

## Testing the impact of sliding versus deciding in cyclical and noncyclical relationships

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### Abstract

This study investigates longitudinally predictors and outcomes of sliding (a desire to avoid clarifying the status of a romantic relationship; measured as relationship talk avoidance) among emerging adults ( $N = 244$ ) in cyclical (ending and renewing a relationship) and noncyclical romantic relationships. Avoidance of relationship talk was positively associated with relationship uncertainty 7 weeks earlier and negatively related to dedication and satisfaction 7 weeks later, through decreased relationship maintenance (measured by constructive communication). We hypothesized that sliding would both predict and be predicted by lower dedication. Dedication did not predict later sliding for cyclical partners, but was associated with lower sliding for noncyclical partners, suggesting dedication may buffer the negative impact of uncertainty for noncycling partners.

The development of romantic relationships during emerging adulthood (roughly ages 18–29; Arnett, 2000) has become a more ambiguous process in the United States (see Sassler, 2010), leaving greater room for uncertainty in the current and future status of relationships than ever before. Relationship uncertainty about the behavioral norms for the relationship, mutuality of feelings, and current and future definition of the relationship (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999) can lead to increased distress (Knobloch & Solomon, 2003) and conflict (e.g., Siegert & Stamp, 1994). According to Stanley and Rhoades (2009), partners can begin to resolve this uncertainty by gathering and evaluating information

about relationship risks, compatibility, and the dedication of each partner (i.e., the desire to maintain or improve the quality of the relationship for the joint benefit of the participants; Stanley & Markman, 1992). Partners who then use this information to make conscious decisions about the current and future state of the relationship (termed *deciding vs. sliding*) are more likely to behave in ways that sustain or improve the quality of the relationship (i.e., relationship maintenance behaviors), reducing uncertainty and risk of future relationship distress and instability (Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2006). Conversely, when partners slide, versus decide, they are not clarifying each partners' expectations and dedication to the relationship (Stanley & Rhoades, 2009), and they are not making conscious decisions about the current and future state of the relationship; this decreases the use of relationship maintenance strategies necessary for sustaining or improving the quality of the relationship and increases their risk for future distress (Stanley et al., 2006).

Previous cross-sectional research has supported connections between subsets of these

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constructs (e.g., Dailey, Hampel, & Roberts, 2010; Stanley et al., 2006), but no study has analyzed their theoretical temporal ordering. Given that no study has analyzed longitudinally the theoretical associations between these constructs, the goals of this study are to explore (a) how sliding is related to earlier relationship uncertainty and dedication and (b) how sliding then relates to future dedication and satisfaction through relationship maintenance behaviors. Additionally, given previous findings regarding the likelihood that partners in cyclical relationship may be at higher risk for sliding, the third goal of this study is to explore how a history of cycling may moderate the associations between these constructs.

#### *Relationship uncertainty and attachment loss anxiety in developing relationships*

Relationship uncertainty is one of three sources of relational uncertainty (the other two being self-uncertainty and partner uncertainty) and consists of doubts people have about the behavioral norms of their relationship, mutuality of feelings, the relationship's current definition, and the relationship's future (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999). Research suggests that relationship uncertainty is associated with decreased attraction (e.g., Gudykunst, 1985) and increased anger, sadness (Knobloch & Solomon, 2003), conflict, and relationship termination (e.g., Siegert & Stamp, 1994). Although uncertainty may increase perceptions of excitement and romance (e.g., Knobloch & Solomon, 2002), it may also postpone the discovery of dissimilarities that may decrease partners' attraction to each other (Norton, Frost, & Ariely, 2007), potentially protecting a relationship from ending (Knobloch & Solomon, 2002). In the long run, though, sustaining uncertainty is likely avoiding "real differences ... that affect the likelihood of success and happiness" in the relationship (Stanley, Rhoades, & Fincham, 2011, p. 242).

According to Stanley and Rhoades (2009), uncertainty is a natural occurrence in developing relationships. As a romantic relationship develops, an emotional attachment forms between partners, and if relational benefits and

satisfaction continue to grow, so will the anxiety over losing their romantic partner (Stanley, Rhoades, & Whitton, 2010). Theoretically, this anxiety over the potential loss of the relationship will continue for any partner who fears his/her emotional attachment is stronger than his/her partners' level of dedication to the relationship (Stanley et al., 2010). Stanley and Rhoades propose that partners who make intentional decisions about the progression of their relationship and clearly communicate about the current and future status of the relationship with each other (i.e., decide vs. slide) reduce partners' relationship uncertainty and anxiety over losing the relationship, thereby increasing the perceived security and stability of the relationship and the willingness of each partner to invest in behaviors that sustain the relationship.

#### *Low- and high-risk relationship development*

Stanley and Markman (1992) proposed two meta-constructs, dedication and constraint, as the key components of commitment development in romantic relationships. Dedication is the long-term orientation and desire of an individual to invest in and improve the relationship for the benefit of both partners, whereas constraints encourage the continuance of the relationship by making termination of the relationship more financially, socially, or psychologically costly (Stanley & Markman, 1992). Stanley and Rhoades (2009) suggest a low-risk relationship formation process in which partners evaluate the risks associated with the relationship, the partners' compatibility with one another, and whether the dedication of both partners is mutual and long term before moving through relationship transitions with one another (i.e., having sex, moving in together, meeting parents, breaking up, and reconciling) that might accrue constraints to ending the relationship regardless of its quality. Deciding is both an intrapersonal cognitive phenomenon and an interpersonal communicative phenomenon (Priem, Bailey, & Fazio, 2015; Stanley & Rhoades, 2009) that reduces the risk of constraints accruing without clarifying partners' dedication to making the relationship work long term (Stanley et al., 2006).

Of course, not every couple responds to increases in potential loss, anxiety, and relationship uncertainty by clarifying their dedication to the relationship. The high-risk formation process is the accrual of relationship constraints that limit options before partners evaluate the dedication of each partner, the relationship's risks, and their compatibility with one another (Stanley & Rhoades, 2009). Partners who slide do not engage in conscious evaluation and discussion of the relationship and allow relationship progression and transitions to "just happen" (Stanley et al., 2006). Such sliding behaviors may increase constraints that favor the relationship's continuation regardless of whether partners are compatible or desire to remain in a relationship together (Stanley & Markman, 1992). As adding just one additional material constraint (e.g., sharing debt, owning a pet) is associated with a 10% increase in the odds of staying together, "deciding" whether to go through a relationship transition decreases the chance that a low-quality relationship will continue due to constraints (Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2010; Stanley & Rhoades, 2009). Although intentional and overt relationship decision making is likely particularly important during large relationship transitions that are the most likely to accrue constraints with life-altering implications (e.g., moving in together, having unprotected sex), we propose that intentional decision making has an important place throughout the developmental process outlined by Stanley and Rhoades (2009). Intentionality and overt relationship decision making throughout the developmental process may reduce the potential negative impact sliding may have on the behaviors partners engage in to maintain their relationship, their dedication to the relationship, and relationship satisfaction (Stanley et al., 2006).

### *Theoretical predictors and outcomes of sliding*

#### *Uncertainty*

Clarifying uncertainty about the current and future status of the relationship with one's partner reduces anxiety over the loss of the relationship (Stanley & Rhoades, 2009). Predicted outcome value theory (Sunnafank,

1986) reasons that people engage in information seeking and communicative behavior to reduce uncertainty when they anticipate a positive outcome, but will stop seeking information and will terminate the conversation if they anticipate a negative outcome. Stanley et al. (2011) term this phenomenon *motivated ambiguity* and suggest that "ambiguity may be preferred to clarity wherever clarity is associated with the possibility of a romantic attachment with uncertain future ending abruptly" (p. 242). Thus, partners may choose to slide versus decide when they perceive that seeking clarity will damage a relationship with a partner they have become attached to. Unfortunately, as relationship uncertainty grows, the more threatening partners perceive interacting with their partner and talking about sensitive topics (Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004; Knobloch & Solomon, 2005; Knobloch & Theiss, 2011), theoretically increasing the chances of sliding.

#### *Relationship maintenance behaviors*

The degree to which partners actively decide to maintain their relationship (vs. slide) may impact the likelihood they will behave accordingly. Relationship maintenance can be defined as behavioral dynamics that help to preserve the relationship (e.g., Dindia, 2000), and include inhibiting impulses to react to a partner's behaviors in ways that are destructive to the relationship (e.g., blaming, criticizing, threatening, and name-calling) and, instead, reacting constructively (e.g., mutual discussion, negotiation, and self-disclosure; Rusbult, Olsen, Davis, & Hannon, 2004). Influenced by cognitive dissonance theory, Stanley et al. (2006) argue that when partners thoroughly evaluate their relationship and decide to continue it over other alternatives, they increase their chances of behaving in ways that maintain their relationship and avoid experiencing the uncomfortable dissonance that occurs when they perform a behavior incongruent with their decision. In support of this idea, Vennum and Fincham (2011) found that greater deciding in young adults' romantic relationships predicted greater relationship maintenance behavior (i.e., negotiation) 14 weeks later.

### *Relationship dedication*

According to Stanley and Rhoades (2009), the process of consciously deciding whether to be in a relationship over other alternatives also helps partners clarify and build their dedication to one another. Although one study found that relationship deciding was not related to dedication 14 weeks later (Vennum & Fincham, 2011), more recent research using a cross-lagged model found a bidirectional negative association between emerging adults' sliding and relationship dedication 7 weeks later (Vennum, Hardy, Sibley, & Fincham, 2015). This bidirectional effect is not surprising; couples who are more dedicated are more likely to want to improve their relationship and make their relationship a priority (Stanley & Markman, 1992), increasing the likelihood that they would be more involved in thoughtful decision making about the relationship (Vennum et al., 2015). Additionally, research suggests that greater dedication is predictive of relationship maintenance behaviors (e.g., Etcheverry & Le, 2005). Thus, sliding and dedication may have a negative bidirectional association across time and relationship maintenance may mediate this association.

Dedication may also be impacted by relationship uncertainty. Previous research suggests that relationship uncertainty is negatively associated with dedication both directly and indirectly through relationship maintenance behaviors (Dailey et al., 2010).

### *Relationship satisfaction*

As previously discussed, in addition to the potential for decreased relationship maintenance behaviors associated with sliding, those who avoid discussing their relationship with their partner are less likely to have the information needed to evaluate the risks associated with continuing the relationship (Stanley & Rhoades, 2009). Accordingly, partners who avoid relationship talk may be at increased risk for being together when relationship satisfaction is lacking (Stanley & Rhoades, 2009).

Many aspects of relationship maintenance are linked with greater satisfaction and a higher likelihood of maintaining satisfaction throughout marriage (Huston & Chorost, 1994;

Stafford, Dainton, & Hass, 2000). Specifically, Gottman and Silver (1999) specify that tactics used during conflict may be associated with couples' proclivity to sustain marital satisfaction. Accordingly, we will be focusing on the role of constructive communication in maintaining partners' satisfaction in the relationship.

Relationship satisfaction may also be impacted by relationship uncertainty. Previous research suggests that relationship uncertainty negatively impacts relationship quality directly (Knobloch & Solomon, 2002; Young, Curran, & Totenhagen, 2013).

### *The impact of previous instability*

Partners who have previously experienced the ending and renewing of their relationship (termed *relationship cycling*) may be particularly prone to higher relationship uncertainty, anxiety about relationship loss, and, hence, sliding. Because individuals in cyclical relationships have already experienced the termination of the relationship, they are often times more uncertain about the "viability of their committed relationship long term" than individuals in relationships without a history of cycling (Vennum et al., 2015, p. 409). Vennum et al. (2015) explain that cyclical partners' increased anxiety about the relationship's potential demise may make it more difficult for individuals to perform careful decision making in regard to sustaining the relationship and invest in behaviors that sustain the relationship. This may result in the greater conflict, physical and verbal abuse, and lower satisfaction and dedication reported by cyclical partners compared to noncyclical partners (Dailey, Middleton, & Green, 2012; Dailey, Pfiester, Jin, Beck, & Clark, 2009; Halpern-Meekin, Manning, Giordano, & Longmore, 2013; Vennum, Lindstrom, Monk, & Adams, 2014).

Previous research suggests that due to their unique relationship history, cyclical relationship processes may differ from the processes found in continuously together relationships. For example, Dailey et al. (2010) found that a history of relationship cycling moderated the association between commitment and some

relationship maintenance behaviors. Specifically, relationship maintenance was related to network inclusion for noncyclers only and was related to openness for cyclers only. As there is previous research suggesting that relationship development processes, such as the association between dedication and relationship maintenance behaviors, are moderated by a history of relationship cycling, we will examine this effect in our proposed model.

*The present study*

The goal of this study was to examine the effect of relationship uncertainty and dedication on later maintenance behaviors associated with sliding and how such behaviors, in turn, are related to future relationship dedication and satisfaction. This was done using a sample of 244 undergraduate students assessed three times at 7-week intervals. In particular, the study provides a test of the following hypotheses and research question:

H1: *Greater relationship uncertainty at T1 will be associated with a decrease in emerging adults' dedication and satisfaction in their relationships at T3 directly and indirectly through increased avoidance of relationship talk at T2 and decreased constructive communication at T3.*

H2: *Greater relationship dedication at T1 will be associated with an increase in emerging adults' dedication in their relationships at T3 directly and indirectly through decreased avoidance of relationship talk at T2 and increased constructive communication at T3.*

H3: *Participants with a history of cycling will report greater uncertainty and avoidance, and lower constructive communication, dedication, and satisfaction than partners without a history of cycling.*

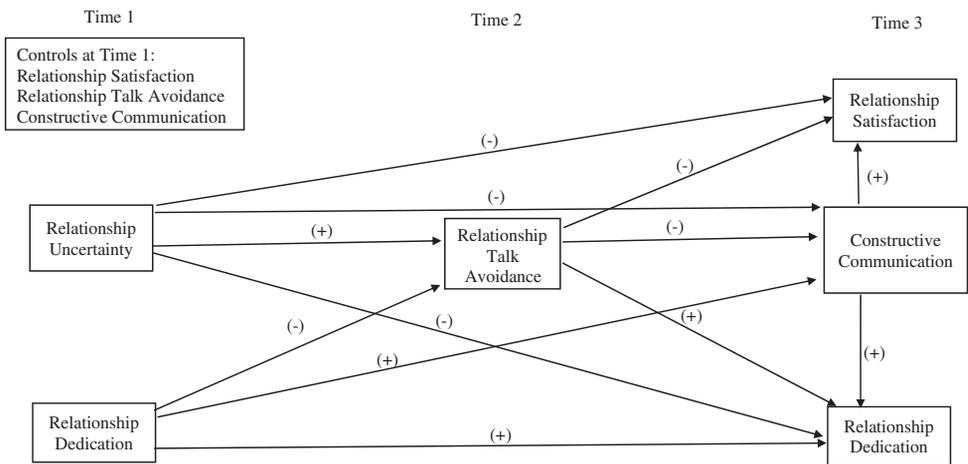
RQ1: *How does a history of cycling moderate the associations between the variables in the proposed model?*

See Figure 1 for the hypothesized model.

**Method**

*Sample*

Data were drawn from a larger study on emerging adult romantic relationships collected at a large Southeastern university. Participants were 979 undergraduate students (69% female and 31% male) representing all majors on campus in an introductory family relations course. Students were given several options for class



**Figure 1.** Hypothesized model of emerging adults' relationships (N = 244). The "+" sign represents a hypothesized positive relationship. The "-" sign represents a hypothesized negative relation.

**Table 1.** Demographic characteristics of participants

Characteristic	Cyclical ( <i>n</i> = 75)		Noncyclical ( <i>n</i> = 169)		Total ( <i>N</i> = 244)	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
<b>Race</b>						
Caucasian	47	63	130	77	177	73
African American	13	17	6	4	19	8
Latino	11	15	20	12	31	13
Asian	3	4	4	2	6	2
Other	1	1	9	5	11	5
<b>Sex</b>						
Male	15	20	36	21	51	21
Female	60	80	133	79	193	79
<b>Sexual partner</b>						
Opposite sex partner	70	93	165	98	235	96
Same sex partner	5	7	4	2	9	4
	Years		Years		Years	
Age, <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	19.55 (1.42)		19.49 (1.41)		19.50 (1.41)	
Relationship length ( <i>SD</i> )	2.29 (1.42)		1.40 (1.55)		1.67 (1.57)	

credit, including participation in the survey used for this study. Those choosing the survey were e-mailed links to a secure online system during the second week of the semester (T1), the middle of the semester (T2), and the last week of the semester (T3). Forty-three percent of students (315 females and 101 males) answered *yes* to the question “Are you currently in a romantic relationship?” Because relationship processes around dedication may differ for those in nonexclusive or married relationships, participants in nonexclusive and married relationships were dropped from the study (34 participants [13.7%] from the noncyclical group and 17 [10.2%] from the cyclical group), reducing the sample to 365 participants. At T2 and T3, participants were asked to indicate *yes* or *no* regarding whether they had ended their relationship since the last survey. Participants who indicated *no* at both T2 and T3 were included, leaving us with a sample of 244 participants in the same relationship at all three time points. Participants further indicated at T1 whether they had broken up and reconciled with this partner at least once. Consistent with previous research (e.g., Vennum et al., 2014), about one third (*n* = 75, 31%) of those in romantic relationships reported their relationship was cyclical. The final sample

consisted of 75 emerging adults in cyclical and 169 in noncyclical exclusive relationships. See Table 1 for sample characteristics.

### Measures

#### *Relationship uncertainty*

The Relationship Uncertainty Scale (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999) was modified in order to reflect more current emerging adult relationship language. This 17-item scale measured participants’ level of uncertainty regarding the behavioral norms of their relationships, mutuality of feelings between partners, and the relationship’s current and future definition. Participants reported their level of uncertainty on a scale ranging from 1 (*not certain at all*) to 5 (*completely certain*) on items such as “whether this is more than a friendship,” “whether you and your partner feel the same way about each other,” and “whether this relationship will end soon.” Items were averaged and coded such that higher scores indicated greater relationship uncertainty ( $\alpha = .95$  at T1).

#### *Relationship talk avoidance*

The Relationship Talk Avoidance Scale (Owen & Fincham, 2011) measured participants’

desire to avoid clarifying the level of dedication and the status of the relationship with their partner on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The four items were “I would rather things be kind of vague about what our relationship is,” “I try to avoid having ‘the talk’ (DTR, ‘defining the relationship’) with my partner,” “I don’t really want to clarify where this relationship is headed,” and “It is important to me to know what this relationship means to us so we have a good sense of its future” (reverse coded). Items were averaged and coded such that higher scores indicated greater relationship talk avoidance ( $\alpha = .75$  at T1 and  $.79$  at T2).

#### *Constructive communication*

Seven items from the Constructive Communication subscale of the Communication Patterns Questionnaire (CPQ; Christensen & Sullaway, 1984; Heavey, Larson, Zumtobel, & Christensen, 1996) measured constructive and destructive conflict management behaviors (e.g., mutually discussing the problem, expressing their feelings, suggesting possible compromises, name-calling, threatening their partner, and blaming their partner). Participants rated the likelihood of these behaviors occurring when a relationship problem arises or during a discussion of a relationship problem on a scale from 1 (*very unlikely*) to 9 (*very likely*). Responses were averaged and coded so higher scores reflected more constructive communication ( $\alpha = .80$  at T1 and  $.83$  at T3). The CPQ Constructive Communication subscale has been shown to be correlated  $.51$  with observed behavior (Hahlweg, Kaiser, Christensen, Fehm-Wolfsdorf, & Groth, 2000).

#### *Relationship satisfaction*

Given the short time frame in which we were measuring change, we used a seven-item relationship satisfaction scale to examine participant’s feelings of satisfaction over the past week (rather than more global measure) that has been shown to have a single-factor structure and high reliability in previous studies (e.g., Vennum & Fincham, 2011). Participants reported their level of satisfaction ranging from 0 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very*) on items such as “Over

the past week, how well has your partner met your needs?” and “In general, how satisfied have you been with your relationship over the past week?” Items were averaged and coded such that higher scores indicated higher levels of relationship satisfaction ( $\alpha = .88$  at T1 and  $.91$  at T3).

#### *Relationship dedication*

Four items from the Commitment Inventory (Stanley & Markman, 1992) measured participant’s dedication to the relationship on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Example items include “I may not want to be with my partner a few years from now” (reverse coded) and “My relationship with my partner is more important to me than almost anything else in my life.” Items were averaged and coded such that higher scores indicated greater dedication ( $\alpha = .82$  at T1 and  $.81$  at T3).

#### *Analytic plan*

Correlations between the variables of interest were first analyzed in SPSS for partners in cyclical and noncyclical relationships. All remaining analyses were run in Mplus 7.0 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2012) using individual raw data. Missing data, which ranged from 0% during T1 to 8.2% during T3, were handled using full information maximum likelihood. Bootstrapping was used to test indirect effects as simulation research demonstrates that bootstrapping is a valid and powerful method for testing the effects of intervening variables (Hayes, 2009; Williams & MacKinnon, 2008). In bootstrapping, if zero is included in the 95% confidence interval (CI), then the indirect effect is not significant at the  $.05$  level (Hayes, 2009). We used the guidelines suggested by Kline (2011) to assess model fit: nonsignificant chi-square value, Bentler comparative fit index (CFI) greater than  $.95$ , Steiger–Lind root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) less than  $.05$ , and a standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) less than  $.08$ .

Hypotheses 1 and 2 were tested through a longitudinal path model in which relationship talk avoidance, relationship satisfaction,

**Table 2.** Correlations among study measures (N = 244)

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
T1 relationship uncertainty	—	.42**	-.30**	-.31**	-.51**	.53**	-.42**	-.64**	-.54**
T2 relationship talk avoidance	.29*	—	-.31**	-.23**	-.53**	.37**	-.26**	-.19*	-.47**
T3 constructive communication	-.43**	-.18	—	.56**	.39**	-.25**	.55**	.16*	.18*
T3 relationship satisfaction	-.34**	-.04	.74**	—	.47**	-.17*	.39**	.21**	.18*
T3 relationship dedication	-.67**	-.30*	.51**	.53**	—	-.31**	.30**	.27**	.61**
T1 relationship talk avoidance	.51**	.50**	-.25*	-.14	-.58**	—	-.35**	-.43**	-.55**
T1 constructive communication	-.57**	-.16	.72**	.67**	.55**	-.28*	—	.34**	.18*
T1 relationship satisfaction	-.67**	-.14	.45**	.49**	.47**	-.35**	.52**	—	.37**
T1 relationship dedication	-.68**	-.25*	.16	.66**	.66**	-.46**	.36**	.55**	—

Note. Values below the diagonal are from cyclers; values above the diagonal are from noncyclers. T1 = Time 1; T2 = Time 2; T3 = Time 3.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$  (two-tailed).

relationship dedication, and constructive communication were added as controls at T1 for their same constructs as T3. For H3, we used a multiple-group analysis of variance to determine whether individuals in cyclical relationships reported greater uncertainty and avoidance, and lower constructive communication, dedication, and satisfaction than partners without a history of cycling. To assess whether a history of relationship instability moderated the associations between variables in our model (RQ1), a multiple-group path analysis was performed. In multiple-group analysis, testing of cross-group equality constraints on unstandardized parameters is recommended due to the potential for different variances across groups (Kline, 2011). Once the unconstrained model demonstrated appropriate fit, further models were run in which parameters were constrained to be equal across groups. Chi-square difference tests and model fit indices were used to determine how a history of relationship cycling moderated the associations between constructs in the model (Kline,

2011). We then constrained the residual variances of the endogenous variables to be equal between cyclers and noncyclers and used a chi-square difference test and model fit indices to test whether the model had comparable explanatory power across groups.

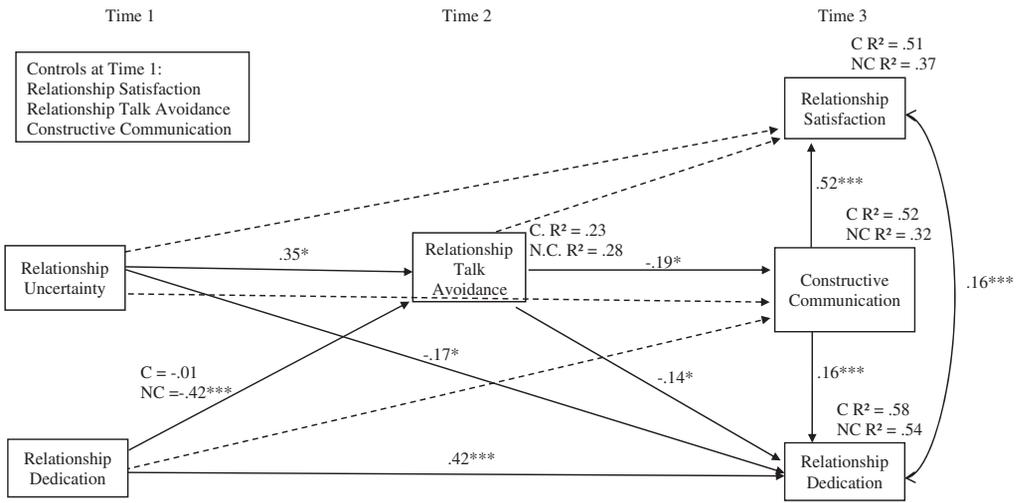
## Results

### Correlations

Table 2 shows the correlations among the variables in the proposed model for participants in noncyclical and cyclical relationships. Although the majority of the correlations were as expected, several associations were significant for partners in cyclical relationships that were not for partners in noncyclical relationships, and vice versa, indicating further analysis of moderation effects was warranted.

### Determining the final path model

We first examined the fit of our model to the data with all the direct effects freely estimated for participants in cyclical and noncyclical



**Figure 2.** Path analysis of emerging adults’ relationships ( $N = 244$ ). Unstandardized estimates shown. C = cyclical. NC = noncyclical. Model fit indices:  $\chi^2(37) = 42.43$ ,  $p = .25$ ; root mean square error of approximation = .04, CI [.00, .08], comparative fit index = .99; standardized root mean square residual = .07. Relationship length was controlled but later removed as it was an insignificant predictor.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$  (two-tailed).

relationships. This unconstrained model was a good fit to the data,  $\chi^2(18) = 24.94$ ,  $p = .13$ , CFI = .99, RMSEA = .06, CI [.00, .11], SRMR = .03. To test for moderation of the relations between the variables in the model, we constrained the direct effects to be equal between cyclers and noncyclers one path at a time. Constraining the path from T1 dedication to T2 relationship avoidance to be the same for cyclical and noncyclical participants resulted in a significant chi-square difference test,  $\chi^2_{diff}(1) = 5.01$ , indicating this association is significantly different for cyclers versus noncyclers; thus, this path was left unconstrained. We found no other significant differences between cyclers and noncyclers on the remaining associations in the model; thus, for parsimony, these paths were constrained to be equal between cyclers and noncyclers. This model was a good fit to the data,  $\chi^2(34) = 41.75$ ,  $p = .17$ , CFI = .98, RMSEA = .04, CI [.00, .09], SRMR = .06.

To test whether the model had comparable explanatory power for partners in both cyclical and noncyclical relationships, we constrained the residual variances of the endogenous variables to be equal across

groups. Constraining the variance of T2 relationship avoidance across groups resulted in a significant chi-square difference test,  $\chi^2_{diff}(1) = 4.16$ , indicating that the model accounted for more of the variance in T2 relationship avoidance for partners in noncyclical relationships than those in cyclical relationships; thus, we chose to not constrain the residual variance of T2 relationship avoidance. Constraining the residual variances of T3 relationship satisfaction, T3 constructive communication, and T3 dedication across groups did not result in significant chi-square difference tests, indicating that there was no significant difference between cyclers and noncyclers. Thus, for parsimony, these residual variances were constrained to be equal between cyclers and noncyclers in the final model.

The final model included constraining all paths and residual variances of the endogenous variables to be the same, except the path from T1 dedication to T2 relationship talk avoidance and the residual variance of T2 relationship talk avoidance. The final model (Figure 2) demonstrated good fit to the data,  $\chi^2(37) = 42.43$ ,  $p = .25$ , CFI = .99, RMSEA = .04, CI [.00, .08], SRMR = .07.

*Hypothesis 1*

We first hypothesized that greater relationship uncertainty at T1 would be associated with a decrease in emerging adults' dedication and satisfaction in their relationships at T3 directly and indirectly through increased avoidance of relationship talk at T2 and decreased constructive communication at T3 (see Table 3 for indirect effects). Contrary to the hypothesis, relationship uncertainty was not directly associated with emerging adults' constructive communication ( $b = -.06, p = .75$ ). Instead, relationship uncertainty was positively associated with relationship talk avoidance ( $b = .35, p < .05$ ), which was negatively related to constructive communication ( $b = -.19, p < .05$ ). In other words, the association between T1 relationship uncertainty and T3 constructive communication was fully mediated by avoidance of relationship talk at T2 (cycling and noncycling,  $b = -.07, p < .05, CI [-.20, -.01]$ ). This can be interpreted as follows: When individuals' relationship uncertainty in emerging adult relationships increases by 1 unit, controlling for initial levels of constructive communication, their constructive communication decreases .07 unit (on average, from the bootstrapping procedure), via its prior effect on avoidance of relationship talk for individuals in both cycling and noncycling relationships. Also contrary to expectations, neither relationship uncertainty ( $b = -.05, p = .75$ ) nor avoidance of relationship talk ( $b = .04, p = .60$ ) was directly related to emerging adults' T3 relationship satisfaction. However, T3 relationship satisfaction was associated with T1 relationship uncertainty through T2 relationship avoidance and T3 constructive communication ( $b = -.04, p < .05, CI [-.11, -.01]$ ) for cyclers and noncyclers.

In line with expectations, increased T1 relationship uncertainty decreased emerging adults' T3 relationship dedication directly ( $b = -.17, p < .05$ ) and indirectly through avoidance of relationship talk at T2 for cyclers and noncyclers ( $b = -.05, p < .05, CI [-.15, -.003]$ ). Additionally, the indirect effect from T1 relationship uncertainty → T2 relationship avoidance → T3 constructive communication → T3 relationship dedication was significant

**Table 3.** Mediation among study measures (N = 244)

Predictor	Mediator(s)	Outcome	C b	NC b	C CI	NCCI
T1 uncertainty →	T2 avoidance →	T3 communication	-.07	-.07	[-.20, -.01]*	[-.20, -.01]*
T1 uncertainty →	T2 avoidance →	T3 satisfaction	.01	.01	[-.03, .07]	[-.03, .09]
T1 uncertainty →	T2 avoidance →	T3 dedication	-.05	-.05	[-.15, -.003]*	[-.15, -.003]*
T1 uncertainty →	T2 avoidance → T3 communication →	T3 satisfaction	-.04	-.04	[-.11, -.01]*	[-.11, -.01]*
T1 uncertainty →	T2 avoidance → T3 communication →	T3 dedication	-.01	-.01	[-.03, -.002]*	[-.03, -.02]*
T1 dedication →	T2 avoidance →	T3 communication	.00	.07	[-.06, .08]	[.002, .24]**
T1 dedication →	T2 avoidance →	T3 dedication	.00	.05	[-.04, .05]	[.01, .11]*
T1 dedication →	T2 avoidance → T3 communication →	T3 dedication	.00	.01	[-.01, .01]	[.001, .04]**
T2 avoidance →	T2 communication →	T3 satisfaction	-.03	-.10	[-.21, -.03]*	[-.24, -.01]**
T2 avoidance →	T2 communication →	T3 dedication	-.03	-.10	[-.07, -.01]*	[-.08, -.01]**

Note. Indirect paths tested with 2,000 bootstraps. CI = confidence interval; C = cyclical; NC = noncyclical. A 95% CI is shown except in places where a 99% CI was significant. \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

**Table 4.** Multiple-group analysis of variance results for cyclical and noncyclical groups (N = 244)

Relationship characteristics	Cyclical (n = 75)		Noncyclical (n = 169)		$\chi^2$ difference test
	M	SD	M	SD	
T1 relationship uncertainty	1.63	0.71	1.56	0.68	$\chi^2_{\text{diff}}(1) = 0.56$
T1 relationship talk avoidance	1.93	1.11	1.60	0.83	$\chi^2_{\text{diff}}(1) = 4.27^a$
T2 relationship talk avoidance	1.57	0.82	1.73	1.02	$\chi^2_{\text{diff}}(1) = 1.64$
T1 constructive communication	7.17	1.50	7.87	0.97	$\chi^2_{\text{diff}}(1) = 12.67^a$
T3 constructive communication	7.22	1.50	7.86	1.16	$\chi^2_{\text{diff}}(1) = 9.08^a$
T1 relationship satisfaction	5.84	1.29	6.31	0.73	$\chi^2_{\text{diff}}(1) = 8.75^a$
T3 relationship satisfaction	5.59	1.36	6.04	1.04	$\chi^2_{\text{diff}}(1) = 5.92^a$
T1 relationship dedication	4.02	0.84	4.00	0.75	$\chi^2_{\text{diff}}(1) = 0.04$
T3 relationship dedication	3.89	0.84	4.06	0.72	$\chi^2_{\text{diff}}(1) = 2.16$

<sup>a</sup>Significant difference between the paths of cyclers and noncyclers.

for cyclers ( $b = -.01$ ,  $p < .05$ , CI [-.03, -.002]) and noncyclers ( $b = -.01$ ,  $p < .05$ , CI [-.03, -.02]).

### Hypothesis 2

We also hypothesized that greater relationship dedication at T1 would be associated with an increase in emerging adults' dedication in their relationships at T3 directly and indirectly through decreased avoidance of relationship talk at T2 and constructive communication at T3. The path from T1 dedication to T2 avoidance of relationship talk significantly differed between individuals with a history of relationship cycling versus those without. For cyclers, this path was not significant ( $b = -.01$ ,  $p = .94$ ), whereas for noncyclers, the association between dedication and avoidance of relationship talk was negative ( $b = -.42$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Contrary to our hypothesis, T1 dedication did not directly impact T3 constructive communication ( $b = -.07$ ,  $p = .47$ ). Instead, T1 dedication impacted T3 constructive communication indirectly through T2 relationship talk avoidance for participants in noncyclical relationships ( $b = .07$ ,  $p < .01$ , CI [.002, .24]), but not for cyclers.

As expected, T1 dedication directly impacted T3 dedication ( $b = .42$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Only for noncyclers, the path of T1 relationship dedication to T3 relationship dedication

was significant indirectly through T2 avoidance of relationship talk ( $b = .05$ ,  $p < .05$ , CI [.01, .11]). The indirect effects from T1 relationship dedication  $\rightarrow$  T2 relationship avoidance  $\rightarrow$  T3 constructive communication  $\rightarrow$  T3 relationship dedication were significant for noncyclers ( $b = .01$ ,  $p < .01$ , CI [.001, .04]) but not for cyclers.

### Hypothesis 3

When examining mean differences between participants in cyclical versus noncyclical relationships, we found that individuals in both types of relationships reported similar levels of relationship uncertainty at T1, relationship dedication at T1 and T3, and relationship avoidance at T2 (see Table 4). Those in cyclical relationships, however, reported higher relationship avoidance at T1, lower constructive communication at T1 and T3, and lower relationship satisfaction at T1 and T3 when compared to those in noncyclical relationships.

## Discussion

The goal of this study was to explore the theoretical path laid out by Stanley et al. (2006), which is centered around the concept that sliding versus deciding, in response to uncertainty, acts as a turning point for negative or positive outcomes. We completed this study using a longitudinal sample of

emerging adults in cyclical and noncyclical exclusive relationships. Specifically guided by Stanley et al.'s (2006) theory of low- and high-risk relationship development, we wondered whether relationship uncertainty and dedication predicted avoidance of relationship talk (an indicator of sliding) and constructive communication (a relationship maintenance behavior) to influence partners' dedication to and satisfaction with the relationship. We further wondered how experiencing a breakup and renewal in the current relationship (relationship cycling) would moderate this process. Our findings indicate that maintenance of relationship dedication and satisfaction during the development of emerging adult romantic relationships is importantly related to earlier relationship uncertainty, dedication, and relationship talk avoidance (i.e., sliding). Although previous studies have found support for associations between components of the model (e.g., Etcheverry & Le, 2005; Stafford et al., 2000; Vennum & Fincham, 2011; Vennum et al., 2015), this study is the first to explore the role of sliding tendencies and relationship maintenance behaviors in the development of dedication and satisfaction using longitudinal data.

This study showed that the impact of emerging adults' relationship uncertainty on relationship maintenance behaviors was fully mediated by their avoidance of relationship talk for both cyclical and noncyclical partners; there were no significant direct effects for relationship uncertainty on constructive communication with relationship talk avoidance in the model. This suggests that relationship uncertainty may not be harmful to constructive communication in itself. Instead, it may be that the behaviors emerging adults choose to do in response to feelings of uncertainty (e.g., deciding or sliding) predict decreased constructive communication more than the feelings of uncertainty themselves.

Our findings of a negative indirect effect on both dedication and satisfaction at T3 from T1 uncertainty, T2 avoidance of relationship talk, and T3 constructive communication provide important insight into the mechanisms through which relationship uncertainty may be associated with relationship satisfaction and

dedication. Although we found T3 satisfaction was negatively associated with both T1 uncertainty and T2 avoidance of relationship talk, neither of these variables directly predicted decreased relationship satisfaction 14 weeks later, controlling for the direct effects of T1 satisfaction and T3 constructive communication. Consistent with the theory of Stanley and Rhoades (2009), our findings provide evidence that failing to gather, evaluate, and communicate relationship information (i.e., sliding vs. deciding) while experiencing uncertainty in the relationship may reduce relationship maintenance behaviors, which may negatively impact dedication and satisfaction. Hence, it may be how uncertainty is handled that impacts satisfaction (e.g., Stafford et al., 2000) more than the presence of uncertainty itself. Because constructive communication, dedication, and satisfaction were at the same time point, though, we could not assess directionality of the effect of constructive communication on relationship satisfaction and dedication, and thus, this hypothesis needs further study.

Interestingly, our results suggest that even though the average scores of T1 dedication and T2 avoidance of relationship talk are similar for cyclers and noncyclers, the relationship between relationship dedication and relationship avoidance is very different: Increased relationship dedication predicted decreased avoidance of relationship talk for noncyclers but not for cyclers. This was the only path in the model moderated by a history of relationship cycling. The nonsignificant association between T1 dedication and T2 relationship talk avoidance caused all of the indirect effects from T1 relationship dedication to be insignificant for cyclers and a significantly different amount of variance to be explained in relationship talk avoidance for cyclers versus noncyclers. We will first explain our results for noncyclers (which made up 69% of our sample) and then explain why we think this difference between cyclers and noncyclers on this specific path occurred.

For noncyclical emerging adults, we found that increased relationship dedication at T1 was associated with a decrease in emerging adults' avoidance of relationship talk at T2. This is consistent with previous research

demonstrating that increased relationship dedication predicted decreased couple's sliding (Vennum et al., 2015). These findings support the idea that those committed to their relationship are more likely to clarify each partners' expectations and dedication to the relationship (i.e., decide vs. slide).

Accordingly, the path between relationship dedication and constructive communication was fully mediated through the avoidance of relationship talk for noncyclers. This means that for noncyclers, although T1 dedication and T3 constructive communication were positively correlated, relationship dedication had no direct effect on constructive communication with relationship talk avoidance in the model. This suggests that increased relationship dedication may not lead to increased relationship maintenance behaviors by itself. Instead, it may be that for noncyclers, gathering, evaluating, and communicating information about the relationship impacts relationship maintenance behaviors more than feelings of dedication in isolation. Thus, these findings support the idea that those who are committed to their relationship and do not have a history of cycling are less likely to be motivated to avoid discussing the relationship (i.e., slide), resulting in greater constructive communication (i.e., relationship maintenance behaviors). Furthermore, the path between initial relationship dedication and later relationship dedication was partially mediated by relationship talk avoidance for noncyclers. Consistent with previous research (Vennum et al., 2015), these findings suggest that dedication both predicts and is predicted by relationship talk avoidance.

We were surprised that there was no significant difference between cyclers and noncyclers in levels of dedication and uncertainty as past research and theory has suggested a difference in these areas (e.g., Dailey et al., 2009; Vennum et al., 2015). One reason for the difference between our study and previous findings is that we only included individuals who dated for all three time points, thus reducing the possible variance in our sample (for more information see the next section).

Interestingly, for cyclical partners, dedication did not provide the counterforce to the effect of relationship uncertainty on sliding

versus deciding behavior that it did for partners in noncyclical relationships. The concept of motivated ambiguity and other theories, such as predicted outcome value theory, suggest that individuals seek to clarify relationship information only if they perceive doing so will result in a positive outcome (Stanley et al., 2011; Sunnafrank, 1986), suggesting that expectations may moderate the relation between dedication and relationship talk avoidance. Due to the previous ending of their relationship, cyclical partners may be more likely to fear that clarifying their partners' relationship status expectations and dedication to the relationship will result in a bad outcome. Hence, regardless of their own levels of dedication, cyclical partners may use relationship talk avoidance as a strategy to keep the relationship stable (Afifi & Burgoon, 1998; Baxter & Wilmot, 1984). At the other end of the spectrum, those cyclers who expect a positive outcome and are dedicated to their relationship may be more likely to address the issues that resulted in the past breakups and renewals because they believe addressing the issues will help the relationship and because they have a greater desire to make the relationship work. Accordingly, our results lend support to the idea that it is not just dedication and communication skill, but motivation as well, that influences emerging adults' ability to maintain healthy relationships.

#### *Strengths, limitations, and suggestions for further research*

This study is the first to examine longitudinally components of the theory put forth by Stanley and Rhoades (2009) on how the strategies with which emerging adults deal with the relationship uncertainty during relationship development may impact dedication and satisfaction in these relationships. The study also uncovered an interesting difference between cyclers and noncyclers that may pave the way to better understanding how relationship development processes may differ for couples with a history of cycling, thus informing strategies for helping those with a history of relationship cycling improve their relationship quality.

Although we were able to determine associations between constructive communication and relationship satisfaction and dedication at T3, the lack of a fourth time point hindered our ability to assess causal ordering. Additionally, further longitudinal research is needed to assess the impact of other relationship maintenance behaviors on relationship satisfaction and dedication. Finally, the time between measurements was 7 weeks in order to measure change over an undergraduate academic semester. Although previous research has found significant change over 7 weeks between sliding and dedication (e.g., Vennum et al., 2015), it is possible that some of the nonsignificant paths may turn out to be significant over a longer period of time. For example, avoidance of relationship talk did not directly decrease relationship satisfaction in our study, but it is quite possible that over a period of years, increased sliding may predict lower satisfaction due to the accumulation of greater constraints over this longer time period.

There were 365 participants in romantic relationships at T1 but 121 of these participants were dropped from the study due to not being in the relationship during all three time points. This is worth noting as cyclical partners who broke up and renewed their relationship during these 14 weeks would have been dropped from our study because our data set did not ask participants whether they had renewed with the partner identified at a previous time point, thus reducing possible variance in our sample. Bearing in mind that uncertainty is associated with relationship termination (Siegert & Stamp, 1994) and that dedication is conceptually a long-term orientation (Stanley & Markman, 1992), it is quite possible that those who terminated the relationship after T1 may have had higher relationship uncertainty and lower relationship dedication. This may explain why cyclers and noncyclers report similar levels of uncertainty and dedication at T1 and why we found only one path was moderated by relationship type (cyclers vs. noncyclers). It is also important to acknowledge that our sample was made up of college students, and thus our results may not be generalizable to emerging adults in different contexts. Additionally, our findings may differ depending on a person's

relationship goals, which we were not able to assess.

Further research is needed to examine what factors other than relationship uncertainty and dedication predict sliding behaviors. Similarly, it is possible that there are factors that were not examined, such as attachment style or relationship constraints, which influence the relationship between variables of our study and could be included in further research. We also think the literature could benefit from further research that expands on the concepts laid out in this article by using dyadic data. For example, it would be interesting to examine how, in cyclical relationships, the associations between the variables in the model differ for the partner who more desired the latest breakup versus the partner who least desired the latest breakup. Additionally, although this study found that increased avoidance of relationship talk (an indicator of sliding) predicts decreased relationship maintenance behaviors, we were not able to test whether this is due to cognitive dissonance processes as Stanley et al. (2006) suggest. Further, the moderation of the path from dedication to relationship talk avoidance suggests that there may be strong differences in the relationship processes experienced by cyclical partners, suggesting further research is needed in this area. Finally, it is likely that reduced dedication, satisfaction, and relationship talk further increase uncertainty, creating an iterative process. More longitudinal research is needed on the bidirectional relationship between variables in this model.

Although the results of this study suggest that increased deciding increased future dedication and constructive communication, all deciding may not be inherently good, just as not all sliding may not be inherently bad. For example, we imagine that forcing relationship talk onto a partner may lead to relationship dissatisfaction. More research is needed to determine in what situations these constructs are helpful or harmful.

### *Conclusion*

In line with the theory presented by Stanley and Rhoades (2009), the results of this study suggest that, on average, sliding behaviors, such as

avoiding gathering and evaluating the information needed to make an informed decision in reaction to relationship uncertainty, may place emerging adults in exclusive relationships at risk for lower relationship maintenance, satisfaction, and dedication. Our results suggest relationship uncertainty may not lead to these outcomes in itself; instead, how couples respond to uncertainty (i.e., slide vs. decide) may lead to these outcomes. For participants in noncyclical relationships, increased dedication to the relationship decreased the likelihood of avoiding relationship talk, whereas dedication had no effect on later sliding for partners in cyclical relationships. This difference suggests that there is something fundamentally different in the processes by which partners with a history of breakup and renewal maintain their relationship. As it seems unlikely that romantic relationship formation for emerging adults will become any less ambiguous in the United States, our results highlight the importance of interventions that promote clear relationship decision making (i.e., deciding vs. sliding) and the impact of relationship maintenance behaviors in sustaining relationship quality.

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