Romantic Relationship Decisions: Focusing on the Role of the Partner

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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2015

Abstract

Decisions about romantic relationships impact a romantic partner as well as the self. In the present research, I tested whether people can be motivated to make relationship decisions that are not necessarily in their own best interests for the sake of the partner. Studies 1 and 2 examined commitment choices. I found that being randomly assigned to write about previous investments the partner had made into the relationship (e.g., time, energy, material resources) led people to feel more committed to their relationships (Study 1). Further, greater daily investment from the partner predicted increases in own commitment over time, even for people who were relatively dissatisfied with their relationships (Study 2). These effects in Studies 1 and 2 were partly explained by the fact that the partner’s investments elicited feelings of gratitude. I next examined breakup decisions in Study 3 by following 1348 individuals in relationships over a 10-week period. I found that people who believed that a breakup would greatly distress their romantic partner were less likely to break up with their partner over the course of the study. This effect held controlling for many previously identified predictors of breakups (e.g., own commitment, own investment), and extended even to individuals who felt relatively less satisfied with their relationships, less committed to their relationships, less invested in their relationships, and more taken for granted by their partners. Finally, I examined relationship initiation decisions in Studies 4 and 5. Single individuals were presented with the dilemma of whether or not to reject an
undesirable romantic date in what they believed to be either a real dating situation or a hypothetical scenario. Participants were less willing to reject the date in reality than participants predicted they would be hypothetically, in part because they felt worse about hurting the potential date’s feelings. Overall, the present research suggests that people do not make romantic relationship choices purely out of self-interest. Rather, the partner’s feelings and perspectives affect relationship decisions across the relationship lifespan, such that people can feel compelled to advance and maintain lower-quality relationships for the sake of the partner.
Acknowledgments

This research was supported in a multitude of ways by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Thank you to SSHRC for making Canada a country of opportunity for people who want to study human behavior.

This work would not have been possible without the help of some very gifted mentors. Louise Wasylkiw: thank you for introducing me to awesome world of relationship science. Emily Impett, Michael Norton, Elizabeth Page-Gould, and Jason Plaks: thank you for all of your brilliant insight, feedback, and encouragement that you have so generously shared with me over the years. Working with you has taught me so much about studying prosocial decisions, and about being a prosocial researcher. To my advisor, Geoff MacDonald: thank you for lending a sensible dose of prevention to my promotion, and, when needed, a reassuring dose of promotion to my prevention. Your guidance has enriched my life and shaped my worldview so tremendously that, if I had never met you, I would not be the same person.

Thank you to all the incredible people in SPRG, TRIG, and the MacDonald Lab: you have made my time at the University of Toronto special. Thank you to Stef and Bonnie, for accompanying me on this grand adventure that is graduate school: your friendships mean the world to me. To my family, and especially my mom: thank you for supporting my dreams and ambitions in so many tangible and intangible ways. Finally, thank you to my husband James: every day, you show me what romantic love is all about.
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Chapter 1
General Introduction

Romantic relationships can be rife with decision-making dilemmas. Should I agree to a date or turn it down? Should I commit to my new partner, or keep the relationship casual? Should I end my long-term relationship, or try to stick with it? Romantic relationship choices are consistently rated as one of the most common sources of regret in life (Roese & Summerville, 2005; Morrison & Roese, 2011), suggesting that people perceive these decisions to have important, long-term personal consequences. These relational concerns are not misplaced: romantic relationships have a profound impact on both physical and mental health (e.g., Holt-Lundstad, Birmingham, & Jones, 2008; Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001; Ruiz, Matthews, Scheier, & Schulz, 2006).

Certain relationship decisions in particular—such as decisions about whether to initiate, advance, and maintain versus dissolve romantic relationships—directly influence who a person winds up with as a life partner, if anyone. Choice of romantic partner matters because some people make better romantic partners than others. For example, securely attached individuals tend to provide particularly sensitive, responsive care for their romantic partners (e.g., Feeney & Collins, 2001; Millings, Walsh, Hepper, & O’Brien, 2012; Simpson, Rholes, Oriña, & Grich, 2002). Furthermore, some pairings of partners may be more compatible than others. For example, one study showed that couples tend to enjoy higher relationship quality when they have similar levels of warmth but dissimilar levels of dominance (Markey & Markey, 2007). Given that more suitable mates lead to more satisfying relationships, research on decisions about whether to initiate, advance, and maintain relationships may hold special promise for uncovering new ways by which people could improve their relationship outcomes.

Complicating matters considerably is the fact that relationship decisions impact the
partner in addition to the self. In order for a new romantic relationship to form, both potential partners must decide to pursue that relationship. If one person chooses not to pursue the relationship, in the absence of force and coercion, no relationship emerges, regardless of the other person’s wishes. Similarly, in order for a casual romantic relationship to transition into a longer-term relationship, both partners must decide to advance and maintain that relationship. Finally, even in the context of long-term relationships, either partner may choose to end the relationship at any point, regardless of how much the other partner wishes for the relationship to continue. In other words, when people make decisions about whether to initiate, advance, and maintain versus dissolve their romantic relationships, those decisions directly shape the romantic partner’s future in addition to their own.

Given the impact that these relationship decisions have on the partner, to what extent do people take their partner’s feelings into consideration when making these decisions? Research on decision making more broadly suggests that people are intrinsically motivated to help other people, even anonymous strangers (e.g., Kunda & Schwartz, 1983; Rand, Greene, & Nowak, 2012; Yamagishi, Li, Takagishi, Matsumoto, & Kiyonari, 2014). Further, the notion that people might make relationship decisions with their partner’s needs in mind is consistent with one of the most prominent theories in relationship science: interdependence theory (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003; 2008; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). However, extant research on important relationship decisions—such as whether to commit to a romantic relationship, whether to end a romantic relationship, and whether to initiate a new romantic relationship—has examined self-interested motives exclusively. No research has directly tested the possibility that people make these decisions with their partner’s feelings in mind.

In the present research, I examined whether people take their partner’s feelings into consideration when they make three major relationship decisions: the decision to commit to a
romantic partner, the decision to end a romantic relationship, and the decision to initiate a new romantic relationship. In each case, I predicted that people would be more likely to make pro-relationship choices—choices that advance and protect the relationship, rather than threaten it—when they believed that doing so would be in the best interests of their romantic partner. Further, I expected that people would make these pro-relationship decisions even when they lack self-interested reasons for doing so.

1 Prosocial Motivation

1.1 Prosocial Decision Making

The field of economics has traditionally used *Homo economicus* as a model for human decision making, where *Homo economicus* is a person who is motivated entirely by self-interest. However, as economic decision models have become increasingly influenced by behavioral research, it has become clear that people who maximize self-interest even to the detriment of others are in fact the exception rather than the norm. For example, in one economic game study of 446 individuals, only 7% of respondents met the behavioral definition of *Homo economicus*, consistently keeping all of the money for themselves instead of allocating it to others (Yamagishi et al., 2014). Indeed, a mounting body of evidence suggests that human beings have inherently prosocial tendencies. For example, one series of economic games studies showed that people were more cooperative with anonymous strangers when they were given less time to make their decisions rather than more, suggesting that their automatic inclinations were toward cooperation rather than competition (Rand et al., 2012). These prosocial tendencies may emerge early in life: one experiment found that toddlers placed in a prosocial game consistently chose a prosocial option (both self and partner benefit) over a selfish option (only the self benefits), even when their interaction partner consistently chose the selfish option (Sebastián-Enesco, Hernández-Lloreda, & Colmenares, 2013).
Contrary to the idea that people only act to benefit others in exchange for personal incentives, research has shown that people actually tend to feel less prosocial when they are incentivized. For example, in one experiment, participants asked to record a text for a blind student felt less morally compelled to help when they were paid for the service compared to when they were not paid (Kunda & Schwartz, 1983). This overjustification effect has even been replicated among 20-month-olds, suggesting that intrinsic motivation to be prosocial exists and can be undermined by external rewards even at a very early age (Warneken & Tomasello, 2008). Indeed, research suggests that people are most prosocial when they have high levels of agency, or control, over the decision making situation (Choshen-Hillel & Yaniv, 2011), and when they feel autonomous—that is, when they do not feel coerced or pressured, but are rather acting in line with their intrinsic and authentic preferences (e.g., Gagné, 2003; Pavey, Greitemeyer, & Sparks, 2012). In sum, there is a compelling body of research suggesting that most people do not make decisions that maximize their own interests to the detriment of others. Instead, people have intrinsic, automatic inclinations to consider the interests of others.

1.2 Interdependence Theory

The notion that people make relationship choices with their partner’s needs in mind is also consistent with interdependence theory: the most integrative theory on how people make choices that involve other people. Interdependence theory represents the idea that social and relational phenomena can be examined through a situation-based lens (e.g., Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003; 2008; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). When two people interact, it is not just the traits and perspectives of each person that influence the outcome of that interaction, but also the emergent, situational features of the experience that they share. The whole is worth more than the sum of its parts: each person’s needs, goals, and motivations must be considered in relation to those of the partner, rather than in isolation, in order to properly
predict the outcome of an interpersonal exchange. For example, imagine that Fred is planning a vacation with Wilma. According to interdependence theory, Fred’s suggestions for what they could see and do will not just be based on his own preferences, but also on what he perceives Wilma’s preferences to be, as well as experiences that they have had travelling together previously. This integrative approach has had an enormous impact on the field of close relationships (e.g., Aron & Aron, 2010; Arriaga, 2013; Holmes, 2002; Murray & Holmes, 2009; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003) because it allows researchers to study nuanced and complex interpersonal processes that are overlooked when considering each individual in isolation.

Interdependence theory posits that for each interaction, each person has the option to act in a manner that maximizes their *given outcomes*: the direct and immediate impact that the interaction will have on the self. Interdependence theorists have labelled these outcomes as “given” because: “they describe immediate effects on the individual, ignoring the partner’s interests and ignoring long-term interaction- or relationship-relevant concerns” (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003; p. 358). In order for a close relationship to function harmoniously, each person’s focus on the given outcomes of the situation must be “transformed” into a focus on the *effective outcomes* of the situation, which include broader considerations such as the needs of the partner and of the relationship (Kelly & Thibaut, 1978). Thus, in order for a person to make a decision with their partner’s needs in mind, they must move away from a focus on immediate self-interest to a focus on broader, potentially more prosocial concerns. For example, in one study, participants in romantic relationships were asked to describe previous instances in which their dating partners had behaved badly (Yovetich & Rusbult, 1994). For each incident, participants were asked to recall the behaviors they *considered* enacting in response to their partner’s behavior, as well as the behaviors that they *actually* enacted in response to their partner’s behavior. Results showed that people considered enacting significantly more destructive
behaviors than they actually enacted toward their partners, suggesting that although participants were initially inclined to react poorly to their partner’s destructive acts, they were able to at least partially transform those self-focused motivations into more pro-relationship responses.

How does this transformation process occur? Interdependence theory posits that transformation of motivation occurs when people adopt rules for how to govern their interactions: rules that take broader considerations into account besides the direct and immediate impact of the interaction on the self (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978). Any number of rules can be adopted, some of which are more prosocial than others (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003, pp. 359-360):

Some rules involve sequential or temporal considerations, such as waiting to see how the partner behaves or adopting strategies such as tit-for-tat (Axelrod, 1984) or turn-taking. Other rules involve weighting one’s own and a partner’s outcomes, such as altruism, maximizing the partner’s outcomes (MaxOther); cooperation, maximizing the partner’s combined outcomes (MaxJoint); equality, minimizing the disparity between one’s own and the partner’s outcomes (MinDiff); competition, maximizing the relative difference between one’s own and the partner’s outcomes (MaxRel); and individualism, maximizing one’s own outcomes irrespective of the partner’s outcomes (MaxOwn) (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Messick & McClintock, 1968).

Thus, interdependence theory posits that people can and do act out of concern for their partner’s needs as long as they adopt a relatively prosocial rule that includes the partner’s needs.

Furthermore, interdependence theorists have posited that this transformation process can occur automatically: over time, people who routinely use these prosocial rules can come to enact them habitually, with little or no conscious thought or effort (e.g., Kelley, 1983; Rusbult & Van Lange, 1996; 2008).

1.3 The Role of Commitment

Although proponents of interdependence theory have suggested a wide variety of rules that could potentially transform motivation into prosocial concern for the romantic partner, the source of motivation that has received the vast majority of empirical attention is commitment.
Committed individuals strongly want and need for their relationships to continue, which motivates them to engage in relationship-protecting and relationship-advancing behaviors even when doing so is not in their own immediate best interest. For example, people are more likely to accommodate their romantic partners—responding constructively to the partner’s destructive acts—when they are more committed rather than less (Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991). Committed individuals are more willing to make sacrifices for their partners, putting the needs of the partner and of the relationship above their own needs (Van Lange, Rusbult, Drigotas, Arriaga, Witcher, & Cox, 1997), and they are also more willing to forgive their partners for transgressions (Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, & Hannon, 2002). Committed individuals also perceive sacrifices for the partner as being less harmful to the self (Whitton, Stanley, & Markman, 2007).

Committed romantic relationships tend to be highly communal in nature. That is, not only do committed people tend to be highly concerned about their partner’s welfare, but they tend to be motivated to meet their partner’s needs *noncontingently*, or with little concern as to what they will receive in return (Clark & Mills, 1993; Mills, Clark, Ford, & Johnson, 2004). Communal norms can be contrasted with exchange norms, which stipulate that people should give to their partner with an expectation of direct reciprocation. In one sample of engaged and newlywed couples, participants reported that their relationships operated on communal norms more than exchange norms by a mean difference of over three points on a 6-point scale (Clark, Lemay, Graham, Pataki, & Finkel, 2010). These communal norms lead people to benefit from meeting their partner’s needs. For example, a daily experience study demonstrated that the more communally motivated people are, the more they tend to enjoy making sacrifices for their romantic partners (Kogan, Impett, Oveis, Hui, Gordon, & Keltner, 2010). The researchers found that on days when highly communally motivated individuals made sacrifices for their partners,
they felt authentic or “true” to themselves while making the sacrifice, which in turn led them to feel more positively about the sacrifice, more appreciated by their partner, and more satisfied with their relationship, as compared to days when they did not sacrifice for their partners.

Overall, the vast majority of research on how romantic partners meet each other’s needs has focused on committed, long-term partnerships. Commitment motivates people to attend to their romantic partner’s needs (e.g., Van Lange et al., 1997), and people who are in committed relationships tend to be highly motivated to meet their partner’s needs (e.g., Clark et al., 2010). However, what is less clear is whether people are motivated to meet their partner’s needs even when own commitment is relatively low. People make crucial decisions about their relationships precisely when they are not particularly committed to those relationships; i.e., when they are still deliberating about whether or not they want to be with their partner long-term. For example, people make initial relationship choices—such as whether to initiate a new relationship—in the complete absence of commitment to the relationship. Do people still take their partner’s needs into account when they are making these crucial relationship choices? Or, are people only motivated to meet their partner’s needs when they are already in a stable, long-term relationship with that person?

2 Research on Relationship Decisions

As described earlier, considerable research points to the possibility that people take their partner’s feelings and perspectives into consideration when making important decisions about their relationships. Research on decision making suggests that when people make choices that affect other people, they have prosocial inclinations to consider those people’s feelings, even in the absence of an ongoing relationship with those individuals. Furthermore, interdependence theory posits a variety of routes—other than commitment—through which people may care about other people’s feelings. However, as of yet, research on relationship decisions has
consistently overlooked the potential role of prosocial motivation. Instead, research on the process through which people choose whether to initiate, advance, and maintain relationship over the long-term has focused on self-interested motives exclusively, as I will outline below.

2.1 The Decision to Commit to a Relationship

When a person is in a relatively new dating relationship, to what extent do people consider their partner’s feelings when deciding whether to advance and maintain the relationship long-term? It seems likely that the partner’s feelings would play a role in this earlier stage of relationship development. People tend to become attached to romantic partners quite early in the romantic relationship. In one study, over 60% of participants who had been in their relationship for only three months were already using their partner as a safe haven: a source of support and comfort when they are distressed (Heffernan, Fraley, Vicary, & Brumbaugh, 2012). In other words, even relatively new dating relationships are already quite interdependent, such that members of the couple rely on one another to meet each other’s needs. It is therefore reasonable to think that when people decide whether to commit to new dating relationships long-term, they consider their partner’s needs and perspectives in addition to their own.

No research I have been able to uncover has examined whether people commit to their romantic partners for partner-focused reasons, although voluminous research has focused on self-interested motives. In particular, the investment model (Rusbult, 1980; Rusbult, 1983)—which is the most theoretically- and empirically-supported model to date of how people become committed to their relationships (e.g., Le & Agnew, 2003)—includes only self-interested predictors of commitment. Built on the tenants of interdependence theory, the investment model asserts that commitment is the psychological experience of feeling dependent on the relationship for the fulfilment of important needs (see also Agnew, Van Lange, Rusbult, & Langston, 1998; Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998; Rusbult & Van Lange, 1996). Specifically, “the state of
dependence is subjectively represented and experienced as feelings of commitment” (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993; p. 6). This very definition of commitment is self-interested in nature: it proposes that own commitment to the relationship is derived completely from one’s own dependence on the relationship to meet one’s own needs, and not on the partner’s dependence on the relationship to meet their needs.

The investment model offers three distinct routes through which people can become dependent on, and thus committed to, their romantic relationships: satisfaction, investment, and quality of alternatives. Relationship satisfaction is the global sense that the rewards of the relationship outweigh the costs of the relationship. Satisfaction is typically captured with items such as, “My relationship is close to ideal.” Investments are resources placed into the relationship over time, such as emotions, time, shared experiences, and tangible assets, all of which the person would lose if the relationship were to end. Investments are measured with items such as, “I feel very involved in our relationship – like I have put a great deal into it.” Finally, quality of alternatives represents the extent to which a person believes that their needs could be fulfilled outside of the relationship. A person has low quality of alternatives to the extent that they feel that life without their current partner would not be as fulfilling or satisfying as life with their current partner. Quality of alternatives is typically measured with items such as, “If I weren’t with my dating partner, I would do fine—I’d find another appealing person to date.”

Consistent with the definition of commitment as own dependence on the relationship, all three of these routes to commitment are self-focused: they represent ways in which the self can be dependent on the relationship. However, the model does not account for the possibility that commitment may also be influenced by perceptions of the partner’s dependence on the relationship. The vast majority of research on the development of relationship commitment has
been conducted within this theoretical framework, and has therefore not explored potential partner-focused motives to commit to a romantic relationship (e.g., Le & Agnew, 2003).

One possible exception is research that has examined mutuality of commitment, whereby members of the couple perceive themselves to have relatively similar levels of commitment to the relationship. Two longitudinal studies showed that mutuality of commitment predicted relationship well-being over and above absolute levels of commitment (Drigotas, Rusbult, & Verette, 1999). Of particular relevance to the present investigation is the fact that people felt worse about their relationship when they perceived their partners to be more committed to the relationship than they were. The researchers found that their results were partially mediated by negative affect. This research does not speak to which negative emotions in particular may have been responsible for the effect, as a variety of negative emotions were collapsed into one measure. However, the researchers postulated that for the less-committed partner, lower relationship well-being may have been partially driven by the relatively partner-focused negative emotion of guilt: people may have felt uncomfortable with their partner having higher commitment than themselves because they felt that this was unfair to their partner.

Unfortunately, these studies did not examine the possible influence of the partner’s commitment on own commitment (do people attempt to repair this discrepancy by increasing their own commitment to match that of their partner?). Thus, there is no evidence that partner-focused motives can drive own commitment behavior. However, the research does point to the possibility that people with relatively lower commitment to their relationships may nevertheless feel concerned about the well-being of their more-dedicated partners.

A different theoretical perspective on how people choose whether to commit to their partners is risk regulation theory. This perspective holds that people do consider their partner’s feelings and perspectives when regulating their commitment levels, but for self-interested
reasons. Risk regulation theory postulates that people must carefully balance the rewards of connectedness against the pain of rejection (Murray, Holmes, & Collins, 2006). People are much more willing to pursue closeness and connectedness when they feel confident about their partner’s acceptance and positive regard (e.g., Murray, Bellavia Rose, & Griffin, 2003; Murray, Holmes, Griffin, Bellavia, & Rose, 2001; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 2000). Thus, according to risk regulation theory, the partner’s dependence and commitment should influence own commitment levels because people feel safer committing to a highly dedicated partner. In support of this perspective, research has shown that people trust their partners more when they are more willing to engage in pro-relationship behavior (e.g., inhibiting negative reactions to the partner’s provocation, willingness to sacrifice), which in turn leads people to commit further to their relationship over time (Wieselquist, Rusbult, Agnew, & Foster, 1999). People also trust their partner more when they believe that they are irreplaceable to their partner (Murray, Leder, MacGregor, Holmes, Pinkus, & Harris, 2009). Furthermore, feelings of inferiority lead people with low self-esteem in particular to actively attempt to increase their partner’s dependence on them in an attempt to restore their feelings of security (Murray, Aloni, Holmes, Derrick, Stinson, & Leder, 2009). Overall, this research shows that people are indeed more committed to highly committed partners, but for the self-interested reason that the partner’s commitment affects own feelings of security in the relationship. A highly committed, dependent partner is safer to commit to because they are more likely to continue to be attentive to one’s own needs.

In sum, there is a theoretically-rich body of research on how people become committed to their romantic partners that has focused exclusively on self-interested motives. The investment model captures own satisfaction, own investment, and own quality of alternatives. Risk regulation theory proposes that the partner’s commitment or dependence on the relationship influence own commitment, but only for self-interested reasons (trust, felt security). No research
has tested the possibility that people can be motivated to commit to their romantic partners for partner-focused reasons. I propose that partner-focused motivations play a role in the decision to commit to a romantic partner. Specifically, I propose that when people in dating relationships make decisions about whether to maintain their relationships over the longer-term, the prosocial motivation demonstrated in multiple decision making domains compels individuals in relationships to consider the implications of these decisions for the partner in addition to the self. People may be more likely to commit to their partners if they believe that doing so is in their partner’s best interests, even if doing so is not necessarily in their own best interests.

2.2 The Decision to End a Relationship

Unlike the person who is merely hesitant to commit to their partner long-term, a person contemplating a breakup is sufficiently unhappy with the relationship that they are considering opting out of that relationship altogether. It is therefore a relatively stronger test of a prosocial motivation to suggest that people take their partner’s feelings into consideration even in the context of breakup decisions. When a person wishes to remain in a relationship—i.e., when they plan to continue to rely on the relationship to meet their needs—the success of the relationship is aligned with one’s own best interests. It is strategic for a person in an intact relationship to prioritize their partner’s needs because doing so will help them to continue to enjoy the benefits that the relationship brings them. However, for a person whose relationship is not meeting their needs and who is in fact considering a breakup, refraining from ending the relationship for the sake of the partner offers little clear benefit to the self.

Not surprisingly, then, researchers have not considered the possibility that people may take their partner’s needs and feelings into consideration when deciding whether or not to end a romantic relationship. For example, a recent meta-analysis examined predictors of non-marital breakups across 137 studies, summarizing the wide range of predictors of stay/leave decisions
that researchers have uncovered (Le, Dove, Agnew, Korn, & Mutso, 2010). Significant predictors of breakups identified in the meta-analysis included positive illusions (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996; Murray & Holmes, 1997), relationship closeness (e.g., Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992; Berscheid, Snyder, & Omoto, 1989), and social network support (e.g., Etcheverry & Agnew, 2004), among others. However, none of the predictors identified—not even the non-significant predictors—was explicitly partner-focused in nature (e.g., partner’s satisfaction, partner’s commitment, partner’s distress in the event of a breakup).

One line of research has explored the role of perceptions of the partner’s commitment in motivating relationship dissolution. Two longitudinal studies show that relationships are more likely to dissolve when people perceive their partners’ commitment levels to fluctuate (and especially, to wane) over time, compared to when they perceive their partners to be consistently committed to the relationship (Arriaga, Reed, Goodfriend, & Agnew, 2006). Most importantly, these effects emerged over and above own commitment to the relationship as well as own satisfaction with the relationship. The authors provided a self-interested explanation for these effects: people feel more secure in the relationship when they are certain of their partner’s commitment to them. However, the partner’s commitment could also be construed as representing the partner’s desire or need for the relationship to continue. The more committed the partner is to the relationship, the more costly a breakup would be for the partner. It is therefore possible—but not yet tested—that people may be motivated to remain with highly-committed partners for the sake of the partner, rather than for the sake of the self.

Another line of research has considered possible moral motivations to refrain from ending romantic relationships. Although moral obligation is not necessarily partner-focused, it is a step away from the perspective that stay/leave decisions are motivated by self-interest alone. Several researchers have theorized that commitment can have a morality-based component,
particularly in the context of marriage. For example, Stanley and Markman (1992) proposed that people often feel morally obligated to stay married to their spouses, which the researchers labelled “Morality of Divorce.” Building on this research, Adams and Jones (1997) showed across a number of samples that items related to moral commitment, such as “I believe that marriage is for life regardless of what happens,” formed their own factor that was distinct from other types of relationship constraints (e.g., lack of romantic alternatives). Johnson, Caughlin, and Huston (1999) broadened the definition of moral commitment beyond commitment to the institution of marriage; in particular, they suggested that people can also feel obligated to maintain a romantic relationship for the sake of their romantic partner.

Together, this research is moving toward a more prosocial—or, at least, less self-interested—perspective on why people might choose to remain in dissatisfying relationships. Unfortunately, these theoretical ideas lack empirical validation. Only one study has examined the longitudinal effects of moral commitment to see if moral commitment predicts stay/leave decisions over time (Lydon, Pierce, & O’Regan, 1997). This study showed that moral commitment predicted a lower likelihood of breaking up for people in long-distance dating relationships. However, two of the four items used to capture moral commitment in this study were general commitment items (feeling “committed to your relationship right now”, and feeling “attached to your dating partner right now”). These two items appear to capture self-interested reasons for wanting to remain in the relationship, meaning that moral obligation and self-interest may not have been teased apart with this measure. Thus, even this study does not provide a clear test of whether people stay in relationships for reasons other than self-interest.

Overall, no research on relationship stay/leave decisions has directly tested whether people might choose to stay in their romantic relationships for partner-focused reasons. Relative to people in stable, ongoing relationships, people who would prefer to end their relationships are
likely to derive considerably less personal benefit from acting in the interests of their partner. Thus, evidence that people do choose to stay in unfulfilling relationships for the sake of their partner would provide particularly strong evidence that prosocial motives play a role in relationship decisions.

I propose that even when people are considering ending a relationship, they consider their partner’s feelings and take those into account. I propose that if people believe that ending the relationship would go against the best interests of their partner—for example, if they believe that a breakup would greatly distress their partner and that their partner strongly wishes for the relationship to continue—concern for the partner may motivate them to refrain from ending the relationship. Thus, people may sometimes choose to remain in a relationship for the sake of the partner, even if doing so is not in the best interests of the self.

2.3 The Decision to Initiate a New Relationship

Arguably, relationship initiation decisions are a particularly strong test of the hypothesis that people make romantic relationship decisions prosocially, particularly when the potential new romantic partner is a stranger. Unlike relationship commitment or dissolution decisions, a person deciding whether or not to date a person they do not know has zero commitment to that individual. They are not dependent on that individual to meet any of their needs, nor do they have any obligation to begin a relationship with that individual. Thus, people do not have to consider the long-term relational implications of their decisions in this context. If people nevertheless take their (potential) partner’s feelings into consideration when choosing whether to initiate a new relationship with this person—for example, by agreeing to a date with an undesirable suitor to avoid inflicting rejection on that person—that would suggest that people are willing to make relationship decisions with others’ feelings in mind even when doing so is of no practical benefit to the self. However, as with research on commitment and dissolution, research
on relationship initiation has (perhaps not surprisingly) focused on self-interested motives exclusively. No research has tested whether people take their potential partner’s feelings into consideration when deciding whether or not to begin a new romantic relationship.

Much of the work in the area of mate selection has examined the traits or attributes that people most prefer in potential romantic partners. That is, this work appears to answer the question of what makes a potential partner desirable, attractive, and rewarding to the self? For example, agreeableness (also operationalized as kindness, warmth, empathy, altruism, responsiveness, or prosocial orientation) and conscientiousness (also operationalized as reliability, trustworthiness, commitment, or faithfulness) are highly valued in romantic partners (Buss & Barnes, 1986; Jensen-Campbell, Graziano, & West, 1995; Li, Bailey, Kenrick, & Linsenmeier, 2002; Phillips, Barnard, Ferguson, & Reader, 2008; Regan, 1998; Sprecher & Regan, 2002). People also tend to prefer partners who are similar to themselves, particularly in terms of values and attitudes (Buss & Barnes, 1986; Buunk & Bosman, 1986; Luo, 2009; Penke & Asendorpf, 2008), as well as personality facets (Botwin, Buss, & Shackelford, 1997; McCrae, Martin, Hrebickova, Urbanek, Moomsta et al., 2008), and lifestyle preferences (Etcheverry & Agnew, 2009; Houts, Robins, & Huston, 1996).

Research adopting an evolutionary approach to mate selection has taken the same self-interested perspective—what makes a potential partner desirable to the self?—but with the assertion that people should be most attracted to partners who are likely to help them raise offspring to maturity. Parental investment theory posits that, because there are key biological differences in the roles that men and women play in reproduction, evolutionary pressures should have shaped men and women’s mate preferences differently (Trivers, 1972). Specifically, men should place greater value on physical attractiveness than women (indicative of reproductive potential), whereas women should place a greater premium on earning potential than men.
large body of work has provided evidence in support of these sex differences (e.g., Buss 1989; Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Feingold, 1990; Fletcher, Tither, O’Loughlin, Friesen, & Overall, 2004; Harrison & Saeed, 1977; Landolt, Lalumiere, & Quinsey, 1995; Li, Bailey, Kenrick, & Linsenmeier, 2002; Nevid, 1984; Shackelford, Schmitt, & Buss, 2005; Sprecher, 1989; Wiederman & Allgeier, 1992). In sum, the majority of research on mate selection has focused on the traits or qualities that make a potential partner attractive to the decision maker (i.e., mate preferences). That is, most research has investigated what the potential partner might have to offer that could convince the decision maker—for self-interested reasons—to pursue a relationship with that person.

Some research has examined the inverse question: what does the decision maker have to offer the potential partner? However, as of yet, such research has only considered self-interested reasons why a person might care about the potential partner’s perspectives. For example, according to the matching hypothesis (Walster, Aronson, Abrahams, & Rottman, 1966), the dating environment functions like a marketplace where what a given individual can obtain is contingent upon what he or she can offer. It is therefore in a person’s best interests to consider their own mate value when making relationship initiation decisions: a person who consistently pursues potential partners who are “out of their league” would waste their time being continually turned down, making it less likely they would be able to acquire a partner. In support of this idea, research suggests that people do indeed take their own mate value into account when deciding whether to initiate relationships (e.g., Montoya, 2008; Taylor, Fiore, Mendelsohn, & Cheshire, 2011). For example, a speed dating study found that women’s own physical attractiveness levels predicted the quality of mates that they chose for themselves (Todd, Penke, Fasolo, & Lenton, 2007). Throughout such research, it is assumed that decision makers take their own mate value
into consideration not because they have the potential partner’s best interests in mind, but because it is fruitless to pursue a relationship with a person who will not return one’s affections.

The research reviewed thus far represents only a small portion of the studies that have been conducted to examine self-focused motives for initiating, or failing to initiate, new relationships. However, no research to date has explored the potential role of partner-focused motives for initiating new relationships, such as concerns about hurting the potential date’s feelings. I propose that partner-focused motives are relevant even in the context of relationship initiation decisions. Specifically, I propose that a basic prosocial impulse not to reject other people and cause them pain can motivate people to accept other people’s romantic advances. Thus, people can be motivated to agree to dates with people who do not meet their dating standards out of concern for the suitor’s feelings. These findings would provide particularly strong evidence for the role of prosocial motivation in relationship decisions.

3 The Present Research

Research on decisions about whether to advance and maintain a relationship—such as whether to commit to a partner, break up with a partner, or initiate a new relationship with a potential partner—has consistently overlooked the potential role of the partner’s feelings. However, according to proponents of interdependence theory as well as empirical research on decision making, people can and do consider others’ feelings when making decisions that impact others. In the present research, I tested whether people take their partner’s feelings and needs into consideration when making important relationship decisions. In particular, I tested whether people can feel compelled to make relationship decisions that are not necessarily in their own best interests for the sake of the partner.

In the research outlined in Chapter 2, I specifically examined how the partner’s investments—i.e., resources the partner has placed into the relationship that they would lose if
the relationship were to end—influence decisions to commit to dating relationships. I predicted that people would be motivated to further commit to their relationship if they perceived that their partner was highly invested in the relationship, even if they themselves were not particularly satisfied with the relationship.

In the research outlined in Chapter 3, I operationalized own versus partner’s interests more broadly. I tested whether people would be less likely to choose to break up with their romantic partner if they believed that their partner was highly dependent on the relationship; that is, if they perceived that their partner was highly committed to the relationship, and would be highly distressed if the relationship were to end. I predicted that perceptions of the partner’s dependence could motivate people to refrain from ending their relationships even if they themselves were not particularly invested, satisfied, or committed, even if they did not feel particularly appreciated by their partner, and even if their own quality of alternatives were relatively high.

Finally, in the research outlined in Chapter 4, I tested whether people can be motivated to accept dates with potential partners who do not meet their dating standards in order to avoid inflicting the pain of rejection on others. In particular, I tested whether people tend to overestimate their willingness to reject potential partners. I predicted that people would be more willing to agree to an undesired date in reality than people anticipated they would be hypothetically, in part because people imagining the situation would underestimate their motivation not to hurt the person’s feelings. Overall, this research would show that people can be motivated to advance and maintain romantic relationships that are not necessarily in their best interests for the sake of the partner.
Chapter 2
Commitment

1 The Role of the Partner’s Investments

To what extent do people consider their partner’s needs when deciding whether to commit to maintaining their romantic relationship long-term? I propose that because the decision to commit to a relationship affects the partner as well as the self, people feel prosocially inclined to consider their partner’s needs when calibrating their own commitment levels. For example, imagine that Wilma is in a dating relationship with Fred. Perhaps Wilma would ideally prefer to keep the relationship relatively casual. However, Fred has already made some meaningful investments into the relationship, and Wilma knows that it would make Fred very happy if she were to take a more long-term view of the relationship in return. In this case, Wilma—appreciating what Fred has already put into the relationship thus far—may commit to the relationship at a somewhat faster rate than she otherwise would prefer to in order to meet Fred’s needs. Thus, Wilma’s commitment levels could be predicted by how much Fred wants the relationship to continue, over and above how much Wilma herself wants the relationship to continue.

1.1 Investment

Investments increase as a new romantic relationship develops, and thus may be particularly likely to drive increases in commitment over time. The effects of an individual’s own investment on his or her commitment to the relationship have been strongly established via investment model research: “Investments increase commitment and help to ‘lock the individual into his or her relationship’ by increasing the costs of ending it—to a greater or lesser degree, to abandon a relationship is to sacrifice invested resources” (Rusbult, 1983, p. 103). No attention
has been paid to the potential role of the partner’s investments in shaping one’s own commitment to the relationship. For example, studies of couples that have included Rusbult’s investment measure have focused on each member of the dyad separately, rather than examining the effects of one partner’s investment behavior on the other partner’s commitment (e.g., Bui, Peplau, and Hill, 1996; Van Lange et al., 1997). However, the partner’s investments signal the partner’s dependence on the relationship and thus the partner’s need for the relationship to continue: the more invested the partner is, the more they have to lose if the relationship were to end. If commitment is shaped, in part, by prosocial concern for the romantic partner, then people should be more motivated to commit to highly invested partners.

1.2 Gratitude

I propose that gratitude may be one important prosocial mechanism through which a partner’s investments have an effect on own commitment. Gratitude is an interpersonal emotion that represents the extent to which people feel thankful and appreciative for what their partner does for them, as well as for who their partner is as a person (e.g., Algoe, Haidt, & Gable, 2008; Gordon, Impett, Kogan, Oveis, & Keltner, 2012; Kubacka, Finkenauer, Rusbult, & Keijsers, 2011). People experience gratitude in romantic relationships when their partner performs kind acts or favors for them, such as being responsive to their needs (Algoe, Gable, & Maisel, 2010; Kubacka et al., 2011). A partner’s investments should therefore elicit feelings of gratitude. By placing their resources into the relationship (e.g., time, emotions, money), the partner is willingly sacrificing their own independence for the good of the relationship.

Gratitude is an emotion that fuels prosocial behavior toward others (see McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, & Larson, 2001 review). Thus, I propose that the gratitude that people experience for their invested partner should, in turn, motivate them to feel more concerned for their partner’s needs. The association between gratitude and prosocial concern for others has
been demonstrated using a range of methodologies (e.g., Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006; DeSteno, Bartlett, Baumann, & Williams, 2010; Froh, Bono, & Emmons, 2010; McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002, Tsang, 2006). For example, Bartlett and DeSteno (2006) experimentally induced feelings of gratitude by staging a computer malfunction near the end of the participant’s task, and then having a confederate (ostensibly another participant) fix the problem so that the participant did not have to complete the task again. Participants in this condition later spent significantly longer completing a tedious and cognitively taxing survey for the confederate. Furthermore, in two follow-up studies, the researchers demonstrated that the effect could not be reduced to obligation-based reciprocity norms (i.e., exchange norms), but was instead due to the emotion of gratitude specifically. Gratitude appears to serve a prosocial function in close relationships as it does in other contexts: expressing gratitude to a close other increases feelings of responsibility for that person’s well-being (i.e., communal strength; Lambert, Clark, Durtschi, Fincham, & Graham, 2010).

According to the investment model, a highly invested partner needs for the relationship to continue, as they would lose a great deal if the relationship were to end (Rusbult, 1980; 1983). Thus, one important way to show appreciation for a partner’s investments would be to demonstrate one’s own commitment in return. Indeed, a growing body of research points to the important role that gratitude plays in facilitating both the development and maintenance of close relationships (e.g., Algoe et al., 2008; Gordon et al., 2012). People who are more grateful for their romantic partners engage in more relationship-maintenance behaviors (Kubacka et al., 2011), are more committed in their relationships, and more likely to stay with their partners over time (Gordon et al., 2012).

Overall, I predict that people respond to their partner’s investments with increased commitment due to feelings of gratitude. The partner’s decision to dedicate resources to the
relationship (e.g., time, energy, money) is an act of sacrifice that people should appreciate. In turn, I expect that gratitude in response to a partner’s investments motivates people to commit to their relationships because gratitude is a prosocial emotion that motivates concern for the partner’s needs (e.g., Lambert et al., 2010) and because more invested partners have a greater need for the relationship to continue (Rusbult, 1980; 1983).

1.3 The Role of Satisfaction

It is difficult to fully disentangle prosocial versus self-interested motives in the context of commitment decisions because of the interdependence that is likely to exist between the self and the partner. In the context of close, ongoing relationships, caring about the partner’s needs often provides important benefits to the self, not just practically but psychologically as well (e.g., Kogan et al., 2010; Le et al., 2012). I am focusing on gratitude in the present chapter because gratitude has been shown to motivate prosocial acts (e.g., Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006; DeSteno et al., 2010). However in the context of close relationships, gratitude also serves as a signal that a romantic partner is responsive, and that the relationship is therefore worth maintaining for self-interested reasons (Algoe, 2012). For example, research with both dating couples (Algoe et al., 2010) and married couples (Gordon et al., 2011) has shown that feelings of gratitude can increase relationship satisfaction for both the recipient and the benefactor. That is, it could be that a decision maker commits to a highly invested partner because the partner’s investments make the decision maker genuinely want the relationship to continue, not because the decision maker is responding to a sign that partner needs the relationship to continue.

To better disentangle self-interested and partner-focused motivations in the present research investigation, I will focus on “conflict of interest” situations: cases in which partner-focused motivations to commit in response to the partner’s investments can be pitted against self-interested motivations not to commit. Specifically, I will be examining how the partner’s
investments might influence commitment when own relationship satisfaction is relatively low. If a partner’s investments can motivate people to commit to relatively unfulfilling relationships, then that would provide stronger evidence that people commit to highly invested partners for the sake of the partner, and not only for the sake of the self or the relationship.

To illustrate, let us return to the example of Wilma and Fred. Imagine that Fred has invested considerable resources into his relationship with Wilma, and Wilma appreciates Fred for these efforts that he has made. Nevertheless, Wilma is not particularly satisfied with the relationship. Wilma’s low relationship satisfaction signifies that this relationship is not doing a particularly good job of meeting her needs. Given that the relationship is yielding relatively few benefits for Wilma, it is less likely to be in her own best interests to commit to the relationship compared to if her relationship satisfaction were higher. If Wilma increases her commitment to Fred at this point, we can be relatively more confident that she is genuinely doing so for her partner’s sake, rather than for her own sake.

1.4 Present Research

In two studies—one experiment and one daily experience study—I tested three central hypotheses. My first prediction was that when people perceive their romantic partner to have invested into the relationship, they will be more likely to commit to the relationship themselves. My second prediction was that this effect will be mediated by gratitude. That is, I hypothesized that people who perceive their partner as more invested will feel a sense of gratitude for their partner, which in turn will promote their own commitment to the relationship. My third prediction was that these effects would hold controlling for relationship satisfaction, and that they would extend even to individuals who were less satisfied with their romantic relationships. These results would suggest that perceiving the romantic partner as being highly invested may
motivate people to stay in their relationships even if those relationships are not particularly fulfilling.

In Study 1, I experimentally tested whether making the partner’s investments salient would lead to stronger feelings of commitment. Specifically, I recruited participants currently in romantic relationships and randomly assigned some of them to think and write about their romantic partner’s investments. I predicted that participants who thought about their romantic partner’s investments would experience stronger feelings of gratitude for their partner relative to those who did not think about their partner’s investments, which would in turn predict higher commitment. In Study 2, I employed daily experience and longitudinal methods to measure investments and feelings of gratitude in a more naturalistic setting. I predicted that people who perceived that their partners made more daily investments into the relationship would feel more grateful for their partners, which would in turn increase people’s own commitment to their relationships over time. I expected these effects to emerge irrespective of relationship satisfaction.

2 Study 1 Introduction

The primary goal of Study 1 was to provide experimental evidence for the link between perceived partner investments and commitment. I recruited participants who were currently involved in romantic relationships and randomly assigned them to one of three conditions: (1) a partner investment condition in which they were instructed to recall investments that their partner had made into the relationship, (2) an own investment condition in which they recalled investments that they had made into the relationship, or (3) a control condition in which they skipped this portion of the experiment entirely. I predicted that relative to the participants in the control condition, participants in the partner investment condition would report greater
commitment to their relationship. I did not have specific predictions about how the partner investment condition would compare to the own investment condition.

A second goal of this study was to rule out an alternative explanation for the association between perceptions of a partner’s investments and commitment. It could be the case that writing about a partner’s investments leads to higher commitment not because people feel motivated to meet the partner’s needs, but because they feel safe to commit to the relationship. As discussed in the general introduction, people feel more trusting of partners who are willing to engage in pro-relationship behaviors, which in turn leads to more commitment (Wieselquist, et al., 1999). People may similarly be more trusting of highly invested partners, in turn leading them to feel comfortable enough to further commit to the relationship. To account for this alternative explanation, I measured feelings of trust in the present study. I predicted that trust would be one mechanism through which perceived partner investments would motivate commitment, in line with past research (Wieselquist et al., 1999). However, I anticipated that gratitude would also emerge as a unique mediator of this effect even after accounting for people’s feelings of trust.

In addition to testing the roles of gratitude and trust in accounting for the hypothesized effect, I also examined indebtedness as a possible alternative mechanism. Indebtedness is similar to gratitude in that it is elicited by prosocial behavior from others; however, it is more likely to occur in the context of casual, exchange-based relationships, rather than in close, communal relationships (Shen, Wan, & Wyer, 2011). Indebtedness represents a sense of obligation to repay another person, rather than a genuine desire to meet their needs. Because participants in the present study were in established romantic relationships that were likely to be highly communal in nature (e.g., Clark et al., 2010), I did not expect that indebtedness would account for the effect of recalling a romantic partner’s investments on commitment, over and above the explanatory effects of gratitude and trust.
Finally, I examined the potential role of satisfaction in people’s willingness to commit to invested partners. I measured feelings of satisfaction with the relationship prior to the experimental manipulation. I predicted that even for individuals who were not particularly satisfied with their relationships, writing about the partner’s investments would lead to greater commitment to maintaining the relationship, primarily due to feelings of gratitude for the partner.

3 Study 1 Methods

3.1 Participants

Participants in romantic relationships were recruited through Amazon.com’s Mechanical Turk. A total of 221 individuals completed the questionnaire. Three participants were excluded because they were not currently involved in a romantic relationship, and another two participants were excluded because they did not follow the instructions for the study. The final sample consisted of 216 participants (87 men, 125 women, 4 unknown), with an average age of 30 (range = 18 to 66). Participants had been in their relationships for an average of five years (range = three months to 43 years; median = 36 months). All participants were residents of the United States.

3.2 Procedure

3.2.1 Global Satisfaction

Participants were first asked to complete the five-item satisfaction subscale from the Investment Model scale (Rusbult et al., 1998). An example item is, “My relationship is close to ideal” (α = .95). These items were measured on a seven-point scale (1 = Disagree completely to 7 = Agree completely).
3.2.2 Experimental Manipulation

Participants were next randomly assigned to one of three conditions: partner investment, own investment, or a control condition. Participants in the partner investment condition were asked to think about and list the various ways in which their current romantic partner had invested in the relationship. Then, participants were asked to think of a specific investment their partner had made that was particularly important or meaningful to the partner, and to describe why it was a significant investment for them to make. Participants in the own investment condition were given the same instructions, except that they were asked to think about their own investments rather than their romantic partner’s investments. Participants in the control condition skipped this portion of the experiment. Next, all participants answered a series of questions about their relationship, each of which was measured on a seven-point scale (1 = Disagree completely to 7 = Agree completely).

3.2.3 State Gratitude

Three items captured participants’ current feelings of gratitude for their romantic partner (Gordon et al., 2012; Gordon & Chen, 2010), including “I feel very lucky to have my partner in my life,” “I feel appreciative of my partner,” and “I am struck with a sense of awe and wonder that my partner is in my life” (α = .91).

3.2.4 State Trust

Three items were selected from the Rempel, Holmes, and Zanna (1985) measure to capture participants’ feelings of trust in their romantic partner, including “I can count on my partner to be concerned about my welfare,” “I can rely on my partner to keep the promises he/she makes to me,” and “I usually know how my partner is going to act. He/she can be counted on” (α = .87).
3.2.5 State Indebtedness

Three items were adapted (Shen et al., 2011) to capture participants’ feelings of indebtedness toward their romantic partner: “I feel indebted to my partner for everything he/she does for me,” “I feel obligated toward my partner to persevere with this relationship,” and “I feel that I owe it to my partner to give this relationship my best shot” (α = .81).

3.2.6 State Commitment

Finally, I included a “state” version of the three-item commitment subscale of the Perceived Relationship Quality Components Questionnaire (Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000) to capture participants’ motivation to maintain their relationships. The three items used were, “At this moment, how committed are you to your relationship?”, “At this moment, how dedicated are you to this relationship?”, and “At this moment, how devoted are you to your relationship?” (α = .97).

Upon completion, participants were probed for suspicion, and were then debriefed.

4 Study 1 Results

4.1 Experimental Effects

My main hypothesis was that participants in the partner investment condition would feel more committed to their relationship relative to those in the own investment or no-recall control conditions. Results of a one-way ANOVA revealed that the recall manipulation had a significant overall effect on commitment to the relationship, $F(2,213) = 3.93, p = .02$. In order to examine differences across experimental conditions, I conducted least significant difference post-hoc tests. As hypothesized, participants who recalled their partner’s investments, $M = 6.66, SD = .55$, were significantly more committed to their relationship compared to those in the no-recall control condition, $M = 6.14, SD = 1.41, p = .006$. However, people who recalled their own
investments, $M = 6.36$, $SD = 1.05$, were not significantly more committed to their relationship than those in the control condition, $p = .23$, nor did they differ significantly from those in the partner investment condition, $p = .16$.

4.2 Mediation Effects

My second hypothesis was that the association between perceptions of a partner’s investments and own commitment to the relationship would be mediated by both gratitude and trust. I tested this using a bootstrap analysis with 5,000 samples. I compared the participants in the partner investment recall condition to those in the own investment condition and the control condition combined. Experimental condition (partner investment versus the two other conditions) was entered as the independent variable. Gratitude and trust were entered as simultaneous mediators. Commitment was entered as the dependent variable.

The results of these mediation analyses are shown in Table 1 and in Figure 1. Consistent with previous research, stronger feelings of trust in the romantic partner mediated the effect of partner investments on relationship commitment ($b = .10$, $SE = .05$, $CI[.02, .23]$). However, even when accounting for trust as a mediator, gratitude also significantly mediated the effect of the romantic partner’s investments on people’s own commitment ($b = .22$, $SE = .09$, $CI[.07, .44]$). That is, writing about a partner’s investments elicited feelings of trust as well as feelings of gratitude, both of which, in turn, increased people’s own commitment to their relationship.
Table 1. Results from Study 1: Simultaneous mediation effects of gratitude and trust on the association between condition (partner investment recall versus other conditions) and romantic commitment.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Point Estimate of Indirect Effect</th>
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Figure 1. Results from Study 1: Gratitude and trust mediate the association between perceptions of partner investments and own motivation to invest.
4.3 Additional Analyses

I next conducted these analyses again comparing the partner investment condition to the control condition without the own investment condition. Gratitude ($b = .27$, $SE = .13$, CI [.04, .55]) and trust ($b = .08$, $SE = .06$, CI [.01, .25]) emerged as significant, simultaneous mediators of the effects of experimental condition on relationship commitment. I further tested the effects comparing the own and partner investment conditions to one another without the control condition. Once again, I replicated my effects for both gratitude ($b = .10$, $SE = .07$, CI [.01, .32]) and trust ($b = .15$, $SE = .09$, CI [.02, .38]).

I further conducted a bootstrapping analysis with indebtedness included in the model. Indebtedness did not mediate the association between condition and commitment ($b = .02$, $SE = .02$, CI [-.01, .10]). Most critically, the mediational effects of trust ($b = .09$, $SE = .05$, CI [.02, .22]) and gratitude ($b = .21$, $SE = .09$, CI [.06, .41]) remained significant above and beyond indebtedness. Thus, these effects could not be attributed to the alternative explanation that writing about a romantic partner’s investments makes people feel indebted to their partners, thus motivating them to commit to their relationships.

Finally, I tested for moderations by gender. I found that gender did not moderate the effects of the manipulation on either commitment ($F(2,206) = 1.21, p = .30$) or gratitude ($F(2,206) = .46, p = .63$), suggesting that these effects extended to both men and women in our sample.

4.4 The Role of Satisfaction

I next wanted to examine whether my effect extends even to participants who are generally less satisfied with their relationships. Can reminding people of their partner’s investments promote commitment even among individuals whose relationships are relatively unfulfilling? I found a significant interaction between satisfaction and condition (partner
investment versus controls) on commitment ($\beta = -.18, SE = .14, p = .001$). Simple effects analyses conducted at one standard deviation above and below the mean in satisfaction (Aiken & West, 1991) showed that the effect of the partner investment recall manipulation on commitment only extended to participants who were relatively less satisfied with their relationships ($\beta = .33, SE = .19, p < .001$) and not to participants who were relatively more satisfied with their relationships ($\beta = -.03, SE = .18, p = .72$). Satisfaction also significantly moderated the effect of the manipulation on gratitude ($\beta = -.24, SE = .12, p < .001$), such that the effect of the manipulation on gratitude extended to participants who were less satisfied ($\beta = .28, SE = .17, p < .001$), but not to those who were more satisfied ($\beta = -.05, SE = .16, p = .40$).

A bootstrapping analysis revealed a significant mediated moderation, such that the moderation between satisfaction and the partner investment manipulation on commitment was significantly mediated by gratitude ($b = -.20, SE = .08, CI[-.39, -.07])$, although not by trust ($b = -.02, SE = .03, CI[-.11, .03])$. Specifically, the effects of the present study only extended to participants who were relatively less satisfied with their relationships; they did not extend to those who were relatively more satisfied.

5 Study 1 Discussion

Altogether, the results of Study 1 demonstrate a causal link between perceived partner investments and own commitment such that people who thought about their romantic partner’s previous investments into the relationship felt more committed, relative to those who thought about their own investments or to those in the no-recall control condition. Furthermore, I identified two mechanisms of this association. Consistent with previous research on pro-relationship behavior (Wieselquist et al., 1999), when participants thought about their romantic partner’s investments into the relationship, they experienced greater feelings of trust, which in turn predicted stronger feelings of commitment. More novel to the literature, writing about the
romantic partner’s investments also elicited feelings of gratitude, which in turn increased people’s own commitment to the relationship. These findings suggest that in addition to a trust-based pathway between partner investments and own commitment, there is also a gratitude-based pathway in which writing about a partner’s investments makes people feel appreciative of their partners. I also ruled out indebtedness as an alternative explanation for this effect.

Although I did not predict these effects, I also found that my key effects were moderated by satisfaction. I had predicted that results would extend to less satisfied individuals, suggesting that a partner’s investments can motivated gratitude and in turn commitment even among individuals whose relationships are relatively unfulfilling. However, results showed that the effects of the partner investment recall manipulation on gratitude and commitment extended only to relatively less satisfied individuals. Thus, the present results suggest that perceiving a partner as invested in a relationship may be a particularly strong motivator of both gratitude and commitment for people who feel relatively less satisfied with their romantic relationships. Since these findings were unexpected, I examined whether they would replicate in my next study before drawing firm conclusions regarding the role of satisfaction.

6 Study 2 Introduction

Study 1 provided initial evidence that perceptions of a partner’s investments motivate further commitment to the relationship. Furthermore, I demonstrated that this association is partially mediated by gratitude. In Study 2, I sought to replicate these effects in day-to-day life by testing my hypotheses in a dataset that was previously collected by Dr. Impett. This study used a 14-day daily experience design with a three-month longitudinal follow-up. Both partners from each couple were recruited and were asked to complete an online questionnaire about their relationship. Next, both partners completed daily diaries over a two-week period. Participants were re-contacted three months later. I predicted that perceived partner investments over a two-
week period would predict increased gratitude over time. In turn, I expected that increased
gratitude at the three-month follow-up would predict increases in commitment to the relationship
over time. I further predicted that the effects of perceived partner investments would emerge
above and beyond one’s own investment behavior.

One important advantage of this study design is that it allows me to look at how gratitude
and commitment are affected by the partner’s specific relationship investments (resources that
the partner places into the relationship on a day-to-day basis) rather than focusing on global
representations of the partner’s investments as I did in Study 1 (i.e., how many resources the
partner has placed into the relationship overall). Research by Neff and Karney (2005) has shown
that global representations of a romantic partner are not always based on that partner’s specific
qualities. Similarly, although people experience gratitude in response to the global perception
that their partner is invested in the relationship, they may not experience gratitude in response to
specific, concrete investments that their partner makes. In Study 2, perceived partner investments
were operationalized as the frequency with which, over a 14-day period, the participant
perceived their partner to have made a sacrifice for them. This design allowed me to examine
whether or not people feel more grateful for their partner in response to their partner’s specific
romantic investments. I predicted that these specific instances of perceived partner investment—
whereby the partner has given something up for the sake of the relationship (Van Lange et al.,
1997)—would predict stronger feelings of gratitude, which would in turn lead to increases in
commitment over time.

Finally, this study design has the advantage of allowing me to examine the perspectives
of both partners. In particular, I wanted to address the question of whether these effects are based
primarily on the partner’s actual investments or on one’s perceptions of the partner’s
investments. I hypothesized that perceptions of investments are based on reality. That is, I expect
that people are able to estimate their partner’s investments into their relationship with relative accuracy. However, in order for people to feel grateful for their partner’s investments, I hypothesized that they must perceive that an investment was made; thus, any influence of the partner’s actual investment behavior on feelings of gratitude toward the partner should be fully mediated through one’s perception of that behavior.

7 Study 2 Methods

7.1 Participants and Procedure

Participants were recruited from the San Francisco Bay Area through the use of paper flyers and online advertisements posted on Craigslist.org. Eighty couples were recruited for the study, but 11 couples were removed from the analyses because one member of the couple did not complete the initial survey or because the participant’s initial survey could not be matched to his or her daily experience records, leaving our final sample at 69 couples. The couples had been dating from six months to 30 years (Median = 16 months; SD = 46.6 months); 48% of the couples were cohabitating. Participants completed the relevant measures as part of a larger study on romantic couples (Impett, Gordon, Kogan, Oveis, Gable, & Keltner, 2010).

Both participants individually completed an initial online survey with measures of relationship quality. Then, they came to the lab to receive training in how to complete the daily experience portion of the study. Both members were asked to complete a brief online survey for 14 consecutive nights beginning the day of the laboratory session. The researchers emphasized that each diary should be completed in private, that the partners should not discuss their answers with one another, and that we would never reveal their responses to each other. Participants completed an average of 12.2 (out of 14) days per person as determined by an automatic time-stamp generated by the website. Three months after completing their last diary, each member of
the couple completed a 10-minute online follow-up survey. Of the 138 participants who provided daily experience data, 104 (75%) participants completed the follow-up survey.

7.2 Background and Follow-Up Measures of Relationship Quality

Commitment was assessed in the baseline survey ($\alpha = .93$) and again at the three-month follow-up ($\alpha = .93$) with the same commitment measure used in Study 2. Relationship satisfaction was measured with five items from the Rusbult et al. (1998) scale at baseline ($\alpha = .90$) and at the three-month follow-up ($\alpha = .92$). Gratitude was measured at baseline and at the three-month follow-up with the 11-item “appreciative” subscale of the Appreciation in Relationships Scale (Gordon et al., 2012). Participants responded to such questions as “I often tell my partner how much I appreciate her/him” on seven-point scales ($\alpha = .82$).

7.3 Daily Relationship Investment Behavior

Each day participants answered questions designed to assess their daily romantic relationship investment behavior, operationalized in this study as daily sacrifice. Based on previous research on sacrifice (e.g., Impett, Gable, & Peplau, 2005), to gather a measure of *own daily investment* participants answered the question: “Today, did you do anything that you did not particularly want to do for your partner? Or, did you give up something that you did want to do for the sake of your partner?” Participants also responded to an adapted version of this question to provide a measure of *perceptions of a romantic partner’s daily investments* into the relationship. I aggregated participants’ scores from the daily diary to create composite measures of frequency of own daily investment ($M = 3.0$ sacrifices; $SD = 2.7$; range = 0 to 11) and perceived frequency of partner’s daily investment ($M = 2.6$ sacrifices; $SD = 2.8$; range = 0 to 11).
8 Study 2 Results and Discussion

8.1 Main Effects

My first hypothesis was that frequency of perceived partner daily investments, as assessed across 14 days, would predict increases in relationship commitment from the baseline of the study to the three-month follow-up. I used multilevel modeling in PASW 20.0 to address the nested nature of our dyadic data (i.e., partners nested within couples). The analyses I report control for two factors. First, I controlled for participants’ baseline levels of commitment to their romantic relationship so that the resulting analyses would reflect changes in commitment over a three-month period of time as a function of perceptions of a romantic partner’s daily investments. Second, because research shows that people project their own feelings and behaviors onto their perceptions of how their partners think and act (e.g., Lemay & Clark, 2008), I also controlled for people’s own daily investments, so that the results would reflect the unique contributions of perceived partner investments above and beyond the contribution of one’s own daily investments into the relationship.

Replicating the results of Study 1 and as shown in Model 1 in Table 2, perceived frequency of partner investment over a two-week period was associated with greater relationship commitment at the three-month follow-up controlling for participants’ own self-reported frequency of daily investment as well as their levels of commitment at baseline. That is, the more frequently people thought that their partner invested into the relationship over the course of the two-week study, the greater increases in commitment they reported over a three-month period of time. Own investment frequency did not significantly predict commitment to the relationship three months later.
8.2 Mediation Effects

My second hypothesis was that gratitude would mediate the effect of perceived partner investments on changes in commitment. In line with this hypothesis and as shown in Model 2 in Table 2, perceiving one’s partner as having made more investments into the relationship was associated with gratitude toward one’s partner three months later controlling for gratitude at the baseline of the study. Further, when perceived partner investments and gratitude at follow-up were entered simultaneously, gratitude predicted higher commitment at follow-up, controlling for both gratitude and commitment at baseline. To test for mediation, I used the Monte Carlo Method for Assessing Mediation (Selig & Preacher, 2008) to generate a 95% confidence interval for the indirect effect with 20,000 resamples. These analyses, shown in Model 3 in Table 2, revealed that when perceived partner frequency of investment and gratitude were entered simultaneously, feelings of gratitude predicted increases in commitment from baseline to the three-month follow-up. As shown in Figure 2, subsequent analyses revealed that gratitude significantly mediated the link between perceived partner frequency of sacrifice and increases in commitment over time (CI[.005, .05]; direct effect = .03, SE = .03, p = .25). In short, participants who thought that their partners invested a great deal into their relationships over the two-week diary felt more grateful toward their partner three months later, which in turn lead them to increase their commitment to the relationship.
Table 2. Results from Study 2: Multi-level modelling analyses

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Commitment at Follow-Up</th>
<th>Gratitude at Follow-Up</th>
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<td><strong>Model 1</strong></td>
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<td>Baseline Commitment</td>
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<td>Own Investment</td>
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<td>Perceived Partner Investments</td>
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<td><strong>Model 2</strong></td>
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<td>Baseline Commitment</td>
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<td>Baseline Gratitude</td>
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<td>Own Investment</td>
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<td>Perceived Partner Investments</td>
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<td><strong>Model 3</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Baseline Commitment</td>
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<td>Own Investment</td>
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<td>Gratitude at Follow-Up</td>
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**Figure 2.** Results from Study 2: Gratitude mediates the association between daily perceptions of the partner’s investments and own commitment at 3-month follow-up

8.3 Additional Analyses

The dyadic data collected in this study enabled me to examine whether people’s perceptions of their romantic partner’s investments are grounded in reality (i.e., overlap with the partner’s reports of daily investments). Indeed, one individual’s perceptions of his or her partner’s daily investment frequency were significantly correlated with the partner’s self-reported investment frequency over the course of the study, \( r = .72, p < .001 \), suggesting that people are quite accurate in their perceptions of their partner’s investments into the relationship. Subsequent mediational analyses using MCCAM revealed that perceptions of a partner’s investments over the two-week period fully mediated the link between the partner’s actual investments and gratitude at the follow-up (95% CI [.02, .08]); direct effect = -.03, \( SE = .02, p = .20 \). Thus, any effect of the partner’s actual investment behavior on an individual’s subsequent feelings of gratitude was fully accounted for by the individual’s *perceptions* of the partner’s investments.
Because gratitude and commitment were both measured at the same two time points, I next sought to rule out an alternative causal model in which the order of these two variables was reversed. Commitment at follow-up did not significantly predict gratitude at follow-up ($b = .09, SE = .02, p = .12$) and the association between perceived partner investments and changes in gratitude remained significant when commitment at follow-up was included in the model ($b = .04, SE = .02, p = .02$). These additional results help to clarify that it is gratitude that mediates the association between perceived partner investments and commitment, rather than commitment mediating the association between perceived partner investment and gratitude.

I next tested for gender effects. I found that the effect of perceived partner investments on gratitude at follow-up was not moderated by gender ($b = .02, SE = .02, p = .29$), nor was the effect of perceived investments on commitment at follow-up moderated by gender ($b = .04, SE = .05, p = .37$), suggesting that these did not differ for men and women.

### 8.4 The Role of Satisfaction

Finally, I tested whether or not these effects could be attributed to baseline differences in relationship satisfaction. I found that controlling for baseline satisfaction, perceived partner investments significantly predicted changes in gratitude ($b = .05, SE = .02, p = .003$) and changes in commitment ($b = .06, SE = .03, p = .04$). Furthermore, satisfaction did not moderate the effects of perceived partner investments on either follow-up gratitude ($b = .06, SE = .04, p = .11$) or follow-up commitment ($b = .01, SE = .06, p = .88$).

These results suggest that perceiving a partner to be highly invested in a relationship leads to subsequently higher levels of gratitude and commitment even among individuals who are relatively less satisfied with their relationships. Notably, the significant satisfaction moderation in Study 1—whereby the effects extended only to less satisfied individuals—did not replicate in Study 2. This leads me to believe that the effect was unique to the experimental
design of Study 1. In particular, it is possible that highly satisfied individuals may have experienced a ceiling effect in Study 1, whereby their gratitude and commitment could not be experimentally increased. Indeed, mean state gratitude and commitment scores in the sample were 6.34 and 6.04, respectively, on 7-point scales.

9 Chapter 2 Discussion

Studies 1 and 2 provide compelling support for the role of a partner’s investments in shaping people’s feelings of commitment to their relationships. Specifically, participants who were reminded of their partner’s investments reported feeling more committed to their relationship relative to participants who were reminded of their own investments or to those in a control condition (Study 1). People who perceived their partner to make more day-to-day relationship investments also reported increases in commitment over time (Study 2). In both studies, these effects were mediated by gratitude: participants who felt that their partner was highly invested in their relationship felt more grateful for their partner, which, in turn, motivated them to further commit to their relationship. I replicated these effects with different research methods (experimental and daily diary), and with different operationalizations of partner investment (experimentally manipulated global investment perceptions and daily concrete investment perceptions).

Past research has assumed that people make important relationship decisions—such as whether or not to commit to a romantic partner—entirely out of self-interest. The present findings suggest that this may not be the case. Whereas past research has shown that people are more committed to relationships if they have personally invested a great deal into the relationship (e.g., Rusbult, 1983; Le & Agnew, 2003), these studies are the first to show that people are similarly more committed to relationships if their partners have invested a great deal into the relationship. That is, when people believe that their partners have put considerable
resources into the relationship, they are more committed to maintaining that relationship long-term.

I propose that the partner’s investments motivate commitment because people want to meet their partner’s needs, and are committing to the relationship—at least in in part—because doing so benefits the partner. However, there are alternative explanations for these findings, which I took several steps to rule out. First, it could be that people are more committed to highly invested partners for the self-interested reason that people feel *safe* committing to highly invested partners. I tested this possibility in Study 1 by measuring trust as a potential mechanism for the effect. I found that although trust did indeed emerge as a significant mediator, the effect of writing about the partner’s investments on own commitment remain even controlling for trust, suggesting that the present effects cannot be explained by a security-based mechanism alone.

Indeed, I found that gratitude emerged as a simultaneous mediator of the effect: people felt grateful for highly invested partners, which motivated them to further commit to the relationship.

These findings raise the important question: just how prosocial is gratitude? Considerable research also shows that gratitude motivates kind acts meant to benefit others (e.g., Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006; DeSteno, Bartlett, Baumann, & Williams, 2010; Froh, Bono, & Emmons, 2010; McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002; Tsang, 2006). Specifically, when people feel grateful for other individuals, they feel intrinsically motivated to act in ways that benefit those people. Thus, gratitude appears to be a more prosocial motivation to commit to a relationship than previously-identified motivations, such as own satisfaction or trust in the partner. However, in the context of close relationships, experiencing and expressing gratitude also has important benefits for the self and for the relationship (e.g., Algoe et al., 2008, 2010; Barlett et al., 2012; Gordon et al., 2012; Kubacka et al., 2011). Therefore, it is still not entirely clear whether gratitude motivates commitment because people want to meet the needs of their highly-invested partners, or because
appreciating a romantic partner leads people to want to commit to the relationship for their own personal benefit.

Perhaps the strongest evidence of prosocial motivation in the present chapter is the fact that the effect extended even to individuals who were not particularly satisfied with their relationships. In Study 1, I found that even less-satisfied individuals felt more committed to their partner when they were reminded of their partner’s investments. In Study 2, I found that individuals with relatively low global levels of satisfaction nevertheless appreciated their partner’s day-to-day relationship investments, which in turn predicted boosts in commitment three months later. In other words, it does not seem to be the case that the association between the partner’s investments and own commitment is contingent on one’s own satisfaction; i.e., the extent to which the relationship is meeting one’s own needs. Rather, it seems that people are more willing to commit to highly invested partners even if they find the relationship to be relatively unfulfilling.

One remaining question that I was unable to address in the present research is whether people choose to commit to highly invested partners for the sake of the partner per se, or for the sake of the relationship. As discussed in the general introduction, the partner’s needs and one’s own needs tend to be strongly linked in the context of close, ongoing relationships, such that meeting the partner’s needs is likely to benefit the relationship, and, in turn, the self. Whereas the failure to meet the partner’s needs has the potential to damage the relationship, successfully meeting the partner’s needs has the potential to enhance the relationship. When a person’s gratitude for their partner’s investments compels them to commit to the relationship in return, they may do so in part with the goal of contributing to the relationship, which would be beneficial to the self. Although this would still be a more prosocial reason to commit to the
relationship than those reasons that have been identified in previous research, it is less prosocial than committing to the relationship purely out of the desire to meet the partner’s needs.

Overall, Studies 1 and 2 are the first studies to provide evidence that people commit to romantic relationships for reasons other than self-interest. I found that people are more likely to commit to highly invested partners, even when their own relationship satisfaction is low. However, the inherently interdependent nature of close, ongoing romantic relationships makes it difficult to fully tease apart self-versus partner-focused motives in this context. Therefore, for a stronger test of my hypothesis, I next turned to a relationship decision for which own versus partner motives have the potential to be more at odds: breakup decisions.
Chapter 3
Dissolution

1 Staying for the Partner’s Sake

A growing body of research suggests that staying in a low-quality relationship leads to negative outcomes for the self. For example, negative marital functioning and marital distress predict a wide range of negative health consequences (see Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001 for review). And yet, people often choose to stay in romantic relationships that leave them unhappy and unfulfilled. In the present chapter, I examine a new possible reason for why this phenomenon occurs: when people decide whether or not to end a romantic relationship, basic prosocial tendencies lead them to consider not only how much they need the relationship to continue, but also how much their partner needs the relationship to continue. I propose that people who are not particularly dependent on the relationship themselves (e.g., low satisfaction, low investment, high quality of alternatives, low commitment) may nevertheless refrain from ending their relationships if they believe that their partners are highly dependent on the relationship.

Breakup decisions present a relatively stronger test of people’s prosocial concern for their romantic partners compared to commitment decisions. When a person still wishes to maintain a relationship, meeting their partner’s needs is in their own best interests because doing so will contribute to the quality of a relationship that they value. In contrast, meeting the partner’s needs provides little clear benefit to a person who wants to exit the relationship entirely. In the present research, I tested the hypothesis that people are less likely to break up with a partner who is highly dependent on the relationship, even if they themselves do not particularly want or need to
maintain the relationship. I predicted that people can be motivated to stay in an unfulfilling relationship for the sake of the partner.

1.1 Ruling out Self-Interested Explanations

Given that the key goal of the present research was to provide further evidence of partner-focused decision making, I wanted to take particular care to rule out alternative, more self-interested explanations for why a partner’s dependence may predict relationship stability. One important alternative explanation for my predicted results is that the partner’s dependence on the relationship leads people to feel more secure in the relationship. Just as Study 1 revealed a security-based mechanism for the association between the partner’s investments and own commitment, there may similarly be a security-based mechanism for an association between the partner’s dependence and the decision to remain in the relationship. As discussed, risk regulation theory posits that the partner’s dependence serves as an important cue that the partner values oneself and the relationship, and will thus continue to be responsive to one’s needs (e.g., Murray, Aloni et al., 2009; Murray, Leder et al., 2009). In line with this research, it follows that people should be less likely to break up with a highly dependent romantic partner compared to a less dependent partner because the partner’s dependence makes them feel valued and loved, contributing to their own relationship quality. In order to directly account for this alternative explanation in the present research, I examined the extent to which people feel appreciated by their partner. When a person feels appreciated, it means that they feel regarded and valued by their partner on a global level (Gordon et al., 2012). I predicted that people would be less likely to break up with a highly dependent partner even if they did not feel particularly appreciated by their partner, signifying that they do not feel particularly valued or confident in their partner’s regard for them.

A second alternative explanation I sought to rule out is methodological in nature. It is
common in the field of romantic relationships to record breakups as a single binary outcome: the relationship is either intact or it has dissolved (see Le et al., 2010 for discussion). As Le and colleagues have noted, “Most past studies have failed to account for responsibility for the breakup” (Le et al., 2010; p. 388). However, in order to study breakups as a relationship decision, it is crucial to know who the “decider” is. This is particularly important in the context of the present work. Without knowing which member of each dissolved couple was the decision-maker, it cannot be determined whether people independently make stay/leave decisions based on their own feelings, or whether they take their partner’s feelings into consideration as well. Predictive effects of partner-focused variables (e.g., perceptions of the partner’s commitment) may be driven entirely by the participants who were broken up with, which would simply mean that the partner’s commitment is predicting the partner’s decision to break up. In order to rule out this alternative hypothesis in the present (non-dyadic) study, I documented who chose to end the relationship on a 5-point likert scale (1 = entirely my decision, 3 = mutual decision, 5 = entirely my partner’s decision). I then excluded from analyses the individuals who provided a “4” or “5” rating; those who reported that they had little to no agency in the decision to break up. This allows for greater confidence that any effects of partner-focused variables are due to the partner-focused variable predicting the participant’s decision, rather than the partner-focused variable predicting the partner’s decision.

1.2 Overview of the Current Study

The present research consisted of a large-scale, two-part longitudinal study of participants in romantic relationships. In Part 1, participants completed a survey with questions about demographic characteristics, questions about their current romantic relationship, and personality measures. Relevant to the present study, Part 1 included survey measures of the partner’s dependence on the relationship, all four investment model components, and feelings of being
appreciated by the partner. In Part 2 of the study, participants responded to weekly emails to indicate whether or not they were still in a romantic relationship with their partner. Participants who broke up indicated which partner had ended the relationship.

I operationalized perceptions of a partner’s dependence on the relationship in two ways. First, I included a measure of perceptions of the partner’s commitment (Arriaga et al., 2006). Based on the premise that dependence on the relationship is experienced psychologically as commitment to the relationship (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993), perceived partner commitment should represent the extent to which a person believes that their partner needs the relationship to continue. As an alternative operationalization, I also measured how much distress participants anticipated that their partner would experience in the event of a breakup. I predicted that participants who believed that their partner was highly committed to the relationship, as well as those who believed that their partner would experience considerable distress in the event of a breakup, would be less likely to choose to end their relationship.

I tested my predicted effects controlling for a number of self-focused motivations to remain in the relationship (i.e., own satisfaction, own investment, own quality of alternatives, own commitment, and own feelings of being appreciated by the partner), and I also tested for moderations by these variables. I expected that my predicted effects would hold not only when controlling for these variables, but I expected that my effects would extend even to individuals who were relatively low on these facets of relationship quality. These results would suggest that people are willing to stay in a relationship for the sake of the partner even when doing so is not particularly beneficial to the self.
2 Study 3 Method

2.1 Participants

I recruited 4,105 participants (3,827 recruited from Amazon’s Mechanical Turk; 278 from our introductory psychology participant pool) to participate in Part 1 of the study. Participants were required to be in romantic relationships; 147 participants not currently in romantic relationships were excluded. An additional 6 participants were excluded for being under the age of 18. The final Part 1 sample consisted of 3,952 participants (2,309 women, 916 men, 727 not reported), with an average age of 26 (Range = 18 to 68, SD = 7.45 years), and an average relationship length of 22 months (Range = less than one month to 40 years, SD = 30 months). A total of 2,325 participants were exclusively dating, 311 participants were casually dating, 281 were in open relationships, 46 were engaged, 258 were common-law, and 22 were married (709 not reported).

2.2 Part 1 Procedure and Measures

At the time of recruitment, participants completed a large package of questionnaires with several measures relevant to the current study. Anticipated partner distress was measured with the item, “Overall, how distressing do you think it would be for your partner if you and your romantic partner were to break up?” (M = 5.48, SD = 1.59), which participants rated on a 7-point scale (1 = not at all distressing to 7 = extremely distressing).

Perceived partner commitment was measured with four items: “My partner is committed to maintaining our relationship,” “My partner intends to stay in this relationship,” “My partner feels very attached to our relationship—strongly linked to me,” and “My partner is oriented toward the long-term future of our relationship (for example, imagines being with me several years from now)” (M = 5.61, SD = 1.41, α = .94; Arriaga et al., 2006), on a 7-point scale (1 = completely disagree to 7 = completely agree).
Investment model components were measured with the standard 22-item scale (Rusbult et al., 1998). Three 5-item subscales captured own satisfaction (e.g., “My relationship is close to ideal,” M = 6.65, SD = 1.84, α = .94), own investment (e.g., “I feel very involved in our relationship—like I have put a great deal into it,” M = 6.10, SD = 1.74, α = .86), and own quality of alternatives (e.g., “My needs for intimacy, companionship, etc., could easily be fulfilled in an alternative relationship,” M = 4.65, SD = 1.85, α = .88), and a 7-item subscale captured own commitment (e.g., “I want our relationship to last a very long time;” M = 6.84, SD = 1.74, α = .89) on a 9-point scale (1 = disagree completely to 9 = agree completely).

Feeling appreciated by the partner was measured with a 7-item scale (Gordon et al., 2012), with items such as, “My partner makes me feel special” (M = 5.00, SD = 1.20, α = .85) on a 7-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree).

2.3 Part 2 Procedure and Methods

After completing Part 1, participants were invited to participate in Part 2 of our study in which they would respond to weekly emails regarding their relationship. Each week, interested participants responded with a simple “yes” or “no” to the question: “Are you and your romantic partner still together?” Participants who indicated “no” also answered a follow-up question: “If you are no longer in your romantic relationship, please also indicate who initiated the breakup, by providing a number from the following scale” (1 = entirely my decision, 3 = mutual decision, 5 = entirely my partner’s decision). Every 12 weeks, participants who had responded to at least 80% of emails during that time period were entered into a $100 gift card draw. Participants were removed from the email list upon request. A total of 1,348 individuals (33% of the Part I sample) participated in the weekly email follow-up, and they responded to our emails for an average of 10 weeks (Range = 1 to 29 weeks).
Independent samples t-tests showed that participants who chose to participate in the follow-up surveys were more dedicated to their relationships on average compared to participants who declined to participate. Specifically, the participants who answered at least one follow-up email were significantly more committed (Cohen’s $d = .33$), more satisfied ($d = .24$), more invested ($d = .09$), they had fewer quality of alternatives ($d = .16$), they perceived their partner to be more committed ($d = .34$), they anticipated that their partner would be more distressed in the event of a breakup ($d = .25$), they felt more appreciated by their partner ($d = .25$), and they felt more communal toward their partner ($d = .39$). For investment, $p = .01$; all other $ps < .001$. These differences suggest that participating in the present research was more appealing to participants whose relationships were higher-quality.

Of the participants who responded to our weekly emails, 241 participants (18% of the Part 2 sample) reported breaking up in Part 2 of our study, whereas 1107 (82%) remained in their relationship for the duration of their participation. This rate of breakup is consistent with previous studies that have examined termination of non-marital relationships (e.g., Impett et al., 2005; Le et al., 2010). In order to examine breakup decisions specifically in the present study, I excluded 67 participants who responded to the initiator status question with a “4” or a “5,” indicating that they had little to no say in the decision to end the relationship.

The final sample included 1281 participants (828 women, 437 men, 16 not reported) with an average age of 26 (Range = 18 to 68, SD = 7.94 years), and an average relationship length of 23 months (Range = 1 month to 40 years, SD = 30 months). A total of 976 participants were exclusively dating, 88 participants were casually dating, 87 were in open relationships, 11 were engaged, 98 were common-law, and 12 were married (9 not reported). A total of 174 of these participants chose to breakup over the course of the study (14%); 57 of these participants indicated that the breakup was entirely their decision, 28 indicated that the breakup was mostly
their decision, and 64 indicated that the breakup was a mutual decision (25 did not indicate who initiated the breakup). This final sample of 1281 participants provides 83% power to detect a significant logistic regression effect at a small effect size (odds ratio = 1.3) even in a model with other predictors that explain 20% of the total variance (R2 = .2) in breakup decisions.

3 Study 3 Results

Intercorrelations among all variables are shown in Table 3. I used binary logistic regression to predict breakup decisions over the course of the study. Predictor variables were standardized. The dependent measure represented the decision that each participant made over the course of the study about whether or not to remain in their current romantic relationship (0 = stayed together, 1 = chose to break up).

I first examined the predictive power of each of the two partner-focused variables independently, without any control variables. I found that indeed, perceived partner commitment ($b = -.66, SE = .08, p < .001, \text{odds ratio} = .52$) and anticipated partner distress ($b = -.59, SE = .09, p < .001, \text{odds ratio} = .56$) each predicted a lower likelihood of choosing to break up. For each standard deviation increase in perceptions of the partner’s commitment, people were only .52 times as likely to break up (i.e., they were 1.92 times as likely to stay together). For each standard deviation increase in how much distress participants anticipated their partner would experience in the event of a breakup, they were only .56 times as likely to break up (1.79 times as likely to stay together).
Table 3. Study 3 correlations among all variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Partner Commitment</th>
<th>Own Satisfaction</th>
<th>Own Alternatives</th>
<th>Own Investment</th>
<th>Own Commitment</th>
<th>Feeling Appreciated</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Partner Distress</td>
<td>.61</td>
<td>.44</td>
<td>-.13</td>
<td>.39</td>
<td>.41</td>
<td>.41</td>
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<tr>
<td>Partner Commitment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-1.6</td>
<td>.42</td>
<td>.61</td>
<td>.60</td>
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<tr>
<td>Own Satisfaction</td>
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<td></td>
<td>-.19</td>
<td>.48</td>
<td>.66</td>
<td>.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Own Alternatives</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-.17</td>
<td>-.41</td>
<td>-.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Own Investment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.53</td>
<td>.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Own Commitment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I next tested whether these partner-focused variables would predict breakup decisions above and beyond five established indicators of relationship quality and predictors of relationship stability: satisfaction, quality of alternatives, investment, overall commitment to the relationship, and feelings of being appreciated by the partner. Results are shown in Table 4. Both perceived partner commitment (\(b = -.25, p = .004\), odds ratio = .78) and anticipated partner distress (\(b = -.23, p < .001\), odds ratio = .80) remained strong predictors of breakup decisions. Specifically, above and beyond all four components of the investment model as well as feelings of being appreciated by the partner, participants were .78 times as likely to break up (in other words, 1.28 times as likely to stay together) for each standard deviation increase in perceived partner commitment. Similarly, participants were .80 times as likely to break up for each standard deviation increase in anticipated partner distress (1.25 times as likely to stay together).
Table 4. Partner’s dependence predicts breakup decisions over and above satisfaction, investment, quality of alternatives, commitment, and feeling appreciated

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Breakup Decision</td>
<td>Breakup Decision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$b$</td>
<td>$SE$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Partner Commitment</td>
<td>-0.25</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternatives</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investment</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment</td>
<td>-0.21</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling Appreciated</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.1 Additional Analyses

To ensure that these effects were not unique to either men or women, I tested for moderations by gender. For each of the partner-focused variables, I tested a binary logistic regression model in which relationship satisfaction, investment, quality of alternatives, commitment, feeling appreciated, gender, and the respective partner-focused variable, and
gender were entered into Step 1, and an interaction term between the partner-focused variable and gender was entered into Step 2. The effects of perceived partner commitment on breakup decisions held controlling for gender \((b = -.37, SE = .12, p = .002, \text{odds ratio} = .70)\), and were not moderated by gender \((b = -.23, SE = .18, p = .19, \text{odds ratio} = .79)\). Similarly, the effects of anticipated partner distress on breakup decisions held controlling for gender \((b = -.39, SE = .10, p < .001, \text{odds ratio} = .68)\), and were not moderated by gender \((b = .04, SE = .21, p = .86, \text{odds ratio} = 1.04)\).

I next tested for moderations by relationship length. Again, for each partner-focused variable, I tested a model with satisfaction, investment, quality of alternatives, commitment, feeling appreciated, the relevant partner-focused variable, and relationship length entered into Step 1, and an interaction term between the partner-focused variable and relationship length entered into Step 2. The effects of perceived partner commitment on breakup decisions held controlling for relationship length \((b = -.35, SE = .12, p = .004, \text{odds ratio} = .71)\), and were not moderated by relationship length \((b = .10, SE = .14, p = .48, \text{odds ratio} = 1.11)\). Similarly, the effects of anticipated partner distress on breakup decisions held controlling for relationship length \((b = -.37, SE = .10, p < .001, \text{odds ratio} = .69)\), and were not moderated by relationship length \((b = .08, SE = .17, p = .65, \text{odds ratio} = 1.08)\).

### 3.2 What Happens When Self-Interest is Low?

These results suggest that people are less likely to choose to end their relationship when they believe that their partner is highly dependent on the relationship. I next sought to test whether this is true even for individuals who have relatively few self-interested reasons to continue the relationship.

I first conducted a series of binary logistic regression analyses testing for possible moderations of the association between perceived partner commitment and breakup decisions. In
the first step of each model, I entered perceived partner commitment, satisfaction, investment, quality of alternatives, commitment, and feeling appreciated. In the second step, I entered an interaction term between perceived partner commitment and one of the five other variables. I tested five possible moderators in total; results of Step 2 of the model are shown in Table 5. None of the tested interactions were significant. These results suggest that when people perceived their partner to be highly committed to their relationship, they were less likely to break up with their partner regardless of their own satisfaction, quality of alternatives, investment, commitment or feelings of being appreciated by their partner.

I next tested for potential moderators of the association between anticipated partner distress and breakup decisions. The first step of each model included anticipated partner distress, satisfaction, investment, quality of alternatives, commitment, and feeling appreciated. The second step included an interaction term between anticipated partner distress and one of the five other variables. Results of Step 2 of the model are shown in Table 6. None of the tested interactions were significant. As with the effects of perceived partner commitment, these results suggest that when people anticipated that a breakup would greatly distress their partner, they were less likely to break up with their partner regardless of their own satisfaction, quality of alternatives, investment, commitment or feelings of being appreciated by their partner.
Table 5. Potential moderators of the association between perceived partner commitment and breakup decisions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Breakup Decision</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$b$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Model 1</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Perceived Partner Commitment *</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Model 2</strong></td>
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</tr>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Model 3</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Model 4</strong></td>
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<td>Perceived Partner Commitment *</td>
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<tr>
<td>Commitment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Model 5</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Perceived Partner Commitment *</td>
<td>-.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling Appreciated</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Each model also included perceived partner commitment, satisfaction, investment, quality of alternatives, commitment, and feeling appreciated as predictors.
Table 6. Potential moderators of the association between anticipated partner distress and breakup decisions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Breakup Decision</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$b$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anticipated Partner Distress *</td>
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<td>Satisfaction</td>
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<td>Model 2</td>
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*Each model also included anticipated partner distress, satisfaction, investment, quality of alternatives, commitment, and feeling appreciated as predictors.

4 Study 3 Discussion

The present research is the first to directly test the idea that people take their partner’s feelings into consideration when making stay/leave decisions. Using a longitudinal design, I examined whether people were less likely to break up with romantic partners who are highly dependent on the relationship; i.e., partners who strongly want and need for the relationship to...
continue. I operationalized perceived partner dependence in two ways in the present study: people’s beliefs about how strongly the partner wants the relationship to continue (i.e., perceived partner commitment) and people’s beliefs about how upsetting a breakup would be for their partner (i.e., anticipated partner distress). I found that each of these variables predicted a lower likelihood of choosing to end the relationship over the course of the study. That is, people were less likely to break up with their partner if they believed that their partner strongly needed for the relationship to continue.

I took a number of steps to rule out alternative, more self-focused explanations for the present results. The most viable alternative explanation is that people care about their partner’s dependence not for the sake of the partner, but for the sake of the self. As discussed in the general introduction, risk regulation theory postulates that a highly dependent partner is a more desirable partner, because one can feel more confident about their acceptance and positive regard (e.g., Murray et al., 2000; 2001; 2003). Thus, people may be less likely to break up with a highly dependent romantic partner not because they are concerned about their partner’s needs, but because the partner’s dependence contributes to own feelings of acceptance and security within the relationship. To rule out this alternative explanation in the present research, I tested for moderations by a number of indicators of relationship quality. In particular, I measured how appreciated people felt by their partner, which represents people’s sense of their partner’s positive regard for them (Gordon et al., 2012). I found that my effects were not moderated by feelings of being appreciated, suggesting that even people who felt unappreciated or relatively more taken for granted by their partner still took their partner’s feelings into account when making stay/leave decisions. Similarly, I did not find moderations by satisfaction, investment, quality of alternatives, or commitment. These results suggest that people are less likely to break
up with a romantic partner who is highly dependent on the relationship regardless of whether the relationship is meeting their own needs.

I further sought to rule out a methodological explanation for our findings. Relationship breakups are typically treated as a relationship-level event, rather than as an individual choice. This conceptualization of breakups makes it impossible to determine just how interdependent breakup decisions are. To account for this confound in the present research, I excluded individuals who were broken up with so that our results would reflect the participants’ own decisions about whether to stay in the relationship, rather than their partner’s decision. Results held with this exclusion, suggesting that it is indeed the case that people are taking their partner’s feelings into account when making their own stay/leave decisions.

In sum, the current study is the first to show that partner-focused concerns can motivate stay/leave decisions. Even when a relationship is not doing a particularly good job of meeting the decision maker’s own needs (own satisfaction, investment, commitment, and feelings of being appreciated by the partner are all relatively low, quality of alternatives is relatively high) concern for a partner’s feelings can discourage them from ending the relationship.
Chapter 4
Initiation

1 Willingness to Reject Potential Romantic Partners

Relationship initiation decisions represent a particularly strong test of the hypothesis that people make relationship decisions prosocially, because it should be particularly easy to walk away from a relationship that has not yet formed. Dependence on that individual to meet one’s needs, as well as feelings of obligation to meet the person’s needs in return, are both at an absolute minimum. In the present chapter, I will specifically examine situations in which people are deciding whether to accept or reject an anonymous stranger who they have yet to meet in person. In this context where people lack any pre-existing social ties to their potential partner, will they still be concerned about the effect that their relationship choices have on this individual? In particular, will people be motivated to avoid inflicting the pain of rejection on their unwanted suitor?

Most research on rejection has focused on the perspective of the person being rejected, rather than the person doing the rejecting. However, the limited research that has examined the perspective of the rejecter suggests that people tend to be motivated to avoid hurting the rejected person’s feelings. In one pair of studies, researchers examined autobiographical accounts of unrequited love, including the perspectives of individuals who have been pursued by unwanted “admirers” (Baumeister, Wotman, & Stillwell, 1993). The researchers found that although rejecters reported feeling morally innocent, they also experienced persistent feelings of guilt about the pain that they had caused to their admirers. Thus, although rejecters tended to feel that they had done nothing wrong in rejecting a person who they were not interested in dating, they nevertheless felt bad about hurting that person’s feelings. Similarly, a study on breakups found
that breakup initiators similarly reported feeling guilty for rejecting their ex-partners, and they worried about being perceived as uncaring or cruel (Perilloux & Buss, 2008). In another study, women were asked to imagine a scenario in which a woman wished to turn down a date request from a man, and they were asked to write down how the woman might reject him (Besson, Roloff, Paulson, 1998). The vast majority of participants (97%) provided impersonal reasons for turning down the date (e.g., already having plans for the evening), rather than personal reasons (e.g., not wanting to date the person). Furthermore, when participants were asked to imagine that the woman did not want further contact with the suitor (i.e., that the date was undesired), they were more likely to provide responses that included apologies, expressions of appreciation for the offer, and expressions of concern for the potential date’s feelings. Together, this research suggests that people tend to be concerned about the feelings of undesired potential romantic partners, and are reluctant to inflict the pain of rejection on those individuals despite the fact that it is morally acceptable (indeed, some may argue that it is morally preferable) to do so.

Overall, I predict that people care about the effect that their relationship decisions have on their (potential) partner, even when they lack any pre-existing social ties to that individual. Thus, people can be motivated to agree to go on dates with undesired potential romantic partners out of a desire to avoid hurting the suitor’s feelings. This finding would build on the previous chapters on commitment and dissolution decisions by demonstrating that people take their (potential) partner’s feelings into consideration when making relationship choices that affect that individual, even when interdependence with that individual is at its lowest.

1.1 Do People Anticipate this Source of Influence On Their Decisions?

The present research will further build on the previous chapters by examining one potential reason why the role of prosocial motivation has been consistently overlooked in the context of relationship decisions, by both researchers and laypeople alike. I propose that
although prosocial motivations can and do affect relationship decisions, people fail to predict the influence that such concerns will have on their behaviors. Past research has shown that people in a “cold,” unemotional state tend to underestimate the influence of their emotions when they are in a “hot” state (Loewenstein, 1996). People have little appreciation for the extent to which emotions may influence their behaviors in the heat of the moment (e.g., Van Boven, Loewenstein, & Dunning, 2005). Recent research suggests that this hot-cold empathy gap may lead people to overestimate their propensity to act in their own interests at the expense of other people (Teper, Inzlicht, & Page-Gould, 2011) and that people may make more prosocial decisions than they anticipate. In the relational context, unanticipated prosocial feelings may act as a barrier to making self-interested decisions, causing people to advance and maintain romantic relationships even when it is not necessarily in their best interests to do so.

Overall, I hypothesized that people making decisions about whether to accept or reject a potential romantic partner (and who are presumably therefore in a hot state) are influenced by their desire to avoid causing that person harm. I further hypothesized that people underestimate this source of influence on mate choices because they underestimate how concerned they will feel about hurting the unsuitable potential partner’s feelings. I tested these hypotheses in two studies. In each study, single participants were given the option to accept or reject a potential date in what they believed to be either a hypothetical context or a real-life context. The potential dates were unsuitable either because they were physically unattractive (Study 4) or because they possessed traits that the participants strongly disliked in a mate (Study 5). I predicted that participants would be less willing to reject these unsuitable potential dates in a real-life context because they would feel more strongly influenced by other-focused concerns in a real-life context than in a hypothetical context. These results would suggest not only that people take other people’s feelings into consideration when making decisions about whom to date, but also
that they underestimate this source of influence when predicting their decisions in the abstract.

2 Study 4 Introduction

In Study 4, participants were presented with three dating profiles that ostensibly belonged to other participants in the study. After selecting their preferred profile, participants were given additional information about the person, including a photo that ostensibly showed the person to be unattractive. Participants assigned to the real condition were told that their potential dates were currently in the lab and were available to meet them, whereas participants in the hypothetical condition were asked to imagine that their potential dates were currently in the lab and were available to meet them. Participants were asked whether they would like to exchange contact information with their potential dates. I predicted that participants would be significantly less willing to reject the unattractive potential date when they thought that the scenario was real rather than hypothetical. I tested two potential mediators of this effect: self-focused motives and other-focused motives.

3 Study 4 Methods

3.1 Participants

To be eligible for the study, participants were required to be heterosexual, single, and interested in dating. A total of 150 introductory psychology students completed the study. Fifteen participants were excluded because they expressed suspicions about the study, and 3 participants were excluded because they were not single. The final sample consisted of 132 participants (65 male, 64 female, 3 unreported) with an average age of 18.91 years (SD = 1.82, range = 17–33 years).
3.2 Materials and Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to either the real condition or the hypothetical condition. For the purposes of this research, I operationalized realism as the belief that the experiment—and particularly decisions made during the experiment—would have real-life consequences. Participants in the real condition were led to believe that they were being given a real opportunity to connect with potential romantic partners, whereas participants in the hypothetical condition were asked only to imagine the experience. Other features were held constant; all participants were told that the potential dates were real people, and no participants actually met any potential dates face-to-face.

All participants were first asked to complete their own dating profile and to provide a photograph of themselves, which they were told would be shared with other participants. Next, participants were presented with three completed dating profiles, ostensibly written by other participants. Participants in the real condition were told that these participants were currently in the lab, and that they might get to meet one of them. In contrast, participants in the hypothetical condition were told that the other participants were unavailable at that particular time, so dating profiles had been taken from a previous session. Participants in this condition were asked to imagine that these potential dates were currently in the lab.

Participants selected their favorite profile. Next, they were given a photo of an unattractive person and were told that it was a photo of the person whose profile they had chosen. They were also given a completed questionnaire indicating that the potential date was interested in meeting the participant. The questionnaire included the following critical question: “Are you willing to exchange contact information with this person for the purposes of dating?” Participants in the real condition were told that this questionnaire had actually been filled out by the potential date in response to the participant’s own dating information; participants in the
hypothetical condition were asked to imagine that the questionnaire had been filled out by the potential date in response to the participant’s own dating information.

Participants were next asked to fill out the same questionnaire (i.e., the one that the potential date had filled out and that they had just read). Participants in the real condition were told that their completed questionnaire would be presented to the potential date; those in the hypothetical condition were asked to imagine that their completed questionnaire would be presented to the potential date.

After making their decision to accept or reject the potential date, all participants were asked, “We’re curious about why people make the relationship choices that they do. Thinking about your decision of whether or not to exchange contact information with the fellow participant, are there any factors that particularly motivated you to want to meet?” This question was followed by a series of potential reasons for agreeing to exchange contact information with the potential date. Participants were clearly told that their responses to this questionnaire would not be shared with anyone other than the researchers. Four statements represented desire not to hurt the potential date’s feelings (i.e., other-focused reasons not to reject the potential date): “I didn’t want to hurt my potential date’s feelings by turning him/her down,” “The idea of refusing made me feel guilty,” “I didn’t want to make my potential date feel rejected,” and “I would have felt bad about turning down my potential date.” Four statements represented self-interest in meeting the potential date (i.e., self-focused reasons not to reject the date): “I thought that my potential date and I could make a good match,” “I thought that a date with this individual would be fun,” “I thought that my potential date and I could be compatible,” and “I was looking forward to meeting my potential date.” For each statement, participants were asked, “How TRUE was this statement for you?” and then “How much did this MOTIVATE you to agree to meet?” Participants rated the items on 5-point Likert scales (1 = not at all, 5 = extremely).
A principal component analysis using varimax rotation showed that the eight responses to the self-focused items loaded onto one factor (lowest factor loading = .72), whereas the eight responses to the other-focused items loaded onto a separate factor (lowest factor loading = .71). Overall, eight responses concerned other-focused motives (α = .93), and eight concerned self-focused motives (α = .90). I averaged responses to create a self-focused motives score and an other-focused motives score for each participant.

Finally, participants were asked, “How physically attractive do you consider yourself to be?” and “How physically attractive do you consider your potential date to be?” Participants responded on a 9-point scale (1 = very unattractive, 9 = very attractive). After the completion of the questionnaires, participants were probed for suspicion and then fully debriefed.

4 Study 4 Results

4.1 Experimental Effects

I first sought to confirm that participants indeed viewed the potential date as unattractive. A paired-samples t test indicated that participants found the potential date (M = 4.48) to be significantly less attractive than themselves (M = 6.08), t(103) = 6.77, p < .001. I next tested my primary hypothesis that participants would be more reluctant to reject the unattractive date when they believed the situation to be real rather than hypothetical. Only 10 of the 61 participants in the hypothetical condition chose to exchange contact information with the unattractive potential date (16%). In contrast, 26 of the 71 participants in the real condition chose to exchange contact information (37%). A chi-square test of independence indicated that participants were significantly less likely to reject the unattractive potential date in the real condition compared with the hypothetical condition, χ²(1, N = 132) = 6.77, p = .009.

I examined potential effects of the experimental manipulation (real condition vs. hypothetical condition) on participants’ self-reported motives regarding their decision. Results of
a Wilks’s lambda multivariate analysis of variance (ANOVA) were significant, $F(2, 129) = 4.85, p = .009, \eta_p^2 = .07$. Table 7 presents results for the motive measures. The manipulation significantly affected participants’ other-focused and self-focused motives for exchanging contact information. Participants felt more concerned about hurting the potential date’s feelings, as well as more genuinely interested in meeting the potential date, when they believed the scenario to be real rather than hypothetical.

Table 7. Results from Study 4: Impact of experimental condition on motives for accepting the potential date

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motive Type</th>
<th>Hypothetical Condition ($M$, $SD$)</th>
<th>Real Condition ($M$, $SD$)</th>
<th>$F(1,130)$</th>
<th>$p$</th>
<th>$\eta_p^2$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Other-Focused</td>
<td>2.62, 1.00</td>
<td>3.12, 1.05</td>
<td>7.82</td>
<td>.006</td>
<td>.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Focused</td>
<td>2.21, .71</td>
<td>2.50, .79</td>
<td>4.77</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.2 Mediation Effects

ANOVA results suggest that both other-focused concerns and self-focused concerns may help to explain why participants were less willing to reject potential partners in the real condition compared with the hypothetical condition. I tested both of these potential mechanisms using a bootstrap procedure (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). I generated a 95% confidence interval for the indirect effect with 5,000 resamples. Significant mediation is indicated when the upper and lower limits of the confidence interval do not include zero. Condition (hypothetical vs. real) was entered as the predictor. Other-focused and self-focused motives were entered as simultaneous mediators. Decision to reject the date (no vs. yes) was entered as the dependent variable. As predicted, other-focused motives significantly mediated participants’ lower likelihood of rejecting the potential date in the real condition compared with the hypothetical condition. In
addition, self-focused motives marginally mediated the association between experimental condition and rejection decision (see Table 8 and Figure 3). Overall, then, participants assigned to the real condition reported being more motivated to exchange contact information with the potential date for both self- and other-focused reasons, and each type of reason independently helped to explain why participants in the real condition were more likely to agree to exchange information than were those in the hypothetical condition.
Table 8. Results from Study 4: Analysis of motives as mediators of the effect of experimental condition (real vs. hypothetical) on the decision to reject the potential date

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Point Estimate of Indirect Effect</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>Lower</th>
<th>Upper</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Other-Focused Motives</td>
<td>-.2928</td>
<td>.2059</td>
<td>-.7994</td>
<td>-.0111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Focused Motives</td>
<td>-.5076</td>
<td>.3247</td>
<td>-1.2404</td>
<td>.0140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>-.8005</td>
<td>.4064</td>
<td>-1.6751</td>
<td>-.1533</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: BCa 95% CI = bias-corrected and accelerated 95% confidence interval, based on 5,000 bootstrap samples.

Figure 3. Results from Study 4: Self- and other-focused motives as mediators of the effect of the experimental condition on the decision to reject the date

Note: On the path from experimental condition (real vs. hypothetical) to decision to reject the date, the value outside parentheses is from the model without the mediators, and the value in parentheses is from the model that included the mediators. All values are unstandardized regression coefficients (*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001).
4.3 Additional Analyses

I next tested for gender effects. First, I ran the bootstrapping analysis again with gender included as a covariate. I found that the effects held controlling for gender: the experimental manipulation had a significant effect on both partner-focused motives ($b = .62, SE = .25, p = .02$), and on self-focused motives ($b = .25, SE = .13, p = .05$). Partner-focused motives, in turn, significantly predicted participants’ decisions to accept versus reject the date ($b = -.62, SE = .25, p = .01$), as did self-focused motives ($b = -1.81, SE = .42, p < .001$). I also ran the bootstrapping analysis with condition and gender both included as covariates, and with a condition*gender interaction term as the predictor. I found that gender did not significantly moderate the impact of the experimental manipulation on partner-focused motives ($b = .29, SE = .36, p = .42$), self-focused motives ($b = .41, SE = .26, p = .12$), or participants’ decisions to accept versus reject the date ($b = -1.46, SE = .90, p = .11$). Thus, the present effects held controlling for gender and were not moderated by gender.

5 Study 4 Discussion

These results suggest that people overestimate their own willingness to reject potential dating partners. When participants were asked to imagine being confronted with an unattractive potential date, the large majority (84%) anticipated that they would reject that individual. However, when participants were presented with this dilemma in what they believed to be a real situation, only 63% actually rejected the unattractive potential date.

This effect was partly explained by self-focused motives: Participants in the real condition were more genuinely interested in meeting the potential date than participants in the hypothetical condition imagined that they would be. However, the effects were also partially explained by other-focused motives, above and beyond the effects of self-focused motives. Participants in the real condition were more concerned about hurting their potential date’s
feelings than participants in the hypothetical condition expected that they would be, which in turn led fewer people to reject the potential date in the real condition compared with the hypothetical condition.

6 Study 5 Introduction

Study 4 provided evidence that people overestimate their willingness to reject potential partners, and that this effect is partially driven by other-focused motives. However, it is possible that this effect is unique to physical attractiveness. In Study 5, I explored whether the effect would generalize to contexts in which potential dates are undesirable because of their habits or traits, rather than their lack of physical attractiveness. Study 5 had a similar methodology to Study 4, except that instead of presenting participants with unattractive photos, I presented participants with additional information suggesting that their chosen dates were incompatible with the participants. I obtained prior reports from participants about “dealbreaker” traits that would lead them to reject potential dating partners (e.g., opposing religious or political views), and tailored the dating profile information so as to contain those person-specific dealbreaker traits. I expected that, as in Study 4, participants who were told that this situation was only hypothetical would be significantly more willing to reject the incompatible potential partner compared to participants who believed the situation was real. I predicted that this effect would be mediated by stronger motivation to avoid hurting the potential partner’s feelings in the real condition compared to the hypothetical condition.

7 Study 5 Methods

7.1 Participants

To be eligible for the study, participants were required to be heterosexual, romantically single, and interested in dating. As in Study 4, I collected as much data as possible over the
course of one academic year. A total of 134 introductory psychology students completed the study. Two were excluded because they were not single, two were excluded because they were not interested in dating, 12 were excluded because they had not provided any dealbreaker traits prior to participation, and 16 were excluded because they expressed suspicions about the study. The final sample was 102 participants (32 male), with an average age of 19.11 (range = 17 to 30, \(SD = 1.76\)). Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: the real condition or the hypothetical condition.

### 7.2 Materials and Procedure

Before the laboratory session, participants completed a questionnaire about their dating preferences. The items were included in a larger package of questionnaires distributed to all introductory psychology students. Students were asked if they would ever consider dating a person who had any of 14 potential deal-breaker traits (e.g., being very religious, being an atheist). They responded either “yes” or “no” to each item; a “no” response indicated that a particular trait was a deal-breaker.

Students were later recruited to participate in my lab experiment on “dating experiences.” They first completed their own dating profiles as well as a sheet of additional information about themselves, which they were told would be shared with other participants. They were next presented with three completed profiles, all of which included some basic information (e.g., age, academic major). Participants were led to believe either that the students from these profiles were currently in the lab (real condition) or that they were from a previous session (hypothetical condition). Participants chose their favorite profiles. Next, they were given a sheet of additional personal information that had ostensibly been filled out by their chosen potential date. These sheets were in fact adapted by the experimenter for each participant to include three of the participant’s previously indicated deal-breaker traits. For example, if a participant indicated in
the initial questionnaire that he or she would never date a very liberal person, the personal information sheet indicated that the potential date’s political views were “very liberal.” As in Study 1, each participant was also given a completed questionnaire indicating that the potential date would like to meet him or her. Participants were told that these responses were written by the potential date (real condition), or they were asked to imagine that the responses were written by the potential date (hypothetical condition).

As in Study 4, participants completed the same questionnaire, which included the question about their willingness to contact the potential date. Participants were told that their responses would be presented to the potential date (real condition) or were asked to imagine that they would be presented to the potential date (hypothetical condition).

Using the 16 questions from Study 4, all participants next rated other-focused ($\alpha = .93$) and self-focused ($\alpha = .93$) factors that may have motivated them to exchange contact information with their potential date. As in Study 1, a principal component analysis using varimax rotation showed that the eight responses to the self-focused items loaded onto one factor (lowest factor loading $= .72$), whereas the eight responses to the other-focused items loaded onto a separate factor (lowest factor loading $= .71$). I averaged responses to create a self-focused motives score and an other-focused motives score for each participant. After the participants completed the questionnaires, they were probed for suspicion and fully debriefed.

Following the completion of the questionnaires, participants were probed for suspicion, and were fully debriefed.
8 Study 5 Results

8.1 Experimental Effects

I first examined whether participants’ willingness to reject the incompatible potential dates differed on the basis of whether they believed the situation to be real or hypothetical. I found that 24 of the 52 participants in the hypothetical condition chose to exchange contact information with the potential date (46%), whereas 35 of the participants in the real condition chose to exchange contact information (74%). A test of independence indicated that participants in the real condition were significantly less likely to reject the unattractive potential date than were participants in the hypothetical condition, $\chi^2(1, N = 99) = 8.22, p = .004$. These results replicate those of Study 4.

I next examined whether the experimental manipulation (real condition vs. hypothetical condition) affected participants’ self-reported motives for their choices. Results of a Wilks’s lambda multivariate ANOVA were significant, $F(2, 96) = 3.71, p = .03, \eta_p^2 = .07$. Table 3 presents results for motives measures. As in Study 4, the experimental manipulation significantly affected participants’ other-focused motives. Participants in the real conditions were more concerned about hurting their potential dates’ feelings than were participants in the hypothetical condition. However, unlike in Study 4, the experimental manipulation did not affect participants’ self-focused motives: Their belief about the scenario (i.e., real or hypothetical) had no effect on their genuine interest in meeting the potential date.
Table 9. Results from Study 5: Impact of experimental condition on motives for accepting the potential date

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Hypothetical Condition (M, SD)</th>
<th>Real Condition (M, SD)</th>
<th>F(1,99)</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>ηp²</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Other-Focused Motives</td>
<td>3.67, 1.43</td>
<td>4.46, 1.45</td>
<td>7.65</td>
<td>.007</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Focused Motives</td>
<td>3.86, 1.43</td>
<td>4.01, 1.14</td>
<td>.33</td>
<td>.57</td>
<td>.003</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

8.2 Mediation Effects

I used a bootstrap analysis with 5,000 samples to test whether other-focused motives was a mediator of the effect of condition (hypothetical vs. real) on decision to reject the date (no vs. yes). I found that other-focused motives marginally mediated this association between condition and outcome, partially explaining why participants in the real condition were less willing to reject their potential dates than were participants in the hypothetical condition (Figure 4). The point estimate of the indirect effect was –0.20 (SE = 0.15), with a bias-corrected and accelerated 95% confidence interval of –0.57 to 0.04.
Figure 4. Results from Study 5: Other-focused motives as a mediator of the effect of the experimental condition on the decision to reject the date.

Note: On the path from experimental condition (real vs. hypothetical) to decision to reject the date, the value outside parentheses is from the model without the mediator, and the value in parentheses is from the model that included the mediator. All values are unstandardized regression coefficients (†$p < .10$, *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$).

8.3 Additional Analyses

To test for gender effects, I ran the bootstrapping analysis again with gender included as a covariate. Results were highly similar controlling for gender: the experimental manipulation still had a significant effect on partner-focused motives ($b = .79, SE = .29, p = .001$), which, in turn, marginally predicted participants’ decisions to accept versus reject the date ($b = -.25, SE = .15, p = .10$). I also ran the bootstrapping analysis with a condition*gender interaction term as the predictor and with condition and gender included as covariates. Gender did not significantly moderate the impact of the experimental manipulation on partner-focused motives ($b = .16, SE = .63, p = .80$), or participants’ decisions to accept versus reject the date ($b = 1.17, SE = 1.25, p = .35$).

9 Study 5 Discussion

Study 4 showed that people overestimate their willingness to reject unattractive potential
dates. Study 5 expanded on this finding, showing that people similarly overestimate their willingness to reject incompatible potential dates. Less than half of participants who were presented with hypothetical potential dates—who ostensibly possessed three different deal-breaker traits—accepted a date. However, when participants were told that these potential dates were currently in the lab, 74% of participants were willing to exchange contact information. Furthermore, when participants only imagined choosing whether to reject an incompatible potential date, they underestimated how concerned they would feel about hurting the potential date’s feelings. As in Study 4, I found that other-focused motives explained why people overestimated their willingness to reject the incompatible date. Unlike in Study 4, however, self-focused motives did not differ significantly between conditions.

10 Chapter 4 Discussion

Studies 4 and 5 show that rejecting an unsuitable potential romantic partner is easier said than done. People overestimated their willingness to reject undesirable potential partners who were physically unattractive (Study 4) or who possessed traits that were incompatible with their own preferences (Study 5). These effects were partially explained by other-focused motives: People failed to anticipate their desire to avoid hurting the potential date’s feelings.

In the previous chapters, I provided evidence suggesting that people take their partner’s feelings into consideration when making decisions such as whether to commit to a relationship (Chapter 2) and whether to end a relationship (Chapter 3). However, as described in the General Introduction, past research has consistently overlooked this source of influence on people’s relationship choices. The present research presents a possible explanation for this oversight. In accordance with the hot-cold empathy gap (Loewenstein, 1996), researchers and laypeople alike may fail to anticipate the extent to which prosocial motivation influence relationship choices. Specifically, the present findings suggest that people underestimate how concerned they are
about hurting the feelings of undesired suitors. Future research should examine whether this empathy gap for prosocial motivation is unique to the relationship initiation context, or whether it might extend to other types of relationship choices as well.

Future research should also examine the boundary conditions of this prosocial motivation. How far might people be willing to go to accommodate undesirable potential partners? The motivation to spare a partner’s feelings may lessen as the cost of doing so increases. The potential partner’s flaws may become more salient as the relationship develops, leading the decision maker to conclude that the opportunity costs of continuing to accommodate this person are too great. Conversely, other-focused motives, such as empathy, tend to become stronger as the decision maker becomes closer to the target, both geographically and psychologically (e.g., Loewenstein & Small, 2007). Indeed, as uncovered in Chapters 2 and 3, people take their partner’s feelings into account even when making long-term relationship decisions such as whether to commit, or whether to break up. Thus, continued investment in the relationship may make a person more, rather than less, motivated to avoid hurting his or her partner.

In the present studies, participants made their decision to accept or reject the date before answering the questionnaire about their self- and other-focused motives. It is possible that the responses to the questionnaire items represent post hoc explanations of participants’ decisions, rather than participants’ true motives. However, studies on self-justification suggest that people tend to justify their decisions as being intrinsically good decisions, rather than admit that they were acquiescing to the desires of other people (e.g., Festinger, 1957; Rasinski, Geers, & Czopp, 2013). Therefore, self-justification should favor endorsement of self-focused motives (i.e., “If I agreed to go on a date with this person, he must be desirable after all”), rather than other-focused motives. In the present studies, other-focused motives had effects above and beyond the effects
of self-focused motives, which suggests that the effects of other-focused motives are unlikely to be the result of self-justification.

   Overall, Studies 4 and 5 identify other-focused motives as a previously overlooked source of influence on mate choice. These findings suggest that people can feel motivated to accept overtures from unsuitable potential partners because they do not want to hurt those individuals. However, people do not anticipate these other-focused concerns in the abstract, so they overestimate their willingness to reject unsuitable potential partners.
Chapter 5

General Discussion

Romantic relationship decisions are the most direct way in which people actively shape their romantic futures. When people make decisions such as whether to commit to a new romantic partner, to end a struggling relationship, or to begin a brand new relationship, they are choosing who they ultimately wind up with, if anyone, as a long-term partner. However, the impact of these choices extends beyond the decision maker: by definition, every decision about a close relationship impacts another person in addition to the self. In the present research, I examined whether people make romantic relationship decisions prosocially. Specifically, do people make decisions about romantic relationships with only their own interests in mind, or do they also take their partner or potential partner’s feelings into consideration?

Across five studies, I showed that people can and do make relationship-advancing decisions that are not necessarily in their own best interests if they believe that these decisions would benefit the partner. In Chapter 2, I showed that people are more willing to commit to partners who they perceive to be highly invested in the relationship, even in cases where their own satisfaction with the relationship is relatively low. In Chapter 3, I showed that people are less willing to break up with partners who they perceive to be more dependent on the relationship, even in cases where their own dependence is relatively low. Finally, in Chapter 4, I showed that people are more likely to agree to a date with an undesired suitor in reality than people predict hypothetically, in part because of a reluctance to hurt the suitor’s feelings. Overall, the present package of studies provides evidence for partner-focused decision making across the relationship lifespan.
The Overlooked Role of Partner-Focused Motives

On its face, the present package of findings may seem quite intuitive. Decision making research has already demonstrated that people tend to consider other people’s needs when making decisions, even when those other individuals are anonymous strangers (e.g., Rand et al., 2012; Yamagishi et al., 2014). It seems only logical that these prosocial tendencies would extend to close relationships. Indeed, the notion that people would consider their partner’s needs when making decisions about romantic relationships is entirely consistent with interdependence theory (e.g., Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003), as well as with research showing that committed romantic partners tend to be highly motivated to meet each other’s needs (e.g., Clark et al., 2010). Yet, the role of the partner’s feelings in relationship decisions has been consistently overlooked in the empirical literature. As reviewed in the general introduction, research on decisions to initiate, advance, and maintain relationships has focused on self-interested motives exclusively. Indeed, in Studies 4 and 5, I found that participants were more concerned about hurting a potential date’s feelings in reality than participants predicted they would be hypothetically, suggesting that laypeople tend to similarly underestimate the role of partner-focused motives in relationship decisions.

Uncovering this blind spot in the literature on relationships and decision-making has important implications for a number of research areas. First, this research makes an important contribution to our understanding of romantic rejection by providing a rare look at rejection from the perspective of the rejecter, rather than the rejectee. Being rejected is an acutely painful experience that people are highly motivated to avoid (e.g., MacDonald & Leary, 2005). As such, considerable research has examined romantic rejection from the perspective of the rejected, or potentially rejected, individual. For example, there is a growing body of research on how fears of rejection discourage people from pursuing new relationships (e.g., Cameron, Stinson, Gaetz, &
Balchen, 2010; Vorauer, Cameron, Holmes, & Pearce, 2003; Vorauer & Ratner, 1998). In the context of ongoing relationships, risk regulation theory provides a comprehensive model for how people monitor their relationships for potential signs of rejection and regulate their relationship behavior accordingly (e.g., Murray et al., 2006; Murray, Pinkus, Holmes, Harris, Gomillion et al., 2011). However, surprisingly little attention has been paid to the other side of rejection: the perspective of the person doing the rejecting. The limited research that has examined the rejecter’s perspective has found that rejecters do indeed tend to feel concerned about the rejectees’ feelings (Baumeister et al., 1993; Besson et al., 1998; Perilloux & Buss, 2008). My research is the first to show that these concerns dissuade people from making decisions that result in romantic rejection in the first place, such as turning down a romantic overture (Studies 4 and 5), or ending an unfulfilling relationship (Study 3). Thus, the present research complements past work on rejection by demonstrating that as difficult as it may be to risk rejection, it can be quite difficult to inflict rejection, as well.

The present findings also have important implications for research on commitment. Past research has shown that willingness to meet the partner’s needs is greatly facilitated by commitment. For example, the more committed a person is to their relationship, the more likely they are to respond constructively to the partner’s destructive acts (Rusbult et al., 1991), sacrifice for their partner (Van Lange et al., 1997), and forgive their partner for transgressions (Finkel et al., 2002). However, it is unclear whether people are still motivated to meet their partner’s needs even when commitment levels are low. When a person is highly committed to a relationship—i.e., when they rely on the relationship to meet their needs and thus strongly wish for the relationship to continue—the success of the relationship is aligned with one’s own best interests (see Hui, Finkel, Fitzsimons, Kumashiro, & Hofmann, 2014, for discussion). It is strategic for a highly committed person to prioritize their partner’s needs, because doing so will help them to
maintain a relationship that they value. However, in the case where a person is not committed to the relationship, what’s in the best interests of the relationship may very well not be in the best interests of the self. Thus, situations of low commitment represent a particularly strong test of people’s willingness to act prosocially toward romantic partners. In the present research, I found that people took their partner’s feelings into consideration when commitment was still developing (i.e., Studies 1 and 2), when commitment was relatively low (Study 3), and even when commitment was entirely absent (Studies 4 and 5). These results suggest that people care about their partner’s feelings (or a potential partner’s feelings) even when they are not currently dependent on the relationship to meet their own needs.

Finally, the present research has implications for the intersection between the fields of decision making and romantic relationships. I have previously argued that romantic relationships can be conceptualized as a decision making domain, such that basic decision principles can be used to inform our understanding of how people make choices about romantic relationships specifically (Joel, MacDonald, & Plaks, 2013). The present research illustrates the utility of this approach. Although the present findings contradict the traditional economic model of human beings as self-interested decision makers, they are entirely consistent with modern behavioral research showing that even economic decisions are made with other people’s interests in mind (e.g., Rand et al., 2012; Yamagishi et al., 2014). Thus, not only are these findings further evidence of the similarity between romantic relationships and other, more traditional decision making domains, but they also highlight the importance of continuous crosstalk between these research areas. If we are to understand how people make crucial decisions about romantic relationships, we need to take advantage of cutting-edge research on decision making more broadly.
2  Just How Prosocial Are These Decisions?

One important question raised by the present work is, why do people care about their partner’s needs? I have argued that the mechanism most consistent with the present data is basic prosocial tendencies: people genuinely care about the welfare of their romantic partner (or potential partner), and thus feel motivated to act in ways that benefit the partner. However, there are two key alternative reasons why a person might care about their partner’s needs, which I have taken a number of steps to rule out in the present research.

One alternative explanation for the present findings is a security-based mechanism. A large body of research has shown how important it is for people in relationships to feel that they have their partner’s acceptance and positive regard (e.g., Murray et al., 2003; Murray et al., 2001; Murray et al., 2000; Murray et al., 2009; Wieselquist et al., 1999). A partner’s desire to advance or maintain the relationship could serve as an important cue to this acceptance, leading people to feel safer advancing the relationship themselves. That is, the partner’s feelings could be relevant to relationship decisions not because people care about meeting their partner’s needs, but because the partner’s feelings signal one’s own level of acceptance. I took a number of steps to account for this alternative explanation in the present research. First, in Study 1, I measured trust as a possible mechanism for the link between writing about a partner’s investments and own commitment to the relationship. I found that indeed, people felt more trusting of their partner after writing about the partner’s investments, suggesting that the partner’s investments served as a signal that the partner would continue to be responsive and reliable. However, these higher levels of trust did not fully explain participants’ own higher commitment levels, suggesting that people are more committed to highly invested partners for reasons beyond their own feelings of security in the relationship. In Study 3, I examined own feelings of being appreciated by the partner as a possible mechanism for the link between perceptions of the partner’s dependence on
the relationship and the decision to end the relationship. I found that the effect of the partner’s dependence on stay/leave decisions held controlling for feelings of being appreciated by the partner. Further, people were less likely to break up with highly dependent partners even if they did not feel particularly appreciated by their partners. In other words, it is not the case that people are more willing to stay with highly dependent partners because the partner’s dependence makes them feel more valued. These findings suggest that people take their partner’s feelings into consideration when choosing whether to advance or maintain the relationship, over and above how secure they feel in the relationship.

Another alternative explanation for the present effects is that people are not concerned about the welfare of their partner, per se, but rather the welfare of the relationship. For a person in a stable romantic relationship, it is strategic to meet the partner’s needs because doing so will benefit the relationship, which in turn will benefit the self (see Hui et al., 2014 for discussion). I ruled out this alternative explanation in the present research by specifically examining situations in which dependence on the relationship to meet one’s own needs is reduced (breakup decisions; Study 3) or eliminated (initiation decisions; Studies 4 and 5). In the case of breakup decisions, it seems unlikely that people would take their partner’s feelings into account for the sake of the relationship, as they are sufficiently dissatisfied with the relationship that they are considering exiting the relationship altogether. Yet, I found that people were less likely to break up with highly dependent partners even when own satisfaction, investment, and commitment were relatively low, and even when own quality of alternatives was relatively high. In the case of initiation decisions, relationship maintenance is not a viable alternative explanation for why people would take their (potential) partner’s feelings into consideration, because there is no relationship to maintain. Indeed, I found that people were reluctant to reject a potential partner whom they had never even met, in part because they did not want to hurt the potential partner’s
feelings. These results suggest that people care about the feelings of their romantic partner or potential partner for reasons other than relationship maintenance.

Overall, the present research takes a number of steps to rule out self-interested reasons why people might care about their partner’s needs, allowing for greater confidence in the conclusion that people tend to genuinely care about the well-being of their romantic partners. Nevertheless, this research only scratches the surface of how these partner-focused motives might influence relationship decisions. Future research is needed to continue to tease apart how different people might care about their partner’s needs to varying degrees, for different reasons, and under different circumstances. In particular, this area of research could benefit from an application of approach-avoidance theories of social motivation (see review by Gable & Impett, 2012). To what extent do people take their partner’s feelings into account for approach-based reasons (e.g., wanting to benefit the partner), or for avoidance-based reasons (e.g., wanting to avoid hurting the partner)? The present research provides preliminary evidence for both types of partner-focused motives. The partner-focused mechanism identified in Studies 1 and 2 was gratitude, which is a positive, approach-focused emotion (e.g., “I feel very lucky to have my partner in my life”). However, the partner-focused mechanism identified in Studies 3 and 4 was quite avoidance-based (e.g., “I didn’t want to make my potential date feel rejected”). This difference is likely to be important: research on sacrifice has shown that although sacrificing for approach motives tends to benefit both the self and the partner, sacrificing for avoidance motives tend to be both personally and relationally detrimental (Impett et al., 2005). Thus, future research should further examine how people might take their partner’s feelings into consideration when making relationship choices for approach- versus avoidance-based reasons.
3 Is Partner-Focused Decision Making Beneficial?

An important, related question raised by the present work is what the downstream consequences might be of making relationship decisions with the partner’s feelings in mind. To what extent is it a good thing that are people are willing to make relationship-advancing decisions for the sake of the partner? On the one hand, relationship quality tends to ebb and flow over time (e.g., Knee, Canevello, Bush, & Cook, 2008). For people who are already paired with compatible romantic partners, partner-focused motives may help them to ride out temporary rough patches in their relationships, ultimately contributing to more stable, long-term relationships. On the other hand, partner-focused motives may also motivate people to advance chronically unfulfilling relationships, perhaps with romantic partners who are not compatible with themselves. Indeed, in Study 5, I found that partner-focused motives helped to motivate people to agree to dates with highly incompatible potential partners (potential partners who possessed traits that the participants had previously identified to be “deal breakers”). Overall, partner-focused decision making seems likely to be a double-edged sword, in that it may ultimately lead to better or worse relationship outcomes. Future research is needed to understand in what contexts partner-focused decision making might ultimately be of benefit versus detriment to the decision maker.

Beyond the implications of partner-focused decision making for the decision maker, it is unclear what the implications of partner-focused decision making might be for the partner. First, to the extent that people make relationship decisions for the sake of their romantic partner, they are making those decisions based on their own perceptions of their partner’s perspectives and needs, which may or may not be accurate. Only one study in the present package included measurements from both members of each couple (Study 2); in this study, I found that people were quite accurate in their perceptions of their partner’s investments. However, other kinds of
partner perceptions may be less accurate. For example, given that people generally tend to underestimate the pain of social rejection (Nordgren, Banas, & MacDonald, 2011), people may similarly underestimate how much they pain a potential romantic partner would experience in the event of a romantic rejection. Alternatively, given that people tend to overestimate how painful a breakup would be for themselves (Eastwick, Finkel, Krishnamurti, & Loewenstein, 2008), people might similarly tend to overestimate how painful a breakup would be for their partner.

Future research should examine just how accurate people are in their perceptions of their (potential) partner’s feelings and needs, because inaccuracies may limit people’s ability to make relationship decisions that actually benefit the partner. For example, imagine that Wilma and Fred both find themselves feeling unfulfilled in their relationship with one another, and are contemplating ending the relationship. Fred may inaccurately perceive that a breakup would devastate Wilma, meanwhile Wilma may inaccurately perceive that a breakup would devastate Fred. They may each choose to continue to maintain the relationship with their partner’s feelings in mind. In this situation, the choice to continue the relationship is clearly benefiting no one, as both partners wish for the relationship to end. This is an extreme example, but it helps to illustrate why further research is needed to determine whether and when relationship decisions made for the sake of the partner may actually benefit the partner.

Even in cases where the partner does wish to advance and maintain the relationship, it is still not clear whether advancing and maintaining the relationship for the sake of the partner is actually in the partner’s best interests in the long-term. A large body of research shows that it is crucial for people to feel valued and accepted by their romantic partners (see Murray et al., 2006; Murray & Holmes, 2009 for reviews). Insecurities and doubts about the partner’s regard can be quite damaging for both the self and the relationship (e.g., Lemay & Clark, 2008; Murray et al., 2001; Murray et al., 2003). Based on this work, a person who chooses to advance and maintain
an unsatisfying relationship may actually be doing their partner a disservice, as the partner may pick up on the fact that the decision maker does not genuinely want to be with them and consequently feel worse about themselves. This may especially be the case if the decision maker chooses to maintain the relationship for avoidance-based motives (e.g., to avoid hurting the partner) rather than approach-based motives (e.g., to please the partner; see Impett et al., 2005, for discussion). That is, in such cases where a person is deciding whether to begrudgingly initiate, advance, or maintain a less-than-ideal relationship for the sake of the partner, freeing the partner to pursue other romantic opportunities may actually be the more prosocial thing to do.

4 Conclusions

Just how far are people willing to go to meet a romantic partner’s needs? The present research shows that people take their partner’s feelings into consideration even when making potentially life-changing relationship decisions. In particular, partner-focused motives can compel people to make relationship-advancing decisions that are not necessarily in their own best interests, such as refraining from ending a low-quality relationship, or agreeing to a date with an incompatible potential partner. This work adds to a growing body of research suggesting that human decision making is more prosocially motivated than previously thought. However, further research is needed to determine just how beneficial versus detrimental these partner-focused relationship decisions ultimately are.
References


Copyright Acknowledgments

The content of Chapter 2 is published in Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin:


The content of Chapter 4 is published in Psychological Science: