

The Creation of Defensiveness in Social Interaction II:  
A Model of Defensive Communication among Romantic Couples

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### Abstract

This investigation extends the work of Stamp, Vangelisti, and Daly (1992) and others by explicating the multi-faceted process of defensive communication among romantic couples. Qualitative data were derived from self-reports about a distinct episode of defensive communication in individual interviews, as well as direct analysis of couples' communication in joint interviews. The proposed theoretical model reflects a more comprehensive, holistic, and precise framework that accounts for the triggers, core episode, outcomes, and contexts of defensive communication. The detailed model, which draws attention to interactive and person-centered features of defensive communication, is illustrated through the narrative account of one couple. Eleven data-based postulates are offered to fuel and focus subsequent investigations.

## The Creation of Defensiveness in Social Interaction II:

### A Model of Defensive Communication among Romantic Couples

Defensive communication is common, if not pervasive, and can stimulate pivotal and potentially devastating events for individuals and relationships (Stamp, Vangelisti, & Daly, 1992). Partners engaged in a defensive communication episode feel increased sensitivity (Stamp et al., 1992) and more readily engage in conflict (Gottman, 1993). Noting the tendency to reciprocate defensiveness, Baker (1980) stated, “Defensiveness becomes a phenomenon readily observable by others and they, sensing defensiveness, often react in a like manner. The communicators thus become involved in a destructive, self-perpetuating cycle” (p. 36). Moreover, as the frequency and duration of defensive communication increases over time, partners may be unable to reverse destructive cycles. Defensive communication can negatively influence relational affect (Jaderlund & Waldron, 1994; Stamp et al., 1992) and relational quality and satisfaction (Gottman, 1993; Knee, Lonsbary, Canevello, & Patrick, 2005). Additionally, Gottman (1993, 1994) has shown that defensiveness is one of the “four horsemen of the apocalypse” heralding the end of marital relationships. Given the many and varied damages wreaked by defensive communication, communication theorists and practitioners alike would do well to better understand these dynamics.

Stamp et al. (1992) investigated the experience of defensiveness in interpersonal interactions and developed a four-pronged model of defensiveness and a corresponding 27-item scale. The Stamp et al. (1992) four-pronged model of defensiveness specifies the components or dimensions of defensiveness. However, researchers have yet to explore the nature of the components themselves, as well as interrelationships among the components. The Stamp et al. (1992) and other investigations (e.g., Becker, Halbesleben, & O’Hair, 2005) have used

quantitative methods that do not afford insight into personal experiences and understandings of defensive communication. Qualitative methods are ideal for evoking a rich, detailed picture that characterizes the phenomenon under investigation in a comprehensive, holistic, and meaningful manner. Additionally, concept explication can yield greater precision in the definition of concepts, such as the components of defensiveness, and it “can strengthen the ties among theory, observation, and research,” producing fuller and more valid understanding of the phenomenon (Chaffee, 1991, p. 2). Given the importance of defensive communication and the value of theory and model explication, a qualitative investigation that further explores the four-pronged model of defensiveness is warranted. Therefore, this study seeks to understand the process of defensive communication in romantic relationships.

According to the Stamp et al. (1992) model, defensive communication involves a *self-perceived flaw* that an individual refuses to admit to another person, a *sensitivity* to that flaw, and an *attack* by another person that *focuses on the flaw*. Defensiveness is elicited by, and expressed through, communication, as “it cannot occur in the absence of social interaction” (p. 177). Stamp et al. argued that their model, unlike previous work, captures how defensiveness is communicatively generated *and* manifested. Through a review of past empirical research and theory, their model integrates features of psychodynamic theory and Gibb’s (1961) defensive climate conceptualization.

The origin of psychodynamic theory usually is credited to Freud (1957), who believed that unconscious forces, or defense mechanisms, motivate people to reduce anxiety or guilt. Psychodynamic theorists conceptualize defensiveness as a trait-based tendency to protect one’s self from threat. For example, Nelson and Horowitz (2001) found that compared to non-defensive participants, defensive participants were less competent in recounting sad memories.

Nelson and Horowitz (2001) argued that defensive individuals utilize an “automatic self-protective cognitive maneuver by which individuals can comply with a task demand to ‘tell about’ an unpleasant memory without ‘reliving it’” (p. 307). Moreover, psychodynamic theorists often examine how defensiveness is related to other elements of personality. For example, defensiveness is linked to attachment style, with insecurely attached individuals more defensive than those who are securely attached (Dankowski, 2001; Leak & Parsons, 2001).

Communication scholars have also utilized a conceptualization that privileges the psychological aspects of defensiveness. For example, Futch and Edwards (1999) examined the effects of defensiveness, sense of humor, and gender on the interpretation of ambiguous messages.

The majority of research elucidating the concepts of *self-perceived flaw* and *sensitivity* to that flaw has focused on defense mechanisms (e.g., Cramer, 1988) and strategies to protect the self (e.g., Waln, 1982) to the neglect of examinations of the nature of the self-perceived flaw about which one is sensitive. Baker (1980) hinted that self-perceived flaws may reflect fundamental beliefs, values, and attitudes, and that sensitivity is heightened by fear of changing and the perceived importance of the flaw under scrutiny. Gordon (1988) argued that defensiveness is characterized by tension, discomfort, accelerated physiological reactions, feeling gripped by the situation, a desire to lash out, feeling of estrangement, and mental confusion. These feelings may be associated with sensitivity to the self-perceived flaw. Research is needed to clarify the nature and relationship of the self-perceived flaw and sensitivity components of the Stamp et al. (1992) model.

The other dominant strand of research, initially developed by Gibb (1961), suggests that defensiveness “is a response to threat-evoking communication which *attacks* and *identifies a flaw within the other*” (Stamp et al., 1992, p. 180). From this perspective, defensiveness

embodies an individual's state (Alexander, 1973; Rozema, 1986), and is defined as "behavior that occurs when an individual perceives threat or anticipates threat in the group" (Gibb, 1961, p. 141). A defensive "climate" is characterized by "defensive communicators [who] send off multiple value, motive, and affect cues, but also ... distort what they receive" (p. 142). Gibb articulated six two-dimensional categories reflective of defensive and supportive climates. Respectively, these categories are: (a) evaluative versus descriptive communication, (b) control versus problem orientation, (c) strategic versus spontaneous communication, (d) neutrality versus empathy, (e) superiority versus equality, and (f) certainty versus provisionalism.

Gibb's (1961) work has influenced subsequent research focused on interactional elements of defensive communication. In an investigation of family systems, Alexander (1973) found that sons' aggression is positively related to mothers' defensiveness. Rozema (1986) found that defensiveness is associated with parent and child reluctance to discuss sexually related issues. Eadie's (1982) findings supported Gibb's (1961) postulates that strategic communication evokes defensiveness and that successful persuasion "shift[s] the climate in a supportive direction" (p. 163).

Compared to the other components of defensiveness, as articulated by Stamp et al. (1992), *attack* has received considerable theoretical and empirical investigation. Many researchers (e.g., Barton, Alexander, & Turner, 1988; Robbins, Alexander, & Turner, 2000; Waldron, Turner, Alexander, & Barton, 1993) have employed Gibb's six categories to explicate the forms of attack. Additionally, Barton et al. (1988) reported that competitive contexts induce defensiveness, particularly among families with delinquent youth. Robbins et al. (2000) described defensive statements as reflecting criticism, blame, and disagreement. Gottman (1994) argued that defensiveness communicates denial of responsibility or blame. According to

Gottman (1994), “yes-but” statements, cross-complaining, rubber man/woman, and *counter-criticism/counter-attack* are manifestations of defensiveness. However, he considers *initial criticism/attack* and defensiveness as independent components in his cascade model of relationship dissolution. Clearly, more research is needed to define the attack component with greater precision and to link it to other components of the Stamp et al. (1992) model.

Finally, little research has investigated the component of *other-perceived flaw*. Research related to other-perceived flaw shows that defensive communication by an individual facilitates defensive communication by a spouse (Gottman, 1994) and family members (Robbins et al., 2000). However, detailed investigations of how others’ recognition of one’s flaw is associated with attack and other components of defensiveness are lacking.

Psychodynamic theory and Gibb’s (1961) work offer unique perspectives on defensiveness. Through an integration of two seemingly opposed bodies of literature, the Stamp et al. (1992) model provides parsimony to the conceptualization of defensiveness. Drawing upon psychodynamic theory, the Stamp et al. model includes the components of a *self-perceived flaw* about which an individual is self-protective due to a *sensitivity* about that flaw. However, previous work has neglected examination of the nature of the self-perceived flaw about which one is sensitive. Reflecting upon Gibb’s (1961) work, the Stamp et al. model includes the components of an *attack* by another person who *perceives and focuses on that flaw*. Past research has not investigated how to best conceptualize the attack component, how it is linked to other components of defensive communication, and how other-perceived flaw is manifested in defensive communication. Therefore, this study was aimed at elucidating the components of defensive communication and how these components work together.

RQ1: What are the components of defensive communication?

RQ2: How do the components of defensive communication operate together?

Though heuristic, previous literature does not capture the type of detail and nuance that is necessary for a comprehensive view of the experience and expression of defensiveness, nor a precise understanding of its constituent components. This study explored the complex process of defensive communication, as reflected by the understandings and perspectives of romantic partners and from direct analysis of romantic partners' communication with each other. In particular, this study was designed to explicate the multiple components of defensive communication in greater detail.

RQ3: What are the contextual conditions of defensive communication?

RQ4: What triggers defensive communication?

RQ5: What are the features of the core (or peak) of defensive communication?

RQ6: What are the outcomes of defensive communication?

The ultimate goal of this study was to develop a more holistic and sophisticated model of the process of defensive communication.

## Method

### *Participants and Procedure*

Participants were recruited through the university setting as well as networking within the community. Approximately 50 participants completed a screening survey about a naturally-occurring conversation in which they became defensive. The screening survey was used to identify individuals who had recently experienced highly defensive communication with their dating or marital partner and were willing to be interviewed about it with their partner. From these screening surveys, participants who were sufficiently defensive were contacted for interviews. Ten romantically involved heterosexual couples participated in in-depth interviews.

Five of these couples were in serious dating relationships; the other five were married. A total of 30 interviews were conducted: 10 individual interviews with males, 10 individual interviews with females, and 10 joint interviews with couples. The individual and joint interviews averaged 20 minutes in length.

The length of dating couples' relationships ranged from 6 to 48 months ( $M = 26.1$ ,  $SD = 19.2$ ), whereas the length of married couples' relationships ranged from 15 to 78 months ( $M = 42.0$ ,  $SD = 23.6$ ). The men ranged from 19 to 31 years ( $M = 23.9$ ,  $SD = 4.2$ ) while the women ranged from 18 to 27 years ( $M = 21.1$ ,  $SD = 2.6$ ). The sample included seven white couples, one Korean married couple, one African-American dating couple, and one married couple with an African man and white woman. Of the men, one held a high school diploma, four were college students, two held college degrees, one held a graduate degree, and two had dropped out of college. Of the women, one held a high school diploma, seven were college students, and two held college degrees.

### *Instruments*

*Screening survey.* Two open-ended questions directed participants to describe in detail a conversation in which they had become defensive, and then to write out the conversation in a script format (i.e., he/she said... I said...). Furthermore, the 27-item instrument developed by Stamp et al. (1992) was employed to measure the intensity of defensive communication. From the open-ended questions and 27-item scale, the researchers identified participants whose responses indicated that they were highly defensive in a conversation with their romantic partner. The researchers recruited these participants and their partners to participate in in-depth interviews.

*Interview schedules.* Two slightly different interview schedules were developed: one for

the individual interview and one for the couple interview. This technique has been used by Stamp (1994), who outlined three reasons he obtained interview data from both the individual and couple: “First, the individual interviews could be compared and contrasted with one another. Second, individual interviews allowed respondents the opportunity to talk about their individual experiences. Third, couple interviews provided the opportunity to collect ‘interactional data’” (p. 92).

Consistent with IRB regulations, participants were informed they might experience slight discomfort when discussing a past defensive communication episode, but such discomfort would probably be no greater than what they would experience in normal daily life. They were also informed that they could discontinue participation at any time without penalty. To encourage trust and candid self-disclosure, the interviewer tried to minimize threat by conveying sensitivity, openness, and respect (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). Additionally, the interviewer conveyed that her interest in defensive communication was like that of a student, one who wanted to learn from the experts (i.e., interviewees) in the matter at hand.

The interview schedules were active (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995) and semi-structured (Hermanowicz, 2002) to encourage participants to reveal data necessary to answer the research questions. To begin, participants described the evolution of their relationship and their perspective regarding the conversation in which at least one member of the couple became defensive (as reported on the screening survey). For example, in both types of interviews, participants were asked, “Please describe what happened in that conversation in as much detail as possible. Tell it like a story, and start at the beginning.” Depending upon the completeness of participants’ responses, follow-up probes included, “What led up to the interaction? Was this a recurring theme? Why did you/your partner become defensive? What was it about the

situation/topic that provoked defensiveness? How did you feel during this situation?”

Additional questions were designed to probe as to how the four dimensions of defensive communication (self-perceived flaw, sensitivity, attack, and other-perceived flaw) documented by Stamp et al. (1992) were manifested, if at all, in participants' conversation. To provide closure, interviews concluded with a question about how the issue discussed in the conversation was resolved.

### *Analysis of the Data*

All of the interviews were transcribed with the cumulative length of the 30 interviews totaling 108 single-spaced pages. The researchers then employed a qualitative thematic analytic procedure which was influenced, in part, by the grounded theory approach (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Although traditional approaches to grounded theory have advocated that categories and theory objectively emerge from the data (Glaser & Strauss), more recent formulations (re)envision qualitative research in ways that allow for the use of extant theory in data analysis, the position of the analyst in shaping the themes, as well as privileging the voice of both researcher and participant. For example, Alvesson and Skoldberg (2000) promote a reflexive methodology involving “a well reasoned logic in interacting with the empirical material (with) rigorous techniques for processing the data” (p. 7) while realizing that “method cannot be disengaged from theory and other elements of pre-understanding” (p. 8). The current study builds upon preexisting theoretical work by Stamp et al. (1992). Using the Stamp et al. framework as a starting point, the analysis of the data allowed for the inductive development and reformulation of categories and the refinement of a theoretical model of defensive communication. In addition, the research was dialogic (Bakhtin, 1981), involving mutuality of voice from both participant and researcher. Like Frank (2005), the

researchers' intent in this investigation was "to offer an account of how researcher and participant came together in some shared time and space" (p. 968) in order to advance knowledge about defensive communication.

The researchers began analysis of the data by carefully and repeatedly reading and listening to the interviews. They relied upon the individual interview data to analyze participants' personal experiences and understandings of an episode of defensive communication with their romantic partner. Although the joint interview data was useful in revealing participants' insights, the researchers also relied upon the joint interview data for direct examination of defensive communication between the romantic partners. Through the procedure of open coding, the researchers conceptualized and developed categories that grouped, labeled, and summarized particular acts of communication in the data. Specifically, each researcher prepared analytical memos to capture insights and reflections. They shared and discussed these analytical memos with each other and compared them to the data. They developed a coding manual with thick descriptions of the categories, as well as examples of the categories from each interview. Thus, throughout open coding, the researchers systematically compared and contrasted categories, and with attention to how well data supported or refuted categories, they continually refined them. They were particularly mindful of how to best represent the components of defensive communication, as well as what contributed to, and resulted from, defensive communication, and the context of defensive communication. Finally, through the procedure of axial coding, the researchers worked on making coherent and sensible connections between these categories, which became the key concepts in an enlarged theoretical model of defensive communication. They used negative cases to search for other plausible explanations and, in some cases, debunk tentative conclusions. Diagramming relationships between the data was using in achieving visual

and conceptual clarity.

The researchers were satisfied with the model when they reached theoretical saturation (e.g., the category structure was stable) and each category could be supported with multiple exemplars. Cresswell (1997) described eight procedures for verifying the soundness of qualitative research claims, and he recommended that researchers employ at least two procedures. In this study, the researchers used four of Cresswell's procedures to ensure credibility of the final model: triangulation (i.e., triangulation of investigators and data—self report and direct observation of interaction), negative case analysis, self reflexivity and theoretical sensitivity, and thick description.

### Findings

The theoretical model is visually depicted in Figure 1. The figure reflects the main components involved in defensive communication among romantic dyads (queried in RQ1). The figure also represents the general processual movement and interrelationships among model components (queried in RQ2). Essentially, the figure represents the triggers, core, outcomes, and context of defensive communication, and therefore is a parsimonious visual depiction of the model. The complete theoretical model contains a number of additional densely interrelated subcategories, which will be explained further in the text that follows.

The new theoretical model is a more comprehensive yet precise expansion and explication of the Stamp et al. (1992) model. Similar to the Stamp et al. model, the model includes the categories of *sensitivity* and *other-perceived flaw*. Additionally, the model includes the categories of *perception of flaw central to the self*, which is an extension of the Stamp et al. category of self-perceived flaw, and *threat*, which incorporates the Stamp et al. category of attack as well as additional subcategories. The model contributes to the literature in four ways:

(a) it presents a *holistic* framework that summarizes the context and events that precede and follow defensive communication, (b) it presents *detailed and nuanced* descriptions of the multiple events that comprise defensive communication, (c) it highlights the *processual and fluid* nature among the events that comprise defensive communication, and (d) it draws attention to both *interactional and person-centered* features of defensive communication. To understand the process of defensive communication, each component of the model will be explained in turn, beginning with an explication of the contexts that color romantic partners' communication. In addition, the narrative accounts of one of the married couples, Emily and Andrew, are provided to illustrate a specific experience within the parameters of the model.

### *Contexts of Defensive Communication*

Context refers to the broader set of conditions in which the phenomenon occurs (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In response to RQ3, which asked about contextual conditions, the data revealed that four contextual conditions underlie defensive communication: perception of flaw central to self, situational difficulties, emotion, and relational concerns.

*Perception of flaw central to self.* The first contextual condition that influenced defensive communication was the perception of one or more flaws central to one's self. As Emily indicated, "The one who's being defensive is usually the one who's kind of insecure about something" (10:I:W:127-128).<sup>1</sup> The perception of one or more flaws central to the self often yields influence throughout the entire process of defensive communication. Once romantic partners have entered a defensive communication episode, the perception of flaws central to the self seems to exacerbate sensitivity and reactions to perceived threats directed towards the self, thus creating a context ripe for the perpetuation of defensive communication. Although Stamp et al. (1992) claimed that self-perceived flaws are unacknowledged (particularly in less intimate

relationships), the data at hand revealed that awareness of, and willingness to, admit one's flaws fluctuates throughout romantic partners' interactions. Although partners are unlikely to admit their personal flaws during a defensive communication episode, it is not unusual for them to admit flaws to their partner *after* the defensive communication episode, as part of relational repair.

Unlike the Stamp et al. (1992) concept of self-perceived flaw, the data suggest that individuals are sensitive about their own flaws *as well as the flaws of others close to them*. For example, Marie was sensitive about her dad's character flaws, and Laura was sensitive about her mother's choice of meat and the lifestyle it reflected. Both participants internalized their parents' blemished characters and actions as reflective of their own. Thus, the label of *flaw central to the self* reflects conceptual enlargement of the Stamp et al. category of self-perceived flaw.

*Situational difficulties.* Another condition that underlies the entire process of defensive communication is the category of situational difficulties. Situational difficulties stemmed from preexisting negative feelings toward the partner or situation, and complexities of particular settings. Participants reported residual negative affect from previous conflict that intensified defensive communication. For instance, Hope and Todd, a married couple, often experienced defensive interactions when Hope was driving, as Todd felt that Hope was a poor driver. Due to carried-over hard feelings from previous arguments, defensive communication erupted whenever the couple traveled together. Additionally, participants noted that particular settings sometimes evoked unpleasant memories of previous conflict and reactivated a defensive communication episode. Sometimes the activities that were occasioned, or expected, within a particular setting increased the likelihood of defensive communication. For example, Brianna and Nick, a dating couple, attended a party with potential romantic rivals. They reported that their consumption of

alcohol in a psychologically-threatening setting worsened the situation and contributed to defensive communication.

*Emotion.* The type and intensity of emotions experienced and expressed by romantic partners also contextualizes the process of defensive communication. The data revealed that participants experienced either dejection-related emotions (e.g., feeling hurt, sad, and depressed) or agitation-related emotions (e.g., fear, anger, and anxiety). Although both combinations of emotion contextualized the core elements of defensive communication, dejection-related emotions are intensified when a perceived flaw that is central to the self becomes salient, while agitation-related emotions are intensified when a threat to self becomes salient. Experiencing dejection-related emotions due to her perceived flaw, Marie shared, “After he said no to that, I felt hurt and misunderstood and um...I felt like he, my feelings weren’t important to him and it was difficult. I just felt like...my needs weren’t being met” (8:I:W:53-54). In contrast, Nick felt agitation-related emotions when feeling threatened by his girlfriend. He stated:

When she got mad at me because I wanted to say hi to one my friends who is a girl, just one, I immediately got defensive because I for so long have been tolerant and have put up with her. At that moment she didn’t trust me one inch and I couldn’t tolerate it. So we started yelling on the dance floor and I left here again, and as soon as I went outside I was so mad and all my friends could tell I was pissed...I was so mad, I mean I was almost crying. (2:I:B:229-240)

Although participants shared a variety of emotions that impacted the defensive communication situation, the type and intensity of emotion clearly contextualized the interaction.

Given that strong emotions can often cause intractability between romantic partners (Retzinger, 1991) and lead to increased conflict, the role of emotions in defensive

communication is not unexpected. In fact, unresolved conflicts often trigger recurring emotional responses that frame future interactions (Gayle & Preiss, 1998). As an underlying force in the defensive process, participants experienced and expressed a variety of negative emotions that fostered defensive communication. Some participants reported and demonstrated difficulty in expressing their emotions to their romantic partner, which seemed to escalate the experience of the emotion. Indeed, Mongrain (2003) reported that if romantic partners experience conflict over, and inhibit display of, emotional expression, they may experience less harmonious communication and less positivity in the relationship.

*Relational concerns.* The final contextual condition influencing the process of defensive communication is relational concerns, which comprises romantic partners' underlying anxiety about the relationship. The two main relational concerns pertain to uncertainty and identity. Participants in dating relationships expressed concerns about relational uncertainty that often colored the process of defensive communication. For example, Christy and Derek, a dating couple, experienced defensiveness when Derek joked about her dating someone else.

D: Um, we went [to the restaurant] and we go out to eat a lot, but it had been a week or two weeks since we were even there. And then umm, we sat in this one booth and we sat in this booth once before but it was like maybe a month ago. We sit down and she was like we sat in the same seat. So she got a little nickname from me and I chuckled and I was like you must be getting me confused with one of your other ones because we didn't even come here yesterday let alone sitting in this booth.

I: How do you feel you were approaching the situation when talking with her?

D: Umm, in a light joking manner because we I mean, we were just hanging out at that time. I mean I knew how she felt about me and vice versa but that is as deep as it

went. I mean if she was with someone else, there was nothing I could say or do about that. So it was mostly in a joking manner.

I: Did you suspect that maybe she had been there with someone else?

D: Yeah. She is smart, okay? And I can understand that there is some knuckle head who can't remember this or that, who we were sitting at a table and we got the same table that we were sitting in yesterday. I mean I don't think that I had even her the day before you know, and that is what makes me think that maybe it was. (5:I:B:147-172)

Uncertainty often resulted from jealousy about the partner's fidelity or interest in another person, threats of relationship termination, lack of relational maintenance, or unclear relational status.

In contrast, married participants reported concerns about their relational identities that shaped defensive communication. Marital participants' concerns centered on their individual role as a wife or a husband, and were shaped by fears about fulfilling their role or expectations for their partner's identity as a husband or wife. As Megan stated, "I'm a Christian and I know that I need to respect him as my husband... I also feel like a husband really needs to be a good, you know needs to look out for the good of the family" (9:I:W:213-216). Megan's concern over marital roles contextualized their defensive situation, as she felt conflicting feelings about their proper relational identities and financial management. Similarly, Laura felt increasing pressure in her relational identity as her living situation changed. She shared, "My mother-in-law comes to live with us and it's not exactly 100% comfortable in the house. Like, I always have to make sure that I get up early and make sure that I'm always being a good daughter-in-law, being a good wife, and I feel like I have to live like, under her watchful eye" (7:I:W:83-86). In this situation, Laura's responses were influenced by her fears about fulfilling her own and her mother-in-law's expectations.

*Triggers of Defensive Communication: Lack of Supportive Communication*

Defensive communication cannot occur in absence of social interaction, as it must be elicited (Gibb, 1961; Stamp et al., 1992). In response to RQ4, which inquired about contributing factors, the data showed that defensive communication is triggered by communication that lacks, or is perceived to lack, a supportive tone or content. Specifically, defensive communication occurred when one or both romantic partners failed to communicate warmth, failed to communicatively share, or failed to award attention to the other. These triggers were interrelated; such that most couples had more than one concomitantly precede their defensive communication episode. The dotted lines connecting the three triggers in Figure 1 illustrate the possibility of their co-occurrence.

*Lack of communicative warmth.* A lack of communicative warmth can spark defensive communication. When individuals do not express care, kindness, and affection, but are instead cold, critical, and rejecting toward their partners, defensive communication can unfold. When Jamal emailed his wife Megan, a personal financial officer, asking her to look up information about a car he liked, she replied with a sterile response in the hopes that Jamal would not pursue purchasing the car. Jamal and Megan identified their impersonal emails (especially Megan's distant response), contextualized by their history of tense exchanges about money and decision making, as setting the stage for an episode of defensive communication.

*Lack of communicative sharing.* A lack of communicative sharing is another variant that can trigger defensive communication. For example, Shawn described how his wife Marie wanted them to stop by her dad's house without giving Shawn advance notice. Shawn felt that Marie once again "sprung" a request upon him, and he resented her tendency to conceal her wishes until action was required. The data showed that most couples remarked or demonstrated that a

lack of openness contributed to defensive communication.

*Inattentiveness.* The final type of trigger of defensive communication is inattentiveness. When an individual feels that his/her partner is not listening or paying attention, that individual tends to feel unsupported and disconfirmed. When Stacy and her boyfriend Brian were on Spring break, Stacy felt disappointed that Brian ignored her and paid attention to his friends. The other two types of trigger were relevant to Stacy and Brian as well. Brian was reluctant to confer with Stacy in deciding how to spend his time; he felt that since they were not yet married, he should be able to do as he pleased. Stacy felt as though Brian was inconsiderate and evasive.

Essentially, a lack of communicative warmth, a lack of communicative sharing, and inattentiveness comprise communicative behaviors that show a low degree of minding in a close relationship. These communicative deficiencies may facilitate feelings of instability and distance between romantic partners rather than creating feelings of stability and closeness (Harvey & Weber, 2002). The data revealed that a lack of supportive communication among one, or more commonly both, of the partners set in motion the core categories of defensive communication, or a defensive communication episode. The term episode does not mean that defensive communication is always book-ended by clear, tidy, or discrete beginnings and endings. However, the data show that certain categories (threat, other-perceived flaw, and sensitivity) comprise the essence of defensive communication. A defensive communication episode transpires when these categories are present and dominant in social interaction.

*Core of Defensive Communication: The Defensive Communication Episode*

RQ5 asked about the features of the core, or peak, of defensive communication. Essentially, a defensive communication episode occurs when an individual interprets a message from his/her romantic partner as threatening. Specifically, the individual perceives that the

partner's threat focuses on a flaw, central to the self, about which he or she is sensitive. In an effort to restore or achieve good feelings about the self, the individual communicatively shifts the threat from the self to the partner, thereby promoting an interactional cycle of defensive communication.

*Threat.* Threat is the interactive strategy that romantic partners use to recognize and enact defensive communication. Perception of threat is the foundation of defensive communication. Individuals are unlikely to become entangled in defensive communication unless they perceive they are in some danger, be it psychological, interpersonal, physical, or another form. Moreover, if they feel threatened, individuals are inclined to proffer counterthreats. There are three manifestations of threat: (a) attack, (b) avoidance, and (c) indifferent justification.

Stamp et al. (1992) originally conceived of an attack as the only means of threat in defensive communication. They referred to Gibb's (1961) six dimensions and Alexander's (1973) description of punishing verbal and nonverbal behaviors to explain how attacks operate in defensive situations. The data show that attack often involves a projection of aggressively articulated blame toward the partner. Compared to typical interactions, the attacking partner is perceived to be unusually forceful in assigning fault to the other partner. Attack is manifested by communication that is direct, dominating, and focused on one's own interest at the expense of the other. For example, Laura and her husband Ian described how Ian's attack spurred defensive communication:

L: Basically, I was in the kitchen and I was cutting the meat. And like getting off the grease and stuff like, the fat, and he walked in and like, *poked* it. And you're like, "Why'd your mom," in Korean, you said, "It's not going to be very good meat. It's cheap. Why did your mother buy *this* meat?" Do you remember that?

I: Yeah.

L: And then I was like, “It’s not bad meat, you know, it’s good meat.” I was thinking, “Here we go again, you always criticize my mom.”

I: I told you, I don’t like her style. (7:J:H/W:369-375)

After repeated interactions in which Ian made disparaging comments about Laura’s parents to her, Laura had developed sensitivity to criticism of her parents. Therefore, even though Ian’s attack was not directly toward Laura, because she had internalized her parents’ flaws as her own, Laura reported feeling attacked.

Although attack is a primary means of communicating threat, it is not the only means. Avoidance can be a more subtle yet poisonous activity that leads to perception of threat. During avoidance, one or both partners actively attempt to evade a defensive communication episode through physical and emotional withdrawal from the situation. Physical withdrawal is typically exemplified by leaving a tense situation, thereby temporarily eliminating the possibility of an explosive exchange. Emotional withdrawal is demonstrated by stonewalling, including blank affect, restricted body movement, and lack of responsiveness to the partner. Together, physical and emotional withdrawal can be a lethal combination, as participants described how “walking away” exacerbates perceptions of threat and the intensity of their emotions, making subsequent attacks especially hurtful. For example, avoidance was key in communicating threat in one particular episode of defensive communication between Brianna and Nick. Two conditions, pervasive uncertainty about their dating relationship, as well as the influence of alcohol, contextualized this couple’s interactions at a late night party. Brianna and Nick each felt particularly threatened when the other interacted with potential romantic rivals. They reciprocally distanced themselves from each other until Brianna accusingly attacked Nick,

saying, “You can stop talking about me now.” She said, “I have never seen him that pissed off before in my life. I was just like ‘uh oh.’” (2:I:G:90-92). Thus, avoidance by one partner often leads to a perception of threat by the other partner.

The third means of threat is indifferent justification. Indifferent justification involves an account for one’s actions without demonstrated concern for the partner; it is threatening because of the implications (such as loss of face) for the partner. For example, while Shawn was driving, he refused Marie’s request for them to visit her dad. He explained to her, “We don’t have time, I’m tired, and I want to go home” (8:I:H:140-141). To complicate matters, Shawn disliked Marie’s dad as well as Marie’s habit of “springing things” on him. Marie felt threatened by Shawn’s explanation because he did not appear to care about her wishes, and she felt that Shawn’s implicit rejection of her dad was a rejection of her as well.

*Other-perceived flaw.* Stamp et al. (1992) defined other-perceived flaw as resulting from an attack focused on an “area or issue that the attacker perceives as a flaw in the other” (p. 180). Consistent with the Stamp et al. model, the data showed that other-perceived flaw occurs when individuals *perceive* that their threatening partner focuses on a flaw central to the individual’s self. In other words, when individuals feel threatened by the partner, they perceive that their partner’s threat is localized on a sensitive self-flaw. The other-perceived flaw can be either action-based (focused on the actions of a romantic partner) or character-based (focused on the character of a romantic partner).

The participants’ accounts and exchanges show that the degree to which the partner clearly demonstrates the other-perceived flaw varies. In some cases (usually through attack), threatening partners overtly reveal their focus on a flaw. As Hope shared:

We get in the car, and before we even pull out on Broadway, it’s like, ‘What are you

doing!’, ‘What, you just pulled out in front on traffic! That light was yellow!’ And I’m just like, ‘Uh, let me drive the way I want to drive. I’m not going to kill anybody I’m being safe...He’s like, ‘Well I hope you don’t drive like that all the time! You drive like a crazy person!’” (6:I:W:132-136)

In other cases (usually through avoidance and indifferent justification), other-perceived flaw is communicated more covertly. Continuing with the last example, Shawn did not explicitly attack Marie or her dad. Marie relied upon her past conversations with Shawn to infer that Shawn perceived her dad, and therefore herself, to be flawed. In his individual interview, Shawn admitted that he knew his justifications would be threatening to Marie because they indicated disapproval of her dad’s lifestyle.

The data suggest that awareness and intentionality of the other-perceived flaw varies. All participants seemed at least somewhat mindful that threatening communication demonstrated that the partner focused on a sensitive issue of the other partner. Additionally, participants who admitted threatening partners often mitigated admissions by saying that they had done so unintentionally. For example, Andrew explained, “[It] seems like when things like that happen to me it’s like I might say something or do something unknowingly that causes her to be offended” (10:I:H:214-215).

*Sensitivity.* Sensitivity occurred when individuals felt threatened by the partner and believed that the partner was honing in on a flaw central to themselves. Similar to Stamp et al.’s (1992) original conceptualization of sensitivity, the data showed that sensitivity accumulated through repeated negative interactions but became most salient in the heat of a defensive communication episode. Highlighting the role of perception and meta-perception, Stamp et al. emphasized that sensitivities develop through interactions with others *in response to* perceptions

of the way people see others seeing them.

Sensitivity seems to be related to the intensity of the threat and opaqueness of other-perceived flaw. The more intense the threat and the more clearly it revealed an other-perceived flaw, the more likely an individual was to feel sensitive. Sensitivity is related to the experience of hurt feelings. In individual accounts and joint interviews, participants often described and demonstrated feeling hurt as part of being sensitive. Leary, Springer, Negel, Ansell, and Evans (1998) found that the intensity of hurt feelings is associated with perceived devaluation of the relationship, or relational threat. In a subsequent study of perceived causes of hurt feelings, Vangelisti, Young, Carpenter-Theune, and Alexander (2005) investigated eight explanations that people report as causing their hurt feelings. Seven of their explanations (relational denigration, humiliation, verbal/nonverbal aggression, intrinsic flaw, ill-conceived humor, mistaken intent, and discouragement) are related to feeling threatened, and one (intrinsic flaw) is explicitly linked to other-perceived flaw.

For example, Jessica and Mark communicated defensively after Mark kept Jessica waiting while she was crunched for time (a situational difficulty that contextualized their interaction). Jessica described, “I got very very angry. ... I basically let loose” (1:J:G:252-253). In their joint interview, Jessica recounted:

When he came out and I started yelling at him ... he started, you know, with the past, and he was saying, “Well, you do this and you do that” and it was like he was verbally slamming me. Saying, this and this and that and using all the “you” terms. Instead of saying “I am sorry that it took so long” and being polite and nice about it, he basically just ripped into me and made me feel horrible. He made me feel horrible because of the challenge I had and I couldn’t do things. (1:J:G:269-273)

To Jessica, Mark's counterattacks were searing and focused on her flaws. Mark's verbal aggression amplified Jessica's sensitivity of her own flaws and hurt her feelings. Not surprisingly, Jessica and Mark reported cyclical engagement in the core processes of defensive communication, where each perceived *threat* from the other *focused on a flaw* central to the self about which each was *sensitive*. The next section focuses on the outcomes of defensive communication episodes.

*Outcomes of Defensive Communication: Relational Repair Strategies*

In response to RQ6, which asked about the outcomes of defensive communication, the data showed that partners use relational repair strategies to mitigate damage to the relationship and to restore positive feelings between the partners. Specifically, participants used meta-communication, apologetic communication, partner-centered preventative communication, and avoidance as relational repair strategies following defensive interactions. To restore positive feelings towards the partner, participants often used a combination of these strategies in communicative exchanges following the episode.

*Meta-communication.* Meta-communication typically entails directly communicating about the defensive communication episode. Participants indicated that this type of repair strategy was essential for conflict resolution, although some couples discussed taking time to cool off and reflect before engaging in meta-communication. Meta-communication involved discussing how the defensive episode occurred (including misunderstandings), and how partners felt and communicated during the episode. As Andrew shared, "Um usually when something like that happens it just takes a lot of talking through. Maybe even going back to um kind of replaying it...It's just talking it out and figuring out what the real issue is...Talking it out is definitely important." (10:I:H:272-281). During meta-communication partners may engage in

supportive communication by indicating that they understand the other's perspective, relating common experiences, forgiving each other, engaging in intimacy behaviors, using humor, and using topical communication rather than accusing communication.

*Apologetic communication.* Apologetic communication is typically defined as one person claiming responsibility for the commission of a possible offense (Robinson, 2004; 2006). The data revealed that this was a common relational repair strategy employed by participants following a defensive communication episode. They often apologized and admitted wrong-doing upon seeing a hurt partner. Christy described how Derek "noticed that I was upset and he basically said he was sorry and that he didn't mean to implicate anything" (5:I:G:61-62). For some couples, apologies were also utilized to mitigate the conflict and to defuse future defensive interactions. An indirect apology, or acknowledgement of culpability, may also be used for repair purposes. For instance, Laura shared that, "He didn't apologize later on, but later on he admitted 'I shouldn't have criticized that [the meat], you know, cause it was good'" (7:I:W:100-101).

*Partner-centered preventative communication.* While meta-communication involves discussion of a *past* defensive communication, partner-centered preventative communication is a relational repair strategy that focuses on the prevention of *future* defensive communication. These two strategies often occur in tandem. As couples mind their relationship (Harvey & Weber, 2002), they use knowledge about their partner to develop maintenance and repair strategies that are customized to the partner and the situation at hand. Jessica discussed how partner-centered preventative communication, in combination with meta-communication, improved the outcomes of her defensive communication episode with Mark. She explained, "We decided that we both made mistakes. We both impeded on each other's time, so to speak, we decided that we are going to instead of getting hot about it next time, we are going to get the

other person's attention and say 'Hey this is happening again, we need to stop this' or 'I need to go, to find a ride home or something'" (1:I:G:138-142). In this example, Jessica and Mark identified openness and forgiveness as key values they wanted to demonstrate in order to avoid and abbreviate future conflicts. The data showed that partner-centered preventative communication fosters feelings of relational closeness, respect, and security and may potentially reduce future episodes of defensive communication.

*Avoidance.* The final relational repair strategy that emerged from the data was the use of avoidance to resolve the situation. Once they have exited the defensive communication episode, partners may physically or verbally evade meta-communication of the episode. Partners may avoid signifiers, such as a certain shirt or type of food, that they associate with the episode. Although avoidance in close relationships is sometimes conceptualized as a negative communicative strategy, the data showed that avoidance could be used as a positive repair strategy. In particular, once the defensive communicated episode has concluded, a brief period of withdrawal can provide a couple with time to regain composure and clarify their thoughts and feelings, and more calmly engage in meta-communication about the episode. For instance, Nick and Brianna took some time apart to think about the situation before discussing what occurred. As Nick conveyed, "I think we let all our major emotions out that night, all the screaming and yelling. And then we let it fester in our minds for a while, you know so we could think of some other things to talk about. But when we did talk about the other things we weren't so loud and vocal about it. So we basically talked about it until we came to an understanding" (2:I:B:271-274). However, long-term avoidance without closure or resolution seemed to precipitate subsequent defensive communication episodes. As an illustration, Megan stated:

The problem, the fact still remains that this is bound to happen again with something

else... I think that one reason it's not resolved is because a lot of times we don't talk about it after the problem subsides, because we don't want to talk about it because we hate fighting. And we really do love each other and you know so it just brings up a lot of feelings that we don't want to face or whatever. (9:I:W:404-413)

In this example, Megan recognized that continued avoidance would delay yet stimulate future defensive communication episodes.

### *Emily and Andrew's Defensive Communication*

To more fully illustrate the model of defensive communication, the specific experience of one couple, Emily and Andrew, is highlighted. As a "case study," their experience is intended to be both representative of defensive communication, while at the same time, uniquely their own (Yerby, Buerkel-Rothfuss, & Bochner, 1994). The narrative account of Emily and Andrew's defensive interaction is therefore "sufficiently unique to evoke comparisons and sufficiently universal to evoke identification" (Bochner, 1994, p. 33).

Emily and Andrew were each 21 years old, had known each other for 3 ½ years, and had been married for 7 months. Both were college seniors at a Midwestern university. The defensive communication episode occurred during a dinner, as explained by Emily:

I was cooking dinner and he came home . . . so I was trying to make meatloaf and um, so then he came he came home after he took a shower and stuff and we sat down to eat. Then I asked him if he liked it and he said, um he paused and said that he, or he didn't say anything and I immediately took it as he didn't like it. (10:I:W:57-64)

From Emily's perspective, the initial pausing and lack of response by her husband was interpreted by her to be a critical reaction to the dinner that she had made. Sensing her reaction, Andrew then said that the dinner was "fine" but this was too little and too late for Emily. She

stated, “Then he was like, ‘Yeah it’s fine’ but he was just trying to appease me, he wasn’t telling me the whole truth and so I got . . .upset” (10:I:W:64-65).

Andrew’s perception of the interaction corroborated Emily’s, though he was able to account for his initial reaction (or lack of same):

Emily made dinner and I came home. Sat down for dinner and sometimes she’ll ask me questions and um I’ll think about it for just a second just because I wasn’t thinking about that before. I told her before this, but just think about it, yeah I like that or just take a second to think. I don’t know I...it’s just something that I do and so I think she took offense to that. Um I...seems like when things like that happen to me it’s like I might say something or do something unknowingly that causes her to be offended. Maybe she thought I was being hurtful to her. (10:I:H:210-215)

Emily’s feelings were indeed hurt “like he was telling me I did a bad job” though she did agree with him upon later reflection that “he wasn’t really trying to hurt my feelings” (10:I:W:101-102;10:J:W:378-379).

There were a number of contextual aspects contributing to the defensiveness experienced by Emily. She acknowledged that she was “trying to make good meals” but, at the same time, also had a flaw central to her self of not being a very good cook and that this meal in particular “didn’t taste very good, I knew it didn’t because it was kind of mushy.” The salience of this flaw was heightened because it was important for her, as a newlywed, to “be all wife-like by cooking dinner.” As a result, she was particularly sensitive about this situation as she “realized it probably wasn’t really about the meatloaf, it was more about me feeling like I was a good enough wife and a good enough partner for him” (10:I:W:74-106). His lack of enthusiasm, therefore, only reinforced her perceived inadequacy as a cook and a wife.

As newlyweds, both of them acknowledged other situational difficulties contributing to the miscommunication that was at the heart of this interaction. Part of the reason for the problem was “we were kind of, I guess, new” (10:I:W:111) acknowledged Emily, while Andrew indicated that interactions like this one “can be confusing especially when you’re first married” (10:I:H:263-264). Andrew realized that situations like this one were not that uncommon for them, but that they have “gotten better just to recognize situations like this where there is no real problem” (10:J:H:371).

As Emily became defensive during this interaction, she responded to Andrew that perhaps the dinner would have been better if “she had more help” around the house. As a result of this comment, Andrew then became defensive as he thought that Emily was “attacking him” and his efficacy as a husband and his “feelings became hurt” as a result. This “additional issue” of spousal duties were based on relational concerns since, according to Emily, they “were just kind of in the midst of like figuring out who’s roles were what and who’s doing what” in their marriage (10:J:W:386-388).

The trigger for Emily’s defensiveness was a lack of supportive communication due to a perceived lack of warmth and attentiveness from Andrew. Emily believed that Andrew would acknowledge the effort she was putting forth. Rather than an initial non-response (Andrew’s pausing) followed by a non-committal “this is fine,” her “expectations” were much higher because she was expecting him to say, “Oh this is the best meal ever! You’re such a great wife!” (10:J:W:341). What she received, however, was a lack of open communication as “he was just trying to appease me and he wasn’t telling me the whole truth” (10:I:W:65). The trigger for Andrew’s defensiveness was the lack of supportive communication due to Emily’s perceived lack of communication warmth and attention. Andrew indicated, when she said “she needed

more help around the house,” that “made me feel hurt,” and “I took it as an attack on me” (10:I:H:231-248).

RQ2 inquired as to how the components of defensive communication operate together. Although the visual model (see Figure 1) and previous explanations of interrelationships among components provide insight into RQ2, the case study of Emily and Andrew provides additional illustration of the components of defensive communication in action. As a result of contextual elements as well as initial triggers, the couple’s core defensive communication episode unfolded in the following way: Emily felt initially threatened by Andrew’s lack of response about her cooking. She perceived that Andrew viewed her as being an inadequate wife, and therefore flawed. Emily became more sensitive about this flaw, as she also perceived this flaw in herself. In defense of herself, Emily then stated to Andrew that she could use more help around the house, initiating a counter threat to him. Andrew perceived that Emily saw his lack of help as a flaw in him as a husband. Andrew, realizing there may be some truth to the statement, became more sensitive to this self perceived flaw as a husband. As a result, a conflict episode ensued as they “fought” and “continued to both be defensive” during the interaction.

For Andrew and Emily, the initial outcome was a positive one through meta-communication and apology. As Andrew said:

So starting to go back and talk it out and explain what you meant just takes a little time, but talking it out is definitely important. And um say if there is anything that is said hurtfully that definitely needs to be taken care of, and um if I say something to Emily that wasn’t that wasn’t right to say to her that wasn’t, that shouldn’t have been said then I definitely need to talk to her. I apologize and try to set things right and admit where I’m wrong if I said something that was hurtful like that. (10:I:H:280-284)

## Conclusion

This study explores the complex process of defensive communication and explicates the components of defensive communication in relation to each other. The proposed theoretical model provides a comprehensive, yet precise, expansion of the Stamp et al. (1992) model of defensive interactions. In addition, the new model contributes to knowledge about defensive communication in four ways. First, this model is a holistic and action-oriented framework focusing on the context in which defensive communication occurs, as well as the triggers that precede, and the outcomes that follow, a defensive interaction. Past research has not fully explored the interrelated facets of defensive communication, particularly as it occurs processually and within overarching contexts. This study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding by highlighting interrelationships and overlapping contexts in the process of defensive communication. Second, the model provides more breadth and depth through the identification and more detailed explanation of additional components. Third, the model conceptualizes defensiveness not as a singular event but as a communicative process that is fluid in nature. Finally, the model focuses on both the interactional and person-centered aspects of defensive encounters, particularly by highlighting the reciprocal nature of the components within the core defensive communication episode as well as the overall process.

The proposed model necessitates a revision in the way defensive communication is regarded. Although often considered a negative relational event, the data revealed that relational benefits to defensive communication sometimes led to subsequent supportive communication and feelings of heightened closeness between romantic partners. Thus, defensive communication should not be conceptualized as solely negative, as it may precipitate positive relational outcomes. Armed with knowledge from the present research, practitioners might help distressed

couples identify and build upon the relational benefits of past defensive communication while avoiding its destructive elements.

The proposed theoretical model unlocks many possibilities for future research. The inductive expansion of a deductively-generated four-pronged model (Stamp et al., 1992) provides unparalleled texture. However, future research should test the expanded model with additional data and methods. To aid forthcoming investigations, the researchers offer 11 testable postulates that reflect components and processes in the model.<sup>2</sup> The postulates were derived through the open and axial coding processes. Although connections among model components are illustrated in the Findings and Figure 1, the postulates further clarify and highlight interrelationships that reveal movement within the model.

The context, or preexisting conditions within the self, interaction, or relationship, influences defensive communication. One contextual condition is a perception of one or more flaws central to the self. The salience of these core flaws seem to contribute to the degree of sensitivity to the flaw as well as the perceived threat by the partner. In addition, residual negative affect from ongoing conflict appears to be connected to the occurrence of defensive interactions. As such, the following postulates are proposed:

Postulate 1: As the perception of a flaw central to the self increases, so does the sensitivity to that flaw.

Postulate 2: As the perception of a flaw central to the self increases, so does perceived threat.

Postulate 3: Residual negative affect from unresolved conflict increases the potential for a defensive communication episode.

Context also involves the emotions experienced and expressed by partners as well as relational

concerns. Within this sample, the type of emotion experienced seemed differentially influenced by the perception of a flaw central to the self or perception of threat to the self. In addition, the type of relationship (dating or marriage) appeared to be linked to different relationship concerns (identity or uncertainty). This suggests the following four postulates:

Postulate 4: As a perceived flaw central to the self increases, so does the occurrence of dejection-related emotions (e.g., feeling hurt, sad, and depressed).

Postulate 5: As the perception of threat to self increases, so does the occurrence of agitation-related emotions (e.g., fear, anger, and anxiety).

Postulate 6: For marital partners, relational identity concerns (rather than relational uncertainty concerns) are more likely to be associated with defensive communication.

Postulate 7: For dating partners, relational uncertainty concerns (rather than relational identity concerns) are more likely to be associated with defensive communication.

As noted, some of the participants identified multiple triggers while others identified a key one. As such, it seems that the occurrence of multiple triggers (such as a lack of attention, sharing, *and* warmth) coincides with heightened perceptions of threat, other-perceived flaw, and sensitivity, leading to the following postulate:

Postulate 8: In comparison to communication characterized by a single trigger, communication marked by a multiple triggers is associated with heightened perceptions of threat, other-perceived flaw, and sensitivity.

A lack of supportive communication in the dimensions of warmth, sharing, and attentiveness triggered a defensive communication episode among romantic partners.

Subsequently, as relational repair, partners engaged in meta-communication, partner-centered preventative communication, apologetic communication, and avoidance. The type of trigger appears to be associated with the type of relational repair strategy, or outcome, of a defensive communication episode. For example, if one or both partners withhold thoughts and feelings, those partners are less likely to engage in meta-communication. Similarly, if one or both partners are cold and aloof toward each other, apologetic communication is unlikely while avoidance seems more likely. Finally, if a defensive communication episode is triggered by inattentiveness, partner-centered preventative communication is unlikely to be employed as a relational repair strategy. Therefore, the following postulates are proposed:

Postulate 9: Communication marked by a lack of sharing is negatively associated with the relational repair strategy of meta-communication.

Postulate 10: Communication marked by a lack of warmth is negatively associated with the relational repair strategy of apologetic communication but positively associated with the relational repair strategy of avoidance.

Postulate 11: Communication marked by a lack of attention is negatively associated with the relational repair strategy of partner-centered preventative communication.

This study contributes to knowledge about defensive communication by extending the Stamp et al. (1992) four-pronged model of defensiveness. The qualitative, inductive exploration at hand provides theoretical advancement of the Stamp et al. quantitative, deductive investigation. Eleven data-derived postulates were proposed to stimulate further refinement of the proposed model. Thus, this study builds on previous work on defensive communication and serves as an impetus for future inquiry on this important topic.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Pseudonyms were used and transcripts were given a couple code (1 through 10) to preserve anonymity and so that direct quotations could be matched to the corresponding participant. As a result, direct quotations are followed by a numerical code, with the first number representing the specific couple; the second letter indicating whether the interview was individual (I) or joint (J); the third letter indicating whether the participant was a husband (H), wife (W), boyfriend (B), or girlfriend (G); and the fourth number(s) indicating the specific line number(s) on the transcript.

<sup>2</sup> For examples of qualitative communication research that developed conceptual models and articulated testable postulates, see Becker and Stamp (2005), Browning (1978), and Stamp (1999, 2004).

Figure 1. A theoretical model of defensive communication among romantic couples.

