

THE COMBINED EFFECTS OF FREQUENCY OF SATISFACTION AND DOMAIN
EQUITY ON RELATIONAL SATISFACTION

by

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ABSTRACT

Romantic relationship research has yet to identify the relationship between conflict, an interpersonal variable, and equity, an intrapersonal variable. The current study represents the first attempt to understand these variables' contribution, separately and interactionally, on individual partner's feelings of relationship satisfaction.

A total of 106 undergraduate and graduate participants completed questionnaires gauging their frequency of conflict and perceptions of equity across each of five relational domains: Love, Status/Power, Money, Services, and Sex, in addition to reporting general levels of relationship satisfaction. Data were interpreted in three separate relationships: conflict and satisfaction, equity and satisfaction, and the interaction of conflict and equity (conflict x equity) and satisfaction.

Results indicate a significant negative relationship between conflict and satisfaction. Secondly, perceptions of inequity relate to low levels of satisfaction in the Love and Status/Power domains. Finally, the combination of conflict and inequity demonstrate significant differences in satisfaction scores in the Status/Power domain only.

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CHAPTER 1

BACKGROUND AND STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Conflict, as a relational dimension, has been studied extensively since the introduction of the concept in the early 1950s (Borisoff & Victor, 1998). As a function of casual and intimate relationships, specifically in the romantic context, the majority of the contemporary literature attempts to understand how couples move through the conflict process (Kurdek, 1995; Stuart, 1980) or how the management of conflict affects the overall satisfaction of one or both of the relationship partners (Cramer, 2002). This approach to the study of conflict typically assesses the communication actions and responses used by each member of the partnership, termed conflict strategies (e.g., Cramer 2000; Greeff & deBruyne, 2000) or conflict tactics (e.g., Canary & Cupach, 1988). These approaches deal with how couples *experience* conflict.

In the field of conflict strategies, there are several recent studies seeking to use the established effects of conflict-management strategies as part of a larger assessment of several combined variables and their contributions to relational satisfaction. Meeks, Hendrick, and Hendrick (1998) used this approach in their study of how relational satisfaction is affected by perspective-taking, self-disclosure, conflict tactics, relational competence, and love attitudes.

In addition to use as a contributor variable, conflict strategies are also currently utilized in literature as moderator variables. Several studies have attempted to link related variables to conflict resolution, establishing an indirect effect on relational satisfaction. Schneewind and Gerhard (2002) attempted to link relationship personality to relational satisfaction by using a mediational model of conflict resolution. They reported a direct relationship with conflict

resolution and an indirect effect on relationship satisfaction. Messman and Mikesell (2000) also used this approach when trying to link competition in dating relationships to negative conflict styles.

The question of what couples fight about, otherwise known as topics of conflict, is significantly less studied. Those few who have explored the role of conflict topics are just understanding why couples experience conflict in specific topical areas and what insights into the relationship these topics provide. To date, contemporary studies that have attempted to understand this facet of conflict research have been plagued with imperfect scales and methodology (e.g., Kurdek, 1994) or have examined causal relationships in an effort to categorize and create a typology of conflict topic areas (e.g., Samter & Cupach, 1998) within a specific relational structure.

The lack of strong qualitative and quantitative measures for gauging conflict topics between romantic partners simply reflects the nascency of this particular dimension of conflict and provides the strongest support for conducting additional research. How can researchers confidently report the affects and effects of conflict in romantic relationships without examining multiple perspectives? Until there are valid and reliable measurement tools for assessing conflict topics, researches can not definitively report the causes and effects of couple's conflict topics.

The lack of research in the area of conflict topics is not the only rationale for increased investigation. Through the study of conflict areas and the frequency of conflict topics experienced by couples, scholars may gain greater understanding of other, more established theories of relational development. Kurdek (1994) cited interdependence as the major conceptual basis for studying conflict topics. He posited that interpartner conflict in areas representing high levels of interdependence are strongly linked to relational satisfaction. The idea of relational

satisfaction also functions as one partner perceiving the relational costs as low or less than the rewards collected (Rusbult, 1983). In addition to the theories of interdependence, viewing a romantic relationship in terms of rewards and costs is the functional basis for equity theory (Hatfield, Utne, & Traupmann, 1979). Equity, though closely related to interdependence, focuses more narrowly on the ratio of one's own perceived costs and rewards in relation to the perceived costs and rewards of the partner (Sprecher, 2001a). When all of the factors balance, the relationship is considered equitable.

Though theorists have researched and developed several models and explanations of equity theory (Walster, Walster, & Bercheid, 1978; Hatfield et al., 1979), few have attempted to determine the explanatory power of this variable in relation to reported romantic satisfaction. This may be a result of sufficient measuring tools. Though quantitative measures exist and are implemented, most seek to measure only a general sense of relationship equity. Those who have studied how perceptions of equity affect relational satisfaction report overall feelings of inequity relate to negative satisfaction (e.g., Van Yperen & Buunk, 1990). Simply stated, "equitable relationships are more satisfying than inequitable ones" (Canary & Stafford, 1992, p. 245). These findings agree with early theorists' speculations that inequity causes relational distress (Walster, Walster, & Traupmann, 1978).

Few articles to date have suggested the usefulness of a *domain-specific* measure of equity, where perceptions of equity are evaluated in specific relational dimensions instead of an overall interpretation. When included in a study, domain-specific measures are utilized, commonly, as an alternative method for measuring the equity variable, often in conjunction with a global equity measure, (e.g., Michaels, Edwards, & Acock, 1984). The most recent of these studies (Sprecher, 2001a) was the first to conclude that various specific perceptions of equity

significantly correlate with generic perceptions. Such findings generate questions of domain-specific equity potentially correlating inversely with relational satisfaction in the same manner as general measures of equity. In addition, perceptions of equity could potentially influence romantic relationships.

Previous research linking equity and relational satisfaction suggests that a direct causal relationship exists: Lack of equity negatively affects satisfaction. However, the possibility remains that feelings of inequity may have an impact on other aspects of a couple's relationship, which would suggest an *indirect* association between equity and satisfaction. Furthermore, additional variables that have an inverse effect on relational satisfaction could, in combination with inequity, produce an even stronger inverse relationship.

One such possible pairing combines conflict topics and perceptions of equity. The establishment of a domain-specific equity measurement allows for the testing of such specific combined effects, because the equity variable can now fracture into topical areas much in the same manner as conflict. Now, both conflict and equity are comparable, using parallel relational domains, when previously these two variables were juxtaposed in their most general forms. Such investigation could determine not only if perceptions of inequity influence the topics couples fight about, but also how conflict and inequity combine to affect overall relational satisfaction. Do couples experiencing frequent conflict in the same domains in which they perceive an imbalance of equity report significant levels of relationship dissatisfaction?

To understand how this is possible, one must first pose the fundamental question, what causes conflict? Folger, Poole, and Stutman (2001) suggest that the potential for conflict exists whenever individual partners perceive differing viewpoints, attitudes, or goals. This latent stage of conflict continues until a triggering event (Rummel, 1976, cited in Folger et al., 2001) forces

the expression of conflict, thus introducing the conflict formally into the relationship, and allowing for a response from the partner. Braiker and Kelley (1979) refer to this latent period as intrapersonal conflict. They also suggest that each partner in a relationship must coordinate and exchange their behaviors, attitudes, and roles. Any perceived imbalance could be seen as cause for bringing the conflict from an *intrapersonal* state to an *interpersonal* state. This imbalance can also be seen as an unacceptable ratio of costs and rewards, or an *inequity* in the relationship. Suggestively, conflict dealing with personal behaviors, attitudes, and relationship roles may arise from perceived inequities, or lack of equity in a relationship. If perceived inequities introduce conflict into the relationship, it appears as though equity may *affect* conflict. Using a domain-specific measure of equity, parallel to conflict domains, may explain if and how conflict and equity relate to one another, and how they interact to influence relational satisfaction.

Statement of the Purpose

The current study investigates the interaction effect of both *frequency of conflict* and *perceptions of equity*, in parallel domain areas, on *relational satisfaction*. Previous studies support a significant, negative relationship between relational satisfaction and frequencies of conflict in the domains of *Power* and *Intimacy* (Kurdek, 1994), and also between satisfaction and a general measure of equity. However, to date, no study has determined how frequent conflict in reported inequitable domain areas contributes to overall feelings of satisfaction in romantic relationships. It is possible that individual partners who experience feelings of inequality in specific domain areas also experience conflict with their partner in the same domains. Do such partners experience significant feelings of dissatisfaction in their relationship? Also, do feelings of inequity, experienced only in an intrapersonal state of conflict, contribute to the same degree

of dissatisfaction as inequity that is expressed via conflict in an interpersonal state? Based on previous research that establishes inverse relationships between conflict and inequity (separately) and satisfaction, *the purpose of this study is to determine how frequency of conflict and perceptions of equity, combined, affect relational satisfaction in romantic relationships.*

Definition of Key Terms

For the purposes of this study, *conflict* is defined as a simple incompatibility between two people (Deutsch, 1973, cited in Erbert, 2000). This definition is preferred because of its simplicity and generality over alternate definitions. Using a general definition of conflict, which does not specify a source of the conflict, allows for the suggestion of an alternative catalyst, such as lack of equity. For this reason, Deutsch's definition is accepted over others such as Thomas's (1976), describing a process which begins when one partner in a relationship has frustrated, or is perceived as intending to frustrate, a goal or concern of the other partner. This definition of conflict alludes to goals or concerns as the catalyst. As previously established, perceived inequities in certain domains may lead to conflict. This alternative suggestion requires a general definition to be further explained and tested.

Conflict can be either *intrapersonal* conflict or *interpersonal* conflict. *Intrapersonal* conflict is contained within oneself and may arise from "the relative loss of independence or over the psychological requirements of commitment" (Braiker & Kelley, 1979, p.143), and is characteristic of the *latent* stage of conflict—the first of Rummel's (1976) five sequential stages of conflict. In the latent stage, individual partners carry the potential for conflict, but have not yet expressed their feelings to their partner. *Interpersonal* conflict, however, is conflict that is experienced by both partners simultaneously and is based on a couple's mutual feelings of

interdependence (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978), or the “extent to which each partner influences the other partner’s positive and negative outcomes derived from the relationship” (Kurdek, 1994, p. 923).

Closely related to the dimension of interdependence is that of *equity*, which is more specifically defined as a perceived balance between each person’s own perceived contributions and outcomes in a relationship and those contributions offered and outcomes experienced by his or her partner (Sprecher, 2001b). When the ratio of contributions and outcomes of one partner are perceived to be equal or balanced with the other partner, then the couple is experiencing equity in the relationship. Inversely, when one partner feels he or she contributes more in the relationship and receives less rewards (or contributing less and receiving more rewards) than their partner, *inequity* exists in the relationship. Perceptions of equity in the relationship have positive associations with feelings of relational satisfaction (Lloyd, Cate, & Henton, 1982). Also, perceptions of inequity are related to reports of *dissatisfaction* (Michaels, Edwards, & Acock, 1984). The concept of *equity* is closely related to that of *equality*, and both affect satisfaction similarly (Canary & Stafford, 1992). However, it is important to note that *equity* is concerned with a partner’s relative inputs and outcomes, where *equality* only gauges relative outputs.

Both interdependence and equity have been found to have serious consequences on how couples experience relational satisfaction. *Satisfaction*, in terms of romantic relationships, is a measurable dimension that gauges the “positivity of feelings for one’s partner and attraction to the relationship” (Sacher & Fine, 1996, p.22).

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The current study, attempts to determine how both frequency of conflict and perceptions of inequity (separately and in combination) affect overall relational satisfaction. There are four major purposes this study seeks to accomplish based on the general goal.

The first purpose is to establish a common scale, using the results from both Kurdek's (1994) conflict topic study and Sprecher's (2001a) equity study, that measures both frequency of conflict and perceptions of equity according to the same relational domains. After developing the scale, second portion of the study will show how reported frequencies of conflict, using the new common conflict domains, relate to feeling of satisfaction. Third, the study will examine how scores of inequity, across each specific domain, are related to overall feelings of satisfaction. The final and fundamental purpose is to determine the interaction effect of both variables, frequency of domain-specific conflict and perceptions of domain-specific equity, on relational satisfaction. The following review of current relationship literature will demonstrate the theoretical and practical justification for these proposed purposes.

Conflict Topics

As previously stated, there is very little current literature devoted to studying conflict topics as a relational dimension. However, there is a contemporary study that attempted to look at *what* couples conflict about and how frequency in certain topical areas affects overall reported relational satisfaction. Kurdek (1994) formulated and tested a 20-item conflict topic scale on 134

gay, lesbian, and heterosexual couples. They were asked to report how frequently they experienced conflict with their partner in each of the 20 dimensions, ranging from *finances* to *being overly critical*. Kurdek cluster-analyzed these 20 items into six cluster areas of conflict: *Power*, *Social Issues*, *Personal Flaws*, *Distrust*, *Intimacy*, and *Personal Distance*. As result, he reported that relational satisfaction was most strongly negatively correlated with frequency of conflict regarding *Power* and *Intimacy* for each of the three couple designations. *Power* was described as “one partner ‘lording over’ the other partner” (p. 927), and included eight topics: *finances*, *lack of equality in the relationship*, *excessive demands or possessiveness*, *friends*, *household tasks*, *leisure time*, *personal digs or insults*, and *being overly critical*; *Intimacy* comprised *sex* and *lack of affection*.

To date, this is the only reported study that attempts to focus strictly on the relationship between relational satisfaction and conflict in specific topical areas. However, in order to consider the results reliable, certain methodological issues regarding the scale used must be addressed.

First, Kurdek’s sample consisted of only couples that were cohabitating—sharing living space. Such a scale should be tested on a more general population, or it could be assumed that reports of frequent conflict in topics such as *finances* or *household tasks*, which are topics more likely to be experienced by cohabitating than non-cohabitating partners, are simply a function of the dynamics of the relationship. Likewise, for this scale to be utilized as a tool to assess frequency of conflict topics on a population including non-cohabitating as well as cohabitating partners, it must be either retested to assure that the results are similar to Kurdek’s original results, thereby indicating reliability, or adapted to include general wording applicable to the entire population. In addition, Kurdek did not test his items in terms of any equity variables. The

scale he developed was not geared toward measurements of equity, and therefore cannot be used alone to measure both conflict topics and perceptions of equity. Consequently, Kurdek's scale must be adapted before it can be used as a multivariate measurement. Establishment of a common scale, which asks participants to respond to domain areas that are common in both conflict and equity literature, generates the first research question:

RQ1: What are the relationships between frequency of conflict and satisfaction across each of the relational domains?

The Role of Equity in Satisfaction

Equity, in its contemporary form, has been studied as a proposed contributor and affecter of relational satisfaction since the late 1970's, when the theoretical framework was first constructed (Walster et al., 1978). Equity is generally expressed as a mathematical ratio consisting of two factors: inputs and outcomes (also investments and rewards). Inputs are described as efforts or investments one partner makes for the betterment of the other partner or the relationship in general. Outcomes (rewards) are inversely described as the benefits one partner reaps from being in the relationship. This inputs/outcomes perspective is based upon an earlier theory of distributive justice (Deutsch, 1975), which breaks down into the simplistic idea of all parties receiving their "fair share." When the input/outcome ratio for one partner is equal to the other partner in a relationship, both partners experience equity. When either partner perceives this ratio as unbalanced, then that partner perceives inequity in the relationship.

A different perspective of equity has been offered by Lloyd, Cate, and Henton (1982), who described equity in terms of shared resources and rewards. In this exchange, an equitable relationship is one where both partners share and exchange resources equally. Foa and Foa

(1974) categorized these “shared resources” into six categories consisting of *Love, Status, Information, Money, Goods, and Services*. Equity can be described as each partner equally sharing these resources and receiving equal rewards derived from these resources.

The “imbalance” experienced as inequity can take one of two forms: underbenefitting inequity or overbenefitting inequity. In *overbenefitting* inequity, one person invests less into the relationship but receives more rewards than his or her relational partner, while an *underbenefitted* person receives fewer rewards but invests more in relation to his or her partner (Sprecher, 2001b). The overbenefitted partner can succumb to feelings of anger and guilt, while the underbenefitted partner feels anger and resentment because he or she is not experiencing the same outcomes as the overbenefitted (Hatfield, Utne, & Traupmann, 1979). Though studies suggest that both types of inequity are damaging to relational satisfaction (Hatfield et al., 1979; Walster et al., 1978), underbenefitting inequity is related to a lower level of satisfaction and is a better predictor of relationship termination (Schreurs & Buunk, 1996).

It is important to note that these ideas of equity are different in definition and context to those of the closely related term, equality. Equality is less concerned with the ratio aspect of investments and rewards and involves just the general principle of each partner receiving his or her fair share (Lindsay, 1982).

As a predictor of relationship satisfaction, Hatfield et al. (1979) have suggested that equity factors best predict reports of relational satisfaction; however a parallel assessment tool which measures both equity and conflict, a communication-based interaction, has not yet been developed. A frequently used scale measuring general perceptions of relational equity is the Global Measure of Participants’ Input, Outcomes, and Equity/Inequity (e.g., Lloyd, Cate, & Henton, 1982; Cate, Lloyd, & Henton, 2001; Michaels, Edwards, & Acock, 1984), developed by

Walster et al. (1978). This scale consists of only four questions, representing the four variables of the equity formula: one's own inputs, their partner's inputs, one's own outcomes, and their partner's outcomes. Responses are given on an 8-point Likert scale, ranging from *extremely negative* to *extremely positive*, and resulting product of the formula describes equity in terms of equitable, underbenefitting, or overbenefitting.

Another common generic scale is the Hatfield Global Equity Measure (e.g., Schreurs and Buunk, 1996; Sprecher 2001a), which is an adaptation of the original Inputs/Outcomes scale (Hatfield et al., 1979). Instead of four assessment questions, this new Global Equity Measure asks the participant to answer a single question: "Considering what you put into your relationship, compared to what you get out of it...and what your partner puts in, compared to what s(he) gets out of it, how would you say your relationship 'stacks up'?" The seven possible responses range from *I am getting a much better deal than my partner* (representing overbenefittedness), to *My partner is getting a much better deal than I* (representing underbenefittedness). Equity in the relationship is reported by the mid-point response: *We are both getting an equally good (or bad) deal*. Though this single-item measure would appear to be incomprehensive at first, it does have the advantages of both high face validity and parsimony (Sprecher, 2001a).

These scales, because of the limited number of assessment questions, can only, at best, determine a very generic measure of equity in a romantic relationship. In addition, they are based solely upon an overall, general perception one has about their current relationship. No aspects included in these scales attempt to determine equity from a conversational or communication perspective.

Additional equity assessments attempt to move beyond the generic nature of these early scales and try to pinpoint specific areas of a relationship where perceived inequities exist. These detailed (also called domain-specific) equity measurements ask participants to give their perception of how equitable their relationship is given a specified set of relational domains. Early studies incorporating this method continued to use the same equity formula as the original global measures, imputing responses into the input/outcome ratio (e.g., Michaels, Acock, & Edwards, 1986). Recently, Sprecher (2001a) used this basic idea of domain-specific equity to determine a composite measure based on responses to specific domains. This attempt differed from previous domain-specific scales because it allowed for the direct comparison of both equity measures, global and domain-specific, to determine their relationship to one another. One of several purposes of this study was to gauge what areas of a relationship participants were thinking about when responding to global measures of equity (p. 481). The given domain areas for this study were based upon Foa and Foa's (1974) classification of resources and included *Love* (affection, warmth), *Status* (prestige, esteem), *Money* (cash, credit, earning potential, paying on dates), *Material Goods* (gifts, sharing possessions), *Information* (knowledge, common sense), and *Services* (favors, comfort). The additional domain of *Sex* (meeting needs and preferences) was also added (p. 485). Participants' scores for each domain level were then compared to two global measures of equity, the Hatfield Global Measure of Equity (Hatfield, et al. 1979) and The Sprecher Global Measure of Equity (Sprecher, 1986). Results indicated that the *Money*, *Status*, and *Love* domains were significantly related to at least one global equity measure, and the *Services* domain was consistently related to all global equity measures. The author concluded that these relationships indicate congruence between detailed and global equity measures when both have similar response scales and do not require the use of an equity formula (p. 496).

Though this evidence would suggest a partner's rating of inequity in one or more domain areas relates to an overall assessment of equity, further testing to this proposition is needed.

With the exception of Sprecher's (2001a) contributions to the field of domain-specific equity, little contemporary research explores this aspect of romantic relationships. Based on the tentative findings that equity in certain domain areas may relate to overall relational equity, there now exists a need to further examine this relationship to see if domain-specific equity correlates with other relational variables in a similar manner as global equity. As previously stated, global inequity, particularly underbenefitting inequity, is strongly related to relationship distress and reports of negative relational satisfaction (Sprecher, 1986). This established relationship leads to the next question:

RQ2: What are the relationships between perceptions of equity and satisfaction across each of the relational domains?

The Relationship between Conflict and Equity

No study has yet examined how equity can be assessed in terms of communication practices. Examining relational conflict, specifically topical areas of conflict, presents one possible research avenue. As previously established, conflict is introduced as an interpersonal experience because one partner perceives an incompatibility in the relationship (Deutsch, 1975). Based upon this definition, conflict can also be interpreted to be a result of a perceived lack of equity in the relationship in one or several relational dimensions. For example, if a person feels as though he or she is responsible for a disproportionate amount of household chores, then it can be inferred that he or she is experiencing an imbalance in the ratio of investment to reward, the defining equation of equity. These imbalances can then, in some instances, be suggested as the

causes of conflict. Therefore, by determining the causes of conflict, most likely expressed by the topic of the conflict itself, one can interpret in what areas persons perceive to lack equity in their relationship. However, for this to be suggestion to be assessed quantitatively, it must first be established that there is a relationship between conflict topics and perceived areas of inequity.

Though it is obvious that couples can potentially experience conflict in a variety of different areas, Braiker and Kelley (1979) have identified four general “levels” of disagreement between individual partners. These include conflict about specific behaviors, conflicts over norms and rules of the relationship, conflicts over personality variables, and conflict over conflict itself (*metaconflict*). It is highly unlikely that conflicts over personality would correlate strongly with perceptions of inequity, based on the fact that personality traits are generally accepted as being a result of environmental influences (Halverson & Wampler, 1997) or genetically inherited (Beatty & McCroskey, 2001). However, Buss (1991) has reported that personality can influence conflict via one partner performing actions that could upset or anger the other partner. Though this causal relationship might be possible, it is unlikely that a participant would rate this type of conflict as a source of inequity in the relationship, unless it was related to dimensions other than personality discrepancies alone.

Also, the general level of metaconflict is one that is unlikely to be perceived as a source of inequity in the relationship. Metaconflict, or conflict about the conflict process, has not been included on any major assessment scale. Samter and Cupach (1998), in their study of topical variations in conflict among same- and cross- sex friends, did not find any reports of conflict about the conflict process itself. These findings are consistent with the absence of metaconflict as a determinant of relational satisfaction in contemporary literature; therefore, metaconflict will not be addressed as a specific domain area during this study.

By contrast, conflicts over specific behaviors and general norms and rules of the relationship both have the potential for alluding to areas of inequity in a relationship. One partner may perform a consistent behavior that is seen as reaping an unfair reward (such as not offering to assist with paying for a dinner) or violating a relationship rule (such as insulting or expressing hurtful comments toward his or her partner), and either example could be perceived as an area of the relationship where inequity exists. By critically examining each of the four suggested general levels of conflict, it appears as though certain conflict topics are related to experienced inequity more than others.

Kurdek (1994) also found that different conflict areas produced different experiences in a relationship, though his work examined the relationship between conflict topics and relational satisfaction. As reviewed earlier, those topics comprising the larger conflict dimensions of *Power* and *Intimacy* were related most negatively to satisfaction. If it has been established that different areas of conflict produce different correlations with relational satisfaction, and it is suggested that different areas of conflict are potentially related to perceived inequities, then do those conflict topical areas which are strongly related to inequity have various relationships to satisfaction? When looking at what specific conflict topics comprised the two most powerful relationships to satisfaction (*Power* and *Intimacy*), it is possible to draw parallels between these two factors and the general areas of conflict discussed above in relation to equity. The six issues which factor loaded as *Power* are described as those where “one partner [is] ‘lording over’ the other partner” (p. 927). *Intimacy* comprised conflicts concerning sex and lack of affection, two topics clearly related to possible inequities. When considering the strong negative correlations between the topics of *Power* and *Intimacy*, both potentially related to areas of inequity in relationships, and relational satisfaction, feelings of negative satisfaction possibly resulted from

perceived inequities rather than the topics of conflict itself. Is it likely, then, that certain conflict topics are actual expressions or manifestations of inequities? In addition, will those topics most closely related to feelings of inequity also produce greater feelings of dissatisfaction than either frequency of conflict or feelings of inequity alone? Do couples who report frequent conflict in the same relational domains in which they also report feelings of inequity experience significant levels of dissatisfaction? Current research alluding to the possibility of a combined influence of conflict and inequity on satisfaction leads to the final research questions:

RQ3: What is the relationship between the interaction of frequency of conflict and perceptions of equity (conflict x equity) and relational satisfaction across each of the relational domains?

The following chapter presents a methodology offered as one possible means to answer each of the established research questions. The final two chapters then review and discuss the results produced from following methodology, along with potential limitations and ideas for future study.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Sample

The sample utilized for this investigation included college students enrolled in communication introductory and upper-level courses at the University of Central Florida. Of the final 106 participants, 28 were male (26%) and 78 were female (74%). The ages of the participants ranged from 18 to 55 years old and averaged 22.2 years. Sixty-four percent of the participants classified themselves as “European American” ($n=68$); 5.7% as “African American” ($n=6$); 13.2% as “Hispanic/Mexican” ($n=14$); .9% as “Middle Eastern” ($n=1$); 2.8% as “Pacific Rim” ($n=3$); and 13.2% as “Other” ($n=14$). All participants who classified themselves as “Other” and also wrote “Caucasian” were reclassified as “European American.”

In addition to the demographic data, participants also completed two questions which assessed their relationship status: time of involvement and type of relationship.¹ Seventeen percent of the participants had been involved in their current relationship for less than six months ($n=18$), 8.5% had been together longer than six months but less than one year ($n=9$), most of the participants (40.6%) were involved longer than one year but less than two ($n=43$), and 34% were together more than two years ($n=36$). Though it could be assumed that time of involvement is directly related to how serious the participants perceive their relationship to be, the frequencies reported for the two variables were very different. Only 1.9% ($n=2$) of the participants reported

¹ The survey utilized in this study did not include any questions assessing the gender of the participant’s relationship partner, or any questions asking the participant to describe their relationship as heterosexual or homosexual.

having a casual relationship, with the remainder of participants reporting that they and their partner were seriously dating (64.2%; $n=68$), living together (19.8%; $n=21$), engaged (7.5%; $n=8$), or married (6.6%; $n=7$). The original intention of the study was to only include those participants who were seriously involved with their romantic partner. However, because such a small number of participants reported a casual relationship, it was determined that this distinction would not skew the final results; therefore, all of the final participants were included in the analysis, regardless of how the relationship was described.

Previous studies support the utilization of college students in romantic relationship contexts, citing strong percentages of students to be involved in serious dating relationships for over a year (Meeks, Hendrick, & Hendrick, 1998; Sanderson & Cantor, 1997; Flora & Segrin, 2000). Based on this information, it would appear as though college-aged students are as capable of sustaining long-term relationships as any other age-based group. The high number of students in this study reporting involvement in serious relationships adds additional support to these previous findings.

Instrumentation

Common Domain Conflict/Equity Scale

The general purpose of this study is to determine the combined effects of both frequency of conflict and perceptions of inequity in similar domain areas. Consequently, the current investigation requires a scale that can measure both variables using the same response domains. However, to date, such a scale is not available, necessitating the creation of a new scale. Kurdek (1994) used a 20-item scale, asking participants to rate how frequently they experience conflict in each of 20 domains, to access the frequency of conflict variable. His study represents the most

contemporary attempt to measure this particular aspect of relational conflict. Kurdek's scale drew from conflict issues sampled by Storaasli and Markman (1990) and Vangelisti and Huston (1994) in their studies. The conclusions of his study reported that each partner's relational satisfaction correlated negatively with the eight topics labeled as *Power (finances, lack of equality in the relationship, excessive demands or possessiveness, friends, household tasks, leisure time, personal digs or insults, and being overly critical)* and the two topics labeled as *Intimacy (sex and lack of affection)*. Because of the recent use of this scale, these two factors are included as contributions from the *conflict topics* variable in creating a new common domain scale.

Similar to the recent creation of a conflict topic scale, Sprecher's (2001a) report of the relationship between domain-specific equity and global measures of equity represents the most recent attempt to determine the validity of a domain-specific equity measure (S. Sprecher, personal communication, January 18, 2004). Drawing from Foa and Foa's (1974) classification of resources, Sprecher asked participants to rate how "fair" they thought their relationship was in terms of who (the participant or their partner) was receiving the "better deal," for each of the six resources (Love, Money, Status, Material Goods, Services, and Information). Results indicated that the *Love, Money, Status, and Services* resources were related to at least one of the tested global measures of equity. The analysis suggests that couples may be considering equity in these domains when responding to global measures of equity. Because of the proposed relationship between each of the reported domains and global measures of equity, the *Love, Money, Status, and Services* domains are included as contributions to the new common domain scale.

The new Common Domain Conflict/Equity Scale, developed to assess both variables of frequency of conflict and perceptions of equity across the same (common) domains, contained

five “domain areas”: *Love*, *Status/Power*, *Money*, *Services*, and *Sex*. Each domain area was accompanied by clarifying suggestions (e.g., “affection, lack of affection, and warmth” for the *Love* domain) in parentheses to further help the participants operationalize and understand what the general domains mean. The first, third, and fourth domain areas were drawn directly from the original Sprecher (2001a) domain-specific equity scale. The second domain area, *Status/Power* represents a combination of two domains, *Status* from the Sprecher scale and *Power* from the Kurdek scale.² The last domain area, *Sex*, was added because it was included as an *Intimacy* topic in the Kurdek conflict topics scale and was ultimately related to reports of negative satisfaction. The descriptive *Sex* (a subtopic in the original Kurdek scale) was used over *Intimacy* (a factor-loaded primary topic) as a domain area to prevent overlap into the *Love* domain. Participants were asked to respond to these five domain areas in two different sections.

Section One asked the participants to respond to how frequently they and their partner fight about topics included in the domain area. Possible responses ranged from *never* (1) to *always* (5) in the same style as the original Kurdek (1994) scale. The response set in the current study was kept identical to the original scale to maintain the integrity of the responses.

Section Two asked the participants to rate each domain area in terms of how fair they feel their relationship is in each of the five domains. Possible responses for Section Two ranged from *very unfair, I am getting the worst deal*, to the midpoint *fair*, to *very unfair, I am getting the better deal* in the same style as the original Sprecher (2001a) scale. Again, this response set was kept identical to maintain the integrity of the responses.

² The original survey listed the second domain as only *Status*, but was changed to *Status/Power* as a result of pilot testing.

The new conflict/equity assessment scale, as an adaptation containing elements from both original scales, allowed for the direct comparison of responses to determine how conflict and equity, in combination, affected satisfaction, a comparison which was not possible using any of the previously developed scales.

Composite scores for frequency of conflict and perceptions of equity were not computed because each response was to a single-item measurement. For example, frequency of conflict in the *Love* domain was assessed only once, through a singular response. Rather, each domain was treated as a separate independent variable: Conflict Love, Conflict Status/Power, Equity Love, Equity Status/Power, etc.

Relational Satisfaction Scale

To assess relationship satisfaction, the Hendrick (1988) Relationship Assessment Scale was included among the various other measurements in the survey. The RAS has been widely used in relationship literature as a valid method of assessing relationship satisfaction among a variety of different relationship stages and the original scale has an established alpha of .86 (Hendrick, 1988). For this study's purposes, the original RAS was utilized instead of any subsequent adaptation. The scale consisted of seven questions (e.g., "In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?") rated on a 5-point Likert scale. The Hendrick RAS was preferred over the Spanier Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976), another widely used and accepted instrument for measuring relational satisfaction, for two reasons. First, in contrast to the concise RAS with only seven assessment questions, the original DAS is a 32-item measure. Though it can be argued that the more detailed the measurement, the more precise results, in this study, a shorter measurement was preferred due to the number of other measurements to be included in the questionnaire in order to prevent response fatigue.

For the current study, the 7-item RAS yielded an alpha reliability of .78. However, during data collection, several students indicated that they did not know how to respond to the reverse-scored items (“...how often you wish you hadn’t gotten into this relationship?” and “...the amount of problems in your relationship?”) and that they found these items “confusing.” Based on this feedback, the alpha reliability was then recalculated without the reverse-scored items. The reliability for the new 5-item RAS was much higher than the original 7-item scale ($\alpha=.88$). Because using the corrected 5-item RAS resulted in such a higher reliability, the two reverse-scored items were dropped from all subsequent analyses and relationship comparisons in all research questions were based on an average of the five positively scored items ($M=4.41$, $SD=.69$).

Procedures

The current investigation utilized the general limited-response questionnaire method, used by both Kurdek (1994) and Sprecher (2001a) for their assessments of frequency of conflict and domain-specific equity, respectively. This method has been established as a valid tool for measuring both conflict topics and inequity.

The sample was convenience-based and the final relevant sample included 106 participants, gathered over four data collections. Three collections included undergraduate students ($n_1=22$, $n_3=57$, $n_4=18$) and one collection included graduate students ($n_2=9$). Graduate students were included in the sample to introduce a wider-range of relationship development and length of time. Participants were not awarded any compensation or extra credit for their partial or full completion of the survey and were not given any penalties for non-participation. Participants

were given a brief introduction to the survey topic and the informed consent process; surveys were then handed out and collected immediately after completion.

All surveys were coded using a triple-code system. The first number of the code identified the collection group (e.g., all surveys collected in the first class begin with the number one, etc.), the second part of the number was consecutively assigned (e.g., 101, 102, etc.), and the third part of the code was a letter designating if the participant answered the survey in terms of the current romantic relationship (A) or past romantic relationship (B). All surveys were checked for completion and relationship type. All “past relationship” or “B” surveys were excluded from the final sample. Surveys with unsigned informed consent forms were also excluded.

Pilot Test

To ensure the accuracy and reliability of each of the scales included in the survey, a pilot test was conducted prior to the actual data collections. Thirty-three students from an upper-level communication course participated in the pilot test. Although their data was not statistically analyzed, their feedback was used to make several corrections to the survey that was subsequently used in the final data collection and analysis:

To clarify the two options in which participants could answer the survey (in terms of a current romantic relationship *or* past romantic relationship), additional directions were added to the beginning of the survey, prior to the opening question asking them to record which option they selected.

During the pilot testing session, students indicated that the instructions for Sections One, Two, and Three (assessing frequency of conflict, perceptions of equity, and relationship satisfaction; respectively) were too cumbersome and might encourage future participants to skip

over the important instructions. Therefore, the directions for each section were shortened in the final survey.

Students indicated that the domain area of *Status* was too vague, and when asked to provide suggestions on how to clarify the domain, they offered that “status” to them indicated that one partner held power over the other. In response to this suggestion, *Status* was thus changed to *Status/Power* incorporating the *Power* dimension from Kurdek’s (1994) scale. The descriptive “making sacrifices” was also added to the *Status/Power* domain per the suggestion of the students in the pilot study to provide even more clarity.³

The seven questions comprising the original RAS scale included in the survey were reworded to provide better parallelism and greater comprehension. The students indicated the reverse-scored items (Questions 15 and 18) were confusing and did not seem to fit the given response set (1=low; 5=high). Despite the rewording, several students during the actual data collection also expressed the same concerns with the reverse-scored items. As a result, Q15 and Q18 were excluded in all further analysis.

In the original survey, Question 19 assessed length of relationship time for those answering in terms of their *current* relationship and Question 20 assessed the same for those answering in terms of their *most recent* romantic relationship. Students during the pilot tested indicated that this distinction was confusing, and they often would answer both questions. Questions 19 and 20 were thus combined into one question with two options.⁴

³ During the actual data collection, there were no questions pertaining to the *Status/Power* domain, nor were there any requests from the participants to provide further information.

⁴ During the actual data collection, few participants answered both options for this question. Only the answer for the relationship they identified in the first question (current or most recent) was recorded.

Analysis

For each of the research questions, a variation of analysis of variance (ANOVA) assessed the relative contribution of conflict and equity on satisfaction within each of the five domains.

For RQ1, which questions the relationship between frequency of conflict and relationship satisfaction across each of the five domains, a simple one-way analysis of variance (one-way ANOVA) was conducted. This method of analysis was also used for RQ2, which asks the similar question of how perceptions of equity are related to relationship satisfaction across each of the five domains. Using one-way ANOVAs for these questions allowed for the direct comparison of each of the five domains using *F* scores. In addition, the use of *post hoc* Tukey tests showed how each level of each domain variable (Conflict Love High, Conflict Love Moderate, Conflict Love Low, etc.) related to average satisfaction scores, and allowed for the assessment of between-group significant differences.

RQ3 proposed an interaction effect between frequency of conflict and perceptions of equity (conflict x equity) and questioned how this interaction relates to average satisfaction scores across each of the five domains. This relationship can also be described as the reported average satisfaction for participants who report various levels of conflict and various levels of equity within the same domain. For each domain, there were three possible levels of conflict (low, moderate, and high) and five possible levels of equity (underbenefitting, moderately underbenefitting, equitable, moderately overbenefitting, and overbenefitting), resulting in a 3 x 5 factorial design. This led to 15 possible response combinations for each domain. Because of the multiple independent variables, a Factorial ANOVA (Univariate ANOVA) was computed to assess the relationship between the conflict/equity interactions on relational satisfaction. This process was repeated for each of the five domain areas. For the purposes of this study, only the

interactions between conflict and equity within the same variable were assessed (i.e. Conflict Love x Equity Love). Between-domain interactions were not included (i.e. Conflict Love x Equity Services).

This prescribed analysis produced several significant findings, reported in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

Through researching past literature and developing a methodological design, this study attempted to assess the effects of two independent variables, conflict (frequency) and equity (perceptions), both separately and in interaction, on the dependent variable of relationship satisfaction. These relationships were investigated across five distinct relationship domains: Love, Status/Power, Money, Services, and Sex. The present chapter presents the statistical findings and resolutions of these investigations.

Because these two independent variables had not been previously compared in direct or parallel relationships, this study warranted the investigations of research questions, rather than proposing specific hypothesis. To review, the research questions offered in this study included:

RQ1: What are the relationships between frequency of conflict and satisfaction across each of the relational domains?

RQ2: What are the relationships between perceptions of equity and satisfaction across each of the relational domains?

RQ3: What is the relationship between the interaction of frequency of conflict and perceptions of equity (conflict x equity) and relational satisfaction across each of the relational domains?

Results for Research Question 1: Conflict and Satisfaction

The first research question asks for the reporting of five basic relationships, conflict and relationship satisfaction across each of the five domains. Analyzing these relationships would produce five separate results: a statistically significant (or not) relationship for each one of the five domain areas. Thus, as opposed to presenting one relationship, there were five studied in this portion. For example, the relationship between relationship satisfaction and frequency of conflict in the Love domain was a different relationship than the one between satisfaction and conflict in the Money domain.

Before the analysis of these five relationships the responses were reduced and recoded using general central tendencies. This was done for two reasons. First, recoding the responses would reduce the number of levels available for analysis within the conflict variable, thereby making comparison more concise. Second, recoding would increase the number of occurrences (frequencies) for each level or cell. For these reasons, the five levels of the conflict variable were reduced to three: low conflict, moderate conflict, and high conflict.

In the original conflict portion of the Conflict/Equity Common Domain Scale, participants could select from one of five responses for each conflict domain, with a response of 1 signifying that they and their partner “never” experienced conflict in that domain, and 5 signifying that they “always” experienced conflict in that domain. Accomplishing the goal of reducing these five responses into three (low conflict, moderate conflict, and high conflict) entailed computing mean scores standard deviations for each of the five domains. The means and standard deviations were rounded to whole numbers due to the nominal and discrete nature of the original response categories. It was necessary to continue the data as nominal and discrete for

further analysis purposes. Using this method, the mean for each of the five domains rounded to “2,” and the standard deviations for all five domains rounded to “1.” Using central limit tendencies, the recoded middle category, “moderate conflict,” included all scores clustered around the mean. The lower category, “low conflict,” contained all scores one standard deviation below the mean.¹ The upper category, “high conflict,” contained all scores one, two, and three deviations above the mean. Using this method, original responses of 1 on the survey recoded to “low conflict;” original responses of 2 recoded to “moderate conflict;” and original responses of 3, 4, or 5 recoded to “high conflict.” All subsequent analysis and results were computed based on this new three-level conflict variable. Average frequencies for the conflict variable across each domain in the original and recoded levels are reported in Table 1.

Table 1 *Average Conflict for Original and Recoded Responses by Domain*

Domains	Original (5 Levels)			Recoded (3 Levels)		
	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Love	106	1.74	0.81	106	1.71	0.74
Status/Power	106	2.02	0.95	106	1.93	0.77
Money	106	1.75	0.96	106	1.68	0.80
Services	106	1.94	0.91	106	1.88	0.78
Sex	105	1.66	0.96	105	1.56	0.71

After recoding the levels into low, moderate, and high response categories for the conflict variable, one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests were conducted to determine if any of the conflict levels produced significant relationships with average satisfaction scores (recalculated

¹ “Low conflict” did not contain any scores below one standard deviation below the mean because “low conflict” was represented by a score of 1 on the original scale, and was the lowest possible response from the original scale.

without reverse-scored items) taken from the Relationship Assessment Scale across any of the domains. The results of these tests answered RQ1 by producing significant relationships between frequency of conflict and relational satisfaction in all five of the relationship domains: Love, Status/Power, Money, Services, and Sex. Results from each one-way ANOVA computed for each domain are reported in Table 2.

Table 2 *One-Way Analysis of Variance for Frequency of Conflict and Relationship Satisfaction by Domain*

Domains	<i>SS</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Love					
Between Group	12.65	2	6.327	17.35	<.001
Within Group	37.57	103	0.365		
Total	50.23	105			
Status/Power					
Between Group	3.65	2	1.823	4.03	0.021
Within Group	46.58	103	0.452		
Total	50.23	105			
Money					
Between Group	4.99	2	2.492	5.67	0.005
Within Group	45.24	103	0.439		
Total	50.23	105			
Services					
Between Group	8.21	2	4.106	10.01	<.001
Within Group	42.01	103	0.408		
Total	50.23	105			
Sex					
Between Group	3.17	2	1.584	3.44	0.036
Within Group	47.01	102	0.461		
Total	50.18	104			

All significance values for the relationship of frequency of conflict and relationship satisfaction were less than five percent ($p < .05$) for each domain. The strongest relationships were reported in the Love, $F(2,103) = 17.35, p < .001$ and Services, $F(2,103) = 10.01, p < .001$,

domains. For all domains, however, high levels of reported conflict were related to respective lower satisfaction levels.

After analysis of variance tests revealed significant relationships across all domains between conflict and satisfaction, *post hoc* tests were conducted to determine where the differences resided within the three possible levels of the conflict variable for each domain. Tukey *post hoc* tests analyzed the differences between the mean satisfaction scores at each level, providing a more detailed picture of how specific conflict levels affect satisfaction for each of the domains. It is not sufficient enough information to be able to report that frequent conflict in a specific domain is related to lower levels of relationship satisfaction. Determining how relationship scores differ at each conflict level produces the most complete comparison, by reporting specifically where the differences are most prevalent. Tables 3 reports the differences between mean satisfaction scores, their accompanying standard deviation scores, and the statistical significances between the conflict levels are reported for each of the domains.

Table 3 *Relationship Satisfaction Scores for Each Conflict Level by Domain*

Domain / Level	Relationship Satisfaction			
	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>SE</i>
		Love		
Low	49	4.76 ^{fg}	0.33	0.05
Moderate	39	4.24 ^a	0.78	0.12
High	18	3.86 ^b	0.74	0.17
Total (N)	106	4.41	0.69	0.07
		Status/Power		
Low	35	4.67 ^a	0.45	0.08
Moderate	43	4.32	0.80	0.12
High	28	4.24 ^a	0.70	0.13
Total (N)	106	4.41	0.69	0.07
		Money		
Low	56	4.56 ^a	0.51	0.07
Moderate	28	4.44	0.56	0.11
High	22	4.00 ^a	1.03	0.22
Total (N)	106	4.41	0.69	0.07
		Services		
Low	39	4.64 ^a	0.38	0.06
Moderate	41	4.49 ^b	0.47	0.07
High	26	3.94 ^{ab}	1.05	0.21
Total (N)	106	4.41	0.69	0.07
		Sex		
Low	59	4.47 ^a	0.68	0.09
Moderate	33	4.50 ^b	0.49	0.09
High	13	3.95 ^{ab}	1.03	0.28
Total (N)	105	4.41	0.69	0.07

Analysis of the differences between the relative satisfaction scores for each level of conflict across the five domains revealed that satisfaction scores differed as a function of conflict within each level and that these differences were not parallel across each of the five relationship domains. In all domains, comparing the satisfaction levels of the “low conflict” groups to the “high conflict” groups revealed significantly lower reported satisfaction scores in the “high

^{f/b} Means are significantly different (within domain) at the .05 level ($p < .05$).

conflict” groups. The Love domain demonstrated significant differences between the relationships of satisfaction and conflict at the “low” and “moderate” levels. This leads to the interpretation that within the Love dimension of relationship, moderate levels of conflict (in addition to high levels) produce significantly lower levels of relationship satisfaction. The Services and Sex domains displayed significantly different satisfaction levels between the “moderate conflict” and “high conflict” groups. Partners who experience only moderate conflict in the areas of services and sex report significantly greater satisfaction than those partners experiencing a high frequency of conflict in the same domains.

Overall, the analysis of relationships between varying levels of conflict and the corresponding satisfaction scores across each of the five domains yielded significant inverse relationships between the two variables across all five domains. Upon further inspection, only the Love domain displayed significant satisfaction differences between the low conflict and moderate conflict groups. All five domains revealed significant satisfaction differences between the low conflict and high conflict groups. Finally, the Services and Sex domains showed significant satisfaction differences between the moderate conflict and high conflict groups.

Results for Research Question 2: Equity and Satisfaction

For this second analysis, the relationship between all levels of equity and their corresponding satisfaction scores were compared using one-way ANOVAs to determine which domains produced the strongest between-domain differences. Then equity levels were compared with one another to determine the within-domain differences using Tukey *post hoc* tests.

Before comparing these relationships, however, all equity responses needed to be recoded in the same manner as the conflict responses, again to reduce the number of factors available for comparison, while increasing the number of cases within each level or cell. The original response set for the equity section of the survey (Section Two) contained seven possible responses for each equity domain: a response of 1 indicated that the participant was “getting the worst deal” (corresponding to underbenefittedness) in regards to relationship issues contained within that domain; a response of 4 indicated that they were “equal” with their partner; and a response of 7 indicated that the participant was “getting the best deal” (corresponding to overbenefittedness) in relation to their partner. The goal for this portion of the recoding was to reduce these original seven responses into the following categories: underbenefitted, moderately underbenefitted, equal, moderately overbenefitted, and overbenefitted.

The recoded categories were constructed for the equity variable in the same manner as the conflict variable, using central tendencies. First, mean equity scores and their corresponding standard deviations were computed across all five domains. In this case, as well as with the conflict variable, the means and standard deviations had to be rounded to whole numbers to maintain the use of nominal, discrete data. In assigning the new codes, the “moderately underbenefitted” and “moderately overbenefitted” codes were used for those scores ± 1 standard deviation away from the mean, and the “underbenefitted” and “overbenefitted” groups contained those scores ± 2 and ± 3 standard deviations away from the mean. Using this classification system, all original scores with 1 or 2 were recoded to “underbenefitted;” scores of 3 recoded to “moderately underbenefitted;” scores of 4 stayed “equal;” scores of 5 recoded to “moderately overbenefitted;” and scores of 5 or 6 recoded to “overbenefitted.” Means and standard deviations

were then recalculated based on the new classification system. Table 4 represents the original and recoded means and standard deviations.

Table 4 *Average Equity for Original and Recoded Responses by Domain*

Domains	Original (7 Levels)			Recoded (5 Levels)		
	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Love	106	4.39	1.14	106	4.29	0.95
Status/Power	105	4.05	1.09	105	3.94	1.15
Money	106	4.25	1.47	105	4.04	1.38
Services	106	4.06	1.12	106	3.95	1.10
Sex	105	4.36	1.20	105	4.26	1.13

Once the equity levels were recoded and new averages computed, one-way analysis of variance tests determined if any of the levels of equity produced significant relationships with average satisfaction scores (kept constant from the conflict ANOVAs). These tests reported that equity scores in the Love and Status/Power domains had statistically significant relationships with that domain's relative satisfaction score. These results reveal that perceptions of equity do, in fact, have a relationship with reported relationship satisfaction, in both the Love and Status/Power domain. Of these two relationships, the Love domain featured a stronger relationship, $F(4,101) = 5.79$ $p < .001$, than the Status/Power domain, $F(4,100) = 3.44$, $p = .011$. Results for all analysis of variance tests for the equity variable appear in Table 5.

Table 5 *One-Way Analysis of Variance for Equity Perceptions and Relationship Satisfaction by Domain*

Domains	<i>SS</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>P</i>
Love					
Between Group	9.37	4	2.34	5.79	<.001
Within Group	40.86	101			
Total	50.23	105			
Status/Power					
Between Group	6.03	4	1.51	3.44	0.011
Within Group	43.85	100	0.44		
Total	49.88	104			
Money					
Between Group	4.16	4	1.04	2.26	0.068
Within Group	46.06	100	0.46		
Total	50.23				
Services					
Between Group	4.17	4	1.04	2.29	0.065
Within Group	46.05	101	0.46		
Total	50.23	105			
Sex					
Between Group	1.51	4	0.38	0.77	0.545
Within Group	48.67	100	0.49		
Total	50.18	104			

In keeping with the same analysis used for the equity variable as with the conflict variables, Tukey *post hoc* tests were conducted on each of the five levels of the equity variable for each of the five domains to assess which combination of levels produced significant differences in their mean satisfaction scores.

No comparisons could be made within the Love domain because the underbenefitted group had only one response available. The Status/Power domain produced the most within-domain significant comparisons. The underbenefitted group ($M = 3.71$) had significantly lower satisfaction scores at the .01 level ($p < .01$) than the equal group ($M = 4.55$) and the overbenefitted group ($M = 4.60$); and lower satisfaction scores at the .05 level ($p < .05$) than the

moderately overbenefitted group ($M = 4.48$). In addition, the moderately underbenefitted group ($M = 4.16$) in the Status/Power domain reported significantly lower satisfaction scores at the .05 level than the equal group ($M = 4.55$).

Within the Money domain, two relationship satisfaction means differed significantly. The underbenefitted group ($M = 3.93$) had significantly lower satisfaction scores at the .01 level ($p < .01$) than the equal group ($M = 4.52$); and lower satisfaction scores at the .05 level ($p < .05$) than the overbenefitted group ($M = 4.60$).

There were also two significant differences found within the Services domain. Similar to the differences within the Money domain, the Services underbenefitted group ($M = 3.73$) had significantly lower satisfaction scores at the .01 level ($p < .01$) than the equal group ($M = 4.52$); and lower satisfaction scores at the .05 level ($p < .05$) than the moderately overbenefitted group ($M = 4.52$). Though not a significant relationship, the

There were no significant differences discovered between the different levels of equity in the Sex domain. However, the overbenefitted group within the Sex domain reported the lowest satisfaction score of any overbenefitted group across all domains. A summary of all within-domain relationship scores is reported in Table 6.

Table 6 *Relationship Satisfaction Scores for Each Equity Level by Domain*

Domain / Level	Relationship Satisfaction			
	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>SE</i>
	Love			
Underbenefitted	1	3.90 ^h	-	-
Moderately Underbenefitted	14	3.68	1.12	0.30
Equal	59	4.55	0.54	0.07
Moderately Overbenefitted	16	4.58	0.54	0.13
Overbenefitted	16	4.43	0.48	0.12
Total (N)	106	4.41	0.69	0.07
	Status/Power			
Underbenefitted	7	3.71 ⁱ	0.90	0.34
Moderately Underbenefitted	21	4.16	0.80	0.17
Equal	50	4.55 ^b	0.64	0.09
Moderately Overbenefitted	18	4.48	0.53	0.12
Overbenefitted	9	4.60	0.46	0.15
Total (N)	105	4.41	0.69	0.07
	Money			
Underbenefitted	11	3.93	1.05	0.32
Moderately Underbenefitted	13	4.32	0.48	0.13
Equal	49	4.52	0.58	0.08
Moderately Overbenefitted	14	4.27	0.84	0.22
Overbenefitted	18	4.60	0.64	0.15
Total (N)	105	4.41	0.69	0.07
	Services			
Underbenefitted	6	3.73	0.92	0.37
Moderately Underbenefitted	19	4.24	1.04	0.24
Equal	60	4.52	0.56	0.07
Moderately Overbenefitted	10	4.52	0.36	0.11
Overbenefitted	11	4.38	0.53	0.16
Total (N)	106	4.41	0.69	0.07
	Sex			
Underbenefitted	5	4.24	0.55	0.25
Moderately Underbenefitted	9	4.18	1.00	0.33
Equal	57	4.51	0.64	0.08
Moderately Overbenefitted	17	4.42	0.53	0.13
Overbenefitted	17	4.27	0.86	0.21
Total (N)	105	4.41	0.69	0.07

^h No post hoc comparisons could be made for the Love domain because the underbenefitted group contained only one case.

ⁱ Means are significantly different (within domain) at the .05 level ($p < .05$).

The results of the multiple analyses conducted for RQ2 establish that within the Status/Power relationship dimension, perceptions of underbenefitting inequity are significantly related to lower satisfaction scores perceptions of equity within the Status/Power domain. If one partner perceives that he or she is underbenefitted in the areas of status and/or power in the relationship, than s/he is likely to report significantly lower satisfaction than a partner who perceives that they are equal to their significant other in status and/or power.

Results for Research Question 3: Conflict x Equity and Satisfaction

The third and final research question investigated the combined effects of both frequency of conflict (established separately in RQ1) and perceptions of equity (RQ2) on reports of relational satisfaction across each of the five domains. The goal of this portion of the investigation was to look at the intersection of each level of the preceding independent variables, and how the multiple combinations of these levels affected relational satisfaction. The same recoded levels that were used for RQ1 and RQ2 were used in these final analyses. The three levels of conflict and five levels of equity combined to create a 3 x 5 interaction of conflict and equity, resulting in 15 different level combinations, the products of which were tested for significance differences in satisfaction scores using a factorial analysis of variance (factorial ANOVA). Table 7 displays the 15 possible interactions present in this 3 (conflict) x 5 (equity) interaction.

Table 7 *Possible Level Combinations for Conflict x Equity Interaction*

Equity Levels	Conflict Levels		
	<i>Low</i>	<i>Moderate</i>	<i>High</i>
Underbenefitted	LC / UE	MC / UE	HC / UE
Moderately Underbenefitted	LC / MUE	MC / MUE	HC / MUE
Equal	LC / EE	MC / EE	HC / EE
Moderately Overbenefitted	LC / MOE	MC / MOE	HC / MOE
Overbenefitted	LC / OE	MC / OE	HC / OE

These 15 possible interaction forms were analyzed for each one of the five different domains, resulting in 150 total possible relationships between the interaction of conflict and equity and satisfaction. The results of the factorial analysis of variance (factorial ANOVA) demonstrated a significant difference between the interaction and reported levels of satisfaction for the Status/Power domain only, $F(7,91) = 2.84, p = .01$. All other ANOVAs between the interaction and relationship satisfaction did not differ statistically. Reports for the factorial ANOVAs across all domains are detailed in Table 8.

Table 8 *Factorial ANOVA Results of Conflict x Equity Interaction by Domain*

Variable	SS	Df	MS	F	P
Love					
Conflict Love	4.92	2	2.46	7.06	0.001
Equity Love	2.58	4	0.65	1.85	0.125
Conflict x Equity (Love)	0.93	6	0.16	0.45	0.846
Residual	32.38	93	0.35		
Total	2114.28	106			
Corrected Total	50.23	105			
Status / Power					
Conflict Status	3.31	2	1.66	4.39	0.015
Equity Status	5.79	4	1.45	3.84	0.006
Conflict x Equity (Status)	7.48	7	1.07	2.84	0.010
Residual	34.30	91	0.38		
Total	2089.28	105			
Corrected Total	49.88	104			
Money					
Conflict Money	3.11	2	1.56	3.42	0.037
Equity Money	2.68	4	0.67	1.47	0.217
Conflict x Equity (Money)	2.23	8	0.28	0.61	0.766
Residual	40.97	90	0.46		
Total	2094.92	105			
Corrected Total	50.23	104			
Services					
Conflict Services	1.61	2	0.80	1.99	0.143
Equity Services	1.31	4	0.33	0.81	0.520
Conflict x Equity (Services)	3.46	6	0.58	1.43	0.212
Residual	37.55	93	0.40		
Total	2114.28	106			
Corrected Total	50.23	105			
Sex					
Conflict Sex	2.30	2	1.15	2.56	0.083
Equity Sex	1.92	4	0.48	1.07	0.377
Conflict x Equity (Sex)	5.46	7	0.78	1.74	0.110
Residual	40.83	91	0.45		
Total	2096.64	105			
Corrected Total	50.18	104			

Note. Statistics for individual relationships between Conflict and Equity (separately) vary slightly from those reported in RQ1 and RQ2 because current statistics are based on using a modified population mean.

Within the Status/Power domain, analyzing the data by visually comparing the average satisfaction scores suggested general patterns of how the interaction of conflict and equity affects satisfaction within the 15 various combinations. Using one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), relationship scores were averaged for each of the 15 combinations. Table 9 illustrates these 15 means based on interaction between the three conflict levels and five equity levels, with the number of cases for each interaction reported in parenthesis beside the mean.

Table 9 *Relationship Satisfaction Scores for Conflict x Equity Interactions*

Equity Levels	Conflict Levels		
	<i>Low</i>	<i>Moderate</i>	<i>High</i>
Underbenefitted	-	2.20 (1)	3.97 (6)
Moderately Underbenefitted	4.20 (4)	3.80 (7)	4.40 (10)
Equal	4.70 (22)	4.56 (24)	3.65 (4)
Moderately Overbenefitted	4.80 (5)	4.20 (8)	4.60 (5)
Overbenefitted	4.85 (4)	4.40 (2)	4.40 (3)

Note. The number of available cases for each cell is reported within parenthesis beside the appropriate mean.

Overall, it appears as though the combination of equity and conflict has the greatest effect on the two interactions of moderate conflict x underbenefitting equity and high conflict x underbenefitting equity. These are the lowest reported satisfaction scores within the Status/Power domain. In all cases, except for high conflict x moderately overbenefitted equity, low conflict consistently resulted in higher satisfaction scores than high or moderate conflict. In addition, there is a pattern of increasing levels of satisfaction from perceptions of underbenefitting equity to overbenefitting equity across all conflict levels. Overbenefitted individuals reported the highest levels of satisfaction for low frequency of conflict. In cases of equity, conflict and

satisfaction demonstrate a strong negative relationship, in agreement with previously reported results.

The first two research questions investigated the relationship between various levels of conflict and equity, respectively, and reports of relational satisfaction to determine if differing levels of satisfaction were affected by frequency of conflict or perceptions of equity in five different relationship domains. Specific within-domain and between-level differences were also reported.

The first relationship, frequency of conflict and relational satisfaction, produced significant differences between the three conflict levels and average satisfaction scores in all five domains. Each domain, however, differed in the strength of the differences, with the Love and Services domains featuring the strongest significance levels.

The second relationship, perceptions of equity and relational satisfaction, produced significant differences between the five levels of equity and average satisfaction scores in the Love and Status/Power domains, with Love again featuring the strongest significant differences.

The final research question investigated the combined effects of frequency of conflict and perceptions of equity on relational satisfaction to determine which relational areas (if any) produced differences in satisfaction scores within the 15 interaction levels. In answering this question, only the Status/Power domain produced a statistically significant interaction effect and demonstrated preliminary patterns of difference between levels. Partners who experience both inequity and conflict (in various levels) report statistically different satisfaction levels when compared directly. Analyzing these differences suggests the uses of conflict and the motivations

behind conflict episodes for partners experiencing varying levels of inequity in the Status/Power domain.

The final chapter offers a discussion of these results, including their relevance and relation to current literature. Possible limitations within the study are also discussed, concluding with what these results could inspire for future research.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

This study represents a primary attempt to directly compare the effects of frequency of conflict and perceptions of equity, separately and interactionally, on reports of relationship satisfaction. Previous studies have focused on the contributions of either of these variables alone (e.g., Cramer, 2002; Schreurs & Buunk, 1996), but never together within the same study. Understanding the complete role that conflict plays in a romantic relationship, by way of studying several relationship domains where partners experience conflict, provides a new perspective on how it contributes to satisfaction. Likewise, investigating how feelings of inequity affect relationship satisfaction across different relationship domains allows for the comparison of these distinct relationships, suggesting that romantic partners may draw upon different areas of their relationship when determining overall feelings of equity. The widely-used generic equity measures are inept at assessing equity on such a micro level, necessitating the creation of a new domain-specific equity measurement. Finally, studying the cross-section of conflict and equity, the interaction of both variables, is made possible for the first time in this study, through the use of a newly-developed scale which assesses both variables across the same relationship dimensions. This interaction may allude to possible relationships between these two variables, providing a clearer model for how and why conflict is initiated between romantic partners.

The findings presented in this differ from previous studies (Kurdek, 1994; Sprecher 2001a), due to the limited number of previous studies investigating the conflict and equity variables in terms of topical (or domain) areas. Therefore, the major contributions of this study

do not replicate or provide further information into commonly studied areas of relational literature. Rather, and perhaps more importantly, this study provides the framework for future studies which can now investigate the relative contributions of conflict and equity on relationship satisfaction, as well as suggesting the need for more detailed equity measures. In addition, this study also explores the possible initiation of conflict in the interpersonal state resulting from latent perceptions of relationship inequities.

High Conflict Leads to Low Satisfaction

One of the primary focuses of this study compared the relationship between reports of conflict and satisfaction scores between each of the five relational domains. This portion of the investigation was similar to Kurdek's (1994) study which reported that high levels of conflict related to low feelings of satisfaction in his domains of *Power* and *Intimacy*.

The results of the current study revealed similar significant relationships between frequency of conflict and satisfaction across all five of the domains tested. In each domain case, individual partners who reported high levels of conflict consistently reported lower levels of relationship satisfaction than those partners who reported low levels of conflict. Though the significance levels varied between the domains, when viewed as a whole group, the relationships between high levels of conflict and low levels of satisfaction were all significant at the .05 level.

These findings reveal an overall pattern linking high levels of conflict to low feelings of satisfaction irregardless of which relationship domain the conflict is contained within. This would suggest that high levels of conflict can be damaging to a relationship, and that it is the mere presence of conflict itself, not the topic of the conflict, which is detrimental. Inversely,

partners who report low levels of conflict consistently report higher levels of satisfaction, alluding to a reciprocal relationship.

The above conclusions reached during the course of this study reveal information inconsistent with Kurdek's (1994) findings, the only other contemporary study measuring conflict via frequency in topical relationship areas. As previously reported, Kurdek found a significant inverse relationship in only two domains, Power and Intimacy. However, these major discrepancies may not serve to discredit his past results or these new findings. Several methodological differences between the two investigations may account for some or all of the variations. Kurdek offered 20 items to which participants rating their level of conflict frequency. These 20 items were then factor-analyzed into the six categories he compared to his participants' satisfaction scores. Kurdek never recollected data based on these new categories to account for participant understanding or to align them with the participants' original intentions. The current study began with five categories (domains) used to disseminate frequency of conflict. This difference in survey design, in addition to those in sample characteristics, may explain the aforementioned variances between results.

Though the major findings of this portion of the study are applicable across all domains, several within-domain differences merit additional discussion. The significance levels, though all falling below .05, were the strongest for the Love and Services domains ($p < .001$). Individual partners who reported high levels of conflict reported the lowest levels of relational satisfaction for these two domains, and the lowest overall in the Love domain. High levels of conflict across all topics may produce negative feelings of satisfaction, but it is those frequent conflicts about topics dealing with affection and warmth (both descriptors for Love) which cause the greatest

feelings of dissatisfaction. Partners concerned about the overall state of their romantic relationship may benefit from analyzing their conflict in this area first. Those who fight about love are less likely to feel as though they are in love, and are therefore less satisfied.

In addition, those individual partners who reported low levels of conflict in the Love domain also reported the highest levels of relationship satisfaction than in any other relationship domain. In terms of romantic couples, this finding could be related to each partner's expectations of relationship norms, and the attempts (or lack thereof) of the other partner to meet these expectation. Analyzing what specific topics couples fight about within these specific domains may provide more detailed insights into how conflict in these relationship domains contributes to overall feelings of satisfaction. For example, when a partner reports that he or she is experiencing "high levels" of conflict in the relational area of Love, what exactly are they fighting with their significant other about? This could be determined by simply asking each partner to provide their own definition of "love" instead of relying upon clinical definitions provided by researchers who are removed from the couple's unique interaction. Using free-response data gathering provides additional information in such situations which can not be accurately captured by survey methodology alone.

The Need for Detailed Equity Measurements

The second major purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between perception of equity, or inequity, and relationship satisfaction in each of the five relationship domains. This study was the first attempt to explore the possible contributions of specific domain equity to satisfaction. Previous studies (e.g., Lloyd, Cate, & Henton, 1982; Schreurs & Buunk,

1996) used only a general and generic measure of equity to determine the variable's relative contributions to satisfaction. Using a domain-specific equity measurement to relate to satisfaction extends Sprecher's (2001a) research linking specific equity measurements to the widely-used generic variations.

The results for this portion of the research indicate significant differences within the different levels of equity (underbenefitted, moderately underbenefitted, equal, moderately overbenefitted, and overbenefitted) and the corresponding relational satisfaction within the Love and Status/Power domains. As in the previous discussion, the Love domain produced the strongest significance ($p < .001$). There was only one participant reporting "underbenefitting" equity within the Love domain, so direct between-level differences could not be analyzed.

Even though overall significance was not reported for any other domains, within-domain, between-level comparisons indicated significant differences in relationship satisfaction between the "underbenefitted" and "equal" groups across three of the four (once Love is excluded) domains: Status/Power, Money, and Services. These conclusions concur with Schreurs and Buunk's (1996) findings that, when using a generic measure of relationship equity, underbenefitting inequity is related to lower levels of satisfaction and provides a better predictor of relationship termination.

Regardless of the variations between significance levels between the relationship domains, the *presence* of variation is the most relevant discovery from this portion of the research. Using a domain-specific study, as opposed to a generic measure of equity, allows for a more descriptive, and perhaps more accurate, representation of how perceptions of inequity are distributed throughout a relationship. Generic measures of equity, which ask only one or two

questions spanning the entire scope of the relationship, do not ask the respondent to report in what areas of the relationship they are experiencing inequity. In addition, generic measures assume that inequity in one relational dimension equals inequity in all relational dimensions. A relational partner who reports general inequity in their relationship because he or she contributes more financially than their partner may not perceive such an inequity as severe as a partner not receiving enough affection, and thus also reports their relationship as inequitable. If researchers cannot confidently say that equity in one relational dimension equals equity in all relational dimensions then generic measures of equity may not accurately represent the perceptions of the scale's respondents.

Results from this study, demonstrating variance in the relationships of equity and satisfaction between relational domains, suggest that inequity in some relational domains (specifically in Love and Status/Power) relate more strongly to negative satisfaction than all other domains. This would indicate that widely used generic measures of equity do not accurately capture a detailed depiction of relational inequity. Rather, they capture the variance between respondents drawing upon different relational experiences to gauge the equity of their relationship. One person who reports general inequity drawing upon their dissatisfaction in the area of affection (included in this study as part of the Love domain) may, in accordance with the results of this study, report significantly less satisfaction than someone who is reporting inequity in finances (included in this study as part of the Money domain). Therefore, participants in a study gauging relational satisfaction using a generic measure of equity are inherently skewing the average satisfaction scores due to the ambiguous nature of generic equity measures. The

present study provides support for the use of domain-specific equity measures when the equity variable is used to relate to reports of relational satisfaction.

The Uses of Conflict by the Underbenefitted, Equitable, and Overbenefitted

The final purpose of this study was to provide support for the proposition that the interpersonal conflict experienced between two romantic partners may arise, in part, from the latent experience of intrapersonal perceptions of inquiries by one or more of the partners. The direct relationship between conflict and equity is not explored in any other previous research. Therefore, this study represents the first attempt to link these two previously unrelated variables via a third variable of relationship satisfaction. In the two previously studied relationships discussed in this study, frequency of conflict and perceptions of equity separately related to scores of relationship satisfaction across five domains. The final section compares the interaction of these two independent variables and the resulting relationship between the interaction and satisfaction, again across each of the five relationship domains.

The results from this comparison indicate that the interaction between the levels conflict and the levels of equity have a significant relationship to reports of relationship satisfaction at the .01 level in the relational domain of Status/Power. That is to say that average satisfaction scores differ between the various combinations between conflict and equity (e.g., low conflict x underbenefitting equity; moderate conflict x underbenefitting equity, etc.).

The nature of this significance suggests that there is a direct relationship between conflict and equity, at least in relation to the satisfaction variable. Those couples who are experiencing conflict as well as equity are reporting different satisfaction levels than those couples who are

either experiencing conflict and perceive their relationship to be equitable or are experiencing low levels of conflict and perceive their relationship to be inequitable.

When visually comparing the mean satisfaction scores of each of the 15 different interaction levels between conflict and equity, preliminary general patterns emerge to demonstrate where the most significant differences exist between these levels.

Underbenefitted partners, or those perceiving themselves to be underbenefitted in the relationship, consistently report the lowest levels of satisfaction for any inequitable group. In terms of the Status/Power domain, these would be individuals who feel their partners has an advantage over them or holds a position of greater power in the relationship. Surprisingly, high conflict levels in the underbenefitted group are related to higher satisfaction scores than moderate conflict levels. Partners who feel as though they are weaker in power in the relationship may benefit from expressing this inequity through conflict, and therefore are more satisfied than those who perceive the inequity but do not also have conflict. This would suggest that underbenefitted partners may actually feel more satisfaction resulting from the presence of conflict in their relationship.

Equitable partners, or those individuals who reported feelings of equity within the Status/Power domain, reported higher levels of satisfaction ($M = 4.70$) in low conflict conditions than underbenefitted or moderately underbenefitted individuals. When conflict shifted from low to moderate levels, there was a drop in average satisfaction score to 4.56, and another drop at the high conflict level to 3.65. This decline in satisfaction in relation to an increase in conflict level is concurrent with the findings between levels of conflict and satisfaction when the equity variable is controlled. Extending the suggestion that conflict in the Status/Power domain may

serve as one partner's expression of dislike over his or her equity position in relation to his or her partner's position, those individuals who feel as though they are equal, yet have high levels of conflict may either ignore their underbenefitted power/status position, may not be aware of their underbenefitted position, or may not want to admit their underbenefitted position. Therefore, there may be inaccuracy in the equity reporting of individual partners. Further testing, and the use of additional measurement techniques, may determine if participants fully understand their own, and their partner's, power/status position in the relationship without relying on the participant's own self-report of equity.

Overbenefitted partners report the highest levels of satisfaction when there is low frequency of conflict. Logically, the partner with the most power/status in the relationship, or the partner who benefits the most from their power/status while contributing the least, would feel the most satisfaction. Similar to the previous patterns, satisfaction declines as conflict level rises for the overbenefitted group, though not as severe as other inequitable groups. Moderately underbenefitted individuals experiencing high levels of conflict report the highest average satisfaction scores of any group experience high levels of conflict. This would appear to suggest that overbenefittedness (in moderate and strong levels) is a buffer for the effects of conflict. In addition, the conflict present in the relationship may not be initiated by the overbenefitted partner. Instead, the reports of conflict by the overbenefitted partner may reflect conflict in which they were reacting to the expression of inequity by the underbenefitted partner. This may be one reason why overbenefitted partners still report relatively high levels of satisfaction regardless of conflict levels. Further study of the relationship between conflict and equity may provide insight into the uses and affects of conflict for each the underbenefitted and overbenefitted partner.

The suggestion of a relationship between conflict and equity is particularly interesting given the nature of the Status/Power relational domain in which the interaction was most significantly related to satisfaction scores. According to Kurdek's 1994 study, the defining characteristic of the Status/Power relational domain is that "one partner [is] 'lording over' the other partner" (p. 927). This would indicate that couples experiencing conflict within in domain are also likely experiencing inequity. The nature of conflict suggests this relationship with inequity is more prevalent in the Status/Power domain than in any other. Couples may experience conflict about household chores, but still feel as though each contributes equally to the relationship and receive equal rewards. It is unlikely that a couple would experience conflict about one partner having more power in the relationship but also perceive the input and outcome of power as equitable: such a scenario would contradict the nature of the Status/Power domain entirely.

The results of this section provide solid support for the continuance of investigation into the nature of the relationship between conflict and equity for future studies. Two previously unrelated variables demonstrate an interaction effect on satisfaction, laying the fundamental groundwork for additional research into this subject.

Limitations

Throughout the course of this study, there were many attempts made to anticipate any limitations to the methodology, scales, and theoretical reasoning to maximize the applicability of the results. However, no research is without its limitations, both those that are unforeseen and those that are unpreventable given the nature of human research. This section discusses both

types of limitations present in this study and gives suggestions for how these may be improved upon for future research.

One limitation to the current study is the number and nature of participants involved. Though it was anticipated, given the use of only two independent variables and one dependent variable, that more than 100 participants would be more than sufficient, once each variable fractured into the corresponding levels, it was clear that more participants may have yielded more definitive results. There were three levels for the conflict variable, five levels for the equity variable, and 15 possible levels for the final interaction between the conflict and equity variable. Using more than 100 participants would have increased the number of cases per level, thereby reducing the amount of variance between relationship scores within each level, making comparison between level more accurate and precise. In one particular comparison, the lack of cases in a particular cell may have prevented significance that would have been present given more participants. In the Love domain, strong significance was found between the levels of conflict and the corresponding satisfaction scores. The same significance was found between the levels of equity and the corresponding satisfaction scores. However, there was only one “underbenefitted” case available for the Love domain in the equity variable, inhibiting post hoc test from being performed. Since the Love domain yielded significance between conflict and satisfaction, and again with equity and satisfaction, it is a reasonable assumption that there would also be a significant relationship in the final interaction comparison; however, there was not. It is possible that the limited number of cases in the “underbenefitted” equity group prevented a final significant comparison. With more cases, it is suggested that the interaction of conflict and equity in the Love domain may yield a significant relationship to satisfaction in the same manner

as the Status/Power domain. Future testing of this suggestion may provide more definitive results.

In addition, the number of participants limited the number of available cases in each cell for the final conflict x equity interaction between-level comparisons. In the beginning, it was not anticipated that the conflict and equity variable would combine into 15 different possible interactions. As the study developed, however, it became apparent that more cases within each interaction level were necessary to draw definitive and strong conclusions. Due to the small case number in some of the interactions, only visual comparisons are available. Future studies with a greater sample size could substantiate or elaborate upon various claims suggested by the current study in regards to the uses of conflict by underbenefitted, equitable, and overbenefitted partners.

Another limitation of the sample was that it contained only those participants currently involved in a romantic relationship; all “past relationship” participants were excluded to prevent recall issues. However, when browsing through the “past relationship” survey responses, many participants in this group reported much lower satisfaction scores than the “current relationship” group included in the study. It is reasonable to assume that people involved a current relationship are relatively satisfied with their romantic partner, and those who are not currently in a relationship were not satisfied with their partner. Using partners who were no longer romantically involved would certainly introduce recall issues, but may also provide a more in-depth picture of how frequency of conflict and perceptions of inequity lead to the termination of relationships. Future studies may include participants who very recently terminated their relationship or are temporarily separated to try to balance between these two issues.

A final limitation of the current study involves the choice of survey methodology. As previously mentioned, other data gathering techniques may have provided more detailed and in-depth results which are not otherwise possible with simple survey research. First, survey methodology limits the number of responses the participant can choose from for each question. Participants may feel as though the responses available may not accurately describe their situation or perceptions, but are forced to select an option because there is no other choice. In such cases, free-response method, as utilized in Samter and Cupach's (1998) study on topical variations in same and cross-sex friendships, allow for greater freedom and creativity in participants' responses.

Interaction observation is another methodology that would provide additional detailed information, particularly in investigating conflict initiation from equity perceptions. Preliminary questionnaires gauging which topics are "high conflict" versus "low conflict" topics would provide a list of conflict domains for each couple. Then, in an observation laboratory, couples could be asked to discuss each topic. Observing the subsequent interaction, and possible resulting conflict, could provide insight into the process of conflict initiation, information that is otherwise not available from survey collection.

Though limiting, survey methodology is the most appropriate data gathering technique in preliminary studies which investigate relationships previously unrelated. The current study utilized survey methodology to determine how each of the proposed variables related to reports of satisfaction using unique relational domains. Using more detailed collection techniques, such as those previously mentioned, would have not served useful purpose without first identifying

how the variables related with one another. Survey methodology provided such answers, suggesting the use of more in-depth techniques in future studies.

Future Directions

Each of the relationships explored in this study support a foundation upon which future research can be built. The examination of frequency of conflict and domain-specific equity is currently under-explored; this study verified that deeper investigation into the nature of these two variables, both separately and in direct relationship with one another, is not only worthwhile, but full of rich possibility for the future of relational communication. The conclusions reached in this study are not necessarily intertwined with one another, but rather each suggests new and exciting avenues for research in their own respective fields.

Future Directions for Conflict Research

Understanding how frequent conflict affects relational satisfaction will only serve to add depth to the already expansive body of literature entailing the effects of conflict strategies and tactics on romantic relationships, both married and premarital. As noted earlier, focusing all energy into studying only one aspect of conflict ignores all other aspects. The results presented in this study suggest that any conflict in large doses may damage a romantic relationship. Studying the participants' interpretation of the severity of conflict in each relational domain in combination with frequency to determine how these two variables interact with one another is only one way to build upon the results of the present study. To report that a relationship has "frequent" conflict does nothing to provide information on the severity of each or all of the conflict episodes. Exploring how severity and frequency relate to one another and combine to

produce varying levels of satisfaction would how each relationship domain is affected by frequent and severe conflict versus frequent and light conflict. Many small arguments may not carry the same weight and few intense arguments. In addition to providing even more depth the field of relational conflict, information on severity between relational dimensions may assist relational counselors in determining how relationships function (or dysfunction).

Study of conflict frequency between domains, similar to the current research, may be extended by altering the response method to allow for free response and coding instead of questionnaire methodology. Samter and Cupach (1998) implored this method in their investigation of topical conflict variations among same- and cross-sex friends. Instead of asking participants to choose from a response set, they would be asked to describe what they and their partner conflict about most. Allowing the participants to choose the responses would allow for a more accurate description of the relational domains, which may alter how each conflict in each domain contributes to feelings of satisfaction.

Future Directions for Equity Research

One of the strongest conclusions of the current research study was the support of a domain-specific equity measure versus a generic measure. Especially when investigating how equity contributes to satisfaction, a generic measure does not provide enough detail to the participants to allow each participant to draw upon the same relational experiences to describe his or her feelings of equity. Though a domain-specific equity measure may not eliminate variance within the domain, it does reduce the possibility for bias. Future study directly comparing these two measures, domain-specific and generic, and each measure's relationship to equity across the same sample may provide more definitive conclusions. This would juxtapose

Sprecher's (2001a) work with the results of the current study. Comparing the two measures within the same study would allow for a more definitive conclusion as to which measure provides the most comprehensive and accurate description of equity within a relationship. This would provide researchers with the most accurate measurement tool possible.

In addition, future research could retest previous research using equity as a contributing variable to relational satisfaction using a domain-specific equity measure to determine if the findings are replicable using the new measurement. Though cumbersome, this may provide insight into previous studies that only explored equity through a single generic instrument (e.g., Cate, Lloyd, & Henton, 1985; Canary & Stafford, 1992)

Another direction in which these results could provide foundation for future study would be in the comparison of perception of equity directly between romantic partners. Only one partner from each couple was tested in this study, because the purposes necessitated the use of perceptions, not dyadic reality. However, future studies could compare perceptions of one partner to the other to determine how relationship reality is formulated in terms of relational equity. Logic would suggest that if one partner reports underbenefitting equity in the Love domain, their partner would report overbenefitting inequity. However, this is not likely the case for every couple. Comparing the perceptions of each partner in the dyad may provide even deeper understanding as to how equity affects relational satisfaction in couples, as opposed to individual partners.

Future Directions for Conflict and Equity Research

Previous literature alluded to the proposition that conflict may arise interpersonally in a relationship from intrapersonal perceptions of inequity. Direct support for this suggestion may

result from future testing analyzing these two variables in direct relationship to one another. Results from this study provide the first step in investigating how perceptions of equity relate to relational conflict via a third dependant variable of satisfaction. The next step for future research would be to develop a study in which conflict and equity could be compared directly. This may be accomplished by again using several relational domains, either the ones suggested by this study or others developed through different analysis.

Directly comparing equity and conflict variables would call for the development of a new scale, or new methodology. Using domain-specific equity scale developed in this study would only serve to replicate the results of this study. Instead of straight survey questionnaire, interview or short-answer, free-response techniques could be used to gather specific and detailed information about a couple's (or individual partner's) recent conflict experience. Questions could then be asked regarding the initiation of the fight, including who "started" the conflict, why it was started, previous feelings that contributed to the conflict, etc. This is merely one avenue to explore in what is likely to become a frequently studied aspect of romantic relationships.

Another way that the current study may be extended is by replicating the results of the interaction between conflict and equity with a larger sample. As previously stated within the limitations of the study, the small sample size of this study limited the number of available cases within each interaction combination. For this reason, only general observations about trends and patterns could be assessed within the scope of the current study. Additional research using a larger sample may further allude to the use of conflict by underbenefitted, equitable, and overbenefitted partners in romantic relationships.

Romantic relationships are inherently complex, deeply intense, and affect every aspect of people's lives, drawing scores of researchers determined to provide insight into their initiation, maintenance and termination. Conflict is present in all relationships, in varying degrees and with varying consequences. Equity asserts that there is a balance to achieve, an ideal that is rarely accomplished in all aspects of a relationship. Satisfaction is the ultimate measure of a couple's happiness. The current study, developed through an exploration of past literature, contributes a framework upon which other studies may be conducted.

APPENDIX A

FREQUENCY OF CONFLICT TOPICS SCALE

Developed by Lawrence A. Kurdek (1994).

On a scale of 1 to 5, please rate how frequently you and your (or former) partner fight (or did fight) about each of the following topics:

(1 = *never*, 5 = *always*)

- Finances*¹⁰
- Lack of affection**¹¹
- Sex**
- Previous lovers
- Drinking or smoking
- Distrust or lying
- Lack of equality in the relationship*
- Excessive demands or possessiveness*
- Frequent physical absence
- Job or school commitments
- Friends*
- Household tasks*
- Leisure time*
- Personal values
- Politics and social issues
- Parents
- Driving style
- Personal grooming
- Personal digs or insults*
- Being overly critical*

¹⁰ Items marked with an asterisk (*) indicate inclusion in the factor-analyzed *Power* dimension.

¹¹ Items marked with a double asterisk (**) indicate inclusion in the factor-analyzed *Intimacy* dimension.

APPENDIX B

DETAILED (DOMAIN-SPECIFIC) MEASURE OF EQUITY SCALE

Developed by Susan Sprecher (2001a).

For each of the resources, indicate how “fair” the exchange in your relationship is. That is, are you contributing about the same amount that you receive from your partner (getting a fair deal) or are you getting an unfair advantage or disadvantage?

1 = *very unfair, I am getting the worst deal*; 4 = *fair*; 7 = *very unfair, I am better the better deal.*)

Love (affection, warmth)*¹²

Status (prestige, esteem)*

Money (cash, credit, earning potential, paying on dates)*

Material Goods (gifts, sharing possessions)

Services (favors, comfort)*

Information (knowledge, common sense)

Sex (meeting needs and preferences)

¹² Items marked with an asterisk (*) indicate responses found to be significantly related to at least one global measure of equity.

APPENDIX C

RELATIONSHIP ASSESSMENT SCALE (RAS)

Developed by Susan S. Hendrick (1988).

On a scale of 1 to 5, please answer the following questions by indicating how satisfied you are with your (or most recent) current relationship:

(1 = *low satisfaction*, 5 = *high satisfaction*)

1. How well does your partner meet your needs?
2. In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?
3. How good is your relationship compared to most?
4. How often do you wish you hadn't gotten into this relationship?¹³
5. To what extent has your relationship met your original expectations?
6. How much do you love your partner?
7. How many problems are there in your relationship?¹

¹³ Items #4 and #7 are to be reversed scored.

APPENDIX D

PARTICIPANT LETTER OF INFORMED CONSENT

Dear Student:

My name is Amanda Dawn Coho and I am a graduate student working under the supervision of faculty member, Dr. Michael Rabby, in the Nicholson School of Communication at the University of Central Florida. You are being asked to participate in an experiment designed to gather information on how relational satisfaction is affected by frequency of conflict and perceptions of equity across five domain areas: Love, Status/Power, Money, Services, and Sex. This research project was designed solely for research purposes and no one except the research team will have access to any of your responses. All responses will be kept confidential. Your identity will be kept confidential using a numerical coding system. Your name will not appear on any of the survey data. The surveys, along with this informed consent form, will be kept by the primary investigator only.

Your participation in this project is voluntary. You do not have to answer any question(s) that you do not wish to answer. Please be advised that you may choose not to participate in this research, and you may withdraw from the experiment at any time without consequence. Non-participation will not affect your grade. You will also not receive any extra credit or additional benefits from completing this survey. There are no other direct benefits or compensation for participation. The surveys will take approximately 5-10 minutes during class time and your participation is not required beyond the time it takes to complete the survey.

There are no anticipated physical risks from participating in this study. However, the questions do ask about your current and former romantic relationships, including only general questions about conflict and equity perceptions in the sexual dimension of your relationship. You are not required to finish the survey, or answer any question that causes any psychological, mental, or emotional discomfort or distress.

If you have any questions or comments about this research, please contact Amanda Coho at amandacoho@hotmail.com, or her faculty supervisor, Dr. Michael Rabby, Nicholson School of Communication, Orlando, FL; (407) 823-2859. Questions or concerns about research participants' rights may be directed to the UCFIRB office, University of Central Florida Office of Research, Orlando Tech Center, 12443 Research Parkway, Suite 207, Orlando, FL 32826. The phone number is (407) 823-2901.

Sincerely,

Amanda Coho

APPENDIX E

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB) APPROVAL FORM



THE UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL FLORIDA
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB)

IRB Committee Approval Form

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR(S): Amanda Coho

PROJECT TITLE: The Combined Effects of Frequency of Conflict and Perceptions of Domain Equity on Relational Satisfaction.

Committee Members:

- Dr. Theodore Angelopoulos: _____
- Ms. Sandra Browdy: _____
- Dr. Jacqui Byers: _____
- Dr. Ratna Chakrabarti: _____
- Dr. Karen Dennis: _____
- Dr. Barbara Fritzsche: _____
- Dr. Robert Kennedy: _____
- Dr. Gene Lee: _____
- Ms. Gail McKinney: _____
- Dr. Debra Reinhart: _____
- Dr. Valerie Sims: _____


Contingent Approval
Dated: _____

Final Approval
Dated: _____

Expedited
Dated: 18 Feb 2004

Exempt
Dated: _____

Chair, IRB

Signed: 
Dr. Sophia Dziegielewska

NOTES FROM IRB CHAIR (IF APPLICABLE): _____

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