

INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE: SATISFICING OR MAXIMIZING? EXAMINING  
INDICATORS OF RELATIONSHIP COMMITMENT

By

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The negative impacts of intimate partner violence (IPV) have the potential to reach each physical, psychological, social, and spiritual realm of a victim's experience. The motive for women to remain in such violent relationships has been examined in relation to a number of different factors, including the fear of escalating violence, sociological barriers, and situational factors. To date, however, research on the sustainability of violent relationships has failed to investigate the way the decision making tendency to settle for less (satisfice) or to seek the best option (maximize) may affect relationship commitment in IPV situations. The first research question addressed in this study, therefore, was to examine the best fitting structural model for violence, satisficing, and relationship commitment through the use of hierarchical multiple regression. Additionally, moral and structural constraints have been shown to play a large role in both why women might remain in violent relationships, and in relationship commitment. The second research question addressed in this study, therefore, was whether and how violence, satisficing, and relationship commitment share similar correlations when moral and structural constraints are controlled for. Data came from a statewide survey of Texan residents, the Texas Healthy Marriage Initiative Baseline Survey Project, and included 470 people who indicated some form of violence within their current relationship. Results from the study indicate that

satisficing and structural constraints were strongly associated with relationship commitment when severity of aggression, marital status, and moral constraints were held constant. Results also indicate that satisficing and maximizing may be measuring two separate concepts as opposed to one construct on a continuum. Implications for clinicians working with individuals in violent relationships and directions for future research in this area are discussed.



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A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the Department of Human Development and Family Science

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Master of Science in Marriage and Family Therapy

by

Morgan Lancaster

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

After decades of research, the devastating, systemic effects of intimate partner violence (IPV) in the United States are undeniable (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000; Davis, 2013; Morrison, Luchok, Richter, & Parra-Medina, 2006; Stith, McCollum, Rosen, Locke, & Goldberg, 2005). The literature suggests a variety of physical, psychological, and social impacts that women experience in association with intimate partner violence (Johnson & Ferraro, 2000; Straus, 2007). With such substantial and convincing evidence of harmful outcomes, researchers and advocates alike, have been curious to understand why victims stay in IPV relationships (Hendy, Eggen, Gustitus, McLeod, & Ng, 2003). The debate—about which factors are most associated with the decision making process to stay or leave—persists, with some literature suggesting that external components are most salient and others asserting internal or personal elements are most important. This study will attempt to address how relationships are sustained by examining the decision making process of those who identify as being in an IPV relationship, and their attempts at finding a “good enough” option (satisfice) or the “best” option (maximize) in maintaining their relationship commitment.

### **Need for the Study**

**IPV incidence rates.** Intimate partner violence is a widespread problem in the United States, with 22.1% of women reporting they were physically assaulted by a partner in their lifetime (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Despite race, religion, and socioeconomic status, this issue affects all women and can lead to a multitude of negative physical, mental and interpersonal health consequences (Davis, 2013; Morrison, Luchok, Richter, & Parra-Medina, 2006; Stith, McCollum, Rosen, Locke, & Goldberg, 2005). Depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and other psychological challenges are more common in this population, which in part

may lead to other risky behaviors like substance abuse (Davis, 2013). Physical health is also seriously impacted in women within IPV situations: IPV is associated with increased mortality, injury and disability, worse general physical health, chronic pain, reproductive disorders, and poorer pregnancy outcomes (Plichta, 2004).

**Victim blaming.** Traditionally, those who describe those in IPV relationships as “battered women,” labeled them as victims and have made attempts to absolve them more so than to explore their “role” in the violence (Schechter, 1982). However, the category of “battered woman” presents “unique difficulties in this regard, because by definition (Walker 1979), battering is not an isolated event, but a process in which battered women stay in or return to the relationships in which they are victimized for at least part of the time” (Dunn, 2005, pp. 4). The normative expectation that people are free to act in their own best interest is violated when victims are depicted as *staying* in their violent relationships. Conceptualizations of women’s apparent passivity in their decision to remain with a violent partner discredits any behavior that could possibly be part of intentional survival strategies, effects of socialization into subordination, or other moral or structural constraints women may face (Hendy, Eggen, Gustitus, McLeod, & Ng, 2003; Peled, Eisikovits, Enosh, & Winstok, 2000; Wallace, 2007). Further efforts to highlight the complexities that exist in the decision to stay with a violent partner are necessary to avoid ‘blaming the victim’ in IPV situations, both in the literature and in the general population.

**Barriers to leaving.** Understanding the outcomes associated with IPV and the decisions women make to stay despite them requires exploration into the barriers of leaving. Separating out and defining the different constraints that are linked to remaining in a violent relationship can shift the social constructionism of female victims to provide room for more autonomy (Dunn,

2005). One of the most significant barriers for women is the fear of escalating violence should they attempt to terminate the relationship; often women are at greater physical risk after the act of leaving in comparison to remaining with their partner (Pagelow, 1992). Additional social values, policies, and greater moral obligations present further potential difficulties when trying to leave, as factors like financial dependency, lack of alternative housing, and personal obligation to a partner come in to play (Johnson, 1991; Johnson, Caughlin, & Huston, 1999). Finally, situational factors and structural constraints have been a focus in much of the research looking at why women stay. Believing that alternative circumstances would be available if the relationship ended, social pressure from the woman's network, the difficulties of termination procedures, and the perception of irretrievable investments all contribute to feelings of being trapped in an IPV situation for women (Johnson, Caughlin, & Huston, 1999). Adding to the literature about situational factors like decision making tendencies, this study is needed to further remove social stigmas and stereotypes about women remaining in these relationships as "blind choice."

**Understanding IPV sustainability.** Previous research has offered a variety of ideas about why a woman might remain in a relationship despite the presence of violence from her husband. Fear of harm, child care needs, financial problems, and strong relationship commitment are just a few of the many potential reasons that might complicate stay-leave decisions (Dunn, 2005; Hendy, Eggen, Gustitus, McLeod, & Ng, 2003). This study will add to this body of literature in hopes that a better understanding of the perpetuation of IPV could eventually reduce its prevalence. A more accurate representation of how IPV relationships continue can strengthen the ability of frontline professionals like marriage and family therapists to effectively work with these women (Wallace, 2007).



**Satisficing and Maximizing.** One important area of research that has yet to be examined in the context of intimate partner violence is a woman's general decision making tendencies about her romantic partner (Mikkelsen & Pauley, 2013). Some literature suggests that people either maximize, approach choices with the goal of finding the "best" possible alternative, or satisfice, approach choices with the goal of finding an option that is "good enough" according to their threshold of acceptability (Dar-Nimrod, Rawn, Lehman, & Schwartz, 2009; Schwartz, Ward, Monterosso, Lyubomirsky, White, & Lehman, 2002). This study could lend important findings to IPV literature since there is a consensus that maximizers are more sensitive to regret, less satisfied than satisficers overall with their decisions, and are captivated by pursuing the best option at the moment of choice (Jain, Bearden, & Filipowicz, 2013; Polman, 2010; Vohs et al., 2008).

**Constraint as control variable.** Several studies have examined the role that perceived constraints play in one's level of dedication to a romantic partner (Rhoades, Stanley, Kelmer, & Markman, 2010; Goodfriend, & Agnew, 2008; Stanley, & Markman, 1992; Rhoades, Stanley, Markman, 2012). Outside factors such as tangible investments, social pressure, alternative options, and moral obligations can serve as barriers to terminating a relationship regardless of dedication level (Stanley & Markman, 1992). However, no research to date has examined how relationship commitment might be affected when these constraints are controlled for. In an effort to fill the gap in the literature, this study seeks to investigate how personal elements like decision making tendencies might affect relationship commitment in IPV relationships aside from perceived outside constraints.

**Clinical implications.** Partner violence is often undetected and underreported by mental health professionals (Avis, 1992; Dersch et al., 2006) and there is no industry standard to which

professionals adhere when intervening in these cases (Dersch et al., 2006; Jory, 2004). However, understanding the dynamics in IPV relationships and best models of treatment is crucial when working with this population. It is essential that therapists, counselors, and other helping professionals have the resources to explore a variety of different reasons that an IPV relationship might continue. The current study may provide a new avenue for clinicians to consider when working with clients who are struggling to make a decision to stay or leave. Family therapists in particular have been criticized for their failure to recognize and respond appropriately to indicators of family violence (Avis, 1992; Stith et al., 2012), and therefore might find the results of the current study to be useful in their practice. New insights for marriage and family therapists regarding general decision making tendencies to settle for a good enough option as opposed to seeking the best possible alternative could aid in their quest to help clients to either feel validated in their level of commitment or further their perception of what might keep them from leaving (Mikkelson & Pauley, 2013).

### **Purpose of the Study**

Data for the current study are drawn from the Texas Healthy Marriage Initiative Baseline Survey Project (Harris, et al. 2008). We examine the relationship between satisficing and maximizing, and relationship commitment when controlling for structural constraint (feeling trapped in the relationship) and moral constraint (feeling morally obligated to remain in the relationship). Specifically, the research questions that will be addressed are: 1) what is the best fitting structural representation of relationship commitment in violent partner relationships in relation to satisficing and maximizing, and 2) what is the nature of the relationship between satisficing and maximizing, and relationship commitment in the context of intimate partner

violence when controlling for structural and moral constraints? Hypotheses for this study include:

H1: Based on the findings of Rhoades, Stanley, Kelmer, and Markman (2010), we anticipate that severity of violence will explain a significant amount of the variance in relationship commitment

H2: Based on the findings of Mikkelson and Pauley (2013), we anticipate that satisficing and maximizing tendencies will have a significant relationship with relationship commitment, even when structural and moral constraints are controlled

These hypothesis will be tested using hierarchical multiple regression. Partner violence will be measured with a range of items that relate to relational aggression, an important part of partner violence. The relational constructs that will be included in this study include Severity of Relational Aggression, Satisficing, Maximizing, Relationship Commitment, Structural Constraint, and Moral Constraint. Other control items will include Marital Status, Gender, and Length of Relationship. Each construct will be measured by a set of questions assessing participants' perception of each of these constructs in their marriage.

## **Conclusion**

The subsequent chapters will present a review of the literature on satisficing and maximizing, possible reasons to stay in IPV relationships, including structural and moral constraints, and relationship commitment in the context of IPV (Chapter 2). Further chapters will also include the methodology from the current study (Chapter 3) and a publishable article from this project (Chapter 4). Last will be a discussion (Chapter 5) of these results and the implications on the future study of why women stay in violent relationships. This last chapter

will also include recommendations for how the findings of this study could be applied in clinical work with women experiencing violence from a partner.

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## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a pervasive social problem. Although there are negative impacts for all who experience IPV, women experience more IPV than do men, with 22.1% of women, compared with 7.4% of men reporting they were physically assaulted by a current or former spouse, cohabitating partner, boyfriend or girlfriend, or date in their lifetime (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). In addition, more than 1,200 women are murdered each year by their husbands or boyfriends (Family Violence Prevention Fund, 2008). Due to this gender disparity in incidence rates, researchers have historically focused more attention on female victims than males, as will also be the case in this text.

Every 15 seconds an act of partner violence occurs, with 65% of women reporting rape and/or physical assault by a current or former domestic partner (National Coalition Against Domestic Violence [NCAD], 1999). Despite many common assumptions, IPV impacts women of all races, religious groups, and socioeconomic status (Gillum, 2002; Huang & Gunn, 2001; Morrison, Luchok, Richter, & Parra-Medina, 2006) and may result in serious physical and mental health consequences (Campbell, 2002; Powers, Curry, Oswald, & Maley, 2002). Intimate partner violence is linked to a multitude of systemic issues, such as diminished physical health, increased risk for mental health distress, and difficulties in their interpersonal sphere (Davis, 2013; Stith, McCollum, Rosen, Locke, & Goldberg, 2005).

Compared to women who have not experienced intimate partner violence, women who have faced IPV are more likely to experience health consequences, with 80% more likely to have a stroke, 70% more likely to have heart disease, 60% more likely to have asthma, and 70% more likely to drink heavily (Family Violence Prevention Fund, 2008). In addition, partner violence is

linked to a range of reproductive health issues, including but not limited to sexually transmitted disease and HIV transmission, miscarriages, and unsafe sexual behavior (Davis, 2013).

Aside from the potential physical effects of abuse, those who experience intimate partner violence are also at much greater risk of psychological problems, including depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder (Stith, McCollum, Rosen, Locke, & Goldberg, 2005). Women with a history of intimate partner violence are more likely to display behaviors that present further health risks, such as substance abuse, mental and psychiatric problems, alcoholism, and increased risk of suicide attempts (Davis, 2013). Historically, these outcomes have been seen as a consequence of a patriarchal culture, understood to be the expression of men's power over women (Stith, McCollum, Amanor-Boadu, & Smith, 2012). In accordance with this perspective, interventions hoping to reduce IPV have mostly been focused on treatment programs for men in men's groups (Stith, Rosen, McCollum, & Thomsen 2004; Stith et al., 2005; Stith et al., 2012). However, in recent decades there has been a shift in the way that partner violence is perceived to incorporate a more systemic perspective (Bennett, Goodman, & Dutton, 1999; Stith, McCollum, Amanor-Boadu, & Smith, 2012).

### **Perpetuation of IPV Relationships**

Inevitably, the general public often focuses less on the perpetrators behavior than the woman's motivation to remain with a partner that hurts her (Stahly, 2000). The notion that violence would disappear if a victim would just leave, assumes that her partners violence is the result of an unhealthy relationship that could easily be fixed by separating the couple. In asking the question, 'why do women stay in violent relationships?' researchers must be careful that we are not similarly placing all responsibility upon women to decide to leave when they may be constrained by a variety of forces that complicate this choice (Dunn, 2005; Eckstein, 2001).

Often this question is perceived as inadvertently blaming the victim of abuse; however, the current study seeks to find answers to this question in hopes to add to the body of literature about understanding the factors that may complicate stay-leave decisions.

The profound impact on the physical, psychological and social well-being that is a consequence of partner violence has been explored. Efforts to understand why individuals remain in relationships where these damaging outcomes occur have been exerted for decades. In order to reduce incidence rates and to assist women in weighing the option to leave abusive partners, it is important to understand the components that contribute to the sustainability of violent relationships. Research focusing on possible reasons why women might stay generally fall into three categories: 1) an increase in danger after women leave and how fear of escalating the violence constrains them; 2) sociological constraints like social values and policies; and 3) psychological and situational factors (Dunn, 2005). The research on these three schools of thought is reviewed below.

### **Possible Reasons to Stay**

**Escalating violence.** Some women in IPV relationships feel trapped with a partner who threatens to escalate the violence if the woman attempts to leave (Peled, Eisikovits, Enosh, & Winstok, 2000). Unfortunately, separation from the abuser does not always terminate the violence. In many instances, leaving may be more dangerous than staying for both the woman and any children involved (Harlow, 1991; Pagelow, 1992; Peled, Eisikovits, Enosh, & Winstok, 2000). Severe injury and even murder may come to women whose partners lash out in reaction to attempts to terminate the relationship. (Saunders & Browne, 1990; Peled, Eisikovits, Enosh, & Winstok, 2000). In this regard, fear of escalating violence may hold some women back from feeling confident enough to leave safely.

**Sociological barriers.** Social values, policies, opportunity structures, and service provisions accounts for a second group of explanations for the entrapment of victimized women. These rationalizations emphasize that unsupportive personal and communal networks, financial dependency on the male partner, and lack of alternative housing may strongly influence a woman's decision to remain in an IPV situation (Okun, 1988; Strube, 1988; Sullivan, 1991; Wilson, Baglioni, & Downing, 1989). Additionally, patriarchal notions regarding gender roles are often imposed by society which may lead to misperceptions for women about their human right to equality (Bograd, 1984; Peled, Eisikovits, Enosh, & Winstok, 2000). Reality constructions about gender roles, the institution of marriage, or other current social values potentially place extra strain on women trying to leave violent relationships.

***Moral constraints.*** In particular, moral commitment, the sense that one is morally obligated to continue a relationship, may serve as a significant sociological barrier in IPV relationships and is a function of three components (Johnson, Caughlin, & Huston, 1999). First, a broader obligation concerning the morality of the dissolution of particular types of relationships may, for instance, cause one to feel that marriage ought to last forever (Rodrigues & Lopes, 2015). Second, one might feel a personal moral obligation to another person based on history, feelings of sympathy, or a variety of other reasons that are specific to that partner (Johnson, 1991). Third, a person might feel obligated to continue a particular relationship because of general consistency values. Kelley (1983) seems to have had this component of moral commitment in mind when he noted that over time people usually try to maintain a consistency in how they feel, think, and act on matters that are important to them. Each facet of moral commitment might cause a woman to feel constrained in one way or another to remain in a violent relationship in an effort to do what is "right" or honorable.

**Situational factors.** Third, a large portion of the research in this area suggests that women's psychological makeup, relationship skills, and personal and situational factors contribute to their entrapment in IPV relationships (Barnett & LaViolette, 1993; Kirkwood, 1993; Peled, Eisikovits, Enosh, & Winstok, 2000; Walker, 1993.) Depression, low self-esteem, fear, loneliness, guilt, and shame, combined with violence, isolation, exhaustion, unpredictability, and some positive attributes of the perpetrator, combine to create and maintain syndromes such as "traumatic bonding" (Peled, Eisikovits, Enosh, & Winstok, 2000; Walker, 1993). Traumatic bonding theory, the notion that strong emotional attachments are formed by intermittent good-bad behavior and power imbalances, has been supported by a number of empirical studies (Dutton & Painter, 1993; Wallace, 2007). A woman who is traumatically attached to her abuser may feel that she loves him, depends on him for her survival, and even identifies with him, in which case it is likely that she will maintain the relationship (Peled, Eisikovits, Enosh, & Winstok, 2000; Wallace, 2007).

**Structural constraints.** These situational factors also encompass perceived structural constraints, the sense that there are barriers to leaving a relationship that might lead one to feel trapped (Johnson, Caughlin, & Huston, 1999). For one, believing that alternative circumstances would be available if the relationship ended may contribute to dependency on the relationship and perceived inability to terminate the relationship (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Perception of the quality of alternatives involves broader considerations to which women may have limited access (Johnson, 1973). Another type of structural constraint comes from social pressure in the individual's network, where loved ones may or may not approve of ending the relationship. When influential people in a woman's life begin asserting their negative opinions about the decision, the woman may feel constrained to continue the relationship even if she feels little

personal commitment (Johnson, Caughlin, & Huston, 1999). Additionally, the difficulty of termination procedures potentially function as a barrier to dissolution. In the case of marriage, there is a set of legal procedures required to divorce, possessions have to be divided, and at least one of the partners ordinarily has to find new housing (Johnson, Caughlin, & Huston, 1999). To the extent that such actions are seen as onerous, women in IPV relationships may avoid them altogether. Finally, irretrievable investments of things like time and resources may impact feelings of constraint (Beeble, Bybee, & Sullivan, 2010). Some women may feel that their departure would represent an unacceptable waste of direct investments and foregone opportunities (Johnson, Caughlin, & Huston, 1999). All instances further promote structural barriers that contribute to feeling constrained in IPV relationships.

Society often overlooks these constraints and assumes that women are choosing to stay, or have “settled” for an abusive partner (Dunn, 2005). Some literature suggests that being content with one’s partner as opposed to seeking the best option for a romantic relationship is positively correlated with satisfaction and commitment (Mikkelsen & Pauley, 2013). Yet, researchers have yet to look at the way that the decision making tendency to settle for less, or “satisfice”, may affect a woman’s commitment to remain in a violent relationship.

### **Satisficing v. Maximizing**

**Satisficing.** Satisficing describes the tendency to approach choices with the goal of finding an option that is “good enough” according to one’s threshold of acceptability (Schwartz et al., 2002). Often when society sees a violent relationship from the outside, the perception is that the female’s threshold of acceptable behavior from her partner has dropped so low that she is willing to consent to such violence, when in fact this may not be true at all. However, in this approach to choice, the individual does not have to consider all information about each option,

the standards for what is acceptable are more modest, and these standards do not depend on the number of options (Roets, Schwartz, & Guan, 2012). Additionally, when adopting a “good enough” approach to decision-making, there is no failure in choosing a merely decent, but not perfect, option.

**Maximizing.** The satisficing decision-making style may seem contradictive to the “American dream” like optimization thought process, since autonomy and choice in individual decision making are highly valued in Western societies (Roets, Schwartz, & Guan, 2012). However, many researchers have found that maximizers, or those who tend to approach choices with the goal of finding the “best” possible alternative, are less satisfied overall with their decisions (Jain, Bearden, & Filipowicz, 2013; Polman, 2010; Roets, Schwartz, Guan, 2012; Schwartz et al., 2002; Yang & Chiou, 2010). For example, Yang and Chiou (2010) found that when looking online for the best romantic partner, adopting maximizing strategies may increase sensitivity to regret stemming from excessive searching when a large number of choices are available and may ultimately lead to disappointment with the decision. In a culture that provides near-unlimited options in all domains in life, this phenomena could prove to be especially relevant when considering relationship satisfaction, as well as individual life satisfaction.

Several important problems seem to arise for individuals when options are added within a domain of choice. First, acquiring adequate and complete information about options makes choosing more strenuous (Schwartz et al., 2002; Roets, Schwartz, & Guan, 2012). It is difficult enough to gather information and go through the deliberations needed to make the best choice among a small amount of options, but to choose from a large array of options takes even more time and energy. So rather than even try, people may disengage, choosing arbitrarily to complete the process. Second, as options expand, people’s standards for what is an acceptable outcome

rise. This could potentially make a satisfactory option more difficult to find. And thirdly, people may come to believe that any imperfect result is their fault, because, with so many options, they have no excuse for not getting the “right” one. With more options, more responsibility falls to the individual to make a choice that will prove to be satisfying and not something they will later regret. It seems that adding options can make a number of circumstances less rather than more attractive for people, sometimes to the point that giving up autonomy to make a choice at all is preferable (Beattie, Baron, Hershey, & Spranca, 1994; Schwartz et al., 2002).

Expanded opportunities for choice need not have these negative psychological effects on everyone. While a maximizer may be struggling with lingering doubt that he or she could have chosen better by searching a bit more, say for a partner, the satisficer is looking for something that is good enough. With “good enough” rather than the “best” as the criterion, the satisficer will be less inclined to experience regret if it turns out that an option better than the chosen one was available (Schwartz et al., 2002). The question that the maximizer is forever asking him- or herself is not “is this a good outcome?” but “is this the best outcome?” Various studies showed that maximizers experience higher levels of regret compared to satisficers and that they show lower levels of satisfaction with decisions. Maximizers also experience lower levels of well-being more generally: they are more dissatisfied with their lives, less happy, more depressed, and less optimistic (e.g., Chang et al., 2011; Dar-Nimrod, Rawn, Lehman & Schwartz, 2009; Iyengar, Wells & Schwartz, 2006; Purvis, Howell & Iyer, 2011; Schwartz et al., 2002).

### **Satisficing and Maximizing in Romantic Relationships**

The study of maximization as an individual personality trait has gained much traction in consumer behavior research, while relatively few studies have examined the effects of maximization in other decision-making domains (Mikkelsen & Pauley, 2013). Given that



decisions about romantic partners are some of the most important ones in life and therefore require significant resource investment, it would follow that some individuals might practice even greater vigilance when selecting a partner. Accordingly, previous research has demonstrated that people tend to demonstrate great care and choose more conservative options when selecting a potential dating partner (Beisswanger, Stone, Hupp, & Allgaier, 2003). Since maximizers would typically be more sensitive to regret, more acutely aware of alternatives, and more hesitant to invest in the relationship if there was a chance their partner might not be the best choice for them, it seems plausible to assume that relationship satisfaction and commitment would be lower for these individuals. Indeed, in a study examining maximizing tendencies in general as well as in relationships specifically, Mikkelson and Pauley (2013) found that maximizing was negatively correlated with satisfaction, investment, and commitment within the relationship. In their model, investment in a romantic relationship served as the strongest and most consistent mediator of the relationship between maximization and commitment. So how might this correlation be different in the situation of partner violence when investment in the relationship is potentially complicated by a number of factors? This question has yet to be addressed in the literature.

### **Commitment in Violent Relationships**

The existing literature on aggression and commitment in romantic relationships seems to vary in conclusions (Rhoades, Stanley, Kelmer, & Markman, 2010). Some research shows that physical aggression is associated with a higher likelihood of relationship termination over time (Carlson, McLanahan, & England, 2004; Lawrence & Bradbury, 2001; Shortt, Capaldi, Kim, & Owen, 2006), suggesting that aggression might be associated with lower relationship commitment. Other studies have found that aggression is associated with higher commitment

(Hammock & O'Hearn, 2002; Pedersen & Thomas, 1992). Contradictions in findings could be related to a failure to sparse out different types of commitment or constraint (e.g. structural v. moral constraint), which may be associated with different levels of dedication to the relationship. Aggression tends to be associated with lower satisfaction (e.g., Lund & Thomas, 2014) which could play a large role in the decision to end the relationship; however, commitment theory suggests that satisfaction is not the only reason partners stay together. Within Stanley and Markman's (1992) theory of commitment, the desire to maintain the relationship for the long term is called interpersonal commitment or dedication. Pressures or circumstances that can serve as barriers to relationship termination are referred to as constraints (Rhoades, Stanley, Kelmer, & Markman, 2010) and seem to play a large role in the level of dedication and commitment in all relationships (Johnson, Caughlin, & Huston, 1999).

Constraints can come in many forms, and different types of constraints may impact relationships differently (Goodfriend & Agnew, 2008; Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2011). Some of the most influential constraints to consider when examining possible barriers to leaving relationships include living together, having children together, social pressure from friends and family for the relationship to continue, concern for one's partner's welfare in the event of a breakup, perceptions regarding the quality of alternative life choices, structural and material investments that would be lost if the relationship ended, perceptions regarding the potential difficulty of terminating the relationship, the availability of suitable alternative partners, the length of the relationship, and the sense that one is trapped in the relationship (Rhoades, Stanley, Kelmer, & Markman, 2010). Similarly, when 1,086 women who had experienced intimate partner violence were asked about concerns in stay-leave decisions, the emerging themes were fear of loneliness, child care needs, financial problems, social embarrassment, poor social

support, fear of harm, and hopes for things to change (Hendy, Eggen, Gustitus, McLeod, & Ng, 2003). Some results from recent literature suggest that constraints like these, overall, help explain more than 30% of the variability in breakups among those who had experienced aggression in the last year (Rhoades, Stanley, Kelmer, & Markman, 2010). More specifically, these findings indicated that those who were living together were more likely to have experienced physical aggression (58.8%) than those who were dating and not living together (43.4%), and that living together was a strong predictor of remaining in the relationship over time. Further examination of the impact that these constraints have on the commitment to stay in IPV relationships specifically is necessary to better understand stay-leave decisions.

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### CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

There are multiple areas of focus in the current literature surrounding the topic of the sustainability of violent partner relationships. A fear of escalating violence, psychological and situational factors, sociological constraints, and personal choice by the woman have been explored by researchers as possible reasons that decisions to leave may be complicated (Dunn, 2005). This study aims to shed light on another piece of the puzzle in fully conceptualizing the complex decision to leave these relationships by examining relationship commitment as a potential function of the decision making tendency to satisfice or maximize. The overwhelming majority of past research on partner violence has focused on female victims because females are disproportionately affected. However, the present study will examine both male and female victims due to statistically significant proportions of both genders confirming they had experienced relational aggression, and in an effort to contribute to the literature on violence experienced by both genders. Through Hierarchical Multiple Regression, the research questions that will be addressed in this study are: 1) what is the best fitting structural representation of relationship commitment in violent partner relationships in relation to satisficing and maximizing, and 2) what is the nature of the relationship between satisficing and maximizing, and relationship commitment in the context of domestic violence when structural and moral constraints are controlled for? Specific hypotheses were:

H1: Based on the findings of Rhoades, Stanley, Kelmer, and Markman (2010), we anticipate that severity of violence will explain a significant amount of the variance in relationship commitment

H2: Based on the findings of Mikkelson and Pauley (2013), we anticipate that satisficing and maximizing tendencies will have a significant relationship with relationship commitment, even when structural and moral constraints are controlled

### **Sample**

Data for this study come from the Texas Healthy Marriage Initiative Baseline Survey Project, a representative, statewide survey of adults 18 years of age and older (Harris et al., 2008). Data were collected in 2007 by the Office of Survey Research at the University of Texas in Austin. The survey assessed attitudes on a variety of topics including partner attributes, marriage, and divorce as well as participants' own relationship and marital history and current satisfaction. Information on the participants and data collection methods of this project have been published elsewhere (see Harris et al., 2008); however, certain key aspects of the sample and sampling procedure are reiterated here. A random digit dialing sampling design was employed in which the household member over 18 with the most recent birthday was asked to participate. Only one member per household was interviewed and interviews typically lasted 45 minutes. A total of 2,500 participants were recruited including an oversample of 500 Hispanic residents. This study will use only data from individuals who reported that there was some form of relational aggression present in their current relationship (N = 470).

Demographic information for the study sample is reported in Table 1 (N=470). Average age for the sample was  $47.73 \pm 14.64$  and average length of relationship in years was  $21.96 \pm 14.67$ . The majority of the study sample was female (62.3 %), White (78.3 %), not Hispanic (69.4 %). The median number of children in the home was one child with a range of zero (37% of the sample) to 12 (.1%) children. Household income was measured categorically (see Table 1) and was fairly evenly distributed for those with incomes above \$25,000.

## Measures

See Table 2 for a list of all the relational constructs and their specific items used in these analyses.

**Relational Aggression.** The presence of violence within relationships was determined in this study using items relating to an important part of partner violence, relational aggression. Items used to measure relational aggression included 7 dichotomous (yes or no) items modified from Johnson and Leone (2005) and included items such as “thinking about your partner, would you say he/she: Insists on knowing who you are with at all times?”, “shouts or swears at you?”, “threatens to hurt you or others you care about?”, and “makes you feel inadequate?”. These items have been shown to have good reliability ( $\alpha = .70$ ; Johnson & Leone, 2005). Johnson and Leone (2005) also looked at the factor structure of these items using principal components analysis and found them to constitute a single construct. Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was .73 (.68 for men and .76 for women), suggesting that this scale remains reliable in both female and male samples.

**Satisficing.** Respondents’ willingness to settle in their relationship was assessed by one item that the researchers felt was a valid representation of this construct: “I am willing to accept disappointments in order to keep this relationship together.” Responses were on a 4-point Likert scale (with responses being “strongly agree,” “agree,” “disagree,” and “strongly disagree”) with higher scores being indicative of higher satisficing tendencies.

**Maximizing.** Additionally, respondents’ assessment of their tendency to maximize was measured with 1 item taken from Schwartz et al. (2002): “Whenever I’m faced with a choice, I try to imagine what all of the other possibilities are, even ones that aren’t present at the

moment.” Responses were also on a 4-point Likert scale, with high scores indicating higher levels of maximizing.

**Relationship commitment.** Dedication or commitment to one’s relationship was measured by four items on the same 4-point Likert scale examining respondents’ level of desire to stay in their relationship. Items were modified from Stanley and Markman (1992) and ranged from “my relationship is the most important thing in life” to “I will likely leave this relationship someday.” Previous studies have shown that scales using these items are reliable with Cronbach’s alphas  $> .70$  (Stanley & Markman, 1992). Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was  $.6$ .

**Structural constraint.** Respondents’ sense that there are barriers to leaving the relationship was measured with one item chosen by the researchers to be the most valid representation of that construct: “I feel a little trapped or pressured by circumstance to continue in this relationship.” Responses were on a 4-point Likert scale (with responses being “strongly agree,” “agree,” “disagree,” and “strongly disagree”) with higher scores being indicative of higher levels of feeling structurally constrained to the relationship.

**Moral constraint.** Similarly, respondents’ feelings that they are morally obligated to remain in the relationship were assessed by one item: “I could never leave my partner because I would feel guilty about letting him/her down.” Responses were on a 4-point Likert scale (with responses being “strongly agree,” “agree,” “disagree,” and “strongly disagree”) with higher scores being indicative of higher levels of feeling morally constrained to the relationship.

## **Data Analysis**

### **Control Variables Operationalized**

One of the challenges with research involving violent behavior is that this complex phenomenon is often influenced by multiple variables, not just a singular effect (Shadish &

Sweeney, 1992). Indeed, social scientists should be concerned about any variable that may indirectly affect a relationship (Aiken & West, 1991). Unwanted effects can be accounted for in research as controlled variables (Baron & Kenny, 1986)

We hypothesize that the structural and moral constraints that respondents report will play a large role in relationship commitment levels. However, we hypothesize that when these structural and moral constraints are controlled for, the satisficing and maximizing variables will still have a significant correlation with relationship commitment. We operationalize structural constraint as feeling trapped or pressured to remain in the relationship, and moral constraint as feeling morally obligated to remain in the relationship.

This study will utilize hierarchical multiple regression because several of the variables have potential to play a role in one's relationship commitment. Hierarchical regression has an advantage over the simpler multiple regression in that variables can be entered at different levels of the model to parse out when and how much of the variance in the dependent variable is accounted for by certain variables (Aiken & West, 1991). Variables that will be examined in this analysis include "relational aggression," "satisficing," "maximizing," "moral constraint," "structural constraint," and "relationship commitment."

The hypothesized model for the data analysis includes several important relationships. First, relational aggression and relationship commitment is predicted to have a strong negative relationship in accordance with the literature that suggests aggression is associated with lower relationship satisfaction and higher relationship termination over time (Carlson, McLanahan, & England, 2004; Lawrence & Bradbury, 2001; Shortt, Capaldi, Kim, & Owen, 2006; Lund & Thomas, 2014). Therefore, we predict that more severe levels of relational aggression will be associated with lower levels of relationship commitment. Second, satisficing is predicted to have

a strong effect on relationship commitment, despite other structural and moral constraints, since previous research has suggested that people tend to demonstrate great care and choose more conservative options when selecting a potential dating partner, but experience negative relational impacts when they try to keep dating options open (Beisswanger, Stone, Hupp, & Allgaier, 2003; Mikkelson and Pauley, 2013). Therefore, we predict that satisficing and maximizing will have a significant relationship with relationship commitment, even when structural constraint, moral constraint, and severity of relational aggression are held constant. Moral and structural constraints will be examined as control variables, as the literature has shown that these constructs play a large part both in why women remain in violent relationships (Johnson, Caughlin, & Huston, 1999), and in measuring relationship commitment (Rhoades, Stanley, Kelmer, & Markman, 2010).



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## **CHAPTER 4: INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE: SATISFICING OR MAXIMIZING?**

### **EXAMINING INDICATORS OF RELATIONSHIP COMMITMENT**

After decades of research, the devastating, systemic effects of intimate partner violence (IPV) in the United States are undeniable (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000; Davis, 2013; Morrison, Luchok, Richter, & Parra-Medina, 2006; Stith, McCollum, Rosen, Locke, & Goldberg, 2005). The literature suggests a variety of physical, psychological, and social impacts that women experience in association with intimate partner violence (Johnson & Ferraro, 2000; Straus, 2007). With such substantial and convincing evidence of harmful outcomes, researchers and advocates alike, have been curious to understand why victims stay in IPV relationships (Hendy, Eggen, Gustitus, McLeod, & Ng, 2003). The debate—about which factors are most associated with the decision making process to stay or leave—persists, with some literature suggesting that external components are most salient and others asserting internal or personal elements are most important.

It seems that one important area of research that has yet to be examined in the context of intimate partner violence is a woman's general decision making tendencies about her romantic partner (Mikkelson & Pauley, 2013). Some literature suggests that people either maximize, approach choices with the goal of finding the “best” possible alternative, or satisfice, approach choices with the goal of finding an option that is “good enough” according to their threshold of acceptability (Dar-Nimrod, Rawn, Lehman, & Schwartz, 2009; Schwartz, Ward, Monterosso, Lyubomirsky, White, & Lehman, 2002). This study could lend important findings to IPV literature since there is a consensus that maximizers are more sensitive to regret, less satisfied than satisficers overall with their decisions, and are captivated by pursuing the best option at the moment of choice (Jain, Bearden, & Filipowicz, 2013; Polman, 2010; Vohs et al., 2008). In the

present study, partners' satisficing and maximizing tendencies are examined in an attempt to better understand the relationship between partner violence and relationship commitment. In particular, the purpose of this article is to examine the relationship between satisficing and maximizing, and relationship commitment when controlling for structural constraint (feeling trapped in the relationship) and moral constraint (feeling morally obligated to remain in the relationship).

## **Literature Review**

### **Intimate Partner Violence**

Every 15 seconds an act of partner violence occurs, with 65% of women reporting rape and/or physical assault by a current or former domestic partner (National Coalition Against Domestic Violence [NCAD], 1999). Despite many common assumptions, IPV impacts women of all races, religious groups, and socioeconomic status (Gillum, 2002; Huang & Gunn, 2001; Morrison, Luchok, Richter, & Parra-Medina, 2006) and may result in serious physical and mental health consequences (Campbell, 2002; Powers, Curry, Oswald, & Maley, 2002). Intimate partner violence is linked to a multitude of systemic issues, such as diminished physical health, increased risk for mental health distress, and difficulties in their interpersonal sphere (Davis, 2013; Stith, McCollum, Rosen, Locke, & Goldberg, 2005).

The profound impact on the physical, psychological and social well-being that is a consequence of partner violence has been explored. Efforts to understand why individuals remain in relationships where these damaging outcomes occur have been exerted for decades. In order to reduce incidence rates and to assist women in weighing the option to leave abusive partners, it is important to understand the components that contribute to the sustainability of violent relationships. Research focusing on possible reasons why women might stay generally

fall into three categories: 1) an increase in danger after women leave and how fear of escalating the violence constrains them; 2) sociological constraints like social values and policies; and 3) psychological and situational factors (Dunn, 2005).

### **Possible Reasons to Stay**

**Escalating violence.** Some women in IPV relationships feel trapped with a partner who threatens to escalate the violence if the woman attempts to leave (Peled, Eisikovits, Enosh, & Winstok, 2000). Unfortunately, separation from the abuser does not always terminate the violence. In many instances, leaving may be more dangerous than staying for both the woman and any children involved (Harlow, 1991; Pagelow, 1992; Peled, Eisikovits, Enosh, & Winstok, 2000). Severe injury and even murder may come to women whose partners lash out in reaction to attempts to terminate the relationship. (Saunders & Browne, 1990; Peled, Eisikovits, Enosh, & Winstok, 2000). In this regard, fear of escalating violence may hold some women back from feeling confident enough to leave safely.

**Moral constraints.** Moral commitment, the sense that one is morally obligated to continue a relationship, may serve as a significant sociological barrier in IPV relationships and is a function of three components (Johnson, Caughlin, & Huston, 1999). First, a broader obligation concerning the morality of the dissolution of particular types of relationships may, for instance, cause one to feel that marriage ought to last forever (Rodrigues & Lopes, 2015). Second, one might feel a personal moral obligation to another person based on history, feelings of sympathy, or a variety of other reasons that are specific to that partner (Johnson, 1991). Third, a person might feel obligated to continue a particular relationship because of general consistency values. Kelley (1983) seems to have had this component of moral commitment in mind when he noted that over time people usually try to maintain a consistency in how they feel, think, and act on

matters that are important to them. Each facet of moral commitment might cause a woman to feel constrained in one way or another to remain in a violent relationship in an effort to do what is “right” or honorable.

**Structural constraints.** Structural constraints are perceived barriers to leaving a relationship that might lead one to feel trapped in the relationship (Johnson, Caughlin, & Huston, 1999). For one, believing that alternative circumstances would be available if the relationship ended may contribute to dependency on the relationship and perceived inability to terminate the relationship (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Another type of structural constraint comes from social pressure in the individual’s network, where loved ones may or may not approve of ending the relationship (Johnson, Caughlin, & Huston, 1999). Additionally, the difficulty of termination procedures potentially function as a barrier to dissolution. In the case of marriage, there is a set of legal procedures required to divorce, possessions have to be divided, and at least one of the partners ordinarily has to find new housing (Johnson, Caughlin, & Huston, 1999). To the extent that such actions are seen as onerous, women in IPV relationships may avoid them altogether. Finally, irretrievable investments of things like time and resources may impact feelings of constraint (Beeble, Bybee, & Sullivan, 2010). All instances further promote structural barriers that contribute to feeling constrained in IPV relationships.

Society often overlooks these constraints and assumes that women are choosing to stay, or have “settled” for an abusive partner (Dunn, 2005). Some literature suggests that being content with one’s partner as opposed to seeking the best option for a romantic relationship is positively correlated with satisfaction and commitment (Mikkelsen & Pauley, 2013). Yet, researchers have yet to look at the way that the decision making tendency to settle for less, or “satisfice”, may affect a woman’s commitment to remain in a violent relationship.

## **Satisficing v. Maximizing**

**Satisficing.** Satisficing describes the tendency to approach choices with the goal of finding an option that is “good enough” according to one’s threshold of acceptability (Schwartz et al., 2002). In this approach to choice, the individual does not have to consider all information about each option, the standards for what is acceptable are more modest, and these standards do not depend on the number of options (Roets, Schwartz, & Guan, 2012). Additionally, when adopting a “good enough” approach to decision-making, there is no failure in choosing a merely decent, but not perfect, option.

**Maximizing.** The satisficing decision-making style may seem contradictory to the “American dream”, since autonomy and choice in individual decision making are highly valued in Western societies (Roets, Schwartz, & Guan, 2012). However, many researchers have found that maximizers, or those who tend to approach choices with the goal of finding the “best” possible alternative, are less satisfied overall with their decisions (Jain, Bearden, & Filipowicz, 2013; Polman, 2010; Roets, Schwartz, Guan, 2012; Schwartz et al., 2002; Yang & Chiou, 2010). People may come to believe that any imperfect result is their fault, because, with so many options, they have no excuse for not getting the “right” one. With more options, more responsibility falls to the individual to make a choice that will prove to be satisfying and not something they will later regret.

## **Satisficing and Maximizing in Romantic Relationships**

The study of satisficing and maximizing as an individual personality trait has gained much traction in consumer behavior research, while relatively few studies have examined the effects of trait in other decision-making domains (Mikkelsen & Pauley, 2013). Given that decisions about romantic partners are some of the most important ones in life and therefore

require significant resource investment, it would follow that some individuals might practice even greater vigilance when selecting a partner. Accordingly, previous research has demonstrated that people tend to demonstrate great care and choose more conservative options when selecting a potential dating partner (Beisswanger, Stone, Hupp, & Allgaier, 2003). Since maximizers would typically be more sensitive to regret, more acutely aware of alternatives, and more hesitant to invest in the relationship if there was a chance their partner might not be the best choice for them, it seems plausible to assume that relationship satisfaction and commitment would be lower for these individuals. However, no previous research has been conducted with these variables in the context of violent relationships.

### **Commitment in Violent Relationships**

The existing literature on aggression and commitment in romantic relationships seems to vary in its conclusions (Rhoades, Stanley, Kelmer, & Markman, 2010). Some research shows that physical aggression is associated with a higher likelihood of relationship termination over time (Carlson, McLanahan, & England, 2004; Lawrence & Bradbury, 2001; Shortt, Capaldi, Kim, & Owen, 2006), suggesting that aggression might be associated with lower relationship commitment. Other studies have found that aggression is associated with higher commitment (Hammock & O'Hearn, 2002; Pedersen & Thomas, 1992). Contradictions in findings could be related to a failure to parse out different types of commitment or constraint (e.g. structural v. moral constraint), which may be associated with different levels of dedication to the relationship. Aggression tends to be associated with lower satisfaction (e.g., Lund & Thomas, 2014) which could play a large role in the decision to end the relationship; however, commitment theory suggests that satisfaction is not the only reason partners stay together. Within Stanley and Markman's (1992) theory of commitment, the desire to maintain the relationship for the long



term is called interpersonal commitment or dedication. Pressures or circumstances that can serve as barriers to relationship termination are referred to as constraints (Rhoades, Stanley, Kelmer, & Markman, 2010) and seem to play a large role in the level of dedication and commitment in all relationships (Johnson, Caughlin, & Huston, 1999). Further examination of the impact that these constraints have on the commitment to stay in IPV relationships specifically is necessary to better understand stay-leave decisions for women.

## **Methodology**

### **Sample**

Data for this study will come from the Texas Healthy Marriage Initiative Baseline Survey Project, a representative, statewide survey of adults 18 years of age and older (Harris et al., 2008). Data were collected in 2007 by the Office of Survey Research at the University of Texas in Austin. The survey assessed attitudes on a variety of topics including partner attributes, marriage, and divorce as well as participants' own relationship and marital history and current satisfaction. Information on the participants and data collection methods of this project have been published elsewhere (see Harris et al., 2008); however, certain key aspects of the sample and sampling procedure are reiterated here. A random digit dialing sampling design was employed in which the household member over 18 with the most recent birthday was asked to participate. Only one member per household was interviewed and interviews typically lasted 45 minutes. A total of 2,500 participants were recruited including an oversample of 500 Hispanic residents. This study will use only data from individuals who reported that there had been some form of relational aggression present in their current relationship ( $N = 470$ ). See Table 1 for further demographic information about the sample. The overwhelming majority of past research on partner violence has focused on female victims because females are disproportionately affected.

However, the present study will examine both male and female victims due to statistically significant proportions of both genders confirming they had experienced relational aggression in our sample, and in an effort to contribute to the literature on violence experienced by both genders.

## **Measures**

See Table 2 for a list of all the relational constructs and their specific items used in these analyses.

**Relational Aggression.** Researchers measured the presence of violence by using items relating to an important part of partner violence, relational aggression. Items used to measure relational aggression included 7 dichotomous (yes or no) items modified from Johnson and Leone (2005) and included items such as “thinking about your partner, would you say he/she: Insists on knowing who you are with at all times?”, “shouts or swears at you?”, “threatens to hurt you or others you care about?”, and “makes you feel inadequate?”. These items have been shown to have good reliability ( $\alpha = .70$ ; Johnson & Leone, 2005). Johnson and Leone (2005) also looked at the factor structure of these items using principal components analysis and found them to constitute a single construct.

**Satisficing.** Respondents’ willingness to settle in their relationship was assessed by one item that the researchers felt was a valid representation of this construct: “I am willing to accept disappointments in order to keep this relationship together.” Responses were on a 4-point Likert scale (with responses being “strongly agree,” “agree,” “disagree,” and “strongly disagree”) with more agreeable responses being indicative of higher satisficing tendencies.

**Maximizing.** Additionally, respondents’ assessment of their tendency to maximize was measured with 1 item taken from Schwartz et al. (2002): “Whenever I’m faced with a choice, I

try to imagine what all of the other possibilities are, even ones that aren't present at the moment." Responses were also on a 4-point Likert scale, with more agreeable responses indicating higher levels of maximizing.

**Relationship commitment.** Dedication or commitment to one's relationship was measured by four items on the same 4-point Likert scale examining respondents' level of desire to stay in their relationship. Items were modified from Stanley and Markman (1992) and ranged from "my relationship is the most important thing in life" to "I will likely leave this relationship someday." Previous studies have shown that scales using these items are reliable with Cronbach's alphas  $> .70$  (Stanley & Markman, 1992). Cronbach's alpha for this scale in the current study was  $.6$ .

**Structural constraint.** Respondents' sense that there are barriers to leaving the relationship was measured with one item chosen by the researchers to be the most valid representation of that construct: "I feel a little trapped or pressured by circumstance to continue in this relationship." Responses were on a 4-point Likert scale (with responses being "strongly agree," "agree," "disagree," and "strongly disagree") with more agreeable responses being indicative of higher levels of feeling structurally constrained to the relationship.

**Moral constraint.** Similarly, respondents' feelings that they are morally obligated to remain in the relationship was assessed with one chosen item by the research team: "I could never leave my partner because I would feel guilty about letting him/her down." Responses were on a 4-point Likert scale (with responses being "strongly agree," "agree," "disagree," and "strongly disagree") with more agreeable responses being indicative of higher levels of feeling morally constrained to the relationship.

## **Research Hypotheses**

H1: Based on the findings of Rhoades, Stanley, Kelmer, and Markman (2010), we anticipate that severity of violence will explain a significant amount of the variance in relationship commitment

H2: Based on the findings of Mikkelsen and Pauley (2013), we anticipate that satisficing and maximizing tendencies will have a significant relationship with relationship commitment, even when structural and moral constraints are controlled

### **Analysis**

One of the challenges with research involving violent behavior is that this complex phenomenon is often influenced by multiple variables, not just a singular effect (Shadish & Sweeney, 1992). Indeed, social scientists should be concerned about any variable that may indirectly affect a relationship (Aiken & West, 1991). Unwanted effects can be accounted for in research as controlled variables (Baron & Kenny, 1986). This study utilized hierarchical multiple regression because several of the variables have potential to play a role in one's relationship commitment. Hierarchical regression has an advantage over the simpler multiple regression in that variables can be entered at different levels of the model to parse out when and how much of the variance in the dependent variable is accounted for by certain variables (Aiken & West, 1991). Variables that we examined in this analysis include "relational aggression," "satisficing," "maximizing," "moral constraint," "structural constraint," and "relationship commitment."

For hypothesis one, standard correlation coefficients and hierarchical multiple regression determined if the severity of relational aggression explained a significant amount of the variance in relationship commitment (Carlson, McLanahan, & England, 2004; Lawrence & Bradbury, 2001; Shortt, Capaldi, Kim, & Owen, 2006; Lund & Thomas, 2014). We entered severity of

aggression in the first step of the regression, along with marital status, and examined both at the first level of analysis and in the overall model.

For hypothesis two, a hierarchical multiple regression helped to determine if satisficing and maximizing tendencies would have a significant impact on relationship commitment when structural and moral constraints are controlled for (Beisswanger, Stone, Hupp, & Allgaier, 2003; Mikkelson and Pauley, 2013). Again, severity of relational aggression and marital status were entered at the first step, moral and structural constraints were entered at the second step as further control variables, and satisficing and maximizing were entered in the last step. We examined moral and structural constraints as control variables since the literature has shown that these constructs play a large part both in why women remain in violent relationships (Johnson, Caughlin, & Huston, 1999), and in measuring relationship commitment (Rhoades, Stanley, Kelmer, & Markman, 2010).

## **Results**

### **Preliminary Tests**

Participants were taken from a large sample (N=2,500) by filtering the dataset for those who reported that they had experienced some form of relational aggression within their relationship (see Table 2 for list of relational aggression items). Standard frequency and descriptive tests were completed on demographic data of the sample, which included 470 individuals who reported that they had experienced some form of negative aggression from their current partner (Table 1). Participants indicated which forms of aggression they had experienced by marking either “yes” or “no” to each item. A sum score variable was computed to measure severity of aggression, based upon the 7 relational aggression items (with higher scores being indicative of more severe aggression). A reliability test was completed to ensure that relationship

commitment could be used as a scale ( $\alpha = .6$ ), and a mean score was computed with four items. All other constructs were single item variables chosen by the research team based upon the most valid representation of those constructs according to the literature (see Table 2).

### **Intercorrelations for Study Variables**

The data was first analyzed using pairwise bivariate correlations (see Table 3). Gender and length of the relationship was not significantly correlated with any of the study variables, and was therefore not controlled for in any further analyses. There were significant correlations between satisficing and structural constraint ( $r = .155, p = .001$ ), moral constraint ( $r = .209, p < .001$ ), and relationship commitment ( $r = .217, p < .001$ ), meaning that higher satisficing scores were associated with higher levels of structural constraint, moral constraint, and relationship commitment. There were also significant correlations between maximizing and structural constraint ( $r = .206, p < .001$ ) and moral constraint ( $r = .181, p < .001$ ), and an approaching significant correlation to relationship commitment ( $r = -.057$ ). Therefore, higher maximizing scores were associated with higher levels of structural constraint and moral constraint. Structural constraint and moral constraint were also significantly correlated to relationship commitment at the  $p < .001$  level ( $r = -.232$  and  $r = .162$ , respectively), suggesting that more structural is associated with less commitment, and more moral constraint equates to stronger relationship commitment.

### **Hypothesis One**

Standard correlation coefficients revealed that there was a significant relationship between relational aggression and relationship commitment ( $r = .229, p < .001$ ). This suggests that participants who reported more severe levels of relational aggression coming from their spouse also had higher levels of relationship commitment towards that spouse. Hierarchical

multiple regression was then used to determine if the severity of relational aggression explained a significant amount of the variance in relationship commitment. Relational aggression only accounted for 5.1% of the variance in reported relationship commitment, meaning that about 5% of participants' commitment to their partner could be explained by the presence (or absence) of aggression ( $F(1, 382) = 20.624, R^2 = .051$ ).

## **Hypothesis Two**

Hierarchical multiple regression was used to determine if satisficing and maximizing tendencies would have a significant impact on relationship commitment when structural and moral constraints were controlled for. At the first step, the researchers entered the relational aggression sum score variable and marital status variable, explaining 8.8% of the variance in relationship commitment ( $F(2, 381) = 18.33; R^2 = .088$ ). At the second step, the researchers entered structural constraint and moral constraint, which explained 17.7% of the variance in relationship commitment ( $F(4, 379) = 20.373; R^2 \text{ change} = .089$ ), and satisficing and maximizing were entered in the third and final step. After entry of satisficing and maximizing at step three, the total variance explained by the model as a whole was 20.5% ( $F(6, 377) = 16.184, p = .002; R^2 \text{ change} = .028$ ; see Table 4). The model suggests that satisficing still has a significant effect ( $\beta = .172, p < .001$ ) on relationship commitment when aggression severity, marital status, and other constraints are controlled for. That is, when aggression severity, marital status, and structural and moral constraints are held constant, the extent to which participants have satisficed in their relationship is significantly associated with their level of relationship commitment to their partner. The model also suggests that structural constraints account for a large amount of variance in reported relationship commitment, as structural constraint was significantly negatively linked with commitment ( $\beta = -.316, p < .001$ ). This suggests that when

controlling for marital status and severity of aggression, the more “trapped” one is feeling in the relationship, the less commitment they have to the relationship.

### **Discussion**

The goal of this study was to determine the nature of the relationship between satisficing and maximizing, and relationship commitment in the context of intimate partner violence when controlling for structural and moral constraints. Some of the previous research shows that negative relational aggression is associated with a higher likelihood of relationship termination over time, and therefore perhaps lower relationship commitment (Carlson, McLanahan, & England, 2004; Lawrence & Bradbury, 2001; Shortt, Capaldi, Kim, & Owen, 2006), while other studies have found that aggression is associated with higher commitment (Hammock & O’Hearn, 2002; Pedersen & Thomas, 1992). Results from the study indicate that relational aggression was associated with higher levels of relationship commitment, confirming what some researchers have asserted in relation to commitment theory (Stanley & Markman, 1992). This theory suggests that satisfaction and happiness with one’s partner is not the only reason partners stay together long term, but rather interpersonal dedication and sometimes other factors, like constraints, play a role in the sustainability of relationships (Lund & Thomas, 2014; Stanley & Markman, 1992). In other words, despite many participants dealing with some form (or often multiple forms) of aggression from their partner, relationship commitment remained high due, in part, to other factors within the relationship. This is an important finding to take note of when assessing for someone’s readiness to leave a relationship in the midst of violence, something that would be very difficult if dedication to one’s partner is still strong.

Second, previous research has shown that constraints can come in many forms, and different types of constraints may impact relationships differently (Goodfriend & Agnew, 2008;



Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2011). Some of the most influential constraints to consider according to the literature when examining possible barriers to leaving relationships include concern for one's partner's welfare in the event of a breakup, perceptions regarding the quality of alternative life choices, and the sense that one is trapped in the relationship (Rhoades, Stanley, Kelmer, & Markman, 2010). This study, however, only found satisficing and structural constraints to be significant factors in relationship commitment. Moral constraints, operationalized in this study as not feeling able to leave due to feelings of guilt, was not significantly correlated to relationship commitment. This could potentially be because moral constraint as a construct should be measured as more than feeling guilty to leave, or because some participants might have other moral obligations to their partners that do not include feelings of guilt.

Third, much of the previous research involving satisficing and maximizing tendencies have described these concepts as being a part of the same construct, on a continuum (Roets, Schwartz, & Guan, 2012; Schwartz et al., 2002). In other words, satisficing has been understood as being the opposite of maximizing. In the current study, the researchers decided to use two different items in the analysis, one to measure satisficing and one to measure maximizing. If it were true that these two concepts were opposites, one would expect that they would have a negative statistical relationship to one another. However, while significant ( $p < .05$  level), satisficing and maximizing shared a correlation coefficient of only  $r = .094$ . Additionally, satisficing was found to be significantly correlated with relationship commitment ( $r = .217, p < .001$ ) while maximizing was not ( $r = -.057, p = .115$ ), and in the final regression model, satisficing accounted for a significant amount of the variance in relationship commitment ( $\beta = .172, p < .001$ ), while maximizing did not ( $\beta = -.17, p = .735$ ). This implies then, that satisficing

and maximizing may not actually be measuring a construct on the same continuum, a finding contradictory to most previous research (Jain, Bearden, & Filipowicz, 2013; Polman, 2010; Roets, Schwartz, Guan, 2012; Schwartz et al., 2002; Yang & Chiou, 2010).

Overall, satisficing and structural constraints were strongly associated with relationship commitment when severity of aggression, marital status, and moral constraints were held constant. This contributes new information to the literature on IPV in the sense that regardless of the level of violence in the home or any moral obligation one might have to his or her partner, the tendency to settle for a partner who he or she thinks is “good enough,” explains a large part of being committed to that relationship. On the other hand, this means that for individuals in violent relationships, having the tendency to look for the “best” opportunity or partner when choosing a mate may actually lead to less satisfaction and less commitment to the partner. This reduced commitment may in part happen because of an increased risk for guilt at having made a “wrong” choice (having to deal with relational aggression from partner) after using so much effort to maximize options (Mikkelsen & Pauley, 2013).

This study also confirms from previous research that structural constraints play an important role in relationship commitment. Researchers have suggested that feeling trapped in the relationship leads to higher likelihood that one will remain in that relationship (Johnson, Caughlin, & Huston, 1999), and indeed, this study found that the more constrained and pressured participants felt to stay with their partner, the less relationship commitment they had ( $r = -.232, p < .001$ ). Taken with the finding about satisficing playing an important role in commitment, this suggests that freely choosing one’s partner and not feeling pressured or constrained to be with them, (even if they are only perceived as a “good enough” choice and not the “best” choice) leads to stronger relationship commitment.

## **Implications**

A more systemic understanding of why individuals stay in violent or aggressive relationships could benefit marriage and family therapists. Instead of assuming men or women are “blindly” choosing to stay in relationships that seem unhealthy on the outside, acknowledging that the decision to remain in such a relationship is much more complicated than what it often seems is important for mental healthcare professionals. Gaining a clearer perspective about whether individuals feel structurally constrained or about whether they have satisficed (or maximized) for their current partner may (according to this study) help practitioners when assessing for relationship commitment between one or more aggressive partners.

Future research should continue to explore the relationship between satisficing and maximizing within aggressive relationships. There is a need for a reliable scale to be developed for these two constructs separately, so that researchers can learn more about these decision making tendencies and how they are different. Having satisficing and maximizing scales will enable researchers to look more reliably at what other parts of relationships may be significantly impacted by these tendencies. Future research should also explore which particular structural constraints hold the most weight within aggressive or violent relationships when considering level of commitment. Finally, IPV assessments should be reevaluated for level of efficacy in picking out satisficing and maximizing tendencies within relationships so that clinicians can utilize a broader perspective on why individuals stay with violent partners.

## **Limitations**

As will all research studies, there were several limitations that should be noted. This study used single items to measure most of the variables (with the exception of severity of

aggression and relationship commitment). As a result, researchers were forced to choose items subjectively that most validly fit the relational constructs. Therefore, the results may only be capturing a part of the overall construct. For example, researchers were unable to further examine variables like which types of structural constraints were most salient to participants.

Another limitation is that the measures from this study do not account for cultural differences between participants. This sample had a significant proportion of participants indicate a Hispanic heritage. In addition to acculturation differences, current researchers could not assess for whether participants felt that the survey provided an accurate representation of important aspects of relationship commitment in the Hispanic community. Also, this sample was drawn entirely from the state of Texas. Although a large, fairly representative sample of the Texas population was obtained, regional and cultural differences in conceptualizations of committed relationships and partner perceptions may impact the findings of this study and reduce generalizability to the larger population. A recent Gallup poll from 2013 that asked about state variations in level of religiosity found that Texas was the 12th ranked state in regards to number of respondents who reported being very religious (Newport, 2013). Partners in this region may, therefore, hold more conservative views of marriage that may impact their notion of commitment in marriage.

Additionally, the interview consisted of over 300 questions and was administered in one sitting. The length of the survey requires researchers to consider the accuracy of the responses. As is true with any self-report inventories, social desirability may have played a role in how much participants disclosed to interviewers. Although statistical analyses suggest that responses fit the assumptions of normality and linearity, the short term maturation of participants must be acknowledged.

Next, data for this study came from individuals in relationships rather than dyadic pairs of marital partners. As these are all relational constructs, the degree to which partners match or differ on these perceptions, could itself be an indicator of the state of their relationship and a piece that this study was unable to include. Jackson, Miller, Oka, and Henry (2014) conducted a meta-analysis in which marital satisfaction was examined in both dyadic and non-dyadic data. They found that there were no gender differences in marital satisfaction when husbands and wives in the same relationship were compared versus significantly different reports of marital satisfaction between genders in non-dyadic data. Future studies, therefore, should consider focusing more on obtaining dyadic data when looking at relationship constructs like commitment, as this may lead to a better understanding of what influences couple satisfaction and dedication.

Lastly, researchers used a cross-sectional sampling design to collect data. As such, this study can only make conclusions about the structure of relationship commitment, and the way that decision-making tendencies impact it at one single point in time. This means that the data is time-limited and provides information only about what participants are perceiving about their relationship and themselves at the time of the survey. It also prevents us from commenting on direction of effects. Longitudinal analysis would provide more in-depth and accurate information about the responses. In addition to verifying responses across time, collecting data at more than a single point provides accuracy about the developmental continuum of satisficing and maximizing tendencies, as well as relationship commitment.

### **Conclusion**

There has been a lack of research exploring satisficing and maximizing tendencies and their association with relationship commitment between aggressive or violent partners. This

study makes a unique contribution to the literature by exploring how satisficing and maximizing are related to commitment when constraints are controlled for. This study was useful in showing that satisficing and structural constraints play a significant role in relationship commitment for couples experiencing relational aggression. Furthermore, severity of aggression within the relationship did seem to have a strong positive relationship with commitment: the more severe the aggression was in the relationship, the more committed the individual was to his or her partner. This study shed light on the need for a broader and more systemic understanding for why individuals stay in violent relationships. Given these findings, it is clear that couples experiencing violence or aggression (and the mental health professionals treating them) could benefit from further clinical, research, and policy efforts to better address their dyadic needs.

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Table 1

*Demographic information*

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Mean (SD) or Frequency (%)</i>
<b>Age</b>	47.73 (14.64)
18-24	10.6%
25-44	42.1%
45-64	35.1%
65+	10.6%
<b>Gender</b>	
Male	36.6%
Female	62.3%
<b>Race</b>	
White	78.3%
Black	8.3%
East Asian	1.3%
Native American	1.7%
Mixed Race or Other	2.6%
<b>Hispanic Ethnicity</b>	30.6%
<b>Income</b>	
Under \$15,000	4.8%
\$15,000 – \$24,999	8.6%
\$25,000 – \$49,999	19.7%
\$50,000 – \$74,999	17.2%
\$75,000 – \$99,999	14.1%
\$100,000 or more	16.8%
<b>Length of Relationship</b>	16.26 (14.69)

*(N=470)*

Table 2

*Relational construct items*

Construct	Item number	Item Name
Relational Aggression	<b>h316ar</b>	Knowing where you are at all times
	<b>h316br</b>	Shouts or swears at you
	<b>h316cr</b>	Jealous or possessive
	<b>h316dr</b>	Threatens to hurt you or others
	<b>h316er</b>	Controls access to money
	<b>h316fr</b>	Makes you feel inadequate
	<b>h316gr</b>	Calls you names in front of others
Structural Constraint	<b>h302r</b>	Feel trapped or pressured to continue relationship
Moral Constraint	<b>h298r</b>	Could never leave b/c would feel guilty
Satisficing	<b>h283r</b>	Accept disappointments to keep relationship
Maximizing	<b>g243r</b>	Try to imagine all other possibilities not present
Relationship Commitment	<b>h268r</b>	Relationship most important thing in life
	<b>h274r</b>	Totally dedicated to making relationship work
	<b>h290rr</b>	Just about ready to give up on relationship
	<b>h295rr</b>	Will likely leave relationship someday

Table 3

*Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations for all constructs*

Variables	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.
1. Relational aggression (sum score)	-								
2. Gender	-.039	-							
3. Marital status	-.041	-.035	-						
4. Length of relationship	.066	.053	-.417**	-					
5. Sacrificing	.055	-.090	-.090	.093	-				
6. Maximizing	.019	-.035	.044	-.041	.094*	-			
7. Structural constraint	-.180**	.091	.052	-.057	.155**	.206**	-		
8. Moral constraint	.016	-.075	.043	.029	.209**	.181**	.204**	-	
9. Relationship commitment (mean score)	.229**	-.064	-.192**	.116*	.217**	-.057	-.232**	.162**	-
<i>M</i>	12.13	1.63	1.71	16.26	2.96	3.06	2.15	2.63	3.20
<i>SD</i>	1.68	.48	1.47	14.70	.91	.88	1.02	1.42	.64

$p < .05^*$   $p < .001^{**}$

Table 4

*Hierarchical multiple regression models examining factors linked with relationship commitment*

Variable	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	$\beta$	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	$\beta$	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	$\beta$
Constant	2.329	.228		2.855	.240		2.627	.251	
Violence sum score	.081	.018	.217**	.059	.018	.159**	.057	.018	.153**
Marital status	-.074	.019	-.191**	-.069	.018	-.179**	-.062	.018	-.161**
Structural constraint				-.189	.030	-.306**	-.195	.031	-.316**
Moral constraint				.051	.022	.113*	.039	.022	.086
Satisficing							.108	.030	.172**
Maximizing							-.011	.033	-.17
$R^2$		.088			.177			.205	
<i>F</i> for change in $R^2$		15.273**			20.533**			6.601**	

 $p < .05$ \*  $p < .001$ \*\*



## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The goal of this study was to determine the nature of the relationship between satisficing and maximizing, and relationship commitment in the context of intimate partner violence when controlling for structural and moral constraints. Previous literature has explored relational aggression as being associated with a higher likelihood of relationship termination over time, and therefore perhaps lower relationship commitment (Carlson, McLanahan, & England, 2004; Lawrence & Bradbury, 2001; Shortt, Capaldi, Kim, & Owen, 2006), while other studies have found that aggression is associated with higher commitment (Hammock & O'Hearn, 2002; Pedersen & Thomas, 1992). Previous research has also examined the important role constraints play in both relationship commitment and settling for a "good enough" decision (Johnson, Caughlin, & Huston, 1999; Beeble, Bybee, & Sullivan, 2010; Dunn, 2005).

Chapter one presented an overview of intimate partner violence and the many biopsychosocial health consequences that come from these situations. Almost a quarter of all women (22.1%) report they were physically assaulted by a partner in their lifetime (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Despite race, religion, and socioeconomic status, this issue affects all women and can lead to a multitude of negative physical, mental and interpersonal health consequences (Davis, 2013; Morrison, Luchok, Richter, & Parra-Medina, 2006; Stith, McCollum, Rosen, Locke, & Goldberg, 2005).

Chapter two demonstrated how there is a gap in the literature and a need for research examining the way in which satisficing and maximizing tendencies impact aspects of relationships, including commitment in violent relationships. Previous research has focused on 3 main reasons why women might stay in violent or aggressive relationships: 1) an increase in danger after women leave and how fear of escalating the violence constrains them; 2)

sociological constraints like social values and policies; and 3) psychological and situational factors (Dunn, 2005). Victims of partner violence or aggression might also have to consider structural constraints (feeling trapped or pressured to remain in the relationship) and moral constraints (feeling morally obligated to remain in the relationship) in the decision to stay or leave a partner (Johnson, Caughlin, & Huston, 1999; Beeble, Bybee, & Sullivan, 2010). However, no research has examined how relationship commitment is impacted when considering decision making tendencies after these constraints are controlled for.

Chapter three presented the methodology for the study, including information on the sample, measures, and analysis. Variables that were examined in this analysis include “relational aggression”, “satisficing”, “maximizing”, “moral constraint”, “structural constraint”, and “relationship commitment”. Standard correlation coefficients and hierarchical multiple regression was used to determine if the severity of relational aggression explained a significant amount of the variance in relationship commitment (Carlson, McLanahan, & England, 2004; Lawrence & Bradbury, 2001; Shortt, Capaldi, Kim, & Owen, 2006; Lund & Thomas, 2014). A hierarchical multiple regression was used to determine if satisficing and maximizing tendencies would have a significant impact on relationship commitment when structural and moral constraints are controlled for (Beisswanger, Stone, Hupp, & Allgaier, 2003; Mikkelsen and Pauley, 2013).

Chapter four was constructed as a journal article including the findings from the literature, the methodology of the study, and the results from analyses of 470 participants in committed relationships. This study provided a unique perspective by examining satisficing and maximizing tendencies in the context of violent or aggressive relationships. Insight gained from

this study will help mental healthcare providers better understand and holistically treat violent couples facing stress from relational aggression.

### **Contradictions to Previous Research**

Some previous literature suggests that relational aggression is associated with higher levels of relationship commitment (Stanley & Markman, 1992), as was also the case in the present study. However, differing from previous literature, results from this study showed that only satisficing and structural constraints seem to be significant factors in relationship commitment. Moral constraints, operationalized in this study as not feeling able to leave due to feelings of guilt, was not significantly correlated to relationship commitment. It was also apparent in the current study that satisficing and maximizing may not actually be measuring a construct on the same continuum, a finding contradictory to most previous research (i.e. satisficing and maximizing are two different constructs).

### **Contributions to Previous Research**

Overall this study found that satisficing and structural constraints were strongly associated with relationship commitment when severity of aggression, marital status, and moral constraints were held constant. This contributes new information to the literature on IPV in the sense that regardless of the level of violence in the home or any moral obligation one might have to his or her partner, the tendency to settle for a partner who he or she thinks is “good enough”, explains a large part of being committed to that relationship. Lastly, this study found that the more constrained and pressured participants felt to stay with their partner, the less relationship commitment they had. Taken with the finding that satisficing plays an important role in commitment, this suggests that freely choosing one’s partner and not feeling pressured or

constrained to be with them, (even if they are only perceived as a “good enough” choice and not the “best” choice) leads to stronger relationship commitment.

### **Confirming Previous Research**

This study is significant in the field of Marriage and Family Therapy because it affirms the systemic perspective in assessing and treating violent or aggressive partner relationships. This research punctuates the need to continue exploring which traits and factors influence an individual’s decision to stay or leave an aggressive partner, particularly when there are structural constraints in place. Additionally, more systemic assessments that include decision making tendency evaluations should be incorporated into research and treatment of IPV. Below are clinical and research recommendations that further expand these points.

### **Clinical Recommendations**

This research highlights the complexity associated with the construct of relationship commitment. In general, previous literature has examined a multitude of other factors that might impact commitment between partners, and this study adds even more to this list. Clinicians should be aware of the many facets of this construct with their clients, and remain conscious of how cultural differences can inform one’s understanding of relationship commitment, particularly between aggressive clients. Within the presenting problem of relational aggression or IPV, clinicians should thoroughly assess for structural constraints that might influence decisions to stay or leave a violent relationship. For example, asking about whether the couple is living together, has had children together, social pressure from friends and family for the relationship to continue, concern for one’s partner’s welfare in the event of a breakup, the availability of suitable alternative partners, the length of the relationship, and the sense that one is trapped in the relationship are all structural constraints that can make it harder for someone to leave a

relationship (Rhoades, Stanley, Kelmer, & Markman, 2010). Processing with clients how these constraints may influence a decision to leave may be an important part of therapy.

Additionally, clinicians should be accepting, respectful, and willing to learn about the experiences of partners in violent or aggressive relationships because each client's understanding may be different based on his or her personal experience with violence. It is important for mental health providers to maintain a "not-knowing" stance since this study demonstrates that not all relational aggression leads to decreased commitment or perhaps even decreased satisfaction; therefore, clinicians should attempt to keep an open mind about what relationship commitment means to each individual in order to better understand how to strengthen that dedication to his or her partner.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

While several research recommendations could come from this study, one that is worth highlighting is the need for a reliable scale to be developed for the constructs of satisficing and maximizing separately, so that researchers can learn more about these decision making tendencies and how they are different. Having satisficing and maximizing scales will enable researchers to look more reliably at what other parts of relationships may be significantly impacted by these tendencies, as well as capture a more thorough representation of each construct. Additionally, future research should also explore which particular structural constraints hold the most weight within aggressive or violent relationships when considering level of commitment. This could be particularly relevant to clinicians as mental health providers seek to assess for the most salient reasons that individuals may stay with violent or aggressive partners. Finally, further research should be conducted to examine why more severe relational aggression is associated with higher relationship commitment. This may lead to distressing

outcomes if there seems to be no threshold of “too much” aggression for individuals’ and their commitment to stay with their partner. Researchers should strive to untangle the complexities within victims’ biological, psychological, social, and spiritual efforts to remain dedicated to a partner despite violence or aggression. The findings from this thesis will hopefully contribute to future research, clinical models, policies, and resources that will add to a more holistic understanding of reasons that people may choose or be constrained to remain in violent or aggressive relationships.

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