

# **The Context of and Motivations for Discussing Relationship Boundaries in Long-Distance Relationships**

by  
**Lauren D. McRae**

B.A. (Hons.), Simon Fraser University, 2018

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

in the  
Department of Psychology  
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

© Lauren D. McRae 2020  
SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY  
Summer 2020

Copyright in this work rests with the author. Please ensure that any reproduction or re-use is done in accordance with the relevant national copyright legislation.

## Approval

**Name:** Lauren D. McRae

**Degree:** Master of Arts (Psychology)

**Title:** **The Context of and Motivations for Discussing  
Relationship Boundaries in Long-Distance  
Relationships**

**Examining Committee:**

**Chair:** V. Gordon Rose  
Senior Lecturer

**Rebecca Cobb**  
Senior Supervisor  
Associate Professor

**Alex Chapman**  
Supervisor  
Professor

**Lucia O’Sullivan**  
External Examiner  
Professor  
Department of Psychology  
University of New Brunswick

**Date Defended/Approved:** July 16, 2020

## Ethics Statement

The author, whose name appears on the title page of this work, has obtained, for the research described in this work, either:

- a. human research ethics approval from the Simon Fraser University Office of Research Ethics

or

- b. advance approval of the animal care protocol from the University Animal Care Committee of Simon Fraser University

or has conducted the research

- c. as a co-investigator, collaborator, or research assistant in a research project approved in advance.

A copy of the approval letter has been filed with the Theses Office of the University Library at the time of submission of this thesis or project.

The original application for approval and letter of approval are filed with the relevant offices. Inquiries may be directed to those authorities.

Simon Fraser University Library  
Burnaby, British Columbia, Canada

Update Spring 2016

## **Abstract**

Having explicit discussions regarding the emotional and sexual boundaries in a relationship often benefits couples' relational and sexual health; however, not all couples benefit. This is perhaps because partners' motives for discussing boundaries and their perceptions of discussion quality vary widely. Thus, the degree to which partners engage in boundary discussions to gain a desired outcome (i.e., approach motive) versus to avoid an aversive outcome (i.e., avoidance motive) may play a role in the quality of their discussions, and subsequently affect long-term relational outcomes. I predicted that individuals' discussion quality would mediate the associations between individuals' approach and avoidance motives and individuals' and partners' relationship satisfaction, commitment, and jealousy on average over six months in a sample of mixed-sex long-distance couples ( $N = 71$ ). Unexpectedly, both approach and avoidance motives were negatively associated with relational outcomes via discussion quality, which may indicate that even theoretically beneficial variables (i.e., approach motives) may depend on the relationship context in which they are enacted. Men's discussion quality was also more consistently associated with relational outcomes, which suggests that the degree to which men feel comfortable discussing relationship boundaries and feel confident about their relationship following the discussion are especially salient for understanding changes in couples' relationship quality over time.

**Keywords:** relationship boundary discussions; approach and avoidance motives; couples' communication; long-distance relationships

# Table of Contents

Approval .....	ii
Ethics Statement.....	iii
Abstract.....	iv
Table of Contents .....	v
List of Tables .....	vi
List of Figures .....	vii
<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
Current Study and Hypotheses.....	3
<b>Method .....</b>	<b>5</b>
Participants.....	5
Procedures.....	5
Measures .....	7
Data analytic approach.....	9
Missing Data .....	10
<b>Results .....</b>	<b>11</b>
Descriptive Statistics and Preliminary Analyses .....	11
Boundary Discussions.....	11
Discussion Quality as a Mediator of the Associations Between Motives and Relationship Outcomes .....	12
Actor and Partner Effects of Motives on Discussion Quality .....	12
Actor and Partner Effects of Motives on Relationship Outcomes .....	13
Actor and Partner Effects of Discussion Quality on Relationship Outcomes.....	13
Indirect Effects of Motives on Relationship Outcomes Through Discussion Quality ..	13
<b>Discussion.....</b>	<b>15</b>
Limitations and Future Directions .....	17
Conclusion .....	18
<b>Tables and Figures.....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>References.....</b>	<b>24</b>

## List of Tables

Table 1.	Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables .....	19
Table 2.	Predicting Relationship Satisfaction, Commitment, and Jealousy from Approach and Avoidance Motives and Discussion Quality, and Predicting Discussion Quality from Approach and Avoidance Motives .....	20

## List of Figures

Figure 1.	Hypothesized mediation model: Discussion quality as a mediator of the association between individuals' approach motives and both partners' relationship satisfaction, commitment, and jealousy. ....	22
Figure 2.	Indirect actor and partner effects of approach and avoidance motives on relationship satisfaction, commitment, and jealousy through actor and partner discussion quality. ....	23

## Introduction

Discussing relationship boundaries (i.e., the extent to which emotional and sexual involvements are acceptable outside of the romantic dyad) is related to sexual health (e.g., Hoff & Beougher, 2010; Kippax et al., 1997; Mitchell et al., 2012) and positive relationship outcomes (Gass et al., 2012). However, not all couples benefit relationally from discussing boundaries (McRae & Cobb, 2019), perhaps because partners' motives for discussing boundaries and their perceptions of discussion quality vary widely (Hoff & Beougher, 2010). Although many couples discuss boundaries to feel closer to their partner (Hoff & Beougher, 2010), other couples might be motivated to discuss boundaries to protect their relationship against feelings of jealousy, infidelity, or other aversive outcomes. This distinction is important because engaging in behaviour to gain a desired outcome (i.e., approach motive) versus engaging in behaviour to avoid an aversive outcome (i.e., avoidance motive) may play a role in the quality of couples' discussions, and can affect long-term relationship outcomes (Gable 2006; Impett et al., 2010). Couples in long-distance relationships may be especially motivated to discuss relationship boundaries to signify their commitment before becoming separated, or to manage threats to the relationship that are related to geographical separation. Thus, I examined how approach and avoidance motives for boundary discussions were related to quality of discussions and relationship satisfaction, commitment and jealousy in long-distance couples, and whether discussion quality mediated the link between motives and changes in relationship outcomes over six months.

Approximately 50% of mixed-sex couples (McRae & Cobb 2019; Richters et al., 2014; Warren et al., 2012) and 60-80% of male same-sex couples (Hoff & Beougher, 2010; Kippax et al., 1997; Mitchell et al., 2012) have discussions at some point in their relationships about whether extra-dyadic involvements are acceptable. Much of the research in this area has focused on explicit sexual agreements (also referred to as monogamy agreements), which delineate what sexual behavior is allowed outside of the primary dyad (e.g., Hoff & Beougher, Hosking, 2014). Negotiation of agreements might lead to monogamy (e.g., agreeing that sex with others outside of the dyad is never

allowed) or non-monogamy (e.g., agreeing that occasional or regular emotional or sexual experiences for one or both partners is acceptable) (Hoff & Beougher, 2010).

Couples may discuss relationship boundaries but never negotiate an explicit sexual agreement. The focus of the current study is on why couples communicate about relationship boundaries, regardless of whether they formed a sexual agreement, and the role that their motives play in intimate relationships. Discussing relationship boundaries has the potential to increase a sense of intimacy, trust, and satisfaction between partners (Gass, et al., 2012; Hoff & Beougher, 2010), and is associated with safer sex practices, at least in male same-sex couples (e.g., Kippax et al., 1997; Mitchell et al., 2012); however, not all couples experience benefits from such discussions (McRae & Cobb, 2019). One factor that might affect whether couples benefit from boundary discussions are whether they have approach or avoidance motives for the discussion.

Approach and avoidance motives appear to have differential effects on relationship satisfaction. Approach motives are goals to move toward a rewarding, desired end state (Feltman & Elliot, 2012; Gable, 2006), and are positively associated with relationship satisfaction and predict increases in satisfaction over time (Gable 2006; Impett et al., 2010). In contrast, avoidance motives are goals to move away from (or maintain distance from) an undesired end state and are negatively associated with relationship satisfaction and predict declines in satisfaction over time (Gable 2006; Impett et al., 2010).

Approach and avoidance motives might be linked to relationship outcomes in divergent ways because they may lead individuals to interpret interactions with others in especially positive or negative ways (Strachman & Gable, 2006). Individuals who are higher in approach motives tend to interpret ambiguous social cues in more optimistic ways than those with avoidance motives (Strachman & Gable, 2006). Individuals who are higher in approach motives tend to be perceived by raters as being more satisfied and more responsive to their partner's needs during social interactions than those higher in avoidance motives (Impett et al., 2010).

Some couples choose to discuss relationship boundaries to increase feelings of satisfaction or commitment (Hoff & Beougher, 2010; Mitchell et al., 2017), which are approach motives. In contrast, other couples may feel motivated to discuss relationship boundaries to prevent feelings of jealousy, which is an avoidance motive. There is little information, however, about whether having approach or avoidance motives leads to achievement of these common desired end states (e.g., to increase satisfaction or commitment or to decrease jealousy) over time. Perhaps individuals' motives when interacting with their partners might influence their and their partner's perceptions of discussion quality, which then may both partners to feel more or less satisfied, committed, and jealous in their relationship over time.

## **Current Study and Hypotheses**

Fewer than half of mixed-sex couples discuss relationship boundaries (McRae & Cobb, 2019; Richters et al., 2014; Warren et al., 2012), but long-distance couples may be more likely to discuss their relationship boundaries because they experience geographical separation and tend to engage in more relationship maintenance behaviours than geographically close couples (Merolla, 2012). Thus, long-distance couples are an ideal group in which to investigate how motives for discussing boundaries affected the quality of their discussions and relationship satisfaction, commitment, and jealousy over the subsequent six months.

I predicted that individuals' discussion quality would mediate the associations between individuals' approach and avoidance motives and individuals' and partners' relationship satisfaction, commitment, and jealousy on average over six months. Given the nested and dyadic nature of this study, I investigated how individuals' motives were associated with their own (i.e., actor effects), and their partners' outcomes (i.e., partner effects). It is important to note that when utilizing the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM; Cook & Kenny, 2005), the associations between individual variables and their own and partner outcomes are referred to as actor and partner effects, however, that is not meant to indicate a causal association, but rather, to distinguish between outcomes that are predicted by individual and partner variables.

First, as shown in the left side of Figure 1, I predicted that approach motives would have positive and avoidance motives would have negative actor and partner effects on the quality of the discussion as assessed by how comfortable the partners felt during the discussion and how confident they felt about their relationship as a consequence of the discussion. Second, given that approach motives typically benefit relationships and perceptions of interpersonal interactions (Gable 2006; Impett et al., 2010; Strachman & Gable, 2006), I predicted positive actor and partner effects on approach motives, relationship satisfaction and commitment, and negative actor and partner effects on jealousy. Likewise, given that avoidance motives are typically detrimental to relationships and perceptions of interpersonal interactions (Gable 2006; Impett et al., 2010; Strachman & Gable, 2006), I predicted negative actor and partner effects on avoidance motives, relationship satisfaction, and commitment and positive actor and partner effects on jealousy. Third, as shown in the right side of Figure 1, I predicted that discussion quality would have positive actor and partner effects on relationship satisfaction and commitment, and negative actor and partner effects on jealousy. Finally, I expected that there would be indirect actor and partner effects on approach and avoidance motives and all relationship outcomes via discussion quality.

## Method

### Participants

Participants were 71 mixed-sex couples who participated in a larger study of long-distance relationships ( $N = 85$ ). Couples had been in relationships for an average of 2.66 years ( $SD = 2.12$ ) and had been long-distance for an average of 1.66 years ( $SD = 2.12$ ). Almost two-thirds (72.5%) of couples reported that they had lived geographically close at one point in time. The distance separating partners ranged from 114 - 12,800 kilometers ( $M = 4,988.11$ ,  $SD = 3,781.48$ ). Women were a mean of 24.37 years ( $SD = 7.24$ ) old, reported a mean of 15.78 years ( $SD = 2.91$ ) of education, and had an average annual income of CAD \$21,305.36 ( $SD = 23,887.44$ ). Women identified as heterosexual (83.1%), bisexual (14.1%), and other (i.e., demisexual or pansexual, 2.8%). Men were a mean of 25.07 years ( $SD = 7.58$ ) old, reported a mean of 15.59 ( $SD = 2.46$ ) years of education, and had an average annual income of CAD \$23,338.06 ( $SD = 29,793.88$ ). Men identified as heterosexual (92.9%), bisexual (4.3%), gay (1.4%), and other (i.e., demisexual or pansexual, 1.4%).

### Procedures

All procedures were approved by the Simon Fraser University Research Ethics Board. Most couples ( $n = 47$ ) were recruited through online advertisements (e.g., Craigslist, Reddit, Kijiji), social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter), ads on university campus and electronic bulletin boards and off-campus bulletin boards (e.g., community centers, libraries, coffee shops), and through word of mouth. Individuals who responded to these recruitment efforts received an information email that included details about the purpose of the study, the requirements for participation, the eligibility criteria, and the consent form. If they were interested in participating, they were asked to reply to the email with full names, ages, phone numbers, and email addresses for both partners, and to confirm that they were both comfortable reading and writing in English. Of the individuals who contacted the lab ( $n = 63$ ), 62 couples were eligible and received questionnaires.

Participants were also recruited by sending information emails to 192 couples who had participated in a previous study on long-distance relationships in the lab. The email included results about the previous study and an invitation to participate in this study including participation requirements, eligibility criteria, and the consent form. Of the 50 individuals who responded with interest, 35 couples were eligible and received questionnaires.

Eligible partners were each sent an email with instructions, a link to the online survey (hosted on a secure server using Remark survey software), and a unique ID number. Participants logged onto the survey, reviewed the consent form and indicated their consent to participate by clicking “submit,” which took them to the first page of the survey. Participants provided demographic information, descriptions of boundary discussions, and completed measures of relationship satisfaction, commitment, and jealousy in the first survey (Time 1). Participants then completed follow-up online surveys assessing relationship satisfaction, commitment, and jealousy three times every two months thereafter over six months (Times 2-4). Each partner received \$10 for completing each online questionnaire in two payments of \$20 after Time 2 (T2) and \$20 after Time 4 (T4). Payments were made by email money transfer or by Amazon gift card.

Of the 97 couples who were eligible and received questionnaires, 12 couples did not complete questionnaires and thus were excluded. Another 14 couples were not in mixed-sex relationships and were excluded because gender differences emerged in the multilevel model analyses yielding a final sample of 71 mixed-sex couples. Independent samples *t*-tests indicated that there were no differences between included ( $n = 71$ ) and excluded ( $n = 14$ ) individuals on Time 1 (T1) demographics (i.e., age, income, or years of education), approach and avoidance motives, discussion quality, relationship satisfaction, commitment, or jealousy where data were available.

## Measures

Cronbach's alpha is reported for all measures in Table 1.

**Demographic factors.** Participants provided demographic information, including age, ethnicity, years of education completed, income (incomes were converted to Canadian currency by a research assistant using an online calculator in January 2020), gender identity, sexual orientation, relationship length, long-distance length, whether they had every lived geographically close to their partner, and their current geographical location (which was used to compute distance in kilometres).

**Approach and avoidance motives.** Participants were asked, "Since you and your partner began your relationship, have you two ever discussed whether romantic and/or sexual involvements with other people were acceptable?" Responses were coded as 0 (*no*) and 1 (*yes*). When participants indicated yes, they responded to the open-ended question: "What was the goal of the discussion(s) about boundaries?" Two undergraduate research assistants and I coded participant responses as to whether they were approach or avoidance motives; consensus coding was used to determine final codes for all participants.

Participant responses were scanned for the most basic units of language that could be meaningfully interpreted as reflecting either approach or avoidance motives. For example, "The goal was to ensure a healthy and faithful relationship which is meaning to last a lifetime and also to manage my partner's jealous and possessive attributes" was coded as two separate meaningful units. The first part of the sentence, "The goal was to ensure a healthy and faithful relationship which is meaning to last a lifetime" was coded as an approach motive, because this participant aimed to maintain positive qualities in a long-term relationship (i.e., working toward a desirable outcome). The second part of the sentence, "to manage my partner's jealous and possessive attributes" was coded as an avoidance motive, because the participant described her desire to reduce unwanted jealousy and possessiveness in her partner (i.e., working to avoid an undesirable outcome). To account for differences in the amount of text each participant wrote, total scores for approach and avoidance motives were computed by dividing the total number

of approach or avoidance motives by the participant's total word count to provide an overall proportion of approach and avoidance motives for each participant.

**Discussion quality.** Partners responded to four questions (regarding the quality of their relationship boundary discussion: (1) I feel comfortable discussing relationship boundaries (e.g., whether or not we will have sexual or romantic involvements with others) (2) I feel uncomfortable discussing relationship boundaries with my partner (3) Discussing relationship boundaries makes me feel insecure about the state of our relationship (4) Discussing relationship boundaries makes me feel more confident our relationship will last. All items were rated on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (*completely disagree*) to 5 (*completely agree*). Items 2 and 3 were reverse coded, and a total score was computed by averaging the four items. Higher scores reflect perceptions of higher quality discussions.

**Relationship satisfaction.** The Couples Satisfaction Index (CSI-16; Funk & Rogge, 2007) assesses participants' satisfaction with their relationship. Items are rated on 5- or 6-point Likert scales. A sample item is "My relationship with my partner makes me happy," rated on a 6-point scale ranging from 0 (*not at all true*) to 5 (*completely true*). The CSI is scored by summing the responses across all items and scores can range from 0 to 81. Higher scores indicate higher levels of relationship satisfaction and scores below 51.5 reflect relationship dissatisfaction (Funk & Rogge, 2007).

**Commitment.** The Dedication Subscale-Short-form (Owen, et al., 2011) is an 8-item measure that assesses participants' personal dedication to their relationship. A sample item is "My relationship with my partner is more important to me than almost anything in my life." Items are rated on a Likert scale that ranges from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). A total score is computed by summing responses and scores can range from 8 to 56, where higher scores reflect higher relationship commitment.

**Jealousy.** The Multidimensional Jealousy Scale, Short-Form (Elphinston, et al., 2011) is a 17-item measure that assesses participants' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral experiences of jealousy in their relationship, and scores can range from 17 to

119. The cognitive subscale asks participants to rate how often jealous thoughts about their partner occur on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 7 (*all the time*). A sample item is, “I suspect that my partner may be attracted to someone else.” The emotional subscale asks participants to rate their emotional reactions in various situations on a Likert scale from 1 (*very pleased*) to 7 (*very upset*). A sample item is, “Your partner is flirting with someone else.” The behavioral subscale asks participants to rate how often they engage in jealous behaviors on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 7 (*all the time*). A sample item is “I look through my partner’s drawers, handbag, or pockets.” A total score is computed by summing responses, with higher scores reflecting heightened experiences of jealousy in one's relationship.

## **Data analytic approach**

Hypotheses were tested with Multilevel modeling (MLM) using the Mixed Procedure in SPSS (IBM Corp, 2019) and the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM; Cook & Kenny, 2005). MLM allows for within- and between-subject differences, and accounts for the nested (i.e., repeated measures of relationship satisfaction, commitment, and jealousy nested within individuals) and interdependent (i.e., dyadic) structure of the data. APIM treats the dyad as the unit of analysis and estimates actor and partner effects. I examined how individuals’ approach and avoidance motives predicted their own (i.e., actor effects) and their partners’ (i.e., partner effects) discussion quality, relationship satisfaction, commitment, and jealousy.

To test the hypothesized mediation model in Figure 1, I examined outcomes separately. Specifically, I conducted analyses predicting discussion quality, relationship satisfaction, commitment, and jealousy separately. Thus, I first examined actor and partner effects of approach and avoidance motives on discussion quality, relationship satisfaction, commitment, and jealousy. Then I examined the actor and partner effects of discussion quality on relationship outcomes. Predictors were grand mean centered and repeated measures were modelled at Level 1 (i.e., relationship satisfaction, commitment, jealousy). Time was also included as a covariate to improve the reliability of estimates. Time was coded as years from T1 to each subsequent survey.

Indirect effects were estimated using the Hayes (2013) MCMED macro for SPSS to compute the products of the a and b path coefficients ( $a*b$ ) for the actor and partner models, and Monte Carlo 95% confidence intervals for the indirect effects. Confidence intervals that do not include zero indicate that the indirect effect is significant at an alpha level of .05. To test the indirect effects, Hayes (2009) recommends that the predictor (e.g., approach motive) should be associated with the mediator (e.g., discussion quality) and the mediator should be associated with the outcome (e.g., relationship satisfaction). Thus, I tested only indirect effects where those conditions were met.

For parsimony, I planned to pool the estimates for men and women as long as there were no gender differences. Thus, I first examined whether estimates differed between men and women for the paths in the mediation model in Figure 1 by examining the interaction between sex (coded as -1 and 1) predictors (e.g., Approach Motive X Sex). Significant interactions indicated that there were gender differences, and thus intercepts and slopes were allowed to vary between men and women, yielding separate parameter estimates for each.

## **Missing Data**

Of the couples who were included, approximately 16.16% of the data for study variables (i.e., approach and avoidance motives, discussion quality, relationship satisfaction, commitment, and jealousy) were missing at Time 1, which is within the typical 15-20% range of missing data for psychology studies (Enders, 2003). As the MIXED procedure in SPSS uses a restricted maximum likelihood approach to handle missing data at Level 1, the same number of observations across participants is not required and thus no further steps were taken to deal with missing data.

## **Results**

### **Descriptive Statistics and Preliminary Analyses**

Descriptive statistics for all measures are in Table 1. I examined whether there were mean differences by sex using paired samples *t*-tests and a Bonferroni correction (Bonferroni, 1963) to mitigate the risk of Type I error. Specifically, I divided the alpha level by the number of paired samples *t*-tests ( $.05/17 = .003$ ). With an alpha of .003, there were no significant differences between men and women on primary study variables (i.e., approach motives, avoidance motives, discussion quality, relationship satisfaction, commitment, jealousy).

I checked the assumption of normality for outcome variables (i.e., relationship satisfaction, commitment, and jealousy) using Q-Q and histogram plots. The data points fell on relatively straight, positively sloped lines on the Q-Q plots for all variables and appeared to estimate a normal curve on the histogram plots for all variables; this can be taken as support for the assumption of normality. I checked the assumption of homoscedasticity of residuals by plotting the standardized predicted values of the outcome variables on the x-axis of a scatterplot, and the standardized residual values of the outcome variables on the y-axis. The data points for each outcome variable fell in roughly an even band around zero, which suggests that the residual values for all predicted outcome scores are approximately equal, supporting the assumption of homoscedasticity.

### **Boundary Discussions**

Most of the sample (88.6% of women and 89.6% of men) reported that they had discussed boundaries with their partner, and among 83.1% of couples, partners agreed that they had either discussed or not discussed boundaries. Of those who had discussed boundaries, most individuals (83.9% of women and 85.2% of men) reported that they had discussed boundaries more than once over the course of their relationship. I examined whether individuals who had discussed boundaries and those who had not differed on the

study variables (i.e., relationship satisfaction, commitment, jealousy), and whether individuals who agreed with their partner about whether a discussion had occurred differed from those who disagreed on the study variables (i.e., relationship satisfaction, commitment, jealousy). I employed a Bonferroni correction (Bonferroni, 1963) to mitigate the risk of Type I error ( $.05/24 = .002$ ). Using an alpha of .002, independent samples *t*-tests indicated no differences between individuals who had and had not discussed boundaries and no differences between individuals who agreed about whether discussions had occurred or not.

## **Discussion Quality as a Mediator of the Associations Between Motives and Relationship Outcomes**

Results of all MLM analyses are in Table 2 and Figure 2; bolded rows in Table 2 indicate where there were gender differences in the coefficients. Actor effects refer to the effect of individuals' predictor on their outcome (e.g., the effect of women's approach motives on their discussion quality) and partner effects refer to the effect of the partners' predictors on the individuals' outcome (e.g., the effect of women's approach motives on their male partner's discussion quality). I first examined direct effects of all predictors on outcomes and then when conditions were present (Hayes, 2009), I tested whether indirect effects were significant.

### **Actor and Partner Effects of Motives on Discussion Quality**

As shown in Table 2, there were no actor effects of women's approach or avoidance motives, or men's approach motives on discussion quality. Contrary to my prediction, women's approach motives had negative partner effects on discussion quality. As expected, men's avoidance motives had negative actor and partner effects on discussion quality. To summarize, the more women expressed approach motives and men expressed avoidance motives, both partners perceived their boundary discussion to be of lower quality.

## **Actor and Partner Effects of Motives on Relationship Outcomes**

There were few actor or partner effects of motives on relationship outcomes. Exceptions were that as expected, men's avoidance motives had negative actor effects on relationship satisfaction and positive actor effects on jealousy, and women's avoidance motives had negative partner effects on commitment. Another finding emerged that was contrary to predictions such that women's approach motives had negative partner effects on relationship satisfaction. In other words, the more women expressed approach motives, the less relationally satisfied men were on average over six months. However, when individuals expressed more avoidance motives, men were less relationally satisfied, less committed, and more jealous on average over six months.

## **Actor and Partner Effects of Discussion Quality on Relationship Outcomes**

Consistent with my predictions, women's discussion quality had positive actor effects on relationship satisfaction and positive partner effects on commitment. Also consistent with my predictions, men's discussion quality had positive actor effects on relationship satisfaction and commitment, negative actor effects on jealousy, and positive partner effects on commitment. In other words, when women reported higher quality boundary discussions, they were more relationally satisfied and had partners who were more committed on average over six months. When men reported higher discussion quality, they were more satisfied, more committed, and less jealous and their partners were more committed on average over six months.

## **Indirect Effects of Motives on Relationship Outcomes Through Discussion Quality**

Following the recommendations of Hayes, 2009, 10 of the 48 possible indirect effects in the hypothesized model met the conditions to be tested (i.e., predictor related to mediator and mediator related to outcome). Of the twelve possible indirect effects of women's approach motives, four were significant. However, only two paths could be termed partial mediation because the direct effects of the motives on outcomes remained significant. The remaining two paths cannot be termed mediation but should be referred

to as indirect effects, because there was no significant direct effect of motives on outcomes. Specifically, women's approach motives had indirect negative effects on women's commitment ( $B = -.02$ , 95% CI [-0.039, -0.001];  $-.04$ , 95% CI [-0.001, -0.02]; partial mediation), men's satisfaction ( $B = -.03$ , 95% CI [-0.06, -0.01]; partial mediation), and men's commitment ( $B = -.03$ , 95% CI [0.01, 0.06]), and positive indirect effects on men's jealousy ( $B = .02$ , 95% CI [0.004, 0.05]) through men's discussion quality. To summarize, when women expressed more approach motives, men perceived their boundary discussions to be of lower quality, and men were subsequently less satisfied, less committed, and more jealous, and women were less committed on average over six months. No indirect effects of men's approach motives could be tested as they did not meet the conditions.

No indirect effects of women's avoidance motives could be tested as they did not meet the conditions. Of the twelve possible indirect effects of men's avoidance motives, six were significant. Of those that were significant, two paths can be termed partial mediation, and four should be referred to as indirect effects. Men's avoidance motives had a negative indirect effect on men's relationship satisfaction ( $B = -.04$ , 95% CI [-0.07, -0.01]; partial mediation) and on men's commitment ( $B = .05$ , 95% CI [0.02, 0.09]), and a positive indirect effect on men's jealousy ( $B = .04$ , 95% CI [0.01, 0.07]; partial mediation) through men's discussion quality. Men's avoidance motives had a negative indirect effect on women's relationship satisfaction ( $B = -.04$ , 95% CI [-0.09, -0.01]) and men's commitment ( $B = .05$ , 95% CI [0.02, 0.09]) through women's discussion quality and a negative indirect effect on women's commitment ( $B = .03$ , 95% CI [0.01, 0.06]) through men's discussion quality. To summarize, when men expressed more avoidance motives, they and their partners perceived their boundary discussion to be of lower quality, and were less relationally satisfied, less committed, (and at least for men) more jealous on average over six months.

## Discussion

I examined whether relationship boundary discussion quality mediated the associations between individuals' approach and avoidance motives and both partners' relationship satisfaction, commitment, and jealousy over six months. Generally, results indicated some support for my hypotheses that there were negative indirect effects of men's avoidance motives on men's and women's relationship outcomes. Contrary to my prediction, however, women's approach motives also had indirect negative effects on some relationship outcomes and had no positive direct or indirect effects.

Consistent with my hypotheses, when men expressed more avoidance motives, both partners perceived their boundary discussion to be of lower quality, and both partners were less satisfied and less committed, and men were more jealous in the subsequent six months. When individuals are high in avoidance motives, they tend to interpret ambiguous social cues in more pessimistic ways than those with approach motives (Strachman & Gable, 2006) and to be less satisfied and less responsive to their partner's needs during social interactions (Impett et al., 2010). This seems to be supported in this study; when men expressed more avoidance motives, they also reported lower comfort in discussing relationship boundaries, and felt less confident about their relationship following the discussion. This suggests that when men are motivated to discuss relationship boundaries to avoid negative outcomes, they may actually interact with their partner differently (e.g., be more vigilant to negative responses, increased hostility), thus reducing the quality of their discussion and eroding their relationship quality over time.

Although theory suggests that approach motives should benefit relationship quality (Gable, 2006), this was not supported. Contrary to my hypotheses, when women expressed more approach motives, male partners perceived their boundary discussion to be of lower quality, and were subsequently less satisfied, less committed, and more jealous, and women were less committed in the subsequent six months. This was surprising because when individuals focus on gaining positive outcomes (i.e., approach motives), their partners are often receptive and their interactions predict better social and

psychological well-being over time (Bernecker, et al., 2019; Gable, 2006; Impett et al., 2010). It is possible that in the context of discussing unpleasant topics such as whether emotional and sexual behaviour outside of the dyad is acceptable or whether a couple will maintain sexual exclusivity while geographically separated, changes the role of approach motives. Approach motives may not be beneficial for relationships when discussing relationship boundaries because they may not match the emotional tone of the conversation. In other words, it may be natural to express some fear or jealousy around relationship boundaries, because that might indicate a commitment to the relationship; whereas only focusing on the desirable reasons for boundary discussions may be perceived as inauthentic by their partners.

Thus, the effect of approach motives may depend on the context. This is similar to emerging thinking regarding other relationship processes such as forgiveness, optimism, benevolent attributions, and kindness that have typically been framed as positive psychological processes that benefit individual well-being as well as interpersonal relationships. Recent research and theory suggest that whether these relational processes ultimately benefit or harm relationships depends on the relationship context (see McNulty & Fincham, 2012, for review). For example, although optimism is generally associated with increased interpersonal well-being (e.g., McNulty & Karney, 2002; Srivastava et al., 2006), the effects of positive expectancies in newlywed marriage depended on spouses' ability to confirm them (McNulty & Karney, 2004). Thus, approach motives may similarly not be inherently positive or negative, but their role may depend on circumstances as is the case with many other so-called positive relationship processes. Alternatively, because we asked participants to recall what motivated them to discuss boundaries, it is possible that their reported motivations did not actually match their true motivations, or that their positive motivations were not adequately portrayed to their partner at the time of the discussion. Future studies should focus on obtaining information about approach and avoidance motives at the time of discussion to rule out this potential explanation.

An interesting aspect of these findings is that generally speaking, men's perception of discussion quality was more consistently associated with relational

outcomes within- and across-partners than women's perceptions of discussion quality. Women's discussion quality was positively associated with their own satisfaction and men's commitment, but men's discussion quality was positively associated with partners' commitment, their own relationship satisfaction and commitment and negatively associated with jealousy. More robust associations between men's discussion quality and relational outcomes could be because the variability of men's perceptions of quality was greater than for women, although the average perception of discussion quality did not differ between men and women. This suggests a wider range in the comfort that men felt when discussing boundaries and their confidence in their relationship following the discussion compared to women. If we had a sample with greater variability in women's perceptions, it is possible that how they felt about the discussions may be more consequential for relationship outcomes over time. However, it may also be that the degree to which men feel comfortable discussing boundaries and how confident they feel about their relationship following the discussion are especially important for understanding changes in their relationship quality over time in comparison to women. The quality of relationship boundary discussions may be more salient for men because they are less accustomed to discussing relationship-focused topics (e.g., Aukett, et al., 1988; Jensen & Rauer, 2015) and the quality of these important conversations may be more potent in maintaining men's relationship quality over time.

## **Limitations and Future Directions**

There are several limitations to the study design. First, participants completed forced-choice items and open-ended questionnaires. A semi-structured interview could allow for a richer source of data to understand motivations for discussing relationship boundaries. It may also have been useful to directly assess participants motives using validated measures of approach and avoidance motives modified to be specific to their boundary discussions. In this study, I interpreted brief narrative descriptions as either representing approach or avoidance motives and this may not have accurately captured the spectrum of motives that participants experienced. Second, although it is a strength to have longitudinal measurement of outcomes, the study is correlational, and I do not have temporal ordering of the predictor and the mediator as they were assessed at the same

time point. I also do not have data on when these boundary discussions took place, and thus cannot know for sure that their reported motives accurately reflect their motives prior to having a discussion about relationship boundaries. In future, studies that assess new relationships and when discussions occur prospectively, or that include an experimental manipulation (e.g., priming partners with approach or avoidance motives, assessing the quality of their discussion, and examining relationship outcomes over time) would be helpful in establishing temporal precedence.

## **Conclusion**

The findings from this study suggest that approach and avoidance motives are associated with relational outcomes through their association with discussion quality. However, unexpectedly, approach and avoidance motives were negatively associated with boundary discussion quality and relational outcomes, which may indicate that even theoretically beneficial motivations (i.e., approach motives) may depend on the relationship context. Many couples tend to discuss relationship boundaries at important relationship junctures, such as when becoming long distance (McRae & Cobb, in press), or when deciding whether to open or close a relationship to extra-dyadic others (Mitchell et al., 2017). It may be that different relational (e.g., infidelity) or developmental (e.g., moving in together) triggers could change the role of approach and avoidance motives. Further, it appears that the degree to which men feel comfortable discussing boundaries and how confident they feel about their relationship following the discussion are especially salient for understanding changes in their relationship quality over time in comparison to women. This may be because men are less accustomed to discussing relationship-focused topics (e.g., Aukett, et al., 1988; Jensen & Rauer, 2015), thus increasing the potency of their ratings in predicting changes in relationship quality over time. This study contributes to an understanding of how approach and avoidance motivations might contribute to long-term relationship outcomes, and in particular, how approach motives do not uniformly benefit relationships when considering couples' communication around relationship boundaries.

## Tables and Figures

**Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables**

	Women				Men			
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>α</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>α</i>
<u>Approach Motives</u>	11.84	14.11	62	-	8.85	13.68	61	-
<u>Avoidance Motives</u>	3.90	7.68	62	-	7.69	14.40	61	-
<u>Discussion Quality</u>	6.54	1.24	71	.70	6.36	1.28	70	.66
<u>Relationship Satisfaction</u>								
Time 1	68.83	9.51	71	.93	69.07	8.57	70	.89
Time 2	68.22	9.75	63	.94	67.46	9.97	63	.93
Time 3	68.66	10.49	50	.95	69.00	8.97	47	.94
Time 4	67.77	10.15	44	.95	66.80	11.25	44	.95
<u>Commitment</u>								
Time 1	37.76	6.69	71	.77	39.71	6.69	70	.86
Time 2	38.03	6.86	63	.83	38.00	7.43	63	.88
Time 3	38.18	7.04	50	.82	37.53	7.16	47	.87
Time 4	37.27	6.78	44	.78	37.27	7.03	44	.87
<u>Jealousy</u>								
Time 1	52.7	7.39	71	.61	49.67	7.48	70	.65
Time 2	52.37	6.79	63	.59	49.19	7.77	63	.66
Time 3	50.82	9.40	50	.79	49.15	8.68	47	.76
Time 4	49.02	5.92	44	.56	48.45	8.79	44	.76

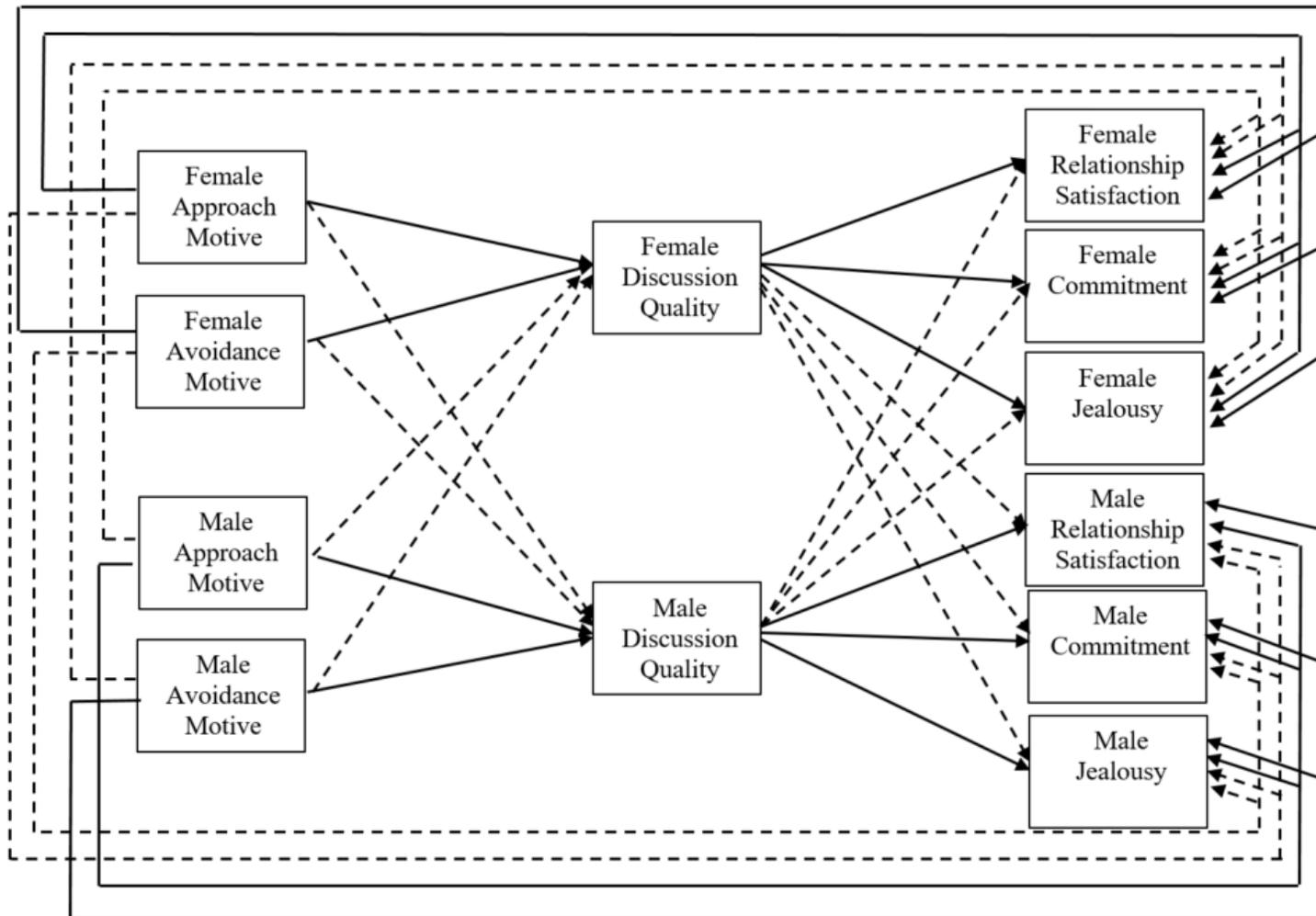
**Table 2. Predicting Relationship Satisfaction, Commitment, and Jealousy from Approach and Avoidance Motives and Discussion Quality, and Predicting Discussion Quality from Approach and Avoidance Motives**

	<u>Women</u>			<u>Men</u>		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>
	<u>Discussion Quality</u>					
Intercept	6.56***	0.14	48.26	6.45***	0.12	51.97
Time	0.00	0.45	0.01	0.36	0.40	0.89
Actor Approach Motive	0.01	0.01	1.17	0.00	0.01	-0.22
Actor Avoidance Motive	-0.02	0.01	-1.59	-0.02***	0.01	-4.29
Partner Approach Motive	<b>-0.01</b>	<b>0.01</b>	<b>-0.81</b>	<b>-0.02**</b>	<b>0.01</b>	<b>-3.02</b>
Partner Avoidance Motive	-0.02***	0.01	-3.44	-0.01	0.01	-1.32
	<u>Relationship Satisfaction</u>					
Intercept	69.10***	1.10	62.68	68.90**	1.05	65.47
Time	-3.17	3.64	-0.87	-3.56	3.40	-1.05
Actor Approach Motive	-0.08	0.05	-1.69	0.01	0.06	0.25
Actor Avoidance Motive	0.00	0.10	0.02	-0.13*	0.05	-2.50
Actor Discussion Quality	2.31***	0.64	3.60	1.85**	0.65	2.83
Partner Approach Motive	<b>0.08</b>	<b>0.06</b>	<b>1.33</b>	<b>-0.12**</b>	<b>0.04</b>	<b>-2.78</b>
Partner Avoidance Motive	0.01	0.05	0.14	-0.09	0.09	-0.91
Partner Discussion Quality	0.12	0.66	0.18	1.17	0.63	1.88
	<u>Commitment</u>					
Intercept	37.71***	0.83	45.53	38.51***	0.74	51.72
Time	-2.45	2.74	-0.89	-2.45*	2.74	-0.89
Actor Approach Motive	-0.02	0.03	-0.47	-0.08	0.04	-1.79
Actor Avoidance Motive	<b>-0.08</b>	<b>0.07</b>	<b>-1.06</b>	<b>-0.04</b>	<b>0.04</b>	<b>-0.96</b>
Actor Discussion Quality	0.58	0.48	1.20	2.21***	0.46	4.77
Partner Approach Motive	0.03	0.05	0.61	-0.05	0.03	-1.50
Partner Avoidance Motive	0.00	0.04	0.06	-0.21**	0.07	-3.12
Partner Discussion Quality	<b>1.10*</b>	<b>0.50</b>	<b>2.22</b>	<b>0.93*</b>	<b>0.44</b>	<b>2.10</b>

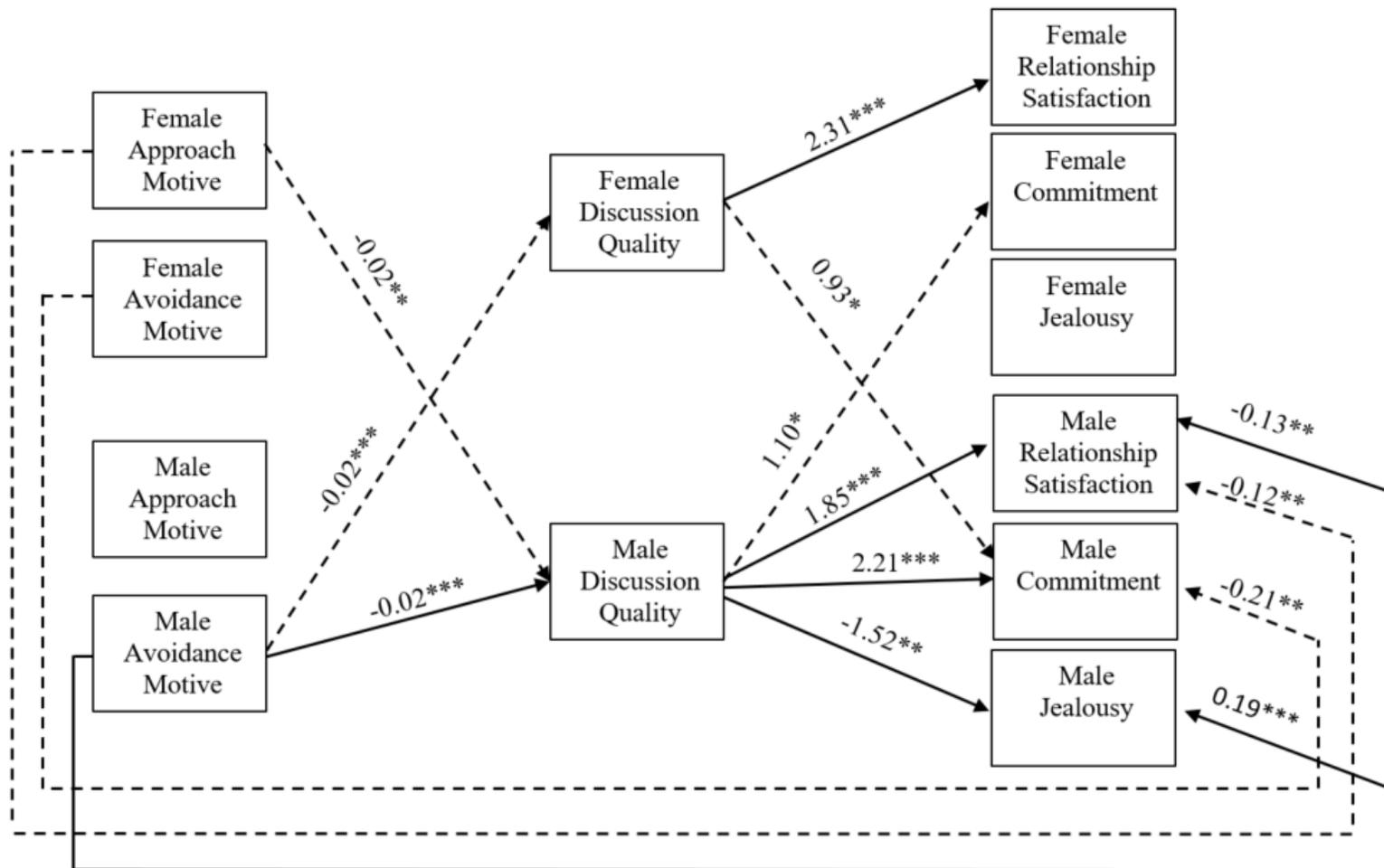
	<u>Women</u>			<u>Men</u>		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>
	<u>Jealousy</u>					
Intercept	52.80***	0.86	61.49	49.09***	0.90	54.77
Time	-7.95**	2.84	-2.80	-2.70	2.91	-0.93
Actor Approach Motive	0.00	0.04	0.06	-0.04	0.05	-0.72
Actor Avoidance Motive	<b>-0.11</b>	<b>0.08</b>	<b>-1.49</b>	<b>0.19***</b>	<b>0.05</b>	<b>4.24</b>
Actor Discussion Quality	0.00	0.50	0.01	-1.52**	0.56	-2.72
Partner Approach Motive	-0.02	0.05	-0.45	0.00	0.04	-0.12
Partner Avoidance Motive	0.04	0.04	1.01	-0.13	0.08	-1.67
Partner Discussion Quality	-0.73	0.51	-1.42	-0.70	0.53	-1.32

Note.  $N = 71$ . Bolded rows indicate gender differences in the multilevel model analyses.

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



**Figure 1. Hypothesized mediation model: Discussion quality as a mediator of the association between individuals' approach motives and both partners' relationship satisfaction, commitment, and jealousy.**  
 Solid lines represent actor effects and dashed lines represent partner effects.



**Figure 2. Indirect actor and partner effects of approach and avoidance motives on relationship satisfaction, commitment, and jealousy through actor and partner discussion quality.**

Solid lines represent actor effects and dashed lines represent partner effects. Only significant paths are included for simplicity.  
 $*p < .05$ .  $**p < .01$ .  $***p < .001$ .

## References

- Aukett, R., Ritchie, J., & Mill, K. (1988). Gender differences in friendship patterns. *Sex Roles, 19*, 57-66. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00292464>
- Bernecker, K., Ghassemi, M., & Brandstatter, V. (2019). Approach and avoidance relationship goals and couples' nonverbal communication during conflict. *European Journal of Social Psychology, 49*, 622-639. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2379>
- Bonferroni, C. E. (1936). Teoria statistica delle classi e calcolo delle probabilità. *Pubblicazioni del R Istituto Superiore di Scienze Economiche e Commerciali di Firenze 8*, 3-62.
- Cook, W. L., & Kenny, W. L. (2005). The Actor-Partner Interdependence Model: A model of bidirectional effects in developmental studies. *International Journal of Behavioral Development, 29*, 101-109. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01650250444000405>
- Elphinston, R. A., Feeney, J. A., & Noller, P. (2011). Measuring romantic jealousy: Validation of the multidimensional jealousy scale in Australian samples. *Australian Journal of Psychology, 63*, 243-251. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1742-9536.2011.00026.x>
- Enders, C. K. (2003). Using the expectation maximization algorithm to estimate coefficient alpha for scales with item-level missing data. *Psychological Methods, 8*, 322-337. <https://doi.org/10.1037/1082-989X.8.3.322>
- Feltman, R., & Elliot, A. J. (2012). Approach and avoidance motivation. In N. M. Seel (Ed) *Encyclopedia of the Sciences and Learning*. (pp. 286-288). Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4419-1428-6\\_1749](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4419-1428-6_1749)
- Funk, J. L., & Rogge, R. D. (2007). Testing the ruler with item response theory: Increasing precision of measurement for relationship satisfaction with the Couples Satisfaction Index. *Journal of Family Psychology, 21*, 572-583. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0893-3200.21.4.572>
- Gass, K., Hoff, C. C., Stephenson, R., & Sullivan, P. S. (2012). Sexual agreements in the partnerships of internet-using men who have sex with men. *AIDS Care, 24*, 1255-1263. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540121.2012.656571>
- Hayes, A. F. (2009). Beyond Baron and Kenny: Statistical mediation analysis in the new millennium. *Communication Monographs, 76*, 408-420. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03637750903310360>

- Hayes, A. F. (2013). Introduction to mediation, moderation, and conditional process analysis: A regression-based approach. The Guilford Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/jedm.12050>
- Hoff, C. C., & Beougher, S. C. (2010). Sexual agreements among gay male couples. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 39, 774-787. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-008-9393-2>
- Hosking, W. (2014). Australian gay men's satisfaction with sexual agreements: The roles of relationship quality, jealousy, and monogamy. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 43, 823-832. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-013-0197-7>
- Impett, E. A., Kogan, A., Gable, S. L., Gordon, A. M., Oveis, C., & Keltner, D. (2010). Moving toward more perfect unions: Daily and long-term consequences of approach and avoidance goals in romantic relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 99, 948-963. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a00020271>
- Jensen, J. F., & Rauer, A. J. (2015). Marriage work in older couples: Disclosure of marital problems with spouses and friends over time. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 29, 732-743. <https://doi.org/10.1037/fam0000099>
- Kippax, S., Noble, J., Prestage, G., Crawford, J. M., Campbell, D., Baxter, D., & Cooper, D. (1997). Sexual negotiation in the AIDS era: Negotiated safety revisited. *AIDS*, 11, 191-197. <https://doi.org/10.1097/00002030-199702000-00009>
- McNulty, J. K., & Fincham, F. D. (2012). Beyond positive psychology? Toward a contextual view of psychological processes and well-being. *American Psychologist*, 67, 101-110. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0024572>
- McNulty, J. K. & Karney, B. R. (2002). Expectancy confirmation in appraisals of marital interactions. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 28, 764-775. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167202289006>
- McNulty, J. K. & Karney, B. R. (2004). Positive expectations in the early years of marriage: Should couples expect the best or brace for the worst? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 86, 729-743. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.86.5.729>
- McRae, L. M., & Cobb, R. J. (2019). Predicting changes in newlywed marital satisfaction from relationship boundary discussions and acceptability of extra-dyadic involvement. Unpublished manuscript.
- McRae, L. M., & Cobb, R. J. (in press). A qualitative analysis of themes in long-distance couples' relationship boundary discussions. *The Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality*.

- Merolla, A. J. (2012). Connecting here and there: A model of long-distance relationship maintenance. *Personal Relationships, 19*, 775-795. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6811.2011.01392.x>
- Mitchell, J. W., Harvey, S. M., Champeau, D., Moskowitz, D. A., & Seal, D. W. (2012). Relationship factors associated with gay male couples' concordance on aspects of their sexual agreements: Establishment, type, and adherence. *AIDS Behavior, 16*, 1560-1569. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10461-011-0064-2>
- Mitchell, J. W., Lee, J-Y., Woodyatt, C., Bauermeister, J., Sullivan, P., & Stephenson, R. (2017). Illuminating the context and circumstances of male couples establishing a sexual agreement in their relationship. *American Journal of Men's Health, 11*, 600-609. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1557988316655528>
- Owen, J., Rhoades, G. K., Stanley, S. M., & Markman, H. J. (2011). The revised commitment inventory: Psychometrics and use with unmarried couples. *Journal of Family Issues, 32*, 820-841. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X10385788>
- Richters, J., Heywood, W., Pitts, M. K., Shelley, J. M., Simpson, J. M., Patrick, K., & Smith, M. A. (2014). Who's cheating? Agreements about sexual exclusivity and subsequent concurrent partnering in Australian heterosexual couples. *Sexual Health, 11*, 524-531. <https://doi.org/10.1071/SH14031>
- Srivastava, S., McGonigal, K. M., Richards, J. M., Butler, E. A., & Gross, J. J. (2006). Optimism in close relationships: How seeing things in a positive light makes them so. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 91*, 143-153. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.91.1.143>
- Strachman, A., & Gable, S. L. (2006). What you want (and do not want) affects what you see (and do not see): Avoidance goals and social events. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 32*, 1446-1458. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167206291007>
- Warren, J. T., Harvey, S. M., & Agnew, C. R. (2012). One love: Explicit monogamy agreements among heterosexual young adult couples at increased risk of sexually transmitted infections. *Journal of Sex Research, 29*, 282-289. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2010.541952>