

**When Power Becomes a Turn-Off: Interactions Between Relational Power and Ineffective Arguing on Sexual Satisfaction in Heterosexual Couples Seeking Therapy**

by

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## Abstract

The purpose of the current study was to explore associations between low relational power, ineffective arguing, and sexual satisfaction among heterosexual couples seeking couples' therapy ( $N = 175$ ). Analyses utilized the Actor-Partner Independence Model to explore three research questions: (1) Is one's own relationship between low relational power and sexual satisfaction mediated by one's own ineffective arguing perceptions (actor-actor-actor)? (2) Is one's own relationship between low relational power and sexual satisfaction mediated by their partner's ineffective arguing perceptions (actor-partner-actor)? (3) Is the relationship between one's low relational power and their partner's sexual satisfaction mediated by one's own perceptions of ineffective arguing (actor-actor-partner)? Results comparing the fit of six alternative structural models indicated a significant indirect effect from male perceptions of low relational power to female sexual satisfaction through male perception of ineffective arguing. This paper concludes with a discussion of these results, along with implications for therapy and future research.

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## List of Abbreviations

IEMSS	Interpersonal Exchange Model of Sexual Satisfaction
EIS	Empathy, Intimacy, and Sexual Satisfaction Model
AUMFT	Auburn University Marriage and Family Therapy
MPS	Miller Power Scale
IRB	Institutional Review Board
GED	General Education Development
MDI	Major Depression Inventory
GAD	Generalized Anxiety Disorder
IAI	Ineffective Arguing Scale
APIM	Actor-Partner Independence Model
SRMR	Standardized Root Mean Square
RMSEA	Root Mean Square Error of Approximation
CFI	Comparative Fit Index
TLI	Tucker-Lewis Index
AIC	Akaike Information Criterion
BIC	Bayesian Information Criterion
CI	Confidence Interval

## Chapter 1: Introduction

One of our innate motivations as humans is to procreate, and the presence of sexual intimacy is an important component of what constitutes a committed romantic relationship. The experience of sex is largely subjective and reflects the interactional and relational nature of sex (Impett et al., 2014). Moreover, satisfaction with sex impacts other areas of life. International research from 29 countries found higher levels of satisfaction with one's sex life is connected to higher life (Impett et al., 2013) and relationship (Impett et al., 2014) quality. Though high sexual satisfaction is ideal, an estimated 50% of couples and individuals experience some sort of sexual problem in their lifetime (Southern & Cade, 2011). In a study of 1,500 divorced Dutch people, roughly 40% indicated sexual problems were part of their divorce motive (de Graaf & Kalmijn, 2006), and some suggest that the presence of sexual dysfunction and dissatisfaction contributes to 50 to 75% of the relationship bond in an undesirable way (McCarthy, 1999; McCarthy, 2003). Such findings indicate sexual satisfaction needs to be considered as an important component of relational health.

It has been argued that the way sexuality has been conceptualized both individually and relationally is overmedicalized, especially when considering the treatment of women (Impett et al., 2013; Schwartz & Southern, 2018; Southern & Cade, 2011; Tiefer, 2008). Additionally, it is derived from patriarchal constructions that champion biological performance and quantity of sexual behavior rather than quality and the subjective experience of pleasure and sex in relationship (Southern & Cade, 2011). There is a perceived divide between the disciplines of sex and close relationships (Impett et al., 2014). A review of the literature critiques sex therapy for not giving guidance on nonsexual aspects of relationships even though the research indicates it may be more important to treat underlying relationship skills, especially for women (McCabe &

Connaughton, 2017). In an effort to combat this, more positive systemic and contextual frameworks of treating issues of sexual dysfunction and dissatisfaction are developing (Hertlein et al., 2015; Tiefer, 2008; Southern & Cade, 2011). Rather than focusing on a removal of dysfunction, an emphasis is placed on sexual issues being an opportunity for sexual and relational enhancement (Impett et al., 2013).

To remedy the perceived divide between the disciplines of sex and close relationships (Impett et al., 2014), it is suggested that factors such as individual choice, relationship factors, cultural values (Southern & Cade, 2011), trauma, emotions, mental illness, and medications (Schwartz & Southern, 2018) should be considered in the treatment of sexual satisfaction. The Empathy, Intimacy, and Sexual Satisfaction (EIS) model of sex therapy calls attention to the need to consider relational contexts in treating sexual concerns because it aids in increasing emotional intimacy, specifically noting building skills in communication (Konzen et al., 2018). Additionally, Schnarch's Crucible Therapy (1991) is a model of sex therapy that aims to increase the capacity for intimacy while resolving sexual issues through the Bowenian concept of differentiation. This approach highlights how sexual problems may arise due to the overall relational system and gives systemic consideration to issues of gridlock and power hierarchies (Schnarch, 1991). Considering the larger emphasis being placed on nonsexual aspects of sexual satisfaction, it is necessary to better understand how different relationship components contribute to sexual experience.

In an effort to contribute to the body of literature on the effects of nonsexual relationship components on sexual satisfaction, the current study utilized the Interpersonal Exchange Model of Sexual Satisfaction (Lawrence & Byers, 1995) as a lens and explored the relationship between low relational power and sexual satisfaction. Relational power is the ability to assert one's needs,

interests, and goals in relational contexts (Knudson-Martin, 2013). Ties have been found between sexual equity and sexual satisfaction (Sanchez-Fuentes et al., 2014), as well as the role relational power plays in components of the sexual relationship such as desire (Brezsnyak & Whisman, 2004), family planning (Blanc, 2001), and coercion (Impett et al., 2014). Additionally, this study explored ineffective arguing as a mediator of the relationship. Ineffective arguing is characterized by an inability to mutually resolve conflict due to failure to cooperatively problem solve, continuation of the same arguments without reaching favorable outcomes or compromise, or destructive communication styles (Kurdek, 1994). This is tied to deficits in sexual satisfaction (Champiri & Dehghani, 2020), and has separately been explored as a vehicle for enacting power in relationship (Traeder & Zeigler-Hill, 2020).

Though associations between sexual equity and sexual satisfaction or the role power plays in other sexual outcomes have been explored, the ties between global relational equity and sexual satisfaction have not. Moreover, ineffective arguing has been considered in relation to sexual satisfaction and relational power separately, but not together. The current study utilized data collected from a marital therapy training program and used hierarchical multiple regression to explore the nature of the relationship between these variables for men and women. The results of data analysis are presented, followed by a discussion on the implications on the findings. Findings of the current study suggest perceptions of ineffective arguing mediate the relationship between low relational power and sexual satisfaction, and that gender plays a role in how these constructs interact in heterosexual relationships.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **The Interpersonal Exchange Model of Sexual Satisfaction**

Due to the complexity of sexual satisfaction and the makeup of sexual relationships, the current study utilized a more integrated approach. The Interpersonal Exchange Model of Sexual Satisfaction (IEMSS) is an exchange model that accounts for the global relational costs and benefits of a sexual relationship (Byers & Wang, 2004; Lawrence & Byers, 1995). This model acknowledges that the overall context of a romantic relationship is not separate from sexual functioning, and thus includes consideration of the influence of nonsexual constructs like intimacy, affection, and communication. Additionally, it blends in the component of perceived equality of sexual and nonsexual rewards and costs between partners (Lawrence & Byers, 1995). In this model, relational distress is a result of an imbalance in costs and rewards that favors costs. Not only does the perceived costs outweigh the rewards, but it is also perceived that one is not getting the same costs and benefits as their partner. Utilizing the IEMSS is beneficial in clinical contexts evaluating sexual satisfaction, as it provides a framework to increase sexual satisfaction through improvement of nonsexual relationship functioning (Byers, 1999).

This theoretical framework is favorable to others for the purposes of this study, as other theories examine multiple aspects of sexual relationships but are not geared specifically toward sexual satisfaction like the IEMSS is (Byers, 1999; Sprecher, 1998). Additionally, this framework captures the nonsexual components of sexual satisfaction. The variables of interest, though also enacted in the realm of sexuality, are characteristic of the relationship at large. Highlighted in this theory is the need for equity in costs and rewards of the relationship, which is indicated by relational power (Knudson-Martin, 2013). Tied to the enactment of relational power, also noted in this model, is communication skills. The ability to effectively argue is

necessary to obtain equitable sexual and nonsexual outcomes. In the current study, the construct of ineffective arguing (Kurdek, 1994) was examined as a mediator of the relationship between relational power and sexual satisfaction.

### **Sexual Satisfaction**

Sexual satisfaction has been historically difficult to define, but simply put it is the level of happiness one has with their sexual experiences (Brezsnyak & Whisman, 2004; Sprecher, 2002; Impett et al., 2014). In creating the IEMSS, Lawrence and Byers (1995) defined sexual satisfaction as “an affective response arising from one’s subjective evaluation of the positive and negative dimensions associated with one’s sexual relationship” (p. 268). Though more inclusive, this definition still does not encompass the many contributors to sexual satisfaction. Qualitative data suggests the individual experience of sexual satisfaction is characterized by positive feelings and pleasure related to sexual experience, as well as lesser mentioned concepts like desire, orgasm, sexual openness, and arousal (Impett et al., 2013; Pascoal et al., 2014). A systematic review of the literature indicates self-esteem, gender and sexual roles, internalized sexual attitudes and values, and sexual self-confidence fall under the internal aspect of sexual satisfaction (Sanchez-Fuentes et al., 2014). This individual subjective experience is situated in a larger relational topography (Pascoal et al., 2014). Specific sexual components include dyadic sexual interest, frequency, motivation, assertiveness, function and novelty, as well as equity in sexual rewards and costs (Sanchez-Fuentes et al., 2014). Aside from the sexual aspect, global relational components such as relationship satisfaction, emotional intimacy, mutuality, equity, support, and conflict resolution contribute to sexual satisfaction as well (Sanchez-Fuentes et al., 2014; Stulhofer et al., 2020).

### ***Sexual Satisfaction as a Barometer for Relational Functioning***

The connection between sexual and general relationship satisfaction has been well established for both men and women (Sprecher, 2002; Brezsnayak & Whisman, 2004), with 46% and 49% of sexual satisfaction being accounted for by relationship satisfaction in women and men, respectively (Mark & Jozkowski, 2013). Longitudinal data suggests this relationship is bidirectional (Byers, 2005; Sprecher, 2002; Impett et al., 2014; McNulty et al., 2016). Such bidirectionality is illustrated in how relational desires for mutual pleasure, expression of love for another, and deepening emotional connection in both men and women are concurrently highly promoted reasons for seeking sexual behavior (Meston & Buss, 2007; Impett et al., 2013), and definers of what makes sex great (Impett et al., 2013). It can also be seen in both constructs' ties to increases in levels of love, commitment (Sprecher, 2002), and relationship stability (Impett et al., 2014). Some argue that the key component of healthy sexuality in marriage is through emotional intimacy and ability to discuss sexual expectations and roles (McCarthy, 2003), and that addressing issues of emotional injury or disconnection in therapy may be beneficial in preventing sexual dysfunction and enhancing sexual experience (Impett et al., 2013). This argument is supported by research indicating a positive relationship between sexual and emotional intimacy for both men and women (Haning et al., 2007; Yoo et al., 2014).

As such, satisfaction with one's sex life may stand as a good indicator of the health of the overall relationship.

### **Power**

At the heart of all relationships is the concept and enactment of power. Generally defined, power is the ability of an individual to influence the thoughts and behaviors of another person in a desired direction or to achieve one's own goals (Atwood & Scholtz, 2005; Bentley et al., 2007; Bevan, 2010; Simpson et al., 2015). It is both individual and dyadic in nature and is fluid across

time and domains (Kim et al., 2019), which is part of what makes it a difficult construct to define. Typically, it is sectioned into the smaller categories of power bases, power processes, and power outcomes (Bentley et al., 2007; Brezsnayak & Whisman, 2004). Power bases are stereotypically male dominated and includes access to and control over resources such as finances, social status, and large-scale social systems (Bentley et al., 2007; Blanton & Vandergriff-Avery, 2001; Brezsnayak & Whisman, 2004). The current study is particularly interested in power processes and outcomes. Power processes are characterized by the ability to control or influence communication styles and interactions, while power outcomes are largely determined by who has the final say in decision making (Bentley et al., 2007; Blanc, 2001; Blanton & Vandergriff-Avery, 2001; Brezsnayak & Whisman, 2004). Power processes are typically female dominated and not as highly valued (Ball et al., 1995; Blanton & Vandergriff-Avery, 2001), while power outcomes are typically male dominated and determine overall results (Buysse & Van Oost, 1997; Knudsen-Martin, 2013).

It has been argued that power is instrumental in the dynamics of relationships, but is often ignored by research (Simpson et al., 2015). Power is a circular dynamic, which highlights its fluidity and interactional nature. It is relationally constructed and reflects how each person attends to the needs, interests, and goals of their partner while also asserting their own (Knudson-Martin, 2013). The more powerful a partner is, the more control they will exert, thus leading to more partner compliance and more growth in power (Dunbar et al., 2008). Those who are less dependent and love less are the most powerful because they have less to lose (Atwood & Scholtz, 2005). The process of creating relational power is often covert, as those in power do not tend to recognize it and their partners tend to automatically accommodate them (Knudson-Martin, 2013). The key aspect of working with issues of power in couples is examining the

comparative influence of each partner over the other (Blanc, 2001). Acknowledging differences in perceived power versus actual power is also important, as they are not always the same and perceived power may be more impactful (LeBaron et al., 2014).

### ***Power and Sexual Satisfaction***

These global relational power dynamics are important to understand in considering sexual satisfaction, as they are replicated in the sexual aspect of relationships. The IEMSS highlights that feelings of global relational equity as well as equity in sexual rewards and costs is tied to higher levels of sexual satisfaction (Lawrence & Byers, 1995). Some findings indicate issues with sexual satisfaction in relationships can arise from unequal relational power (Southern & Cade, 2011), and a review of the literature found sexual equity is tied to higher sexual satisfaction (Sanchez-Fuentes et al., 2014). Half of newlyweds report experiencing sexual coercion at the hands of their partner (Impett et al., 2014), which is a manifestation of power imbalances (Bentley et al., 2007). Power imbalances also influence levels of sexual desire felt by husbands and wives, with perceived differences resulting in lower levels of desire (Brezsnyak & Whisman, 2004). Other areas of sexual decision making that are affected by power dynamics include freedom for voluntary sex, fertility decisions, disease protection, pregnancy support, and abortion (Blanc, 2001). The associations between power and the occurrence of sexual behaviors (Browning et al., 1999) and power and desire (Brezsnyak & Whisman, 2004) have been examined, but the relationship between relational power and sexual satisfaction has not.

The relationship between power and different aspects of sexuality influences women more heavily than men, as many research findings found no relationship for men while a relationship was present for women (Buysse & Van Oost, 1997; Katz & LaRose, 2019; Lau et al., 2006; Tirone & Katz, 2020). When it comes to power hierarchies in sex, men are still

predominantly allowed more implicit and explicit sexual rights than women around the world (Blanc, 2001; Impett et al., 2013). For example, women who perceive their partner as having more power are less successful in implementing and attaining safer sex goals, but this was not the case for men. The same study found that women had to negotiate safe sex practices for a significant time before the encounter in order to be successful, but males could do it in the moment (Buysse & Van Oost, 1997). More egalitarian power is tied to a higher likelihood of discussing and agreeing on contraceptive practices and access to services such as family planning and therapy, while unequal power can be tied to violence (Blanc, 2001). Aside from safe sex practices, women experience more of a disadvantage in their ability to decline sex or assert one's needs in intimate settings (Blanc, 2001; Impett & Peplau, 2003). It may be that due to the dynamic of men initiating sex and women accepting, women might use sex as a source of power to get what they need in the relationship more generally (Atwood & Scholtz, 2005). Circling back to the IEMSS, sex then becomes a cost to the reward of getting one's other relational needs met. This idea is supported by the findings that women are more likely to conceptualize rewards of sex in the context of how their partner treats them, and costs are conceptualized as more physical in nature including experience of sexual pain or lower likelihood of achieving orgasm (Impett et al., 2014). It may be that women's use of sex as a bartering tool and the inability to communicate and get one's sexual needs met could lead to lower levels of satisfaction with one's sex life for women in comparison to men. The relationship between power and sexual satisfaction has been described above as being directly related, but there is a potential they are indirectly related through other relational constructs such as conflict management processes.

### ***Marital Quality and Power***

The role of power in couple dynamics is salient, as the literature highlights its tie to relational outcomes. Perceptions of equal power is tied to higher levels of relationship satisfaction, trust, happiness, and security in addition to increases in global wellbeing for both men and women. Not only that, but balanced power is also related to deeper feelings of being understood, respected, and cared for (Kim et al., 2019; Knudsen-Martin, 2013). On the contrary, power imbalances are linked with marital distress and dissatisfaction throughout the lifespan. More specifically, unequal distribution of power is related to violence, decreased intimacy, problems with communication and conflict management, and lower levels of trust (Atwood & Scholtz, 2005; Knudsen-Martin, 2013; Kulik, 2004; LeBaron et al., 2014; Traeder & Zeigler-Hill, 2020), and are a risk factor for divorce (Waite et al., 2009). It also may result in higher levels of depression and anxiety (Kim et al., 2019; Knudsen-Martin, 2013). In instances of power imbalance, it becomes difficult for the disadvantaged partner to directly communicate and gain access to their needs and desires, which is particularly true for women (Knudson-Martin, 2013). Considering the ties power has to the core components of intimate relationships, it is an important treatment target when considering therapy. Even when partners believe they have an equal relationship, the power in the relationship still favors men and requires a conscious and active decision to overturn (Knudson-Martin & Mahoney, 2009; Knudson-Martin, 2013).

### ***Gendered Differences in Power***

Due to historical gender norms, it is usually men who hold the most power because society prizes men's priorities, needs, and desires in ways that are taken for granted by most people (Knudsen-Martin, 2013). This claim is highlighted by the findings that women are more likely to report having less power in marriage (Bulanda, 2011), and are more often affected by the constraints of relational power through things like dependent children, religious ideals, lack

of better alternatives, or a loss of already invested time and resources than men (Impett & Peplau, 2003). In reviewing the literature, it seems women have more to benefit from obtaining equality in their relationships than men, but only to a certain threshold. Arguably due to women's limited access to power in overall society, marital equality is reported as more important for women than men (Kulik, 2004). In addition to the power processes they already hold, access to sources of power like financial resources, decision making outcomes, and division of household labor significantly increases their enjoyment of the relationship, whereas this connection is not present for men because they already have those things (Ball et al., 1995; Dunbar et al., 2008; Kulik, 2004).

Though this is the case, getting to the point of women obtaining more equal footing presents challenges. In instances where women do obtain more power, they receive more resistance from male partners when the dynamic is equal or in favor of the woman than men do in any power configuration (Dunbar et al., 2008; Knudsen-Martin, 2013). This may in part be because men feel more of a threat from powerlessness than women due to the social constructions of what relational power should look like (Bentley et al., 2007). Even in women's stereotypical access to power processes they still must be sure to accommodate men to achieve their desired outcomes (Ball et al., 1995; Knudson-Martin & Mahoney, 2009), which indicates that men indirectly hold that power too. In general, men are more able to undermine any source of power women have in relationships due to historic conceptions of gender roles and power dynamics (Kim et al., 2019). This power differential is highlighted in the findings that men tend to describe themselves as having more power while women tend to describe the same relationships as equal. Additionally, men desire more power regardless of their perceived level of power, whereas women's desire for more power wanes once they perceive equality (Traeder &

Zeigler-Hill, 2020). In sum, relational power is traditionally skewed toward men and women face more backlash and limits in trying to obtain relational equality. This limits their ability to communicate and have their needs met. These differences in power lend themselves to opportunities for power to be challenged or renegotiated. Thus, it is important to consider if the process of power negotiation and conflict management plays a role in relational outcomes.

### **Ineffective Arguing**

As highlighted in the power literature, one of the main components of relational power is the power held in decision making processes and outcomes (Blanc, 2001). The current study focused on ineffective arguing in the process of communication and if it mediates the relationship between power and sexual satisfaction. When considering sexuality, some mechanisms of conflict like attachment (Prager et al., 2015; Impett et al., 2014) and assertiveness in conflict (Metz & Epstein, 2002) have been explored, but the literature does not focus as much on more expansive pictures of the dyadic process of conflict. One dyadic construct of conflict is ineffective arguing. Ineffective arguing is characterized by an inability to mutually resolve conflict (Kurdek, 1994). This inability can manifest itself in multiple ways. Some examples include repeated arguments over the same thing or an inability to cooperatively problem solve. Reflective of the discussions of power, it may also present as feeling like one does not have a fair say in conflict or decision making and knowing the outcomes of arguments because one is unable to enact change in a more favorable direction (Kurdek, 1994). This is similar to Gottman's concept of gridlock (Gottman, 1999), wherein couples become so entrenched in polarized stances on a problem that they fall deeper into the rut of emotional disengagement and inability to make progress in finding a joint solution. Being gridlocked in conflict can then lead to feelings of rejection, resentment, and hopelessness for positive outcomes. There has been

some association found between such conflict processes and sexual outcomes. Joint decision making on sexual matters may contribute to sexual satisfaction (Impett et al., 2014), and lower levels of conflict resolution satisfaction is tied to lower sexual desire in women (Brezsnyak & Whisman, 2004). Neither of these findings explore the role of ineffective arguing more specifically.

### ***Ineffective Arguing and Power***

Power is largely illustrated through communication with one another, wherein the true respect of one another's rights is revealed. Conflict that emerges between mismatched goals is an opportunity for power to be enacted (Traeder & Zeigler-Hill, 2020), and the distribution of power is connected to marital conflict (Loving et al., 2004). Through the lens of the IEMSS (Lawrence & Byers, 1995), ineffective arguing may be conceptualized as a mechanism by which sexual and overall relational equity may be challenged as it is a component of power processes. Successful conflict strategies are necessary to negotiate marital power, and it has been suggested that targeting power imbalances in therapy is helpful in achieving better conflict resolution outcomes (Knudson-Martin & Mahoney, 2009). This is an important goal, as couples resolving conflict with more equitable and mutually satisfying ways experience increased relationship satisfaction (Metz & Epstein, 2002). Power can be seen in ineffective arguing, as it is connected to verbally dominant communication styles or withholding of information (Atwood & Scholtz, 2005), serial arguments due to an inability to come to consensus (Bevan, 2010), and emotional volatility and conflict minimizing (McCarthy, 1999). The enactment of power in these ways can contribute to declines in cooperative problem solving, as the one with more power is less likely to sacrifice their self-interest for the good of their partner and engage in compromise in conflict (Kim et al., 2019). The partner with less power may use conflict avoidance or noncompliance as

a way to enact the lower amount of power they do hold (Dunbar et al., 2008; Knudsen-Martin, 2013).

Generally speaking, the process and power dynamics of conflict resolution are gendered much like the overall relational dynamics. Both husbands and wives are more likely to report the male holds the power over decision making outcomes (Ball et al., 1995; Buysse & Van Oost, 1997). Research indicates that women usually hold power over raising and directing the conversation, but over 75% of both men and women reported that she is required to do so in favorable contexts for him to have a higher chance at obtaining desired outcomes (Ball et al., 1995). Interestingly, 30% of these men reported their greatest fear in these instances was that the conflict would result in changes in domestic labor that were unfavorable to them, whereas 74% of women's greatest reported fear was his response. Though women may hold the power of raising and directing conversation, men often undermine it by controlling topic of conversation, minimizing issues salient to their partners, and feeling entitled to determine outcomes (Knudsen-Martin, 2013). This dominance of men in decision making is tied to lower levels of marital satisfaction for women, but men's levels of satisfaction decrease even when the power is perceived as equal (Blanton & Vandergriff-Avery, 2001). Considering the role ineffective arguing plays in sexual satisfaction and the ways women are disadvantaged in the realm of conflict resolution, it may be that women's sexual satisfaction suffers most when ineffective arguing is present and they are experiencing a lower level of power in the relationship. There is currently no literature exploring how these constructs are related, but it is an important dynamic to consider for those in the business of couple's therapy.

### ***Ineffective Arguing and Sexual Satisfaction***

There are gaps in the literature regarding the concept of ineffective arguing as a whole and its ties to sexual satisfaction, but there are findings regarding the components within. As a negative communication aspect of global relational functioning, the IEMSS would consider ineffective arguing as a cost to the sexual relationship (Lawrence & Byers, 1995). Thus, it is indicated as mechanism to enact change in sexual satisfaction that is worth exploring. The main component of ineffective arguing is the use of disruptive communication styles and an inability to effectively problem solve, which is detrimental to sexual satisfaction (Champiri & Dehghani, 2020; Metz & Epstein, 2002; Metz & Dwyer, 1993; Schwartz & Southern, 2018; Impett et al., 2014). Such styles can include withdrawal and compliance patterns (Gesell et al., 2020), higher use of verbal aggression (Clymer et al., 2008), and lower levels of asserting one's needs (Metz & Epstein, 2002). Inability to resolve commonplace arguments over issues like finances, relatives, or time can result in declines in sexual reciprocity and satisfaction (Southern & Cade, 2011), and higher levels of unresolved problems leads to more declines in satisfaction (Metz & Epstein, 2002; Impett et al., 2014). Additionally, higher levels of conflict surrounding engagement in sex and use of contraceptives is related to higher amounts of destructive communication from men and disempowerment towards women (Katz & LaRose, 2019). Conversely, higher sexual satisfaction is predicted by higher levels of conflict resolution in couples who have adopted children (Rouleau et al., 2018), and increased satisfaction with the outcomes of conflict resolution predicts increased intercourse-specific satisfaction (Sanchez-Fuentes et al., 2014).

### **The Current Study**

To combat the perceived discrepancies between the disciplines of sex and close relationships (Impett et al., 2014), the current study examined the relationship between couples' perceptions of low relational power, ineffective arguing, and their sexual satisfaction in couples

seeking relationship therapy that have not yet completed their first session. Though some literature illustrates a bidirectional relationship between power and sexual satisfaction, this study focused on how perceived lower relational power is indirectly associated with sexual satisfaction. It has been noted in the literature that power is present in all aspects of relationships but is often ignored or under considered in research and clinical settings as a treatment target (Knudsen-Martin, 2013; Simpson et al., 2015). In line with utilizing the framework of the IEMSS, considerations of nonsexual relationship components are important in conceptualizing the state of the sexual relationship as a more global outcome of general relationship functioning (Lawrence & Byers, 1995). The treatment seeking population is important to examine as they are generally at a point of relational dysfunction when seeking services but have not yet received any treatment that could change the way these constructs interact organically. The lack of previous intervention is imperative, as power dynamics are generally unevenly distributed unless overt attention has been given to creating balance (Knudson-Martin & Mahoney, 2009; Knudsen-Martin, 2013).

The mediating role of ineffective arguing in the relationship between low relational power and sexual satisfaction was examined. In consideration of the IEMSS, communication abilities are a global construct of the relationship that influences sexual satisfaction (Lawrence & Byers, 1995). The presence of ineffective arguing could be considered a cost to the sexual relationship, potentially contributing to lower sexual satisfaction. For example, components of ineffective arguing such as the inability to problem solve and the use of destructive communication styles are linked to lower sexual satisfaction (Champiri & Dehghani, 2020; Schwartz & Southern, 2018). This link is present at an immediate sexual level, as it plays a role in the determination of sexual outcomes such as safety and sexual engagement (Katz & LaRose,

2019), but also at a global relationship level in regard to more mundane topics such as finances and time management (Southern & Cade, 2011). Additionally, due to communication having a hand in the enactment of power dynamics, ineffective arguing is an indicator of unequal power distributions in relationships (Loving et al., 2004). This enactment of power at a global relationship level can be seen to trickle down into the sexual relationship, particularly for women as destructive forms of communication regarding sex has been tied to disempowerment of women (Katz & LaRose, 2019). Knowing this, ineffective arguing may be a therapeutic target that aids in balancing relational power and positively influencing the sexual relationship.

It was hypothesized there was a full mediation of the relationship between low relational power and sexual satisfaction by ineffective arguing. Based on the above literature review, the following hypothesized actor and partner effects were explored:

- 1) Higher male perceptions of low relational power were associated with lower male sexual satisfaction through higher male perceptions of ineffective arguing
- 2) Higher male perceptions of low relational power were associated with lower female sexual satisfaction through higher male ineffective arguing
- 3) Higher female perceptions of low relational power were associated with lower female sexual satisfaction through higher female perceptions of ineffective arguing
- 4) Higher female perceptions of low relational power were associated with higher male sexual satisfaction through higher female ineffective arguing

These hypotheses were tested utilizing bootstrapping procedures for indirect effects in a dyadic structural equation mediation model. The following control variables were included in the analysis to strengthen the evidence for the hypothesized model: having a longer relationship (Sanchez-Fuentes et al., 2014), more dependent children in the home (Fallis et al., 2016), and

higher levels of education (Rainer & Smith, 2012); all of which have been shown to negatively impact sexual satisfaction for couples. Other controls that were included (age and income) have mixed results in associations with sexual satisfaction (Chao et al., 2011; Rainer & Smith, 2012; Velten & Margraf, 2017). Finally, sexual dysfunction (Velten & Margraf, 2017), and mental health symptoms (Carcedo et al., 2020; Scott et al., 2012) were included because of the evidence suggesting they play a significant role in sexual satisfaction outcomes.

The hypothesized model can be seen in Figure 1. This model was also tested against five alternative models to ensure best model to data fit. Previous research suggests direct associations between sexual equity and sexual satisfaction (Sanchez-Fuentes et al., 2014; Southern & Cade, 2011), so the direct pathway between power and sexual satisfaction was included to examine if it improved model fit. Additionally, the relational and circular construction of power (Dunbar et al., 2008; Knudson-Martin, 2013), ineffective arguing (Loving et al., 2004; Traeder & Zeigler-Hill, 2020), and sexual satisfaction (Sanchez-Fuentes et al., 2014; Stulhofer et al., 2020) necessitated testing the hypothesized model against alternative ordered models.

## Chapter 3: Methods

### Data

The data used in this study was cross-sectional data collected from the Auburn University Marriage and Family Therapy center (AUMFT). The services in this therapy center are provided to individuals, couples, and families in Auburn and surrounding areas by graduate students completing the Marriage and Family Therapy master's program at Auburn University. The collected data came from the initial assessment packet clients completed at the beginning of treatment, as the aim of this study was to examine couples cross-sectionally before receiving treatment. The university institutional review board (IRB) approved this study as a means to ensure best practices in research.

### Sample

The sample was comprised of couples ( $N = 175$ ) seeking couples' therapy at the Auburn University Marriage and Family Therapy Center between 2015 and 2019. Relationship length ranged from 2 to 519 months ( $M = 77.59$ ,  $SD = 78.89$ ), and number of children ranged from 0 to 5 ( $M = 2.81$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ). Household income was distributed as follows: under \$20,000 (16.6%), \$20,000 to \$39,999 (20%), \$40,000 to \$59,999 (18.3%), \$60,000 to \$79,999 (12.5%), \$80,000 to \$99,999 (10.3%), and \$100,000 and over (0.6%). Among wives, 18.9% were non-white and 78.3% were white. Regarding education, 21.7% achieved high school or GED level, 4.6% received vocational or technical training, and 73.1% achieved a college degree ranging from associates to graduate level completion. Among husbands, 20.6% were non-white and 78.3% were white. Regarding education, 31.4% achieved either junior high, high school or GED level, 8.6% received vocational or technical training, and 59.4% achieved a college degree ranging

from associates to graduate level completion. See tables 1 and 2 for full demographic and control variable descriptive information.

## **Measures of Interest**

### ***Low Relational Power***

Low relational power was the independent variable, which was measured by the Miller Power Scale (MPS). This measure was developed from other scales (i.e., Ball et al., 1995; Crosbie-Burnett, & Giles-Sims, 1991; Lindahl et al., 2004). Statements such as “My partner tends to discount my opinion”, “When I want to talk about a problem in our relationship, my partner often refuses to talk with me”, and “It often seems my partner can get away with things in our relationship that I can never get away with” were presented to participants. Items were answered with a 5-point Likert scale rating level of agreement with the presented statement (1= *Strongly disagree* to 5= *Strongly agree*), with higher scores indicating a lower perceived level of relational power. Reliability of the scale was measured using Cronbach’s alpha (women:  $\alpha = .828$ , men:  $\alpha = .997$ ) and indicated excellent reliability. See appendix B for scale items.

### ***Ineffective Arguing***

Ineffective arguing was the mediating variable in this study. The Ineffective Arguing Index (Kurdek, 1994) measured occurrences such as having repeated arguments over the same thing, being unable to reach a desirable outcome for both parties, and being unable to reach any kind of resolution. This is an 8-item self-report measure utilizing Likert scales to indicate levels of agreement with given statements regarding arguing (1= *Strongly Disagree* to 5= *Strongly Agree*). Examples of given statements include “Our arguments are left hanging and unresolved” and “Our arguments seem to end in frustrating stalemates”. Three items are reverse scored, and higher scores indicate a higher perception of being unable to reach desirable outcomes in

conflict. Reliability of the scale was measured using Cronbach's alpha (women:  $\alpha = .790$ , men:  $\alpha = .559$ ) and indicate acceptable reliability. See appendix C for scale items.

### ***Sexual Satisfaction***

Sexual satisfaction was the dependent variable of interest. A 3-item subset of the Female Sexual Function Index was utilized for all participants as a report of overall sexual satisfaction over the previous 4 weeks. The scale asked about levels of satisfaction with “the amount of emotional closeness during sexual activity between you and you partner?”, “your sexual relationship with your partner?”, and “How satisfied have you been with you overall sexual life?”. The overall 19-item measure is geared toward females, but the subset used is gender neutral and specifically considerate of the sexual relationship rather than individual sexual function (Rosen et al., 2000). Satisfaction was measured on a Likert scale in each item (1= *Very dissatisfied* to 5= *Very satisfied*), with higher scores indicating a higher level of satisfaction. Reliability of the scale was measured using Cronbach's alpha (women:  $\alpha = .933$ , men:  $\alpha = .936$ ) and indicate excellent reliability. See appendix D for scale items.

### ***Control Variables***

**Demographics.** The intake paperwork participants completed prior to receiving services includes a section on demographics. Demographics of interest that are answered by filling in a blank space include number of children living at home (“How many biological, adopted, step-children under 18 live in your home at least 50% of the time?”), relationship length (years and months), and age (years). Additional demographics were examined that were answered utilizing multiple choice format. These included combined gross income (“What is your combined gross income (before taxes) in the current year?” indicated by selecting the encompassing income bracket) and education level (indicated by selecting the most applicable level spanning from

*junior high school or less to graduate/professional degree*). See appendix A for demographic items.

**Sexual Functioning.** The Sexual Problems Subscale of the Trauma Symptom Checklist-40 contained 8-items inquiring about frequency of sexual problems in the past two months (Elliot & Briere, 1992). Answers were provided on a Likert Scale (0=*Never* to 3=*Often*). Examples of problems presented include low sex drive, having unenjoyable sex, and sexual over-activity. Answers were totaled to give a composite score, and higher scores indicated higher levels of sexual dysfunction. Reliability of the scale was measured using Cronbach's alpha (women:  $\alpha = .736$ , men:  $\alpha = .767$ ) and indicate acceptable reliability. See appendix E for scale items.

**Mental Health Outcomes.** Anxiety symptoms were measured utilizing the 7-item Generalized Anxiety Disorder-7 (GAD-7) scale (Spitzer et al., 2006). Participants were asked to indicate on a Likert Scale (0= *Not at all* to 3= *Nearly every day*) the frequency of feelings such as "trouble relaxing", "Becoming easily annoyed or irritable", and "Feeling nervous, anxious, or on edge". Higher scores indicated higher levels of anxiety. Reliability of the scale was measured using Cronbach's alpha (women:  $\alpha = .920$ , men:  $\alpha = .905$ ) and indicate excellent reliability. See appendix F for scale items.

Depressive symptoms were measured utilizing the 10-item Major Depression Inventory (MDI; Olsen et al., 2003). Participants were asked to indicate on a Likert Scale (0 = *Not at all* to 5 = *All of the time*) the frequency of symptoms such as "Have you felt low in spirits or sad?", "Have you felt that life isn't worth living?", and "Have you had difficulty in concentrating, such as reading the newspaper or watching television?" in the past two weeks. Higher scores indicated higher levels of depression symptoms. Reliability of the scale was measured using Cronbach's

alpha (women:  $\alpha = .917$ , men:  $\alpha = .601$ ) and indicate acceptable reliability. See appendix G for scale items.

## **Procedures**

Auburn University's IRB approved the collection of data from clients at the AUMFT Center, from which the data for this sample occurred. Clients were recruited to the clinic largely through self-selection, but other methods such as social media, flyers, court mandate, and referral sampling also brought clients in. The data for this sample was collected between 2015 and 2018 from the intake packets all therapy clients over the age of twelve completed prior to receiving services. Clients also completed an informed consent process at that time, which included signing a paper copy of clinic policies and client rights as well as facilitating a verbal discussion explaining what the information presented means and allowing for any participant questions. The intake packets included the measures indicating the variables of interest, as well as demographics. To ensure equal accessibility, paperwork was provided in English or Spanish depending on participants' language needs.

## **Data Analytic Plan**

Utilizing the SPSS program's (version 25.0) Missing Value Analysis 7.5, an expectation maximization (EM) technique was used with inferences based on the likelihood under the normal distribution (Hill, 1997). The Little's MCAR test was used to estimate whether values were missing completely at random. The results indicated that data (a total of 3.143% of all values; ranging from 0.0% for female GAD to 6.3% for female sexual dysfunction) was indeed missing completely at random: chi-square = 295.507 ( $df = 270$ ;  $p = .137$ ). Full Information Maximum Likelihood was used to impute the missing values using the Mplus software (Muthén & Muthén, 2012).

The data was tested for the assumptions of linear regression. This includes linearity, normality, multicollinearity, and homoscedasticity. To avoid violating the assumption of independence of observations due to utilizing couple data, an actor-partner interdependence (APIM) framework was used to perform dyadic mediation analysis (Ledermann & Bodenmann, 2006). Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations were examined, and structural equation modeling in Mplus 7.0 (Muthén & Muthén, 2012) was utilized to answer the current research questions. Male and female perceptions of low relational power were regressed onto male and female ineffective arguing, and male and female ineffective arguing was regressed onto male and female sexual satisfaction.

Model fit was evaluated by examining chi-square, standardized root mean square residual (SRMR), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), comparative fit index (CFI) and Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI). Good model fit is indicated by a non-significant chi-square value, RMSEA and SRMR values smaller than .06 and .08 respectively, and CFI and TLI values greater than .95 (Hu & Bentler, 1999). Once this was completed, indirect paths were tested using bootstrapping procedures with 2,000 samples at the 95 % confidence interval. Alternative models were tested using nested and non-nested model comparison. Nested comparison was completed using a chi-square difference test, whereas non-nested comparisons were completed using Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) and Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC). Lower values of these indices show less discrepancy between the model being tested and the true best fit model (West et al., 2012).

## Chapter 4: Results

### Bivariate Analysis

Findings from correlation analyses show important information regarding relationships among main study variables. Both male and female low relational power were significantly negatively associated with their own and their partner's sexual satisfaction and positively associated with their own and their partner's perception of ineffective arguing. Sexual satisfaction for both partners was also significantly negatively correlated with ineffective arguing reports for themselves and their partner. Additionally, all constructs were significantly positively correlated between partners (see Table 3).

### Alternative Model Comparisons

The original hypothesized model was tested against 5 plausible alternative models. First, I tested a nested model on whether including the direct pathways was a significantly better fit to the model or if removing them (the hypothesized, full mediation model) was better. Each model was estimated and the chi-square difference supported the proposed model: omitting the direct paths did not worsen model fit [ $\chi^2_{diff}(32)=45.778, p=.0544$ ]. Second, I tested the original, hypothesized model to four plausible alternative non-nested models. The hypothesized model tested the ordering of perceptions of power to ineffective arguing to sexual satisfaction (Low Relational Power  $\rightarrow$  IAI  $\rightarrow$  Sexual Satisfaction: AIC = 2909.73, BIC = 3064.57). Potential alternative models that were tested include a relationship between sexual satisfaction and low relational power through ineffective arguing (Sexual Satisfaction  $\rightarrow$  IAI  $\rightarrow$  Low Relational Power: AIC = 3939.05, BIC = 4088.23), a relationship between low relational power and ineffective arguing through sexual satisfaction (Low Relational Power  $\rightarrow$  Sexual Satisfaction  $\rightarrow$  IAI: AIC = 3272.88, BIC = 3418.52), a relationship between ineffective arguing and sexual satisfaction

through low relational power (IAI→Low Relational Power →Sexual Satisfaction: AIC = 3271.81, BIC = 3426.57), or a relationship between ineffective arguing and low relational power through sexual satisfaction (IAI→Sexual Satisfaction→Low Relational Power: AIC = 3674.93, BIC = 3824.11). Observation of the corresponding AIC and BIC values indicates the hypothesized model has the least discrepancy (smallest AIC and BIC values) to the true model, and therefore is the best fit.

### **Final Model**

The final mediation model results are depicted in Figure 2. The model revealed good fit to the data:  $\chi^2(32)=45.778, p=.0544$ ; RMSEA=.058 (95% CI [.000, .093]); CFI=.968; TLI=.922; SRMR=.041, and accounted for 58% of the variance in female ineffective arguing, 75% of the variance in male ineffective arguing, 46% of the variance in female sexual satisfaction, and 33% of the variance in male sexual satisfaction.

### **Main Variable Pathways**

Regarding the main study variables, higher male perceptions of ineffective arguing was related to lower levels of female sexual satisfaction ( $\beta = -0.27, p = 0.016$ ). Higher female perceptions of ineffective arguing were associated with higher levels of female perceptions of low power ( $\beta = 0.65, p < 0.001$ ) and higher levels of male perceptions of power ( $\beta = 0.20, p = 0.006$ ). Higher female perceptions of low power were associated with higher male perceptions of ineffective arguing ( $\beta = 0.30, p < 0.001$ ), and higher male perceptions of low power were associated with higher male perceptions of ineffective arguing ( $\beta = 0.57, p < 0.001$ ). Additionally, there were positive associations between both partners' perceptions of ineffective arguing ( $\beta = 0.22, p = 0.027$ ) and both partners' reports of sexual satisfaction ( $\beta = 0.36, p < 0.001$ ).

### **Control Variable Pathways**

Regarding effects of control variables, higher female sexual satisfaction was associated with lower levels of household income ( $\beta = -0.15, p = 0.033$ ) and lower levels of female sexual dysfunction ( $\beta = -0.50, p < .001$ ). Higher male sexual satisfaction was associated with a higher number of children ( $\beta = 0.18, p = 0.047$ ) and lower level of male sexual dysfunction ( $\beta = -0.36, p < 0.001$ ). Higher levels of male depressive symptoms were associated with lower male perceptions of ineffective arguing ( $\beta = -0.24, p = 0.003$ ), but higher levels of male anxiety symptoms were associated with higher male perceptions of ineffective arguing ( $\beta = 0.22, p = 0.006$ ). Higher male perceptions of ineffective arguing was additionally associated with higher levels of reported male sexual dysfunction ( $\beta = 0.18, p = 0.001$ ).

### **Indirect Effects**

Two significant indirect effect pathways were found. First, there was a statistically significant indirect effect from male perceptions of low relational power to female sexual satisfaction through male perception of ineffective arguing: male low relational power  $\rightarrow$  male ineffective arguing  $\rightarrow$  female sexual satisfaction ( $\beta = -0.15, p = 0.013, 95\%$  Confidence Interval [CI] = - 0.279, -0.043). This can be interpreted as follows: A 1-standard deviation unit increase in the male perception of low relational power is associated with a .15 standard deviation decrease in female sexual satisfaction via the prior effect of male low relational power on male ineffective arguing. Second, there was a significant indirect effect from female perceptions of low relational power to female sexual satisfaction through male perception of ineffective arguing: female low relational power  $\rightarrow$  male ineffective arguing  $\rightarrow$  female sexual satisfaction ( $\beta = -0.08, p = 0.050, 95\%$  Confidence Interval [CI] = - 0.182, -0.020). This can be interpreted as follows: A 1-standard deviation unit increase in the female perception of low relational power is

associated with a .08 standard deviation decrease in female sexual satisfaction via the prior effect of female low relational power on male ineffective arguing.

There was one more indirect effect that approached significance (trend level). This was an indirect effect from male perceptions of low relational power to male sexual satisfaction through male perception of ineffective arguing: male low relational power → male ineffective arguing → male sexual satisfaction ( $\beta = -0.12$ ,  $p = 0.092$ , 95% Confidence Interval [CI] = -0.264, 0.021). This can be interpreted as follows: A 1-standard deviation unit increase in the male perception of low relational power is associated with a .08 standard deviation decrease in male sexual satisfaction via the prior effect of male low relational power on male ineffective arguing.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

The current study looked at the relationships between perceptions of low relational power, ineffective arguing strategies, and sexual satisfaction between male and female partners in a sample of committed heterosexual couples seeking couples' therapy. Multiple noteworthy findings emerged from the data, including that male's ineffective arguing mediated the relationship between male perceptions of low relational power and female sexual satisfaction. In other words, lower relational power in men is associated with lower female sexual satisfaction through higher male perceptions of ineffective arguing. Thus, men's lower perceptions of relational power it is related to lower levels of sexual satisfaction for their partner through higher levels of his ineffective arguing. The data also supports that both partners perceptions of low relational power are related to their own and each other's perceptions of ineffective arguing, and male perceptions of ineffective arguing are significantly directly related to women's sexual satisfaction. To ensure the empirical credibility of these findings, multiple covariates known to have effects on sexual satisfaction were included in the model, both full and partial mediation were tested, and the model was compared to a number of alternatively ordered models. Thus, these findings are robust and provide an interesting examination into the associations between relational processes and sexual satisfaction in heterosexual couples seeking couples' therapy.

Previous research indicates a direct relationship between sexual equity and sexual satisfaction (Sanchez-Fuentes et al., 2014; Southern & Cade, 2011), but the current study provides evidence to support more relational and global mechanisms of enacting power at hand. The data suggests that lower relational power in males is associated with lower female sexual satisfaction through higher male perceptions of ineffective arguing for couples seeking therapy. Thus, when men perceive that their partner has more power it is related to higher levels of male

ineffective arguing, and in turn is associated with lower sexual satisfaction for their partner. This relationship is not present for their partners constructs, meaning male sexual satisfaction is not related to female ineffective arguing regardless of power configuration. These findings align with previous research suggesting women receive more resistance from male partners when power is equal or in favor of the woman than men do in any power configuration (Dunbar et al., 2008; Knudsen-Martin, 2013). Due to ineffective arguing being a mechanism for power to be enacted (Dunbar et al., 2008; Traeder & Zeigler-Hill, 2020), it may be that his perception of ineffective arguing is an effect of his own or her attempts to enact power in unhelpful ways. This is disruptive to the relationship, and she then pays the price in regard to her sexual satisfaction. These findings extend the scope of the IEMSS from how costs and rewards impact the sexual satisfaction of oneself (Byers & Wang, 2004; Lawrence & Byers, 1995) to consider how one partner's perceptions of costs to the relationship can ultimately be related to a cost for the other partner. In this case, men's perceptions of lower power and higher ineffective arguing is associated with women's cost of declines in sexual satisfaction.

The other significant indirect effect indicate lower relational power in females is associated with lower female satisfaction through higher male ineffective arguing. In other words, when women perceive less relational power it is related to her own lower levels of sexual satisfaction through his perceptions of ineffective arguing. This is interesting, because it suggests that women only experience lower sexual satisfaction if they feel less powerful when their partner is unsatisfied with the outcomes of conflict, but not when she is unsatisfied with conflict outcomes. In this case, it may be that women are attempting to challenge their perceived lower levels of power through enacting conflict, and men perceive it as unhelpful arguing. The bummer if this is the case is that the effort to challenge power dynamics is still associated with

undesirable sexual outcomes for women, which aligns with previous literature suggesting men hold the power to determine if women's processes of challenging power are palatable enough to grant desired outcomes (Ball et al., 1995; Knudsen-Martin, 2013). This suggestion of the data further indicates a need to examine the gendered dynamics of how sexual satisfaction relates to conflict processes more fully for therapy seeking couples.

There was also one trend-level indirect effect that may have achieved significance with a larger sample size. This indirect effect indicates lower relational power in men neared association with lower male sexual satisfaction through higher male ineffective arguing. Therefore, when men perceive less relational power it relates to his own declines in sexual satisfaction through his own perceptions of ineffective arguing. Taking this in tandem with the significant results of the study, when men perceive themselves as having less power and perceive more ineffective arguing in the relationship, it is harmful for the sexual satisfaction of both himself and his partner. One reason this could be the case is that due to sex being a mutual activity, one partner's compounded feelings of disempowerment and gridlock may relate to a rift in the relationship that makes emotional and sexual intimacy difficult to achieve for both partners (Kim et al., 2019; Loving et al., 2004; Metz & Epstein, 2002). In the context of the IEMSS (Byers & Wang, 2004; Lawrence & Byers, 1995), this would indicate these costs of the relationship outweigh the rewards in association with sexual satisfaction. Another potential explanation is that this relationship may have only approached significance because the detrimental effect on sexual satisfaction may be stronger for women. Past research has explored how women's sexual outcomes historically suffer more than men's in relationship to power (Buysse & Van Oost, 1997; Katz & LaRose, 2019; Lau et al., 2006; Tirone & Katz, 2020), but not if there are gendered imbalances in how sexual satisfaction relates to conflict processes. The

current study may indicate a need to examine this more fully, not only in couples seeking therapy but also in the general population.

When considering direct associations between the main variables, both male and female lower relational power were significantly associated with their own and their partner's higher perception of ineffective arguing. This indicates a power imbalance in the relationship where it is perceived the other partner has higher levels of power coincides with higher levels of unhelpful conflict styles. This makes sense, as previous research has found links between imbalanced power distributions and conflict levels (Loving et al., 2004). It also makes sense, as conflict is an opportunity to enact power in styles such as verbally dominant communication styles or withholding of information (Atwood & Scholtz, 2005), serial arguments due to an inability to reach desired outcomes (Bevan, 2010), emotional volatility and conflict minimizing (McCarthy, 1999), and an inability of the partner with more power to engage in compromise (Kim et al., 2019). Higher male perceptions of ineffective arguing were also significantly related to lower levels of sexual satisfaction for women, but the same relationship was not found between female sexual satisfaction and her own perceptions of ineffective arguing or male sexual satisfaction and female ineffective arguing. This is interesting, because it does not support past research suggesting an inability to feel heard and reach the outcomes one desires is tied to lower satisfaction with one's own sex life (Champiri & Dehghani, 2020; Metz & Epstein, 2002; Metz & Dwyer, 1993; Schwartz & Southern, 2018; Impett et al., 2014). Rather, it implies women suffer lower sexual satisfaction when their partner does not feel heard or like they are achieving their desired outcomes.

Interesting to consider is that the data does not indicate women's perceptions of low relational power or ineffective arguing have any relationship to male sexual satisfaction. This

contradicts the earlier argument that one partner's feelings of disempowerment and ineffective conflict negatively impacts both partners, because the impact does not go both ways.

Considering the historical constructions of power and how difficult it is to truly enact egalitarianism in a heterosexual relationship (Knudson-Martin & Mahoney, 2009; Knudson-Martin, 2013), it may be that men's perceptions are still the underlying driver of some relational outcomes for women, such as sexual satisfaction. Due to the previous findings that men who hold the most power are less sensitive to acknowledging it (Knudson-Martin, 2013) but more sensitive to the challenging of it (Dunbar et al., 2008; Knudsen-Martin, 2013), it may be that men are more likely to view challenges of power by their partner as a sign of unhelpful conflict resolution styles while women may not view it that way or their perceptions do not have as much of an impact on relational outcomes.

### **Clinical Implications**

Considering this sample is comprised of therapy seeking couples, therapy is a great entrance point into challenging some of these imbalances. As highlighted in the IEMSS (Byers & Wang, 2004; Lawrence & Byers, 1995), there are more nuances in how we treat sexual satisfaction than just the sexual or biological realms of a relationship. These findings indicate there is nuance in how we understand the presence or absence of conflict and how that interacts with power dynamics in the relationship, particularly through the lens of gender. Clinicians may benefit from examining ways men overtly or covertly contest women's attempts to challenge power dynamics in heterosexual relationships, as it may improve sexual outcomes for both partners. In the same line, it may be helpful to reframe ineffective arguing processes as unmet attempts to balance power in the relationship or to make patterns of one partner's perceptions taking precedence over outcomes such as sexual satisfaction overt. If working through an

Emotion Focused Therapy (Greenberg, 2015) lens, these processes of power negotiation and ineffective conflict can be made overt by reframing them as a cycle engendering unmet attachment needs. Working through it in this way allows partners to soften what can feel like power struggles, level mismatches in power through shared vulnerability, and enact ways to connect intimately and transform their conflict patterns.

In line with Schnarch's Crucible Therapy (1991), it would behoove clinicians to give systemic consideration to elements of the overall relational system such as conflict processes and power negotiation when considering sexual outcomes, as the data shows they are related. Additionally, the finding that it is men's perception of ineffective arguing that mediates the relationship indicates there is still a gendered aspect of relational outcomes for heterosexual couples that supports the idea that it is still a problem that needs to be overtly considered in treatment (Knudson-Martin & Mahoney, 2009; Knudson-Martin, 2013). It may be helpful for clinicians to expand their lens from how the couple interacts to how the different components of the relationship interact and what that explicitly means for each partner.

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

One of the bigger limitations to this study is the measurement of power. Our analyses did not have a mechanism by which to indicate perceptions of equal power and did not separate power by types like process and outcome. The measure used is also more focused on action of the partner rather than actions of the self, which more explicitly indicates how one feels about their partner's power than their own. Additionally, it is focused on the narrow element of decision-making power without consideration of other domains of power within the relationship, in which each partner in the relationship may have varying levels of across domains. It would be helpful to explore what types of power are most impactful or focus more on perceptions of how

oneself enacts power and succeeds rather than how a partner enacts power and diminishes the agency of the other. Not only that, but future research could also benefit from examining agreement between partners on power levels in their relationship because their perceptions may differ. Another limitation is that the relational constructs are generalized to the whole relationship, and the IAI focuses most on conflict resolution processes than other behaviors associated with ineffective arguing. This is still helpful in that patterns of interaction can be pervasive throughout a relationship, but it does not take into consideration that power and conflict can manifest very differently depending on relational domains. For instance, a couple may align well on values and practices in regard to child rearing and feel equal and able to successfully resolve conflict in that domain, but highly disagree and exert power differently over matters connected to finances. Future research may benefit from exploring if the relationship between these variables changes depending on the relationship domain examined.

Typical of many limitations in research, all measures are self-report and based on the perceptions of each partner of the relationship. Though our perceptions do drive the way we interact, they also are not always a true reflection of behaviors and outcomes and can be easily skewed. The sample is from heterosexual therapy seeking couples, as well as is not diverse in regard to race or gender and sexual identity, therefore results may not be highly generalizable to other populations such as racially diverse couples, LGBT couples, or couples not seeking therapy. The current study additionally only examined cross-sectional data, which does not illustrate how these constructs relate and change over time depending on developmental phase of the relationship or the individual people.

Future research observing the process of power and ineffective arguing in couples through a qualitative or behavioral observation approach could be more successful in exploring

the “why?” of the current findings, particularly because the IAI highlights a set of behaviors in conflict resolution. Future research could also benefit from including other known related variables such as relationship satisfaction, or other relationship level variables such as presence of violence in understanding the nuances of how these variables interact. Considering this study was cross sectional, utilizing a longitudinal study design could also examine how these processes relate or change over time.

### **Conclusion**

The findings of this study enrich the existing body of literature by examining more explicitly relational and gendered processes of sexual satisfaction in committed heterosexual couples through a dyadic lens. In this sample of couples before therapy, male perceptions of ineffective arguing in the relationship bore more weight in negatively impacting women’s sexual outcomes than the other way around. Though ineffective arguing perceptions are not explicitly measured as power, this may suggest men still hold the power of perception when influencing outcomes in heterosexual relationships. In consideration of these findings, it is imperative to note that though our culture is attempting to address issues of gender inequity, gender hierarchies are still at play even in the more covert processes of relationships and continue to have an impact on the experience of female pleasure. This necessitates a continued dedication to acknowledgement of and explicit action toward addressing how longstanding structures of gendered power are still at play in even our closest relationships. Although this may be truer in the instance of relational dysfunction or need for extra relational support— as these findings were generated from therapy seeking couples—effort toward actively dismantling these structures must ensue further downstream to close relationships.

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**Table 1***Demographic information for all couples (N = 175)*

	Females %	Males %
<b>Age (in years)</b>		
19 - 25	22.3	16
26 - 32	32	30.3
33 - 39	20	22.3
40 - 46	16.6	16
47 - 53	5.1	9.7
54 - 60	2.3	2.8
61 +	0.6	2.9
<b>Race</b>		
Asian American/Pacific Islander	2.3	0.6
African/Black	13.7	14.9
Hispanic	0.6	2.3
Caucasian	78.3	78.3
Other	2.3	2.3
Missing	0.6	1.1
<b>Education</b>		
Junior High School or less	0	1.1
High school or GED	21.7	30.3
Vocational or Technical School	4.6	8.6
Associate's degree	15.4	10.3
Bachelor's degree	33.1	25.7
Graduate or professional degree	24.6	23.4
Missing	0.6	0.6
<b>Both (Couple Variable)</b>		
<b>Income</b>		
		%
Under \$20,000		16.6
\$20K-\$39,999		20
\$40K-\$59,999		18.3
\$60K-\$79,999		12.5
\$80K-\$99,999		10.3
\$100K+		0.6
Missing		5.7
<b># Children</b>		
		%
0		42.3
1		20.6
2		19.4
3		13.1
4+		2.9
Missing		1.7
<b>Relationship Length</b>		
		%
24 months and under		29.7
25-48 months		16
49-60 months		5.7
61-84 months		14.9
85-108 months		10.3
109+ months		23.4

**Table 2**  
*Control Variable Descriptives*

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Range</b>
Female Depression	21.81	12.60	0-50
Male Depression	18.20	11.25	0-50
Female Anxiety Symptoms	12.59	6.81	0-24
Male Anxiety Symptoms	9.95	6.34	0-24
Female Age	33.42	9.27	20-65
Male Age	35.40	10.42	19-69
Relationship Length	77.59	78.89	2-519
Number of Children	2.81	1.21	0-5
Female Dysfunction	7.62	4.86	0-21
Male Dysfunction	6.19	4.72	0-21

*Note. Relationship length is measured in months.*

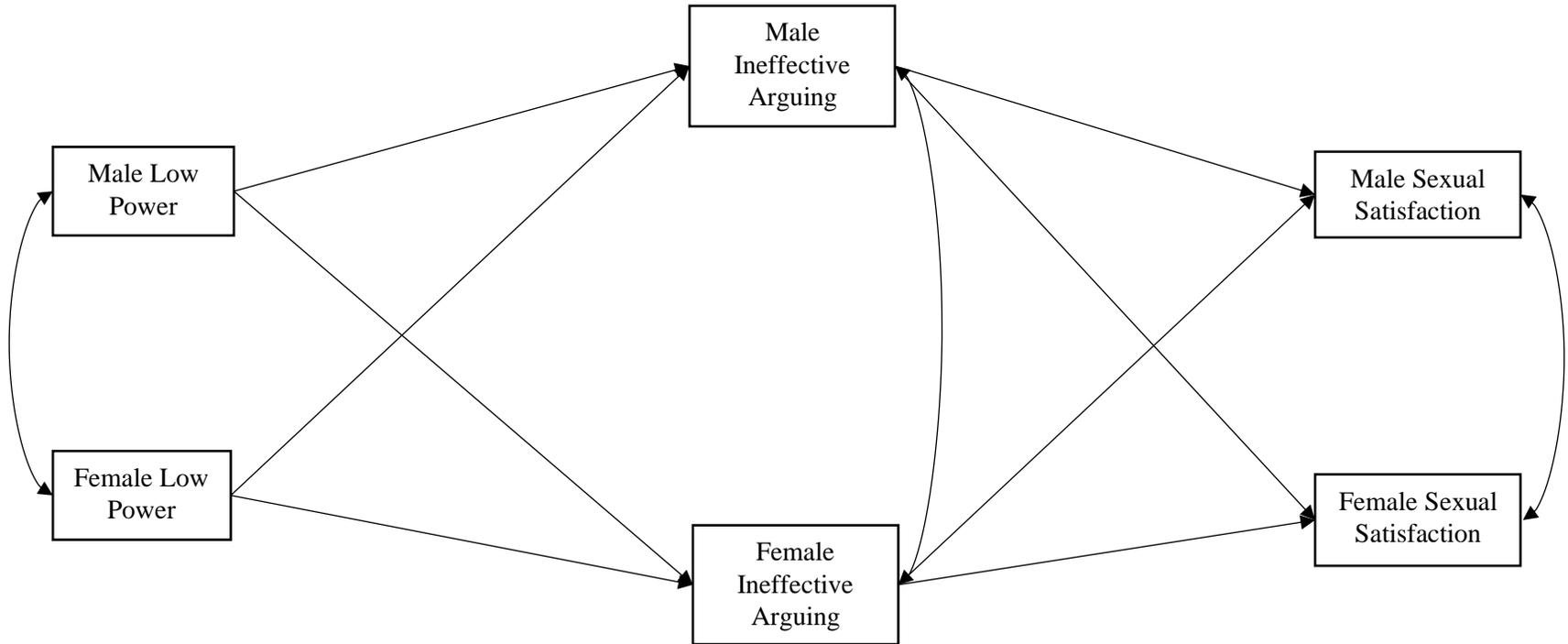
**Table 3***Bivariate Correlation Matrix of Main Variables*

<b>Variables</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>
1. Female Low Power	-					
2. Male Low Power	.52**	-				
3. Female Sexual Satisfaction	-.25**	-.34**	-			
4. Male Sexual Satisfaction	-.16*	-.37**	.62**	-		
5. Female IAI	.76**	.58**	-.24**	-.22*	-	
6. Male IAI	.61**	.78**	-.30**	-.37**	.64**	-
Mean	42.47	42.56	9.25	9.35	27.47	26.18
SD	13.21	12.14	4.08	4.09	8.50	7.82
Range	15-72	15-70	2-70	0-15	8-40	9-40

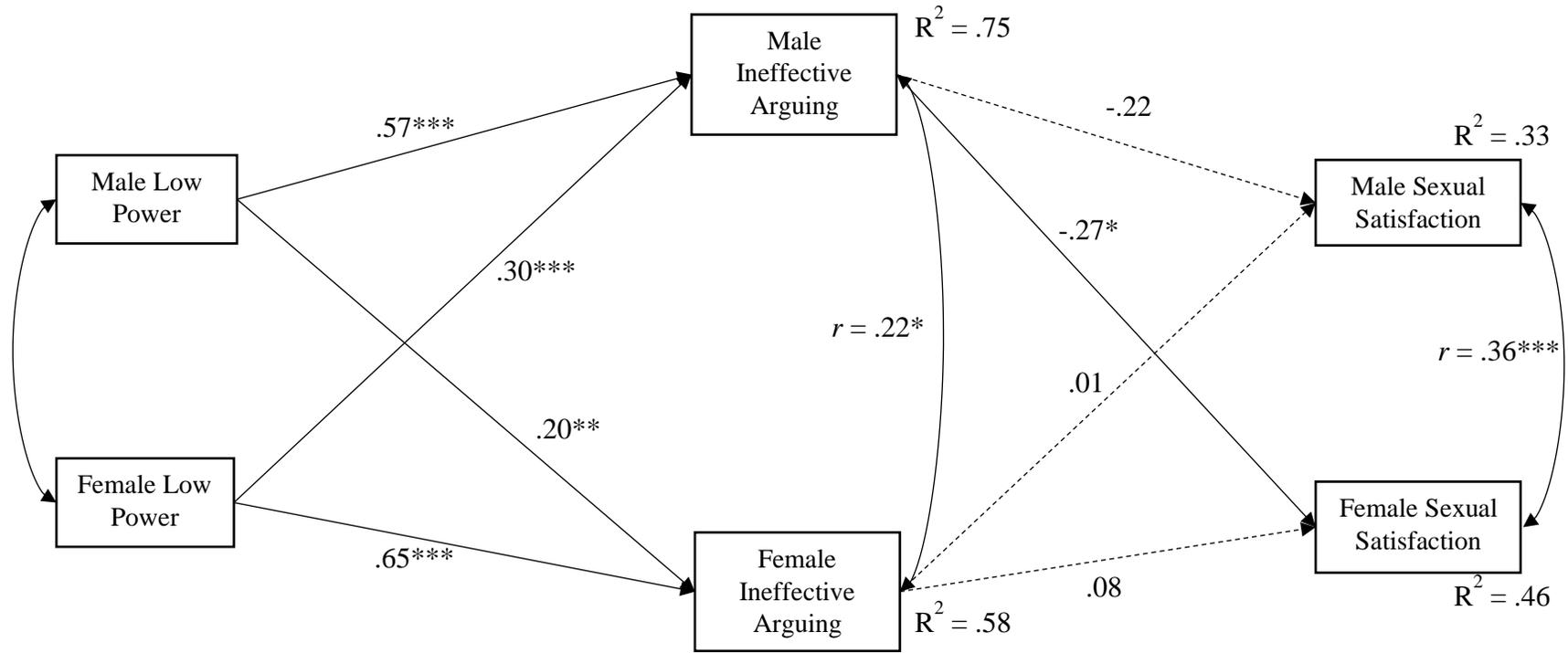
*Note.* \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$

**Figure 1**

*Hypothesized Dyadic Structural Equation Model of Couples*



**Figure 2**  
*Dyadic Structural Equation Model of Couples*



Note.  $\chi^2 = 45.78(32)$ ,  $p = .054$ , CFI = 0.968, TLI = 0.922, RMSEA = .058 (.00 - .093), SRMR = .041; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*  $p < .05$ .

## Appendix A

### Demographic Questions

1. Your age: \_\_\_\_\_ 2. Your Sex: \_\_\_\_\_ 3. Partner Sex: \_\_\_\_\_ 4. Racial/Ethnic Group (Specify): \_\_\_\_\_
5. How many times have you been married? \_\_\_\_\_ 6. How many times has your partner been married? \_\_\_\_\_
7. Your current relationship/marital status is: Circle the best answer.  
*A. Single/Never Married    B. Married    C. Divorced    D. Separated*  
*E. Widowed    F. Committed Relationship (Not Living Together)    G. Committed Relationship (Living Together)*
8. Your current relationship length (years & months)? \_\_\_\_\_
9. How many biological, adopted, step-children under 18 live in your home at least 50% of the time? \_\_\_\_\_
10. How many total people live in your home? \_\_\_\_\_
11. What is the highest level of education you attained? Circle the best answer.  
*A. Junior High School or less    B. GED/High School    C. Vocational/Technical School*  
*D. Associate Degree/2 years    E. Bachelor Degree    F. Graduate/Professional Degree*
12. What is your combined gross income (before taxes) in the current year Circle the best answer  
*A. Under \$5,500    B. \$5,501 to \$11,999    C. \$12,000 to \$15,999*  
*D. \$16,000 to \$19,999    E. \$20,000 to \$24,999    F. \$25,000 to \$29,999*  
*G. \$30,000 to \$34,999    H. \$35,000 to \$39,999    I. \$40,000 to \$49,999*  
*J. \$50,000 to \$59,999    K. \$60,000 to \$69,999    L. \$70,000 to \$79,999*  
*M. \$80,000 to \$89,999    N. \$90,000 to \$99,999    O. \$100,000 or more*

## Appendix B

### Relationship Power Scale

	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Undecided</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>
1. My partner tends to discount my opinion .....	1	2	3	4	5
2. My partner does not listen to me .....	1	2	3	4	5
3. When I want to talk about a problem in our relationship, my partner often refuses to talk with me .....	1	2	3	4	5
4. My partner tends to dominate our conversations .....	1	2	3	4	5
5. When we do not agree on an issue, my partner gives me the cold shoulder .....	1	2	3	4	5
6. I feel free to express my opinion about issues in our relationship .....	1	2	3	4	5
7. My partner makes decisions that affect our family without talking to me first .....	1	2	3	4	5
8. My partner and I talk about problems until we both agree on a solution .....	1	2	3	4	5
9. I feel like my partner tries to control me .....	1	2	3	4	5
10. When it comes to money, my partner's opinion usually wins out .....	1	2	3	4	5
11. When it comes to children, my partner's opinion usually wins out .....	1	2	3	4	5
12. It often seems my partner can get away with things in our relationship that I can never get away with .....	1	2	3	4	5
13. I have no choice but to do what my partner wants .....	1	2	3	4	5
14. My partner has more influence in our relationship than I do .....	1	2	3	4	5
15. When disagreements arise in our relationship, my partner's opinion usually wins out. ....	1	2	3	4	5

## Appendix C

### Ineffective Arguing Index

**Please indicate how much each argument description fits your relationship.**

	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Undecided</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>
1. By the end of an argument, each of us has been given a fair hearing .....	1	2	3	4	5
2. When we begin to fight or argue, I think, "Here we go again." .....	1	2	3	4	5
3. Overall, I'd say we're pretty good at solving our problems.....	1	2	3	4	5
4. Our arguments are left hanging and unresolved.....	1	2	3	4	5
5. We go for days without settling our differences .....	1	2	3	4	5
6. Our arguments seem to end in frustrating stalemates.....	1	2	3	4	5
7. We need to improve the way we settle our differences .....	1	2	3	4	5
8. Overall, our arguments are brief and quickly forgotten .....	1	2	3	4	5

## Appendix D

### Sexual Function Index

Over the past 4 weeks, **how satisfied have you been:**

	<i>Very Dissatisfied</i>	<i>Moderately Dissatisfied</i>	<i>Equally Satisfied/ Dissatisfied</i>	<i>Moderately Satisfied</i>	<i>Very Satisfied</i>
1. With the amount of emotional closeness during sexual activity between you and your partner?.....1		2	3	4	5
2. With your sexual relationship with your partner? .....1		2	3	4	5
3. How satisfied have you been with your overall sexual life? .....1		2	3	4	5

## Appendix E

### Sexual Problems Index

How often have you experienced the following symptoms over the last two months?      *Never*-----*Often*

4. Sexual problems .....	0	1	2	3
5. Low sex drive .....	0	1	2	3
6. Sexual over-activity .....	0	1	2	3
7. Not feeling satisfied with your sex life.....	0	1	2	3
8. Having sex that you didn't enjoy.....	0	1	2	3
9. Bad thoughts or feelings during sex .....	0	1	2	3
10. Being Confused about your sexual feelings .....	0	1	2	3
11. Sexual feelings when you shouldn't have them .....	0	1	2	3

## Appendix F

### Generalized Anxiety Disorder-7

	<i>Not at All</i>	<i>Several Days</i>	<i>More than Half the Days</i>	<i>Nearly Every Day</i>
1. Feeling nervous, anxious or on edge .....	0	1	2	3
2. Not being able to stop or control worrying .....	0	1	2	3
3. Worrying too much about different things .....	0	1	2	3
4. Trouble relaxing .....	0	1	2	3
5. Being so restless that it is hard to sit still .....	0	1	2	3
6. Becoming easily annoyed or irritable .....	0	1	2	3
7. Feeling afraid as if something awful might happen .....	0	1	2	3

## Appendix G

### Major Depressive Inventory

	<i>All the Time</i>	<i>Most Times</i>	<i>More than Half the Time</i>	<i>Less than Half the Time</i>	<i>Some- Times</i>	<i>At No Time</i>
1. Have you felt low in spirits or sad? .....	5	4	3	2	1	0
2. Have you lost interest in your daily activities? .....	5	4	3	2	1	0
3. Have you felt lacking in energy and strength? .....	5	4	3	2	1	0
4. Have you felt less self- confident? .....	5	4	3	2	1	0
5. Have you had a bad conscience or feelings of guilt? .....	5	4	3	2	1	0
6. Have you felt that life wasn't worth living? .....	5	4	3	2	1	0
7. Have you had difficulty in concentrating, e.g. when reading the newspaper or watching TV? .....	5	4	3	2	1	0
8. (A) Have you felt very restless? .....	5	4	3	2	1	0
(B) Have you felt subdued or slowed down? .....	5	4	3	2	1	0
9. Have you had trouble sleeping at night? .....	5	4	3	2	1	0
10. (A) Have you suffered from reduced appetite? .....	5	4	3	2	1	0
(B) Have you suffered from increased appetite? .....	5	4	3	2	1	0