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Age-Related Changes in Demand – Withdraw Communication Behaviors

Demand–withdraw communication is a set of conflict-related behaviors in which one partner blames or pressures while the other partner withdraws or avoids. The present study examined age-related changes in these behaviors longitudinally over the course of later life stages. One hundred twenty-seven middle-aged and older long-term married couples were observed at 3 time points across 13 years as they engaged in a conversation about an area of relationship conflict. Husbands’ and wives’ demand–withdraw behaviors (i.e., blame, pressure, withdrawal, avoidance) were objectively rated by trained coders at each time point. Data were analyzed using dyad-level latent growth curve models in a structural equation modeling framework. For both husbands and wives, the results showed a longitudinal pattern of increasing avoidance behavior over time and stability in all other demand and withdraw behaviors. This study supports the notion that there is an important developmental shift in the way that conflict is handled in later life.

Managing conflict is one of the central tasks of maintaining a marriage. In the face of disagreement, some couples are able to engage in constructive dialogue that facilitates conflict resolution, whereas others display more maladaptive behaviors that can take a serious toll on the relationship (Fincham, 2003; Weiss & Heyman, 1997). Whereas a great deal of research has focused on examining the causes and consequences of communication behaviors during conflict (Bradbury, Fincham, & Beach, 2000; Gottman & Notarius, 2002), comparatively little is known about how such behaviors *change* over time as couples move into later life stages. This was the starting point for the present study, which examined longitudinal changes in demand–withdraw behaviors among middle-aged and older long-term married couples.

DEMAND–WITHDRAW COMMUNICATION

One specific set of behaviors thought to be particularly disruptive for relationships has been termed the *demand–withdraw communication pattern* (e.g., Eldridge & Christensen, 2002). Demand–withdraw is characterized by a set of behaviors in which one partner tries to discuss problems, criticizes or blames their partner for problems, or pressures the partner to change. Conversely, the other partner tries to avoid discussion of the problem or passively withdraws from the interaction (e.g., Christensen, 1988; Eldridge

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1 & Christensen, 2002). Demand–withdraw is
 2 common during relationship conflicts and has
 3 been described as one of the central, most
 4 intractable, and destructive patterns of marital
 5 interaction (Heavey, Layne, & Christensen,
 6 1993).

7 Reports of demand–withdraw-type patterns
 8 (i.e., the nagging wife and the emotionally with-
 9 drawn husband) have been present in the mar-
 10 ital literature for decades (e.g., Fogarty, 1976;
 11 Napier, 1978; Terman, Bittenwieser, Ferguson,
 12 Johnson, & Wilson, 1938). Empirical research
 13 in this area benefited from an influential series of
 14 studies conducted by Christensen and colleagues
 15 in the 1980s and 1990s (e.g., Christensen, 1988;
 16 Christensen & Heavey, 1990). Early on, research
 17 showed an association between the frequency of
 18 reported demand–withdraw behavior and marital
 19 dissatisfaction, as well as a tendency toward
 20 gender differentiation in demand–withdraw
 21 roles (i.e., wives demanding and husbands with-
 22 drawing; Christensen & Shenk, 1991). Sub-
 23 sequent studies supported these findings and
 24 expanded on this original work in important
 25 ways. For example, observational measures of
 26 demand and withdraw behaviors (e.g., Caugh-
 27 lin & Vangelisti, 2000; Christensen & Heavey,
 28 1993; Vogel & Karney, 2002) began to appear,
 29 an advance that contributed depth, richness,
 30 and theoretical clarity to this area of research
 31 (Gottman & Notarius, 2002). In addition, new
 32 findings emerged showing the relationship of
 33 demand–withdraw to marital violence (e.g.,
 34 Berns, Jacobson, & Gottman, 1999; Holtzworth-
 35 Munroe, Smutzler, & Stuart, 1998), the pres-
 36 ence of demand–withdraw across cultures (e.g.,
 37 Christensen, Eldridge, Catta-Preta, Lim, & San-
 38 tagata, 2006; Rehman & Holtzworth-Munroe,
 39 2006), and the factors that contribute to gender
 40 differentiation in demand–withdraw behaviors
 41 (e.g., Eldridge, Sevier, Jones, Atkins, & Chris-
 42 tensen, 2007; Holley, Sturm, & Levenson, 2010).

43 Despite the numerous studies that have
 44 investigated demand–withdraw behaviors,
 45 important gaps in the literature remain, includ-
 46 ing most notably (a) a lack of research on
 47 demand–withdraw behaviors in middle-aged
 48 and older couples (including those in long-term
 49 marriages) and (b) the lack of longitudinal
 50 research on how demand–withdraw behaviors
 51 change as couples age. In a review of marital
 52 research in the 20th century, Gottman and
 53 Notarius (2002) noted that the existing obser-
 54 vational research on marital interactions has

1 been overwhelmingly conducted with relatively
 2 young couples. Life span developmental
 3 research clearly shows that individuals and
 4 relationships continue to change across the life
 5 span (Carstensen, Mayr, Pasupathi, & Nessel-
 6 roade, 2000; Mares & Fitzpatrick, 1995). For
 7 example, relationships in general and marital
 8 relationships in particular assume increasing
 9 importance at later stages of life (Carstensen,
 10 Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999) and strongly
 11 affect social, emotional, and physical well-being
 12 (Bookwala, 2005; Walker & Luszcz, 2009).
 13 Thus, research on demand–withdraw behaviors
 14 may benefit from a life span developmental
 15 perspective (e.g., Eldridge & Baucom, 2012).

17 CHANGES IN DEMAND–WITHDRAW 18 BEHAVIORS IN MIDLIFE AND LATE LIFE 19

20 As couples age, the challenges and tasks
 21 they face are quite different than those
 22 faced by their younger counterparts (Erikson,
 23 1950, 1982). By midlife (defined here as age
 24 40–50), spouses are often dealing with life
 25 tasks involving raising families and assuming
 26 increasing responsibilities in the workplace, and
 27 they are coping with greater role strain than
 28 at any other life stage (Burr, 1972; Lachman,
 29 2004). In later life stages (defined here as age
 30 60 or over), many of these responsibilities have
 31 subsided as children have left the home and
 32 individuals have retired from work (e.g., Moen,
 33 Kim, & Hofmeister, 2001; Orbuch, House,
 34 Mero, & Webster, 1996). New difficulties can
 35 arise in late life, however, due to changes
 36 in living arrangements, reductions in income,
 37 declining health and vitality, and shrinking social
 38 networks (e.g., Barnes & Parry, 2004; Burman
 39 & Margolin, 1992; Wrzus, Hanel, Wagner, &
 40 Neyer, 2013). As couples move through these
 41 developmental periods, emotional and relational
 42 changes occur that may profoundly influence
 43 the ways that spouses handle relationship
 44 conflict (Pruchno & Rosenbaum, 2003). In this
 45 regard, life span developmental perspectives
 46 offer suggestions as to the type of age-related
 47 changes that may occur in demand–withdraw
 48 behaviors as couples move through later life
 49 stages.

50 One perspective stems from the *socioemo-*
 51 *tional selectivity theory* (SST; Carstensen, 1991;
 52 Carstensen et al., 2000). With regard to norma-
 53 tive aging populations, this theory posits that
 54 the motivation to seek emotionally meaningful

1 experience and to regulate emotion increases
 2 with age, driven in part by a sense of time
 3 in life becoming more limited. SST does not
 4 imply that disagreements do not exist in late
 5 life; instead, it suggests that that in later phases
 6 of life disagreements may not result in relation-
 7 ship conflict because heated arguments may be
 8 viewed as relatively unimportant or as serving
 9 little purpose (Carstensen, Graff, Levenson, &
 10 Gottman, 1996). SST has received broad sup-
 11 port in many different domains (Carstensen,
 12 2006). This includes marital research, which
 13 has shown fewer areas of disagreement in
 14 older compared to middle-aged couples (Lev-
 15 enson, Carstensen, & Gottman, 1993) and
 16 an age-related decline in affectively negative
 17 interactions (Carstensen, Gottman, & Leven-
 18 son, 1995; Gilford & Bengston, 1979). Given
 19 these shifts toward a greater orientation toward
 20 meaningful experiences, fewer areas of dis-
 21 agreement, and less negative interactions, the
 22 SST perspective suggests that conflict-related
 23 demand–withdraw behaviors would decrease
 24 in later life.

25 Although studies on aging and interpersonal
 26 interactions have rarely examined married
 27 couples, research in this tradition suggests there
 28 may actually be a more differentiated pattern
 29 of change in demand behaviors and withdraw
 30 behaviors. For example, studies by Birditt
 31 and Fingerman (2005) and Blanchard-Fields
 32 (2007) have indicated that older adults report
 33 more use of avoidance and denial strategies
 34 during interpersonal problems as compared to
 35 younger adults, particularly in situations when
 36 such strategies may benefit the relationship.
 37 To the extent that withdrawing may serve the
 38 socioemotional goals of reducing conflict and
 39 maintaining the relationship, a refined reading
 40 of SST suggests that demand behaviors may
 41 decrease over time, whereas withdraw behaviors
 42 may increase over time.

43 Support for a pattern of age-related increase
 44 in withdraw behaviors also comes from life
 45 span developmental models of motivation
 46 and regulation (Brandtstadter & Rothermund,
 47 2002; Haase, Heckhausen, & Wrosch, 2013;
 48 Heckhausen, Wrosch, & Schulz, 2010). These
 49 theories propose that, as individuals grow older,
 50 they become more prone to disengage from
 51 offending situations and unattainable goals, such
 52 as things that they may not be able to change.
 53 Numerous studies in this area support (a) an
 54 increase in goal disengagement with age and

(b) the vast benefits of goal disengagement 1
 in late life for subjective well-being and even 2
 physical health (e.g., Brassen, Gamer, Peters, 3
 Gluth, & Buchel, 2012; Heckhausen et al., 2010; 4
 Wrosch, 2011). If this perspective is applied 5
 to disagreements in long-term married couples, 6
 it may be that spouses increase over time 7
 in withdraw behaviors (i.e., passive nonverbal 8
 withdrawal, active avoidance) that serve the 9
 function of disengagement from unattainable 10
 goals (e.g., the resolution of a long-standing 11
 area of conflict). Therefore, for couples in later 12
 life, withdrawing from conflict may occur more 13
 frequently and be helpful for both the individual 14
 spouses and the relationship. 15

16 Few studies have directly examined 16
 demand–withdraw behaviors across the life 17
 span. Studies that have examined behaviors 18
 conceptually similar to demand–withdraw 19
 have used either cross-sectional designs (Henry, 20
 Berg, Smith, & Florsheim, 2007) or short-term 21
 longitudinal designs with younger couples 22
 (Kurdek, 1995; Noller, Feeney, Bonnell, & 23
 Callan, 1994). Thus, the question of how 24
 demand–withdraw behaviors change in later 25
 life has remained unanswered. 26

27 THE PRESENT STUDY 28

29 The present study examined how 30
 demand–withdraw behaviors change in 31
 later life, a question of great importance to 32
 both marital and life span developmental 33
 research. In a sample of middle-aged and older 34
 couples in long-term first marriages, demand 35
 and withdraw behaviors were examined at 36
 three time points, spanning a 13-year period. 37
 The study used a correlational research design 38
 as we sought to study naturally occurring 39
 changes in demand–withdraw behaviors over 40
 time. This study advanced the literature by 41
 (a) examining longitudinal changes in demand 42
 and withdraw behaviors (thereby overcoming 43
 the limitations of cross-sectional designs, which 44
 confound age and cohort effects), (b) examining 45
 a middle-aged and an older cohort (to determine 46
 whether patterns of change generalized across 47
 age groups), (c) using objective behavioral cod- 48
 ing of demand–withdraw behaviors obtained 49
 at each time point (rather than relying on 50
 self-report data), and (d) assessing changes 51
 in demand–withdraw behaviors for husbands 52
 and wives using dyadic latent growth curve 53
 modeling (Olsen & Kenny, 2006). 54

1 Finally, demand and withdraw behaviors were
 2 examined separately. Prior research has often
 3 considered these behaviors in tandem (e.g.,
 4 measuring total demand–withdraw behaviors
 5 or characterizing a particular gendered pattern,
 6 such as wife-demand/husband-withdraw). These
 7 approaches may mask important differences in
 8 how demand and withdraw behaviors change
 9 during later life stages. As Sevier, Simpson, and
 10 Christensen (2004) noted, “Individual measures
 11 have advantages over couple level measures
 12 as they do not carry any implication of a
 13 contingency based on partner’s behavior and
 14 avoid the problem of obscuring different patterns
 15 within similar couple level scores” (p. 166).

16 The hypotheses were based on the life
 17 span developmental theories reviewed above.
 18 For withdraw behaviors (passive nonverbal
 19 withdrawal and active avoidance of conflict
 20 discussions), we predicted an increase over
 21 time for both spouses. For demand behaviors
 22 (blaming the partner and pressuring for change),
 23 we predicted a decrease over time for both
 24 spouses.

27 METHOD

28 *Participants*

29 The sample consisted of middle-aged and older
 30 couples who participated in a longitudinal
 31 study of long-term marriages. Participants were
 32 originally recruited through advertisements in
 33 San Francisco Bay Area newspapers and other
 34 media sources. To participate, couples had to
 35 meet the following six criteria: (a) spouses
 36 were either between the ages of 40 and 50
 37 and married at least 15 years, or between 60
 38 and 70 and married at least 35 years; (b) age
 39 difference between spouses was less than 5
 40 years; (c) spouses’ marital satisfaction scores
 41 were within 20 points of each other; (d) the
 42 primary wage earner was not retired; (e) English
 43 was the primary spoken language; and (f) a
 44 score of 7 or below on the Michigan Alcoholism
 45 Screening Test (Selzer, 1971).

46 Recruitment procedures were designed so
 47 that the final sample was representative of the
 48 demographics of the Bay Area in terms of
 49 religion, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status and
 50 represented a range of marital satisfaction levels.
 51 Comparable numbers of relatively satisfied
 52 and dissatisfied couples were recruited for
 53 the middle-aged and older subsamples. The

1 limitations in differences between spouses in age
 2 and marital satisfaction were included so that the
 3 sample would be representative of the modal
 4 long-term marriage (i.e., spouses relatively
 5 close in age and satisfaction). Similarly, the
 6 sampling strategy confounded age with marital
 7 duration because the goal of the study was to
 8 examine long-term first marriages, wherein age
 9 and marital duration are typically associated.
 10 Several prior publications have used data
 11 from this study (e.g., Levenson et al., 1993;
 12 Levenson, Carstensen, & Gottman, 1994; Shiota
 13 & Levenson, 2007). No prior publication,
 14 however, has reported the demand–withdraw
 15 behavior coding, which was not part of the
 16 original study but was added after the third wave
 17 of data collection was completed.

19 *Sample Characteristics Across Time*

20
 21
 22 *Initial sample at Time 1 (1989).* The total sam-
 23 ple consisted of 156 couples (82 middle-age
 24 couples, 74 older couples); see Table 1 for a
 25 summary of sample demographic characteris-
 26 tics. The ethnic distribution of the couples was
 27 86% Caucasian, 4% Black, 3% Hispanic, 3%
 28 Asian, and 4% other. Most participants were
 29 Protestant or Catholic (62%), and had relatively
 30 high socioeconomic status. The majority of
 31 couples (149) had children.

32
 33 *Time 2 (1995).* One hundred twenty-five
 34 (80.1%) of the original 156 couples participated
 35 in the laboratory assessment. Of the rest, five
 36 couples had divorced; one or both spouses was
 37 deceased in 10 couples; and nine couples either
 38 chose not to participate or could not be contacted.

39
 40 *Time 3 (2001).* Ninety (57.7%) of the original
 41 156 couples participated in the laboratory
 42 assessment. At the time of assessment, eight
 43 couples had divorced; one or both spouses was
 44 deceased in 26 couples; and 21 couples either
 45 chose not to participate or could not be contacted.

46
 47 *Final sample.* The final sample consisted of
 48 127 couples (63 middle-aged, 64 older) who
 49 participated in at least two of the three laboratory
 50 assessments; this represented 81.4% of the
 51 original sample. To determine the equivalence of
 52 the final sample with those who were excluded,
 53 we conducted *t* tests to compare these groups
 54 on the variables of age, length of relationship,

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Initial Sample and Final Sample of Couples at Time 1

Characteristic	Initial sample		Final sample	
	Middle-aged (<i>n</i> = 82)	Older (<i>n</i> = 74)	Middle-aged (<i>n</i> = 63)	Older (<i>n</i> = 64)
Mean age, husbands (<i>SD</i>)	44.9 (2.9)	64.3 (3.1)	44.6 (2.8)	64.0 (3.0)
Mean age, wives (<i>SD</i>)	43.8 (2.9)	62.8 (3.3)	43.7 (2.9)	62.5 (3.0)
Mean marital duration (<i>SD</i>)	21.3 (3.5)	40.5 (3.7)	21.1 (3.5)	40.2 (3.4)
Mean number of children (<i>SD</i>)	2.2 (1.0)	3.2 (1.4)	2.1 (1.0)	3.3 (1.4)
Percentage with children at home	78.0	14.9	77.8	14.0
Percentage of husbands working full or part time	98.8	91.9	98.4	93.8
Percentage of wives working full or part time	85.4	66.2	85.7	64.1
Percentage European American	80.5	91.9	80.2	95.2
Mean Time 1 marital satisfaction (<i>SD</i>)	108.7 (16.0)	114.1 (16.0)	110.4 (15.7)	114.3 (16.3)

Note: Marital satisfaction was calculated by averaging scores on two well-established self-report measures: (a) the Marital Adjustment Test (Locke & Wallace, 1959) and (b) the Marital Relationship Inventory (Burgess, Locke, & Thomes, 1971). For the final study sample, there were no differences between middle-aged and older couples with regard to marital satisfaction.

marital satisfaction, and demand–withdraw behaviors at Time 1; chi-square tests were conducted for ethnicity and religion. The results revealed no differences on any of these variables between the final sample and those not included ($ps > .05$). Thus, inclusion in the final sample was nonselective.

Procedure

Questionnaires. At each of the three waves of data collection, each spouse individually completed questionnaires prior to the laboratory visit. The measures assessed a number of domains, including demographic information, health, and marital satisfaction. The primary analyses for the current study used data only from the demographic questionnaire.

Laboratory assessment. The procedures for laboratory visits were derived from those originally developed by Levenson and Gottman (1983). At each of the three time points, spouses came to the laboratory and had recording devices attached for obtaining physiological measures (not part of the present study). Couples then engaged in three conversations: (a) events of the day — a general discussion of what had happened in the past day; (b) conflict — a mutually selected area of continuing disagreement in their relationship; and (c) positive — a mutually selected pleasant topic. The specific topics of the respective conversations were free to vary across time

points. Each conversation lasted 15 minutes and was preceded by a 5-minute silent period. A video recording was made of the interactions using partially hidden cameras. Spouses then attended a second laboratory session in which they watched the video recordings and provided ratings of how they were feeling during the interactions using a rating dial (also not part of the present study). Because demand–withdraw behaviors are most commonly manifest during times of disagreement, we used data only from the conflict conversations.

Measures

Demand–withdraw behaviors. Demand–withdraw behaviors during the conflict interactions were coded from the video recordings by research assistants trained in the Couples Interaction Rating System (CIRS; Heavey, Gill, & Christensen, 1996), which includes four dimensions used to measure demand–withdraw. Demand behaviors consisted of *blame* (blames, accuses, or criticizes the partner and uses critical sarcasm or character assassinations) and *pressure for change* (requests, demands, nags, or otherwise pressures for change in the partner). Withdraw behaviors consisted of *withdrawal* (withdraws, becomes silent, refuses to discuss topic, or disengages from discussion) and *avoidance* (avoids discussing the problem by hesitating, changing topics, diverting attention or delaying the discussion).

Coders watched the entire conflict interaction and provided ratings of the four behaviors using

1 a 9-point Likert scale ranging from *not at all*
 2 (1) to *a lot* (9). Coders were instructed to
 3 consider the relative intensity and frequency
 4 of the behavior when generating ratings rather
 5 than using a simple counting or tallying method.
 6 Behavioral coding took place over a 2-year
 7 period using two teams of coders. Coders were
 8 trained using videos from a separate study of
 9 marital interaction. Reliability between the two
 10 teams was high (overall interrater $\alpha = .98$ for
 11 the final week of training). Videos (from all time
 12 points) were coded in a randomized order. Each
 13 conflict interaction was coded independently by
 14 four to six coders, with two to three coders
 15 randomly assigned to either the husband or
 16 the wife. Coders met to discuss ratings on a
 17 weekly basis so as to maintain reliability over
 18 time. Interrater reliability was computed within
 19 each team. Coders demonstrated high reliability
 20 (average $\alpha = .90$ for blame, .92 for pressure, .80
 21 for withdrawal, and .83 for avoidance). The
 22 mean of the coders' scores for each of the
 23 four demand and withdraw behaviors (*blame*,
 24 *pressure*, *withdrawal*, and *avoidance*) were used
 25 in the final analyses.

Analytical Strategy

29 Data were analyzed using latent growth curve
 30 modeling (LGM) for dyads (to account for
 31 interdependence between husbands and wives)
 32 within a structural equation modeling framework
 33 following recommended procedures (Olsen &
 34 Kenny, 2006). For the analyses, we used the
 35 SPSS AMOS module (version 20.0; Arbuckle,
 36 2011). AMOS uses a full information maximum
 37 likelihood algorithm to estimate missing values.
 38 The present LGMs (one for each demand and
 39 withdraw behavior) were based on Olsen and
 40 Kenny's (2006) actor–partner interdependence
 41 LGMs for interchangeable dyads; they were
 42 adapted to account for husbands and wives being
 43 distinguishable by removing equality constraints
 44 between spouses. In LGM, two latent variables
 45 are modeled: the intercept and the slope. The
 46 intercept mean indicated the average latent mean
 47 of the respective construct at Time 1 (i.e., the
 48 initial level of the behavior). The slope mean
 49 indicated the average age-related latent change
 50 in the respective construct across Times 1, 2,
 51 and 3 (i.e., the rate of change the behavior). To
 52 test our primary hypotheses, we examined the
 53 slope mean for each of the respective demand
 54 and withdraw behaviors for husbands and wives.

FIGURE 1. THE DYADIC LATENT GROWTH CURVE MODEL.



21 Note: This conceptual dyadic LGM is based on Olsen
 22 and Kenny (2006) and adapted for distinguishable dyads.
 23 The figure shows two linear LGMs modeling changes in
 24 husbands' (H) and wives' (W) behavior simultaneously with
 25 residual variances set equal across time and autocorrelated
 26 residuals. T1 = Time 1; T2 = Time 2; T3 = Time 3;
 27 E = measurement error.

30 We identified the appropriate LGM (e.g.,
 31 linear or nonlinear) for each behavior using the
 32 following recommended procedures (e.g.,
 33 Coffman & Millsap, 2006). We started with
 34 a linear LGM with intercept loadings set to
 35 [1; 1; 1] and slope loadings set to [0; 1; 2].
 36 Figure 1 shows the dyad-level LGM with which
 37 we started. In instances where this model did not
 38 show good fit, we moved on to a nonlinear LGM
 39 with slope loadings set to [0;free;2]. Residual
 40 variances initially were constrained to be equal
 41 across waves of data collection and were relaxed
 42 to improve model fit if appropriate. Note that,
 43 for most LGMs, slope variances were not
 44 significant and sometimes negatively estimated
 45 and were therefore set to zero (without loss
 46 in model fit) as per the example of de Frias
 47 and colleagues (de Frias, Lövdén, Lindenberger,
 48 & Nilsson, 2007); accordingly, we did not
 49 include slope covariances in these cases. As
 50 an indicator of model fit, we inspected chi-
 51 square, which is a measure of absolute fit and
 52 has been recommended for samples with 75
 53 to 200 cases (Kenny, 2012). Nonsignificant chi-
 54 square values, $ps > .05$, indicated that the LGMs

showed good fit. In addition, we inspected the comparative fit index (CFI) and the root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA). CFI values above .90 indicate reasonable fit, and CFI values above .95 indicate good fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999). RMSEA values below .06 indicate good fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999).

In a set of post hoc analyses, we examined, using multigroup modeling, whether age-related changes in demand–withdraw behaviors differed across middle-aged and older cohorts. Following established procedures (e.g., Duncan & Duncan, 2004), we tested whether slope means in the dyadic LGM differed across the age groups by comparing (a) an unconstrained model and (b) a model where the slope means were constrained to be equal.

RESULTS

Preliminary Analyses

The within-spouse and between-spouse correlations between husbands' and wives' scores for each of the four demand–withdraw behaviors at Time 1 are presented in Table 2. Overall, the within-spouse intercorrelations for demand behaviors (i.e., blame and pressure) were strong (but not perfect) for both husbands and wives, and the within-spouse intercorrelations for withdraw behaviors (i.e., withdrawal and avoidance) were moderate for both spouses. These results support the notion that the specific demand–withdraw behaviors are related but distinct constructs. Table 2 also shows the mean scores for husbands' and wives' demand and withdraw behaviors at Time 1. In line with what is typically seen in opposite-sex couples who choose one conflict topic to discuss (e.g., Eldridge & Baucom, 2012; Eldridge

& Christensen, 2002), paired *t* tests indicated that wives demonstrated higher levels of blame, $t(126) = 3.54, p < .001$; and pressure, $t(126) = 3.21, p < .01$; than their husbands, whereas husbands demonstrated higher levels of withdrawal $t(126) = 3.80, p < .001$, than their wives. There were no differences between husbands and wives in avoidance, $t(126) = 1.58, p = .19$.

Figure 2 is included for descriptive purposes; it shows the mean levels for each of the demand–withdraw behaviors for middle-aged and older spouses across each of the three time points. Although the primary focus of this article is longitudinal change, we conducted a preliminary analysis to assess whether there were age group differences in the Time 1 (baseline) demand and withdraw scores. Independent-measures *t* tests showed no age group differences for any of the demand–withdraw behaviors at baseline for wives (all *ps* > .05). There were no age group differences for blame or withdraw behaviors at baseline for husbands. Middle-aged husbands, however, showed higher levels of pressure, $t(125) = 2.93, p < .01$, and lower levels of avoidance, $t(125) = 2.07, p < .05$, as compared to older husbands.

Longitudinal Changes in Demand–Withdraw Behaviors: Dyadic LGMs

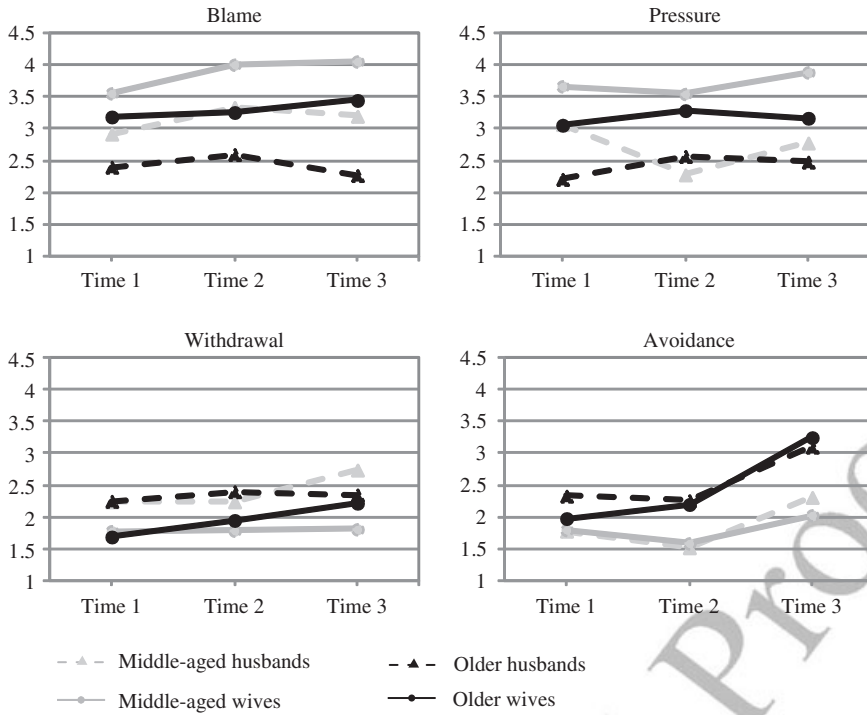
We examined how husbands' and wives' demand–withdraw behaviors changed over time in a series of dyadic LGMs (see Figure 1 for the model). The dyadic LGMs for blame, pressure, and withdraw behaviors all showed satisfactory fit according to chi-squares, all *ps* > .05 (see Table 3), as well as the additional fit indexes (blame: CFI = 1.00, RMSEA = .000; pressure: CFI = .92, RMSEA = .039;

Table 2. Husbands' (H) and Wives' (W) Demand and Withdraw Behaviors: Descriptive Statistics and Intercorrelations at Time 1 (N = 127)

Variable	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. H blame	2.66 (1.8)	—							
2. H pressure	2.64 (1.7)	.63***	—						
3. H withdrawal	2.25 (1.4)	.07	-.05	—					
4. H avoidance	2.06 (1.5)	-.08	-.07	.28**	—				
5. W blame	3.34 (2.3)	.40***	.21*	.14	-.18*	—			
6. W pressure	3.36 (2.1)	.17	.14	.28**	-.17	.61***	—		
7. W withdrawal	1.73 (1.0)	-.01	.09	.25**	.30**	.01	-.12	—	
8. W avoidance	1.89 (1.3)	.06	.10	.15	.67***	-.17	-.18*	.39***	—

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

FIGURE 2. DEMAND AND WITHDRAW BEHAVIORS BY SPOUSE AND COHORT AT TIMES 1, 2, AND 3.



withdrawal: CFI = .96, RMSEA = .050; avoidance: CFI = .98, RMSEA = .040). For both husbands and wives, the results showed no significant changes in blame, pressure, and withdraw behaviors over time, as indicated by nonsignificant slope means (see Table 3).

Because of strong interdependence between husbands' and wives' avoidance behavior (i.e., the correlation between husbands' and wives' avoidance intercept was .82, and the dyadic LGM did not converge because of this high multicollinearity), it seemed more appropriate to specify the LGM for avoidance behavior at the couple level. Thus, we specified a couple-level LGM by averaging husbands' and wives' avoidance behavior at each time point and obtained scores for couples' avoidance behavior. The resulting couple-level LGM demonstrated a good fit, $\chi^2(2) = 2.41, p = .300$; CFI = .98; RMSEA = .040. The results showed that couples' avoidance behavior increased over time, as indicated by a significant slope mean (M_S ; see Table 3). Gender-specific follow-up analyses confirmed this increase in avoidance behavior for both husbands ($M_S = .29,$

$p < .01$) as well as wives ($M_S = .30, p < .001$), as indicated by significant slope means.

We conducted post hoc analyses to determine whether changes in demand–withdraw behaviors generalized across age groups using dyadic multigroup LGM. For both spouses, the results showed no age group differences in the rate of change for blame, pressure, or withdrawal behaviors, as indicated by nonsignificant differences in slope means ($\Delta\chi^2, ps > .05$). For avoidance, results from the multigroup couple-level LGM hinted toward age group differences in the rate of change, as indicated by a marginally significant difference in the slope means, $\Delta\chi^2(1) = 2.72, p = .099$. Gender-specific follow-up analyses showed a difference between middle-aged and older wives in their rate of change in avoidance behavior, $\Delta\chi^2(1) = 9.49, p < .01$. Middle-aged wives ($M_S = .08, p = .357$) showed a smaller and nonsignificant increase in avoidance behavior, whereas older wives showed a more pronounced and significant increase, ($M_S = .61, p < .001$). For husbands, the increase in avoidance behavior generalized across age groups, as indicated

Table 3. *Husbands' and Wives' Demand–Withdraw Behaviors Over Time: Dyadic Latent Growth Curve Models (N = 127)*

Variable	Model fit χ^2	Husbands				Wives			
		Intercept		Slope		Intercept		Slope	
		<i>M</i>	σ^2	<i>M</i>	σ^2	<i>M</i>	σ^2	<i>M</i>	σ^2
Blame ^{a,b,c}	13.27, <i>p</i> = .58	2.73***	1.25***	−0.08		3.40***	2.20***	0.20	
Pressure ^{a,b,c,d}	21.37, <i>p</i> = .26	2.66***	0.69***	−0.02		3.37***	1.44***	0.05	
Withdraw ^{a,c,d}	17.14, <i>p</i> = .19	2.24***	0.75***	−0.10		1.74***	0.43***	0.10	
		Couple							
Avoidance ^{b,e}	2.41, <i>p</i> = .30	2.01***	0.50***	−0.26***	0.18*				

Note: Results for blame, pressure, and withdrawal behavior are based on a series of dyadic latent growth curve models conducted for husbands and wives simultaneously. Results for avoidance behavior are based on a couple-level latent growth curve model (LGM; the dyadic LGM did not converge because of high correlations between husbands' and wives' avoidance behavior). ^aLinear LGM with slope loadings set to [0;1;2]. ^bResidual variances set equal across time. ^cSlope variance set to [0]. ^dResidual covariances not included. ^eResidual variances equal across time for husbands. ^fNonlinear LGM with slope loadings set to [0;free;2].

p* < .05. **p* < .001

by nonsignificant age group differences in the slope mean ($\Delta\chi^2, p > .05$). Finally, we investigated age group differences in the intercept means of the four demand–withdraw behaviors. As expected, the results mirrored our preliminary findings regarding cross-sectional baseline differences (reported above). Middle-aged husbands showed higher initial levels of pressure behavior, $\Delta\chi^2(1) = 7.43, p < .01$, and lower initial levels of avoidance behavior, $\Delta\chi^2(1) = 4.33, p < .05$, as compared to older husbands; all other intercept comparisons were nonsignificant ($\Delta\chi^2, ps > .05$).

DISCUSSION

Demand–withdraw communication is a common, deleterious pattern in which one spouse blames or pressures while the other spouse avoids or withdraws (Christensen, 1988). We conducted the present study to determine how demand–withdraw behaviors change as couples move into later stages of life. We examined changes in objectively coded demand–withdraw behaviors over a 13-year period for middle-aged and older married couples. Longitudinal findings showed a significant increase in avoidance behaviors over time; this pattern of change was found for both husbands and wives. All other behaviors (blame, pressure, and withdrawal) showed a pattern of longitudinal stability over time. These findings have implications for marital as well as life span developmental research.

Increasing Age, Increasing Avoidance

Building on life span developmental perspectives derived from the SST and motivational theories, we had hypothesized that, as spouses shifted toward less conflict and greater goal disengagement in later life stages, withdraw behaviors would increase. Our results provide partial support, with one type of withdraw behavior (avoidance) increasing while the other (withdrawal) remained stable. In our hypothesis, as in most research on demand–withdraw, avoidance and withdrawal behaviors were grouped together as “withdraw” behavior. But some have argued that these two forms of withdrawing represent distinct behavioral processes that may have very different implications for the course of a conflict interaction (e.g., Caughlin, Hardesty, & Middleton, 2012; Roberts, 2000). Indeed, the constructs of withdrawal and avoidance look very different in their presentation. Avoidance is characterized by a spouse actively avoiding discussing the conflict topic, either by hesitating, changing the topic, or diverting attention (Heavey et al., 1996). Avoidance is typically considered to be a maladaptive response to conflict in as much as it impedes effective conflict resolution (e.g., Roloff & Cloven, 1990). For younger couples, it makes sense that avoidance behaviors may be particularly problematic; issues are newer, and the need to seek solutions may be more pressing due to the high levels of role strain. For long-term married spouses in later stages of life, however, avoidance behaviors might shift from being maladaptive to being a neutral or even

1 adaptive strategy. Although not facilitating conflict resolution per se, avoidance behaviors may
 2 move the discussion away from toxic areas and
 3 toward more benign topics. For example, older
 4 couples in our sample would say things such
 5 as “We’ve discussed this a million times; let’s
 6 just agree to disagree. Now what do you want
 7 to do for dinner?” Such utterances typically did
 8 not engender negative responses but instead led
 9 the conversation away from conflict and into
 10 neutral, or even pleasant, topics (as evidenced
 11 by the high correlations between husband and
 12 wife avoidance scores as spouses appeared to
 13 mutually agree to avoid the conflict discussion).

14 Whereas avoidance tends to be an active
 15 process that diverts attention from a conflict,
 16 withdrawal tends to be more nonverbal and
 17 passive. It is characterized by a spouse removing
 18 him or herself from conflict by becoming
 19 silent, looking away, or disengaging from the
 20 discussion. This is very similar to Gottman’s
 21 (1989) concept of *stonewalling*, which is defined
 22 as a “total lack of listening behavior” and
 23 “tuning out of the partner.” Stonewalling has
 24 been found to be one of the most maladaptive
 25 conflict behaviors, even earning a designation as
 26 one of the “four horsemen of the apocalypse”
 27 (Gottman, 1994). So, whereas withdrawal might
 28 be another method of disengagement, it may be
 29 more likely than avoidance to elicit a negative
 30 response from the partner. Thus, for couples
 31 in later life stages, avoidance appears to be
 32 uniquely in line with both the motivational
 33 and SST perspectives in that it provides a
 34 way to disengage from conflict *and* move
 35 conflict toward a more positive interaction.
 36 These divergent patterns of change for avoidance
 37 versus withdrawal highlight the importance of
 38 not only disaggregating demand and withdraw
 39 behaviors from the couple-level composite but
 40 also of considering the unique characteristics of
 41 the individual behaviors. Moreover, the finding
 42 of increased avoidance with age adds a piece of
 43 longitudinal support to the SST and motivational
 44 models of life span development, which have
 45 often been examined on the basis of cross-
 46 sectional data (e.g., Blanchard-Fields, 2007;
 47 Haase et al., 2013).

48 In contrast to our hypothesis, demand behav-
 49 iors (blame and pressure) generally showed
 50 stability over time. An understanding of this
 51 lack of longitudinal change may come from
 52 further exploration of the motivational theory of
 53 life span development (Heckhausen et al., 2010).

1 Although this theory indicates that older adults
 2 will increasingly disengage from offending situ-
 3 ations and unattainable goals, the same may not
 4 be true for goals that are perceived as attain-
 5 able. It has been suggested that the tendency
 6 to engage in attainable goals is stable across
 7 the life span as individuals at all ages seek to
 8 influence, shape, and control their physical and
 9 social environment (White, 1959). Taking into
 10 consideration the function of blame and pres-
 11 sure (as well as withdrawal), the stability in
 12 these behaviors may reflect this purpose. Specif-
 13 ically, blame and pressure behaviors can serve
 14 the function of pursuing desired changes in one’s
 15 partner, and withdrawal can be an effective strat-
 16 egy for maintaining the status quo (Holley et al.,
 17 2010; Peplau & Gordon, 1997). Therefore, it
 18 may be that, even while there is an increase
 19 in the overall level of disengagement-related
 20 behaviors (i.e., avoidance) being manifest by
 21 both spouses, the types of demand and with-
 22 draw behaviors that may serve goal pursuit or
 23 goal maintenance functions remain relatively
 24 stable over time as spouses continue to seek to
 25 influence their partner toward attainable desired
 26 outcomes.

27 In terms of the generalizability of our
 28 findings, changes that occurred over time did
 29 not differ for husbands and wives. Thus,
 30 even though husbands and wives started at
 31 different initial levels in terms of demand and
 32 withdraw behaviors as expected (e.g., Eldridge
 33 & Christensen, 2002), there were no differences
 34 in how spouses changed over time. Moreover,
 35 most mean-level changes generalized across
 36 middle-aged and older married spouses. One
 37 exception was the finding that older wives
 38 increased in avoidance at a faster rate than
 39 middle-aged wives, suggesting that wives may
 40 be slower to develop avoidance strategies than
 41 husbands.

42 With regard to the cross-sectional differences,
 43 two age group differences emerged: Older
 44 husbands showed higher levels of avoidance
 45 behaviors and lower levels of pressure behaviors
 46 than middle-aged husbands at baseline. As with
 47 all cross-sectional findings, it can be difficult to
 48 determine whether these differences represent
 49 age-related effects or cohort effects. Viewed as
 50 age-related effects, middle-aged husbands may
 51 be confronting more role strain and having
 52 more areas in which they want to pursue
 53 change, whereas the older husbands may have
 54 moved toward greater conflict disengagement

1 and more positive interactions. Viewed as cohort
 2 effects, husbands in the older generation (i.e.,
 3 married in the 1950s) might more tightly adhere
 4 to gender-stereotyped demand–withdraw roles
 5 than husbands from the middle-aged generation
 6 (i.e., married in the 1970s). Given that the
 7 longitudinal findings lent support for age-related
 8 increase in avoidance (while pressure remained
 9 stable over time), these cross-sectional findings
 10 may represent some of each kind of influence,
 11 with the difference in avoidance reflecting age-
 12 related processes and the difference in pressure
 13 reflecting generational differences.

14 *Strengths, Limitations, and Future Directions*

15 The present study was designed to address
 16 several gaps in the existing literature on
 17 demand–withdraw behaviors and to extend it
 18 in several new directions. The findings have
 19 broad implications for our thinking about how
 20 individuals deal with challenges such as rela-
 21 tionship conflicts as they grow older. In terms
 22 of strengths, the study used a measure of
 23 objectively coded behaviors and demonstrated
 24 the value of separate consideration of indi-
 25 vidual demand and withdraw behaviors. Fur-
 26 thermore, the study had a longitudinal design
 27 with a 13-year duration, included different age
 28 groups, and used contemporary data analytic
 29 methodologies that are appropriate for model-
 30 ing longitudinal and dyadic data. The present
 31 study examined changes in demand–withdraw
 32 behaviors in middle-aged and older long-term
 33 married couples, a population that is generally
 34 underrepresented in the marital literature. As
 35 such, this study provides a unique view into
 36 communication processes in couples who “sur-
 37 vived” through the earlier years of marriage, the
 38 more common time for marriages to end (e.g.,
 39 Gottman & Levenson, 2000).

40 In terms of weaknesses, this study did not
 41 include a younger cohort of couples. Spouses at
 42 earlier stages of life course development tend
 43 to have different priorities and face different
 44 challenges than do middle-aged or older couples.
 45 Future studies would benefit from including
 46 couples from a wider range of age groups.
 47 Furthermore, this study confounded marital
 48 duration with age. Although the limitations
 49 on marital durations were imposed purposely
 50 in order to create homogeneous samples
 51 representative of their respective life stages,
 52 future studies may want to expand to include,

1 for example, older couples who are newly
 2 married. This would allow an examination of
 3 the distinct effect of age in contrast to marital
 4 duration, which could be important because
 5 marital length has been shown to be associated
 6 with demand–withdraw behaviors (Eldridge
 7 et al., 2007). In addition, although our study
 8 is the first to examine changes in observed
 9 demand–withdraw behaviors longitudinally in
 10 two age group cohorts, we acknowledge that
 11 even more sophisticated study designs (i.e.,
 12 cohort sequential designs) are needed to fully
 13 disentangle age effects from history and cohort
 14 effects. It is also worth noting that this
 15 study used a single-topic methodology (i.e.,
 16 spouses mutually selected one conflict issue to
 17 discuss) rather than the alternative two-topic
 18 methodology (i.e., each spouse selects a conflict
 19 issue and both are discussed; Christensen &
 20 Heavey, 1990). The two-topic methodology has
 21 been valuable in assessing patterns of gender
 22 differences and has shown that the conflict topic
 23 can strongly influence demand and withdraw
 24 behaviors (Eldridge & Baucom, 2012). The
 25 single-topic methodology reflected the present
 26 study goals of evaluating longitudinal changes
 27 in naturalistic conflict discussions between
 28 spouses. Future studies, however, may want
 29 to consider the potential benefits in using a
 30 two-topic conflict protocol.

31 With regard to our analytical strategy, we used
 32 LGM techniques and focused on mean-level
 33 changes in demand–withdraw behaviors (i.e.,
 34 slope means). We explored individual deviations
 35 from these mean-level changes (i.e., slope
 36 variances) and found most to be nonsignificant
 37 or effectively zero. The absence of evidence,
 38 however, is not necessarily evidence of absence.
 39 LGMs in general — even with large samples
 40 ($N = 500$) and several time points — can have
 41 low statistical power to detect slope variances
 42 and covariances, as has been demonstrated
 43 by Hertzog and colleagues (e.g., Hertzog,
 44 Lindenberger, Ghisletta, & Oertzen, 2006).

45 Final limitations pertain to sample attrition
 46 and generalizability. The primary reason for
 47 attrition in the present study was mortality;
 48 this occurred disproportionately for the older
 49 couples as compared to the middle-aged couples.
 50 This is an issue with all longitudinal studies
 51 conducted with older populations, although
 52 our analyses (noted above) suggested that
 53 attrition did not affect the variables of central
 54 interest in the present study. With regard to

1 generalizability, because of the aforementioned
 2 limitations regarding age and marital duration,
 3 these findings may not generalize to younger or
 4 nonmarried couples or to older couples married
 5 for a shorter duration of time. Furthermore, the
 6 study sample was representative of individuals
 7 in their age groups in the San Francisco Bay
 8 area. As such, this representative sample is
 9 overrepresented by spouses who are Caucasian,
 10 educated, and of relatively high socioeconomic
 11 status (see Levenson et al., 1994); findings from
 12 these couples may not generalize to other ethnic
 13 and socioeconomic groups.

14 In terms of future directions, we think it
 15 would be useful to examine how age-related
 16 changes in demand and withdraw behaviors
 17 relate to important outcomes such as marital
 18 satisfaction. Research has generally supported
 19 a close link between demand–withdraw and
 20 marital dissatisfaction, but perhaps this is true
 21 for only certain aspects of demand–withdraw
 22 and not for others (i.e., avoidance). Life span
 23 developmental research suggests that possible
 24 benefits of higher avoidance in late life —
 25 beyond marital satisfaction — could include
 26 benefits to general well-being and even physical
 27 health via mechanisms such as lower cortisol
 28 (Wrosch, Bauer, Miller, & Lupien, 2007) and
 29 adaptive shifts in autonomic and frontostriatal
 30 regulation (Brassen et al., 2012). Therefore, the
 31 present study raises the exciting possibility that
 32 a communication behavior formerly thought of
 33 as maladaptive based on research predominantly
 34 conducted with younger couples might function
 35 quite differently in later life. This might have
 36 profound implications, not only for marital
 37 research but also for marital therapy at different
 38 life stages.

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 45

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