From bad to worse: Relationship commitment and vulnerability to partner imperfections

Abstract
Having a satisfying romantic relationship is not always feasible, particularly as one discovers less-than-perfect partner characteristics. It is suggested that less committed couple members are more vulnerable to negative partner characteristics than are highly committed couple members. Forty-one dating couples individually indicated their commitment level, were randomly assigned to receive positive- or negative-false feedback about the partner’s personality, and indicated their postmanipulation satisfaction and uncertainty levels. Negative partner feedback affected the satisfaction of less committed but not highly committed individuals. Feeling uncertain about the relationship mediated less committed couple members’ increased vulnerability to negative partner information. The association between uncertainty and commitment was curvilinear and stronger under conditions of relationship threat. Self-esteem did not predict responses to threat.

Even the best of relationships can face occasional challenges or threats. Strong commitment to a relationship often is the “glue” that keeps couple members together when relationship challenges arise. Being committed involves a sustained intent to remain in a relationship; several factors drive commitment, such as a strong attachment to a partner, assuming one will be with the partner in the long-term future “no matter what,” having barriers to leaving a relationship, and feeling morally obligated to remain with a partner (Arriaga & Agnew, 2001; see Kurdek, 2006, for a review of different models of relationship commitment). Strong commitment encourages spontaneous acts and thoughts that keep a relationship intact (Rusbult, Olsen, Davis, & Hannon, 2001). Conversely, weaker commitment may open the door to threats, allowing them to exert an influence on the relationship. The purpose of this study was to determine whether relationship threats influence highly committed and less committed couple members in the same way.

Reactions to relationship threats provide a snapshot of how well couple members maintain their relationship. Some couple members ignore a threat and resist having it influence their relationship. While they may do a lot or only a little to improve their relationship, they successfully maneuver a potentially damaging influence. On the other hand, couple members who react negatively to relationship threats reveal that they are vulnerable to damaging influences. Research shows that heightened sensitivity or reactivity to a negative relationship influences or even predicts declines in the quality of a relationship (Arriaga, Reed, Goodfriend, & Agnew, 2006; Campbell,
Simpson, Boldry, & Kashy, 2005; Jacobson, Follette, & McDonald, 1982; Simpson, Ickes, & Grich, 1999). Threats can be damaging to a relationship: Those who allow threats to penetrate their relationships are not likely to have lasting relationships. Thus, a hallmark of relationship maintenance, indeed a hallmark of having a successful relationship over the long term, involves being relatively immune to mild or moderate relationship threats. (Some severe threats, such as abuse by a violent partner, would warrant reevaluating the relationship.) As such, we sought to better understand how couple members react to relationship threats.

Most of the extant research on relationship threats has emphasized the couple members’ individual-level characteristics (e.g., self-esteem, attachment; Collins & Feeney, 2004; Murray, Rose, Bellavia, Holmes, & Kusche, 2002) or each of their perceptions of the other’s regard (Holmes, 2004) rather than examining their respective levels of commitment. Yet commitment level predicts relationship maintenance more generally (see Rusbult et al., 2001). We examined how people at varying levels of commitment react to a specific threat, namely, receiving negative information about a relationship partner, and we explore how commitment (a relationship-specific variable) compares to self-esteem (an individual difference variable). More specifically, we propose that negative partner information influences less committed couple members more than it influences more committed couple members. We first describe extant research on reactions to relationship threats, focusing particularly on commitment as a variable that predicts couple members’ reactions. We also suggest that heightened uncertainty might explain why less committed couple members struggle with threats. We then present the results of an experiment conducted with dating couples to test these ideas and discuss implications of the results.

Who is vulnerable to relationship threats?

General threats. As stated above, couple member responses to threats are a critical part of relationship maintenance and thus stand to predict which relationships might last versus end. Even relationships that seem perfect at the outset invariably face challenges. Such challenges can have many different sources, such as experiencing a conflict with a partner, lack of support from friends and family members, the appearance of someone whom a couple member finds attractive, or even a general state of unhappiness by one couple member that leads to persistent negative relationship feelings and thought patterns.

Several studies have demonstrated that individuals may differ in their reactions to relationship threats. There is evidence that some individuals have general tendencies to monitor relationship-threatening information, whereas others ignore it (Ickes, Dugosh, Simpson, & Wilson, 2003). Nonetheless, the implications for reacting to relationship-threatening information remain unclear.

Another individual difference variable that may predict reactions to relationship threats is attachment style, namely, the global expectation one holds about whether a partner will be caring and responsive (see Simpson & Rholes, 1998). For example, when asked to rate the “sex appeal” of attractive others while in the presence of one’s partner, anxious–ambivalent individuals became more distressed and less confident about their relationship (Simpson et al., 1999). Anxious–ambivalent individuals also respond to conflict by becoming less satisfied with and close to the partner, more so than securely attached or avoidant individuals (Campbell et al., 2005). In general, insecurely attached individuals show more negative effects of lacking partner support during a stressful time (Collins & Feeney, 2004), feel less trust toward their partner, report fewer positive trust episodes, and cope worse with trust violations (Mikulincer, 1998), as compared with securely attached individuals.

Self-esteem is another individual difference variable that may predict reactions to threat, given that it predicts how well relationships are maintained (see Holmes, 2004). In one demonstration of reactions to a threat, low-self-esteem individuals read more into potential (but unconfirmed) relationship problems than high-self-esteem individuals (Murray et al., 2002). Moreover, high-self-esteem individuals maintain steadier ratings of their
partner, reacting less to daily events (Graham & Clark, 2006).

In short, certain individuals have general proclivities in their relationships to perceive or experience relationship threats. Yet reactions in specific relationships may vary. As such, individual difference variables often do not predict relationship outcomes as well as variables that capture feelings toward a specific relationship (e.g., trust toward a particular partner rather than trust in general; Arriaga & Rusbult, 1998; Arriaga et al., 2006; Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, & Hannon, 2002; Martz et al., 1998; Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991). We sought to examine variables that more precisely capture feelings toward a specific relationship.

Rusbult has suggested that a person’s level of commitment to a specific relationship is a robust predictor of his or her reactions to relationship threats (Arriaga & Rusbult, 1998; Rusbult & Buunk, 1993; Rusbult et al., 2001). For example, committed people respond to negative partner acts by repressing the urge to retaliate and instead reacting constructively—what Rusbult labeled “accommodation” (Rusbult et al., 1991). Similarly, when role-playing a situation in which one might pursue a relationship with an attractive person other than one’s current partner, highly committed individuals derogate the attractive alternative more than less committed individuals (Johnson & Rusbult, 1989), particularly when the other person is more attractive than one’s partner (Lydon, Meana, Sepinwall, Richards, & Mayman, 1999). High commitment also makes people more likely to forgive following a partner betrayal (Finkel et al., 2002) and more likely to think about their relationship in ways that allow them to endure being apart for extended periods of time (Lydon, Pierce, & O’Regan, 1997). In short, highly versus less committed individuals respond differently to relationship threats.

Why do highly versus less committed individuals respond differently? When the relationship threat stems from situations in which a partner engages in a negative partner act or transgression, the initial urge is to retaliate (Rusbult et al., 1991). Interdependence theory (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978) suggests that a negative situation (such as a negative partner act) initially elicits a comparably malevolent response. For example, when a partner becomes irate over a minor issue, the urge may be to retaliate with one’s own anger. Yet not all couple members retaliate because they have different motivations toward their specific relationship (Kelley, 1979). A couple member who is highly committed to a particular relationship, by definition, is one who is highly motivated to see that the relationship lasts; the motivation to maintain the relationship provides an impetus for redefining a retaliation-inducing situation as one in which a constructive response would better serve one’s relationship-maintaining goal (Holmes, 1981; Kelley, 1979; Rusbult & Buunk, 1993). As such, a committed couple member might repress an angry response and instead diffuse the situation with humor.

Highly committed couple members frequently react to negative partner acts in ways that reflect the highly committed person’s motivation to maintain a relationship, whereas less committed couple members are less motivated to redefine or transform the situation in benign ways and thus are more likely to retaliate. This accounts for couple member responses when a partner engages in a relationship transgression or hurtful behavior.

**Threats stemming from partner faults.** Not all relationship threats involve negative or hurtful partner acts leveled against a couple member. For example, one might discover partner characteristics that are undesirable but that do not directly reflect malevolent partner acts. These threats create given situations in which there is not an urge to retaliate, given that the partner has not engaged in an overt destructive behavior. Such threats do not necessarily bring into question a partner’s motives as much as they bring into question whether the partner is the “right” person, deserving of one’s own caring and constructive behaviors (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996). These are precisely the types of threats—because they do not involve negative partner intentions and therefore do not warrant a negative response— which highly committed couple members may overlook but with which less committed couple members may struggle.
We sought to examine reactions to such a threat, namely, learning that one’s partner seems to have negative personality characteristics. Once again, interdependence theory suggests that highly committed couple members invoke their motivation to maintain the relationship, and consequently, they might downplay or reinterpret the partner faults (Arriaga, 2002). Indeed, extant research has demonstrated that turning partner faults into “virtues” is a mechanism for sustaining a relationship (Murray & Holmes, 1993). When there is not a relationship threat, the cognitive mechanisms whereby highly committed couple members maintain their relationship are well documented (e.g., illusions, Murray et al., 1996; perceived superiority, Rusbult, Van Lange, Wildschut, Yovetich, & Verette, 2000). But particularly when faced with a threat (cf. Holmes & Rempel, 1989), highly committed individuals invoke their goal of maintaining the relationship and respond to such a threat by redefining or transforming the partner fault into something that does not threaten the relationship.

What do less committed individuals do? Their reactions are less well understood (Boon & Holmes, 1999). A threat that stems from partner faults does not create a situation that calls for behavioral retaliation, and yet less committed individuals lack the motivation to redefine the situation to be less negative. Below, we suggest that the relationships of less committed individuals are vulnerable because relationship threats heighten feelings of uncertainty.

Vulnerability to relationship threats and relationship satisfaction

Uncertainty of less committed couple members. Uncertainty involves the extent of confidence versus questions and doubts that individuals have about their relationship (cf. Knobloch & Solomon, 1999). Do less committed couple members generally experience more uncertainty? Although the association between commitment and uncertainty has not been directly examined, there is extant research documenting a negative association between intimacy and uncertainty (Solomon & Knobloch, 2001).

High commitment entails feeling certain about the future of the relationship or one’s intentions to stay with the partner (i.e., high commitment goes with high certainty). Commitment and uncertainty, however, reflect distinct constructs, as it becomes clear when one considers individuals who are not highly committed over time; two people may average the same level of lower commitment over time, but one may feel uncertain and vacillate over time between different levels of commitment (low certainty), whereas the other may be certain and steadfast about being only moderately or less committed (i.e., high certainty; cf. Arriaga et al., 2006). Thus, it stands to reason that commitment and uncertainty are highly negatively correlated at high levels of commitment and more weakly related at lower levels of commitment (cf. Thompson & Holmes, 1996, on commitment and ambivalence) but negatively correlated on average given that less committed individuals are likely to experience uncertainty at higher rates than highly committed individuals. As such, less committed individuals are likely to experience latent uncertainty that may or may not be present in their feelings at any given moment.

Uncertainty, negative partner information, and satisfaction. We suggest that among less committed couple members, negative partner information triggers new doubts and uncertainty. Why should this be the case? First, new negative partner information may fuel the impression that the partner is not the right person for a relationship. Individuals who feel uncertain about their relationship may pay special attention to information that violates their expectations of a good partner (cf. Driscoll, Hamilton, & Sorrentino, 1991). Also, uncertain individuals adjust their impressions of a partner time and again, making them highly reactive (or sensitive) to each partner interaction (Surra & Hughes, 1997).

Second, extant research indirectly suggests that higher uncertainty is linked to lower satisfaction. Uncertainty may bring about high reactivity, which is associated with greater relationship distress, less closeness, and, importantly, lower satisfaction (Campbell et al., 2005; Jacobson et al., 1982). Furthermore,
uncertainty may cause people to mentally process negative partner information in ways that weaken their relationship. Highly committed individuals integrate negative partner information into broader positive mental categories—for example, by believing that a partner may have negative qualities but they are overshadowed by more pervasive positive qualities. In contrast, for less committed partners, the negative partner qualities may be more salient (Murray & Holmes, 1999) and affirm doubts about the relationship (Showers & Zeigler-Hill, 2004).

In summary, it stands to reason that highly committed couple members should feel relatively certain about their relationships. Conversely, less committed couple members should experience more relationship uncertainty in general making their satisfaction vulnerable at any given time. When less committed couple members are given negative partner information, this renews latent feelings of uncertainty, which should cause lower satisfaction than those who receive positive partner information. Thus, for less committed individuals, uncertainty may mediate the link between receiving negative partner information and low satisfaction.

Current research

Several different types of threats have been examined in past research. At a theoretical level, we sought to examine a subtle threat in which the partner does not act badly because it is precisely these threats that do not call for retaliation yet may elicit a negative reaction from less committed couple members. (Unambiguous salient threats may elicit negative reactions irrespective of one’s level of commitment.) Thus, subtle threats suggest a specific vulnerability of less committed individuals.

We examined the subtle threat of having a less-than-perfect partner (cf. Johnson & Rusbult, 1989, for an example of a more salient threat; cf. Boon & Holmes, 1999, for an example of a subtle threat) and, more specifically, receiving negative (vs. positive) diagnostic information about a partner’s personality. After measuring commitment and manipulating the partner information couple members received, we examined postmanipulation levels of satisfaction. Although satisfaction is considered to be a cause of commitment (Rusbult, 1983; Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998), it also is commonly used as a valid indicator of the ongoing state of a relationship (e.g., Murray et al., 1996). We tested our hypotheses using a sample of undergraduate university students in dating relationships because they tend to have more varying levels of commitment than married individuals (Adams & Jones, 1997). We obtained a convenience sample given that precise sampling frames of dating college students are not easily obtainable, as would be necessary for a probability sample.

Given the strong positive correlation between satisfaction and commitment in dating relationships (Le & Agnew, 2003), we expected that commitment would be positively associated with postmanipulation satisfaction (Hypothesis 1). Furthermore, we anticipated that commitment would moderate the association of the partner information manipulation on satisfaction, wherein the manipulation would not affect highly committed couple members’ levels of satisfaction but would cause differences in less committed couple members’ level of satisfaction (Hypothesis 2). That is, we expected an interaction between the commitment and the manipulation to provide evidence that the effect of the manipulation on satisfaction occurs for less committed individuals only.

We further expected that for less committed couple members, uncertainty would mediate the effect of the partner information manipulation on satisfaction level (Hypothesis 3). That is, we tested a mediation model qualified by level of commitment (i.e., a mediated moderation model; Muller, Judd, & Yzerbyt, 2005). Because we anticipated no effect of the manipulation on more committed couple members, we did not advance a mediation hypothesis for this group.

In addition, we provided a preliminary test of an assumption we made above that a relationship-specific variable works better than a generalized individual difference variable in predicting reactions to a relationship threat.
We examined whether self-esteem would moderate the effect of the manipulation on satisfaction, similar to the way we expected commitment to moderate this association. Self-esteem has figured prominently in predicting responses to threats to one’s self-worth as well as general relationship threats, as we described above (see Holmes, 2004, for a review). We did not have data on attachment styles and thus could not analyze the possible moderating role of this individual difference variable.

Method

Design and participants
The study was a between-subjects experiment with one manipulated variable (negative vs. positive feedback) and one measured, continuous variable (level of commitment). The initial sample was 45 dating couples who we recruited from introductory psychology courses. This study was one of many that appeared in a listing of psychology studies for students taking introductory psychology courses; all listed studies included a brief description of study tasks and inclusion criteria. The study description used to recruit participants for this study was as follows: “Couples will complete several measures about themselves & their relationship on the computer. They will be asked to rate the validity of the measures. Both you and your partner must freely agree to participate in the experimental session.” At least 1 couple member received credit toward an introductory psychology course requirement. We eliminated 4 couples from the sample (after giving them course credit) because in probes for dishonest responses, they admitted to pretending that they were in a romantic relationship for purposes of getting course credit. The final sample was 41 couples (82 individuals).

Most of the participants were enrolled at a major public research university located in a small city (population approximately 90,000 permanent residents) in a relatively rural Midwestern area of the United States. Participants were 19.5 years old on average (SD = 1.4, range = 18–26 years). The majority of participants were White (83%; 6% African American, 6% Asian American, 0% Latino, and 5% Other). The study required that participants be in a dating relationship and bring their current dating partner to the study. Couple members had been dating each other for 18.5 months on average (SD = 16.4, range = 1–60 months). All couples were exclusive except for 2 individuals (2% of sample), who indicated they dated others in addition to (but less than) the couple member present. All but 2 couples were in heterosexual relationships.

Procedure

Data collection sessions occurred in a small meeting room and eight individual computer cubicles; up to 8 participants (4 couples) took part in each session. Sessions lasted approximately 1 hr. When couples arrived at the study site, the experimenter and a research assistant greeted them and escorted to the meeting room. The experimenter described the general nature of the project as asking laypersons to rate the validity of various personality scales, a task professional psychologists typically do. The experimenter further stated that they would each individually and privately follow several steps; namely, they would (a) complete the personality scales; (b) be randomly assigned to one of two conditions, one in which they receive a profile of their own personality versus one in which they receive a profile of their partner’s personality; and (c) be asked to rate whether the scale seemed valid (i.e., whether the profile accurately described oneself or one’s partner, depending on the condition). The experimenter also mentioned that, time permitting, they would be asked to fill out a short written survey for a separate study.

After providing this overview of the study, the experimenter escorted each partner into
individual computer cubicles, such that the women occupied cubicles accessed from one hallway and the men occupied cubicles accessed from a separate hallway. The rationale for keeping men and women separate was to avoid having couple members possibly interact with each other upon completing the computer task but before completing the dependent measure (which we administered later, as described below). The experimenter and the research assistant were both female; they randomly worked with either men or women to avoid having the same experimenter work with only one gender group.

While in their individual cubicles, participants completed a consent form and a brief background information form, which assessed demographic characteristics, relationship duration, relationship status, long-distance status (i.e., whether they drive more than 20 min to see each other on any given day), relationship commitment, self-esteem, and implicit theories of relationships. \(^1\) Thus, we measured commitment level in the background information form and prior to the feedback manipulation. Then, using a computer (MediaLab software; Jarvis, 2006), participants (a) completed three fabricated personality scales, (b) waited for the computer to calculate their own or their partner’s profile (the experimenter told them it could take a few minutes if their partner is still completing the personality scales), (c) learned that they were in the “partner profile” condition, (d) received either positive or negative feedback about their partner (as specified by random assignment), and (e) started evaluating the validity of the feedback, which provided an opportunity to administer a manipulation check item.

In reality, we did not examine responses to the personality scales and used these scales only as a method of introducing the partner feedback manipulation; the feedback did not reflect partner responses as we prepared it in advance. Random assignment occurred at the level of the individual rather than couple: Within each couple, we randomly assigned one partner to a positive partner feedback condition and the other to a negative feedback condition so as to retain the individual as the unit of analysis. Randomly assigning couples to experimental conditions (a commonly used alternative) requires treating the couple as the unit of analysis at the data analysis stage, which may obscure differences between couple members.

Immediately following the manipulation check, the computers presumably “crashed” (i.e., an error message appeared on the screen, and the participant was not able to answer more questions). The experimenter struggled to fix the computers but finally resigned herself to stopping the study. As an afterthought, she said there was enough time for participants to do the separate study, which involved completing a written survey and asked them if they were willing to switch tasks; all participants agreed. In reality, the computer crash was a contrived excuse to administer a survey measuring satisfaction (dependent variable) and uncertainty (mediator), without raising suspicions that the computer study and survey were related. Couple members did not have an opportunity to interact with each other during the computer task, the contrived computer crash, or the written survey task.

After completing the written survey, the experimenter escorted participants back into the meeting room and did an extensive debriefing. The experimenter then distributed a second consent form acknowledging that deception had been used and asked participants whether they would like to have their data analyzed or instead disposed of and not analyzed. All participants agreed to have their data analyzed. Finally, the experimenter answered questions and thanked participants for their participation.

**Measures and manipulation**

**Level of commitment.** The background information form included the Chance of Marriage Estimate (CME; Surra & Hughes, 1997), which is an established single-item measure of commitment. The measure instructed participants to provide a percentage (0–100%) reflecting the chance that they will marry their

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\(^1\) The measurement of implicit theories about relationships was for purposes beyond the scope of the current research. This data set has not been used in any other papers that are published or under review.
partner ("The percent chance of marriage for my current partner and I today is ____ %"), taking into consideration their own thoughts about marrying the partner and what they think the partner's thoughts are. We were not able to include a multiple-item measure because we (a) measured commitment on a background information form for a study on personality assessment (see the Procedure section) and having too many items would raise suspicions that this study was about relationships and (b) had limited time in which to assess commitment. This particular scale appears in published research (see Surra & Hughes, 1997), and more generally, several variables have been shown to be adequately measured with single-item measures (e.g., Agnew, Van Lange, Rusbult, & Langston, 1998; Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992, with respect to self-partner cognitive overlap; Robins, Hendin, & Trzesniewski, 2001, with respect to self-esteem).

We had intended to use another single-item measure of commitment that required participants to check one of five statements describing varying levels of commitment, which we validated against Rusbult’s seven-item measure of commitment (Rusbult et al., 1998; these two measures were correlated .90). Unfortunately, this single-item measure had a restricted range and little variance. In contrast, the measure based on the CME had more variance, and thus, this is what we used. The single-item measure used and the one validated against Rusbult’s seven-item measure were highly correlated, \( r(82) = .79, p < .001 \). Of course, despite this high correlation, it is possible that some individuals who indicate low intentions to marry are nonetheless committed (e.g., they may prefer a cohabitation arrangement).

**Self-esteem.** We used a single-item measure of self-esteem that asked participants to indicate their agreement with the following sentence, “I have high self-esteem,” followed by 7-point response scale ranging from 1 (do not agree at all) to 7 (agree completely). Robins et al. (2001) validated this item against more extensive items.

**Partner feedback manipulation.** We randomly assigned participants to receive either positive or negative feedback about the partner in the form of a partner personality profile. The profile summarized three personality dimensions: (a) communal versus self oriented, which presumably reflected a person’s “characteristics in (1) general social interactions and (2) competitive situations”; (b) ego resilience or “the ability of someone to maintain a strong sense of self”; and (c) escapist fantasy versus realist, which presumably indicated “how much people use fantasy in their lives to escape or withdraw from real problems or social issues they are experiencing.” For each dimension, the computer indicated a partner score and a paragraph describing how to interpret the score; the scores and paragraph reflected either positive qualities or negative qualities.

In the positive feedback condition, participants read that their partner scored a +15 on the ego resiliency measure where the range was from −20 to +20, a 22 on the measure of escapist or fantasy versus realist where the range was from 0 to 200, and a label of “communal” on the communion versus self-oriented scale where the two classifications were “communal” or “self-oriented.” In the negative feedback condition, participants read that their partner scored a −15 on the ego resiliency measure, a 128 on the measure of escapist or fantasy versus realist, and a label of self-oriented. The paragraphs used appear in the Appendix. Three of the six paragraphs (high in communal, high in ego resiliency, high in escapism) were modified versions of paragraphs used in other research (Goodfriend, 2004).

Prior to the study, we did a pilot test to calibrate the effects of the manipulation paragraphs. Using a separate sample of 28 participants, we randomly assigned participants to read the three positive paragraphs or the three negative paragraphs. They rated how positive or negative (depending on which set they received) the paragraphs were, using a scale from 1 (not at all positive/negative) to 7 (extremely positive/negative). There were significant differences in the magnitude of positivity versus negativity for one of the three personality dimensions. We modified the paragraphs further and retested them on a new
sample of 60 participants. There were no significant differences in the magnitude of positivity versus negativity, and the mean ratings ranged from 5.00 to 5.79. Thus, the positive and negative feedback manipulations were of relatively equal strength and sufficiently strong.

Also, as can be seen from reading the positive versus negative version of each personality dimension, the two versions include wording that could describe any person, thus maximizing the possibility that participants would believe the profile corresponded to their partner; it became clear during the extensive debriefing that this was the case. We were very careful during debriefing to ensure that participants recognized that we wrote the paragraphs prior to the study and they are not about the partner. Other research involving a salient relationship threat—namely, rating an attractive alternative in the presence of one’s partner (Simpson et al., 1999)—revealed no harmful effects as a result of undergoing threat procedures.

Manipulation check. Following presentation of the partner’s personality profile, a manipulation check item was nested among three items that presumably assessed participants’ ratings of the validity of the profile they read. The manipulation check item assessed whether participants perceived the positive versus negative feedback about the partner as such. The item was, “How would you characterize the feedback you received,” followed by a 7-point response scale ranging from 1 (very negative) to 7 (very positive).

Level of satisfaction. To measure postmanipulation level of satisfaction, the written survey included Rusbult’s (Rusbult et al., 1998) five-item measure of relationship satisfaction (e.g., “I feel satisfied with our relationship,” “My relationship is close to ideal”; \( \alpha = .92 \)), along with a 7-point response scale ranging from 1 (do not agree at all) to 7 (agree completely). The five items were averaged.

Relationship uncertainty. To measure postmanipulation uncertainty, participants completed nine items modeled after a measure by Knobloch and Solomon (1999). The nine items captured uncertainty about oneself (“How certain are you about your feelings for your partner?” “How certain are you about how much you want this relationship right now?” “How certain are you about where you want this relationship to go?”; \( \alpha = .90 \)), about the relationship (“How certain are you about the future of this relationship?” “How certain are you about whether or not you and your partner are right for each other?” “How certain are you about whether or not this relationship will end soon?”; \( \alpha = .86 \), reflecting high interitem reliability), and about the partner (“How certain are you about your partner’s feelings for you?” “How certain are you about your partner’s view of this relationship?” “How certain are you about how much your partner wants this relationship right now?”; \( \alpha = .91 \)). Each item used a 7-point response scale ranging from 1 (completely or almost completely uncertain) to 7 (completely or almost completely certain). The three subscales were highly correlated (all \( p s < .001 \)): uncertainty about oneself versus relationship, \( r(82) = .79 \); uncertainty about oneself versus the partner, \( r(82) = .43 \); uncertainty about the relationship versus the partner, \( r(82) = .61 \). We averaged the nine items (\( \alpha = .92 \)).

Other information. Using the background information form, we also assessed several demographic characteristics of each couple member, as well as a few characteristics of their relationship, such as the duration of the relationship and the status of the relationship (e.g., dating exclusively). Using the survey, we included a final page that probed for dishonest responses (e.g., not being in a relationship).

Results

Data analysis overview

The data structure was hierarchical with two levels: individual participants (Level 1) nested within couples (Level 2). We first assessed whether ratings from both partners of the same couple were independent of each other by examining the correlation between two couple members’ responses (which in this case is equivalent to the intraclass correlation, defined as between-couple variance divided by the
sum of between-couple variance and within-couple variance; Singer, 1998). Their ratings were highly positively correlated: commitment, \( r(41) = .72, p < .001 \); satisfaction, \( r(41) = .57, p < .001 \); and uncertainty, \( r(41) = .60, p < .001 \). These high positive associations suggest that ordinary least squares (i.e., standard) regression would likely yield incorrect results (Singer, 1998). Given the interdependent (correlated) nature of partner scores, we used multilevel modeling (also known as hierarchical linear modeling), which has advantages that have been described elsewhere (Campbell & Kashy, 2002; Gable & Reis, 1999; Kenny, Kashy, & Bolger, 1998). Although an alternate approach might have been to use analysis of variance (ANOVA) in a repeated measures analysis, multilevel modeling estimates an intercept for each couple, rather than estimating a single intercept for all couples; as such, it affords more precision in its estimates.2

Multilevel modeling analyses can be done in several different software packages. We used SAS software’s PROC MIXED procedure (SAS Institute, 1992) following guidelines Singer (1998) describes. The analytic approach has the same flexibility as using general linear models (e.g., PROC GLM in SAS) in that one can simultaneously analyze continuous and categorical independent variables.

Unless otherwise noted, all model estimates reported below were derived from a random coefficients model using restricted maximum likelihood estimate, controlling for variance due to being part of a couple. Prior to testing models, we centered all continuous independent variables using their respective grand means. We used an alpha level of .05 for all statistical tests. Participant sex was not associated with any of the independent or dependent variables nor did it moderate any of the effects; therefore, we did not include participant sex in the analyses reported below.

Manipulation check

We examined whether the partner feedback manipulation had the intended effect on the manipulation check (i.e., how negative vs. positive participants perceived the partner feedback to be; higher numbers suggest a more negative rating.3 As expected, participants who received positive partner feedback perceived it to be more positive (\( M = 3.90, SD = 1.50 \)) than participants who received negative feedback (\( M = 1.90, SD = 0.97 \)), \( t(80) = -7.18, p < .001 \). We also examined whether there was an interaction between partner feedback and commitment in predicting how negative versus positive participants perceived the partner feedback to be; the interaction (tested in a random coefficients model that also included main effects) was not significant, \( t(38) = 2.50, p = .122 \), suggesting that the manipulation had a similar effect on highly versus less committed individuals.

In addition, we examined whether participant random assignment to different conditions successfully resulted in two groups that had relatively equal levels of commitment (as measured prior to the manipulation). Commitment did not differ for the two conditions, \( t(80) = 0.22, p = .825 \) (commitment for participants in the negative feedback condition, \( M = 67.36, SD = 32.25 \); commitment for participants in the positive feedback condition, \( M = 68.90, SD = 30.64 \)).

Hypothesis tests

Effects on satisfaction (Hypotheses 1 and 2). Table 1 provides the means and standard

2. As Kurdek (2006) notes, multilevel models take into account couple membership by calculating an intercept for each couple. The intercept reflects the average value of a given variable for a given couple and is a random variable (i.e., it varies by couple); it is not the average intercept across all couples (i.e., a fixed variable, as in ordinary least squares regression). The couple-specific intercepts are taken into account in analyses that examine differences between individuals (e.g., differences in level of satisfaction as a function of the manipulation); as such, these analyses treat the individual as the unit of analysis but account for interrelatedness in couple ratings.

3. This first analysis includes only one independent variable, the manipulation. Given that members of a single couple were always in different conditions (as described in the Method section), observations in this particular analysis were independent. Thus, the results of the PROC MIXED analysis (excluding a random statement and thus not making it a random coefficients model) were identical to the results of a standard ANOVA.
deviations for all variables that we examined in hypothesis and subsequent tests. For each model test, we report t-s, p values, and the unstandardized parameter estimates (the coefficients that PROC GLM provides for a random effects model). The unstandardized parameter estimates provide a direct interpretation of the change in the dependent variable (e.g., satisfaction) as a function of a unit increase in the independent variable (e.g., commitment; Singer, 1998). For example, an unstandardized parameter estimate of .01 for satisfaction on commitment would suggest that a 1-unit increase in commitment (where the scale ranges from 0 to 100) corresponds to a .01 increase in satisfaction.

To examine Hypotheses 1 and 2, we tested a model in which the dependent variable was satisfaction, and the independent variables were commitment, the partner feedback manipulation, and the interaction between these two independent variables. Consistent with Hypothesis 1, commitment was significantly associated with postmanipulation satisfaction, as can be seen in the first model, third row of Table 2, the unstandardized parameter estimate of .023 indicates that a 1-unit increase in commitment (where the scale ranges from 0 to 100) corresponds to a .01 increase in satisfaction.

Mediation by uncertainty (Hypothesis 3). In support of Hypothesis 2, the manipulation influenced satisfaction levels of less committed couple members but not more committed couple members. Hypothesis 3 suggested that the effect of the manipulation on less committed couple members might be mediated by postmanipulation uncertainty. In effect, this hypothesis suggests a mediated moderation model (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Muller et al., 2005), whereby

5. Relationship duration was significantly associated with uncertainty, F(1, 37) = 4.84, p = .034, such that couple members in longer relationships reported less uncertainty, simple correlation, r(78) = −.30, p = .007. Relationship duration, however, (a) did not moderate any of the effects tested in the mediation analysis, (b) did not remain significantly associated (main effect) with uncertainty when we added the other independent variables, and (c) did not change the pattern of results when included versus excluded from the mediation models. Therefore, we omitted relationship duration from the mediation analysis.
uncertainty mediates the effect of the manipulation by commitment interaction on satisfaction. Following guidelines Muller et al. (2005) describe, we examined the conditions supporting a mediated moderation model. The first condition is that the effect of the feedback manipulation (independent variable) on satisfaction (dependent variable) be moderated by commitment (i.e., the manipulation affects less committed participants only), a condition met above.

The second condition Muller et al. (2005) stipulate is that the effect of the feedback manipulation on uncertainty (mediating variable) be moderated by commitment level. As can be seen in the second model of Table 2, the interaction between the feedback manipulation and the commitment was significant (fourth row), as was the main effect of commitment on uncertainty (third row) but not the main effect of the manipulation (second row). Follow-up analyses parallel to those testing Hypothesis 2 revealed that at low commitment (i.e., 1 SD below the commitment mean), participants who received negative feedback had significantly higher levels of uncertainty (3.63) than those who received positive feedback (3.16), $t(38) = 2.14, p = .039$; the difference between conditions was not significant at the mean level of commitment (negative feedback: 2.56; positive feedback: 2.47), $t(38) = -0.65, p = .523$, or at high commitment (negative feedback: 1.50; positive feedback, 1.78), $t(38) = 1.23, p = .228$. Thus, the feedback manipulation influenced uncertainty levels of less committed individuals only.

The third and fourth conditions involved testing whether the feedback manipulation, commitment, the Manipulation × Commitment interaction, uncertainty, and the Uncertainty ×

| Table 2. Results of models tested for all hypothesis tests (effects of independent variables satisfaction and uncertainty) |
|-----------------|-----------------|---|---|---|
| Statistical models | Parameter estimate | $t$ | $df$ | $p$ |
| Hypotheses 1 and 2 | | | | |
| Model 1 | | | | |
| Satisfaction, as a function of: | | | | |
| Intercept | 5.730 | 47.52 | 40 | <.001 |
| Feedback manipulation | 0.081 | 1.31 | 38 | .197 |
| Commitment | 0.023 | 6.90 | 38 | <.001 |
| Manipulation × Commitment | −0.006 | −2.92 | 38 | <.006 |
| Hypothesis 3 | | | | |
| Model 2 | | | | |
| Uncertainty, as a function of: | | | | |
| Intercept | 2.516 | 25.64 | 40 | <.001 |
| Feedback manipulation | −0.048 | −0.66 | 38 | .516 |
| Commitment | −0.028 | −9.16 | 38 | <.001 |
| Manipulation × Commitment | 0.006 | 2.34 | 38 | <.025 |
| Model 3 | | | | |
| Satisfaction, as a function of: | | | | |
| Intercept | 5.866 | 50.63 | 40 | <.001 |
| Feedback manipulation | 0.022 | 0.33 | 36 | .740 |
| Commitment | 0.008 | 1.91 | 36 | <.064 |
| Manipulation × Commitment | −0.002 | −1.06 | 36 | <.296 |
| Uncertainty | −0.469 | −4.60 | 36 | <.001 |
| Uncertainty × Commitment | 0.005 | 2.12 | 36 | <.041 |

Note. The parameter estimates reported are unstandardized. The feedback manipulation was coded −1 for the negative feedback condition and 1 for the positive feedback condition. We centered all continuous independent variables prior to including them in model tests.
Commitment interaction predict satisfaction as Muller et al. (2005) suggest. The third condition is that the effect of the interaction between uncertainty and commitment on satisfaction should be significant. As shown in the third model of Table 2, this interaction was significant (sixth row), as was the main effect of uncertainty (fifth row) and the main effect of commitment was marginal (third row). In an analysis parallel to the test of Hypothesis 2, follow-up analyses revealed that uncertainty and satisfaction were negatively related at all levels of commitment, but the negative uncertainty–satisfaction link was particularly strong at lower levels of commitment: low commitment, $t(38) = -6.04, p < .001$, mean commitment, $t(38) = -5.10, p < .001$, and high commitment, $t(38) = -2.47, p = .018$.

The test of the fourth condition (using the same model as that of the third condition) Muller et al. (2005) stipulate is that the effect of the manipulation by commitment interaction on satisfaction be reduced in magnitude in the third model of Table 2 (which includes the mediator, uncertainty) versus the first model (which excludes the mediator; see fourth row of each model); this interaction was indeed reduced in magnitude (−.006 in the first model vs. −.002 in the third model) and became nonsignificant. These findings are consistent with a model in which the effect of the manipulation on less committed couple members’ levels of satisfaction is mediated by their feelings of uncertainty.

Ancillary analyses testing assumptions about commitment and uncertainty. In the introduction, we made two assumptions regarding the association between commitment and uncertainty: (a) they are negatively correlated overall but (b) they are more strongly negatively correlated among more committed couple members. This suggests that when uncertainty is regressed onto commitment, the slope will have a curved shape whereby the negatively sloped line at lower levels of commitment is less pronounced than at higher levels of commitment (a predominantly negative, concave downward curve; Aiken & West, 1991).

To test this, we examined a model in which uncertainty was the dependent variable, and the independent variables were commitment (centered) and commitment (centered) squared. The commitment term was significant and negative, unstandardized parameter estimate = −.032, $t(39) = -8.83, p < .001$, ...

Figure 1. Satisfaction level as a function of the feedback manipulation (positive vs. negative) and commitment level (1 SD below the mean, mean, and 1 SD above the mean).
as was the commitment squared term was also significant and negative, unstandardized parameter estimate = −.0002, \( t(39) = −2.22, p < .032 \). The negative commitment estimate suggests a predominately negative slope, as expected, and the negative commitment-squared estimate suggests a pattern in which the slope becomes more negative (i.e., curves downward more) as level of commitment increases (i.e., a predominantly negative, concave downward curve; Aiken & West, 1991, pp. 62–66). Consistent with our assumptions, commitment and uncertainty were negatively correlated on average but particularly among more committed participants.

We also explored whether commitment and uncertainty were more strongly linked when there was a relationship threat (i.e., in the negative partner information condition) than when there was not a threat, which would suggest conditions under which commitment and uncertainty become contingent upon each other. As stated above in meeting the second condition of a mediation model, there was a significant interaction between the manipulation and the commitment in predicting uncertainty (see Table 2, second model, fourth row). To assess the simple effect of commitment on uncertainty within each of the two feedback conditions (making observations independent, as couple members were in different feedback conditions), we assessed the simple correlation of commitment and uncertainty at each level of the partner feedback condition. The negative correlation between commitment and uncertainty was stronger when participants received negative feedback, \( r(41) = −.82, p < .001 \), than when they received positive feedback, \( r(41) = −.66, p < .001 \), although both were strong, significant correlations. This suggests commitment and uncertainty covary more strongly under conditions of threat than under more positive conditions.

Commitment versus self-esteem

Might an individual difference variable be similar to commitment level in its moderating association with satisfaction? First, we examined the association of self-esteem with commitment and with satisfaction. The mean level and standard deviation for self-esteem are presented in Table 1. In a model predicting commitment from self-esteem (centered), self-esteem was not associated with commitment, unstandardized parameter estimate = .687, \( t(40) = 0.36, p = .718 \). In a model predicting satisfaction from self-esteem, however, self-esteem was positively associated with relationship satisfaction, unstandardized parameter estimate = .195, \( t(40) = 2.49, p = .017 \). In a model predicting satisfaction from commitment and self-esteem (simultaneously), each was associated with satisfaction: commitment, unstandardized parameter estimate = .023, \( t(39) = 6.98, p < .001 \); self-esteem, unstandardized parameter estimate = .176, \( t(39) = 2.81, p = .008 \). Thus, self-esteem independently predicted satisfaction when controlling for commitment.

Next, we examined whether the effect of the feedback manipulation might be stronger for low- (vs. high-) self-esteem individuals (i.e., whether self-esteem moderated the effect of the manipulation on satisfaction), as was the case for commitment (Hypothesis 2). As stated in the Introduction, both variables have been shown to predict responses to a relationship threat. The model included satisfaction as the dependent variable; the independent variables were self-esteem, the partner feedback manipulation, and the interaction between these two independent variables. The interaction was not significant, unstandardized parameter estimate = −.038, \( t(38) = −0.47, p = .644 \). We also examined all higher order interactions of self-esteem with commitment and the manipulation in predicting satisfaction; none of the interaction effects involving self-esteem were significant. Finally, we repeated the main analysis (commitment moderating the effect of the manipulation) to determine whether including self-esteem as a covariate altered the pattern of results; it did not.

Discussion

The results of this experiment revealed that not all dating couple members are equally vulnerable to negative information about one’s partner; less committed couple members are more
vulnerable than more committed couple members. Less committed couple members reported lower levels of satisfaction than more committed ones (Hypothesis 1), and the partner information manipulation affected the less committed but not the highly committed (Hypothesis 2). Uncertainty mediated the influence of the manipulation on less committed couple members (Hypothesis 3). In contrast to the moderating role of commitment, self-esteem did not moderate the effect of the feedback manipulation. Below, we discuss the broader theoretical and practical implications of these findings, as well as their strengths and limitations.

A theoretical consideration concerns how this research fits with existing models of relationship maintenance. According to Rusbult (Rusbult et al., 2001), high satisfaction, few alternatives to the current relationship, and high levels of investment in a relationship all contribute to high commitment, which in turn motivates one to maintain the relationship. Moreover, engaging in relationship maintenance predicts further increases in commitment (Agnew et al., 1998). Murray (1999) similarly suggests that actions and thoughts in relationships are motivated phenomena, although the motivating factor is not commitment per se but rather a strong sense of conviction about the relationship that results from believing that the partner will be loving, caring, and have one’s interests at heart (i.e., a strong sense of felt security in the relationship). According to this model, individuals who believe that their partner loves and cares for them see things in a more positive light than may actually be warranted and even manage to bolster the relationship in the face of a threat; conversely, those who cannot convince themselves that the partner loves them and will care for them come to expect negative things in their relationship and even bring about such negative outcomes (see Holmes, 2004, for a review). Thus, existing models of relationship maintenance suggest that individuals who are less motivated to maintain a relationship will not handle relationship threats well.

The current findings expand our theoretical knowledge of relationship maintenance to a class of situations that is prevalent and yet understudied: those involving subtle partner threats. For example, family members and friends may make negative comments about a partner, or one might observe unbecoming partner behavior under special circumstances—a partner may become a “different person” under times of high work-related stress, with a particular friend who brings out the worst in a partner, or at a wild party. Sooner or later, most couple members face such situations that highlight negative partner qualities and thus pose a subtle threat.

Because there are many opportunities for coming across a negative partner quality, it is important to consider how this information affects couple members. We have shown that whether a couple member is affected depends on his or her level of commitment. Highly committed individuals work around situations that reveal negative partner information and may even respond by bolstering their relationship. A counterintuitive finding from the current study was that highly committed couple members reported higher satisfaction when they received negative information than positive information (see Figure 1), although this difference was only marginal (p = .069).

On the other hand, less committed individuals lack the motivation to ignore negative partner information. Our data suggest that relationship threats make feelings of uncertainty particularly salient for less committed couple members, which causes low satisfaction. In this way, low satisfaction may breed reductions in commitment, spawning a downward trajectory of more doubt and increasingly negative relationship outcomes. In short, the absence of a position of strength not only creates a less than ideal relationship (e.g., one characterized by less commitment) but also exposes a person to having the relationship worsen when faced with negative partner information—that is, things go from bad to worse.

More generally, it stands to reason that repeated relationship threats can have devastating consequences for a couple, particularly for those who are less committed. As new partner information exacerbates their preexisting doubts time and again, less committed individuals likely reach a point where their views of the relationship cannot withstand more threats.
Although we did not examine whether individuals are more likely to end their intimate relationship when faced with repeated threats, we suspect that this would be the case. Whether the threat causes people to organize partner information so that negative aspects come to mind (Murray & Holmes, 1999; Showers & Zeigler-Hill, 2004) or to ruminate about the information in ways that have lasting effects (cf. Campbell et al., 2005), the likely road for people who are reactive to negative events is one of relationship distress (Jacobson et al., 1982) and eventual dissolution of a relationship. Future research could examine the specific thoughts and perceptions of less committed participants in response to negative partner feedback so as to understand better the process by which threats might cause problems or eventual dissolution.

This is the first study to examine the association between commitment and uncertainty directly. These variables are related but conceptually distinct; one can be certain versus uncertain about one’s commitment—for example, certain about being highly committed, uncertain about being highly committed, certain about not being committed, and so forth. The uncertainty items we used (version from Knobloch & Solomon’s, 1999, measure) presumably tap confidence versus doubt over feelings, regardless of whether these feelings generally reflect high or low commitment. As we showed, commitment and uncertainty were highly negatively correlated in this sample, which involved generally committed participants; highly committed couple members reported low levels of uncertainty or rather higher levels of certainty in their high commitment. But there was also evidence that these two constructs are distinct rather than directly derivative of each other: The negative correlation was stronger for more committed couple members (a strong rejection of uncertainty) than for less committed couple members (a relatively less consistent rejection of uncertainty). Moreover, commitment and uncertainty seem to be more yoked under conditions of relationship threat (negative feedback) rather than under more positive conditions (positive feedback), further bolstering the idea that for less committed individuals, uncertainty wreaks havoc under conditions of threat.

The difference in findings for commitment versus self-esteem is also noteworthy. Both variables have been shown to predict a high motivation to regulate one’s relationship (Holmes, 2004; Murray, 1999; Rusbult et al., 2001). In this research, we measured both prior to the manipulation using single-item measures, and both predicted postmanipulation satisfaction. Nonetheless, they differed in the extent to which they moderated the effect of the manipulation; commitment did whereas self-esteem did not.

We speculate that there are related conceptual and measurement reasons for the different findings for commitment versus self-esteem. Conceptually, commitment directly involves one’s own motivation to maintain a relationship (Rusbult, 1983). On the other hand, self-esteem involves one’s sense of worthiness to a relationship partner; that is, it relates to perceptions of whether one will motivate a partner to want the relationship (Holmes, 2004). Moreover, operationally the commitment item was worded with reference to one’s relationship, whereas the self-esteem item was worded to capture a generalized individual difference; all things being equal, a relationship variable might correlate more with a relationship characteristic than a generalized individual difference variable. The current support for commitment moderating the effect of relationship threat is consistent with past research showing better prediction of relationship outcomes from variables tapping feelings toward that specific relationship than by generalized individual difference variables (Arriaga & Rusbult, 1998; Finkel et al., 2002; Rusbult et al., 1991).

Although the current findings are theoretically coherent, there are caveats to the extent to which they provide strong empirical support for these claims. First, although the data were consistent with a model in which uncertainty is a mediator, uncertainty was a measured variable (rather than manipulated), and as such, the evidence for mediation is not foolproof. The data fail to discount this mediation model, but they also cannot be taken to confirm the model.
Second, we did not use probability sampling so as to obtain a representative sample of a more general population. As such, the findings from our convenience sample of dating couples at a North American university in the Midwest region cannot be assumed to generalize to other samples that focus on marital relationships, dating couples who are not in a university setting or in other university settings, or even dating couples at the university where we did this research (see Jaffe, 2005).

Third, we examined self-esteem in this research but future research might expand the analysis to include other individual difference variables, such as attachment style. Consistent with extant research, we speculate that anxious–ambivalent individuals might be more affected by the manipulation (in a manner similar to less committed individuals) than securely attached or avoidant individuals (cf. Campbell et al., 2005).

Fourth, this research did not assess whether the manipulation effect on less committed individuals was short lived or more long lasting. During debriefing, we spent considerable time “undoing” the effects of the manipulation, and other research suggests that such manipulations of relationship threat are not long lasting (Simpson et al., 1999). The duration of such threats remains an empirical question with ethical implications for doing research with couples.

Despite these caveats, there were several design issues that strengthen the conclusions. First, we demonstrated how threats can affect satisfaction. This is noteworthy given that low satisfaction can be a sign of a distressed relationship. Thus, we provided evidence of a potential cause of relationship distress. Second, and in a related vein, we provided stronger evidence than would be obtained from correlational methods that the partner feedback manipulation was the cause of variations in postmanipulation satisfaction. As stated in the Results section, the two feedback groups did not differ in their level of commitment. There has not been extensive experimental research on how less versus more committed individuals respond to relationship threats (see Johnson & Rusbult, 1989, and Lydon et al., 1999, for exceptions) and particularly to information that one may have a “less-than-perfect” partner.

Third, existing research on reactions to an imperfect partner has focused on variables other than commitment, despite a large body of research showing the important role of commitment in predicting relationship outcomes (Adams & Jones, 1997; Rusbult et al., 2001). We showed that negative partner information causes lower satisfaction but only when one lacks the motivation to maintain a relationship. Thus, commitment is not only a consequence of relationship satisfaction; it reflects one’s vulnerability to disappointing partner information—whether one is immune to the effects of such information or instead is susceptible to heightened uncertainty—which, in turn, further influences one’s level of satisfaction. This research expands what we know about the importance of commitment in guiding relationships.

Fourth, we examined our ideas in dating relationships, which are driven primarily by feelings of wanting the relationship to continue or lack thereof (i.e., personal commitment; Johnson, 1999). Thus, we established that these feelings matter, rather than confound these feelings with moral obligations or other factors that influence decisions to persist or end (i.e., moral or structural commitment; Johnson). Future research could extend the current findings to determine whether moral and structural factors influence responses to relationship threats and thus play into decisions about whether to stay or leave.

More generally, this study provides a novel contribution to a growing body of research that examines how couple members react to relationship threats. In the end, one might ask: Why bother understanding how less versus more committed individuals in dating relationships respond to learning that their partner has personality flaws? The main reason is that in any relationship with a prospect of a future, disappointment with a partner is inevitable (Brickman, 1987; Murray, 1999). If discovering disappointing partner information on one occasion was sufficient to end any relationship, then few (if any) relationships would last. Indeed, many relationships may survive a threat and sustain long-term partnerships (Brickman,
1987). But repeated threats may undermine a relationship to the point that it ends, particularly for those who already have weakened commitment. The practical issue becomes to help less committed individuals differentiate preexisting doubts from new ones that arise and place each doubt into perspective as to how it affects, and whether it should affect, the long-term livelihood of the relationship.

References


Vulnerability to partner imperfections


Rusbult, C. E. (1983). A longitudinal test of the investment model: The development (and deterioration) of satisfaction and commitment in heterosexual involve-


Appendix

Ego-resiliency

Positive partner feedback paragraph. Positive, higher numbers resulting from this scale mean higher amounts of ego-resiliency. This indicates that despite their public personality,
underneath it all they have a relatively strong character; for the most part they feel okay with themselves, although everyone struggles with this from time to time. Deep inside, these people constantly strive for greater independence of thought, even if they are not always able to achieve this. When they fail to succeed at a given task, they may be disappointed with themselves and even somewhat hard on themselves, but they also try to learn from the mistake. They go to great lengths to not let failures affect their self-esteem, and put substantial energy into viewing these events as opportunities to become stronger.

**Negative partner feedback paragraph.** Negative, lower numbers resulting from this scale mean lower amounts of ego-resiliency. This indicates that despite their public personality, deep inside they struggle to remain strong; they can be “clingy” and over-reliant on others despite efforts to hide this. Although not always apparent, it is difficult for these people to maintain independence of thought. They also tend not to score very high on measures of subconscious self-esteem, even though publicly they may compensate by presenting themselves as being secure. When they fail to succeed at a given task, privately they “replay” their failure in their own minds and it eventually rubs off on others. The occasional successes at fighting their insecurities come from hard work by them and by those close to them.

**Escapist fantasy versus realist**

**Positive partner feedback paragraph.** Scores that are between 0–50 are classified as highly realistic. Individuals in this group are known to possess a healthy sense of reality. Research has shown that this is adaptive when they face problems. First, although they may deny the problem at first or make light of it, eventually, they deal with it. In a similar vein, they are good at eventually working toward their goals. Second, although these individuals may fantasize on occasion, for the most part they are grounded in the real issues at hand. Moreover, people with low scores tend to be less prone to guilt than people with high scores, although it is normal for everyone to feel guilty on occasion. Low scorers are prone to being relatively sensible and generally well adjusted.

**Negative partner feedback paragraph.** Scores that are between 150 and 200 are classified as highly escapist. Individuals in this group are known to possess highly active fantasy lives. Research has shown that this may lead to several problems, however, when they must deal with troubles in reality. First, these individuals often spend so much time fantasizing that they procrastinate on the actual problem and never adequately solve it. Secondly, people with high scores often have fantasies that are slightly abnormal or perverse in some way (for example, involve illegal activities) and this may lead to guilt or low self-esteem. Finally, if these individuals’ fantasies do ever become reality, they are often so disappointed in this reality (it usually does not live up to the fantasized results) that they become angry and irrational.

**Communion versus self-oriented**

**Positive partner feedback paragraph.** People who are classified as “Communal” generally care more about their relationships with other people (friends, relationship partners) than their success. In the long-run, they tend to put the needs of others who are very special to them in front of their own needs. Although they may have “petty moments,” generally they do favors for their friends and never ask to have the favor returned. Compared to those who are Self-Oriented, these people are internally less dominant and competitive at work or school, although publicly they may appear competitive if the situation calls for this. Ultimately, they define “success” more in terms of their connections with others than in terms of outside rewards (such as money or job titles).

**Negative partner feedback paragraph.** People who are classified as “Self-Oriented” generally care more about their success than their relationships with other people (friends, relationship partners). Although they may display caring behaviors, in the long-run they put their own needs in front of others’ needs.
Despite their occasional favors for others, deep down they expect to have all their favors returned. Compared to Communals, these people have dominant tendencies that they show publicly, but they can also appear submissive to compensate for their internal tendencies. They also tend to be highly competitive, even if they downplay this to others. Ultimately, they define “success” more in terms of outside rewards (such as money or job titles) than in terms of their connections with others.