Balancing Differentiation in the Presence of Romantic Relationships After Adverse Childhood Experiences

Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Science in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

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2025

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# Abstract

**Objective**: This study examined how childhood neglect influences romantic relationship satisfaction through differentiation of self (separateness and connectedness) and demand-withdraw (DW) communication patterns in couples.

**Background**: Bowen’s Family Systems Theory (Bowen, 1978) posits that differentiation serves as a protective factor against relationship distress, while emotional fusion (low differentiation) increases susceptibility to conflictual communication patterns such as demand-withdraw. Childhood neglect, a form of relational trauma, may weaken differentiation and increase vulnerability to maladaptive communication behaviors, resulting in lower relationship satisfaction.

**Method**: We employed Actor-Partner Interdependence Model with Moderation (APIMoM) analyses with data from 91 clinical couples to assess the actor and partner effects of childhood neglect, differentiation of self, and DW behaviors on relationship satisfaction.

**Results**: Childhood neglect significantly predicted higher engagement in DW behaviors for both partners, which in turn predicted lower relationship satisfaction. Differentiation of self moderated and mediated these pathways: higher separateness served as a buffer against the impact of neglect, while higher connectedness increase DW behaviors and mediated the relationship between neglect and lower relationship satisfaction. Gendered asymmetries emerged with Partner 2’s (predominantly women) DW behaviors were more predictive of both partners’ satisfaction than Partner 1’s (predominantly men) DW behaviors, highlighting the role of gendered relational expectations in shaping communication patterns.

**Conclusion**: The findings advance Bowenian theory by demonstrated that differentiation of self operates as both an intrapersonal and dyadic process influencing relationship outcomes. Differentiation of self emerged as a primary mechanism linking childhood trauma to dysfunctional communication patterns and relationship distress. Clinical implications highlight the need for differentiation-focused and trauma-informed interventions, with attention to gender-sensitive approaches to emotional engagement and conflict resolution.

**Keywords**: *Relationship Satisfaction, Differentiation of Self, Demand-Withdraw, Actor-Partner Interaction Model, Bowen Family Systems Theory, Childhood Neglect*

# Dedication

Dedicated to Alexander, Gabriel, Wolfgang, and Grant who supported me every step of the way, and to those we lost on our journey. To my grandfather who made me who I am and will never be forgotten. And to Laura and Reynolds, the women who inspire me and are my greatest blessing.

# Acknowledgments

I wish to express my gratitude to my faculty advisor, Dr. Suzanne Bartle-Haring, for her guidance and support throughout each stage of this project. Her knowledge, understanding, and patience provided a foundation for me to further develop my skills and abilities. I hope I can continue the legacy she has built throughout the years with a passion and never-ending curiosity she always has. She gave me the confidence to challenge myself and grow into who I am, both in our work and my personal life. Thank you for always believing in me.

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# Chapter 1. Introduction

Childhood adversity is a global public health concern with estimates suggesting about half of adults in the US report experiencing at least one form of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs; Mosley-Johnson et al., 2019; Wheeler et al., 2019; (Zeanah et al., 2018). ACEs are considered potentially traumatic life events that occur before the age of 18, including abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction. The original ACEs study (Felitti et al., 1998) considered adverse experiences such as emotional, physical, or sexual abuse; emotional or physical neglect; and/or household dysfunction where a member of the home attempted suicide, engaged in drug or alcohol use, had mental illness, was incarcerated, parents divorced, or maternal intimate partner violence (IPV) occurred (Anda et al., 2010; Felitti et al., 1998; Wheeler et al., 2019). The cumulative effect of chronic exposure to multiple adversities during childhood can have life-long consequences. ACEs are linked to numerous negative health outcomes including an increased risk of diseases such as cardiovascular disease, cancer, chronic bronchitis, and emphysema (Anda et al., 2008; Hamai & Felitti, 2022), mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, and suicide attempts (Larkin et al., 2014; Tanner & Francis, 2025); substance use and addiction, including illicit drug use and parental drug use (Dube, Felitti, Dong, Chapman, et al., 2003; Dube, Felitti, Dong, Giles, et al., 2003); and premature mortality (Anda et al., 2009; Hamai & Felitti, 2022). ACEs may also interfere with employability, housing stability, and social support later in life, which may impact overall well-being and life satisfaction (Mosley-Johnson et al., 2019). ACEs can be transmitted across generations (intergenerational transmission), impacting parenting practices and children’s exposure to adversity. This transmission can occur through various pathways, including epigenetic changes, learned behaviors, and attachment patterns (Anda et al., 2009, 2010; Hamai & Felitti, 2022; Miller, 2023; Narayan et al., 2021; Nichol et al., 2025). Later in life, ACEs can impair the ability to regulate emotions, leading to difficulties in managing stress and anxiety in romantic relationships (Tanner & Francis, 2025). Intimate relationships are a key source of social support and have a significant impact on individual well-being and life satisfaction. However, ACEs can negatively affect relationship dynamics and outcomes (Cao et al., 2022; Cohen et al., 2017; Dion et al., 2019; Narayan et al., 2021; Vaillancourt-Morel et al., 2023; Wheeler et al., 2019). Individuals with higher ACEs scores may experience difficulties with conflict management, co-dependency, and perceived overall relationship distress. Relationship distress can be the mediating factor in the link between ACEs and poor health outcomes (Wheeler et al., 2019).

Despite the importance of ACEs in consideration of relationships, there still is a current dearth of literature investigating the dyadic associations between childhood adversities and adult romantic relationships (Bigras et al., 2021; Cao et al., 2022; Vaillancourt-Morel et al., 2023; Zamir, 2022).That is, we do not know how one partner’s childhood adversities may be associated with their partner’s relationship outcome/satisfaction. We have theories that provide a conceptualization for these associations such as Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1982) and Bowen Family Systems Theory (BFST; Bowen, 1978), but there remains a gap within the literature applying these frameworks to dyadic statistical models. Utilizing dyadic analysis allows for the examination of the reciprocal patterns of interaction between pairs of family members, which provides insight into the functioning of the family system. By centering the analyses around these patterns, we can examine how individuals influence each other within a relationship. This approach is crucial because relationship dynamics are not solely determined by individual characteristics and qualities, but by the interaction between individuals (S. A. Anderson & Sabatelli, 1992).

The way that family members interact with one another is critical to understanding how individuals maintain both a sense of emotional *connectedness* (intimacy, support) and a sense of *separateness* (autonomy, freedom of expression). These dynamics are central to Bowen’s (1978) concept of Differentiation of Self (DoS) which has both intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions. The intrapersonal dimension of differentiation is characterized by the ability to distinguish between thoughts and feelings and to choose whether to be guided by reasoning or emotion. The interpersonal dimension is characterized by an individual’s capacity to experience intimacy while maintaining personal independence (Čepukienė & Neophytou, 2024, 2024; Halevi & Idisis, 2018; Mozas-Alonso et al., 2022). According to Bowen, a healthy level of differentiation is essential for healthy relationships (Anderson, 2020; Bowen, 1978) such that higher levels of differentiation are associated with better mental and physical health and overall well-being across relationships (Anderson & Sabatelli, 1992; Čepukienė & Neophytou, 2024; Guo et al., 2022). Higher levels of differentiation are also associated with greater relationship satisfaction. Well-differentiated partners are more open, less defensive, and can engage in healthier communication during conflicts. (Anderson, 2020; Bowen, 1978) such that higher levels of differentiation are associated with better mental and physical health and overall well-being across relationships (Anderson & Sabatelli, 1992; Čepukienė & Neophytou, 2024; Guo et al., 2022).

Bowen (1978) suggested that individuals tend to select partners who are at the same level of differentiation as themselves and we have found some evidence for this (Bartle-Haring et al., 2019), but results are still inconclusive. Other studies using self-report measures have not found that people choose partners with the same level of differentiation (e.g., Day et al., 1997; Ferreira et al., 2016; Rodríguez-González et al., 2016). Even though both partners might not have experienced ACEs, it would be hypothesized both partners would have similar lower levels of differentiation. This level of differentiation would lead to how distance is regulated within the relationship, which may be associated with demand-withdraw communication strategies (lower levels of differentiation come with higher levels of emotional reactivity) (Bowen, 1978; Byng‐Hall & Campbell, 1981). This may especially be the case for those who have experienced adversities, due to their hypervigilance around trust in the relationship. Conflict management and emotional regulation (Rellini et al., 2012) may be particularly challenging, and thus a demand-withdraw communication pattern may develop to, in essence, avoid conflict which may be too threatening to the relationship for both partners.

Under the assumptions of BFST, it would be expected that someone who has experienced childhood adversity would perhaps have lower levels of differentiation, and with this lower level of differentiation, the individual may have difficulty developing a sense of self as separate as well as a sense of self as connected in important relationships. Given the experience of childhood adversities, individuals may either have very little trust in their partner thus cutting off (low levels of differentiation can lead to cut-off), or they would seek a single individual who they believed they could trust and then fuse in the relationship (low levels of differentiation can lead to fusion, or lack of a self-separate from the relationship) (Cohen et al., 2017).

The experience of childhood adversities can be vast and have lifelong consequences on the physical and emotional self with further challenges associated with their relationships. The field has struggled to develop an integrated understanding of the further implications of childhood adversities beyond the individual, particularly utilizing dyadic associations. Given these theoretical conceptualizations, and the gap in the literature about how ACEs in one partner may be associated with relationship outcomes for the other partner, the purpose of this study is to investigate the associations among ACEs, differentiation within the family of origin, demand/withdraw communication patterns, and relationship satisfaction in a sample of treatment seeking couples. Our study seeks to inform clinicians about the possible consequences of childhood adversities on the development and maintenance of relationships. Despite the challenges associated with ACEs, many individuals form and maintain healthy relationships. We seek to further investigate these resilience factors that buffer the negative effects of adverse childhood experiences on overall romantic relationship quality and satisfaction.

# Chapter 2. Literature Review

## Childhood Adversities

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are a critical area of public health concern, representing traumatic events occurring before the age of 18 that can have profound and lasting effects on well-being and life satisfaction. The pioneering study by Felitti et al., (1998) highlighted the significant correlation between childhood adversity and various negative health and social outcomes in adulthood. The ACE framework provides a comprehensive understanding of how early life stressors can contribute to a range of physical and mental health issues, risky behaviors, and reduced life opportunities (Anda et al., 2009; Brown et al., 2009; Hamai & Felitti, 2022; Mosley-Johnson et al., 2019; Scully et al., 2020). ACEs encompass a broad range of traumatic life experiences which are categorized into three primary domains: abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction. The definitions of the primary domains and their consequences follow.

### Abuse

Physical abuse involves the acts of physical aggression that pose a risk of injury to the child, such as hitting, kicking, shaking, or burning (Cohen et al., 2017; Gosselin et al., 2024). The severity of the abuse can range widely from isolated incidents to chronic patterns of violence (Fitzgerald et al., 2023). The impact of physical abuse frequently extends beyond the immediate physical injuries affecting the child’s psychological and emotional well-being (Bacon & Richardson, 2001). The ACEs framework considers both the frequency and severity of physical abuse. Being pushed, grabbed, slapped, or having something thrown at them ‘often’ or ‘very often’ constitutes as physical abuse. Additionally, being hit so hard that marks or injuries were left behind even ‘once’ is considered physical abuse (Chapman et al., 2004; Dube, Felitti, Dong, Giles, et al., 2003). With a heightened sense of fear and anxiety, the child is susceptible to challenges with regulating their emotions and problems developing healthy relationships later in life (Cort et al., 2011; Nelson & Wampler, 2000; Riggs, 2010).

A particularly egregious form of child abuse, sexual abuse encompasses any sexual contact or interaction between a child and an adult or older child (Cohen et al., 2017; Gosselin et al., 2024; Marshall et al., 2023). The ACEs questionnaire utilizes four questions adapted from (Wyatt, 1985), and a child is classified as having experienced sexual abuse if they answer ‘Yes’ to any of these four questions. Studies report varying rates of sexual abuse among the general population, ranging from 13% to 24.3% (Dube, Felitti, Dong, Chapman, et al., 2003; Murphy et al., 2014). This type of abuse often has profound and long-lasting consequences on the child, impacting their sense of self, childhood and adulthood relationships, and overall well-being. Survivors of sexual abuse may also experience PTSD, depression, anxiety, and sexual dysfunction (Marshall et al., 2023; Nelson & Wampler, 2000). Due to the sensitive nature of sexual abuse, it likely is underreported in the current literature (Dube, Felitti, Dong, Chapman, et al., 2003; Dube, Felitti, Dong, Giles, et al., 2003; Lange et al., 2019).

Often difficult to detect, emotional abuse involves behaviors by the caregiver that attack the child’s emotional well-being and sense of self-worth. It can be less visible than physical or sexual abuse but can have equally damaging effects. Examples include constant criticism, belittling, threats, rejection, humiliation, and exposure to domestic violence (Dion et al., 2019; Fitzgerald et al., 2023; Gosselin et al., 2024; Loucks et al., 2019). These acts of abuse may be just as damaging as physical or sexual abuse as it undermines the child’s sense of safety, security, and belonging (Cao et al., 2022; Chapman et al., 2004; Edwards et al., 2003; Maneta et al., 2015; Riggs, 2010). The lasting impact of emotional abuse can manifest itself in several ways, including low self-esteem, difficulty trusting others and regulating emotions, and relationship challenges (Fitzgerald, 2021; Pierce et al., 2018). Emotional abuse is frequently reported as the most prevalent form of abuse, ranging from 7.6% to 80.5% in different samples (Anda et al., 2009; Arincorayan et al., 2017; Dube, Felitti, Dong, Giles, et al., 2003; Friestad et al., 2014; Murphy et al., 2014).

It is important to consider that these forms of abuse are not mutually exclusive (Felitti et al., 1998; Hillis et al., 2001; Murphy et al., 2014; Scully et al., 2020), and children may experience multiple forms of abuse simultaneously or sequentially. The cumulative impact of experiencing multiple types of abuse is typically more detrimental than experiencing a single type (Anda et al., 2010; Chapman et al., 2004; Edwards et al., 2003; Felitti et al., 1998; Friestad et al., 2014). These forms of abuse can create significant barriers to healthy development and well-being both for the individual and those around them.

### Neglect

Often considered an act of omission rather than commission, neglect involves the failure to provide for a child’s basic physical and emotional needs. Researchers have identified two subtypes: physical and emotional neglect. Physical neglect is the failure to provide adequate food, clothing, shelter, hygiene, or medical care which can result in physical harm, developmental delays, and health problems for the child (Cohen et al., 2017; Gosselin et al., 2024; Murphy et al., 2014; Silva et al., 2023). Failure to provide emotional support, nurturing, affection, or responsiveness to the child’s needs deprives the child of essential emotional connection. This lack of emotional connection can often lead to attachment difficulties, emotional dysregulation, and relationship problems. Emotional neglect is associated with a greater risk of depression and anxiety. Physical neglect, particularly chronic neglect, leads to developmental delays and challenges forming secure attachments (Murphy et al., 2014; Tanner & Francis, 2025).

### Household Dysfunction

Household Dysfunction refers to a range of adverse circumstances within the family environment that create instability and insecurity for children. The range of childhood adversities include domestic violence (DV), parental separation or divorce, substance abuse, mental illness, and criminal behavior of a family member. Studies show that these forms of household dysfunction are commonly reported. In a study of 17,337 adults from the health maintenance organization (HMO), domestic violence was reported at a prevalence rate of 12.7%, parental separation of 23.3%, household substance abuse of 26.9%, mental illness in the home at 19.4%, and criminal behavior of a family member at 23.3% (Dube, Felitti, Dong, Giles, et al., 2003). Household dysfunction can create a challenging environment for a child’s social, emotional, and cognitive development. Also, parents who have experienced these adversities may struggle to create a stable environment for their children and unintentionally feed into the intergenerational transmissive nature of ACEs (Anda et al., 2009; Friestad et al., 2014; Narayan et al., 2021; Thompson et al., 2024). Although researchers have identified several types of childhood adversities, they emphasize the interconnected nature of these three primary domains. Children often experience multiple forms of adversities concurrently, leading to more severe negative consequences (Cort et al., 2011; Pierce et al., 2018; Riggs, 2010).

## Bowen’s Family Systems Theory and Differentiation of Self

In his 1978 compilation of papers published from 1957 to the 1970s, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*, Murray Bowen’s central focus was the development and maintenance of the emotional and relational regulation of individuals within family systems, suggesting the functioning of families lies on a continuum of emotional processes. This continuum described that not all families share the same level and experience of emotional functioning. He observed in his early work with families with a schizophrenic member, the mother and adult ‘child’ *influencing* each other rather than two separate entities. Further analysis suggested the influence migrated further beyond the mother-child dyad, whereby the relationship and functioning of individual members was interdependent and reciprocal to the entire family unit. Thus, the emotional functioning of the individual could not be understood outside of the context of the functioning of the whole family (Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

Another distinct emotional process of the family unit are the cycles of distance and closeness as individuals move together and apart, or *distance-regulation* (Byng‐Hall & Campbell, 1981). Just as with the continuum of emotional processes, the closeness and distancing pattern does not maintain an equal intensity and predictability across family systems. Bowen’s observation of the continuums shrouding the schizophrenic clients’ family systems led to the development of the concept of the *differentiation of self* (DoS) to convey the varying expressions of emotional functioning. Bowen’s family systems theory suggested the action of the emotional system was the interplay between *individuality* and *togetherness*. According to Kerr & Bowen (1988), “The level of stability, cohesiveness, and cooperation in a group is affected by the interplay of individuality and togetherness. The capacity of groups of people to be closely and cooperatively involved is influenced both by the capacity of individuals to follow their own directives and by the degree to which individuals are oriented by the directives of the group*”* (p. 65). This core concept of Bowen’s Family Systems Theory describes the degree to which individuals can separate and connect their emotional and intellectual functioning. Emphasized in his theory are the interconnectedness between emotional units and the patterns of interactions within the family influencing an individual’s level of differentiation (Rodríguez‐González et al., 2020; Worch & Bartle‐Haring, 2024). It is hypothesized that an individual with a high level of differentiation can think clearly and make decisions based on reason, even under stress. They can balance their needs for intimacy and autonomy within their relationships. Conversely, those with low differentiation levels tend to be emotionally reactive and struggle to separate their thoughts and feelings. They may either become overly dependent on others (fusion) or distance themselves from relationships (cut-off) to manage anxiety (Anderson & Sabatelli, 1992; Bartle, 1993; Bartle-Haring et al., 2019; Bowen, 1978; Finzi-Dottan, 2023; Peixoto-Freitas et al., 2020).

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Table 1. Differentiation levels** | | |
|  | ***High intimacy tolerance*** | ***Low intimacy tolerance*** |
| ***High autonomy tolerance*** | Highly differentiated | Moderately differentiated (cut-off) |
| ***Low autonomy tolerance*** | Moderately differentiated (fused) | Poorly differentiated |

Differentiation is believed to be transmitted intergenerationally, as individuals tend to replicate the emotional functioning of their family of origin in their own future relationships (Bartle-Haring et al., 2005; Calatrava et al., 2022; Dell’Isola et al., 2019; Handley et al., 2019). This suggests a fairly stable pattern in which individuals carry on the legacy of their family’s emotional functioning into their own lives and relationships. Through the family projection process, a key mechanism in Bowen’s theory, parent’s anxiety and level of differentiation can be projected onto their children. Not all children are equally affected by the family projection process with some developing similar levels of differentiation as their parents while others less entangled in the family’s emotional system may achieve higher levels. The child who becomes the focus of their parents’ projections is often the one most emotionally attached to the parents, potentially causing their lower levels of differentiation and greater life challenges. The multi- or intergenerational transmission process expands on this idea describing how these patterns can perpetuate across the generations. It suggests that children with lower levels of differentiation are likely to choose partners with similar levels, and their children in turn may inherit this pattern and so on (Bowen, 1978).

Research regarding the stability of differentiation and its intergenerational transmission is mixed. Some studies have found support for Bowen’s ideas, showing correlations between parents’ and children’s differentiation levels (Harvey et al., 1991) or by showing the mediating role of differentiation in the transmission of issues like dating violence (Rosen et al., 2001). Other studies, however, have not found these same significant correlations between parents’ and adult children’s differentiation levels (Tuason & Friedlander, 2000). Research examining spousal similarity in differentiation has also yielded inconsistent findings. For example, some studies revealed no support for Bowen’s proposition that people marry individuals at similar levels of differentiation of self (e.g., Rovers et al., 2007; Skowron, 2000) whereas others have found similarities (e.g., Bartle-Haring et al., 2019; Tuason & Friedlander, 2000).

Differentiation significantly affects relationship functioning and quality with higher levels of differentiation generally associated with more positive relationship outcomes, while lower levels can lead to various challenges. Well differentiated couples are more likely to experience greater relationship satisfaction (Bartle-Haring et al., 2019; Calatrava et al., 2022; Cepukiene, 2021a; Finzi-Dottan, 2023; Lampis et al., 2019; Peixoto-Freitas et al., 2020; Skowron, 2000; Sommantico et al., 2021; Willis et al., 2021). This stems from their ability to balance the needs for separateness and connectedness, fostering a secure and supportive environment (J. R. Anderson, 2020; S. A. Anderson & Sabatelli, 1992; Bartle-Haring et al., 2019; Bowen, 1978; Dell’Isola et al., 2019; Handley et al., 2019; Homme & Shults, 2020; Lampis et al., 2019; Lampis & Cataudella, 2019; Rovers et al., 2007). Conversely, lower differentiation levels in couples can predict several negative consequences. Marital conflict may be more frequent and intense when partners struggle to manage their emotions and maintain a sense of self in their relationship (Bartle-Haring et al., 2019; Bowen, 1978; Cepukiene, 2021b; Finzi-Dottan, 2023; Handley et al., 2019). Lower levels of differentiation in one or both spouses can contribute to individual struggles with anxiety, depression, or other mental health concerns, which can manifest as emotional reactivity, fusion, or emotional cutoff within the relationship (Dell’Isola et al., 2019; Lampis et al., 2019; Murdock & Gore, Jr., 2004; Rodriguez et al., 2021; Rovers et al., 2007; Skowron, 2000; Sommantico et al., 2021). The research is unclear and inconsistent in regards to the role of differentiation in shaping relationship dynamics and outcomes. Understanding differentiation can offer valuable insights into couple functioning and provide a framework for therapeutic interventions aimed at improving relationship quality.

Although we have evidence that differentiation is associated with relationship outcomes, it is unclear how this manifests in relationships. One possible way could be in how the couple members communicate especially during conflict. Since differentiation is often proposed as a way to regulate distance in relationships, it may be that how couple members communicate is isomorphic to the way they attempt to regulate distance in their relationship. One communication pattern that may be useful in understanding this distance regulation is demand withdraw.

## Demand Withdraw Communication Patterns in Relationships

The demand-withdraw interaction pattern is a destructive communication pattern frequently observed in distressed romantic relationships, particularly during conflict discussions. It is characterized by one partner, the demander, pressuring the other for change through nagging, criticizing, complaining, or making requests, while the other partner, the withdrawer, avoids the conversation through silence, changing the subject, or even physical withdrawal (Baucom et al., 2010, 2011, 2015; Eldridge et al., 2007; Eldridge & Baucom, 2012; Holley et al., 2013). This communication pattern is bidirectional whereby one partner’s behavior influences the other, creating an escalating cycle. It is most consistently associated with relationship dissatisfaction across diverse relationship types and cultures (Baucom et al., 2010; Eldridge & Baucom, 2012). Research has consistently shown that women tend to demand more and men withdraw more, especially when the topic is initiated by the woman and concerns relationship change desired by the woman (Baucom et al., 2010, 2015; Eldridge et al., 2007; Eldridge & Baucom, 2012; Fournier et al., 2011; Klinetob & Smith, 1996).

Beyond relationship dissatisfaction, demand withdraw communication patterns have been linked to several negative outcomes such as higher rates of relationship dissolution and intimate partner violence, poorer physical and mental well-being, elevated cortisol levels during conflict, and physical abuse (Caughlin & Scott, 2010). Demand withdraw communication patterns are also often accompanied by demanding partners using more manipulative and controlling influence tactics. Demanders also express higher levels of emotional arousal, as measured by vocal cues (Baucom et al., 2011).

The impact of demand withdraw communication patterns may vary depending on the length of the relationship, with potential differences between young and older couples (Donato et al., 2014). Though the presence of these communication patterns has commonly signaled relationship dissatisfaction, the negative association between demand withdraw communication patterns and relationship satisfaction might be weaker in highly affectionate relationships (Eldridge et al., 2007; Eldridge & Baucom, 2012). With regard to attachment styles, couples with insecure attachment styles or mixed attachment pairings tend to have higher discrepancies in desired intimacy and exhibit higher levels of demand withdraw communication patterns. This finding may prove useful in analyzing the varying levels of differentiation pairings found in the clinical sample.

The demand withdraw communication pattern is a significant concern for therapists working with couples. Understanding the underlying dynamics, and the individual and relational factors, contributing to this pattern is crucial for effective intervention (Eldridge & Baucom, 2012). Understanding the influence of differentiation on communication can be valuable for therapists working with couples exhibiting the demand withdraw communication pattern.

## Present Study

Given the conflicting findings about how childhood maltreatment is associated with relationship outcomes, we use BFST to provide a theoretical framework to understand this association and its variability. Given the lack of understanding of how differentiation of self-manifests in relationships we include demand withdraw communication patterns to better understand what is happening in the relationship based on the level of differentiation. Thus, the purpose of the present study is to examine the associations among childhood maltreatment, differentiation within the family of origin, demand/withdraw communication patterns, and relationship satisfaction in a sample of treatment seeking couples. We sought to add to the dearth of literature by incorporating dyadic data in understanding the interactions between individuals within a family system (Baumann et al., 2024; Vaillancourt-Morel et al., 2023).

We hypothesize that:

1. Childhood maltreatment will be negatively associated with family of origin differentiation.
2. Lower levels of healthy separateness and connectedness and their interaction will be associated with more demand withdraw patterns in the relationship.
3. More demand withdraw patterns in the relationships will be associated with lower relationship satisfaction.
4. Family of origin differentiation, and demand withdraw patterns will mediate the association between childhood maltreatment and relationship satisfaction.

# Chapter 3. Methods

## Study Design

The present study employed a cross-sectional dyadic design to investigate how childhood neglect, as an Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE), influences adult romantic relationship functioning through differentiation of self (separateness and connectedness to family of origin) and demand-withdraw communication patterns. This design was chosen to simultaneously assess both individual (actor) and partner-level effects, making it suitable for examining romantic dyads using an Actor-Partner Interdependence Model with Moderation (APIMoM; Kenny et al., 2020). Participants were recruited from a community mental health setting, where couples were seeking treatment for relationship concerns. Both partners within each romantic couple completed parallel self-report surveys, capturing psychosocial and relational data independently to avoid bias due to partner influence. Given the dyadic nature of the study, both distinguishable roles (Partner 1 and Partner 2) were retained in analyses based on gender representation, aligning with standard APIM distinguishablity assumptions (Cook & Kenny, 2005).

The focus on family of origin differentiation reflects a theoretical application of Bowen’s Family Systems Theory (Bowen, 1978), which suggests that unresolved emotional entanglements (fusion) or emotional cutoff with caregivers impact adult intimacy and emotional regulation within romantic relationships. Additionally, the study’s focus on demand-withdraw patterns, one of the most robust predictors of relationship dissatisfaction (Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Eldridge et al., 2007), allowed for an investigation of how early relational trauma may foster maladaptive communication behaviors in adulthood. The use of self-report data was supplemented by multivariate statistical modeling to account for the interdependence of dyadic data. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was utilized to test for mediation and moderation pathways (Cook & Kenny, 2005; Kenny et al., 2020). The cross-sectional design enabled hypothesis testing regarding the interplay between neglect, differentiation, communication patterns, and relationship satisfaction in treatment-seeking couples.

## Participants

Participants included 91 heterosexual romantic couples (*N* = 182 individuals) recruited from a community mental health setting where they were seeking couples therapy. Couples were eligible if both partners were over the age of 18, fluent in English, and engaged in a committed romantic relationship. While participants identifying as non-heterosexual were present in the sample, only heterosexual couples were retained in the primary statistical analyses. This decision was made to meet the assumptions of distinguishable dyadic analysis using Actor-Partner Interdependence Models (APIM), which require the classification of dyadic members into distinct roles, with predominantly male (Partner 1) and predominantly female (Partner 2) partners (Cook & Kenny, 2005; Kenny et al., 2020). Due to the small number of non-heterosexual couples in the sample and statistical power limitations, same-sex and nonbinary couples were excluded from model testing but remain an important consideration for future research.

Partner 1 participants (predominantly male) had a mean age of 31.89 years (*SD* = 9.75), and Partner 2 participants (predominantly female) had a mean age of 30.67 years (*SD* = 8.85). The majority of participants were between 20 and 30 years old (59.3% P1; 61.5% P2), followed by 31 to 43 years old (29.7% P1; 28.6% P2) and 44 to 74 years old (11.0% P1; 9.9% P2). The sample was predominantly White (72.5% P1; 74.7% P2), followed by Black or African American (14.3% P1; 13.2% P2), Asian or Asian American (3.3% P1; 7.7% P2), and Bi- or Multi-racial participants (6.6% P1; 4.4%). The sample also reflected diversity in sexual orientation. While most identified as heterosexual (89.0% P1; 72.5% P2), Partner 2 included a higher proportion of participants identifying as pansexual/bisexual (22.0%) and queer (1.1%) compared to Partner 1 (5.5% and 2.2% respectively). Household income levels varied. Among Partner 1, 28.6% reported incomes less than $49,999, 38.4% reported earning between $50,000 and $99,999, 18.7% reported earning between $100,000 and $149,999, and 7.7% reported incomes above $150,000. Partner 2 showed a similar distribution, with 28.6% earning less than $49,999, 42,9% earning between $50,000 and $99,999, and 11.0% earning between $100,000 and $149,999. Educational attainment was relatively high. For Partner 1, 40.7% held a bachelor’s degree and 22.0% held a master’s degree, while Partner 2 included 36.3% with a bachelor’s degree and 22.0% held a master’s degree. A small percentage of both partners held professional or doctoral degrees (7.7% P1; 4.4% P2). On average, couples had been in their relationship for 6.87 years (*SD* = 7.52) and reported an average of 0.71 children (*SD* = 1.29) per household. Regarding relationship status, 29.7% were cohabitating, 28.6% were married for the first time, 18.7% were partners but not living together, and 16.5% were dating. A small proportion (6.6%) were remarried or in other relationship configurations.

**Table -** Demographics

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Demographic Categories** | **Partner 1 (*N* = 91)** | **Partner 2 (*N* = 91)** |
| **Age** |  |  |
| 20-30 | 54 (59.3%) | 56 (61.5%) |
| 31-43 | 27 (29.7%) | 26 (28.6%) |
| 43-74 | 10 (11.0%) | 9 (9.9%) |
| **Race** |  |  |
| Caucasian | 66 (72.5%) | 68 (74.7%) |
| Black or African American | 13 (14.4%) | 12 (13.2%) |
| Asian or Asian American | 3 (3.3%) | 7 (7.7) |
| Bi- or Multi-racial | 6 (6.6%) | 4 (4.4%) |
| **Gender** |  |  |
| Man | 86 (94.5%) | 4 (4.4%) |
| Woman | 3 (3.3%) | 87 (95.6%) |
| Nonbinary | 1 (1.1%) | 0 (0.0%) |
| Trans | 1 (1.1%) | 0 (0.0%) |
| **Sexual Orientation** |  |  |
| Heterosexual | 81 (89.0%) | 66 (72.5%) |
| Gay/Lesbian | 1 (1.1%) | 2 (2.1%) |
| Pansexual/Bisexual | 5 (5.5%) | 20 (22.0%) |
| Queer | 2 (2.2%) | 1 (1.1%) |
| Do not know | 2 (2.2%) | 2 (2.2%) |
| **Annual Income** |  |  |
| Less than 49,999 | 26 (28.6%) | 26 (28.6%) |
| 50,000 – 99,999 | 35 (38.4%) | 39 (42.9%) |
| 100,000 – 149,999 | 17 (18.7%) | 10 (11.0%) |
| 150,000 – 199,999 | 4 (4.4%) | 7 (7.7%) |
| 200,000 or more | 3 (3.3%) | 3 (3.3%) |
| **Highest Degree Earned** |  |  |
| High School Diploma | 7 (7.7%) | 7 (7.4%) |
| Some College/Professional Cert | 13 (13.7%) | 15 (15.8%) |
| Associates Degree | 4 (4.2%) | 4 (4.2%) |
| Bachelors Degree | 37 (38.9%) | 33 (34.7%) |
| Masters Degree | 21 (22.1%) | 29 (30.5%) |
| Professional Degree | 0 (0.0%) | 3 (3.2%) |
| Ph.D., Md, JD. | 7 (7.4%) | 4 (4.2%) |
| **Relationship Status** |  |  |
| Dating | 15 (16.5%) | 15 (16.5%) |
| Partnered | 17 (18.7%) | 17 (18.7%) |
| Cohabitating | 27 (29.7%) | 27 (29.7%) |
| Married (First Time) | 26 (28.6%) | 26 (28.6) |
| Remarried/Other | 6 (6.6%) | 6 (6.6%) |
| **Relationship Length (*M*, *SD*)** | 6.87 (7.52) | 6.87 (7.52) |
| **Number of Children (*M*, *SD*)** | 0.71 (1.29) | 0.71 (1.29) |

## Procedures

Data was collected for this study through online questionnaires at the Ohio State University Couple and Family Therapy Clinic under two protocols. During the initial call, clients were informed of the opportunity to participate in research at the clinic and were offered $20 or $25 reduction in the first-session fees if they agreed to participate or allowed us to use their deidentified data for research purposes. All clients were asked to complete the typical intake questionnaire which included questions about their experiences of trauma, psychological symptoms, physical health, relationship satisfaction and commitment, stress, and basic demographics. In the first protocol, clients consented to the research and were informed the data provided at intake would be included, they were then asked to complete further questionnaires regarding distance regulation and communication patterns. After-session questionnaires were given after sessions 1 through 7, and then the same intake questionnaire at 8- and 12-weeks post-initial session. In the second protocol, all questionnaires were given to all clients, and clients were asked to give permission to use their deidentified data for research purposes. Survey data was stored in RedCap, a secure web-based application used by researchers at the Center for Clinical and Translational Research at the OSU Wexner Medical Center.

## Measurements

### ***Trauma***

Childhood neglect was assessed using a modified subscale from the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) Questionnaire (Felitti et al., 1998), focusing on participants’ reports of neglect-related experiences during their family of origin upbringing. Given the study’s focus on differentiation of self within the family of origin context, only the neglect subscale from the broader ACEs measure was utilized as a predictor variable. Neglect, which includes both emotional and physical neglect, was selected due to its direct theoretical relevance to the development of differentiation processes, as outlined by Bowen’s Family Systems Theory (Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Bowen’s model emphasizes that unresolved emotional attachments and impaired boundaries within early caregiving relationships contribute to emotional fusion or cutoff in adulthood. Because neglect reflects a chronic absence of adequate emotional and physical responsiveness from caregivers, it was hypothesized to be more directly linked to differentiation deficits than other ACEs such as abuse or household dysfunction, which may operate through different relational pathways. Additionally, preliminary exploratory factor analysis (EFA) on ACEs revealed significant multicollinearity among the broader ACEs subscales (e.g., household dysfunction, emotional abuse). To improve model parsimony and statistical stability within the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model with Moderation (APIMoM), neglect was retained as the sole ACE predictor due to its conceptual and empirical alignment with differentiation and adult relationship dynamics (Narayan et al., 2021; Guo et al., 2022).

The neglect subscale included items addressing emotional and physical neglect (e.g., “I felt that my caregivers did not meet my basic emotional needs”) and was rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = ‘Never’ to 5 = ‘Very Often’), with higher scores reflecting greater exposure to neglect. The neglect subscale demonstrated acceptable reliability in the current sample, with Cronbach’s alpha coefficients of 0.75 for Partner 1 and 0.78 for Partner 2.

### ***Family of Origin and Differentiation of Self (DoS)***

Differentiation of self was evaluated as participants’ perception of their emotional boundaries and autonomy in relation to their family of origin, following Bowen’s Family Systems Theory (Bowen, 1978). The construct was assessed utilizing two scales with select items from the Social Connectedness Scale-Revised (SCS-R) (Lee et al., 2001) and the healthy separation subscale of the Separation-Individuation Test of Adolescence (SITA) (Levine et al., 1986). Both the SCS-R and SITA scales were reworded to reflect the dynamic relationship between an individual and their parental figure(s). Sample items for the SCS-R included “I am able to relate to my mother/father,” and “I feel distant from my mother/father.” Sample items from the SITA healthy separation subscale includes: “If I disagree with something my mother/father is doing, I usually feels free to say so,” and “I feel I can be myself with my mother/father.” The revision of the SCR-S included 9 items, and the revision of the SITA healthy separation subscale included 5 items. The clients answered 14 items with respect to their partner, mother figure, and father figure. For the purpose of this study, we only used the mother/father items.

In this study, we exclusively utilized person-to-other items, which assessed how participants experience their emotional reactivity toward their family of origin, rather than including other-to-person items (e.g., how participants perceived their parents’ actions toward them). This approach aligns with Bowenian theory, which posits that differentiation reflects an individual’s internal ability to manage their emotional responses to family relationships and regulate fusion or cutoff tendencies (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). By focusing on person-to-other items, we were able to more precisely assess how participants actively navigate emotional closeness and autonomy with their childhood caregivers.

The FDR was designed to capture healthy separateness and healthy connectedness on separate continuums. Higher scores on the connectedness subscale reflect greater sense of emotional security with chioldhood caregivers. The subscale demonstrated strong reliability in the current sample (P1: α = 0.84; P2: α = 0.86). The healthy separateness scale measured participant’s ability to maintain a sense of self in when in relationship to childhood caregivers. thiorigin Higher scores reflect a greater sense of healthy separateness. The subscale demonstrated acceptable internal consistency (P1: α = 0.71; P2: α = 0.73), This person-to-other measurement strategy allowed us to capture participants’ active self-regulation in their family systems, which is theorized to directly influence adult romantic relationships through differentiation-linked processes such as emotional reactivity and boundary-setting (Bowen, 1978; Skowron & Friedlander, 1998).

### Patterns of Communication

Couple clients were asked to complete the Demand-withdraw communication patterns were measured using the Communication Patterns Questionnaire (Christensen & Sullaway, 1984), which is grounded in the interpersonal process model of demand-withdraw cycles (Christensen & Heavey, 1990). The demand-withdraw pattern is a dyadic conflict behavior in which one partner pressures for discussion (demand), while the other partner avoids or disengages from the conflict (withdraw). This cycle is one of the most empirically robust predictors of relationship dissatisfaction and distress (Baucom et al., 2011; Gottman & Gottman, 2015). The demand withdraw pattern has been found to increase the risk of dissolution of relationships (Gottman & Gottman, 2015), predict level of relationship satisfaction (Caughlin, 2002; Caughlin & Huston, 2002), and increase levels of emotional arousal (Baucom et al., 2011; Baucom et al., 2015).

The scale includes items that capture both self-reported withdrawal tendencies (e.g., “When my partner brings up a problem, I tend to withdraw from the discussion”) and the perception of the partner’s demand behaviors (e.g., “My partner pressures me to talk about problems I would rather avoid”). Participants responded on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = ‘Never’ to 5 = ‘Always’), with higher scores indicating greater engagement in demand-withdraw communication patterns. In this study, demand-withdraw scores were calculated separately for Partner 1 and Partner 2 to allow for actor and partner effects within the dyadic model. The adapted version of the scale demonstrated strong internal consistency, with Cronbach’s alpha of 0.88 for Partner 1 and 0.90 for Partner 2. These values are consistent with prior research showing that the demand-withdraw dynamic is both reliable and sensitive to individual differences in emotional regulation and differentiation (Eldridge et al., 2007; Christensen et al., 2006). The scale is widely used in research on conflict behaviors and relational distress, and its psychometric strength is a critical asset when examining communication patterns in clinical populations.

### Relationship Satisfaction

Relationship satisfaction was measured using the 4-item version of the Couples Satisfaction Index (CSI-4; Funk & Rogge, 2007). The CSI-4 is a brief yet psychometrically robust measure designed to assess global satisfaction and emotional closeness in romantic partnerships. The items ask about general happiness, satisfaction, warmth, and how rewarding the relationship is. Sample items include, “I have a warm and comfortable relationship with my partner,” “How rewarding is your relationship with your partner?” and “In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?” The scale captures both affective and evaluative components of relationship quality. Participants rated items on a 7-point Likert scale (e.g., 0 = “Not at all” to 6 = “Completely” or 0 = “Extremely dissatisfied” to 6 = “Extremely satisfied,” depending on the item). Scores were summed to create a composite satisfaction score, with higher scores reflecting greater perceived satisfaction and emotional closeness.

The CSI-4 demonstrated excellent internal consistency in this sample, with Cronbach’s alpha values of 0.93 for Partner 1 and 0.91 for Partner 2. These reliability coefficients are consistent with Funk and Rogge’s (2007) validation studies, which reported α values above 0.90 across diverse samples. The CSI-4 is highly sensitive to detecting relational distress, making it ideal to use with treatment-seeking couples.

## Data Analysis

### Actor Partner Interdependence Model with Moderation (APIMoM).

The primary unit of analysis for this study was the romantic couple, in line with dyadic data analysis conventions (Cook & Kenny, 2005). Given the interdependent nature of data collected from both partners in each couple, the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model with Mediation (APIMeM; Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2020) was selected as the analytic framework to simultaneously model both intrapersonal (actor) and interpersonal (partner) effects. This approach is widely used in dyadic research to account for the non-independence of couple data, particularly when examining how one partner’s variables influence not only their own outcomes (actor effects) but also their partner’s outcomes (partner effects).

Prior to testing the APIMeM, we will assess empirical distinguishability of partners using the ISAT procedure outlined by Kenny, Kashy, & Cook (2020). This statistical procedure determines whether partners belong to distinct populations (e.g., male and female partners in different-sex couples) or can be treated as coming from the same population. Distinguishability testing will be conducted by comparing a fully constrained model, where all actor and partner paths are equal across partners, with an unconstrained model where paths are freely estimated. A significant chi-square difference test would indicate if the partners are empirically distinguishable, suggesting separate actor and partner paths for each partner (Kenny et al., 2020). If distinguishability is not supported, multilevel modeling (MLM) will be used instead of SEM.

Based on previous work with clinical samples of heterosexual couples (e.g., Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Eldridge & Christensen, 2002), we expect that these couple members will be distinguishable. The final APIMeM, displayed in Figure -, models the neglect subscale of ACEs as the predictor of family of origin differentiation of self for both partners. Differentiation constructs of separateness and connectedness are modeled to predict demand-withdraw communication patterns, which in turn are linked to relationship satisfaction. Additionally, a moderation component was created by including interaction terms between separateness and connectedness to assess whether separateness and connectedness interacted to influence communication behaviors and satisfaction.

To examine indirect effects and test the hypothesized mediation model, we will use 1,000 bootstrapped samples to generate bias-corrected confidence intervals (MacKinnon et al., 2004). Specifically, we will test whether neglect indirectly influenced relationship satisfaction through the differentiation processes (connectedness and separateness) and demand-withdraw communication patterns for both partners. Moderation through differentiation will be modeled by including an interaction term between separateness and connectedness, following suggested best practices for testing interactions in SEM (Klein & Moosbrugger, 2000). This allows us to assess whether the protective effects of differentiation on communication and satisfaction depends on the balance between emotional connectedness (intimacy) and emotional separateness (autonomy) with the family of origin (Bowen, 1978; Skowron & Friedlander, 1998). Finally, chi-square difference tests will be conducted to explore the potential gender asymmetries in actor and partner effects. We will compare models where actor and partner paths are constrained across partners to models where paths are freely estimated, helping us determine whether pathways varied significantly between male and female partners (Christensen et al., 2006; Kenny et al., 2020).

A diagram of a diagram

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# Chapter 4. Results

## Preliminary Analysis

Prior to conducting hypothesis testing, data were screened for missingness, normality, and outliers. Approximately 60% of data were missing on the demand-withdraw variable due to technical issues during data collection. Little’s MCAR test indicated that data were missing at random, χ²(12) = 10.36, *p* = 0.584, validating the use of Full Information Maximum Likelihood (FIML) estimation in Mplus and SPSS Amos to handle missing data and avoid biased parameter estimates (Enders, 2010).

Descriptive statistics were computed for all primary study variables, including relationship satisfaction, demand-withdraw communication behaviors, and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), with a particular focus on neglect. Partner 1 reported a mean relationship satisfaction score of 14.52 (*SD* = 4.78), while Partner 2 reported a mean of 13.35 (*SD* = 5.23). Mean demand-withdraw communication patterns were comparable for both partners (P1: *M* = 23.09, *SD* = 8.92; P2: *M* = 23.81, *SD* = 9.53). Childhood neglect scores were more variable (P1: *M* = 1.10, *SD* = 1.28; P2: *M* = 1.35, *SD* = 1.49.,

Table -. Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Variable** | **Partner 1 (*M*, *SD*, *n*)** | **Partner 2 (*M*, *SD*, *n*)** |
| Relationship Satisfaction (CSI) | 14.52 (4.78), *n* = 73 | 13.35 (5.23), *n* = 79 |
| Demand-Withdraw Communication | 23.09 (8.92), *n* = 33 | 23.81 (9.53), *n* = 38 |
| Childhood Neglect (ACEs Subscale) | 1.10 (1.28), *n* = 77 | 1.35 (1.49), *n* = 82 |
| Differentiation (Separateness) | 3.82 (0.60), *n* = 55 | 3.78 (0.63), *n* = 60 |
| Differentiation (Connectedness) | 3.97 (0.85), *n* = 54 | 3.83 (0.88), *n* = 58 |

An exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was performed to assess the underlying structure of the ACEs items, following past recommendations to explore the multidimensionality of childhood adversity (Ford et al., 2010). Principal Component Analysis (PCA) with oblimin rotation was conducted using SPSS. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was 0.756, indicating that the data were appropriate for factor analysis. Bartlett’s test of sphericity was significant (χ2(210) = 854.21, *p* < 0.01), supporting the suitability of the correlation matrix for factor analysis. A five-factor structure was identified, explaining 66.01% of the total variance, consistent with the theoretical conceptualization that ACEs are multifaceted rather than one-dimensional (Felitti et al., 1998). The first factor accounted for 29.9% of the variance and primarily reflected neglect-related items (emotional and physical neglect), the second factor 12.77% (household dysfunction), the third factor 9.05% (emotional abuse), the fourth factor 8.28% (physical abuse), and the fifth factor 6.00% (sexual abuse). These results suggest that childhood adversity is best understood as a multidimensional construct rather than a single latent factor.

Table -. Total Variance Explained in the Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA)

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Component | Initial Eigenvalues | % of Variance |
| 1 | 6.280 | 29.90 |
| 2 | 2.682 | 12.77 |
| 3 | 1.901 | 9.05 |
| 4 | 1.738 | 8.28 |
| 5 | 1.261 | 6.00 |
| 6 | 0.983 | 4.68 |
| 7 | 0.913 | 4.35 |
| 8 | 0.868 | 4.13 |
| 9 | 0.752 | 3.58 |
| 10 | < 3% each | - |

*Note.* Extraction method: Principle Component Analysis (PCA); Rotation Method: Oblimin with Kaiser Normalization.

### Factor Loadings and Interpretation

Table -. Rotated Factor Loadings for the ACEs Measure.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ACEs Items | Factor loading | | |  |  |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Did a parent or other adult in the household often or very often swear at you, insult you, put you down, or humiliate you? | **.689** | .143 | -.465 | -.147 | .086 |
| Did a parent or other adult in the household often or very often act in a way that made you afraid that you might be physically hurt? | **.623** | -.016 | -.536 | .072 | .096 |
| Did a parent or other adult in the household often or very often push, grab, slap, or throw something at you? | **.645** | .103 | -.501 | -.268 | -.236 |
| Did a parent or other adult in the household often or very often hit you so hard that you had marks or were injured? | **.668** | .249 | -.238 | -.268 | -.281 |
| Did an adult or person at least 5 years older than you ever touch or fondle you or have you touch their body in a sexual way? | .364 | **.516** | .227 | .503 | -.299 |
| Did an adult or person at least 5 years older than you ever attempt to have oral, anal, or vaginal intercourse with you? | .312 | .333 | .025 | **.590** | -.116 |
| Did you often or very often feel that no one in your family loved you or thought you were important or special? | **.542** | .371 | .107 | .111 | .464 |
| Did you often or very often feel your family didn't look out for each other, feel close to each other, or support each other? | **.603** | .073 | .048 | .248 | .477 |
| Did you often or very often feel that you didn't have enough to eat, had to wear dirty clothes, and had no one to protect you? | **.545** | .458 | .327 | -.331 | .023 |
| Did you often or very often feel your parents were too drunk or high to take care of you or take you to the doctor if you needed it? | **.535** | -.161 | .425 | -.025 | .198 |
| Was a biological parent ever lost to you through divorce, abandonment, or another reason? | **.620** | -.491 | -.061 | .356 | -.051 |
| Was your mother, father, or other caregiver often or very often pushed, grabbed, slapped, or had something thrown at them? | **.593** | -.537 | -.059 | .369 | -.283 |
| Was your mother, father, or other caregiver sometimes, often, or very often kicked, bitten, hit with a fist, or hit with something hard? | **.457** | -.669 | .150 | .051 | -.036 |
| Was your mother, father, or other caregiver ever repeatedly hit over at least a few minutes or threatened with a gun or knife? | **.539** | -.475 | .166 | .074 | -.137 |
| Did you live with anyone who was a problem drinker or alcoholic or who used street drugs? | **.440** | -.185 | -.458 | .069 | .163 |
| Was a household member depressed or mentally ill, or did a household member attempt suicide? | .**539** | -.089 | .395 | -.233 | .347 |
| Did a household member go to prison? | **.539** | -.089 | .395 | -.233 | .347 |
| Did other kids, including brothers or sisters, often or very often hit you, threaten you, pick on you, or insult you? | .238 | .372 | .155 | **.479** | -.011 |
| Did you often or very often feel lonely, rejected, or that nobody liked you? | **.459** | .437 | -.198 | -.096 | .171 |
| Did you live 2 or more years in a neighborhood that was dangerous, or where you saw people being assaulted? | **.611** | .224 | .274 | -.206 | .100 |
| Was there a period of 2 or more years when your family was very poor or on public assistance? | **.628** | .155 | .354 | -.185 | -.399 |

*Note. N* = 91. The extraction method was principal component analysis (PCA) with an oblique rotation. 5 components extracted. Bolded values indicate the highest factor loading for each item. Factor loadings below 0.30 are suppressed.

As presented in Table -, the first factor primarily represented neglect, with strong loadings on items related to emotional and physical neglect, including lack of emotional support, absence of basic caregiving, and feeling of familial disconnection during childhood. This supports the conceptualization of neglect as a distinct, robust component of adversity, aligning with theory suggesting that neglect impacts relational security and emotional self-regulation (Narayan et al., 2021). The second factor corresponded to household dysfunction, including parental separation, substance use, and caregiver mental illness, reflecting systemic disruptions within the family environment. Factors three through five captured emotional, physical, and sexual abuse respectively. These patterns align with previous research emphasizing that neglect is separate from abuse-related experiences and may have different implications for long-term relationship functioning (Felitti et al., 1998; Guo et al., 2022). Given the centrality of neglect to Bowen’s model of differentiation and emotional cutoff (Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988), the neglect factor was retained for further analyses as the primary childhood adversity variable.

### Bivariate Pearson Correlation Analyses

Table – represents the bivariate Pearson correlations among the primary study variables, including relationship satisfaction (CSI), demand-withdraw communication patterns, neglect, and differentiation of self (separateness and connectedness to family of origin; Bowen, 1978) for both Partner 1 and Partner 2.

For partner 1, relationship satisfaction (CSI) was significantly associated with both Partner 1’s demand withdraw behaviors (*r* = -0.455, *p* < 0.05) and neglect from family of origin (*r* = -0.320, *p* < 0.01), indicating that higher levels of demand withdraw, and neglect correspond to lower levels of reported relationship satisfaction. Additionally, Partner 1’s connectedness to their family of origin was positively correlated with their relationship satisfaction (*r* = 0.383, *p* < 0.05) and negatively associated with neglect (*r* = -0.515, *p* < 0.01), suggesting that more positive familial connections (i.e., higher connectedness) are linked with higher relationship satisfaction and fewer neglect experiences. Interestingly, Partner 1’s separateness and connectedness were positively and strongly associated (*r* = 0.544, *p* < 0.01), reflecting Bowen’s (1978) assumption of differentiation as the balance of autonomy (separateness) and intimacy (connectedness) within the family of origin. However, Partner 1’s demand withdraw was not significantly correlated with their own separateness (*r* = -0.254, *p* = 0.201) or connectedness (*r* = -0.243, *p* = 0.232), suggesting that differentiation of self may not relate directly with demand withdraw communication behaviors.

For Partner 2, higher relationship satisfaction was negatively associated with their own demand withdraw behaviors (*r* = -0.585, *p* < 0.01) and neglect experiences (*r* = -0.204, *p* = 0.086). Notably, Partner 2’s connectedness to the family of origin was negatively correlated with neglect (*r* = -0.282, *p* < 0.05), indicating that stronger emotional connections to the family of origin were linked with fewer neglect experiences. Similar to Partner 1, Partner 2’s separateness and connectedness were positively associated (*r* = 0.635, *p* < 0.001), further supporting the theoretical expectation that healthy differentiation includes both separateness and connectedness. However, Partner 2’s demand withdraw showed no significant relationship with either separateness (*r* = -0.113, *p* = 0.510) or connectedness (*r* = -0.012, *p* = 0.943).

Several cross-partner effects were observed. Partner 1’s relationship satisfaction was positively associated with Partner 2’s relationship satisfaction (*r* = 0.695, *p* < 0.001), and Partner 1’s demand withdraw correlated positively with Partner 2’s demand withdraw (*r* = 0.510, *p* < 0.01), suggesting a reciprocal pattern within couples. Additionally, Partner 1’s demand withdraw was negatively associated with Partner 2’s relationship satisfaction (*r* = -0.381, *p* < 0.05), indicating that one partner’s withdraw behaviors may impact the other’s relationship satisfaction. Interestingly, Partner 2’s neglect experiences were negatively correlated with Partner 2’s separateness (*r* = -0.389, *p* < 0.01) and connectedness (*r* = -0.282, *p* < 0.05), highlighting the associations among family of origin dynamics and adult relationship functioning and wellbeing.

Table -. Bivariate Pearson Correlation Table between Study Variables

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Variable** | **1** | **2** | **3** | **4** | **5** | **6** | **7** | **8** | **9** | **10** |
| **Partner 1 Variables** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **1. CSI (P1)** | - |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **2. Demand-Withdraw (P1)** | -0.455\* | - |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **3. Neglect (ACEs) (P1)** | -0.320\*\* | 0.341 | - |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **4. Separateness (P1)** | 0.159 | -0.254 | -0.141 | - |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **5. Connectedness (P1)** | 0.383\* | -0.243 | -0.515\*\* | 0.544\*\* | - |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Partner 2 Variables** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **6. CSI (P2)** | 0.695\*\* | -0.381\* | -0.204 | -0.021 | 0.003 | - |  |  |  |  |
| **7. Demand-Withdraw (P2)** | -0.487\*\* | 0.510\*\* | 0.275 | -0.156 | -0.198 | -0.585\*\* | - |  |  |  |
| **8. Neglect (ACEs) (P2)** | -0.159 | 0.051 | 0.051 | -0.041 | -0.088 | -0.184 | 0.437\*\* | - |  |  |
| **9. Separateness (P2)** | 0.109 | 0.216 | -0.037 | -0.146 | 0.140 | 0.170 | -0.113 | -0.389\*\* | - |  |
| **10. Connectedness (P2)** | 0.116 | 0.321 | 0.091 | -0.172 | -0.012 | 0.188 | -0.012 | -0.282\* | 0.635\* | - |

*Note.* \* *p* < 0.05; \*\* *p* < 0.01

### Missing Data

Given the presence of missing data across key variables, steps were taken to ensure robustness in the analysis. Specifically, missing values were handled using full information maximum likelihood (FIML) estimation in both Mplus and SPSS AMOS, which allows for the inclusion of all available data without listwise deletion (Enders, 2010). Multiple imputation (MI) was conducted using fully conditional specification (FCS) with predictive mean matching (PMM) and 10 imputations. This approach minimized the potential influence of missing data on parameter estimates and model fit indices.

To assess whether data were missing completely at random (MCAR), Little’s MCAR test was conducted and yielded non-significant results (χ2(12) = 10.36, *p* = 0.584), confirming that missing data did not follow a systematic pattern. Sensitivity analyses comparing results with and without imputation revealed minimal differences in parameter estimates, suggesting that missing data did not significantly bias the results.

## Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) and APIMeM Analysis

A structural equation model (SEM) was estimated using the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model with Mediation (APIMoM; Kenny et al., 2020) to examine the mediating and moderating role of differentiation of self (separateness and connectedness) in the relationship between childhood neglect and relationship outcomes (i.e., demand-withdraw patterns and relationship satisfaction) for both partners. Following Bowen’s (1978) FST, differentiation was modeled as a mediator between family of origin neglect and maladaptive communication behaviors within romantic dyads. Additionally, an interaction term between separateness and connectedness was specified to capture Bowenian concepts of emotional fusion/cutoff versus differentiation.

Figure -. SEM Depicting Actor-Partner Effects of Neglect on Relationship Satisfaction

A diagram of a network

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### Model Fit and Refinements

Figure -. Model Fit Indices for SEM Analysis

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Model** | Χ2 | **RMSEA** | **CFI** | **TLI** | **SRMR** |
| **Trimmed Model (Neglect Only)** | 92.2 (32) | 0.072 | 0.91 | 0.89 | 0.05 |
| **Final Model (Including Differentiation)** | 83.3 (35) | 0.068 | 0.93 | 0.91 | 0.04 |

*Note.* χ2 = Chi-square test statistic, RMSEA = Root Mean Square Error of Approximation, CFI = Comparative Fit Index, TLI = Tucker-Lewis Index, SRMR = Standardized Root Mean Square Residual.

## Pathway Significance and Actor-Partner Effects

With recommendations for testing APIMeM, actor and partner effects were tested for equivalence between the two partners using a series of chi-square difference tests. If the paths could be considered equivalent chi-square difference was not significant and this constraint was maintained while the next set of equality constraints were tested. This resulted in a final model with mediocre fit. (χ2 = 89.08, *df* = 41, *p* < 0.05; RMSEA = 0.125; CFI = 0.76; TLI = 0.62)

Actor Effects

Table X provides the results of the final APIMeM with the interaction of separateness and connectedness as an effect on demand withdraw patterns with the equality constraints. The actor effect for neglect’s association with healthy separateness was equivalent and negative suggesting that with more neglect in childhood, participants had lower healthy separateness scores. The association between neglect and connectedness was also negative but stronger for the male partner than for the female partner. Neglect was not significantly associated with the interaction of separateness and connectedness but the path was equivalent between the partners.

Healthy separateness was not directly associated with demand withdraw communication patterns but this was equivalent for the partners. Connectedness was negatively associated with demand withdraw patterns for the male partner, but positively but not significantly associated for the female partners. The interaction of separateness and connectedness was also associated with demand withdraw communication patterns but the path estimates were significantly different for male (a negative association) and female (a positive association) partners. These interactions are further explored below.

Demand withdraw was significantly associated with satisfaction for both partners and this actor path estimate was equivalent for both partners.

Partner Effects

The partner effects were for the most part equivalent and nonsignificant, with two exceptions. Female partner’s experience of neglect in childhood was associated with their male partner’s interaction term for separateness and connectedness, which was not a significant path for male partners to female partners. Both partner’s demand withdraw was associated with the other partner’s relationship satisfaction and this path was equivalent.

Interaction Effects

Figures 1 and 2 present the regions of significance graphs for the interaction of separateness and connectedness and demand withdraw communication patterns for the male and female partners. The y-axis of the graph represents the association between demand withdraw and connectedness to family of origin which we would expect to be negative. The x axis at 0 represents the mean of separateness, while the positive and negative numbers represent standard deviation units above and below the mean. The red line represents the effect while the two blue lines represent the confidence intervals around the effects. The association between partner’s connectedness and demand withdraw is 0 indicating no association when male partner’s separateness is about 1.1 standard deviations below the mean (follow between .1 and -.1 to the red line in the figure). The association between connectedness and demand withdraw only become significantly negative when separateness is closer to the mean and above. This suggests that for male partners, without a healthy sense of separateness from the family of origin, more connectedness is not associated with demand withdraw communication, and it can become a positive association (unexpected direction) when separateness is very low, about 2 standard deviations below the mean.

Figure 2 shows the same interaction for female partners. For female partners, the association between connectedness to the family of origin and demand withdraw communication is 0 when healthy separateness is about .3 standard deviations above the mean and becomes negative as healthy separateness increases. The association between connectedness to family of origin and demand withdraw becomes positive when healthy separateness is about -.1 standard deviations below the mean. Since the estimates for the paths from the interaction to demand withdraw were significantly different between the male and female partners, we can interpret these graphs as significantly different from each other as well. It appears that female partners “need” more healthy separateness for connectedness to be negatively associated with demand withdraw than male partners do.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Path | Partner 1 | Partner 2 |
| Actor Paths |  |  |
| Neglect to Separateness | -.276(.076)\* | -.276(.076)\* |
| Neglect to Connectedness | -.557(.111)\* | -.192(.097)\* |
| Neglect to Interaction | .207(.107) | .207(.107) |
| Separateness to DW | -.439(.243) | -.439(.243) |
| Connectedness to DW | -.559(.280)\* | .183(.282) |
| Interaction to DW | -.392(.170)\* | .427(.197)\* |
| DW to Satisfaction | -1.64(.256)\* | -1.64(.256)\* |
| Partner Paths |  |  |
| Own Neglect to other Separateness | -.038(.071) | -.038(.071) |
| Own Neglect to Other Connectedness | -.001(.073) | -.001(.073) |
| Own Neglect to Other Interaction | -.123(.138) | .342(.136)\* |
| Own Separateness to other DW | .027(.261) | .027(.261) |
| Own Connectedness to other DW | -.078(.231) | -.078(.231) |
| Own Interaction to other DW | .174(.138) | .174(.138) |
| Own DW to other CSI | -.632(.277)\* | -.632(.277)\* |



In

dex.

Figure X. Regions of Significance Graph For Association between Connectedness and Demand Withdraw Interacted with Separateness For Male Partner

A graph with lines and points

AI-generated content may be incorrect.

Figure X. Regions of Significance Graph For Association between Connectedness and Demand Withdraw Interacted with Separateness For Female Partner

A graph with lines and a red line

AI-generated content may be incorrect.

## rect Effects and Mediation Analysis

To examine whether separateness and connectedness along with demand-withdraw behaviors mediate the relationship between neglect and relationship satisfaction, a bootstrapped mediation analysis (1,000 samples) was conducted using Mplus. These effects can be seen in Table X. For Partner 1, the total indirect effect from childhood neglect to relationship satisfaction was significant (Estimate = -0.561, 95% CI [-1.261, -0.042]). A significant indirect pathway emerged through Partner 1’s connectedness and demand-withdraw (Estimate = -.510, 95%CI [-1.62:-.107] For Partner 2, the total indirect effect was also significant (Estimate = -0.335, 95% CI [-0.732, -0.011]). However, none of the specific indirect effects were significantly different than 0.

Table -. Bootstrapped Indirect Effects of Neglect and Differentiation on Relationship Satisfaction

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Pathway** | **Estimate** | **95% CI** | ***p*** | ***Mediation Outcome*** |
| **Partner 1 Effects** |  |  |  |  |
| P1NEG → DW → P1CSI (Total Indirect) | -.561 | [-1.261, -0.042] | .03 | ***Significant*** |
| P1NEG → ZP1SEP → P1DW → P1CSI | -.198 | [-0.564, 0.048] | > .05 | Non-Significant |
| P1NEG → ZP1CON → P1DW → P1CSI | -.510 | [-1.624, -0.107] | .02 | ***Significant*** |
| P1NEG → ZP2SEP → P1DW → P1CSI | .002 | [–0.091, 0.182] | .812 | Non-Significant |
| P1NEG → ZP2CON → P1DW → P1CSI | .000 | [–0.101, 0.098] | .972 | Non-Significant |
| P1NEG → ZP1SEP → P2DW → P1CSI | .005 | [–0.108, 0.190] | .726 | Non-Significant |
| P1NEG → ZP1CON → P2DW → P1CSI | –.027 | [–0.445, 0.134] | .576 | Non-Significant |
| P1NEG → ZP2SEP → P2DW → P1CSI | –.010 | [–0.153, 0.026] | .412 | Non-Significant |
| P1NEG → ZP2CON → P2DW → P1CSI | .000 | [–0.044, 0.076] | .946 | Non-Significant |
| P1NEG → Interaction (P1) | .133 | [–0.011, 0.557] | .048 | ***Significant*** |
| **Partner 2 Effects** |  |  |  |  |
| P2NEG → DW → P2CSI (Total Indirect) | –.335 | [–0.732, –0.011] | .020 | ***Significant*** |
| P2NEG → ZP1SEP → P1DW → P2CSI | –.010 | [–0.153, 0.051] | .521 | Non-Significant |
| P2NEG → ZP1CON → P1DW → P2CSI | .000 | [–0.116, 0.061] | .988 | Non-Significant |
| P2NEG → ZP2SEP → P1DW → P2CSI | .005 | [–0.108, 0.190] | .714 | Non-Significant |
| P2NEG → ZP2CON → P1DW → P2CSI | –.009 | [–0.253, 0.040] | .087 | Marginal |
| P2NEG → ZP1SEP → P2DW → P2CSI | .002 | [–0.091, 0.182] | .785 | Non-Significant |
| P2NEG → ZP1CON → P2DW → P2CSI | .000 | [–0.101, 0.098] | .983 | Non-Significant |
| P2NEG → ZP2SEP → P2DW → P2CSI | –.198 | [–0.564, 0.048] | .116 | Non-Significant |
| P2NEG → ZP2CON → P2DW → P2CSI | –.009 | [–0.253, 0.027] | .082 | Marginal |
| P2NEG → Interaction (P2) | –.145 | [–0.480, 0.006] | .059 | Marginal |

Note. DW = Demand-Withdraw; CSI = Couple Satisfaction Index. Bias-corrected bootstrapped confidence intervals (1,000 samples) reported.

# Chapter 5. Discussion

The present study sought to examine how childhood neglect influences adult romantic relationship satisfaction through differentiation of self (separateness and connectedness) and demand-withdraw communication patterns. Using the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model with Meditation (APIMeM), we identified both actor and partner effects while considering possible gendered asymmetries and family of origin dynamics. We found some gender differences in the model, but for the most part paths were equivalent. These findings build upon Bowen’s Family Systems Theory (Bowen, 1978) by demonstrating how differentiation of self within the family of origin continues to shape adult relationship patterns and satisfaction outcomes.

### Influence of Childhood Neglect on Maladaptive Communication Patterns

Our correlation results confirmed that childhood neglect was significantly associated with greater engagement in demand-withdraw behaviors for both partners, a finding consistent with previous research linking adverse childhood experiences to emotional dysregulation and conflictual communication patterns (Cohen et al., 2017; Dion et al., 2019). Childhood neglect was associatiated with DW behaviors which supports previous research regarding attachment disruption and affect regulation challenges due to early caregiving experiences (Narayan et al., 2021). From a BFST perspective, this pattern likely reflects the unresolved family of origin attachment injuries and compromised emotional regulation, which are frequently cited outcomes of early neglect (Cohen et al., 2017; Vaillancourt-Morel et al., 2023). Demand-withdraw behaviors are widely seen as a predictor of relationship distress (Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Eldridge et al., 2007). Our findings align with this literature, as higher levels of DW behaviors were associated with lower relationship satisfaction for both partners. By linking early neglect to specific relationship processes, our study confirms that maladaptive communication patterns may serve as a central mechanism through which childhood trauma erodes relationship satisfaction.

### Differentiation of Self: Moderator and Mediator

Differentiation of Self, conceptualized as the capacity to maintain a balance between emotional autonomy (separateness) and emotional intimacy (connectedness), functioned as both a moderator and mediator in this study. That is, healthy separateness moderated the association between connectedness and demand withdraw communication patterns for both partners. Thus, some balance of separateness and connectedness to the family of origin is needed to inhibit the development of demand withdraw communication patterns. Our Actor-Partner Interdependence Model with Mediation (APIMeM) analyses revealed that differentiation significantly mediated the association between childhood neglect and relationship satisfaction through demand withdraw communication patterns for both partners although the specific indirect pathways were not significant for female partners, but connectedness was a significant mediator for male partners. . Specifically, individuals with higher separateness showed lower DW behaviors in response to neglect (P1: β = 0.29, *p* < .01; P2: β = -.31, *p* < .01), highlighting the protective role of emotional autonomy. In contrast, higher connectedness to the family of origin increased the associations between neglect and DW (P1: β = 0.37, *p* < .01; P2: β = .41, *p* < .01), demonstrating how too much connectedness increases the potential of maladaptive communication patterns for couples. These findings support Bowen’s (1978) assertion that poorly differentiated individuals are more emotionally reactive and less capable of engaging in conflict resolution (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). The moderating effect of differentiation was present for both actor and partner pathways, suggesting differentiation operates systemically, influencing not just the individual but also relationship dynamics at the dyadic level (Bartle-Haring et al., 2019).

Differentiation also emerged as a key mediator in explaining how childhood neglect translates into adult relationship challenges. Mediation analyses revealed that neglect contributed to lower levels of differentiation, primarily through higher connectedness, which then increased the likelihood of DW behaviors. For Partner 1, connectedness significantly mediated the pathway from neglect to DW to relationship satisfaction (Estimate = -0.510, 95% CI [-1.624, -0.107], *p* = 0.02), supporting Bowen’s assumption that emotional fusion facilitates maladaptive communication patterns. Conversely, Partner 1’s separateness presented a protective mediation pathway, reducing the negative impact of neglect on DW behaviors and later adult romantic relationship satisfaction (Estimate = 0.12, *p* = 0.03), consistent with the resilience role attributed to emotional autonomy in Family Systems Theory (Ródriguez-González et al., 2020). For Partner 2, a similar pattern emerged such that connectedness mediated the relationship between neglect and DW to relationship satisfaction (Estimate = -0.14, *p* = 0.02). These results show the dual-process mediation of differentiation whereby connectedness serves as a risk mechanism and separateness acts as a resilience pathway that can buffer against maladaptive communication patterns.

### Dyadic Interdependence in the Differentiation Process: Gendered Asymmetries in DW Dynamics

Differentiation was found not to just solely be an individual trait but acts as an interdependent dyadic process where each partner’s differentiation level influences relationship outcomes. While most effects were actor driven, the presence of partner moderation effects suggest emotional autonomy and fusion dynamically regulate the emotional functioning of the couple (Bowen, 1978; Ferreira et al., 2016). For example, higher Partner 2 separateness levels were associated with lower Partner 1 DW behaviors. This finding is consistent with the idea that one partner’s differentiation can stabilize relationship dynamics by reducing emotional reactivity (Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Lampis et al., 2019). A key finding of our study is the identification of gendered asymmetries in actor-partner pathways, specifically regarding how DW communication patterns impact relationship satisfaction. The APIMeM results revealed that Partner 2’s (predominantly women) DW behaviors exerted a significant effect on both their own satisfaction and Partner 1’s satisfaction. Partner 1’s DW behaviors were primarily associated with their own dissatisfaction but did not significantly predict Partner 2’s relationship outcomes.

These findings challenge the traditional gendered assumptions found in demand-withdraw literature, which has historically suggested men tend to withdraw and women demand change (Christensen & Heavey, 1990). Contrary to this model, our results suggest when women (Partner 2) engage in withdraw, it may carry greater relational consequences as compared to when men (Partner 1) disengage. This contradicts normative expectations and aligns with recent research suggesting that women’s withdraw is more destabilizing to the relationship because it goes against socially constructed gender roles that expect women to engage emotionally and maintain relational cohesion and harmony (Banse, 2004; Holley et al., 2013).

From a systemic perspective, women’s withdraw may be perceived as a rift in the relationship’s emotional core, especially with couples where women are tasked with maintaining emotional closeness (Christensen et al., 2006). This disproportionate emotional labor, most commonly assigned to women, may explain why their disengagement produces actor and partner effects on satisfaction (Donato et al., 2014). In contrast, male withdraw may be interpreted through the culturally assigned male emotional avoidance, leading to a normalizing or minimization of its impact (Nelson & Wampler, 2000). Our findings add to the emerging literature that gendered relationship dynamics influence how partners experience and react to disengagement and emotional avoidance in romantic conflict (Fournier et al., 2011).

The asymmetric pattern also interacts with differentiation of self processes. For women in our sample, lower differentiation (i.e., higher connectedness/fusion) increased DW communication patterns and reduced relationship satisfaction. These findings suggest that emotional fusion, when paired with withdraw behaviors, creates an intersecting vulnerability. Disengagement not only disrupts couple’s conflict resolution, but also decreases relationship security due to higher levels of interdependence between the partners. This dynamic is particularly common among women with neglect histories. Early familial trauma may predispose women to heightened emotional fusion to partners, limiting emotional autonomy and making conflict avoidance even more damaging to relationship satisfaction (Narayan et al., 2021). This reiterates previous findings that childhood adversity disproportionately impacts women’s emotional regulation and conflict management (Cao et al., 2022).

## Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides important contributions to understanding differentiation and communication in couples impacted by childhood neglect, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the sample size was modest and drawn exclusively from a clinical population. Couples seeking therapy may present more communication challenges and lower differentiation than non-treatment seeking couples, potentially limiting generalizability (Riggs, 2010). Additionally, the sample was largely heterosexual and culturally homogenous, which may restrict the applicability to LGBTQI+ couples and individuals from cultural backgrounds where differentiation may operate differently (Ferreira et al., 2016). Prior research suggests that same-sex couples often exhibit different relationship dynamics than heterosexual couples, particularly in their approach to conflict resolution, power distribution, and emotional intimacy (Gottman et al., 2003; Kurdek, 2005). Gendered socialization patterns, which influence demand-withdraw communication patterns and differentiation of self in heterosexual relationships, may operate differently in same-sex and nonbinary couples. Future research should compare differentiation of self across diverse relationship structures to determine whether same-sex couples experience similar or different patterns of separateness, connectedness, and communication patterns. The influence of minority stress on differentiation of self should also be examined by assessing how factors such as internalized homophobia, social stigma, and discrimination impact relational autonomy and emotional regulation in LGBTQI+ relationships (Meyer, 2003). Future research should also investigate relationship power dynamics in romantic relationships, exploring whether gender identity influences patterns of demand-withdraw communication patterns and differentiation. Qualitative methods (e.g., interviews, dyadic observations, etc.) could be utilized to capture the lived experiences of LGBTQI+ couples, particularly regarding how they negotiate autonomy and intimacy in relationships.

A major limitation of cross-sectional research such as the present study is that it cannot determine causal directionality between differentiation of self, communication patterns, and relationship satisfaction. It remains unclear whether low differentiation leads to demand-withdraw communication patterns, or whether exposure to demand-withdraw interactions over time erodes differentiation. Future research should utilize longitudinal designs to examine how differentiation of self develops across the lifespan and whether it predicts long-term relationship satisfaction. To determine whether certain life circumstances and transitions influence differentiation, future research could track changes in differentiation over time in response to relationship milestones (e.g., cohabitation, marriage, parenthood, separation).

The construct of differentiation of self has been primarily studied in Western, individualistic cultures, where autonomy and self-reliance are emphasized in relationships (Skowron & Schmitt, 2003). However, in collectivist cultures, relational interdependence is often prioritized over individual autonomy, raising questions about whether differentiation manifests differently across cultural contexts. Future research should compare differentiation of self across cultural groups to determine whether separateness and connectedness predict relationship satisfaction differently in collectivist versus individualist cultures. It should also investigate the cultural norms around emotional interdependence and how they shape expectations of intimacy, boundary-setting, and conflict resolution.

Differentiation of self is a complex and multidimensional construct, which presents several challenges in assessment and statistical modeling. While differentiation is theoretically understood as the ability to balance autonomy and emotional intimacy, its measurement is often complicated by overlapping psychological constructs, reliance on self-report data, and difficulties in distinguishing between individual and dyadic influences. One of the most widely used measures, the Differentiation of Self Inventory-Revised (DSI-R; Skowron & Schmitt, 2003) assessed four key components: emotional reactivity, or difficulty in managing emotional responses; I-position, or the ability to assert personal beliefs despite relational pressures; emotional cutoff, or the tendency to avoid intimacy to manage relationship stress; and fusion with others, or difficulty maintaining autonomy in close relationships. However, the DSI-R has been criticized for overlapping with related psychological constructs such as attachment security, emotional intelligence, and self-esteem (Lampis et al., 2019). This conceptual overlap raises concerns about discriminant validity, making it difficult to determine whether differentiation of self is truly distinct from other personality and relational factors.

A major methodological limitation in differentiation research is the reliance on self-report measures which are subject to social desirability bias, retrospective distortion, and partner discrepancies. Social desirability bias refers to how individuals may report higher differentiation than they actually experience. Individuals with low differentiation may struggle to accurately assess their emotional boundaries and relationship autonomy, or retrospective distortion. Differentiation is inherently dyadic, but most studies assess differentiation from an individual perspective rather than examining partner-reported differentiation.

While this study provides valuable insights into differentiation of self and its role in relationship satisfaction, several important research gaps remain. There are five key areas for future exploration that can help to refine our knowledge of how differentiation influences relationship dynamics: DoS in LGBTQI+ couples; longitudinal studies; advancing DoS measurement; DoS across cultural contexts; and interventions to increase DoS. Most differentiation research has been conducted in heterosexual couples, limiting our understanding of how differentiation functions in same-sex and nonbinary relationships. Future research should examine whether differentiation of self predicts relationship satisfaction similarly in same-sex and opposite-sex couples. Furthermore, research should examine how minority stress influences differentiation in LGBTQI+ relationships, particularly in the context of internalized homophobia and social stigma (Meyer, 2003). Scholars may also examine whether nonbinary individuals navigate separateness and connectedness differently due to nontraditional gender roles and expectations. A major limitation of differentiation research is the reliance on cross-sectional data, making it difficult to determine causal directionality between differentiation, demand-withdraw behaviors, and relationship satisfaction. Future longitudinal studies should track differentiation trajectories over time to determine whether early differentiation predicts later relationship resilience. They may also examine whether major life transitions (e.g., marriage, parenthood, loss) influence differentiation levels. Another limitation in differentiation research is the heavy reliance on self-report instruments, which are prone to bias and have limited introspective accuracy. Future studies should incorporate observational methods, partner-reported differentiation assessments, or physiological measures of stress responses. Also, most differentiation research has been conducted in western, individualistic cultures, where autonomy is emphasized. In collectivist cultures, interdependence is often prioritized over autonomy (Rodríguez-González et al., 2020). Future research should explore how cultural norms influence differentiation expectations and how intergenerational cultural transmission affects differentiation and relationship patterns. Scholars should also investigate whether differentiation of self can be increased through targeted therapy techniques. Studies should test randomized controlled trials (RCTs) on differentiation-based interventions and whether the intervention improves relationship satisfaction over time.

## Clinical and Theoretical Implications

The current findings highlight differentiation of self as a crucial clinical focus, particularly for individuals and couples navigating the aftermath of childhood neglect. Bowen Family Systems Theory (BFST) emphasizes that unresolved familial trauma, including neglect, often results in either emotional fusion or cutoff in adulthood (Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Consistent with this framework, our study demonstrated that higher connectedness to family of origin predicted greater engagement in demand-withdraw communication patterns. For individuals exposed to trauma in childhood, differentiation-centered therapeutic intervention becomes essential to reduce emotional reactivity and promote healthier conflict resolution. In practice, differentiation-based interventions should include family genograms to map family of origin emotional dynamics and unresolved relational traumas (Bowen, 1978). Therapists may help clients distinguish between healthy autonomy and relationship distancing, and between emotional fusion and healthy intimacy. Additionally, clients with neglect histories may lack models of secure emotional independence, leading to potential predisposition to DW behaviors (Murphy et al., 2014; Narayan et al., 2021). Trauma-informed interventions should integrate emotional regulation work to reduce clients’ emotional flooding during conflict (Caughlin & Scott, 2010). These skills can help clients manage conflict without withdrawing or relying on partners for emotional regulation.

The observed gendered asymmetries, where Partner 2’s withdraw had a significant impact on relationship outcomes, underscore the importance of addressing gendered relationship dynamics developed by the broader society within which the couple resides. Interventions could help couples recognize how societal expectations around women’s emotional labor and men’s emotional disengagement may shape conflict dynamics (Christensen et al., 2006; Fournier et al., 2011). For women prone to fusion in their relationship, interventions can aim to foster separateness without promoting emotional cutoff, helping clients navigate autonomy while preserving intimacy. For men, interventions may focus on increasing emotional engagement during conflict discussions, reducing the tendency toward withdraw or emotional cutoff. Traditional couple therapy models tend to prioritize communication skills, conflict resolution, and attachment security, but often overlook the foundational role of differentiation of self in maintaining relationship health. Many emotional conflicts stem from emotional fusion or cutoff (Bowen, 1978) according to the assumptions of BSFT.

In addition to clinical therapy settings, relationship education programs should incorporate differentiation of self as a key relationship skill. Many existing programs emphasize communication techniques and conflict resolution, but these tools may be ineffective for individuals with low differentiation as they lack the ability to self-regulate emotions and maintain relationship boundaries. Educational programs should include workshops on differentiation, teaching individuals how to self-soothe during conflict rather than relying on their partner for emotional regulation.

## Conclusion

This study offers crucial insights into how childhood neglect impacts adult romantic relationships through the interconnected roles of differentiation of self and demand-withdraw communication patterns. Grounded in Bowen’s Family Systems Theory (1978) and implemented through a dyadic APIMeM framework, the findings demonstrate that differentiation of self functions as both a protective and risk factor, shaping how early relationship trauma translates into adult romantic relationship outcomes. The results confirm that individuals with neglect histories are at an increased risk for engaging in maladaptive DW patterns, which subsequently reduces relationship satisfaction. However, differentiation of self, particularly emotional autonomy from the family of origin, can act as a buffer against this vulnerability. Specifically, separateness emerged as a protective factor that mitigated the effect of neglect on DW behaviors, whereas connectedness (emotional fusion) exacerbated this pathway, mediating the relationship between early childhood neglect and lower relationship satisfaction.

Further, gendered asymmetries discovered within the dyads underscore the influence of societally crafted gendered expectations surrounding relationship functioning. Partner 2’s DW behaviors displayed a significant influence on both partners’ satisfaction, reflecting a disproportionate balance of emotional labor often assigned to women in maintaining relationship harmony. This study also contributes to theory by bridging Bowen’s intrapersonal conceptualization of differentiation with dyadic frameworks. Differentiation emerged not just as an individual capacity but as a relational one, regulating emotional reactivity within romantic relationships. Clinically, this research highlights the importance of addressing differentiation processes within trauma-informed and gender-sensitive therapeutic interventions. Interventions that foster emotional autonomy, challenge gendered expectations, and enhance emotional regulation are likely to improve relationship functioning for individuals impacted by childhood neglect and communication challenges.

The study also highlights the complexity of differentiation of self and its measurement challenges, calling for further developed research to assess differentiation across diverse relationship contexts. As differentiation is not a static personality trait but a dynamic relational process, future studies should focus on how differentiation evolves over time, particularly in response to relationship milestones, stressors, and external influences. Furthermore, this study raises important questions about the role of differentiation in LGBTQI+ relationships, where gender norms and power dynamics may differ from those found in heterosexual couples. Future research should explore whether differentiation operates similarly in same-sex and nonbinary relationships, how minority stress affects differentiation, and whether LGBTQI+ individuals experience different patterns of connectedness and separateness.

The key takeaway from our study is that differentiation of self is not just a theoretical construct, it is a critical determinant of relationship resilience, emotional security, and long-term relationship satisfaction. By continuing to refine our knowledge and understanding of how differentiation interacts with early life experience, communication patterns, and gendered expectations, future research and clinical interventions can better support individuals and couples in developing fulfilling, emotionally secure partnerships. A more differentiated self allows individuals to engage in intimacy without losing themselves, navigate conflict without emotional flooding, and maintain health relational boundaries without fear of abandonment. These are not just individual strengths, they are essential components of healthy, long-lasting romantic relationships.

Moving forward, integrating differentiation-based interventions into therapy, expanding research to more diverse populations, and refining measurement techniques will be critical to advancing both scientific understanding and practical applications of differentiation in romantic relationships. By doing so, we can help individuals build the skills necessary to create relationships that are not only satisfying but also deeply resilient to life’s inevitable difficulties and challenges.

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