of each partner. This grant provides support to analyze trajectories of intact and dissolved romantic relationships from both partners’ perspectives and determine relationship change effects on short- and long-term mental health and well-being.

Aim 1: This study will examine dyadic data to gain a more complex understanding of intrapersonal and interpersonal influences that are associated with stability or instability in romantic relationships across diverse groups in the United States (U.S.). We will test differences in interdependence by attending to the ways in which partner effects may vary in adult romantic relationships to identify needs and stressors from both partners in couples across time and contexts. This study seeks to meet this need by assessing adult relationships and their stability dyadically and longitudinally. This dyadic assessment will incorporate how both partners evaluate their relationship and how these evaluations influence the individual and partner’s perceptions, behaviors, and overall satisfaction in the relationship. Finally, this study aims to expand knowledge about diverse relationships; most existing studies focusing on the ways in which individuals define, understand, and demonstrate commitment in romantic relationships have been conducted predominantly with samples of White adults or collegiate students. We will rectify this limitation by oversampling racially diverse individuals and recruiting couples across varying ages to increase representation. This aim has implications to identify how individuals impact the relationship (and one another), replicate and extend common relationship metrics, and reveal a greater diversity of underrepresented experiences.

Aim 2: This study will also be novel in its approach by acquiring dyadic data from adults in dissolved romantic relationships. Many adults experience at least one nonmarital breakup prior to marriage; therefore, the impact of romantic breakups cannot be understated. There usually are two sides to a breakup with limited agreement about the execution, including the mutuality and timing. Distinct dissolution roles accompany the breakup process. This breakup decision-making process can occur as unilateral (self- or other-oriented) or bilateral (mutual-oriented).

When combining breakup accounts from both partners, prior findings reflect minimal agreement about bilateral breakups. The previous dyadic analyses are dated and not diverse. Current metrics primarily utilize individual perspectives and cannot test how agreement (or discrepancy) is observed in the breakup. The dearth of longitudinal dyadic data examining partners who have broken up has primarily focused on identifying predictors of relationship dissolution, not the effects of the breakup on each partner. We will explore the decisions and discrepancies to change or end the relationship as well as identify how individual and relational characteristics impact transitions. Dyadic data on breakups reveal discrepancies in relationship trajectories and provide implications to better approach subsequent adjustment, distress, mental health, and well-being. Our aim seeks to further scrutinize, replicate, and extend previous research to understand the perceptions available from both partners to answer how partners make the decision to change the definition of their relationship, including the time course of these transitions.

Aim 3: This study will evaluate the longitudinal impact on relationship health and emotional well-being. Adults rely heavily on their romantic partners for intimacy and support; therefore, romantic relationships have potential for substantial impacts on mental health and well-being. Multiple noteworthy longitudinal dyadic data sets have been conducted on romantic relationships. Though valuable, these data sets frequently do not: (1) contain heterogeneous samples, (2) consistently measure couple-related variables over time, or (3) include measures of mental health or well-being. These limitations offer fertile ground to build and expand on intact and broken up relationships, specifically how the relationship impacts individual health. Romantic relationship instability is associated with adjustment, distress, and maladaptive coping mechanisms and has potential to increase risk of mental health problems. Specifically, we seek to understand individual and relational health through maintenance and change. This study will illuminate how heterogeneous adults maintain short- and long-term relationships as well as experience relationship breakups. Relational measures are associated with mental health outcomes, and as such, are not typically related to the perceptions of the relationship itself or consistent across partners. Relationship status commonly privileges intact relationships, and we aim to use relationship status to inform both relational health and individual well-being. This aim seeks to find out how longitudinal change can yield suggestions for addressing romantic relationship health.

Research Methods & Methodological Design
Participants will be recruited from Prolific, an online crowdsourcing research platform. We will enroll individuals in couples (for dyadic analysis) since securing both partners is challenging in relational research. Prolific participants are not only more demographically diverse, they also typically deliver higher quality data than other convenience samples. We will use the following criteria: in a romantic relationship at baseline and both partners live in the U.S. Further, we will be oversampling racially diverse participants to better identify the needs and impacts of a variety

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of populations. As racial minorities and non-collegiate samples are often underrepresented in research studies about romantic relationships, we seek to assess how expectations, values, processes, behaviors, and outcomes vary across different groups.

This project will take place over one year with assessments occurring every two months. We will distribute an online Qualtrics survey at baseline and for each wave. At baseline, participants will provide information about individual demographics and mental health (e.g., depression, anxiety, adjustment) and relationship baseline information (e.g., quality, commitment, uncertainty). Every two months (Waves 1-5), we will solicit additional information to determine changes in relational (in)stability and mental health. Unique quantitative and qualitative measures will be solicited from both partners, whether intact or broken up. In particular, partners who broke up will provide information about the breakup event (e.g., role, adjustment, distress) to determine how different individuals and partners manage their communication, behavior, and emotions.

The analyses will examine assessments using inferential statistics to make comparisons within and between individuals and partners as well as in-tact and broken up relationships. We will conduct structural equation modeling, hierarchical linear modeling, actor-partner interdependence modeling, and growth modeling. These longitudinal analyses will identify short- and long-term relational changes as well as projections for future mental health and well-being.

**Deliverables**

This project will expand, enhance, and promote the relationship science initiatives for multidisciplinary collaboration amongst pre-tenure researchers. We anticipate presenting our findings at regional, national, and international conferences with interdisciplinary audiences. We will submit our research in our respective disciplines: National Communication Association (NCA), National Council on Family Relations (NCFR), and interdisciplinary conferences, such as International Association of Relationship Research (IARR), Society for Personality and Social Psychology (SPSP), and Society for the Study of Emerging Adulthood (SSEA). Research presented at these conferences will be submitted as peer-reviewed publications for a variety of disciplines related to communication, emerging adults, family science, mental health, and romantic relationships. Several submissions will aim for open-access opportunities to expand readership and availability of research supported by this grant agency. In addition to publication access, we plan on providing availability to the dataset (e.g., through Love Consortium or Open Science Framework) to promote transparency, collaboration, and future developments in relationship research. This project will establish feasibility for future external funding opportunities from federal and nonprofit agencies that seek to encourage and support novel and ambitious research on interpersonal relationships.