

Breaking Bad: Commitment Uncertainty, Alternative Monitoring, and Relationship Termination in Young Adults

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Commitment uncertainty represents an ongoing state of conflicted feelings or thoughts about the future of a relationship. It is currently an underexplored dynamic within romantic relationships and may be a key component of young adult relationships that may influence the likelihood of relationship termination. When commitment is uncertain, individuals may engage in serious monitoring of relationship alternatives. The authors examined the associations between commitment uncertainty, serious alternative monitoring, attachment style, and relationship termination. Results supported the hypothesis that higher levels of commitment uncertainty are related to greater likelihood of termination. Interestingly, serious monitoring of alternatives was not related to relationship termination. Implications are offered for the management of these important relational processes.

KEYWORDS *relationship termination, commitment, commitment uncertainty, attachment*

INTRODUCTION

Termination of a romantic relationship (breakup) can be a painful, stressful, and confusing time for most individuals, and this experience may be heightened for young adults navigating new relationships (e.g., Sprecher, Felmlee, Metts, Fehr, & Vanni, 1998). Still, breakups are common within the college student population, with approximately 70% of students reporting at least one romantic relationship breakup (Knox, Zusman, & Nieves, 1998). Intuitively, one of the strongest predictors of sustaining a relationship is a healthy and strong level of commitment between partners. Broadly, commitment has been described as the intentional choice to persist in the relationship and sustain an emotional attachment (Rusbult, 1980), wherein partners give up other relationship choices (Stanley, 2005) and become increasingly constrained and dedicated (Owen, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2010). Several factors influence the generation and maintenance of commitment, such as attachment and uncertainty, and these variables may exert unique influences on the trajectory of commitment over time (Stanley, Lobitz, & Dickson, 1999; Stanley, Rhodes, & Whitton, 2010). To some degree, commitment fluctuates in normative and predictable ways (Drigotas, Rusbult, & Verette, 1999). Commonly, commitment between partners is often tested, developed, and strengthened within the initial phases of dating, decreasing anxiety about attachment (Eastwick & Finkel, 2008; Stanley et al., 2010) and exhibiting normal peaks and lows as the relationship passes through life events (Glenn, 2002; Simon, Krawczyk, & Holyoak, 2004).

When a relationship no longer meets one's needs or when there has been significant hurt or breaches of trust between partners, one or both partners may become more uncertain about their level of commitment to the relationship going forward. Currently, commitment uncertainty is an underexplored dynamic within romantic relationships and may be a key component of young adult relationships. Most closely paralleling the construct of commitment uncertainty is the idea of *relational* uncertainty, which refers to the confidence one has about their perceptions and involvement in a dyadic relationship (Knobloch, 2007; Knobloch & Solomon, 1999, 2002). Relational uncertainty covers a wide variety of issues within relationships (e.g., uncertainty about having/raising children, career issues, finances; see Knobloch, 2008). Moving toward a more specific construct, commitment uncertainty refers to the degree to which a partner feels unsure or ambivalent about their desire to persist within their current relationship. In this way, commitment uncertainty captures an ongoing state of conflicted or fluctuating feelings or thoughts about the future of the relationship (Lüscher & Pillemer, 1998; Priester & Petty, 2001).

One signal of weak or decreasing relationship commitment is serious monitoring of possible alternative partners, wherein one evaluates the quality of another individual as a potential relationship partner and may engage in

flirtation or may develop an emotional connection with a person as a means of “testing the waters” (Fincham, Lambert, & Beach, 2010). The qualifier term “serious” is included to highlight the distinction between commonplace casual monitoring of alternatives and the more active steps one engages in such as flirtation and developing an emotional relationship. This practice may be more common among young adult college students who are often embedded in an environment populated by same-aged peers who may share similar values, lifestyles, and interests. Dedication, a central dimension of commitment, has been found to be negatively associated with serious alternative monitoring in that those with higher levels of dedication to their partner do not engage in as much alternative monitoring (Johnson & Rusbult, 1989; Stanley & Markman, 1992; Stanley, Markman, & Whitton, 2002). Ultimately, serious alternative monitoring may erode the foundation of a healthy committed relationship, causing partners to decrease investment and effort in their primary relationship, making termination more likely.

On the other hand, the relationship between commitment uncertainty and serious alternative monitoring may be a bidirectional one; as dedication becomes more uncertain within a relationship, partners’ evaluation of alternatives may increase. Or, alternatively, it may be that as monitoring of alternatives and the perception of having other romantic options increases, one’s commitment becomes more tenuous. This dynamic may be further fueled by attachment strategies wherein one may engage in conspicuous alternative monitoring to increase affection or desire from one’s current partner (anxious attachment strategy) or to detach from a seemingly negative or anxiety provoking interdependency with one’s partner (avoidant attachment strategy) (Collins & Gillath, 2012; Eastwick & Finkel, 2008). In this way, attachment-related motivations to manage anxiety within relationships may be related to the degree of serious alternative monitoring and/or breakup.

Consistent with these observations, how relationships move forward, especially during times of uncertainty, may be influenced by one’s attachment strategy. Specifically, individuals develop a sense of emotional security or insecurity, largely built on experiences with early caregivers (Bowlby, 1969). As adults, individuals continuously incorporate new experiences and develop internal working models of relationships that guide expectations and relational strategies (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Attachment systems are characterized as secure or insecure (anxious and avoidant). Securely attached individuals generally hold the belief that others are dependable, available, and trustworthy. Those more insecurely attached exhibit a preoccupation with avoiding real or perceived abandonment and rejection from close others, where those more anxiously attached attempt to cope by making strong efforts to connect and seek reassurance (Kirkpatrick & Hazan, 1994) and those more avoidantly attached engage in more detachment and resistance to intimacy (Cassidy & Shaver, 2008). Studies have identified connections between different attachment styles the ways in which individual navigate

sustaining and ending romantic relationships (Collins & Gillath, 2012; Davis, Shaver, & Vernon, 2003; Feeney & Noller, 1992).

Avoidant attachment and commitment uncertainty have similar characteristics in that both reflect experiences of ambivalence about one's attachment to a partner. However, a key difference is that avoidant attachment is more of a strategy intended to manage anxiety about dependency and rejection within a relationship, whereas commitment uncertainty is more related to one's appraisal about the value and likelihood of persisting in a particular relationship. Whereas attachment is thought to be relatively stable across a lifetime, differing for different kinds of relationships (e.g., friendships, romantic relationships, familial relationships) (for review, Fraley, 2002), commitment uncertainty may vary in response to relationship events, satisfaction levels, met or unmet needs, or communication quality between partners. As commitment varies, one may begin to engage in more serious alternative monitoring, perhaps testing the waters to gauge the relative satisfaction of the current relationship against possible others.

The magnitude and direction of associations between attachment strategies, commitment uncertainty, and serious alternative monitoring have been underexplored, despite the fact that the interrelationship between these factors may have important implications for the ways in which romantic relationships are sustained or end. Accordingly, the current study sought to address the gap in the literature regarding the dynamics between romantic relationship commitment uncertainty, attachment, serious monitoring of alternatives, and relationship breakup. Specifically, we hypothesized that individuals who express more commitment uncertainty would be more likely to engage in serious alternative monitoring, after controlling for attachment style and length of relationship (hypothesis 1). We also predicted that relationship breakup would be associated with commitment uncertainty (hypothesis 2a), serious alternative monitoring (hypothesis 2b), after controlling for anxious and avoidant attachment.

METHOD

Participants

The initial sample of participants totaled 485, of whom 172 (35.5%) reported being in an exclusive romantic relationship at the beginning of the semester. Given our focus on commitment uncertainty in exclusive dating relationships, we excluded participants who were not in an exclusive romantic relationship (e.g., dating multiple individuals) or who were married/engaged.

Additionally, to ensure participants' responses were valid, we included screener items throughout the study (e.g., "Relationships are based on trust, to ensure that we can trust your responses please check the Agree box").

Participants who did not complete these items accurately were screened from the final sample.

Of the final sample ($N = 172$), 150 (87.2%) were women and 22 (12.8%) were men. The mean age was 19.6 years old ($SD = 1.67$) and 121 (70.3%) participants identified as White, 3 (1.7%) participants identified as Asian American, 17 (9.9%) participants identified as African American, 23 (13.3%) participants identified as Hispanic, 1 (0.6%) participant identified as American Indian, and 7 (4.1%) participants identified as multiethnic/racial. Sixty-three (36.6%) were first-year students, 53 (30.8%) were sophomores, 37 (21.5%) were juniors, and 19 (11.0%) were seniors.

Measures

SERIOUS ALTERNATIVE MONITORING

We used a nine-item measure to assess the degree to which individuals were engaging in behaviors related to extradyadic relations, such as flirting with others, being emotionally connected to others, time spent thinking about others, and feeling tempted to be physically intimate. The items were rated on a 7-point scales 1 (*None, Never, Not at all*; the item anchors varied for some questions) to 7 (*A great deal, Very often, Extremely*). This measure was adapted from Fincham, Lambert, and Beach (2010), which demonstrated a 6-week test-retest correlation of 0.60 as well as negative associations with relationship satisfaction. In the current study, the Cronbach alpha was .96.

EXPERIENCES IN CLOSE RELATIONSHIP SCALE-SHORT FORM (ECR-SF; WEI, RUSSELL, MALLINCKRODT, & VOGEL, 2007)

The ECR-SF was used to assess participants' attachment. Specifically, the scale has two subscales: Anxiety and Avoidance, with six items per subscale. The items are rated on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*Definitely not like me*) to 7 (*Definitely like me*). Wei et al. (2007) reported support for the validity for this measure through correlations with psychological well-being, loneliness, fear of intimacy, and comfort with self-disclosure measures. Cronbach's alphas for the Avoidance and Anxiety subscales in the current sample were .83 and .74, respectively.

COMMITMENT UNCERTAINTY SHORT SCALE (CUSS; STANLEY & RHOADES, 2011)

The CUSS was developed to capture two elements of commitment uncertainty: personal uncertainty and perceptions of partner's uncertainty. In this study, only the personal uncertainty scale was administered. The four items were "I am unsure how committed I really am to the future of this relation-

TABLE 1 Bivariate Correlations, Means, and Standard Deviations for Variables

	1	2	3	4	5
1 Breakup	—				
2 CUSS	0.22**	—			
3 Altern Mon.	0.06	0.23**	—		
4 Anxious	−0.03	0.16*	0.07	—	
5 Avoidant	0.12	0.31***	0.16*	0.23**	—
Mean (SD)	—	2.33 (1.51)	3.01 (1.77)	3.42 (1.24)	1.91 (1.04)

Notes: CUSS, Commitment Uncertainty Short Scale; Altern Mon., Serious Alternative Monitoring; Anxious, Anxious Attachment (ECR); Avoidant, Avoidant Attachment (ECR). * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

ship,” “My commitment to my partner is a day-to-day thing at this point,” “My level of commitment in this relationship has been wavering,” and “My commitment to this relationship goes up and down a lot.” These items were rated on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly Agree*). The Cronbach’s alpha was .82.

RELATIONSHIP TERMINATION (BREAKUP STATUS)

Participants who indicated that their relationship ended over the course of the semester were coded as 1 (Yes, relationship ended) and those who were still in their romantic relationship were coded 0 (No, relationship continued). There were 69 (40.1%) participants who ended their relationship over the course of the semester.

Procedures

Participants were recruited through an introductory course on families across the lifespan that fulfills a liberal studies requirement and therefore attracts students from across the university. Data were collected during the spring semester of 2012 at a large public university in the southeastern United States. Students were offered multiple options to obtain extra credit for the class, one of which comprised the survey used in this study. Ninety-eight percent of the class decided to participate in the study. They completed informed consent and were told how to access the online survey. They were given a 5-day window in which to complete the survey. All procedures were approved by the university institutional review board.

RESULTS

Table 1 provides bivariate correlations, means, and standard deviations for the variables studied. To examine our first hypothesis, that individuals who

TABLE 2 Summary of Regression Predicting Serious Alternative Monitoring

	<i>B</i>	(<i>SE</i>)	<i>b</i>	ΔR^2
Step 1				0.038
Anxious	0.04	0.11	.03	
Avoidant	0.31	0.14	.18*	
Rel. Length	0.10	0.10	.08	
Step 2				0.043
Anxious	0.01	0.11	.01	
Avoidant	0.20	0.14	.12	
Rel. Length	0.12	0.09	.09	
CUSS	0.26	0.09	.22**	

Notes: CUSS, Commitment Uncertainty Short Scale; Anxious, Anxious Attachment (ECR); Avoidant, Avoidant Attachment (ECR). * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

express more commitment uncertainty will be more likely to engage in serious alternative monitoring, we conducted a linear regression analysis using serious alternative monitoring as the outcome variable. Commitment uncertainty served as the predictor variable, and anxious and avoidant attachment as well as length of relationship served as control variables. As seen in Table 2, commitment uncertainty was a significant predictor, accounting for 4.3% of the variance in serious alternative monitoring over and above attachment and length of relationship. Of the control variables only avoidant attachment was significantly and positively associated with serious alternative monitoring. These results support our first hypothesis.

Next, we used the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, Version 19.0) with a logistic regression approach to predict the likelihood of breaking up over the course of the semester. To test our second hypothesis, commitment uncertainty and serious alternative monitoring (hypotheses 2a and 2b) served as predictor variables, and length of relationship, anxious attachment and avoidant attachment served as control variables. We entered all variables, except commitment uncertainty in step 1 of the logistic regression and then in step 2, commitment uncertainty was entered into the model. The results demonstrated that step 1 of the model was not statistically significant $\chi^2(4) = 5.08$, $p = .28$, classification percent correct = 60.8%. Accordingly, none of the predictor variables were statistically significant ($ps > .05$). However, the addition of commitment uncertainty in step 2 of the model was statistically significant, $\chi^2(1) = 6.66$, $p = .01$, and the overall model was statistically significant, $\chi^2(5) = 11.74$, $p = .04$, classification percent correct = 68.0%. Thus, of the predictors, only commitment uncertainty was statistically significant, supporting hypothesis 2a only (see Table 3). Based on the odds ratio, the likelihood of breaking up increased 35% for every 1-unit increase in commitment uncertainty.

TABLE 3 Summary of Logistic Regression Predicting Breaking Up

	<i>B</i>	(<i>SE</i>)	Odds ratio	95% Confidence interval
Step 1				
Anxious	−0.11	.14	0.90	0.69–1.17
Avoidant	0.20	.16	1.23	0.89–1.69
Altern Mon.	−0.08	.09	1.08	0.90–1.29
Rel. Length	−0.16	.11	0.85	0.68–1.07
Step 2				
Anxious	−0.14	.14	0.87	0.66–1.14
Avoidant	0.10	.17	1.11	0.79–1.55
Altern Mon.	0.03	.10	0.87	0.85–1.24
Rel. Length	−0.15	.12	1.03	0.69–1.09
CUSS	0.30**	.12	1.35	1.07–1.71

Notes: CUSS, Commitment Uncertainty Short Scale; Altern Mon., Serious Alternative Monitoring; Anxious, Anxious Attachment (ECR); Avoidant, Avoidant Attachment (ECR). ** $p < .01$.

DISCUSSION

Overall, those who experienced more commitment uncertainty engaged in more serious alternative monitoring and were more likely to terminate their relationship over the course of three-months. It seems that those who reported higher levels of commitment uncertainty allowed themselves to disengage from their relationship, to some degree, in order to gauge whether they might be more satisfied with a different partner or within a different kind of relationship. These types of testing thoughts and behaviors may serve to shore up one's commitment as individuals are able to gain perspective on their relationship; alternatively, these actions may fracture the couple identity and erode foundational bonds (Blow & Hartnett, 2005; Charney & Parnass, 1995; Williams & Hickie, 2011).

Young adults' navigation of romantic relationships often occurs in concert with other dimensions of identity exploration/formation. Specifically, young adults undergo a process of identity formation along with the development of intimacy (Penuel & Wertsch, 1995). However, the development of a strong sense of identity necessitates the development of independence and autonomy, which can be at odds with the goal of developing intimacy and interdependency with a partner (Blatt & Blass, 1996; Sanderson & Cantor, 1995). In this way, it may be that some young adults engage in serious alternative monitoring as a way to balance the need for the development of an independent identity, while also working to develop an interdependent intimate connection with the partner.

Alternatively, those with high levels of commitment uncertainty may engage in serious alternative monitoring as a breakup strategy wherein they attach to a transitional person(s) as they slowly terminate their relationship. This idea fits with other researchers' conceptualization of breakup strategies. For example, Collins and Gillath (2012) identified avoidance/withdrawal and

manipulation as two indirect breakup strategies associated with negative outcomes. In this way, serious alternative monitoring may be a form of an avoidance/withdrawal breakup strategy or a manipulative strategy as a way to sustain control or the desired direction of a relationship. This type of approach may also reflect a negative relational maintenance behavior, designed to induce jealousy and increase affection from one's partner under the threat of a competing alternative, in order to address unmet needs or desires that fuel uncertainty (Dainton & Gross, 2008; Goodboy & Meyers, 2010). Others may engage in serious alternative monitoring as a way to continue their existing relationship, despite high levels of commitment uncertainty, as a means of getting their needs met in multiple ways, with multiple people. For example, an individual who feels a lack of emotional reciprocity with their partner, leading to dissatisfaction and uncertainty about their relationship commitment, may seek out an emotional connection with an alternative person. Consistent with relationship inertia theory (Stanley et al., 2006), couples who have been working to sustain a relationship for a considerable amount of time may more heavily prioritize "keeping things going" rather than endure the pain and confusion of disentangling the developed constraints and emotional attachments. For these individuals, serious alternative monitoring may be a short-term strategy to sustain their relationship, weathering the uncertainty, ultimately maintaining the relationship in this way or terminating the relationship when ready.

Within the current study, avoidant attachment was significantly positively associated with serious alternative monitoring. This seems to suggest that for those reporting higher degrees of avoidant attachment, detaching from a relationship is a strategy of self-protection to prevent the pain associated with rejection or abandonment (Schachner & Shaver, 2002). Research has supported this notion, finding avoidant attachment to be related to more indirect breakup strategies, which in turn are associated with more negative post breakup outcomes (Collins & Gillath, 2012; Sprecher, Zimmerman, & Abrahams, 2010). Furthermore, the data support a possible partial mediation effect, wherein the relationship between avoidant attachment and serious alternative monitoring is mediated by commitment uncertainty. Although this finding was not predicted, this further supports the notion that commitment uncertainty is a strong and unique influence, over and above attachment strategies, in the prediction of serious alternative monitoring.

In contrast, anxious attachment was not related to alternative monitoring, which seems to fit with the notion that those more anxiously attached will employ relationship strategies that are more focused on increasing acceptance, commitment, and affection from one's partner, not detachment (Davis et al., 2003; Dutton & Winstead, 2006). Still, the results revealed that commitment uncertainty was a significant predictor of serious alternative monitoring over and above attachment style, suggesting that the experience of commitment uncertainty may be a unique contributor to partici-

pation in serious alternative monitoring than attachment strategy alone. It is possible that different attachment strategies drive different pathways toward alternative monitoring, which may fuel commitment uncertainty. In this way, there seems to be important distinctions between relationship specific dynamics such as commitment uncertainty, and a more global and static style of attachment. Taken together, individuals should be aware of the ways in which their attachment strategy interacts with situational relational components, and the potential for these forces to influence the trajectory of their relationship.

Relationship breakup was predicted by commitment uncertainty only, whereas attachment, length of relationship, and engagement in serious alternative monitoring did not attain statistical significance in predicting breakup. These results suggest important implications about the degree of influence commitment uncertainty exerts on the trajectory of a relationship – over and above other salient relationship dynamics. It would seem that the influence of commitment uncertainty more strongly influences the course of a relationship than does serious alternative monitoring. It may be that serious alternative monitoring has an effect on relationship termination indirectly, only when combined with commitment uncertainty. As stated earlier, serious alternative monitoring may result in reinforcement that one's relationship has value over and above other alternatives, and this may lead to an increase in investment. On the other hand, commitment uncertainty calls into question the very existence of a couple's future, reducing the likelihood that one makes continuous sacrifice and/or investment going forward, which in turn diminishes the motivation for each partner to continue working on the relationship.

Limitations

Results of the current study must be understood in concert with the limitations of the design, sample, and analysis. First, the data are correlational, making it difficult to infer direction of effects with any confidence. For example, commitment uncertainty and serious alternative monitoring were significantly correlated and both predicted one another within the models. It is not clear whether commitment uncertainty leads to more serious alternative monitoring or vice versa. Still, it seems that both variables are important in the trajectory and maintenance of a relationship, and further research is needed to disentangle the temporal order of these effects. Second, the relatively small sample consists of undergraduate students at a large southeastern university, with students overwhelming self-identified as young Caucasian heterosexual individuals. These demographics, along with the relatively small sample size, potentially limits the statistical power of the study, as well as the generalizability of the conclusions to other populations and identities. Future research should include a more diverse sample in terms of race/ethnicity and sexual orientation to determine if these same effects exist

across populations. In addition, the fact that the sample largely relied on young adults, points to the need for future research to specifically examine the effects of commitment uncertainty and serious monitoring of alternatives within married couples, cohabitating couples, and those in long-term relationships. Still, these results shed preliminary light on the effect of these important variables and provide a foundation from which future studies may work.

Implications

As individuals navigate relationships, it is important to acknowledge the degree of commitment uncertainty and serious alternative monitoring in an intentional and clear-headed way. Results of the current study suggest a bidirectional connection between these experiences, and there may be multiple relationship pathways forward depending on how partners acknowledge these dynamics. Commonly, partners experience fluctuations in their experience and perception of relational dynamics. At basic levels, most individuals experience relational uncertainty that fluctuates across the span of a relationship, such as uncertainty about having children or living together or how to effectively navigate challenging conflicts with one's partner (Knobloch, 2007, 2008). However, commitment uncertainty is a more specific and more critical component of the sustainment of a healthy relationship. Intuitively, when one's commitment becomes less certain, the possibility of relationship breakup increases. What partners do with this uncertainty is crucial for the ways in which the relationship moves forward. Within psychotherapy, it would be beneficial for clinicians to process these perceptions of uncertainty, encouraging clients to identify the sources producing or maintaining uncertainty, exploring the relative importance of the dynamics causing uncertainty, and encouraging active or proactive steps to be taken within the relationship. Furthermore, validating and normalizing a client's experience of uncertainty can provide a foundation for identifying the components of uncertainty that are actually important values for the individual client, versus transient concerns.

Engagement in serious alternative monitoring seems to strengthen the possibility of breakup and is likely done without a strong vision for how this may affect one's relationship. Ultimately, commitment uncertainty and serious alternative monitoring are relatively common experiences with relationships. Therapists can assist clients in effectively, honestly, and intentionally addressing these experiences, which may help partners clarify or adjust their relationship to be more satisfying, or, alternatively, to end their relationship in a more direct and thoughtful way.

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