Conflict and Control: Examining the Association Between Exposure to Television Portraying Interpersonal Conflict and the Use of Controlling Behaviors in Romantic Relationships

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Abstract:

Based on content analyses examining the type and amount of relational conflicts featured in popular television (Brinson, 1992; Brinson & Winn, 1997; Comstock & Strzyzewski, 1990; Fine, 1981; Greenberg, Buerkel-Rothfuss, Neuendorf, & Atkin, 1980; Sherry & De Souza, 2005), the present study investigated the link between exposure to television that is high in interpersonal conflict and viewers' use of relational control in their romantic relationships. The results demonstrate a small but statistically significant relationship between exposure to interpersonal-conflict television and relational control, even after controlling for demographic, relationship, and personality variables. Further, the results demonstrate that the main relationship was moderated by viewers' perceived realism of television. Theoretical implications are discussed.

Keywords: Cultivation Analysis | Relational Control | Television | Interpersonal Conflict | Romantic Relationships

Article:

The television world is comprised of romantic couples and, in this romantic world, conflict abounds. "It's difficult to think of a show in which conflicts between romantic couples are not a part of the plot or subplot" (Sherry & De Souza, 2005, p. 4). Conflicts are used to advance plots, to create drama, and to, ultimately, draw viewers.

Content analyses have examined the frequency and context of romantic conflicts in various television genres (Brinson, 1992; Brinson & Winn, 1997; Comstock & Strzyzewski, 1990; Fine, 1981; Greenberg et al., 1980; Sherry & De Souza, 2005), and in the main, this research has found conflict to be quite prevalent. Certainly, one of the consequences of watching television saturated with romantic conflict is that viewers might develop the expectations that real-life romantic relationships are inevitably conflict-ridden (De Souza & Sherry, 2006). This might

especially be the case among young-adult viewers who are testing the waters with serious romantic relationships in their own lives (Arnett, 2000). A logical next step in this literature is to investigate how exposure to conflicts on television is related to viewers' perceptions of their actual romantic relationships. Thus far, empirical research examining the relations between television exposure and actual behavioral tendencies in romantic relationships is lacking. This is surprising, given that several of the aforementioned content analyses concluded that research needs to investigate such links, for example, "obviously the next step in this research effort involves an attempt to actually correlate television content with real-life interactions" (Comstock & Strzyzewski, 1990, p. 279).

In terms of the effects of television viewing on expectations of romantic relationships, most of what we know focuses on the effects of portrayals of sexuality (Aubrey, Harrison, Kramer, & Yellin, 2003; Brown & Newcomer, 1991; Collins et al., 2004; Pardun, L'Engle, & Brown, 2005). Relational conflict has not been addressed in these studies, perhaps because researchers have focused on whether television exposure perpetuates social problems—such as sexual promiscuity—while overlooking more normative behaviors in romantic relationships.

In the present study, we seek to examine the relations between exposure to television programs that are high in interpersonal conflict and the degree to which viewers endorse interpersonal control in their own romantic relationships. Based on the principles of cultivation theory (e.g., Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli, & Shanahan, 2002), we investigated the idea that exposure to romantic conflict on television might cultivate a perception that romantic relationships are rife with conflict; thus, one way to respond to such high-conflict situations is to exert control over one's partner in order to regain control and mastery over one's environment. We further examined whether these relations were moderated by the viewers' perceived realism of television content, as well as their motivations for viewing television.

The Connection Between Relational Conflict and Relational Control

The present study is grounded in research on couples that has shown a positive correlation between relational control and relationship conflict. For the present study, we are guided by Cartwright's (1959) definition of relational control as the degree to which one intentionally regulates another's behavior. Coined as one of the "most important dimensions of relationships" (Heatherington, Escudero, & Friedlanger, 2005, p. 192), the relational control construct has been studied and operationalized by scholars from different disciplines. In particular, the work of Millar, Rogers, and colleagues (e.g., Millar & Rogers, 1976; Millar, Rogers, & Bavelas, 1984; Rogers, 2004) has operationalized the construct of relational control by several key interaction patterns: domineeringness (a one-up conversational move by Partner A), dominance/submission (a one-up move by Partner A followed by a one-down move by Partner B), and competitive symmetry (a one-up move by Partner A followed by another one-up by Partner B). In general, findings suggest that a positive relationship exists between healthier relational functioning and more complementary patterns, such as dominance and submissiveness, and an inverse

relationship between healthy relational functioning and domineeringness and competitive symmetry (for a comprehensive review, see Rogers & Escudero, 2004).

We defined conflict as occurring when a person's actions or goals interfere with another's (Peterson, 1983). Conflict causes pain resulting in feelings of guilt, rage, anxiety, resentment, loneliness, and disregard (Olson & Golish, 2002), as well as defensive mechanisms, including avoidance, isolation, and aggression (Bokar, Sell, Giordano, & Tollerud,2011). One common finding in the literature on relational communication is the positive relationship between the amount of conflict in romantic relationships and the presence of relational control (Stets, 1993, 1995). According to Stets (1995), when individuals' control over their environment is threatened, such as it can be when conflict occurs, they will exert control over their partners in order to regain a sense of mastery over the environment. Thus, conflict between partners can result when one individual perceives that he or she lacks control over the situation and/or the partner. In a study of 509 college student daters, the most important factor in predicting relational control was the amount of conflict in the relationship, and those who were more likely to control were male, non-white, low in mastery, low in trust, and low in perspective taking (Stets, 1995). Importantly, relational conflict is also correlated with relational violence (Riggs & O'Leary, 1989; Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980), considered the most severe way in which partners attempt to establish control (Frye & Karney, 2006). Indeed, conflict between aggressive couples "may be characterized by more extreme and explicit attempts to control the other than those of non-aggressive couples" (Olson & Golish, 2002, p. 196).

All of these factors fall in line with the view of relational control as a compensatory process; when situations occur where control over the environment is threatened, one partner will react by controlling the other partner to regain a sense of mastery. Combining the literature on romantic conflict and relational control with cultivation theory (Gerbner et al., 2002), we would expect that the more exposure to representations of romantic conflict on television, the more that television viewers might be cultivated to accept that conflict is an acceptable way to reestablish relational control and mastery in romantic relationships. Thus, repeated exposure to television that is high in interpersonal conflict might coincide with the use of controlling behaviors and expectations in a romantic relationship.

Representations of Romantic Conflict on Television

Estimates of the frequency of conflict that is contained in television varies considerably by study. Certainly, differences of measurement, in addition to differences by type and genre, affect such estimates. For example, Brinson (1992) noted seven conflicts per hour of programming in prime-time dramas. In another study using the same definition of conflict, Brinson and Winn (1997) recorded 4.08 conflicts per hour in a sample of 40 hours of daytime talk shows. Additionally, mediated examples of familial and relational conflict abound as illustrated by Comstock and Strzyzewski (1990), who found 8.79 conflicts per hour in television programming known to have family and close personal relationships as primary plot elements. However, using a definition of

conflict that rested only on overt instances of conflict (e.g., arguments) rather than covert conflict, Sherry and De Souza (2005) noted only 1.05 conflicts per hour, in 92 hours of the ten most popular programs with adolescent viewers.

Content analyses have further investigated gender differences in the portrayals of conflict on television. In most instances, the conflict occurs between male and female characters, as opposed to male-male interactions or female-female interactions. Fine (1981) argues that the tendency to show male and female characters arguing with each other supports a "battle of the sexes" outlook on romantic relationships. Conflict is most often initiated by the female character (Comstock & Strzyzewski, 1990; Sherry & De Souza, 2005), who attributes the cause to the male partner (Sherry & De Souza, 2005). In television programs popular with adolescents, Sherry and De Souza found that female characters engaged in distributive conflict resolution strategies (e.g., patronizing comments, chastisement, defensive actions) more often than men, whereas men engaged in more integrative resolution behaviors (e.g., apologizing, changing behavior).

On the whole, Sherry and De Souza (2005) found that the more negative and malicious distributive resolution behaviors, which would include behaviors related to asserting power or control over others, were more typical than the more positive integrative resolution behaviors. Lee (2008) found similar results examining confrontation between married couples in South Korea television drama shows. In contrast, Comstock and Strzyzewski (1990) found that prosocial means to resolve conflicts were more common than negative means. Still, Comstock and Strzyzewski cautioned against assuming prosocial effects on viewers because the prosocial fare in their sample was not as interesting or visually stimulating as the antisocial acts.

Effects of Television Exposure on Beliefs about Interpersonal Relationships

Although young people are likely to be affected by a variety of media sources, including music, movies, and the Internet (Pardun et al., 2005), they still spend more time with television than any other type of mass medium (Roberts, Foehr, & Rideout, 2005). Although research has not investigated the links between television exposure and relational conflict, several correlational studies have examined the relations between television viewing and beliefs about romantic relationships. For example, Segrin and Nabi (2002) reported that adults who watch programs that contain references to romantic relationships hold more idealized beliefs about marriage; however, overall television viewing was negatively related to these conceptions. Amount of television viewing was also shown to be positively associated with several dysfunctional relationship beliefs, including the beliefs that (a) men and women differ substantially in personalities and relationships needs, (b) it is critically important to find a perfect sexual partner/experience, and (c) partners can change neither themselves nor the qualities of their relationships (Haferkamp, 1999).

Eggermont (2004) found a link between television viewing and characteristics desired in a romantic partner. He showed that overall television viewing was positively associated with

believing that both physical appearance and a pleasant personality were important in romantic relationships. Eggermont, Beullens, and van den Bulck (2005) expanded on this finding that watching drama on television led to lower body satisfaction in adolescent girls and concerns on what boys find attractive about girls.

Theoretical Grounding: Cultivation Theory

In discussing the implication of the results of their content analysis that investigated interpersonal conflicts on television, Comstock and Strzyzewski (1990) argue, "television has the potential to influence interaction in close personal relationships" (p. 263). Such an argument rests on the theoretical foundation of cultivation theory (e.g., Gerbner et al., 2002), which supports the premise that observations of interactions among television characters has the potential to influence viewers' stereotypes, role learning, aggression, and worldviews.

According to cultivation theory (e.g., Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1980), television has monopolized and subsumed other sources of information, ideas, and consciousness for heavy TV viewers. Thus, the theory predicts that heavy television viewers will develop beliefs and that are in line with this "TV" view of reality. Extending this argument to the current study, we might suggest that television's heavy emphasis on conflict in romantic relationships cultivates a perception that conflict and control in romantic relationships is normal and therefore acceptable.

Importantly, most cultivation studies show only moderate or small effects. A meta-analysis of cultivation research found significant but small cultivation effects (average effect size = .09), and they argue that despite the seemingly small average effect, the results should not be treated as trivial (Morgan & Shanahan, 1997).

A strict interpretation of cultivation theory would hold that viewers digest a lifelong, continuous flood of homogenous messages on television, and mere exposure to television—irrespective of particular content, genre, or themes—cultivates beliefs in line with television reality (e.g., Gerbner et al., 1980). Yet, critics have suggested cultivation effects may be better conceptualized as content specific rather than the result of total television viewing (Gunter,1994; Rubin, Perse, & Taylor, 1988). For example, Potter and Chang (1990) found that exposure to specific types of programs is a better predictor of cultivation-type outcomes, such as estimates of victimization, than overall television viewing. The rationale for this revision to cultivation theory is that viewers' exposure to the themes, characters, and plots is likely what shapes viewers' reactions, and so measurement of the content, instead of the number of hours spent in front of the television, is a more appropriate measure to test cultivation theory.

Research that would help answer this question has been mixed. In comparing general viewing and genre-specific viewing, some research has reported that general exposure has a greater impact on adolescents' romantic expectations of their partners than content-specific television (Eggermont, 2004; Haferkamp, 1999). Furthermore, Segrin and Nabi (2002) found evidence that overall television exposure and genre-specific viewing had different effects. Whereas overall

television exposure was negatively related to idealistic expectations about marriage, exposure to romantically themed television was positively related to idealistic marriage expectations. Given the lack of clarity on this issue, the present study included the amount of television viewing and content-specific viewing (exposure to television portraying interpersonal conflict). We reasoned that exposure to content that feature interpersonal conflict would affect how much control viewers use in their romantic relationships. Formally, we posited:

H_1: Exposure to television portraying interpersonal conflict will positively predict participants' use of control in romantic relationships.

However, given the diversity of portrayals of conflict in the television landscape, we did not have an a priori hypothesis about the relation between total amount of television viewing and the use of control in romantic relationships. Hence, the following research question was advanced:

RQ_1: Will the amount of television viewing predict participants' use of control in romantic relationships?

Perceived Realism and Viewing to Learn

Comstock and Strzyzewski (1990) suggested that in looking at the correlations between television exposure and real-life interpersonal interactions that researchers examine the potential moderating role of viewers' motivations to learn about the self and others and the viewers' perceived realism of television content. The rationale for doing this is based on two central arguments.

First, if we consider perceived realism and the motivation to view television to learn about the self and others to be characteristics of active viewing, then, in support of a uses-and-gratifications perspective, Rubin (2002) argued that being an active viewer means being selective, attentive, and involved, characteristics that act as catalysts for effects from television. Rubin has also shown that stronger cultivation effects are possible when media content is seen as realistic. This claim has also been supported by Potter (1986), who found that the relation between television viewing and estimates of victimization was strengthened for those who perceive television content to be realistic.

Second, when the content is perceived to be realistic, viewers may make use of information garnered through viewing entertainment television, particularly when the situations they experience are similar to those enacted by the television characters (Comstock & Strzyzewski, 1990). Essentially, when their favorite characters are engaged in romantic relationships that are punctuated by frequent conflicts, viewers may use that mediated example as a useful reference for how to act in their own romantic relationships. Busselle (2001) found support for this claim, finding that the perceived realism of behavioral actions (e.g., extramarital affairs, conflict) in television shows can help make those examples more accessible in viewer's minds. That is, perceived realism of television content can serve as a heuristic cue for people as

they bring up examples of behavior. Thus, perceiving television content to be realistic should be predictive of behaviors that are in line with these portrayals. Similarly, if viewers think that television offers information they can use to learn about themselves and others, then their feelings about romantic relationships should also be in line with television portrayals.

In the present study, we reasoned that perceived realism and viewing to learn would moderate the main relations between the television exposure variables and participants' use of control in romantic relationships.

H_2: The relation between interpersonal-conflict television exposure and participants' use of control in romantic relationships will be strongest for those who perceive television to be realistic.

H_3: The relation between interpersonal-conflict television exposure and participants' use of control in romantic relationships will be strongest for those who are motivated to watch television to learn about the self and others.

Method

Participants

In total, 592 undergraduate participants from a large, Midwestern university completed a questionnaire in exchange for extra credit in a communication or a human development and family studies (HDFS) class. The instrument for the present study was embedded in a larger study on media and interpersonal relationships.

The respondents were on average 19.83 years old ($SD = 2.37$), ranging from 17 to 43. Although a college sample obviously presents some problems with generalizability to larger populations, we decided that this was an appropriate age group because emerging adulthood, between approximately 18 to 25 years, is a developmental period in which acquiring romantic skills is believed to be a significant developmental function (Furman & Simon, 1999), especially the ability to establish stable romantic relationships (Arnett, 2000).

In total, 67.6% ($n = 398$) of the sample was female, and 32.4% ($n = 191$) was male; 86.3% ($n = 511$) of the sample identified as European American, 7.4% ($n = 44$) as African American, 2.5% ($n = 15$) as Asian American, and .5% ($n = 4$) as Latino. The remaining 2.8% ($n = 17$) did not identify with any of these categories. On a scale from 1 (*less than high school*) to 6 (*graduate degree completed*), participants reported a mean of 4.33 ($SD = 1.50$) to describe their mothers' level of education and 4.64 ($SD = 1.54$) to describe their fathers' level of education. In addition, 58.3% ($n = 345$) estimated their family's household income to be $75,000 or above.

Procedure

The survey was administered online. During recruitment, students signed up to attend a computer lab on campus at a specific time. There, the students completed their consent forms and completed the surveys in a lab session facilitated by one of the research team.

Measures

Relational control

The Control Scale (Stets, 1995) was used to measure participants' use of control in their romantic relationships. Participants were asked to report on their behaviors with their current partners or, if not currently in a romantic relationship, they were instructed to refer to their most recent past partner. Those who had never had a romantic relationship were dropped from analysis ($n = 30$). Participants reported on a 5-point scale (1 = *never*; 5 = *very often*) their agreement with 10 statements (e.g., "I set the rules in my relationship with him/her"; "I keep him/her in line"). Their responses were summed. Cronbach's α was .79.

Exposure to television portraying interpersonal conflict

The method used for measuring and calculating exposure to television programs portraying interpersonal conflict tapped a combination of *amount* of exposure and *type* of exposure. First, participants reported their habitual exposure to 100 popular television shows. Second, a separate, impartial sample of "judges" (not research participants in the main sample) subjectively rated each show according to how much interpersonal conflict they perceived the programs to contain. Third, the mean ratings supplied by the judges were multiplied by participants' frequency-of-viewing scores for each show, and these products were averaged. The resulting variables reflect both frequency of viewing and extremity of interpersonal conflict contained in the programs. Past research has used a similar procedure to measure a variety of exposure/content variables, including exposure to sexually oriented television (Aubrey et al., 2003; Brown & Newcomer, 1991), exposure to thin-ideal television (Harrison, 2000), and exposure to violent television (Huesmann, Eron, Lefkowitz, & Walder, 1973).

Frequency of viewing (0 = *never*; 5 = *always*) was measured for 100 television shows. At the time the data were collected, the television shows chosen were on the air, and they were meant to represent the diversity of television offerings, including prime-time scripted dramas and sitcoms (e.g., *The West Wing, Scrubs*), reality programs (e.g.,*Survivor*), daytime soap operas (e.g., *One Life to Live*), and day-time talk shows (e.g., *The Oprah Winfrey Show*).

A separate questionnaire was given to another sample of 60 undergraduates who were enrolled in an introductory communication class the semester after the initial data were collected. The judges rated each show on an 11-point scale for how often interpersonal conflict occurred (0 = *never*; 10 = *all the time*). The judges were given the following instructions:

Interpersonal conflict occurs whenever a person's actions or goals interfere with another's. For this study, we are particularly interested in how interpersonal conflict is portrayed on television. Examples of interpersonal conflict on television might include: arguments, backstabbing, bickering, expressions of contempt, defensive actions and reactions, disagreement, fighting, power struggles, expressions of resentment, scheming against another. Please note that this is not an exhaustive list of ways that television portrays interpersonal conflict but they are *examples* of interpersonal conflict.

Attached is a list of television programs that are currently on air or have been recently aired. For each program, we would like you to make an overall evaluation of the amount of interpersonal conflict contained in each example. Clearly, there is variation in interpersonal conflict from episode to episode or from issue to issue. Your task, however, is to assess what you perceive to be the average amount of interpersonal conflict contained in each program.

If the judges had never seen or had difficulty assessing the show, they marked a box designated "never seen or don't know." Because these ratings represent a *global* evaluation of interpersonal conflict based on the judges' *overall* impressions of the material, we were only interested in programs that could be adequately evaluated by the judges. To that end, shows with widely varying interpersonal conflict ratings (as indicated by a standard deviation of over 3 on the 11-point scale) and shows that were evaluated by fewer than half of the judges ($n = 29$) were eliminated from the analyses. Given these criteria, 26 shows were included in the final measure. The shows most highly rated in interpersonal conflict included *The Real World, The O.C.*, and *Nip/Tuck*. Shows receiving the lowest ratings on interpersonal conflict were *American Idol, CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*, and *7th Heaven*. The ratings, means, and standard deviations of the interpersonal conflict ratings are contained in Table 1.

Table 1. Ranks, Means, Standard Deviations, and Sample Sizes of Interpersonal Conflict Ratings of the Television Programs Included in Exposure to Television Portraying Interpersonal Conflict

Rank	Program	M	SD	N
1.	The Real World	8.05	1.74	58
2.	The O.C.	7.76	1.90	46
3.	Nip/Tuck	7.55	2.37	38
4.	Desperate Housewives	7.52	2.35	44
5.	Sex and the City	7.16	2.54	49
6.	Surreal Life	6.79	2.09	38
7.	The Bachelor	6.57	2.67	42
8.	The Bachelorette	6.42	2.72	38
9.	Family Guy	6.40	2.16	48
10.	America's Next Top Model	6.37	2.21	43
11.	That '70s Show	6.36	1.87	44

12.	The Apprentice	6.26	2.42	35
13.	Will & Grace	6.20	2.05	46
14/15.(tie)	Viva La Bam	6.19	2.92	37
14/15.(tie)	Grey's Anatomy	6.19	2.38	32
16.	Law and Order	5.81	2.68	31
17.	Dr. Phil	5.80	2.99	35
18.	Survivor	5.75	2.24	32
19.	Punk'd	5.74	2.74	58
20.	The Simple Life	5.64	2.64	36
21.	Fear Factor	5.61	2.21	43
22.	The Simpsons	5.60	2.45	48
23.	ER	5.32	2.05	41
24.	American Idol	5.02	2.54	54
25.	CSI: Crime Scene Investigation	5.00	2.04	34
26.	7th Heaven	4.58	2.17	47

Hours of television watched per week

Respondents were asked to report, on average, how many hours of television they watch on each "typical" day of the week. These daily reports were summed to measure total number of hours of television watched per week. Cronbach's α was .93. The combined frequency-of-viewing score for all 100 shows was positively correlated with the measure of hours of television watched per week, $r = .44$ ($p < .001$).

Perceived realism

The Perceived Realism Scale (Rubin et al., 1988) was used to determine how close to reality participants perceived television. Participants reported on a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*) their agreement with five statements about the realism with which television portrays life. Examples included "Television presents things as they really are in life" and "Television lets me really see how people live." However, one item —"If I see something on TV, I can't be sure it really is that way" — was dropped from analysis because of its low interitem correlation with the other items. Cronbach's α for the remaining four items was .73.

Viewing to learn

Four items were combined to represent viewing television to learn about the self, for example, "By watching TV, I feel I can learn about life's problems and situations" (Aubrey et al., 2003). Respondents rated their level of agreement with each statement (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*). Cronbach's α was .86.

Data Analysis

First, we examined zero-order correlations to investigate whether a variety of potential control variables were in fact correlated with relational control. We examined three categories of potential control variables: (a) demographic variables (age, sex, race, parental educational level, and family household income); (b) romantic relationship characteristics (relationship status, relational length, and relational satisfaction); and (c) personality characteristics (trait aggression, extroversion, and neuroticism). Variables that were significantly correlated with relational control were controlled for in subsequent regression models. Four significant correlations emerged. Relational control was significantly correlated with sex, $r(584) = .11$, $p = .007$; relational satisfaction, $r(417) = -.18$, $p < .001$; trait aggression, $r(583) = .15$, $p < .001$; and neuroticism, $r(583) = -.18$, $p < 001$. Based on these results, we controlled for the influence of each of these variables. [1]

The second step of data analysis was to examine the zero-order correlations between the television exposure variables (amount of TV viewing, exposure to television portraying interpersonal conflict) and relational control. Perceived realism and the viewing-to-learn motivation were also correlated with relational control.

The third and final stage in data analysis was to conduct hierarchical regression models, in which the control variables were entered in the first step, overall television viewing was entered in the second step, and the content-specific exposure variable was entered in the third step for Hypothesis 1. For Hypotheses 2 and 3, the content-specific exposure variable was entered in the first step, perceived realism and viewing to learn were entered in the second step, and the interactions between these variables were entered in the third.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

For each television show included in the interpersonal-conflict television measure, there was a possible range of 0 (no exposure to a show) to 50 (a show that was rated as a "10" in interpersonal conflict and a "5" in frequency of viewing). The actual scores ranged from 0 to 28.17 with a mean of 6.84 ($SD = 3.72$). With a possible range of 0 to 50, the scores on relational control ranged between 2 to 43, with a mean of 21.15 ($SD = 5.89$).

On an agreement scale from 1 to 5 for both perceived realism and for the viewing-to-learn motivation, respondents reported a 2.22 ($SD = 0.70$) on perceived realism and 2.57 ($SD = 0.86$) on viewing to learn.

Hypothesis 1: Relations Between Television Exposure and Relational Control

Hypothesis 1 predicted that exposure to interpersonal conflict on television would predict relational control. First, we found a weak but statistically significant zero-order correlation

between exposure to television portraying interpersonal conflict and relational control, $r(582) = .11$, $p = .01$.

In the next stage of analysis, the results of a hierarchical regression model showed that sex, relational satisfaction, trait aggression, and neuroticism were significantly related to relational control. Specifically, women reported more relational control,[2] trait aggression positively predicted relational control, and relational satisfaction and neuroticism both negatively predicted relational control.[3] The addition of amount of television viewing in Step 2 did not significantly add to the model (adjusted $R^2_{change} = .00$). In the third step, the results indicated that viewing television that portrayed interpersonal conflict positively predicted relational control, as predicted. Thus, these results provide support for Hypothesis 1.

Research Question 1: Relations Between Amount of Television Viewing and Relational Control

In contrast to the content-specific television viewing, amount of television watched per week was not significantly correlated with relational control, $r(582) = -.02$. As shown in Table 2, amount of television viewing did not significantly predict relational control.

Table 2. Hierarchical Regression Models Examining Relations between Television Exposure Variables and Relational Control

	Relational control
Step 1	
Sex	.19***
Relational satisfaction	−.13**
Trait aggression	.21***
Neuroticism	−.14**
Adjusted R²	.10***
Step 2	
Amount of TV viewing	−.04
Δ Adjusted R²	.00
Step 3	
TV portraying interpersonal conflict	.12*
Δ Adjusted R²	.01
Note. N = 562. Coefficients are standardized Betas (ß). *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.	

Hypotheses 2 and 3: Exploring the Moderating Impact of Perceived Realism and Viewing to Learn

Hypotheses 2 and 3 stated that the relations between interpersonal-conflict television viewing and relational control would be strongest for those who perceive television to be realistic and for

those who are motivated to watch television to learn about the self and others. The results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Examining Perceived Realism and the Viewing to Learn Motivation as Moderators in the Relationship between Interpersonal-conflict TV Exposure and Relational Control

	Relational control
Step 1	
Interpersonal-conflict TV viewing	.11**
Adjusted R^2	.01*
Step 2	
Perceived realism	.06
Viewing to learn	.13**
Δ Adjusted R^2	.02+
Step 3	
Interpersonal-conflict TV viewing* Perceived realism	.44*
Interpersonal-conflict TV viewing* Viewing to learn	.12
Δ Adjusted R^2	.03*
Note. N = 562. Coefficients are standardized Betas (ß). + $p < .10$. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.	

A statistically significant interaction emerged suggesting perceived realism moderates the relation between exposure to interpersonal-conflict TV and relational control. To further investigate this interaction, the slopes of the lines for those who were high in perceived realism (one *SD* above the mean) were compared to those who were average (mean) and low (one *SD* below the mean) on perceived realism. The lines are graphed in Figure 1. As predicted, the relation between interpersonal-conflict television exposure and relational control appears to be strongest for those who perceive television to be realistic. Thus, Hypothesis 2 was supported.

Figure 1. Perceived realism as moderator between interpersonal-conflict TV viewing and relational control.
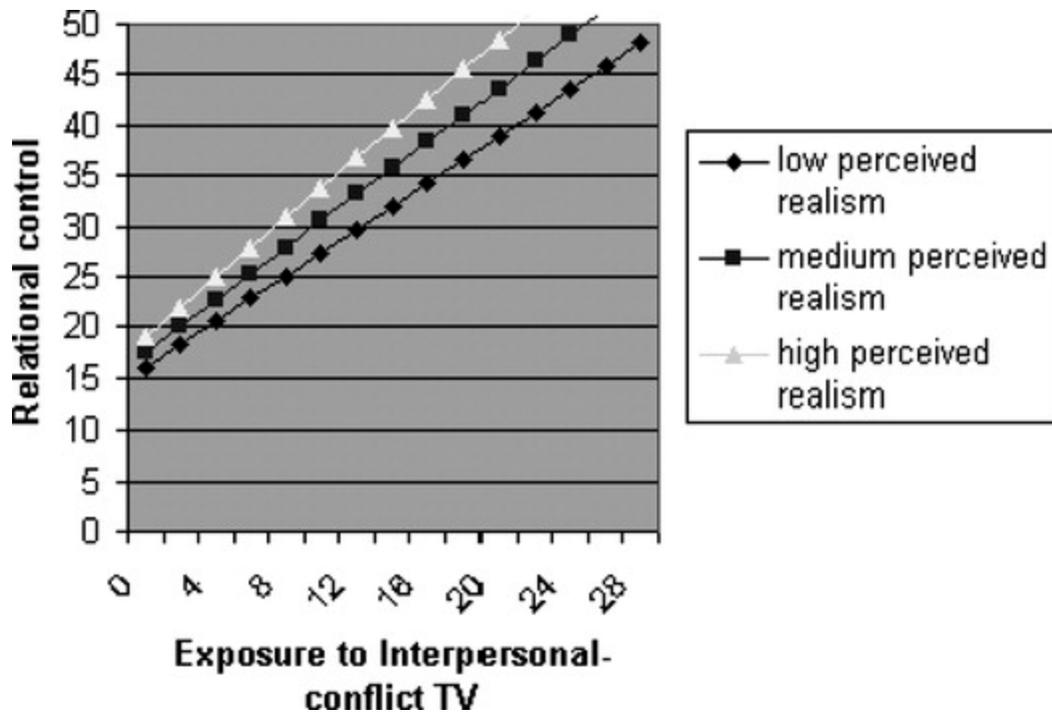
There was no evidence of the viewing to learn motivation moderating the relations between television exposure and relational control; thus, Hypothesis 3 was not supported by the results.

Discussion

The results of the present study supported our main hypothesis that exposure to interpersonal conflict on television positively predicted the use of relational control in romantic relationships. This finding might be a result of two processes. First, as supported by the content analytical work by Sherry and De Souza (2005), conflict on television is typically shown in ways that highlight acts of relational control (e.g., domineeringness, dominance). Thus, exposure to interpersonal conflict might be related to relational control because these two concepts (conflict and control) become semantically and behaviorally entangled. Moreover, because conflict is defined as parties competing for incompatible goals, control becomes an integral part to resolving the conflict. The findings of the present study certainly support individuals' tendencies to relate interpersonal conflict with relational control. Second, as supported by research on romantic couples (Stets, 1993, 1995), television might cultivate a perception that interpersonal conflict and exertions of control in romantic relationships are normative and expected. To the extent that conflicts make people feel a lack of control over their environment, exerting relational control allows for the person to maintain a sense of mastery in the relationships and thus compensate for the lack of control (Stets, 1995). The findings here suggest that mediated examples may indeed cultivate such a belief.

Clearly, the size of this relationship was relatively small. However, in the context of cultivation theory (Gerbner et al.,2002), we should expect but not dismiss relatively small relations between television viewing and real-world perceptions.

[T]he discovery of a systematic pattern of even small but pervasive differences between light and heavy viewers may be of far-reaching consequence. It takes but a few degrees shift in the average temperature to have an ice age or global warming. (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1994, p. 26)

Thus, cultivation can be thought of as a subtle process, but because television exposure to consistent themes is likely to be cumulative, reinforcing expectations and beliefs about romantic relationships, it is still socially and culturally significant.

To further consider these findings from a theoretical perspective, paired with cultivation theory, we argue that it is helpful to consider a "scripts" approach to romantic conflict. According to the cognitive information-processing model (Huesmann, 1997), viewers store information about how to handle interpersonal conflicts in the form of cognitive scripts, develop attitudes and expectations based on this information and activate them when the appropriate situation arises. For example, if a viewer observes a character, especially a character who is the same gender and is someone with whom he or she could identify, engaging in conflict with a romantic partner and then receiving a positive consequence for that behavior (e.g., receiving attention, winning the argument, establishing control in the relationship), the script encoded by the viewer could also include cues about how the viewer should behave in a romantic conflict. In turn, the encoding of the appropriateness of romantic control could ultimately reinforce his or her acceptance of using romantic control in his or her own relationships. Continued use of relational control would depend on the extent to which the retrieved script produces a desirable outcome.

To bring in the premises of cultivation theory (Gerbner et al., 2002), scripts are firmly established by being reinforced (Huesmann, 1997), such as prolonged, continuous exposure to consistent themes on television tying relationship conflict and control together in the minds of viewers. Each exposure to the mediated conflict script can activate the individual's own encoded scripts, and with each activation, the need to exert relational control might grow stronger and more valid (Ward, 2003). In light of this explanation, the present study does not grasp the subtleties of that process and, instead, measures only the stimulus (i.e., television exposure) and the ultimate expected outcome (i.e., relational control). In the future, we will test these relations with more attention paid to how scripts and schemata might guide romantic interactions.

The present study also demonstrated evidence of the moderating impact of perceived realism on the main relations between interpersonal-conflict television viewing and relational control. The relations between these variables were strongest for people who scored the highest on the perceived realism measure. This finding supports Potter's (1986) work on how perceived realism affects the cultivation process. In essence, the extent to which television "cultivates" a

controlling view on romantic relationships is at least somewhat contingent on the degree of perceived realism that viewers hold. Thus, perhaps the combination that best explains the use of relational control among college students is watching a lot of television that is high on interpersonal conflict and perceiving that content to be realistic.

This research also supports previous research that suggests that cultivation effects are better conceptualized as content-specific rather than the result of total amount of television exposure. In essence, we suggest that viewers' own romantic relationships are probably affected by the actual portrayals of romantic conflict, which provide detailed scripts about appropriate ways to act in romantic relationships, rather than the total number of hours viewers spend in front of the television. That is, examining the content, instead of mere frequency of exposure, is more appropriate because this measurement strategy actually taps the portrayals of interpersonal conflict that are likely to inform viewers' own interactions in their romantic relationships.

Limitations and Future Directions

The most obvious methodological limitation of the current project is its cross-sectional design. Although we argue that television exposure precedes relational control, we cannot rule out the possibility that the actual causal order is reversed. In other words, it is possible that people who are controlling in their relationships seek out television that portrays a great deal of interpersonal conflict.

Furthermore, regarding measurement, the advantage of the interpersonal-conflict television exposure variable was that it captured both the frequency and intensity of exposure to interpersonal conflict on television. However, the measure does not offer a distinction between viewers who watch a little television with a lot of conflict versus viewers who watch a lot of television with a little conflict. Consideration of Greenberg's (1988) conceptualization of "drench" effects versus "drip-drip" effects is relevant here. According to this perspective, media portrayals can affect viewers by either providing a small number of very salient models that are particularly influential to viewers, or media portrayals can continuously feature the same types of models of behavior and thus affect them in a slow, "drip-drip" fashion. Based on the current study, we do not know if one particular model of relational control is most salient to viewers (i.e., a "drench" effect) or if the portrayals of a lot of romantic relationships with relatively little interpersonal conflict (i.e., a "drip-drip" effect) are shaping viewers' perceptions of their own romantic relationships.

Clearly, future work should examine a younger age group. Perhaps a younger sample would have yielded stronger relations between the television exposure variables and relational control. The influence of television on a romantic relationship might be stronger for adolescents and teens because they are forming social norms and schemas of romantic relationship behaviors (Eggermont, 2004).

We would also like to extend this work by examining differing types of relational perceptions that could be shaped by television exposure, such as scripts about how to behave during conflicts and how much conflict is accepted and/or expected in romantic relationships. Because effects of this nature are likely to be cumulative, occurring over time, certainly, such research questions would also benefit from longitudinal work.

Despite limitations of the present study, the results are provocative in that they suggest that the theme of interpersonal conflict in television, which cuts across genre and format, is correlated to controlling behaviors in romantic relationships. Although content analyses have examined romantic conflicts in various television genres (e.g., Comstock & Strzyzewski, 1990; Greenberg et al., 1980; Sherry & De Souza, 2005), we believe the present study represents an initial step in understanding how exposure to these conflicts relates to viewers' behaviors toward their romantic partners and their expectations of their actual romantic relationships.

Notes

Note. $N = 562$. Coefficients are standardized Betas (ß).

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

Note. $N = 562$. Coefficients are standardized Betas (ß).

[+] $p < .10$. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

Sex was coded as $0 =$ men and $1 =$ women. Relational satisfaction was assessed with the following question (only for those reporting being involved in a romantic relationship), "How would you describe the degree of happiness in your relationship?" Responses were coded on a 6-point scale (1 = *extremely unhappy*; 6 = *extremely happy*). Trait aggression was measured with the Trait Aggressiveness Scale (Buss & Perry, 1992; sample $\alpha = .83$), and the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire-Revised (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1975) measured neuroticism (sample $\alpha = .70$).

Given that previous research suggests that women will be less likely to favor interpersonal conflict in romantic relationships because it does not easily fit with cultural expectations of femininity (Brinson, 1992; Brinson & Winn,1997), we also tested for sex differences in the results. Specifically, we also ran regression models entering the interaction between sex and the television exposure variables. None of the interactions were statistically significant, so we do not report them here.

These main effects on relational control support previous work in the relational communication literature. For further discussion, see Daly (2002), Olson, Baoicchi-Wagner, Kratzer, and Symonds (2012), and Rogers, Castleton, and Lloyd (1996).

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