

# REALITY TELEVISION VIEWING INFLUENCED BY EMERGING ADULTS' DIFFERENTIATION

By

Lauren Stiegler

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Director of Thesis: Damon Rappleyea, PhD

Major Department: Human Development and Family Sciences

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine direct and indirect effects of differentiation on viewers' television involvement and Gottman's Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse behaviors through the amount of reality television viewed and viewers' marriage readiness (i.e. relationship intentions) for emerging adults (age 18-26). Studies have identified that some emerging adults are thriving and living positively and others face many challenges (Nelson, & Padilla-Walker, 2013). Reality television has been increasingly popular within this demographic and labeled a "Super Peer," because of its immense influence (Ward, 2002). There is a lack of research that assesses what variables affect reality television viewership. The researcher utilized a structural equation model to examine the relationships between differentiation and the impact of reality television. The data was collected through an online survey to understand the indirect and direct effects of reality television viewership on emerging adults and relationships.



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DIFFERENTIATION

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By

Lauren Stiegler

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By

Lauren Stiegler

APPROVED BY:

DIRECTOR OF

THESIS: \_\_\_\_\_

Damon Rappleyea, Ph.D.

COMMITTEE MEMBER: \_\_\_\_\_

Jake Jensen, Ph.D.

COMMITTEE MEMBER: \_\_\_\_\_

Jacquelyn Mallette, Ph.D.

CHAIR OF THE DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN DEVELOPMENT AND FAMILY SCIENCE:

\_\_\_\_\_

Sharon Ballard, Ph.D.

DEAN OF THE

GRADUATE SCHOOL: \_\_\_\_\_

Paul J. Gemperline, Ph.D.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

As emerging adults transition out of their caregiver's house and into college, many of them thrive and many of them experience challenges (Nelson, & Padilla-Walker, 2013). The experiences that emerging adults live are shown to be predictors of adulthood and self-development (Nelson, & Padilla-Walker, 2013). An overwhelming amount of first-time adult marriages end in divorce. Therefore, there is a need to better understand the romantic relationships of emerging adults that shape their sense of self (Gottman & Silver, 1999). In addition to dissolution, dissatisfaction within romantic relationships is highly correlated with mental health illnesses that can negatively impact the lives of emerging adults (Whitton & Kuryluk, 2012). With the established links between mental health and relationship satisfaction and functioning, researchers and clinicians need to better understand the potential factors that influence relationships.

The media's influence on emerging adults' has been of particular interest in recent literature. Lately reality television has taken a large role in society among 18-26 year olds, specifically. Researchers have identified that many of its viewers embody and exhibit the behaviors seen on television in their everyday lives (Ward, 2002). Specifically, television influences its young viewers' personal beliefs about romantic relationships (Ward, 2002). The literature on television argues it supports distorted, harmful and stereotypical behaviors that are increasingly consumed by impressionable emerging adults (Ward, 2002). Television has been labeled as a "Super Peer," because it provides a non-realistic view of what a relationship should look like. Reality television was termed a "Super Peer" by researchers because of the education,

although usually inaccurate, on sex that it provides to its viewers (Ward, 2002). Viewers are then at risk of being influenced by the content that is viewed.

This study attempts to assess if reality television viewership is impacted by differentiation or vulnerability to others' opinions and beliefs. The researcher assessed for one's level of differentiation's impact on viewer involvement and marriage readiness. Gottman explored the conflict between couples to identify four behaviors that are predictors of divorce (Gottman et al., 1998). The identified behaviors, criticism, defensiveness, contempt and stonewalling, are destructive behaviors that are viewed across many reality television shows. The researcher aims to suggest that the more reality television viewed, the more likely the viewer exhibits the Four Horsemen behaviors seen on television. If emerging adults are highly susceptible to the media's normalization of negative behaviors, they could be more likely to portray the behaviors in real life and increase chances of relationship dissolution.

### **The Need for this Study**

Reality television purposely blurs the lines between real life and entertainment to continue building on its large following (Peek & Beresin, 2016). Emerging adults are not particularly prone to seeing and internalizing the difference between what is seen on reality television and real-life (Peek & Beresin, 2016). The blurred lines allow for reality television to facilitate the use of negative, stereotypical relationship beliefs and behaviors (Ward, 2002). Although entertaining, reality television viewers often accept and perpetuate the negative beliefs and behaviors they see (Palmer, 2013). Literature has yet to examine in depth what makes the television viewer more vulnerable to the television's influence. If literature examines which viewers are more likely to embody the exhibited television behaviors in real life, practitioners could use the knowledge to help lessen the impact for emerging adults.

Murray Bowen argues that as one's level of differentiation increases, their sense of individuality is greater and the influence of others is less impactful (Bowen & Kerr, 1988). Differentiation of Self Inventory can, therefore, be used as a tool to measure one's level of susceptibility to other's influence, including the media. Few researchers have assessed if an individual with high differentiation is less inclined to demonstrate reality television's negative behaviors in real life because they have a more stable self and is less emotionally reactive in relationships. The less differentiated a person is, the more vulnerable he/they may be to the negative messages sent through reality television. The "Super Peer's" influence on its viewers is problematic. In practice, if a therapist can identify the individual's level of differentiation, h/she can understand the person's draw to television and the level of impact it has on their relationships.

### **The Purpose of the Study**

Literature has discussed different aspects of concern for the misleading nature of reality television. Reality television creates a skewed mold of how relationships should function. Specifically, reality television portrays examples of negative behaviors and interactions within couple relationships that are continually viewed by impressionable emerging adults (Kim, Schooler, Lazaro, & Weiss, 2019).

Murray Bowen describes one's vulnerability to others' opinions as one's level of differentiation (Bowen & Kerr, 1988). From a Bowen Family Systems Theory perspective, the researcher examined if a participant's level of differentiation is a related factor to the amount of television they view. In addition, if a participant views high amounts of reality television, is she more likely to exhibit negative behaviors in real life? The first goal of this thesis was to assess the participant's level of differentiation. After the participant's differentiation was assessed, her

amount of reality television viewed and viewer involvement were calculated. The second portion of the study assessed the participant's exhibition of Gottman's Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse behaviors in real-life relationships.

From a structural equation model, the researcher conducted correlational analyses and regressions to identify if the variables were related. With the knowledge of the participants' displayed behaviors in real life and level of differentiation, the researcher provided psycho-education about the effects of Gottman's negative behaviors in relationships. An increase in awareness and knowledge of Gottman's Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse behaviors could increase present and future relationship satisfaction, mental health, and relationship success in the future.



## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Emerging Adulthood**

The period between adolescence and adulthood, ages 18-26, has been defined as emerging adulthood (Nelson & Barry, 2005). Research highlights that some emerging adults are thriving and endorsing the positive aspects of adulthood, but unfortunately, at the same time, others are facing many challenges and are struggling (Nelson, & Padilla-Walker, 2013). According to literature, establishing sexual relationships is a developmental challenge that emerging adults face (Ward, 2002). A study with a sample of 487 undergraduate students sought to examine the possible relationship between different categorical groups of emerging adults and whether or not these groups were important predictors for adulthood and self-development (Nelson & Padilla-Walker, 2013). Based on the data collected, researchers created three emerging adult groups: an externalizing group, a poorly adjusted group, and a well-adjusted group (Nelson & Padilla-Walker, 2013). Specifically, the well-adjusted group maintained high levels of regulated internal values and low levels of anxiety, depression, drug and drinking usage (Nelson & Padilla-Walker, 2013). This research highlights the differences among all emerging adults. Since emerging adulthood has been tied to success as an adult, researchers may want to identify a vulnerable, poorly adjusted emerging adult to increasing their functioning.

### **Mental Health of Emerging Adults**

About 67% of first-time marriages will end within 40 years (Gottman & Silver, 1999). Additionally, researchers have linked failed or “bad” marriages to stress and negative mental health outcomes (Gottman & Silver, 1999). By following with adult relationships, research has

consistently tied emerging adults' mental health to the quality of their romantic relationships (Whitton, & Kuryluk, 2012).

A longitudinal study focused on depressive symptoms and the quality of romantic relationships starting in adolescence and continuing through emerging adulthood (Vujeva, & Furman, 2011). Through emerging adulthood, there was a link between depressive symptoms at the age of 15, heightened relationship conflict and low amounts of positive problem-solving behaviors when compared to participants with lower amounts of depressive symptoms (Vujeva, & Furman, 2011). The researchers concluded that the presence of depressive symptoms around the age of 15 might impact relationship quality in emerging adulthood years (Vujeva, & Furman, 2011). This research suggests a link between positive problem-solving skills and a low amount of depressive symptoms and relationship conflict. With this information, an intervention can be created to focus on positive conflict resolution.

### **Romantic Relationships in Emerging Adulthood**

Current research emphasizes an increase in distress and dissolution within adult romantic relationships (Sullivan, et. al., 2010). Specifically, research suggests that romantic partners' emotional health and physical health are both impacted by relationship distress (Sullivan, et. al., 2010). Interventions may target the reduction of externalizing behaviors to improve the emerging adult's overall relationship satisfaction. Within this type of intervention, the partners may also experience an improvement in their physical and mental health (Van Dulmen et al., 2008).

These findings support a need for an intervention that targets unhealthy behaviors to improve relationship satisfaction, mental, and physical health. A reduction in externalizing behaviors in emerging adult relationships can increase one's sense of security and positively impact the relationship (Van Dulmen et al., 2008). This study emphasized that this association

was even more significant for emerging adults than for adolescents (Van Dulmen, et. al., 2008). Using these findings is relevant when developing an intervention to improve emerging adults' relationship satisfaction.

Relationship exploration and conflict are common encounters in emerging adulthood. Researchers in a longitudinal study assessed the association between relationship satisfaction and conflict management in 267 emerging adults (Roberson, et. al., 2015). The results of the collected data indicated a relationship between social adjustment and conflict management in emerging adults (Roberson, et. al., 2015). Specifically, the better the individual's conflict management skills, the more socially adjusted they were.

The study also found that conflict management was correlated to college academic adjustment through the emerging adult's relationship satisfaction (Roberson, et. al., 2015). Additional literature supports the idea that emotional coping abilities in emerging adults can predict the individual's adjustment to college life (Johnson et al., 2010). If an emerging adult has better conflict management skills, their relationship satisfaction and academic adjustment are higher. These factors are important indicators of challenges that many emerging adults face. These findings are helpful when developing an intervention to reduce emerging adults' relationship dissolution rate, academic adjustment challenges, and poor mental health.

A study's findings suggest that 69% of couple conflicts are perpetuated, never usually resolved (Gurman et al., 2015). Literature suggests that examining behaviors exhibited during interactions, especially romantic ones, is very important (Gottman, & Gottman, 2017). Researchers have assessed the importance of negative-to-positive behavior ratios during the relational conflict. Results have supported the idea that the more negative behaviors or emotions that are exhibited during a relationship conflict, the less happy the couple reported being

(Gottman, & Gottman, 2017). Gottman defines an emotionally intelligent marriage as one where the positive thoughts and feelings outweigh the negative ones (Gottman & Silver, 1999). Although relationship conflict is not dissolvable, it runs the risk of perpetuating if not de-escalated (Gottman et al., 2002).

Literature maintains that conflict within a relationship is inevitable and the goal of couple's therapy should not be the elimination of it but to maintain stability in the face of it (Gurman et al., 2015). When conflict is perpetuated in a relationship, emotional reactivity increases considerably with each interaction. As reactivity escalates, certain interactional behaviors are the most destructive and potentially flag an early prediction of divorce (Gottman et al., 2002). Research already links higher relationship satisfaction to conflict management skills. Being aware of predictors of divorce can target those behaviors through education on managing relationship conflict.

### **Bowen Family Systems Theory: Differentiation**

Relational conflict is perpetuated by each partner's heightened emotional reaction to stress (Bowen & Kerr, 1988, pg. 61). Murray Bowen argued that an "emotional [reaction] is assumed to be regulated by the interplay of a force that inclines people to follow their directives, to be independent (individuality), and a force that inclines them to respond to directives from others, to be connected (togetherness)" (Bowen & Kerr, 1988, pg. 61). Bowen placed value in the need for a balance of individuality and togetherness, also known as differentiation. This process highlights the notion that "closeness requires separateness" (Neil & Kniskern, 1982, p. 121). To increase one's level of differentiation, they must reduce emotional reactions. As one's level of differentiation increases, their sense of individuality is greater and the need for

togetherness is less impactful (Bowen & Kerr, 1988). When this balance is achieved, one can easily cope with circumstantial stress, conflict, or change and is not easily influenced by others.

In individuals or couples that have low differentiation, it is important to note that as one's "balance [shifts] to foster less individuality and more togetherness, [one becomes] less tolerant of and more reactive to [another's] moves toward increased or decreased involvement" (Bowen & Kerr, 1988, pg. 76). A partner experiencing a threat to their relationship may respond in a heightened emotion to restore their healthy balance. If one can learn to maintain a high differentiation with a lowered emotional reactivity, they can make room for productive communication. A goal of a couple's intervention may consider this theory when discussing partner differences and conflict.

### **Effectiveness of Bowen Family Systems Theory**

Murray Bowen's Family Systems Theory was tested to assess the relationship between the differentiation of self and the individual's quality of marital relationship (Skowron, 2000). The study found that the "couples' levels of differentiation explained substantial variance in marital adjustment" (Skowron, 2000). The researchers concluded that the couples' level of emotional cutoff and emotional reactivity could predict their amount of marital distress (Skowron, 2000). The first finding is important when trying to understand how a couple's level of differentiation may predict their marital adjustment capabilities. When considering marital adjustment ability, research shows that one's level of differentiation impacts one's ability to communicate and may impact one's overall relationship satisfaction (Bowen & Kerr, 1988, pg. 76; Skowron, 2000). These findings are important to keep in mind when thinking of an effective intervention that targets relationship satisfaction and communication. If emotional reactivity and

cutoff predict marital distress, an intervention may want to target behaviors in relationships that increase or decrease distress (Skowron, 2000).

### **Unregulated versus Undifferentiated**

An observation that Gottman (1994, 1999) made based on his results is couples who are in balanced, functional relationships manage conflict in different ways than unbalanced, dysfunctional relationships. He labeled the balanced group as ‘regulated’ and the unbalanced group as ‘nonregulated.’ The definitions of balanced/regulated and unbalanced/unregulated can mirror Bowen’s concepts of high differentiation and low differentiation. A couple that is regulated can be labeled emotionally intelligent, meaning the partners can express more positive, less emotionally reactive thoughts (Gottman & Silver, 1999). This is also a factor when determining differentiation (Bowen & Kerr, 1988).

Gottman specified that anger management, active listening, and “I” statements are not necessarily the most effective tools to use with couples (Gottman & Silver, 1999). Gottman believes that positive, genuine sentiments meant to counteract the “Four Horseman” behaviors are the most effective tool to make a marriage work (Gottman & Silver, 1999). More importantly, the strongest, most stable relationships contain partners that share a sense of meaning through the support of one another (Gottman & Silver, 1999). When considering a relationship intervention, it may be important to be aware of the couple’s level of differentiation, or emotional intelligence to understand their ability to manage conflict and adapt to stress.

Gottman expressed that partners must be tolerant of each other. He believes that if one thinks he or she can change their partner, a fair compromise can never be reached (Gottman & Silver, 1999). When a couple is balanced, or differentiated, and not emotionally reactive, there may be room for compromise and problem solving (Gurman et al., 2015). A healthy compromise

must have space for both partner's voices. Compromising during a relational conflict comes from both partners expressing needs pertinent to the issue that they cannot change and discussing aspects of the conflict they are more flexible towards (Gurman et al., 2015).

Describing one's perspective of what can change, the flexible demands, and cannot change, the non-negotiable needs is another way to define differentiation. A willingness to compromise for one's partner is an attempt at increasing one's innate sense of togetherness (Bowen & Kerr, 1988, pg. 76). When attempting to compromise and resolve conflict, increased differentiation and lowered emotional reactivity appear to be effective (Bowen & Kerr, 1988). The goal of this type of compromise is to establish safety during honest moments and to facilitate positive communication (Gurman et al., 2015). If each partner has a voice and a willingness to discuss what can and cannot change, the ability to effectively communicate the issue improves.

#### **Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse**

Relationship conflict must be understood to increase relationship satisfaction (Gottman et al., 2002). Escalation of relational conflict has maintained the prediction of early divorce in less than 6 years of marriage (Gottman, & Levenson, 1992). In an attempt to understand relationship dissolution, Gottman concluded that de-escalation of conflict is important for increased relationship functioning (Gottman, 1979). Gottman et al. (2000) argued that active listening and anger management were ineffective interventions to create sustained change with couples that are experiencing conflict.

Research consistently implies that therapy with a focus on increasing relationship satisfaction, reducing conflict and increasing positivity throughout the relationship is most effective for lasting change (Bray & Jouriles 1995; Gottman et al., 2002). Awareness of potentially harmful behaviors and communication habits can improve relationship satisfaction

and reduce the likelihood of divorce (Gottman et al., 2000). Gottman (1994) argued that therapy with a focus on reducing specific negative behaviors would be the most effective when working with couples experiencing conflict (Gottman and Gottman, 1999). Therapy with a focus on the reduction of these behaviors was referred to as a preventative measure for the dissolution of relationships (Gottman and Gottman, 1999). Gottman stands by his theory that awareness and preventative measures are most helpful when working with couples.

Gottman studied the interactions of 130 newly-wed couples to better understand the destructive behaviors that perpetuate conflict (Gottman et al., 1998). In Gottman's study (1998), he attempted to observe the couple to define their dissolution predictability. This study collected a baseline assessment of each partner's marital satisfaction before observing the couple's interactional patterns (Gottman and Gottman, 1999). In addition to self-reported information, the researchers asked the couples to describe a disagreement they consider to be problematic within their relationship (Gottman et al., 1998). Based on the longitudinal data collected, Gottman identified 4 behaviors as predictors of divorce: stonewalling, defensiveness, criticism, and contempt (Gottman et al., 1994).

The identified behaviors discussed above were common themes that Dr. Gottman noticed to be the most prevalent and destructive to the stability of the marriage. Gottman highlighted the link between the number of occurrences of the behaviors in a relationship and the couple's potential divorce outcome with more than 90 percent accuracy (Gottman & Gottman, 1999). Gottman argues that the more the couple experiences these behaviors, the more likely the couple is to dissolve (Gottman et al., 2000). These behaviors were then given the labeled the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (Gottman et al., 1994).



## **Criticism**

Gottman labels and describes each of the four behaviors that he believed are detrimental to a couple's relationship (Gottman et al., 1994). First, the behavior labeled "criticism" is defined as when one partner verbally highlights an issue as a deficit of their partner's character (Gurman, et. al., 2015). An example of this behavior is the response, "what is wrong with you?" (Gottman & Silver, 1999). The key part that makes a statement criticism is when one partner insinuates that there is something globally wrong with the other partner (Gottman, 1999). The difference established between a complaint about a partner to criticism of a partner is using the phrases "you always" or "you never" (Gottman, 1999). The given counter-response instead of criticism is an expression of feelings and emotions using "I" statements to avoid blame (Gurman, et. al., 2015). The more specific a voice of displeasure about a relationship is, the less global and critical it comes across.

## **Defensiveness**

Next, when one partner voices a critical perception, the countering partner usually displays the second identified Four Horsemen behavior. The behavior labeled "defensiveness" is defined by actions of whining, explaining and taking the innocent stance, or counterattacking, defending oneself (Gurman et al., 2015). An example of this behavior in a statement would be, "it's not me, it is actually you" (Gottman & Silver, 1999). This behavior is destructive because the partner displaying defensiveness is avoiding self-responsibility in the situation and places blame on the other partner. The response that has been shown to de-escalate this behavior is taking responsibility for any part, big or small, of the conflict (Gurman et al., 2015). Similar to Bowen's concept of differentiation, acknowledging that one's self plays a part in conflict is important for self-growth.

## **Contempt**

Gottman believes that the third identified Four Horsemen behavior is the most damaging when displayed in conflict. The behavior labeled “contempt” can be described as a self-appointed position of superiority, which usually includes eye-rolling, hostile humor, mocking, insults, sarcasm, or name-calling towards the partner (Gurman et al., 2015; Gottman & Silver, 1999). Contempt is seen as the most destructive behavior because it is built up resentment and negative thoughts towards another person (Gottman & Silver, 1999). To lessen contempt, actions of respect must be present and strong. Respect is strengthened through partners’ expressions of admiration and appreciation (Gurman et al., 2015).

## **Stonewalling**

Finally, the behavior identified as “stonewalling” can be described as a partner’s disengagement from relationship interactions (Gurman et al., 2015). The behavior can be verbal or non-verbal. An example of a verbal stonewalling is “I do not care” or physically removing one’s self from the room to avoid the conflict (Gottman & Silver, 1999). The stonewalling partner may also withhold the physical or verbal expression of feelings to maintain their disengagement. Women are less likely to exhibit this behavior than men (Gottman, 1994). To counter stonewalling behaviors, a partner must be able to self-soothe to reduce physical and physiological arousal (Gurman et al., 2015). The partners may take a break to reduce emotional reactivity and return to the conflict. The goal of self-soothing is for the one partner to maintain the ability to stay present for the other partner (Gurman et al., 2015).

## **Support and Limitations**

The behavioral predictions that Gottman (1994) concluded were replicated in various studies. Research has shown that a heightened amount of the “Four Horsemen” behaviors

between two partners can predict a continual decline in relationship satisfaction and an increase of instability (Gottman, & Levenson, 1992). A study conducted by Holman and Jarvis (2003) reviewed specific couple-conflict types to understand more about relationship quality. The study reproduced reliable results similar to Gottman's (1998) study (Holman, & Jarvis, 2003). Additionally, another study has specifically supported Gottman's assertions that the four behaviors are valid predictors of divorce among couples that are married (Hafen & Crane, 2003). The study was able to reproduce Gottman's findings effectively. Researchers have also been able to replicate the findings of Levenson and Gottman's research (1992) on emotional-soothing (Gurman et al., 2015). When partners can avoid these emotionally escalated behaviors they can stay present and understand their partner's position and problem-solving can be achieved (Gurman et al., 2015).

One of the key critiques of Gottman's (1998) study was the break down of the selected couples: 20 of the most distressed, 20 of the least distressed and 17 divorced couples. The issue with these categories is the researchers potentially only tested the extreme relationships, which makes the study less generalizable (Stanley et al., 2000). The second key critique of Gottman's (1998) study was concern about the lack of attention on the potential impact of age, income, ethnicity, education or failure to obtain an initial relationship satisfaction score (Stanley et al., 2000). This critique is highlighting the potential effect of each participant's social location. Gottman responded to the second critique by stating that the couples did not significantly differ on any of the demographic variables, excluding the husband's age (Gottman et al., 2000).

In reply to the first critique, Gottman et al. (2000) argued that by choosing those distinct groups based on relational distress, a specific baseline satisfaction score would not be necessary. Gottman et al. (2000) also responded to a critique on the study's potential gender effect by

suggesting that research shows women are more likely than men to start a discussion surrounding a difficult issue (Stanley et al., 2000). Lastly, Gottman (2000) restated his conclusion that the ‘Four Horsemen’ behaviors were greater predictors of dissolution over anger.

### **Impact of Reality Television on Emerging Adults**

The Bureau of Labor Statistics stated that the civilian population, ages 15 and up, watch about 2 hours and 46 minutes of television per day (2018). Reality television, in particular, has gathered a large following. Reality television (RTV) is defined by entertainment shows that are meant to reproduce depictions of everyday life and inadvertently produce unattainable expectations of reality (Palmer, 2013). Research emphasizes the vagueness of reality and reality-based television, through the eyes of an adolescent (Peek & Beresin, 2016). The differences between reality television and reality are often purposely blurred for entertainment purposes. Research urges RTV viewers of its increasingly accepted and tolerated behaviors (Palmer, 2013). Television has been labeled as a “Super Peer,” because it provides a non-realistic view of what a relationship should look like (Ward, 2002). Reality television, although entertaining, has been shown to reinforce a discourse that perpetuates society’s problematic norms (Palmer, 2013).

Literature has shared concerns about the misleading and excessive amount of unhealthy, stereotypical sexual relationship interactions portrayed on television (Ward, 2002). Literature suggests that emerging adults’ beliefs about what they consider appropriate “feminine” or “masculine” behaviors have an impact on their sexual decisions (Ward, 2002). RTV has been shown to portray various types of negative examples of how romantic relationships and encounters should be (Ward, 2002). It is important to understand the systemic impact of reality television on its viewers, their relationships, and the negative behaviors endorsed, which are increasingly accepted and perpetuated in real life.

## **Reasons for Watching Reality Television**

Researchers have targeted the effects of reality television by examining aspects of its viewers' intentions on watching it. Studies have examined RTV viewers' intentions through the lens of the uses and gratifications theory. This theory suggests that adolescent viewers watch RTV for either entertainment or learning purposes (Rubin, 1986). Studies concluded that viewers watch television content that aligns more consistently with their personal needs (Katz, Blumer, & Gurevitch, 1974; Rubin, 1986). A more recent study examined this notion by assessing viewers' motives. The researchers used a 17-item Likert scale that assessed 4 factors: mood regulation (i.e. "I watch TV to create a certain mood for me"), entertainment (i.e. "I find TV viewing relaxing"), television dependency (i.e. "I chose to watch TV above doing something else"), and escape (i.e. "I watch TV when I want everyone to leave me alone"). After examining viewers' motives, the study concluded that watching RTV did not affect the belief that boys are obsessed with sex and that girls are sex objects (Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2011). This study indicated the need for a longitudinal exploration of RTV and adolescents' sexuality (Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2011).

## **Effects of Reality Television**

There is a vast amount of literature that implores the need to examine the full impact of reality television. The main take away from television literature is that it highlights distorted, harmful and stereotypical content that is increasingly consumed by impressionable emerging adults (Ward, 2002). RTV viewers who identify with the content displayed have a higher tendency of being influenced and affected by the television show (Ward, 2002). Researchers' calls for concern about RTV align with a study that assessed the link between realistically portrayed aggression and imitation of the portrayed aggressive behavior in its viewers

(Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2011). Researchers collected 498 adolescents and, over 3 years, assessed the effects the participants experienced from watching romantic reality television and their reasons for watching it (Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2011). The researchers concluded that for females, romantically themed reality television encouraged communication about sex among peers (Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2011). This finding is important when attempting to understand the impact of reality television on emerging adults' perception of relationships and sexual behaviors. If sexual behaviors portrayed on television perpetuate sexual conversations among females, it would be interesting to evaluate the impact of the behaviors on communication between two romantic partners.

Support for a relationship between television and endorsed sexual behaviors and attitudes is large (Zurbriggen & Morgan, 2006). A study assessed the negative impact that television, specifically stereotypical relationship portrayals, has on its viewers (Ward, 2002). The researchers examined 259 diverse undergraduate students (ages 18-22) to evaluate TV's impact on students' perceptions of sexual relationships (Ward, 2002). Each participant viewed a TV clip that was categorized as one of the following: neutral, nonsexual content, or one of three different stereotypical sexual behaviors (Ward, 2002).

The researchers concluded that there is a significant relationship between the TV's contents portrayed and students' assumptions and attitudes on sexual interactions based on what they see (Ward, 2002). The findings showed that group differences in sexual attitudes could be influenced or molded by "experimental exposure to sexual content, even from brief, one-time, video exposure" (Ward, pg. 3, 2002). Also, women in the study who viewed TV clips with sexual stereotypes were more likely to encourage the behavior shown than the women who viewed the neutral content (Ward, 2002). The researchers warn about the dichotomy television

creates between male sexual aggressiveness and female passivity and responsibility (Ward, 2002). These findings are relevant when examining the full impact of television and the perpetuation of negative behaviors by its viewers.

In addition to sexual behaviors in television, physically threatening behaviors have also been assessed. A study examined 174 adolescents to better understand the influence of reality television, specifically, on its young viewers (Ward & Carlson, 2013). Each participant was asked to identify their usage on various media platforms, the amount of socially aggressive reality television consumed, their perception of the realness of the reality television, and if they engage in any of the identified socially aggressive acts (Ward & Carlson, 2013). The researchers concluded that there was a significant relationship between the amount of socially aggressive TV consumed and the amount of socially aggressive behaviors endorsed, especially with those who contributed a higher level of realness to the content (Ward & Carlson, 2013).

The researchers highlighted that gender did not moderate the results (Ward & Carlson, 2013). The last key finding of the study was the emphasis that reality television produced higher levels of socially aggressive behavior reenacted than any other media (Ward & Carlson, 2013). It is important to note that gender did not affect the results, meaning that both males and females are absorbing the behaviors and portraying them in reality. This study is only part of the support for raising awareness about the behaviors exhibited in television shows, whether sexual or physical and endorsements by its viewers.

### **Relationship Workshop**

When assessing the effectiveness of couple therapy for adults in relationships, literature concludes support for systemic interventions that target relationship distress (Carr, 2009). Literature supports that “attending to and noticing...internal and external stimuli may contribute

to greater relationship satisfaction” (Khaddouma, et. al., 2015). A study collected data from 80 distressed couples to assess psycho-educational treatment outcomes (Babcock et al., 2013). The workshops were done with Dr. John and Julie Gottman. The goals of the workshops were to improve relationship satisfaction and stability (Gottman et al., 2005).

A section of the couple’s workshop focused on conflict management. A brief intervention called *Manage Conflict* was evaluated to see if it decreased dysfunctional relationship conflict and increased functional conflict processes (Gottman et al., 2005). The workshop aimed to coach couples in regulation and management of conflict using “softened startup, accepting influence, effective repair, physiological self and partner soothing, taking effective breaks, and compromise” (Gottman et al., pg. 16, 2005).

The study assessed for the “Four Horsemen” behaviors with 33 statements, an example of one being “I can get mean and insulting [during a] dispute” (Babcock et al., pg. 12, 2013). The researchers suggested that the couples’ marital distress was influenced by destructive conflict and pre-workshop marital satisfaction (Babcock et al., 2013). The results of the study suggested that conflict management improved the couples’ marital satisfaction one year after the workshop (Babcock et al., 2013). A key suggestion the researchers made was that a brief psycho-education before a couple attends therapy could increase the effectiveness of treatment for distressed couples (Babcock et al., 2013). These findings are relevant when developing an intervention to improve couples’ communication abilities.

Literature has shown that the study of relationship interactions can improve the knowledge of effective, systemic work with families and couples. Researchers have found that observational data of conflict-related interactions between partners is helpful when assessing or examining negative and positive communication behaviors (Gottman et al., 2005). In a study



referenced above, researchers assessed the effectiveness of a conflict management workshop with distressed couples (Gottman et al., 2005). In addition to observational data, the researchers used the Couple's Problem Inventory to measure a variety of relationship issues (Gottman et al., 2005; Gottman, Markman, & Notarius, 1977). Researchers coded behaviors that were seen as themes throughout the couple conflict videos that were observed. Specifically, the "Four Horsemen" behaviors were assessed and coded as negative affect codes (Gottman et al., 2005).

Targeting the coded behaviors and the Couple's Problem Inventory, the conflict management course reduced the intensity of the negative affect of the wife (Gottman et al., 2005). This finding suggests that awareness around healthy conflict communication and destructive behaviors, such as the "Four Horsemen" behaviors, may improve the functioning and satisfaction of a partner in a relationship. An intervention that encapsulates these findings could attempt to prevent or even undo destructive relationship patterns that add to the marital dissolution rate that is affecting many people today.

## **CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY**

### **Purpose of the Study**

This article explored the idea that reality television normalizes and endorses behaviors, similar to Gottman's identified Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, in real-life romantic relationships. The purpose of this study was to examine the direct and indirect effects of one's level of differentiation on viewer involvement and frequency of Gottman's behaviors through the amount of reality television viewed and marriage readiness (i.e., relationship intentions). The more vulnerable one is to others' beliefs and behaviors, the lower the level of differentiation and poorer mental health outcomes. The lower one's differentiation, the more susceptible they are to the content viewed on reality television. Increasing awareness around negative relationship behaviors could decrease relationship dissolution and increase relationship satisfaction. The research questions that were examined in this study were based on recent research relevant to reality television and emerging adults.

### **Research Questions and Hypotheses**

RQ 1) Is one's level of differentiation significantly associated with viewer involvement?

H 1) The lower one's level of differentiation, the higher the amount of viewer involvement.

RQ 2) Does the amount of Reality Television viewed impact viewer involvement and negative conflict communication behaviors?

H 2) The more RTV watched, the higher the level of viewer involvement and the more negative conflict communication exhibited.

RQ 3) Is one's level of differentiation significantly linked with one's marriage readiness (i.e. relationship intentions)?

H 3) The lower one's level of differentiation, the lower their criteria for marriage readiness.

RQ 4) Does one's level of differentiation have an effect on viewer involvement mediated through the amount of reality television viewed?

H 4) Differentiation does have an effect on viewer involvement mediated through the amount of reality television viewed.

RQ 5) Is one's level of differentiation significantly associated with the frequency of negative conflict communication behaviors exhibited mediated or moderated through marriage readiness?

H 5) The researcher has no prior hypotheses about mediation and/or moderation.

### **Study Design**

The study used a structural equation model and the Mplus program to run correlational analyses and regressions to examine significant relationships between the variables' mean scores. Descriptive statistics were created for the variables' mean scores and demographic information. Any demographic information that was correlated with the dependent and independent variables was controlled. The independent variable in the study was the participant's level of differentiation. The dependent variables were viewer involvement and frequency of exhibition of Four Horsemen behaviors. The mediating variable between differentiation and viewer involvement was the amount of reality television viewed. The researcher examined whether the participant's marriage readiness (i.e. relationship intentions) was a mediator or moderator between differentiation and Gottman's behaviors.

### **Participants and Enlistment**

Participants were comprised of emerging adults, ages 18-25, who watch reality television, no demographic identifications were excluded, other than age. Structure sampling was used to collect the sample. The researcher reached out to students in undergraduate classes that voluntarily chose to participate in the online study. The professor of the class discussed the

concept of the study and asked the students if any females that watched reality television had an interest in participating. The participants were collected until the researcher obtained at least 80 participants. Since the intervention was a lower level, a larger sample size is not needed (Kadam, & Bhalerao, 2010).

### **Inclusion Criteria**

Majority of the research that focused on the influence of reality television assessed individuals, aged 18-25, and labeled emerging adults. Ward's (2002) study that focused on television's influence on young adults suggested that females were more likely to endorse and replicate the sexual behaviors seen in television clips. This study will inclusively collect male, female, and non-binary participants. Since recent research focused on emerging adults that are in heterosexual romantic relationships, the researcher believed the influence would be higher in participants in heterosexual relationships. The researcher had the participants complete a survey that began with a demographic questionnaire to collect the appropriate sample. Through the demographic portion, the researcher was able to collect the individuals that identified as emerging adult age and watched reality television. The questions used in the demographic sample were based on the demographic questions used in Ward's article (2002).

### **Procedures**

#### **Informed Consent**

Informed consent was gathered from each participant before she began the online survey. Each participant was aware that the participation of the survey was voluntary, that she could stop or withdraw from the survey at any time, the overall purpose of the online survey, the potential benefits and costs to the survey, and finally, the extent and use of confidentiality for all participants. Once the informed consent was reviewed, the participant was asked to sign the form

if she complied and agreed to its nature. The participants were also given a chance to respond with any concerns or questions she had before the start of the survey.

### **Confidentiality**

Within the informed consent, the participants were made aware of the limits to confidentiality as well as the extent to which the researcher went to keep the confidentiality of the participants secured. To protect the confidentiality of the participants, the data collected remained anonymous by the use of variable names instead of the participants' names. Every piece of data collected was de-identified and password protected by the researcher. Since the survey was done online at the location of the participants' choice as well as on the participants' personal device, confidentiality was easier to secure. The data will be stored for the completion of the study and 5 years after the published results. After 5 years, the data will be destroyed.

## **Methodology**

### **Participants**

This study's sample included participants who fit emerging adult age parameters (18-26). Primary recruitment was through undergraduate courses at a rural southeastern university and national social media recruitment (e.g. Facebook). The sample included participants from a variety of social location backgrounds. Other than age, participants were not excluded based on any other demographic information.

### **Procedures**

The researchers collected data using the online Qualtrics software (2014) to distribute a survey to participants interested in taking part in the study. Prior to beginning the survey, the participants were also provided an informed consent document outlining the purpose of the

survey, and the potential risks and benefits of participating. Researchers utilized convenience sampling to acquire a sample of emerging adults.

**Demographic Questionnaire.** Participants were asked to identify the following demographic variables: gender (male, female, non-binary, or other), sexual orientation (heterosexual, gay or lesbian, pansexual, or other), age (in years), and relationship status (if in relationship, the length of the relationship in months or years).

**Reality Television Viewership.** After the demographic portion of the survey, the participants were asked 1) If she/he viewed reality television as defined by any entertainment show that is meant to reproduce depictions of everyday life (yes or no), 2) What reality television shows she/he watched (given 10 options and a fill-in-the-blank), 3) The amount of hours per day she/he approximately spends watching reality television, and 4) The amount of hours per week, including the weekend, she/he approximately spends watching reality television (Palmer, 2013). For question 1, the 10 shows that were listed were retrieved from a magazine website that looked at the top, current reality television shows: The Real World, Trading Spaces, Making the Band, American Idol, The Bachelor, Queer Eye, America's Next Top Model, Project Runway, The Hills, and The Real Housewives (Mitchell, 2019). Since the list did not cover all of the existing reality television shows, the researcher provided an "other" option for the participant to fill in. This is a unique measure that the researcher developed and a Cronbach's alpha was not created.

**Viewer's Involvement.** The participant's involvement in viewing reality television shows was examined because involvement has been shown to increase the show's effects on real-life behaviors (Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999). The scale was borrowed from Hall's (2009) article on audience involvement. The scale had 9 items, 5 of which were adapted from Hawkins et al., (2001) and the other four were created by Hall (2009). The purpose of the measure was to

assess the level participants' sought information about the show and the amount the participant communicated or socialized with others about the show (Hall, 2009). The 9 items were broken down into three factors: social involvement (4 items), cognitive involvement (3 items), and online involvement (2 items). Each item had a range of 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*a lot*). The total mean of the items was calculated and labeled as the participant's level of involvement. The scale has good reliability and the Cronbach alpha coefficient was  $\alpha = .87$ .

**Differentiation of Self Inventory.** The Differentiation of Self Scale was used to assess the participant's level of differentiation. The scale had 43 items that the participant ranged from 1 (*Not at all true of me*) to 6 (*Very true of me*). The scale assessed for four factors to understand the participant's level of differentiation: Emotional Reactivity, I-Position Language, Emotional Cutoff, and Fusion with Parents. The four variables were broken up within the scale by the researcher to examine various associations more effectively. This scale provided quantitative data and calculated the participant's overall level of differentiation, or susceptibility. The emotional reactivity scale has good reliability and the Cronbach alpha coefficient was  $\alpha = .82$ . The I-Position scale has acceptable reliability and the Cronbach alpha coefficient was  $\alpha = .703$ . The emotional cutoff scale has acceptable reliability and the Cronbach alpha coefficient was  $\alpha = .77$ . The Fusion with others scale has questionable reliability and the Cronbach alpha coefficient was  $\alpha = .66$ .

**Criteria for Marriage Readiness Questionnaire.** The Criteria for Marriage Readiness Questionnaire (CMRQ) is a modified version of the Criteria for Adulthood Questionnaire. The Adulthood Questionnaire has tested a vast amount of emerging adults to assess for adulthood criteria (Carroll, et. al., 2009; Arnett, 1998; Nelson, 2003; Nelson, Badger, & Wu, 2004). The scale was intended to examine the beliefs and attitudes the participants have about romantic

relationship behaviors and standards. Furthermore, this scale was used to understand the participant's intentions and behaviors in a relationship. The CMRQ asks participants to "indicate whether or not you believe the following are necessary for a person to be ready for marriage." The responses ranged from yes (necessary for marriage readiness) to no (not necessary for marriage readiness). After the first question, the participants were asked to "give your opinion of the importance of each of the following in determining whether or not a person is ready to get married." Each of the 47-items were assessed on a 4-point scale (1= not at all important, 2 = not very important, 3 = fairly important, and 4= very important). The items were added up and a sum score was created for further analysis. The scale has good reliability and the Cronbach alpha coefficient was  $\alpha = .87$ .

**Self-Test (The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse).** The researcher used a self-test version of Gottman's Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse behaviors (Gottman et al., 1998). Although these behaviors are specific to couple interactions, the assessment could be used to examine the relational behaviors exhibited by individuals, in general, during conflict. The researcher referred to these behaviors as negative conflict communication because that is the behaviors that the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse generally symbolize (Gottman et al., 1998). The self-test had 26 items that required a Yes or No response. The self-test specifically assessed for criticism, contempt, defensiveness and stonewalling behaviors. The score was added up and a sum score was created for each participant. The scale has good reliability and the Cronbach alpha coefficient was  $\alpha = .81$ .

### **Research Questions and Hypotheses**

RQ 1) Is one's level of differentiation significantly associated with viewer involvement?

H 1) The lower one's level of differentiation, the higher the amount of viewer involvement.



RQ 2) Does the amount of Reality Television viewed impact viewer involvement and negative conflict communication behaviors?

H 2) The more RTV watched, the higher the level of viewer involvement and the more negative conflict communication exhibited.

RQ 3) Is one's level of differentiation significantly linked with one's marriage readiness (i.e. relationship intentions)?

H 3) The lower one's level of differentiation, the lower their criteria for marriage readiness.

RQ 4) Does one's level of differentiation have an effect on viewer involvement mediated through the amount of reality television viewed?

H 4) Differentiation does have an effect on viewer involvement mediated through the amount of reality television viewed.

RQ 5) Is one's level of differentiation significantly associated with the frequency of negative conflict communication behaviors exhibited mediated or moderated through marriage readiness?

H 5) The researcher has no prior hypotheses about mediation and/or moderation.

### **Data Analyses**

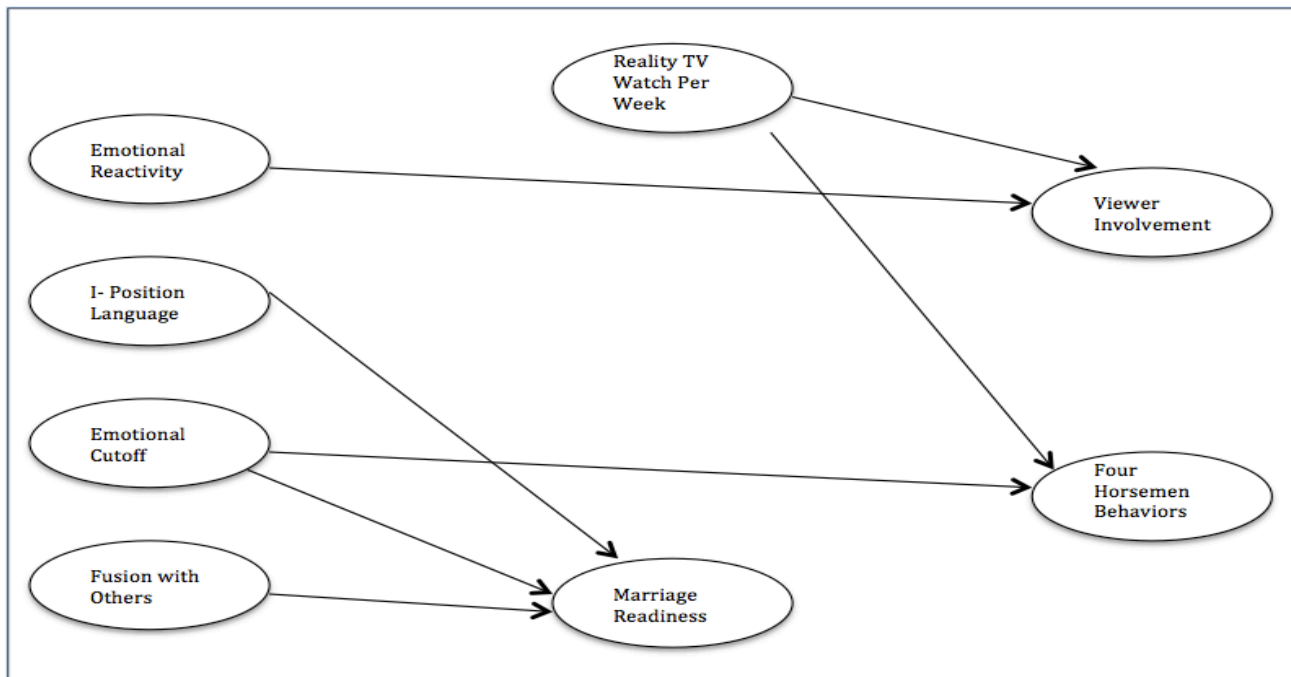
The study utilized a structural equation model based on one independent variable (level of differentiation), two dependent variables (viewer involvement and Four Horsemen Behaviors), and two mediating and/or moderating variables (amount of television viewed and relationship intentions). Using SPSS, the researcher ran descriptive statistics for all of the variables and created mean scores for each. Then, correlational analyses were run to identify significant relationships between all of the variables. Then, using MPlus (Version 8.0; Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2018), the researcher ran simultaneous regressions using the mean scores for each variable scale to identify any direct or indirect effects.

## Regressions

According to the identified research questions, regressions would be most effective to examine the linear relationships between all variables (Mukaka, 2012). Correlations are described as an approach that examines a linear relationship between two variables (Mukaka, 2012). A test that can measure relationships between multiple variables is relevant to this study. After the data was collected, the researcher analyzed the regression coefficients of the variables to assess for any significant relationships. After examination of initial correlations, the researcher then ran regressions. With the regression analyses, the researcher examined significant or non-significant associations between the participant's level of differentiation, amount of reality television viewed, marriage readiness, level of viewer involvement, and the amount of Four Horsemen behaviors exhibited (e.g. negative conflict communication).

## Controls

**Figure 1:**  
*Conceptualization Model*



In order to test the study's proposed model, the Mplus program (Version 8.0; Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2018) was utilized to analyze structural equation models (SEM). The researcher chose SEM as the analytic approach because it appropriately tests the modeling of all the examined variables concurrently (Kline, 2011). The researcher began with testing the first mediation model using the product of coefficients strategy (Preacher et al., 2007), in which the associations between differentiation (as reported by the participants) and each participant's level of viewer involvement were mediated by the amount of reality television viewed. Next, the researcher examined whether differentiation and the frequency of the Four Horsemen behaviors (as reported by the participant) are mediated or moderated by relationship intentions (as reported by the participant).

The good model fit indicates dependability with the study's data and is required before interpreting coefficients in a SEM (Kenny, 2015). A range of fit indices were used to assess the study's goodness-of-fit. The indices include the chi-square statistic/degrees of freedom ratio, the root mean square error approximation (RMSEA), comparative fit index (CFI), and the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR). RMSEA values less than .08 and CFI values close to .95 are shown to indicate an acceptable model fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999). A  $\chi^2/df$  ratio below 3.0 indicates acceptable model fit (Carmines & McIver, 1981).

## CHAPTER 4: MANUSCRIPT

Emerging adulthood is a time of immense transformation and is often clouded with difficult challenges (Nelson & Padilla-Walker, 2013). In particular, establishing healthy, romantic relationships is a common test and some are more successful than others (Ward, 2002). Self-identity is crucial for a successful adult relationship, which many emerging adult relationships lack (Beyers & Seiffge-Krenke, 2010). An underdeveloped self-identity can lead to relationship dissatisfaction. Dissatisfaction within romantic relationships is highly correlated with mental health disorders, such as depression, that can negatively impact one's future and the quality and duration of relationships (Whitton & Kuryluk, 2012; Vujeva, & Furman, 2011). Positive experiences in emerging adult relationships can increase one's sense of security, which is an important aspect to foster as one transitions into adulthood (Van Dulmen et al., 2008; Whitton & Kuryluk, 2012). More importantly, these experiences are shown to be predictors of adulthood (Nelson, & Padilla-Walker, 2013).

Therefore, there is a need to understand the influences that negatively impact romantic relationships of emerging adults. Lately, reality television has taken a large role in society among 18-26 year olds, serving as a "Super Peer" because of the education, although usually inaccurate, it provides about what a relationship should look like (Ward, 2002). Television glorifies distorted, stereotypical behaviors that are increasingly consumed by impressionable emerging adults and implemented into their real-life relationships (Ward, 2002). This relational trend is problematic as it impacts a vulnerable population that is preparing for adulthood. With these established links, researchers and clinicians need to better understand the potential factors that influence this generation's relationship functioning to make way for more success in their adulthood years.

## **The Need for this Study**

Reality television producers purposely blur the lines between real life and entertainment to strengthen its following (Peek & Beresin, 2016). Although entertaining, reality television viewers often accept and perpetuate the destructive beliefs and behaviors they see, which in turn can negatively impact their relationships (Palmer, 2013). Current research has yet to identify what makes the television viewer more vulnerable to television's influence. Emerging adults are in a phase when self-development and connection with others are important. This concept is known as differentiation. Murray Bowen argues that as one's level of differentiation increases, their sense of individuality is greater and the influence of others is less impactful (Bowen & Kerr, 1988). Therefore, the less differentiated one is, the more vulnerable they may be to the messages sent through television. By contrast, higher levels of differentiation seemingly dull the impact of external messages on self-application. Understanding which viewers are more likely to be vulnerable to television's behaviors, practitioners could use the knowledge to increase the effectiveness of their work with emerging adults. This research could provide more effective therapeutic intervention that can positively impact clients' relationships.

## **The Purpose of the Study**

From a Bowen Family Systems Theory perspective, the researcher examined if a participant's level of differentiation is related to their reality television viewing habits. In addition, the researcher aimed to explore the participant's frequency of specific behaviors that Gottman identified as predictors of divorce (Gottman et al., 1998). The researcher aimed to suggest that the more reality television viewed, the more likely the viewer exhibits negative conflict communication (i.e Four Horsemen behaviors) perpetuated on television. The primary aim of this study was to assess the participant's level of differentiation and their level of reality

television exposure. Based on the participant's level of reality television exposure, this study examined what impact did that viewing actually have on romantic relationship behavior (Gottman's Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse scale was used to calculate behavior assimilation).

The researcher conducted correlational analyses and regressions to identify if the variables were related. The researcher provided psycho-education about the effects of Gottman's negative behaviors in relationships to each participant. An increase in awareness and knowledge of Gottman's Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse behaviors could increase present and future relationship satisfaction, mental health, and relationship success in the future.

## **Literature Review**

### **Emerging Adulthood**

Some emerging adults are thriving and endorsing the positive aspects of adulthood, but unfortunately, at the same time, others are facing many challenges and are struggling (Nelson, & Padilla-Walker, 2013). According to literature, establishing sexual relationships is a developmental challenge that emerging adults face (Ward, 2002). More specifically, research has consistently tied emerging adults' mental health to the quality of their romantic relationships (Whitton, & Kuryluk, 2012). Researchers have linked failed or "bad" marriages to stress and negative mental health outcomes (Gottman & Silver, 1999). A study with a sample of 487 undergraduate students sought to examine predictors for adulthood and self-development (Nelson & Padilla-Walker, 2013). Based on the data collected, the researchers labeled three emerging adult groups: an externalizing group, a poorly adjusted group, and a well-adjusted group (Nelson & Padilla-Walker, 2013). The well-adjusted group maintained high levels of regulated internal values and low levels of anxiety, depression, drug and drinking usage (Nelson & Padilla-Walker, 2013). This study supports the link between adulthood adjustment among

emerging adults' and their mental health, thus highlighting the need to better understand variables that impact their transition into adulthood.

Furthermore, research emphasizes an increase in distress and dissolution within adult romantic relationships (Sullivan, et. al., 2010). Research suggests that romantic partners' emotional health and physical health are both impacted by relationship distress (Sullivan, et. al., 2010). These findings support a need for more insight into unhealthy behaviors to improve relationship satisfaction, mental, and physical health in emerging adults. In addition to decreasing mental health concerns, a reduction in negative behaviors in emerging adult relationships can increase one's sense of security and positively impact the relationship (Van Dulmen et al., 2008). One study emphasized that this association was even more significant for emerging adults than for adolescents (Van Dulmen, et. al., 2008). Since emerging adulthood has been tied to stability as an adult, researchers may want to understand and identify vulnerable, poorly adjusted emerging adults to increase their functioning in relationships.

Examining the link between mental health decline and relationship dissatisfaction, researchers in a longitudinal study assessed the association between relationship satisfaction and conflict management in 267 emerging adults (Roberson, et. al., 2015). Supportive research suggests that examining behaviors exhibited during interactions, especially romantic ones, is very important (Gottman, & Gottman, 2017). The results of the collected data indicated a relationship between social adjustment and conflict management in emerging adults (Roberson, et. al., 2015). Specifically, the better the individual's conflict management skills, the more socially adjusted they were. The study also found that conflict management was correlated to college academic adjustment through the emerging adult's relationship satisfaction (Roberson, et. al., 2015). Additional literature supports the idea that emotional coping abilities in emerging

adults can predict the individual's adjustment to college life (Johnson et al., 2010). If an emerging adult has better conflict management skills, their relationship satisfaction and academic adjustment are higher as well. These findings are helpful when examining how to reduce emerging adults' relationship dissolution rate, academic adjustment challenges, and poor mental health. Clinicians may apply this information to their work with struggling emerging adults.

Although relationship conflict is not dissolvable, it runs the risk of perpetuating if not de-escalated (Gottman et al., 2002). Literature maintains that conflict within a relationship is inevitable and the goal of couple's therapy should not be the elimination of it but to maintain stability in the face of it (Gurman et al., 2015). When conflict is perpetuated in a relationship, emotional reactivity increases considerably with each interaction. As reactivity escalates, certain interactional behaviors are the most destructive and potentially flag an early prediction of divorce (Gottman et al., 2002). Research already links higher relationship satisfaction to conflict management skills. If an emerging adult can practice healthy conflict communication, they can understand and improve relationship functioning to decrease existing mental health concerns that are associated with college adjustment. Getting a better understanding of the modeled sources of negative relational interactions, such as television, can also help with relationship functioning.

### **Bowen Family Systems Theory: Differentiation**

Relational conflict is perpetuated by each partner's heightened emotional reaction to stress (Bowen & Kerr, 1988, pg. 61). Bowen argued that an "emotional [reaction] is assumed to be regulated by the interplay of a force that inclines people to follow their directives, to be independent (individuality), and a force that inclines them to respond to directives from others, to be connected (togetherness)," also known as differentiation (Bowen & Kerr, 1988, pg. 61). To increase one's level of differentiation, they must adjust the four variables of differentiation:



emotional reactivity, emotional cutoff, fusion with others, and I-Position language. When this balance is achieved, one can easily cope with circumstantial stress, conflict, or change and is not easily influenced by others.

When examining couples that are experiencing conflict, literature suggests that ones who are balanced and functional manage conflict in different ways than unbalanced, dysfunctional relationships. The researchers labeled the balanced group as ‘regulated’ and the unbalanced group and ‘nonregulated’ (Gottman, 1994; Gottman, 1999). One could argue that balanced couples that are better able to handle conflict are less emotionally reactive and less fused with others; thus, suggesting the regulated couples most likely have high levels of differentiation. It may be important to be aware of the one’s level of differentiation, or susceptibility to others, according to the four identified variables, to better understand their ability to manage conflict and the impact that outside sources, such as reality television, have on the person’s relational behaviors.

#### **Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse**

Escalation of conflict has maintained the prediction of early divorce in less than 6 years of marriage (Gottman, & Levenson, 1992). In an attempt to understand relationship dissolution, researchers concluded that de-escalation of conflict is important for increased relationship functioning (Gottman, 1979). Awareness of potentially harmful behaviors and communication habits can improve relationship satisfaction and reduce the likelihood of divorce (Gottman et al., 2000). In addition, therapy with a focus on reducing specific negative behaviors would be the most effective when working with couples experiencing conflict (Gottman and Gottman, 1999). Therefore, researchers attempting to understand the impact of outside sources, such as television, may want to also provide education about the potential relationship risks of adapting negative

behaviors that are seen on reality shows. Based on longitudinal data collected when observing couples discuss a conflict, researchers identified 4 behaviors as predictors of divorce: stonewalling, defensiveness, criticism, and contempt (Gottman et al., 1994). Gottman argues that the more the couple experiences these behaviors, the more likely the couple is to dissolve (Gottman et al., 2000). These behaviors were then given the label the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (Gottman et al., 1994).

Gottman's Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse behaviors can be viewed on television and absorbed by shows' viewers. When discussing television's impact on emerging adults' relationships, a high frequency of the Four Horsemen behaviors could suggest a low level of differentiation, or high emotional reactivity, because of the individual's inability to self-regulate and choice to not respond rationally, in a balanced way, to the other partner (Bowen & Kerr, 1988). In addition, a higher frequency of the Four Horsemen behaviors in real-life could be linked to a high risk of vulnerability to negative behaviors glorified on television (Gottman, 1979). Thus, researchers could benefit from assessing one's level of differentiation, one's level of television viewing, or exposure to negative behaviors, and one's use of negative behaviors in real-life.

### **Reality Television and Emerging Adults**

The Bureau of Labor Statistics stated that the civilian population, ages 15 and up, watch about 2 hours and 46 minutes of television per day (2018). Reality television, in particular, has gathered a large following. Reality television (RTV) is defined by entertainment shows that are meant to reproduce depictions of everyday life and inadvertently produce unattainable expectations of reality (Palmer, 2013). The viewers' intentions for and involvement in watching reality television could support the theory that viewers purposely learn from and embody the

negative relationship behaviors they see. One study's results support this assumption by suggesting that adolescent viewers watch RTV for either entertainment or learning purposes (Rubin, 1986). In addition, studies concluded that viewers watch television content that aligns more consistently with their personal needs (Katz, Blumer, & Gurevitch, 1974; Rubin, 1986). Therefore, when a viewer is more vulnerable to outside influences, or has a low level of differentiation, they may view more television seeking information on how a relationship should function when they are dissatisfied with their own romantic situation.

The differences between reality television and reality are often purposely blurred for entertainment purposes. Research urges RTV viewers of its increasingly accepted and tolerated behaviors (Palmer, 2013). Literature has shared concerns about the misleading and excessive amount of unhealthy, stereotypical sexual relationship interactions portrayed on television, which impact impressionable viewers (Ward, 2002). The main take away from television literature is that it highlights distorted, harmful and stereotypical content that is increasingly consumed by suggestible emerging adults. RTV viewers who identify with the content displayed have a higher tendency of being influenced and affected by the television show (Ward, 2002). An additional study examined 174 adolescents to better understand the influence of reality television, specifically, on young viewers (Ward & Carlson, 2013). Each participant was asked to identify their usage on various media platforms, the amount of socially aggressive reality television consumed, their perception of the realness of the reality television, and if they engage in any of the identified socially aggressive acts (Ward & Carlson, 2013). The researchers concluded that there was a significant relationship between the amount of socially aggressive TV consumed and the amount of socially aggressive behaviors endorsed, especially with those who contributed a

higher level of realness to the content (Ward & Carlson, 2013). These results are important when examining the extent of reality television’s influence on viewers’ real-life behaviors.

With the literature described above, researchers could benefit from assessing the relationship between one’s level of differentiation, the influence that level has on the amount of television one watches, and the prevalence of the television’s negative content in the viewer’s real-life behaviors. Furthermore, when examining a viewer’s beliefs and attitudes about romantic relationships, one should better understand where the beliefs are stemming from. Studying this relationship could help clinicians and researchers manage the negative impact that television and the media have on real-life relationships.

## **Methodology**

### **Participants**

This study’s sample included 118 participants, who fit emerging adult age parameters (18-26). Primary recruitment was through undergraduate courses at a rural southeastern university and national social media recruitment (e.g. Facebook). The sample included participants from a variety of social location backgrounds. Other than age, participants were not excluded based on any other demographic information (see table 1).

**Table 1:**  
*Participant Demographics*

	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>Gender</b>		
<i>Female</i>	87	88.8
<i>Male</i>	10	10.2
<i>Non-Binary</i>	1	1
<b>Sexual Orientation</b>		
<i>Heterosexual</i>	83	84.7
<i>Bisexual</i>	9	9.2
<i>Gay or Lesbian</i>	3	3.1
<i>Pansexual</i>	2	2

<b>Age</b>	<i>Other</i>	1	1
	18	2	2
	19	4	4.1
	20	9	9.2
	21	18	18.4
	22	14	14.3
	23	14	14.3
	24	20	20.4
	25	12	12.2
	26	5	5.1

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## Procedures

The researchers collected data using the online Qualtrics software (2014) to distribute a survey to participants interested in taking part in the study. Prior to beginning the survey, the participants were also provided an informed consent document outlining the purpose of the survey, and the potential risks and benefits of participating. Researchers utilized convenience sampling to acquire a sample of emerging adults. The participants were not compensated in any way.

**Demographic Questionnaire.** Participants were asked to identify the following demographic variables: gender (male, female, non-binary, or other), sexual orientation (heterosexual, gay or lesbian, pansexual, or other), age (in years), and relationship status (if in relationship, the length of the relationship in months or years).

**Reality Television Viewership.** After the demographic portion of the survey, the participants were asked 1) If she/he viewed reality television as defined by any entertainment show that is meant to reproduce depictions of everyday life (yes or no), 2) What reality television shows she/he watched (given 10 options and a fill-in-the-blank), 3) The amount of hours per day she/he approximately spends watching reality television, and 4) The amount of hours per week,

including the weekend, she/he approximately spends watching reality television (Palmer, 2013). For question 1, the 10 shows that were listed were retrieved from a magazine website that looked at the top, current reality television shows: The Real World, Trading Spaces, Making the Band, American Idol, The Bachelor, Queer Eye, America's Next Top Model, Project Runway, The Hills, and The Real Housewives (Mitchell, 2019). Since the list did not cover all of the existing reality television shows, the researcher provided an "other" option for the participant to fill in.

**Viewer's Involvement.** The participant's involvement in viewing reality television shows was examined because involvement has been shown to increase the show's effects on real-life behaviors (Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999). The scale was borrowed from Hall's (2009) article on audience involvement. The scale had 9 items, 5 of which were adapted from Hawkins et al. (2001) and the other four were created by Hall (2009). The purpose of the measure was to assess the level participants' sought information about the show and the amount the participant communicated or socialized with others about the show (Hall, 2009). The 9 items were broken down into three factors: social involvement (4 items), cognitive involvement (3 items), and online involvement (2 items). Each item had a range of 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*a lot*). The total mean of the items was calculated and labeled as the participant's level of involvement. The scale has good reliability and the Cronbach alpha coefficient was  $\alpha = .87$ .

**Differentiation of Self Inventory.** The differentiation of Self Scale was used to assess the participant's level of differentiation. The scale had 43 items that the participant ranged from 1 (*Not at all true of me*) to 6 (*Very true of me*). The scale assessed for four factors to understand the participant's level of differentiation: Emotional Reactivity, I-Position Language, Emotional Cutoff, and Fusion with Parents. The four variables were broken up within the scale by the

researcher to examine various associations more effectively. Each variable was recorded on the scale 1= low or high frequency to 4= low or high to create consistency for each differentiation score. The emotional reactivity scale has good reliability and the Cronbach alpha coefficient was  $\alpha = .82$ . The I-Position scale has acceptable reliability and the Cronbach alpha coefficient was  $\alpha = .703$ . The emotional cutoff scale has acceptable reliability and the Cronbach alpha coefficient was  $\alpha = .77$ . The Fusion with others scale has questionable reliability and the Cronbach alpha coefficient was  $\alpha = .66$ .

**Criteria for Marriage Readiness Questionnaire.** The Criteria for Marriage Readiness Questionnaire (CMRQ) is a modified version of the Criteria for Adulthood Questionnaire. The Adulthood Questionnaire has tested a vast amount of emerging adults to assess for adulthood criteria (Carroll, et. al., 2009; Arnett, 1998; Nelson, 2003; Nelson, Badger, & Wu, 2004). The scale was intended to examine the beliefs and attitudes the participants have about romantic relationship behaviors and standards. Furthermore, this scale was used to understand the participant's intentions and behaviors in a relationship. The CMRQ asks participants to "indicate whether or not you believe the following are necessary for a person to be ready for marriage." The responses ranged from yes (necessary for marriage readiness) to no (not necessary for marriage readiness). After the first question, the participants were asked to "give your opinion of the importance of each of the following in determining whether or not a person is ready to get married." Each of the 47-items were assessed on a 4-point scale (1= not at all important, 2 = not very important, 3 = fairly important, and 4= very important). The items were added up and a mean score was created for further analysis. The scale has good reliability and the Cronbach alpha coefficient was  $\alpha = .87$ .

**Self-Test (The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse).** The researcher used a self-test version of Gottman's Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse behaviors (Gottman et al., 1998). Although these behaviors are specific to couple interactions, the assessment could be used to examine the relational behaviors exhibited by individuals, in general, during conflict. The researcher referred to these behaviors as negative conflict communication because that is the behaviors that the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse generally symbolize (Gottman et al., 1998). The self-test had 26 items that required a Yes or No response. The self-test specifically assessed for criticism, contempt, defensiveness and stonewalling behaviors. The score was added up and a mean score was created for each participant. The scale has good reliability and the Cronbach alpha coefficient was  $\alpha = .81$ .

### **Research Questions and Hypotheses**

RQ 1) Is one's level of differentiation significantly associated with viewer involvement?

H 1) The lower one's level of differentiation, the higher the amount of viewer involvement.

RQ 2) Does the amount of Reality Television viewed impact viewer involvement and negative conflict communication behaviors?

H 2) The more RTV watched, the higher the level of viewer involvement and the more negative conflict communication exhibited.

RQ 3) Is one's level of differentiation significantly linked with one's marriage readiness (i.e. relationship intentions)?

H 3) The lower one's level of differentiation, the lower their criteria for marriage readiness.

RQ 4) Does one's level of differentiation have an effect on viewer involvement mediated through the amount of reality television viewed?



H 4) Differentiation does have an effect on viewer involvement mediated through the amount of reality television viewed.

RQ 5) Is one's level of differentiation significantly associated with the frequency of negative conflict communication behaviors exhibited mediated or moderated through marriage readiness?

H 5) The researcher has no prior hypotheses about mediation and/or moderation.

### **Data Analysis**

The study utilized a structural equation model based on one independent variable (level of differentiation), two dependent variables (viewer involvement and Four Horsemen Behaviors), and two mediating and/or moderating variables (amount of television viewed and relationship intentions). Using SPSS, the researcher ran descriptive statistics for all of the variables and created mean scores for each. Then, correlational analyses were run to identify significant relationships between all of the variables. Then, using MPlus (Version 8.0; Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2018), the researcher ran simultaneous regressions using the mean scores for each variable scale to identify any direct or indirect effects.

### **Regressions**

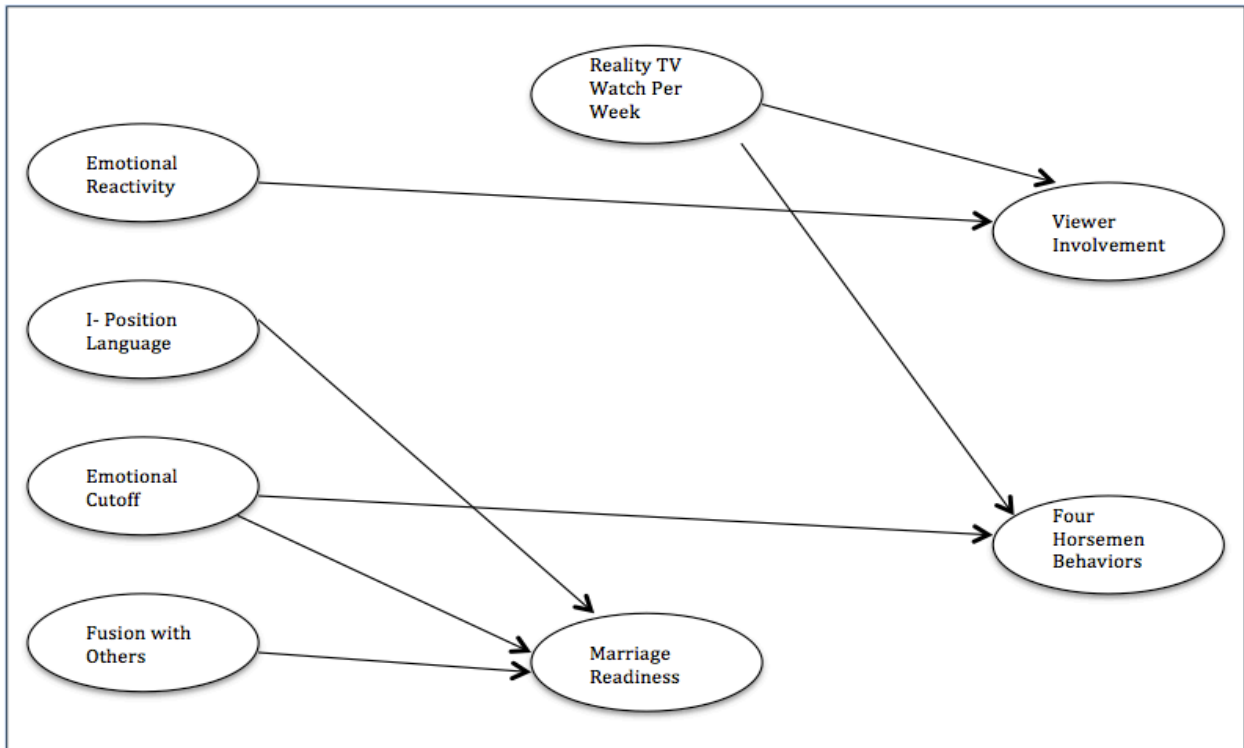
According to the identified research questions, regressions would be most effective to examine the linear relationships between all variables (Mukaka, 2012). Correlations are described as an approach that examines a linear relationship between two variables (Mukaka, 2012). A test that can measure relationships between multiple variables is relevant to this study. After the data was collected, the researcher analyzed the regression coefficients of the variables to assess for any significant relationships. After examination of initial correlations, the researcher then ran regressions. With the regression analyses, the researcher examined significant or non-significant associations between the participant's level of differentiation, amount of reality

television viewed, marriage readiness, level of viewer involvement, and the amount of Four Horsemen behaviors exhibited (e.g. negative conflict communication).

In order to test the study's proposed model, SPSS and the Mplus program were utilized to analyze the structural equation models (SEM). The researcher chose SEM as the analytic approach because it appropriately tests the modeling of all the examined variables concurrently (Kline, 2011). The researcher began with testing the direct effects model, and then the mediation models using the product of coefficients strategy, in which the associations between differentiation (as reported by the participants) and each participant's level of viewer involvement were mediated by the amount of reality television viewed (Preacher et al., 2007). Next, the researcher examined whether differentiation and the frequency of negative conflict communication (as reported by the participant) are mediated or moderated by relationship intentions (as reported by the participant).

The good model fit indicates dependability with the study's data and is required before interpreting coefficients in a SEM (Kenny, 2015). A range of fit indices were used to assess the study's goodness-of-fit. The indices include the chi-square statistic/degrees of freedom ratio, the root mean square error approximation (RMSEA), comparative fit index (CFI), and the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR). RMSEA values less than .08 and CFI values close to .95 are shown to indicate an acceptable model fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999). A  $\chi^2/df$  ratio below 3.0 indicates acceptable model fit (Carmines & McIver, 1981).

**Figure 2:**  
*Conceptual Model*



**Results**

**Preliminary Analyses**

Descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations for all studied variables are reported in Table 2. On average, the emerging adults reported high emotional cutoff statements for differentiation ( $M = 4.31$ ) and high marriage readiness ( $M = 3.54$ ). Emerging adults, on average, also indicated higher levels of emotional reactivity ( $M = 3.30$ ) and I-Position language ( $M = 3.83$ ). In addition to these accounts of differentiation and marriage readiness, emerging adults also had a higher average of television viewed per week ( $M = 11.2$ ) and viewer involvement ( $M = 4.55$ ). Variables were correlated in the expected directions and many of the correlations were significant.

**Table 2:**  
*Descriptive Statistics and Correlations (n = 98)*

Construct	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Reality Television Viewed Per Week	--							
2. Viewer Involvement	.296**	--						
3. Emotional Reactivity	.059	-.283**	--					
4. I-Position Language	.107	.166	.193	--				
5. Emotional Cutoff	-.072	-.048	.034	.060	--			
6. Fusion with Others	.042	-.239*	.436**	.220*	-.139	--		
7. Marriage Readiness	-.064	.124	-.138	.255*	.298**	-.373**	--	
8. Four Horsemen Behaviors	.295**	.074	-.012	-.010	-.291**	-.029	-.207	--

*Note.* \*\*\* $p < .001$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$

### Testing the Direct Effects Model

We tested the direct associations with the variables of differentiation (Emotional Reactivity, I-Position, Emotional Cutoff, and Fusion with Others) as the independent variables, viewer involvement and the negative conflict communication as the dependent variables. The results of the regression analyses are presented in Table 3. This model had an excellent fit for the data:  $\chi^2(1) = 0.477, p = .49$ ; CFI = 1; TLI=1; RMSEA = .000 (.000, .235).

Analyses of direct effects indicated that participants with high emotional reactivity scores were more likely to score high on viewer involvement ( $\beta = -0.286, p = .005$ ), which partially supports the fourth hypothesis. The participants with high I-Position scores were more ready for marriage ( $\beta = .206, p = .051$ ), which supports hypothesis 3. In addition, participants with high emotional cutoff scores were less ready for marriage ( $\beta = 0.249, p = .005$ ), supporting hypothesis 3, and they reported more negative conflict communication ( $\beta = -0.246, p = .010$ ), which partially supports hypothesis 5. Participants with high fusion with others scores were more ready for marriage ( $\beta = -0.245, p = .030$ ). Participants who watch more hours of reality television per week had higher viewer involvement scores ( $\beta = .299, p = .001$ ) and reported more negative conflict communication ( $\beta = .277, p = .003$ ), which supports the second hypothesis. According to this data, hypothesis 1 was not necessarily supported; meaning, one's level of differentiation did not have an effect on how much reality television was viewed per week.

**Table 3**  
*Standardized Parameter Estimates for Paths*

Direct Paths		$\beta$	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>
Emotional Reactivity → Viewer Involvement	-0.286	0.103	.005	
I-Position Language → Marriage Readiness	0.206	0.106	.051	
Emotional Cutoff → Four Horsemen Behaviors	-0.246	0.095	.010	
Emotional Cutoff → Marriage Readiness	0.249	0.089	.005	
Fusion with Others → Marriage Readiness	-0.245	0.113	.030	
Reality TV Per Week → Viewer Involvement	0.299	0.087	.001	
Reality TV Per Week → Four Horsemen Behaviors	0.277	0.094	.003	
I-Position Language → Viewer Involvement	0.158	0.099	.109	
Emotional Cutoff → Viewer Involvement	-0.056	0.094	.549	
Fusion with Other → Viewer Involvement	-0.074	0.109	.496	
Marriage Readiness → Viewer Involvement	0.069	0.105	.508	
Marriage Readiness → Four Horsemen Behaviors	-0.195	0.114	.087	
Emotional Reactivity → Four Horsemen Behaviors	0.095	0.126	.448	
I-Position Language → Four Horsemen Behaviors	-0.044	0.112	.693	
Fusion with Others → Four Horsemen Behaviors	-0.194	0.130	.135	
Emotional Reactivity → Reality TV Per Week	0.016	0.118	.892	
I-Position Language → Reality TV Per Week	0.119	0.108	.269	

Emotional Cutoff →Reality TV Per Week	-0.073	0.101	.474
Fusion with Others → Reality TV Per Week	0.051	0.120	.667
Emotional Reactivity →Marriage Readiness	-0.091	0.113	.420

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### **Testing Indirect Effects Model**

Next, we tested the mediation model with the 4 differentiation variables (Emotional Reactivity, Emotional Cutoff, Fusion with Others, and I-Position Language) as the independent variables, viewer involvement and the Four Horsemen behaviors as the dependent variables, and reality television watched per week and marriage readiness as the two mediation variables. The associations between the differentiation and the dependent variables were not significantly mediated by either of reality television nor marriage readiness. Last, we tested the model using marriage readiness as a moderator for the association between differentiation and the Four Horsemen behaviors but the moderating relationship was not significant. Therefore, hypotheses H3 and H4 were not found to be supported by the data.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of the current study was to explore the relationships between one’s level of differentiation, reality television viewing habits, frequency of negative conflict communication (e.g. Four Horsemen behaviors), and marriage readiness. Other literature has examined the significant link between television viewing and its influence on its viewers’ real-life behaviors. For example, some research has indicated that distorted, harmful, and stereotypical content are increasingly consumed and exhibited by impressionable emerging adults, which negatively impacts real-life relationships (Ward, 2002). There is little research that tries to understand the perpetuation of television content’s impact on viewers. The findings of the current study provide

greater understanding of how one's level of differentiation has an impact on television content influence, negative conflict communication, and marriage readiness. An in-depth examination of what factors impact an increase in adaptations of negative relational behaviors seen on television can add to previous findings about the link between emerging adults' mental health, the quality of their relationships, and their physical well-being (Sullivan, et. al., 2010; Whitton, & Kuryluk, 2012).

### **Impact of Differentiation on Reality Television Viewing**

The results for the first examined hypothesis indicated that the participants who reported higher emotional reactivity scores were more likely to score high on viewer involvement. This finding suggest that the lower one's level of differentiation, the more influenced they are by the content they see. This finding supports previous findings that have discussed television's influence (Palmer, 2013; Ward & Carlson, 2013; Ward, 2002). Furthermore, the more reality television that was viewed, the more likely the person exhibited reactive, ineffective communication. This study confirms previous findings that reality television viewing impacts communication in real-life relationships (Ward, 2002; Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2011). The current findings add to the existing literature by showing how one's level of vulnerability to influence, or level of differentiation, is linked to the influence of reality television's content. When examining one's level of differentiation and the factors that influence it, such as reality television, more awareness is created to better achieve a balance between individuality and vulnerability to others so one can cope with stress and conflict more effectively (Neil & Kniskern, 1982).



### **Impact of RT Viewing on Marriage Readiness and Negative Conflict Communication**

The study's second hypothesis was confirmed, which indicates that the participants who watched more hours of reality television per week had higher "viewer involvement" scores. This indicates that the more content that was consumed, the more involved the viewer was with the content that was viewed. Reality television viewership is an important factor and research shows evidence that viewers watch content for learning purposes and those that relate more to the content viewed are most affected (Rubin, 1986; Ward, 2002). This study's finding supports a relationship between viewer involvement and television's influence on the viewer's beliefs and attitudes about relationships.

In addition, participants that reported more hours of reality television viewership per week reported a higher frequency of negative conflict communication. There is established evidence that television displays distorted, negative behaviors that are often consumed by vulnerable viewers (Ward, 2002). It is important to examine what impacts the extent of reality television's influence on viewers as its been shown to portray negative, non-realistic relationship behaviors (Ward, 2002). This study's findings confirm the current research on reality television viewing and implementation of problematic behaviors (Palmer, 2013). Previous studies have supported a link between viewing aggressive behaviors on television and adapting them in real-life (Coyne, et. al., 2010) but have not examined television's impact on communication styles. With evidence that conflict management skills improve one's social and college adjustment, it is important to study the variables that influence conflict communication (Roberson, et. al., 2015).

### **Impact of Differentiation on Marriage Readiness and Negative Conflict Communication**

The results for the third research question indicated that the participants with higher "I Position" scores, or higher levels of differentiation, were more ready for marriage. In addition,

participants with high levels of “emotional cutoff,” or low levels of differentiation, were less ready for marriage and held more negative, unhealthy beliefs about relationships. Another finding that supported the second hypothesis indicated that participants with high “fusion with others” scores were more ready for marriage. These findings suggest that one’s level of differentiation impacts one’s level of marriage readiness and one’s beliefs about and behaviors in relationships. These results support the third hypothesis that stated the lower one’s level of differentiation, the lower their criteria for marriage readiness and positive, healthy beliefs about relationships. When an individual has a low level of differentiation, they cannot effectively communicate, which may decrease their relationship satisfaction and potentially mental health (Bowen & Kerr, 1988).

The researchers examined the findings that there was no data that supported the amount of reality television viewed was a mediation variable between differentiation and viewer involvement. This lack of support could be because the level of differentiation was broken up into the four variables rather than examining the participant’s collective level of differentiation. In addition, the researchers examined the lack of support for one’s level of marriage readiness moderating the relationship between one’s level of differentiation and one’s frequency of the Four Horsemen behaviors. The lack of support could be due to the researcher not breaking up the four behaviors examined for negative conflict communication so that the participant would have four different frequencies to assess.

Lastly, participants with high “emotional cutoff” scores reported a higher frequency of negative conflict communication. Therefore, one’s level of emotional cutoff (e.g. differentiation) impacts their conflict communication. This finding suggests a link between one’s level of differentiation and embodiment of negative relationship behaviors that are often glorified on

television. Identification of negative conflict communication can provide insight into the stability of one's relationships (Gottman & Gottman, 1999). First, relational conflict needs to be understood and examined; then, de-escalation of conflict can occur to strengthen the relationship functioning (Gottman et al., 2002; Gottman, 1979). Awareness about the use of negative conflict communication and the impact of one's level of differentiation can make room for a change to a more positive, genuine sharing of emotions that will counter the negative (Gottman & Silver, 1999). This awareness can also reduce one's likelihood for divorce and improve mental health (Gottman et al., 2000; Sullivan, et. al., 2010).

### **Limitations**

The information discovered in the data of this study is important for clinical and research implications. However, there are a few identified limitations that need to be discussed. Since the researcher used an online survey, a few limitations have been identified from that style of data collection. First, the sample of participants was collected through voluntary and snowball recruitment, mainly from the North Carolina region; meaning, the results may not be effectively generalized to the population. In addition, the researcher did not collect data about the racial/ethnic identities of any of the participants, which limits the scope of the information. Future research should try to examine more diverse participants that can be better generalized to the entire population. In addition, the participants are self-reporting the data online, which increases the chances of bias. To combat this limitation, the researcher expressed to the participants beforehand that the data will be anonymous and their responses would not be linked to any personal identifying information. In addition, non-binary was a gender that was included in the data analyses but there was only 1 participant that identified as this gender. The results

described should be applied with caution to the non-binary population since the sample size was small.

When examining each participant's level of differentiation, the researcher found it more effective to assess the four variables of differentiation (Fusion with others, Emotional Reactivity, Emotional Cutoff, and I-Position Language) rather than create a single level of differentiation. This is a limit to the study because the researcher is correlating the individual scores of each of the four variables as defining factors for one's level of differentiation.

Lastly, when collecting the data about the participant's frequency of Four Horsemen behaviors, the four behaviors were not separated and therefore the participant's score was a collection of all four. The researcher determined this limitation after the data was collected and analyzed. The conclusion was then reached that it would have been more meaningful to separate the behaviors individually to see which behaviors were more frequent for each participant. The researcher has plans to further this research by separating the behaviors and running the analyses again.

### **Implications**

Understanding the impact of reality television in romantic relationships is an important issue for marriage and family therapists. The results of the current study contribute to the current body of literature and expand on the multifaceted associations between one's level of differentiation, reality television viewership, marriage readiness, and use of negative conflict communication. The current study has significant implications for future research and applied clinical work.

## **Research Implications**

Research has examined the impact of reality television on its viewers and has been supported continuously (Palmer, 2013; Ward, 2002). The piece that is limited in the current research is what makes a viewer more susceptible to television's influence. This is important when understanding the full impact of the television's content. Assessing the relationship one has with television can increase awareness about its influence on real-life. In addition, previous research has linked negative mental health outcomes with relationship stress and understanding what factors influence negative relationship behaviors, such as reality television, would be important to help increase healthy mental well-being (Gottman & Silver, 1999).

With the average individual watching about 2 hours and 46 minutes of television per day (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018), it is necessary to include this variable in assessments of one's outside influences. This study contributes to the current research by evaluating patterns and associations of differentiation in emerging adults and the influence of reality television through a Bowen Family Systems Lens. The reality television patterns discussed and assessed in this study include many of the most current shows viewed by emerging adults, providing an overall perspective of reality television viewership. Including the most current and popular shows allowed the researcher to understand television viewership patterns that are current, rather than other studies that were done years ago.

In addition, the results of this study highlight the impact of one's level of differentiation on television's behavioral influence. An accurate and full assessment of susceptible people would benefit from examining the association between the individual and reality television. These findings pave the way for future research regarding the topic and produce valuable information for therapists to consider in their clinical work with families and parents.

## **Clinical Implications**

In regards to marriage and family therapists and other clinicians, understanding variables that make an individual more susceptible to television's influence can further the work that is done with emerging adults as well as with families and parents. Specifically with differentiation, this study highlights the impact that reality television has on real-life relationships.

Understanding the client's level of differentiation and susceptibility to influence is important when working with emerging adults, especially ones that are experiencing relationship distress and poor conflict resolution (Gottman et al., 2002). When a therapist understands in-depth the magnitude of influential outside sources that the client is vulnerable to, the therapist can more effectively facilitate change in the client's level of differentiation.

Furthermore, the results of this study support that one's level of differentiation, or vulnerability to others, is an important factor when assessing reality television's full impact. Therefore, therapists practicing from a Bowen Family Systems lens may benefit from assessing the extent of reality television's influence, in addition to other typical influences, such as family members and other important relationships. Specifically, the findings confirm the degree to which reality television impacts its viewers and the behaviors they exhibit in real-life (Peek & Beresin, 2016). The more information a therapist has about the influential sources in a client's life, including family, peers, and television, the more effectively the therapist can facilitate conversations that encourage the client to differentiate, lower emotional reactivity, and increase positive conflict communication when balancing their forces of individuality and togetherness, which provide a stable foundation for committed relationships. Through this full examination, the client will be better capable in communication, problem-solving, and relationship success. In these increased capacities, the client's mental and physical health will be healthier.

## **Conclusion**

In summary, through the lens of Bowen Family Systems theory, vulnerable emerging adults that watch reality television more frequently are more involved in reality television viewing, more likely to exhibit negative conflict communication, and are less ready for marriage. Overall, it appears that the less differentiated one is, the greater the negative impact of reality television content that is perpetuated in relationships and conflict. Understanding the link between reality television and one's relational conflict capabilities is important for researchers and clinicians. Emerging adulthood is linked to the successes and failures of self-development and adulthood (Whitton & Kuryluk, 2012). It is important to learn the negative and positive impacts that sources, such as television, have on impressionable individuals to target mental and physical health trends that are associated with relationship dissolution.

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## APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL



EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY  
University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board  
4N-64 Brody Medical Sciences Building · Mail Stop 682  
600 Moye Boulevard · Greenville, NC 27834  
Office 252-744-2914 · Fax 252-744-2284 ·  
[rede.ecu.edu/umcirb/](http://rede.ecu.edu/umcirb/)

### Notification of Exempt Certification

From: Social/Behavioral IRB  
To: [Lauren Stiegler](#)  
CC: [Damon Rappleyea](#)  
Date: 12/16/2019  
Re: [UMCIRB 19-002882](#)  
REALITY TELEVISION VIEWING INFLUENCED BY EMERGING ADULTS' DIFFERENTIATION

I am pleased to inform you that your research submission has been certified as exempt on 12/16/2019. This study is eligible for Exempt Certification under category # 2ab.

It is your responsibility to ensure that this research is conducted in the manner reported in your application and/or protocol, as well as being consistent with the ethical principles of the Belmont Report and your profession.

This research study does not require any additional interaction with the UMCIRB unless there are proposed changes to this study. Any change, prior to implementing that change, must be submitted to the UMCIRB for review and approval. The UMCIRB will determine if the change impacts the eligibility of the research for exempt status. If more substantive review is required, you will be notified within five business days.

Document	Description
Consent Form(0.04)	Consent Forms
Recruitment Email(0.01)	Recruitment Documents/Scripts
Recruitment Flyer(0.02)	Recruitment Documents/Scripts
Survey Items(0.02)	Surveys and Questionnaires
Thesis(0.01)	Study Protocol or Grant Application

For research studies where a waiver of HIPAA Authorization has been approved, each of the waiver criteria in 45 CFR 164.512(i)(2)(ii) has been met. Additionally, the elements of PHI to be collected as described in Items 1 and 2 of the Application for Waiver of Authorization have been determined to be the minimal necessary for the specified research.

The Chairperson (or designee) does not have a potential for conflict of interest on this study.

## APPENDIX B: QUALTRICS SURVEY

### **Demographic Questionnaire:**

Please indicate your gender identity:

- 1) Male
- 2) Female
- 3) Non-binary
- 4) Transgender
- 5) Other \_\_\_\_\_

Please select the category that includes your age:

- 1) Under 18
- 2) 18-20
- 3) 21-23
- 4) 24-25
- 5) 26 and Up

Please indicate your identified sexual orientation:

- 1) Heterosexual
- 2) Gay
- 3) Bi-sexual
- 4) Asexual
- 5) Pansexual
- 6) Other \_\_\_\_\_

Please indicate your relationship status:

- 1) In a relationship
- 2) Not in a relationship
- 3) Other \_\_\_\_\_

### **Amount Reality Television Viewing**

Do you watch reality television as defined by any entertainment show that is meant to reproduce depictions of everyday life?

- 1) Yes
- 2) No

What reality television shows do you or have you watched? Choose all that apply.

- The Real World



- Trading Spaces
- Making the Band
- American Idol
- The Bachelor
- Queer Eye
- America's Next Top Model
- Project Runway
- The Hills
- The Real Housewives

Please indicate the amount of hours per day you spend watching reality television.

- 1) Less than an hour
- 2) 1-2 hours
- 3) 3-4 hours
- 4) 5 or more hours

Please indicate the amount of hours per week you spend watching reality television, including the weekend.

- 1) Less than 2 hours
- 2) 3-5 hours
- 3) 6-8 hours
- 4) 9-11 hours
- 5) 12 or more hours

### **Viewer Involvement**

Please indicate how true each of the following statements is for you on a scale of 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*a lot*).

- 1) When I'm watching the program, I talk back to the television.
- 2) I try to predict what will happen on the program.
- 3) I discuss the program with other people.
- 4) I often watch the program with other people.
- 5) I often think hard about something I've seen on this program.
- 6) I often think about what I would do if I were in the situation portrayed on the program.
- 7) When I'm watching, I try to imagine how a person on the program is feeling.
- 8) I've posted or chatted about this program online.
- 9) I've looked for information about this show on the Internet.

## **Differentiation of Self Inventory**

These are questions concerning your thoughts and feelings about yourself and relationships with others. Please read each statement carefully and decide how much the statement is *generally true* of you on a 1 (nor *at all*) to 6 (*very*) scale. If you believe that an item does not pertain to you (e.g., you are not currently married or in a committed relationship, or one or both of your parents are deceased), please answer the item according to your best guess about what your thoughts and feelings would be in that situation. Be sure to answer every item and try to be as honest and accurate as possible in your responses.

1. People have remarked that I'm overly emotional.
2. I have difficulty expressing my feelings to people I care for.
3. I often feel inhibited around my family.
4. I tend to remain pretty calm even under stress.
5. I'm likely to smooth over or settle conflicts between two people whom I care about.
6. When someone close to me disappoints me, I withdraw from him or her for a time.
7. No matter what happens in my life, I know that I'll never lose my sense of who I am.
8. I tend to distance myself when people get too close to me.
9. It has been said (or could be said) of me that I am still very attached to my parent(s).
10. I wish that I weren't so emotional.
11. I usually do not change my behavior simply to please another person.
12. My spouse or partner could not tolerate it if I were to express to him or her my true feelings  
about some things.
13. Whenever there is a problem in my relationship, I'm anxious to get it settled right away.
14. At times my feelings get the best of me and I have trouble thinking clearly.
15. When I am having an argument with someone, I can separate my thoughts about the issue from my feelings about the person.
16. I'm often uncomfortable when people get too close to me.
17. It's important for me to keep in touch with my parents regularly.
18. At times, I feel as if I'm riding an emotional roller coaster.

19. There's no point in getting upset about things I cannot change.
20. I'm concerned about losing my independence in intimate relationships.
21. I'm overly sensitive to criticism.
22. When my spouse or partner is away for too long, I feel like I am missing a part of me.
23. I'm fairly self-accepting.
24. I often feel that my spouse or partner wants too much from me.
25. I try to live up to my parents' expectations.
26. If I have had an argument with my spouse or partner, I tend to think about it all day.
27. I am able to say no to others even when I feel pressured by them.
28. When one of my relationships becomes very intense, I feel the urge to run away from it.
29. Arguments with my parent(s) or sibling(s) can still make me feel awful.
30. If someone is upset with me, I can't seem to let it go easily.
31. I'm less concerned that others approve of me than I am about doing what I think is right.
32. I would never consider turning to any of my family members for emotional support.
33. I find myself thinking a lot about my relationship with my spouse or partner.
34. I'm very sensitive to being hurt by others.
35. My self-esteem really depends on how others think of me.
36. When I'm with my spouse or partner, I often feel smothered.
37. I worry about people close to me getting sick, hurt, or upset.
38. I often wonder about the kind of impression I create.
39. When things go wrong, talking about them usually makes it worse.
40. I feel things more intensely than others do.
41. I usually do what I believe is right regardless of what others say.
42. Our relationship might be better if my spouse or partner would give me the space I need.
43. I tend to feel pretty stable under stress.

### **Criteria for Marriage Readiness Questionnaire**

For the following statements, please give your opinion of the importance of each of the following in determining whether or not a person is ready to get married by rating each statement on a 4-point scale (1 = *not at all important*, 2 = *not very important*, 3 = *fairly important*, and 4 = *very important*).

- 1) Be able to express feelings in close relationships
- 2) Be able to listen to others in an understanding way
- 3) Be able to discuss personal problems with others
- 4) Be respectful of others when dealing with differences
- 5) Accept responsibility for the consequences of your actions
- 6) Committed to a long-term love relationship
- 7) Avoid aggressive and violent behavior
- 8) Become less self-oriented, develop greater consideration for others
- 9) Make life-long commitments to others
- 10) Be able to maintain a positive outlook on life
- 11) Establish a relationship with parents as an equal adult
- 12) Learn always to have good control of your emotions
- 13) Have come to terms with any negative family experiences
- 14) Have overcome any personal challenges

### **Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse**

For the following statements, please indicate if you have used each behavior during an argument with your partner or significant other:

- 1) At times, during an argument, I think it is best just not to respond at all.
- 2) During an argument I keep thinking of ways to retaliate.

- 3) During a hot argument I think, “It doesn’t matter what you say” and I stop listening.
- 4) During arguments, it is important to me to point out inaccuracies or explain my position.
- 5) I don’t get credit for all the positive things I do in our relationship.
- 6) When my partner is upset, I think “I don’t have to take this kind of treatment.”
- 7) When I see a glaring fault in my partner I can’t recall my partner’s positive qualities
- 8) I hate it when things in our discussions stop being rational.
- 9) My partner can be pretty stubborn, arrogant and smug at times
- 10) I let things build up for a long time before I complain. I don’t complain until I feel very hurt.
- 11) I often feel a sense of righteous indignation when my partner is complaining.
- 12) I only bring up problems if I know I’m right and want my partner to accept my point of view.
- 13) I point out patterns and analyze my partner’s personality as part of my complaints.
- 14) I think that it is best to withdraw to calm down, avoid a big fight and not get my feelings hurt.
- 15) I withdraw when my partner’s emotions seem out of control.
- 16) In a disagreement, I think it’s important to determine who is at fault.
- 17) In a discussion, I make general points instead of being specific about one situation or action.
- 18) In arguments I may be emotional, sarcastic, or call my partner names. Later, I regret this.
- 19) It’s hard for me to see my partner’s point of view when I don’t agree.

- 20) When complaining to or about my partner, I use phrases like “you always” or “you never”.
- 21) My partner is too touchy and gets their feelings hurt too easily.
- 22) To avoid blame, I have to explain why and how the problem arose
- 23) When my partner complains I feel like I just want to get away from there.
- 24) When my partner complains, I have to control myself to keep from saying what I really feel.
- 25) When my partner complains, I realize that I also have complaints that need to be heard.
- 26) In arguments, sometimes my response is to sigh, or roll my eyes.

### **Follow-up**

- 1) How helpful was this educational piece? 1 (not at all) to 7 (very helpful)
- 2) If yes, what about it was helpful? If not, what about it was not?

### **Behavioral Information**

The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse is a metaphor depicting the end of times in the New Testament. They describe conquest, war, hunger, and death respectively. Dr. Gottman uses this metaphor to describe communication styles that can predict the end of a relationship.

The first horseman of the apocalypse is **criticism**. Criticizing your partner is different than offering a critique or voicing a complaint! The latter two are about specific issues, whereas the former is an ad hominem attack: it is an attack on your partner at the core. In effect, you are dismantling his or her whole being when you criticize.

Complaint: "I was scared when you were running late and didn't call me. I thought we had agreed that we would do that for each other."

Criticism: "You never think about how your behavior is affecting other people. I don't believe you are that forgetful, you're just selfish! You never think of others! You never think of me!" If you find that you and your partner are critical of each other, don't assume your relationship is doomed to fail. The problem with criticism is that, when it becomes pervasive, it paves the way

for the other, far deadlier horsemen. It makes the victim feel assaulted, rejected, and hurt, and often causes the perpetrator and victim to fall into an escalating pattern where the first horseman reappears with greater and greater frequency and intensity.

The second horseman is **contempt**. When we communicate in this state, we are truly mean - treating others with disrespect, mocking them with sarcasm, ridicule, name-calling, mimicking, and/or body language such as eye-rolling. The target of contempt is made to feel despised and worthless. *"You're 'tired?'* Cry me a river. I've been with the kids all day, running around like mad to keep this house going and all you do when you come home from work is flop down on that sofa like a child and play those idiotic computer games. I don't have time to deal with another kid - try to be more pathetic..."

In his research, Dr. Gottman found that couples that are contemptuous of each other are more likely to suffer from infectious illness (colds, the flu, etc.) than others, as their immune systems weaken! Contempt is fueled by long-simmering negative thoughts about the partner - which come to a head in the perpetrator attacking the accused from a position of relative superiority. Contempt is the single greatest predictor of divorce according to Dr. Gottman's work. It must be eliminated!

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The third horseman is **defensiveness**. We've all been defensive. This horseman is nearly omnipresent when relationships are on the rocks. When we feel accused unjustly, we fish for excuses so that our partner will back off. Unfortunately, this strategy is almost never successful. Our excuses just tell our partner that we don't take them seriously, trying to get them to buy something that they don't believe, that we are blowing them off.

She: "Did you call Betty and Ralph to let them know that we're not coming tonight as you promised this morning?"

He: "I was just too darn busy today. As a matter of fact you know just how busy my schedule was. Why didn't you just do it?" He not only responds defensively, but turns the table and makes it her fault. A non-defensive response would have been: "Oops, I forgot. I should have asked you this morning to do it because I knew my day would be packed. Let me call them right now." Although it is perfectly understandable for the male to defend himself in the example given above, this approach doesn't have the desired effect. The attacking spouse does not back down or apologize. This is because defensiveness is really a way of blaming your partner.

The fourth horseman is **stonewalling**. Stonewalling occurs when the listener withdraws from the interaction. In other words, stonewalling is when one person shuts down and closes himself/herself off from the other. It is a lack of responsiveness to your partner and the interaction between the two of you. Rather than confronting the issues (which tend to accumulate!) with our partner, we make evasive maneuvers such as tuning out, turning away, acting busy, or engaging in obsessive behaviors. It takes time for the negativity created by the first three horsemen to become overwhelming enough that stonewalling becomes an

understandable "out," but when it does, it frequently becomes a habit.

Being able to identify **The Four Horsemen** in your conflict discussions is a necessary first step to eliminating them, but this knowledge is not enough. To drive away destructive communication patterns, you must replace them with healthy, productive ones. Practice, practice, practice! Pay close attention the next time you find yourself engaged in a difficult conversation with your partner, a friend, or even with your children.

See if you can spot any of **The Four Horsemen**, and try to observe their effects on the people involved. Even the most successful relationships have conflict. Our research has shown that it's not the appearance of conflict, but rather how it's managed that predicts the success or failure of a relationship. We say "manage" conflict rather than "resolve," because relationship conflict is natural and has functional, positive aspects. The first step in effectively managing conflict is to identify and fight The Four Horsemen when they arrive in your conflict discussions. To do otherwise is to risk serious problems in the future of your relationship. Below, we share antidotes for fighting off The Four Horsemen in your relationship:

**Criticism:** A complaint focuses on a specific behavior, while a criticism attacks the character of the person. The antidote for criticism is to complain without blame. Talk about your feelings using I statements and then express a positive need. What do you feel? What do you need?

Criticism: "You always talk about yourself. You are so selfish."

Antidote: "I'm feeling left out by our talk tonight. Can we please talk about my day?"

**Defensiveness:** Defensiveness is defined as self-protection in the form of righteous indignation or innocent victimhood in attempt to ward off a perceived attack. Many people become defensive when they are being criticized, but the problem is that being defensive never helps to solve the problem at hand. Defensiveness is really a way of blaming your partner. You're saying, in effect, the problem isn't me, it's you. As a result, the problem is not resolved and the conflict escalates further. The antidote is to accept responsibility, even if only for part of the conflict.

Defensiveness: "It's not my fault that we're always late, it's your fault."

Antidote: "Well, part of this is my problem, I need to think more about time." **Contempt:** Statements that come from a relative position of superiority. Some examples of displays of contempt include when a person uses sarcasm, cynicism, name-calling, eyerolling, sneering, mockery, and hostile humor. Contempt is the greatest predictor of divorce and must be eliminated. The antidote is building a culture of appreciation and respect.

Contempt: "You're an idiot."

Antidote: "I'm proud of the way you handled that teacher conference."

**Stonewalling:** Stonewalling occurs when the listener withdraws from the interaction. The antidote is to practice physiological self-soothing. The first step of physiological self-soothing is to stop the conflict discussion. If you keep going, you'll find yourself exploding at your partner or imploding (stonewalling), neither of which will get you anywhere. The only reasonable



strategy, therefore, is to let your partner know that you're feeling flooded and need to take a break. That break should last at least twenty minutes, since it will be that long before your body physiologically calms down. It's crucial that during this time you avoid thoughts of righteous indignation ("I don't have to take this anymore") and innocent victimhood ("Why is he always picking on me?").

Spend your time doing something soothing and distracting, like listening to music or exercising. In one of our longitudinal research studies, we interrupted couples after fifteen minutes and told them we needed to adjust the equipment. We asked them not to talk about their issue, but just to read magazines for half an hour. When they started talking about their issue again, their heart rates were significantly lower and their interaction more positive and productive.

## APPENDIX C: INFORMED CONSENT



### Informed Consent to Participate in Research Information to consider before taking part in research that has no risk.

You are being invited to participate in a research study titled Reality Television Viewing Influenced by Emerging Adults' Differentiation being conducted by Lauren Stiegler a Master's student at East Carolina University in the Human Development and Family Sciences department. The goal is to survey 60 individuals through an online survey. The survey will take approximately 15-25 minutes to complete. It is hoped that this information will assist us to better understand young adult relationships and the influence that reality television has on its viewers. Your responses will be kept confidential and no data will be released or used with your identification attached. Your participation in the research is voluntary. You may choose not to answer any or all questions, and you may stop at any time. There is no penalty for not taking part in this research study. Please call Damon Rappleyea at 252-481-2961 for any research related questions or the University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board (UMCIRB) at 252-744-2914 for questions about your rights as a research participant.

