

Inattentive and Contented: Relationship Commitment and Attention to Alternatives

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Commitment to a relationship is affected by the quality of one's alternatives to that partnership, but one must be aware of those alternatives in order for them to be influential. In a study of the links between attention to one's alternatives and relational outcomes, participants described their relationships, inspected slides of attractive opposite-sex targets, and, 2 months later, reported whether their relationships had ended. Satisfaction with, investment in, commitment to, and adjustment in a dating relationship were negatively correlated with reports of vigilance toward desirable alternatives to that relationship. In the lab, those who had earlier claimed to be attentive to alternatives really did spend more time inspecting pictures of attractive opposite-sex targets. Moreover, there was no better predictor of relationship failure than high attentiveness to alternatives. Inattentiveness may be a maintenance mechanism that helps to preserve and protect desirable relationships. Even if the grass is greener on the other side of the fence, happy gardeners will be less likely to notice.

People who stay happy in close relationships seem to work at it, using a number of cognitive and behavioral tactics to forestall conflict and maintain contentment (Dindia & Canary, 1993). Some of these involve specific styles of interaction. For instance, committed lovers often actively "bite their tongues" and restrain themselves from responding to their partners' provocations with surly behavior of their own (Rusbult, Yovetich, & Verette, 1996); such accommodating behavior helps the couple avoid the negative exchanges that characterize unhappy partnerships (Gottman, 1994).

Other maintenance strategies are somewhat more subtle, involving patterns of perception that protect and enhance the relationship. Happy lovers idealize both their partners (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996) and their partnerships (Van Lange & Rusbult, 1995), believing both to be more desirable than those of other people. What makes such judgments interesting is that they do not appear to be entirely veridical (see Murray et al., 1996). Indeed, people seem to use the same sorts of beneficial misperceptions—or "healthy illusions"—in thinking about their intimate relationships that they do in judging their own talents (see Taylor & Brown, 1988).

Perceptions of Alternatives

In particular, people may misjudge the alternative partnerships available to them in order to remain more content with their

current lot. Interdependence theory asserts that partners' commitment to their relationships depends in part on their perceptions of how well they could be doing with other potential partners (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978): Only those who believe their current outcomes are better than those they could obtain elsewhere are likely to remain committed to their existing relationships (see Drigotas & Rusbult, 1992). This makes the evaluation of one's alternative options an important enterprise, but motivated distortions in these judgments may be another subtle means with which satisfied partners help maintain their relationships.

For instance, Johnson and Rusbult (1989) found that committed lovers tended to underestimate the desirability of potential alternative partners who could lure them away from their present lovers. Remarkably, the more salient possible alternatives became (i.e., the more attractive they were and the greater their availability), the less favorably they were evaluated by people already committed to other relationships.

Subsequently, Simpson, Gangestad, and Lerma (1990) demonstrated that people involved in romantic relationships find young, opposite-sex people in general to be less physically and sexually desirable than do people who are not currently dating someone. Daters and nondaters agree in their judgments of targets who are not potential alternatives, such as young, same-sex or older, opposite-sex others. Only those people who could serve as threatening comparisons to one's current partner are perceived differently (and less favorably), suggesting that these subtle derogations serve to help maintain relationships.

Attending to Alternatives

There may be yet another perceptual means through which relationships are maintained. Desirable alternatives must obviously be noticed in order to be distracting and influential, but clinical studies suggest that explicit assessments of potential alternatives are less common among contented spouses than among spouses who are dissatisfied (e.g., Jacobson, Waldron, &

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Moore, 1980). Interdependence theory acknowledges that frustrated partners may sometimes try not to think about desirable alternatives they cannot have (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959, p. 176); I further suggest that committed partners often ignore the alternatives they can pursue. Contented partners may be less likely to pay attention to the quality of their alternatives, and may help protect their partnerships through such heedlessness.

Conceptual support for this possibility comes from diverse camps. Leik and Leik (1977) specifically defined commitment as the stage of relationship development in which "the members are no longer attending to alternatives. The feeling of each partner is that the current relationship is to be maintained and alternatives are simply irrelevant" (p. 312). However, very few relationship studies have actually addressed attention processes. Indeed, Berscheid (1994) decried the "short shrift" given such phenomena by relationship researchers, noting that they have long been of considerable interest to scholars of social cognition.

Years ago, for instance, Jones and Thibaut (1958) asserted that "if we can successfully identify the goals for which an actor is striving in the interaction situation, we can begin to say something about the cues to which he will attend" (p. 152). Indeed, recent models of person perception typically acknowledge that one's particular interpersonal goals (Hilton & Darley, 1991; Srull & Wyer, 1986) and one's interdependence with a target (Fiske & Neuberg, 1990) substantially influence the focus of one's attention and the depth of one's processing in interpersonal environments. In general, people are assumed to be "motivated tacticians" (Fiske, 1993) who selectively allocate attention to those who can best fulfill their desires and needs. Much of the time, this selectivity is fully intended (Fiske, 1989), and people are aware of the attentional choices they make. On other occasions, however, through repetition or routine, habits of attention become automatic and quite unconscious (Bargh, 1994); in such cases, people may be relatively heedless of certain others without being aware of it.

Thus, to the extent that commitment to one partner reduces the goal relevance of alternative partners, committed lovers may be relatively inattentive to their alternatives. Furthermore, to the extent that they are dependent on their partners for valuable outcomes, lovers should lend more attention to their partners and less to unimportant others. (Attention is limited, and attention allocated to one target reduces the attention available for anything else; Shrifin & Schneider, 1977.) In fact, Berscheid, Graziano, Monson, and Dermer (1976) demonstrated such an effect when they forced research participants to choose between watching a videotape of a person they would soon date and two other tapes portraying targets who were unavailable as partners. People spent more time inspecting their upcoming dates than the other targets, and Berscheid et al. (1976) concluded that outcome dependency affects the allocation of interpersonal attentiveness.

Altogether, then, happy lovers may not only subtly derogate their alternatives (Johnson & Rusbult, 1989; Simpson et al., 1990), they may be less knowledgeable about those alternatives in the first place. Commitment may reduce one's interest in seeking information about possible alternatives so that, even if "the grass is greener on the other side of the fence" as an old cliché asserts, people who are happy with their own yards may not notice. (This would also be efficient, as is typically true of

automatic perceptual processes, Bargh, 1994, in precluding the need to derogate threatening alternatives.) The present study sought to explore the links between relationship satisfaction and commitment and attention to one's alternatives.

In an initial questionnaire, respondents described their feelings about their present romantic relationships. Recent reviews of interdependence theory have documented the important roles of satisfaction, perceptions of alternatives, investments and relationship commitment in determining relational outcomes (e.g., Rusbult & Buunk, 1993), so several measures probed these factors. Also included was a self-report measure of attentiveness to alternatives that assessed the vigilance with which respondents monitored their other options. Thereafter, some respondents participated in a laboratory procedure that explored behavioral concomitants of attention to alternatives. Participants viewed slides of attractive same- and opposite-sex targets while their skin conductance was measured, so as to obtain a global measure of their emotional responsiveness to potential alternatives (Blascovich & Kelsey, 1990). Finally, 2 months later, most of the original respondents reported whether their relationships had ended. I hypothesized that higher satisfaction, investments, and commitment would all be associated with reduced attention to potential alternatives. Moreover, I anticipated that low attention to alternatives would help maintain positive relational outcomes, with lower attention predicting relationship continuation rather than failure.

Method

Participants

Ninety-nine male and 147 female volunteers from psychology classes at Sam Houston State University participated. Their median age was 21 years. Twenty-three percent of them were not dating anyone at that time; 15% were dating more than one person (casual daters), 38% were dating a steady partner and no one else (exclusive daters), and 24% were cohabiting or married. Those dating more than one person reported a median length of 3 months with their primary partners. Median relationship durations were 14.5 and 13.0 months for the exclusive daters and cohabiting respondents, respectively; married participants had been together for a median of 51 months.

Survey Procedure

In group sessions, participants completed a confidential demographic and dating history questionnaire that assessed their relationship status and measured various perceptions of their current partnerships. More specifically, the questionnaire examined their satisfaction with, alternatives to, investments in, commitment to, and outcomes from their current relationships.

Satisfaction. Three scales assessed aspects of attraction to and satisfaction with one's partner: (a) Rubin's (1970) Love Scale, a nine-item inventory that assessed the amount of romantic love respondents felt for their partners (e.g., "I would do almost anything for my partner"; "It would be hard for me to get along without my partner"); (b) Rubin's (1970) Liking Scale, a nine-item measure of friendly, companionate liking (e.g., "My partner is one of the most likeable people I know"); and (c) the seven-item Relationship Assessment Scale (Hendrick, 1988), which assessed global satisfaction with one's relationship (e.g., "In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?").

Alternatives. Three measures assessed participants' perceptions of their possible alternatives to their relationships: (a) Simpson's (1987)

Quality of Alternatives Index, which asked respondents to identify a particular person who was the best realistic alternative to their current partner, and then to compare 14 specific benefits obtainable from the alternative partner to those they received from their current partner (e.g., "When it comes to dating someone who is *physically attractive*, the benefits from my best alternative partner would be [better or worse] than those I get from dating my current partner"); (b) an Ease of Finding an Alternative Partner Index (Simpson, 1987), a six-item measure that assessed the facility with which respondents believed they could find suitable alternatives to their current partners (e.g., "It would take me a fairly long time to find another dating relationship as good as my current one"); and (c) an item that asked participants to provide a specific estimate of the number of realistic alternatives they possessed. *Realistic alternatives* was defined as "people who you might be interested in dating and who might be interested in dating you."

Investments. Rusbult, Johnson, and Morrow's (1986) 10-item Investments Scale asked participants what they would lose by ending their current relationships (e.g., "All things considered, how much have you 'put into' your relationship?").

Commitment. Commitment was measured with items drawn from Sabatelli and Pearce's (1986) Commitment Scale, which assessed respondents' dedication to their relationships (e.g., "I want to be with my present partner forever;" "I favor breaking up" [reverse scored]), combined with two additional items that assessed respondents' specific expectations for their relationships (e.g., "What is the likelihood that you will be dating your current partner 1 year from now?").

Relationship adjustment. Two more scales assessed aspects of couple functioning and relational adjustment: (a) Berscheid, Snyder, and Omoto's (1989) Relationship Closeness Inventory (RCI), a 78-item measure of behavioral interdependence that assessed the frequency, diversity, and strength of the interactions partners shared (e.g., "On average, how many minutes did you spend alone with your partner each morning during the past week?"); and (b) Spanier's (1976) Dyadic Adjustment Scale, a 32-item measure of relational adjustment (e.g., "How much do you agree or disagree about sex?").

Attention to alternatives. The only new inventory was an Attentiveness to Alternatives Index, which was formed by aggregating three items written by Sabatelli and Pearce (1986) with three items written by me. Factor analysis revealed that the index's items, which appear in the Appendix, all loaded on a single factor. The index assessed one's alertness to other potential partners.

With the exception of the RCI, the scales were all answered on five-point scales. All of them were reliable; each of them had a Cronbach's alpha of .83 or higher, including the Attentiveness to Alternatives Index ($\alpha = .85$). The questionnaire also assessed the duration of participants' current relationships and the number of other people they had dated during the past year.

Laboratory Procedure

Within 3 weeks of collection of the survey data, 74 people (31 men, 43 women) participated in individual lab sessions in which behavioral correlates of attentiveness to alternatives were examined. The sample included all of the survey respondents who could be recruited and scheduled for a lab session soon after the survey; this ensured that few changes in dating status had occurred. None of these participants were married; 33% of them were not presently dating anyone, 27% were casually dating more than one person, and the remaining 40% were dating a single partner. They were recruited for a study ostensibly dealing with the effectiveness of print advertisements and were unaware of the procedure's connection with the earlier survey.

During the lab sessions, participants were asked to view 12 slides of advertisements taken from various national magazines (see Simpson et al., 1990); 4 of the slides pictured attractive male models, 4 displayed

attractive female models, and 4 exhibited products in ads that did not include models. Pilot testing with introductory psychology students ($N = 97$) on a larger sample of stimulus advertisements indicated that the models portrayed in the slides were all similarly attractive and the ads themselves were equally vivid and attention-getting.

Participants were asked to "familiarize" themselves with the 12 slides by examining each in turn; they were instructed to spend as much or as little time inspecting each slide as they liked, but were asked to maintain a 10-s blank-screen interval between slides. (A clock with a sweep second-hand was nearby.) Each participant then used the slide projector's remote control to examine the slides at his or her own pace. Simultaneously, the experimenter used a millisecond timer with a photoelectric gate to measure the time spent inspecting each slide. The order of the slides was arranged so that each participant first viewed a slide of a same-sex target, then an opposite-sex target, and then a product slide. This sequence was repeated through all 12 slides; within that order, however, the sequence of specific slides was counterbalanced across participants.

While each participant examined the slides, his or her skin conductance was measured using two Ag-AgCl electrodes with Unibase conductive medium attached with velcro strips to the medial phalanges of the first two fingers of his or her nondominant hand (see Fowles et al., 1981). These data were recorded on a Model 6-B physiograph (Narco Bio-Systems, Houston, Texas).

Participants then were asked to take a second look at four of the slides to judge the attractiveness of the people or product pictured, and their interest in meeting them (or in using the product). For the sake of convenience, participants rated the two opposite-sex targets, the same-sex target, and the product judged by pilot participants to be the most attractive targets of each set, reporting their evaluations on 19-point Likert scales.

After this procedure, participants were fully debriefed. This portion of the study's mixed design thus included (a) participant sex and (b) relationship status as between-subjects variables, and (c) type of slide as a within-subjects variable.

Survey Follow-Up

A follow-up questionnaire was administered to all of the participants who could be contacted—215 of the original 246—8 weeks after their first self-reports were obtained. They were asked whether their dating status had changed and whether they were still involved with the same partner. Fifty-six of the dating participants (30%) were no longer dating their original partners. (None of the married respondents divorced, but one cohabiting couple did break up.) This procedure allowed a comparison of those relationships that had ended during the 2-month period to those that had continued.

Results

Measures of Attentiveness

Three dependent variables addressed attentiveness to alternatives. The first two measures, the self-reports on the Attentiveness to Alternatives Index and the time spent actually inspecting the attractive opposite-sex slides, were intended to be relatively direct measures of attentiveness. The models pictured in the slides were not real alternatives, of course, but interest in them was presumed to be related to attention to real targets of this sort. These data were positively skewed, so logarithmic transformations of the data were performed. In addition, opposite-sex viewing time was regressed on the time spent inspecting same-sex slides to account for global individual differences in

viewing time. The resultant residualized scores were reasonably pure measures of unique attention to attractive heterosexual targets.

The third measure relevant to attentiveness was the participant's skin conductance levels as he or she inspected the opposite-sex slides. An index of the physiological reactivity of 67 participants was obtained by scoring the number of significant shifts (greater than 5 mV/s) in skin conductance occurring within 30-s intervals during the slide exposures (see Blascovich & Kelsey, 1990).¹ These data described the participants' emotional responsiveness to the slides and were only indirect measures of attentiveness; nevertheless, they were expected to be related to the interest with which participants monitored their alternatives.

Attention to Alternatives, Satisfaction, and Commitment

The correlations of self-reported attentiveness with the other relational self-reports of the respondents who were involved in dating relationships ($n = 141$) or marital or cohabiting relationships ($n = 46$) are shown in Table 1. As expected, partners' satisfaction with and investments in their relationships were both negatively correlated with their attentiveness to their possible alternatives. The more attentiveness participants reported, the less loving and satisfied they were and the less they had to lose by ending their current relationships. Moreover, attentive participants believed that they actually had a greater number of alternatives, and perceived those alternatives to be of higher quality, than did participants who were less attentive to other partners. Attentive participants also felt their alternatives could be easily obtained. Attentiveness was thus associated with considerably better alternatives than those typically reported by those who were less attentive.

Furthermore, attentive participants were less committed to their relationships and had recently dated a greater number of

people. Not surprisingly, then, high attentiveness to alternatives was also related to less closeness and poorer relational adjustment.

Self-reports of attentiveness thus exhibited the anticipated patterns of association with other relational variables. Results for the behavioral measure of attentiveness, time spent inspecting opposite-sex targets, were less straightforward. Participants who claimed to be attentive to their alternatives did indeed spend more time examining attractive models in the lab than did those who were less attentive, providing validation for the Attentiveness Index. Those who lingered over the opposite-sex models also thought they had more realistic alternatives ($r = .27, p < .05$). However, the behavioral measure was significantly related to only two other self-reports; those who looked for longer periods evidenced weaker commitment to ($r = -.21, p < .05$) and less closeness in ($r = -.23, p < .05$) their current relationships.

Neither measure of attentiveness was significantly correlated with the physiological reactivity with which participants examined the opposite-sex slides. In fact, only one self-report measure was significantly correlated with reactivity: Those who reported better relational adjustment watched the slides with lower arousal ($r = -.22, p < .05$).

Attentiveness as a Mechanism of Relationship Maintenance

Interdependence theory suggests that satisfaction with a relationship, investments in it, and the quality of one's alternatives jointly determine commitment to that relationship; in turn, commitment encourages the use of various processes of relationship maintenance that directly affect relational outcomes (see Rusbult & Buunk, 1993). Thus, if inattentiveness to alternatives is a meaningful maintenance tactic, it should help mediate the influence of commitment on relational outcomes and should thus explain some of commitment's impact on relational well-being.

Adjustment and closeness. This possibility was first investigated using respondents' reports of their adjustment and closeness in their relationships. Regressing adjustment on commitment demonstrated that commitment accounted for 23% of the variance in adjustment, $\beta = .48, F(1, 162) = 48.79, p < .001$. However, a second, hierarchical regression showed that attentiveness to alternatives alone accounted for 15% of the variance in adjustment, $\beta = -.38, F(1, 162) = 16.98, p < .001$, and with attentiveness in the equation, commitment could explain only an additional 11% of the variance in adjustment (see Table 2).

Attentiveness also played an important role in predicting a couple's behavioral closeness. Commitment explained 36% of the variance in respondents' RCI scores, $\beta = .60, F(1, 162) = 48.89, p < .001$, but attentiveness alone explained 23%, $\beta = -.48, F(1, 162) = 40.85, p < .001$, and with attentiveness accounted for, commitment explained only an additional 13% of the variance in closeness.

Table 1
Correlations of the Dating or Married Participants' Other Measures With the Attentiveness to Alternatives Index

Variable	<i>r</i>
Self-report	
Love	-.55
Liking	-.31
Satisfaction	-.51
Quality of alternatives	.51
Accessibility of alternatives	.53
Number of alternatives	.27
Duration of relationship	-.15
Number of others dated	.36
Investments	-.49
Commitment	-.67
Adjustment	-.41
Closeness	-.48
Behavioral (laboratory)	
Attention to opposite-sex targets	.27
Arousal to opposite-sex targets	.07

Note. $N = 187$ for the survey responses; critical value for $p < .01, r > |.17|$. $n = 52$ for the lab responses; critical value for $p < .05, r > |.20|$.

¹ Occasional equipment problems caused the skin conductance data for 7 participants to be unusable.

Thus, for both of these key outcome variables, accounting for attentiveness notably reduced the ability of commitment to predict how well relationships were faring. Each of these results is consistent with the possibility that attentiveness mediates the influence of commitment on relational well-being.

Relationship termination. The relative abilities of attention to alternatives and commitment to predict whether a relationship would dissolve over the 2-month period from survey to follow-up was also examined. Participants' feelings of commitment forecasted whether their partnerships would survive, $\beta = .22$, $F(1, 162) = 8.04$, $p < .01$. However, participants' self-reported attentiveness did as good a job, $\beta = -.49$, $F(1, 162) = 27.52$, $p < .001$, and with attentiveness accounted for, commitment added only a little additional information about the likelihood that a relationship would fail.

This was an intriguing result, and it was further explored by comparing the usefulness of attention to alternatives in predicting relationship failure to the information provided by the established factors of satisfaction, investments, and quality of alternatives.² These three variables are clearly informative (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993; Simpson, 1987), but in a multiple regression analysis with attentiveness, only the measure of investments added any meaningful prediction of relationship continuation or termination over the 2-month period. (See Table 3.) To forecast a relationship's future most efficiently, we need not ask whether one is happy; we should ask instead whether one is particularly interested in how well one could be doing elsewhere, and what one would lose by leaving.

Attraction to opposite-sex targets. Finally, the participants' evaluative ratings of the opposite-sex slides in the lab were analyzed to determine the ability of the relational self-report variables to predict the participants' judgments of the attractiveness of, and their desire to meet, desirable models outside their relationships. Multiple regression analyses indicated that only one of the relationship scales—attentiveness to alternatives—was significantly related to either judgment. The more vigilant to other possibilities a person was, the more interested

Table 2
Hierarchical Regression of Adjustment, Closeness, and Relationship Continuation-Failure on Commitment and Attention to Alternatives

Predictor	R	ΔR^2	β	F(1, 162)	p
Adjustment					
Attention to alternatives	.38	.15	-.38	16.98	.001
Commitment	.51	.11	.36	17.56	.001
Closeness					
Attention to alternatives	.48	.23	-.48	40.85	.001
Commitment	.60	.13	.46	19.99	.001
Relationship continuation-failure					
Attention to alternatives	.49	.24	-.49	27.52	.001
Commitment	.56	.32	.36	9.53	.01

Note. $n = 187$. The tabled F values test the significance of the ΔR^2 associated with each variable.

Table 3
Multiple Regression of Relationship Continuation-Failure on Attention to Alternatives and Satisfaction, Investments, and Alternative Quality

Predictor	β	R	ΔR^2	F(1, 162)	p
Attention to alternatives	-.48**	.48	.24	17.09	.001
Investments	.27*	.53	.05		
Satisfaction index	.16				
Alternatives index	-.16				

Note. $n = 187$. The tabled F value tests the significance of the full equation.

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

he or she was in meeting the desirable models, $\beta = .36$, $F(1, 73) = 11.14$, $p < .01$, and the more physically attractive he or she judged the models to be, $\beta = .34$, $F(1, 73) = 8.73$, $p < .05$. With attentiveness in the equations, no other self-report measure added any significant prediction of these responses.

In sum, these analyses established that a measure of a partner's attention to his or her alternatives provided valuable information about a relationship's functioning and probable future.³ In fact, no better predictor of relationship failure emerged from the variables collected here.

Effects of Relationship Status

Self-reports. Neither the patterns of the correlations nor the regression results reported earlier differed across the three (i.e., casual daters, exclusive daters, and married-cohabiting) relationship groups. The three groups did differ, however, in their attentiveness to alternatives, $F(2, 178) = 14.07$, $p < .001$. Casual daters ($M = 18.1$) were considerably more attentive than were exclusive daters ($M = 15.1$) or married-cohabiting respondents ($M = 14.3$). Duncan's multiple range test indicated that the differences between all three groups were significant ($p < .05$), with married or cohabiting respondents being significantly less attentive to their alternatives than were their dating counterparts.

Reactions to opposite-sex targets. The lab procedure did not include any married or cohabiting participants, but did include a group of people who were not dating anyone at the time. Analysis of the residual duration scores showed that the nondaters, casual daters, and exclusive daters differed somewhat in their behavioral attentiveness to the heterosexual targets. There was a trend for the nondaters ($M = 0.2$) and casual daters ($M = 0.3$) to inspect the slides for longer periods than exclusive (M

² To simplify these analyses, overlapping measures of satisfaction and perceptions of one's alternatives were combined into global indices. The love, liking, and Relationship Assessment Scale scores were transformed into z scores and averaged to produce a satisfaction index; a similar procedure combined the Quality of Alternatives Index and the Ease of Finding an Alternative Partner Index to develop a measure of alternative quality. These tactics seemed justified both by the high correlations among these scales and by the assumptions of interdependence theory.

³ Finally, inspection of the residuals from all of these regression analyses indicated that various assumptions of normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity were met.

= -0.7) daters did, $F(2, 69) = 2.19, p < .07$. Participants who already had consistent partners appeared less interested in the attractive targets than did those who did not have such relationships.

Exclusive daters also evidenced less physical arousal in response to the opposite-sex slides. A multivariate analysis of covariance that treated the four individual slides as a within-subject variable, participant sex and relationship status as between-subjects variables, and arousal in response to the same-sex slides as a covariate revealed that participants who were dating only one partner reacted significantly less strongly (by Duncan's multiple range test) to the opposite-sex slides than did nondaters or those dating more than one person $F(2, 61) = 3.06, p < .05$. (The means appear in Table 4.) People in exclusive relationships showed weaker physical responses to slides of attractive opposite-sex models than did those not currently involved in such relationships, but casual daters and nondaters did not differ in their responses.

The different relationship groups also differed in (a) their interest in meeting the opposite-sex targets and in (b) their judgments of the targets' physical attractiveness. A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) of the two items revealed a main effect of relationship status, $F(2, 67) = 6.19, p < .05$. As Table 4 shows, Duncan's multiple range tests indicated that those involved in exclusive dating relationships were less interested in meeting the targets and considered them to be less physically attractive than did those who were either dating no one or casually dating several people at once. These data replicate Simpson et al.'s (1990) finding that persons involved in exclusive relationships may derogate the attractiveness of alternative partners as one means of protecting their relationships from external threats. Their lower interest in actually meeting the targets is also consistent with the present premise that such persons ought to be less attentive to their alternatives in the first place.

Sex Differences

The patterns of correlations and the regression results did not differ for men and women, but men did report higher attentiveness ($M = 16.5$) to alternatives than women did ($M = 13.1$), $F(1, 178) = 37.22, p < .001$. This result replicates a variety

of prior findings that portrayed men as more permissive and less monogamous than women (e.g., Clark & Hatfield, 1989; Hendrick, Hendrick, Slapion-Foote, & Foote, 1985), and did not depend on sex differences in relationship status; there were similar proportions of men and women in each of the relationship groups (i.e., casually dating, exclusively dating, or married-cohabiting).

In the lab, men also examined the slides for longer periods of time than women did, $F(1, 60) = 4.31, p < .02$. The physiological responses of men and women did not differ, but a significant MANOVA revealed that the opposite-sex slides engendered stronger autonomic responses in both sexes than did the same-sex slides, $F(1, 60) = 5.68, p < .01$.

Discussion

The results provide substantial evidence, through converging operations in differing settings, that commitment to a relationship and attentiveness to its alternatives are interrelated. These findings are also consistent with the presumption that inattentiveness to alternatives is a relationship maintenance mechanism that helps to preserve and protect desirable relationships. Self-reports of satisfaction with, investment in, and commitment to a dating relationship were highly—and negatively—correlated with reports of vigilance toward desirable alternatives to that relationship. Furthermore, people who were more attentive to their alternatives evidenced lower adjustment and closeness in their present relationships, and had actually dated more alternative partners during the past year.

It may not be surprising, then, that those who were especially alert to their alternatives were also less likely to be dating the same partner 2 months later. What was remarkable was the relative ability of attentiveness to forecast relationship failure. No other predictor derived from interdependence theory more powerfully accounted for breakups.

In the lab, those who claimed to be attentive really did spend more time inspecting attractive pictorial opposite-sex targets. Also, individuals who had previously said they were less committed spent more time inspecting opposite-sex targets than did those who were more committed to their existing partnerships. Participants involved in steady, exclusive dating relationships tended to spend less time monitoring alternatives, and were clearly less autonomically responsive to opposite-sex targets than were those who were casually dating, or dating no one.

The findings thus reinforced and extended the notion that people may perceptually defend themselves against threats to existing relationships by derogating potential alternatives (Johnson & Rusbult, 1989; Simpson et al., 1990). Not only did participants in exclusive dating relationships consider alternative targets to be less attractive, they evidenced less interest in their potential alternatives through both their self-reports and behavioral responses. Moreover, among all the relational variables assessed, only attentiveness to alternatives uniquely predicted participants' judgments of the physical attractiveness of, and their desire to meet, opposite-sex targets.

In demonstrating that the salience of one's alternatives may vary with one's commitment, the data explicate an interesting subtlety of interdependence theory. Thibaut and Kelley (1959) predicted that dependence on a relationship might lead one to

Table 4
Effects of Relationship Status

Dependent measure	Relationship status		
	Dating no one	Casual dating	Exclusive dating
Skin conductance	19.5 _b	19.1 _b	15.8 _a
Desire to meet target	14.6 _b	15.3 _b	11.2 _a
Perceived physical attractiveness of target	15.6 _b	17.1 _b	13.8 _a

Note. Higher numbers reflect greater arousal, desire to meet target, and perceived attractiveness; for the latter two items the possible range was 1–19. Within each row, means with different subscripts differ significantly ($p < .05$) by Duncan's multiple range test.

decrease "the salience of the good outcomes" (p. 174) available elsewhere. The present data support this possibility. According to interdependence theory, attractive alternatives can draw individuals away from satisfying relationships. However, lovers may remain committed in part because they are inattentive to the alternatives they do possess. One must be aware of desirable, easily accessible alternatives in order for them to be influential, but the salience of one's alternatives varies inversely with one's commitment; as a result, happy lovers may, in fact, be blind to attractions that would (and do) disrupt lesser partnerships. Reduced attentiveness to one's alternatives may thus stand as another subtle tactic that serves to protect and maintain existing relationships.

Caution is appropriate; the mixed design used in this study does not allow for unambiguous conclusions as to why this pattern exists. For instance, the negative correlation between satisfaction and attentiveness to alternatives may indicate that those who become unhappy begin to monitor their other options out of a defensive preparation for the worst. However, it is equally likely that unnecessary attention to needless alternatives creates dissatisfaction by distressing and alienating the partner and distracting oneself. These and other possible interpretations remain to be explored in future research.

Nevertheless, some speculation about the possible mechanisms underlying these effects is desirable. The observed results may not be due to motivated inattentiveness but may simply reflect a passive availability heuristic. Committed partners may routinely assess the quality of their potential alternatives just like anyone else, but because their relationships are so rich and their partners so fulfilling, those alternatives may seem pallid by comparison. As a result, other potential partners would be neither salient nor memorable, and happy, committed lovers would seem "inattentive" according to our self-report index.

However, our participants' responses to the opposite-sex models observed in the lab suggest a more provocative alternative explanation. Less committed partners may be more attentive to alternatives because they are more actively seeking information about their options. Discontented lovers may be more eager to investigate their alternatives than are those who are content to abide in blissful ignorance. Of course, the presumption that these are motivated changes in attentiveness begs the question of whose behavior reflects the greater departure from ordinary processing; does commitment make people less attentive than they usually are, or does discontent temporarily increase attention above baseline levels?

This may not be a trivial distinction because it speaks to different underlying processes. If people are lazy "cognitive misers" who tend to engage in as little mental work as possible (see Fiske & Taylor, 1991), they may typically be heedless of their alternatives until increasing discontent creates the need to pay attention. This would cast attentiveness in a straightforward need-reduction model, suggesting that it operates only as needed. On the other hand, if people normally monitor their alternatives (as, for instance, an evolutionary perspective would suggest; Kenrick, 1994), the reduced attentiveness of committed lovers may reflect a form of *perceptual defense* with which people protect themselves against threatening stimuli. Such phenomena often occur without one's awareness (Bargh, 1994; Greenwald, 1992; Kihlstrom, Barnhardt, & Tataryn, 1992). The

Attentiveness to Alternatives Index obviously taps conscious self-report, but people may be relatively unaware of changes in their attentiveness to alternatives as satisfaction waxes and wanes; thus, future studies might profitably track attentiveness over time in relationships.

Alternatively, reduced attentiveness may be a conscious strategy designed to minimize frustration. One prominent perspective on motivation, expectancy X value theory (Weiner, 1992), suggests that situational constraints that reduce one's likelihood of attaining a goal should reduce its global desirability, and thus one's motivation to pursue it. A close relationship (especially marriage) may be just such a constraint, enormously complicating one's ability to embrace alternative attractions and making them seem relatively unattainable. People might then intentionally reduce their interest in their alternatives in order to avoid wishing for what they can't have. Obviously, several possibilities exist and are worthy of further study. It does seem self-evident, though, that where relational maintenance is concerned, "what one doesn't know" (about alluring alternative attractions) "can't hurt one" (or, at least one's relationship).

Strengths and Limitations

One desirable aspect of the present procedure was the lack of apparent connection between the survey and lab phases of the investigation. Participants' attentiveness to alternatives was measured in one context and its behavioral correlates were assessed in another, seemingly unrelated setting. Consequently, it is unlikely that the results were unduly affected by context effects (Council, 1993).

The inclusion of both dating and married participants in the survey phase of the study also allows a moderate amount of generalizability for these results. (Indeed, the negative relation between commitment and attentiveness to alternatives held across all three relationship groups and both sexes.) However, the number of participants involved in each type of relationship (i.e., casual, exclusive, married) was not large, so replication of these results will be welcome. More important, only one member of any particular couple was contacted, so these results are individual effects rather than dyadic effects. Further study of commitment and inattentiveness among both partners of a couple, including each partner's perception of the other's attention to alternatives, would be enlightening.

It would also be valuable to examine the extent to which individual differences mediate these results. Given the same levels of satisfaction, for instance, some people may be more routinely attentive to alternatives than others. People who are high in sociosexuality, for instance, are more accepting of casual sex and tend to have a greater number of sexual partners than do those who are low in sociosexuality, who regard sex as a marker of relational intimacy and commitment (Simpson & Gangestad, 1991). Because they do not associate sex with love, people high in sociosexuality may routinely be more alert to alternatives when they are already happily attached to a close partner. The negative link between commitment and attentiveness may be attenuated among such individuals.

Personality differences in global curiosity and sensation seeking may also affect these results. High sensation seekers pursue variety in their sexual experiences and tend to be relatively

dissatisfied with their relationships (Thronquist, Zuckerman, & Exline, 1991). They also display stronger electrodermal responses to novel stimuli much like those that characterized casual daters in the present results (Zuckerman, 1990). Thus, on the one hand, high sensation seeking appears to have much in common with high attentiveness to alternatives; however, on the other hand, high sensation seekers are capable of more sustained focused attention than are low sensation seekers, whose attention tends to wander (Ball & Zuckerman, 1992). Further study of personality differences in attentiveness is obviously needed and may prove especially profitable.

Conclusions

A truism suggests that the "grass is always greener" elsewhere. However, this pessimistic warning ignores the lasting success of many close partnerships. More to the point, the present study suggests that people who are devoted to their own yards may be less likely to be aware of others' pastures. Happy, committed lovers not only tend to derogate their potential alternatives (Johnson & Rusbult, 1989; Simpson et al., 1990), they also seem to be relatively heedless of their alternatives from the outset. Even if the grass is greener elsewhere, happy gardeners may not notice.

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Appendix

The Attentiveness to Alternatives Index

Please consider how OFTEN or SELDOM each of the following statements applies to you. Rate each statement using this scale:

1	2	3	4	5
never	seldom	occasionally	often	always

1. I am distracted by other people that I find attractive.
2. I flirt with people of the opposite sex without mentioning my partner.
3. I'm very aware that there are plenty more "fish in the sea."
4. I'm interested in having an affair.
5. I go out socially with opposite sex friends without telling my partner.
6. I rarely notice other good-looking or attractive people. [reverse-scored]

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