Asymmetrically Committed Relationships

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Abstract

This study compared romantic relationships in which there was a substantial difference (> 1 *SD*) in the commitment levels of the two partners to those with more equal levels. These asymmetrically committed relationships (ACRs) were studied in a national, longitudinal sample of unmarried, opposite-sex romantic relationships (*N* = 315 couples); 64.8% (*n* = 204) of relationships were categorized as non-ACRs, 22.8% were ACRs in which the male partner was less committed than the female partner (*n* = 72), and 12.4% (*n* = 39) were ACRs in which the female partner was less committed than the male partner. Those who were cohabiting or who had children together were more likely to be in ACRs than those without these characteristics. Compared to those not in ACRs, the less committed partners in ACRs (referred to as "weak links") reported lower relationship adjustment, more conflict, and more aggression in their relationships, however these differences were explained by their low levels of commitment. The more committed partners in ACRs ("strong links") also reported lower relationship adjustment, more conflict, and more aggression than those not in ACRs, even when controlling for their levels of commitment (which were also higher, on average, than those not in ACRs); this finding is noteworthy given that high levels of commitment usually inhibit conflict and aggression. Relationships in which the female partner was the weak link were more likely to break up within two years (54%) than those with male weak links (29%) or non-ACRs (34%). However, asymmetrical commitment was not nearly as important a predictor of break-up as females' levels of commitment. The findings advance the understanding of asymmetrical commitment in romantic relationships and highlight the value of studying both members of a couple in research on commitment.

Keywords: Commitment, Romantic relationships, Interdependence, Principle of Least Interest

Asymmetrically Committed Relationships

> *If one lover is considerably more involved than the other, his greater commitment invites exploitation or provokes feelings of entrapment, both of which obliterate love.* (Blau, 1964, p. 84)

Family theorists such as David Blau (1964) recognized, decades ago, the importance of asymmetrical commitment in relationships. In psychology, the emphasis on interdependence makes obvious the importance of mutuality in commitment (e.g., Thibaut & Kelley, 1959; Rusbult, 1983). Before psychologists were studying commitment, scholars had suggested that imbalances between partners influence motivation and power dynamics. Sociologist Willard Waller (1938) wrote about the Principle of Least Interest, noting that the person with the least interest in a relationship has the most power: “That person is able to dictate the conditions of association whose interest in the continuation of the affair is least" (p. 191; see also Ross, 1921). “Interest in the continuation” is a core aspect of commitment (e.g., Stanley & Markman, 1992), with various studies showing that higher levels of commitment predict relationship stability (Impett, Beals, & Peplau, 2001; Le, Dove, Agnew, Korn, & Mutso, 2010; Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2010).

As suggested by both Waller and Ross, when there is asymmetrical commitment, the least committed partner should have the most power. Indeed, sociologists have long linked differential commitment to power dynamics, focusing on differences between partners in the quality of alternatives as the driver of asymmetrical power (see Cook, Cheshire, & Gerbasi, 2006; cf. Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). In contrast to situations of asymmetrical commitment, Cook and Emerson (1978) emphasized that mutually committed relationships are characterized by two

partners who are each focused on maximizing joint outcomes. These conceptualizations overlap with the idea that commitment produces a transformation of motivation (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978) that leads to "we-ness" (e.g., Agnew, Van Lange, Rusbult, & Langston, 1998) or couple identity (Stanley & Markman, 1992; cf. Lewandowski, Nardone, & Raines, 2010). Thus, asymmetrical commitment should not only reflect power imbalances but also unbalanced transformation of motivation between partners, which in turn would diminish pro-relationship behaviors that allow partners to handle differences successfully (e.g., Rusbult, Zembrodt, & Gunn, 1982), curtail destructive behaviors like aggression (e.g., Slotter et al., 2012), and make sacrifices for the good of the relationship (e.g., Wieselquist, Rusbult, Foster, & Agnew, 1999).

In this study, we examine associations between asymmetrical commitment and the characteristics, quality, and stability of romantic relationships in a sample of dyads drawn from a national sample of individuals in serious, unmarried romantic relationships.

Asymmetrical Commitment in Contemporary Relationships

While specific ideas about asymmetrical commitment have existed in social science for decades, Stanley, Rhoades and their colleagues have argued that asymmetrically committed relationships are of growing importance to understand. Although this assertion would be hard to test directly with data on long-term trends, there are at least three interrelated phenomena supporting it. First, they argue that there has been a steady decline in culturally supported and defined steps and stages in the development of commitment in romantic relationships (Stanley, 2002; Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2006). That is, there is a growing diminishment in access to or use of culturally supported emblems (or signals) used to clarify commitment in developing relationships (Stanley, Rhoades, & Whitton, 2010). Second, they argue that there is a growing preference for ambiguity in romantic relationships prior to marriage because of a loss of

confidence in commitment and lasting love, with associated fears of rejection and loss. Further, they argue that ambiguity is often motivated by self-protective instincts in the context of uncertainty (Stanley, Rhoades, & Fincham, 2011). Third, important relationship transitions, such as moving in together or having a child together, increasingly come about from processes more easily characterized as sliding (cf. Manning & Smock, 2005) than from something more akin to deciding, where deciding reflects the development of clarity and mutuality of intention between two partners (Stanley et al., 2006).

Stanley et al. (2010) argue that this environment of ambiguity allows greater opportunities for relationships to form and continue even where there is substantial asymmetrical commitment because there are fewer scripts or customs forcing ambiguity out into the open. For example, there is less pressure now on less committed partners to make clear their lower commitment levels prior to transitions such as into cohabitation that increase constraints for remaining together (Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2012a; cf. Stanley et al., 2006). This is important because constraints make relationship continuance more likely net of personal commitment to the partner (Rhoades et al., 2010). Consistent with such reasoning, Rhoades, Stanley, and Markman (2006) showed that couples who began to live together before developing clarity about marital intentions (reflected in engagement) not only have poorer quality relationships, but that these relationships are characterized by greater levels of asymmetrical commitment years into marriage.

To summarize, asymmetrical commitment has long been of interest to both sociologists and psychologists studying relationship development and commitment. It may also be of growing importance because customs now make it easier than in past eras for asymmetrically committed relationships to come about and continue.

Phenomena Related to Asymmetrical Commitment

A number of empirical studies address asymmetrical commitment, relying on varied methods and theoretical backgrounds. Some studies have focused more on perceived differences in involvement or interdependence whereas others have focused more on measured differences in commitment between partners; some studies explicitly address both.

In a relatively early study, Hill, Rubin, and Peplau (1976) found that perceived unequal involvement in the romantic relationships of college students predicted break up prior to marriage. Further, women's ratings of love better predicted remaining together than men's ratings, whether or not the woman was the more or less involved partner. Inspired by the Principle of Least Interest and building on Hill et al.'s (1976) study, Sprecher, Schmeeckle, and Felmlee (2006) found that relationships perceived to be asymmetrical in involvement had lower relationship quality and were more likely to break-up, especially if the woman was perceived to be the less emotionally-involved partner. Consistent with the Principle of Least Interest, the partner perceived to be less involved was also viewed as having the most control over relationship continuance. Although discussed as a matter of involvement, the ideas contained in these papers are easily mapped onto the construct of commitment, with more emotional involvement reflecting greater commitment to the relationship and the partner. These studies strongly suggest that relationships are especially vulnerable if a woman (in these heterosexual samples) has less commitment (or love, involvement, whatever the term) than her male partner.

The importance of perceived differences in commitment was highlighted in work by Drigotas, Rusbult, and Verette (1999), who examined actual differences in partners' self-reports of commitment as well as perceived mutuality of commitment in two samples of young couples (one dating and one married). They found that both actual levels of commitment and perceived

mutuality of commitment accounted for unique variance in relationship adjustment. And, closely related to such findings, Le and Agnew (2001) examined mutuality of dependence using a measure that asked respondents which partner relies on the relationship more across five areas of common need (from Drigotas & Rusbult, 1992). Using diary methods, they found that perceived mutual dependence was associated with more positive and less negative relationship emotions. These studies support Blau's (1964) strong assertion that mutuality in dependence and commitment should be positively associated with relationship quality.

The findings noted thus far are primarily based on the perception of perceived mutuality of involvement or commitment rather than actual measured differences in commitment. Findings from studies examining actual levels of commitment have found patterns consistent with those already noted. For example, two studies showed that the commitment levels of less committed partners are more predictive of couple outcomes than the commitment levels of more committed partners (Attridge, Berscheid, & Simpson, 1995; Schoebi, Karney, & Bradbury, 2012). Attridge et al. referred to less committed partners as "weak-links" and more committed partners as "strong-links," a terminology that we also adopt. When predicting break-up in dating relationships over a period of six months, Attridge et al. (1995) found that it did not matter whether men or women were the less committed partner; weak-link partners' scores were more predictive of break-up than the strong-link partners' scores. Thus, they found that it was low commitment of the less committed partner that mattered most for stability, regardless of gender of the partner. Similarly, Schoebi et al. (2012) examined how aspects of commitment predicted divorce among a longitudinal sample that began as couples were newlyweds, with the authors able to examine dissolution up to 11 years into marriage. They found that asymmetrical commitment, and the weak-link partner's commitment score in particular, predicted divorce.

Some researchers have used methods that highlight both the difference between partners as well as the levels of commitment of partners, in understanding how relationship quality is associated with asymmetrical commitment. For example, Oriña et al. (2011) found that both lower levels of commitment and also discrepancies between partners were associated with greater observed hostility in conversations of romantically involved, young adult couples. Likewise, Rhoades, Stanley, and Markman (2012b) showed that asymmetrical commitment was associated with relationship quality among cohabiting couples when controlling for overall levels of commitment of the partners. Such studies highlight the fact that asymmetrical commitment is not synonymous merely with low committed partners or couples in which one partner is not very committed. The phenomenon of asymmetrically committed relationships (ACRs) is dyadic in that asymmetry requires both a less committed partner and a relatively more committed partner.

The Present Study

In the present study, we examined ACRs among unmarried couples in heterosexual, romantic relationships. The study focused on relationship characteristics (such as cohabitation), relationship quality, and the relative longer-term stability (over 2 years) of ACRs compared to non-ACRs.

We operationally defined ACRs as relationships in which partners differed in ratings of commitment by at least one standard deviation. In contrast to studies that focused on perceived differences (e.g., Le & Agnew, 2001; Sprecher et al., 2006), we examined actual differences in levels of commitment. Further, we chose not to analyze differences in commitment between partners as a continuous variable because, in contrast to studies that define asymmetrical commitment based on any magnitude of difference in commitment (e.g., Oriña et al., 2011; Rhoades et al., 2012b), we wanted to define ACRs on the basis of what would be an arguably

substantial difference between partners; that is, we were interested in asymmetry that is likely both to be consequential in relationship outcomes and likely to be perceived. As noted earlier, we believe that large asymmetries are increasingly important to study in an era where people slide through potentially constraining relationship transitions. We also believe that the average person does not think in terms of small degrees of difference in commitment with their partner but is more likely to be aware in broader terms of whether their partner is similarly committed, or not. We wanted these analyses to conform to how people actually experience relationships, and believe that the definition of asymmetry we adopt has high external validity, where large asymmetries will matter. In contrast, we do not believe that small differences in actual commitment levels are likely to be consequential and that such differences may be explained by small fluctuations in levels of commitment (and satisfaction) over time. Larger differences are likely to reflect serious, ongoing asymmetries between partners that should be associated with important characteristics and dynamics of relationships, and, thus, are reflected in the types of analyses presented here.

After examining findings based on this definition of asymmetry, we repeated the analyses controlling for levels of commitment in order to ascertain which patterns may be related merely to low or high commitment.

One of the advances of this study is that, compared to most prior studies, the sample we use is broader; it comes from a national sample of those in unmarried romantic relationships of at least two month's duration (see Rhoades et al., 2010). Our sample was larger (n = 315 couples) than those used in studies reviewed earlier and it was not restricted in similar ways (a criticism voiced by Sprecher et al., 2006), such as to those recruited in college (e.g., Hill et al., 1976; Le & Agnew, 2001; Sprecher et al., 2006), to samples comprised almost entirely of white people (most

of the studies cited above), to samples where almost no couples have children or that do not specify if there were children (e.g., Hill et al., 1976; Le & Agnew, 2001; Sprecher et al., 2006), or only to cohabiting couples (Rhoades et al., 2012b).

Hypotheses about Relationship Characteristics

Hypothesis 1. We expected that men would be more likely than women to be weak-link partners in ACRs. This hypothesis is based on Sprecher et al.'s (2006) findings regarding relationships with perceived differential emotional involvement (see also Rhoades et al., 2006).

Hypothesis 2. We expected that ACRs would be more common among cohabiting couples than non-cohabiting couples. This prediction is based on the fact that cohabiting relationships have more constraints for remaining together than dating, non-cohabiting relationships (e.g., Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2012a). Given that ACRs should have some inherent weaknesses, cohabitation would make these relationships more likely to continue. As such, we expected ACRs to be over-represented among cohabiting couples in the sample.

Hypothesis 3. Based on the same reasoning for hypothesis 2, we expected that those couples with a child together would be more likely to be in ACRs. The reasoning is bolstered further by evidence that having a child together before marriage creates external reasons for relationships continuing that are associated with lower quality marriages (Surra, Chandler, Asmussen, & Wareham, 1987). However, other research suggests that having a child together in contemporary unmarried relationships is not necessarily associated with greater relationship stability (Rhoades et al., 2010). Nevertheless, we expected unmarried couples with a child together to be more likely than those without a child together to be in ACRs. We also examined if having children from prior partners was associated with ACRs, with no prediction about it.

Hypothesis 4. We expected that couples with a commitment to marry will be less likely

to have asymmetrical commitment than those without a commitment to marry. This prediction is not based merely in the obvious fact that plans for marriage will reflect higher average levels of commitment. As noted earlier, Stanley et al. (2010) argued that ambiguity about the status and future of romantic relationships makes asymmetrical relationships more likely to come about because the asymmetry is less likely to be fully revealed (cf. Stanley et al., 2011). Thus, this hypothesis is based on the idea that, at the dyadic level, having *mutual* plans for marriage is non-ambiguous, and such relationships will be less likely to be ACRs.

Hypotheses about Relationship Quality and Stability

Hypothesis 5. We expected those in ACRs, whether weak-link or strong-link partners, to report lower relationship quality (assessed by measures of negative interaction, relationship adjustment, and physical aggression). This hypothesis is based on the theorizing of Waller (1938) about such relationships as well as on findings cited above (Drigotas, et al., 1999; Oriña et al., 2011; Sprecher et al., 2006; Rhoades et al., 2012b). This is the first study we know of to examine whether ACRs are associated with greater levels of aggression in romantic relationships. Given that commitment can constrain aggressive impulses (Slotter et al., 2012), we expected more aggression in ACRs, though, for the same reason, we also examined whether such associations would become nonsignificant when controlling for overall levels of commitment.

Hypothesis 6. We expected ACRs to be more likely to dissolve than non-ACRs. This prediction is based on studies cited above (e.g., Hill et al., 1976; Schoebi et al., 2012; Sprecher et al., 2006). We also expected that this would be particularly true if women were the weak links, consistent with the findings of Sprecher et al. (2006) and Hill et al. (1976).

Method

Participants

Participants in the current study were 315 couples (*N* = 630 individuals) who took part in a larger, national longitudinal project on romantic relationship development (Rhoades et al., 2010). All participants were unmarried but recruited as being in a "serious romantic relationship" with a member of the opposite sex for at least two months' duration. As of Time 1, women averaged 25 years of age (ranging from 18 to 40, *SD* = 4.90) and men averaged 27 years of age (ranging from 18 to 52, *SD* = 6.58). Ages can be greater than the recruitment target of 34 and under (see below) because only the age of the partner first recruited was constrained by the recruitment methodology. Women and men had a median of 14 years of education (ranging from 9 to 22 years for women, *SD* = 2.23, and 7 to 24 years for men, *SD* = 2.51). The median income was $10,000 to $14,999 annually for women (ranging from under $4999 to over $100,000) and $20,000 to $29,999 annually for men (ranging from under $4999 to over $100,000). Regarding employment, 77% of women and 83% of men were employed full or part time. In terms of ethnicity, this sample was 9.5% Hispanic or Latino and 90.5% not Hispanic or Latino. The sample was 83.0% White, 10.0% Black or African American, 1.7% Asian, 0.5% American Indian/Alaska Native, and .6% Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander; 3% reported being of more than one race and 1.2% did not report race. In terms of race and ethnicity, this sample is comparable to the English-speaking population of the United States for those in this age range. The median number of months that these couples had been together was 26.75.

Procedure

To recruit participants for the larger project, a calling center used a targeted-listed telephone sampling strategy to call households within the contiguous United States. After a brief introduction to the study, respondents were screened for participation. To qualify, respondents needed to be between 18 and 34 years old and be in an unmarried relationship with a member of

the opposite sex that had lasted two months or longer. Those who qualified, agreed to participate, and provided complete mailing addresses (N = 2,213) were mailed forms within two weeks of their phone screening. Of those who were mailed forms, 1,447 individuals returned them (65.4% response rate); however, 152 of these survey respondents indicated on their forms that they did not meet requirements for participation, either because of age or relationship status, leaving a sample of 1295 of the 2,213 that was followed longitudinally by mail in the parent project.

A couple subsample was recruited as part of the larger project in the following way. When forms were first mailed to the 2,213 respondents with complete mailing addresses, roughly half of these individuals were randomly assigned to receive an additional set of forms, and asked if they would like to invite their partner to participate in the study. Thus, 1,143 of the 2,213 were chosen to invite their partners. Of these 1,143, 710 returned their own questionnaires to begin participating in the longitudinal study. Of this group of 710 individuals, 318 partners also returned questionnaires, resulting in a sample of 318 couples; 315 had commitment scores for both partners at the first time point, resulting in the analytic sample used here.

Participants completed questionnaires approximately every 4 months, up through 26 months of follow-up analyzed here for relationship stability. Hence, we used T1 (which occurred in 2007 and 2008) along with information about relationship stability from follow-ups T2 through T7 (up through 2010). Participants were paid $40 at each assessment point. An average of 87% of participants completed each follow-up, with over 95% completing at least one time point after Time 1. Relationship stability outcomes are known for 306 of the 315 T1 couples (97%) up through two years following T1, with 107 of 306 couples breaking up over this time. All procedures were approved by our university IRB.

Measures

In the parent project, participants completed a questionnaire that took about 45 minutes at each of 11 time points; they were paid $40 each time. The measures we used for the current study were selected from those available to address these hypotheses. Other measures not selected for the current study included questionnaires on personal wellbeing and personality, family history, personal histories (e.g., number of prior sexual partners), attachment, specific relationship experiences (e.g., timing of sex in the relationship), constraints (e.g., signing a lease together, joint accounts), and sexual satisfaction.

Relationship characteristics.

Cohabitation. Living together was assessed by a question asking "Are you and your partner living together? That is, do you share a single address without either of you having a separate place?" (Yes = 1, No = 0); 40.8% were living together and 59.2% were not at T1. *Mutual Plans to Marry* was assessed by asking participants, "Have the two of you together made a specific commitment to marry?" Possible responses were "Yes, we are engaged", "Yes, we are planning marriage but we are not engaged", and "No". Couples where both partners responded "Yes" (engaged or planning) were coded as committed to marry (Yes = 1, No = 0); 47.2% reported commitment to marry and 52.8% did not. *Prior Children* was assessed by asking participants to provide the number of their own biological children. We coded couples as either (or both) partner having a child from a prior partner (1) or neither having such a child (0); in 23.7% of the couples, one or both partners had a child from a prior partner. *Child(ren) Together* was assessed by asking about the number of biological children each participant had with their present partner. We coded couples on whether they reported having one or more biological children together (1) or not (0); 12.7% of the couples reported having a child together.

Relationship quality and stability.

Commitment. Commitment was measured with 14 items for assessing dedication from the Commitment Inventory (Stanley & Markman, 1992). Each item was rated on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) scale. Example items are "I want this relationship to stay strong no matter what rough times we encounter" and "I like to think of my partner and me more in terms of 'us' and 'we' than 'me' and 'him/her,'" Numerous studies demonstrate the reliability and validity of the measure (e.g., Rhoades et al., 2010; Whitton, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2008). A mean score was used, with higher scores indicating more commitment (M = 5.58, SD = 0.93, α = .87).

Negative interaction. We used the 7-item Communication Danger Signs Scale (see Stanley, Markman, & Whitton, 2002) to measure negative interaction, e.g., "Little arguments escalate into ugly fights with accusations, criticisms, name-calling, or bringing up past hurts." The measure is rated on a 1 (*never or almost never*) to 3 (*frequently*) scale. This scale has demonstrated adequate reliability and validity in previous work (e.g., Stanley et al., 2002). This measure was scored by averaging the items, with higher scores indicating greater levels of negative interaction (M = 1.63, SD=0.49, α = .80).

Relationship adjustment. To assess global relationship adjustment, we used the 4-item version of the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Sabourin, Valois, & Lussier, 2005; Spanier, 1976). This brief version of the original has been shown to be internally consistent, highly correlated with the original, and a valid predictor of relationship quality (Sabourin et al. 2005). The total score was used, with higher scores reflecting higher relationship adjustment (M = 16.75, SD = 3.23, α = .79).

Physical aggression. We used the 10-item minor physical aggression subscale from the Revised Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996). The

measure has demonstrated validity in prior research (e.g., Straus et al.). Five items asked about behaviors from the respondent "toward" the partner and five items asked about behaviors "from" the partner toward the respondent. The means of the two five-item subscales were analyzed separately, with higher scores reflecting more physical aggression (Toward, $M = 0.44$, $SD = 0.93$, $\alpha = .83$; From, $M = 0.45$, $SD = 0.98$, $\alpha = .86$).

Relationship stability. Relationship stability data were obtained from the longitudinal time points mentioned earlier (T2 through T7); 34.9% had broken up by T7 (107 of the 306 couples for whom the outcome was known).

Results

Table 1 presents the correlations among the variables used to test hypotheses.

Relationship Characteristics

Relationships in which partners' commitment scores differed by one standard deviation or more were coded as ACRs. The means for the commitment scores for weak-link partners, strong-link partners, and those in non-ACRs are presented in Table 3 (described below in the relationship quality analysis section). As expected based on the operational definition, weak-link and strong-link partners were significantly different in commitment scores ($p < .001$). Additionally, strong-link partners scored higher on commitment than those in non-ACRs ($p < .001$), and weak-link partners scored lower than those in non-ACRs ($p < .001$).

In terms of sample break-down, 64.8% of relationships were categorized as non-ACRs ($n = 204$), 12.4% had a female weak link ($n = 39$), and 22.8% had a male weak link ($n = 72$). Overall, Hypothesis 1 received support; when there was asymmetrical commitment, men were more likely than women to be the weak link, $\chi 2\ (1, N = 111) = 9.81$, $p < .01$.

To test couple-level associations with asymmetrically committed relationships, we used

logistic regressions with ACR vs. non-ACR as the dichotomous outcome variable and couple characteristics (i.e., cohabitation status, plans for marriage, children from prior partners, and children together) as predictors (Table 2). After the analysis of each predictor, we tested it again in a model controlling for commitment levels. The analyses without controlling for commitment levels are referred to as Model 1 and those controlling for levels of commitment as Model 2 in the table. Since these variables are all couple-level variables, the Model 2 analyses controlled for couple mean levels of commitment for Model 2. Table 2 also shows the percentage of couples who were in ACRs for each predictor.

Hypothesis 2 was supported. As shown in Table 2, living together was associated with greater odds of a relationship being asymmetrically committed compared to not living together, and this difference remained significant controlling for level of commitment. Hypothesis 3 was also supported. Couples who had a child together were more likely to be in ACRs, and this finding also remained significant when controlling for level of commitment. Having children from prior relationships was not associated with being in an ACR. Hypothesis 4 was only supported when not controlling for level of commitment; mutual plans to marry was associated with lower odds of being in an ACR before, but not after, adding the control for commitment.

Relationship Quality and Stability

The next set of analyses focused on relationship quality (Hypothesis 5). Table 3 presents the means and standard deviations for the relationship quality variables, by weak-link, non-ACR, and strong-link groups. Table 4 presents the analyses for testing Hypothesis 5. Whether an individual was a weak link or not, or was a strong link or not, was entered as a predictor of four different indices of relationship quality in separate two-level multilevel models (using HLM 7.0 software; Raudenbush, Bryk, Fai, Congdon, & du Toit, 2011), as these variables are individual-

level variables that can vary between partners. After the initial analyses, each predictor was tested again in a model which controls for the level of commitment of those in the analysis. (As before, the analyses controlling for level of commitment are referred to as Model 2 in the table.)

Hypothesis 5 was supported, particularly for strong-link partners. Both being a weak link and being a strong link was associated with more negative interaction, lower relationship adjustment, and more physical aggression. However, when controlling for levels of commitment, these associations only remained significant for strong links and became non-significant for weak links.

Hypothesis 6 posited that ACRs would be more likely to end than non-ACRs. To provide the clearest presentation of the findings, Hypothesis 6 was first evaluated with a 3 X 2 chi-square analysis (Table 5) of break-up rates by whether couples had no weak link, a male weak link, or a female weak link; there was a significant difference, χ^2 (N = 306) = 7.18, $p < .05$. The odds of breaking up were greater for relationships where the woman was a weak link compared to either of the other two categories. Specifically, weak-link male relationships were no more likely to break up than non-ACRs, χ^2 (1, N = 269) = .45, $p > .50$. Weak-link female relationships were more likely to break-up than non-ACRs, χ^2 (1, N = 234) = 5.66, $p < .05$, and they were also more likely to break up than weak-link male relationships, χ^2 (1, N = 109) = 6.45, $p < .05$. Thus, hypothesis 6 was confirmed.

To add controls for levels of commitment in these analyses, a logistic regression was used to parallel the analysis just presented, with relationship stability (1 = intact, 0 = broken up) as the dependent variable with four predictors entered simultaneously: relationship has a male weak link or not, relationship has a female weak link or not, and male and female levels of commitment. For both of the weak-link variables, the referent category was non-ACR

relationships. As can be seen in Table 6, the only unique and significant predictor of relationship stability controlling for the other three predictors was female level of commitment. If female level of commitment was not included in the model, the male level was a significant predictor, but it explains only 1/5th as much variance in stability as female commitment.[1]

Discussion

This paper examined relationships in which one partner was substantially less committed than the other. The findings were consistent with theory and prior findings, and they advance the understanding of relationship commitment in a recent, relatively large, national sample of couples in unmarried but serious romantic relationships.

Relationship Characteristics

As predicted, cohabiting couples were more likely to be asymmetrically committed than those who were dating and not living together. In addition, as anticipated, couples with children together were more likely to be asymmetrically committed, but those where one or both partners had a child from a prior relationship were not. Both living together and having a child together could function as constraints, making ACRs more likely to continue when they may otherwise have ended. Of course, we cannot assess if this is the reason the hypothesis was supported, only that the findings were consistent with this reasoning. It is also possible that couples with asymmetrical commitment are more likely to cohabit (rather than move directly or rapidly into marriage), since cohabitation is associated both with more ambiguous commitment (Lindsay, 2000) and lower levels of commitment (Stanley, Whitton, & Markman, 2004). Cohabitation does not necessarily force any clarity about commitment when the transition so commonly comes

[1] The methods and purposes of Schoebi et al. (2012) were quite different from this study but it is impressive that they showed that weak-link commitment scores predicted divorce, even when controlling for overall relationship satisfaction. We decided to explore if the finding here held when controlling for relationship adjustment. The results were unchanged; only the female commitment score significantly and uniquely predicted relationship stability.

about more from something like sliding than where two partners discuss it and make a decision about what is happening (Manning & Smock, 2005; Stanley, et al., 2006; Stanley et al., 2011). Conversely, it is hard to imagine couples with asymmetrical commitment being necessarily more likely to have a child together than those not in ACRs, so we are more confident in the likely direction of that finding.

Those with mutual plans to marry were less likely to be asymmetrically committed than those without plans for marriage. However, this finding fell to non-significance when controlling for levels of commitment, so the association may merely be a function of lower average level of commitment for ACRs, driven by the weak-link partner. And yet, a central feature of relationships where two people have mutual plans to marry is that the process of developing such plans requires both mutual agreement and, most often, public declaration of commitment—two conditions that Stanley et al. (2010) argue make it very hard for asymmetrical commitment to survive. Admitting to the risk of tautological reasoning, it makes sense that couples with such plans will be less likely to have asymmetrical commitment because they have been through a process that pulls for clarity about high commitment on the part of both partners.

Relationship Quality

ACRs were associated with lower relationship quality, though the associations for those who are weak links may be explained merely by their low levels of commitment and not asymmetry, per se. That is not nearly as surprising as the fact that those in relationships with weak links, the strong-link partners, reported lower relationship adjustment, more negative interactions, and more aggression, even controlling for their relatively high levels of commitment. In fact, strong links reported mean levels of commitment that were higher than the average respondent not in an ACR. We acknowledge that the method of defining the ACRs made

it likely that strong links would have high commitment levels. And yet, such high levels of commitment are otherwise routinely associated with reports of higher not lower relationship quality (e.g., Stanley & Markman, 1992). This highlights the nature of asymmetrical commitment as a dyadic, not individual level, phenomenon. While being committed to one's partner is usually a good sign for relationship quality (and stability), it clearly does not work out so well when that partner is not on the same page. These findings provide compelling evidence that being highly committed to a relationship that is lacking in mutual dependence and commitment is a negative experience. These observations become even more compelling when considering the present findings regarding aggression.

People in ACRs reported higher levels of negativity and aggression, compared to those not in ACRs. Generally, there is clear evidence that commitment inhibits aggression (e.g., Slotter et al., 2012), and, yet, we found that those who are in relationships with weak links are relatively highly committed while also reporting more negative behaviors, including aggression, than those not in ACRs. Although weak links likely don't inhibit negativity because they have relatively low commitment, this cannot be said, on average, for strong links; despite having high levels of commitment, high levels of negative behavior occur, including in the form of their own aggression toward their partners. In our introduction to this paper, we noted Kelley and Thibaut's (1978) powerful idea that commitment produces a transformation of motivation that benefits ongoing relationships. However, these findings make clear that such a transformation in just one partner is either difficult to maintain in the presence of a less committed partner or that it simply takes both partners to be transformed for the positive effects to occur. Thus, it appears to take two partners with high commitment, not just one, to inhibit negative dyadic behavior.

These findings on relationship quality are consistent with notions expressed by theorists

many decades ago. Strong-link partners likely find their relationships quite frustrating, consistent with Waller's (1938) principle of least interest. As Blau (1964) posited, their greater commitment "invites exploitation or provokes feelings of entrapment, both of which obliterate love" (p. 84)—but, perhaps, not always commitment. However, asymmetrical commitment was also associated with greater likelihood of breaking up.

Relationship Stability

As noted earlier, Sprecher et al. (2006) found that relationships were more likely to break up if the woman was perceived to be the less involved partner. It is hard to say if it should directly follow from such a perception-based measure that a directly-measured differences in level of commitment would produce a similar finding. Thus, we thought it at least possible that either a male or a female weak link would be associated with greater likelihood of dissolution. Nevertheless, consistent with Sprecher et al., we found that relationships in which men were weak links were not more likely to break up than non ACRs whereas relationships in which women were weak links were significantly and substantially (20 percentage points) more likely to break up than either other group. Further, while this finding has parallels in prior samples, we are finding this pattern in a modern, current, and national sample of couples in serious but unmarried relationships. This shows remarkable consistency across time, including from the early 1970s (Hill et al., 1976) to the 1980s, to early 1990s (Sprecher et al., 2006), and to recent years (2007 to 2010) in this sample. One could have expected such patterns to change along with other social changes affecting romantic relationships (such as about roles or economic opportunities). Instead, there is a striking consistency across time *and* methods. And yet, we also found that asymmetrical commitment may not be the main story, in this context, when it comes to predicting relationship instability.

Although relationships in which women were weak links were the most likely to break up, the interpretation that this is due to the asymmetrical commitment was substantially weakened by the analysis controlling for levels of commitment. That analysis clearly suggests that what explains the weak-link finding regarding women is simply the fact that female commitment levels were found to be much more determinative of dissolution than male levels of commitment. That is, relationships with women scoring low in commitment were the most likely to break-up, and we did not find that this held for men. Thus, despite vast differences in measures, samples, and historical time between this study and Hill et al.'s (1976) study, the present finding echoes theirs, as they found that female levels of love best predicted stability. Although partners who are lower in commitment may play the most determinative role in relationship dissolution (cf. Attridge et al., 1995; Schoebi et al., 2012), this dynamic might be especially true where women are lowest in commitment, at least in unmarried relationships. The finding here is quite different but it may also be related to the fact that, at least in the U.S., women are more likely to initiate the ending of marriages than men (Amato & Previti, 2003).

Strengths and Limitations

This study has numerous strengths. First, the sample is national and reasonably representative of unmarried, serious opposite-sex romantic relationships in the U.S. Second, the sample is comprised of paired partners, allowing for direct measurement of the nature of those in high and low committed positions within their relationships. Third, the study relied on actual differences in levels of commitment between partners. Fourth, we know the dissolution status for 97% of these couples two years following the initial time point, allowing for strong inferences about the propensity to break up.

Even though we have excellent information on relationship stability, causality cannot be

determined on such matters as to why cohabitation or lower relationship quality is associated with asymmetrical commitment. For example, lower relationship quality is probably both a cause and consequence of asymmetrical commitment. Also, while we utilized a strong sample in many respects, the present findings do not address the earliest stages of new relationships, and how relationship quality, relationship events, and tendencies regarding commitment may interplay in the early formation of relationships that have important asymmetries in commitment. Of course, it is also a limitation that all variables used were self-reports**.**

Finally, we would anticipate that most samples of couples in relationships are over-represented by two partners who were both committed enough to participate in research. It seems quite probable that the percentage of couples in the serious but unmarried relationships who are asymmetrically committed in this sample is an under-representation of the actual prevalence.

Conclusion

The study of asymmetrical commitment is related to the most fundamental ideas about commitment. Stanley, Rhoades and colleagues (e.g., 2006; 2010; 2011) believe that ambiguity has grown more much more common in serious romantic relationships prior to marriage, and that it combines with transitions increasingly characterized by sliding to support the formation of relationships with large asymmetries in commitment. The present study cannot test this theory as a historical trend but it does suggest large asymmetries are relatively common and important. If Stanley, Rhoades, and colleagues are correct in their assertions about ambiguity and asymmetry, the ideas advanced long ago by the likes of Waller and Blau have particular relevance for relationships today because ACRs may well be more common and consequential for adults and their children than ever before. The present study advances knowledge about asymmetrical commitment and supports the value of using dyadic data to examine directly differences in

partners' reports of commitment.

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Table 1

Correlations

	1	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*	*6*	*7*	*8*	*9*	*10*
1. Commitment	--	.12*	.31**	-.02	-.16**	-.33**	.66**	-.15**	-.16**	.33**
2. Cohab	-.03	--	.19**	.24**	.32**	.22**	-.09	.10	.10	.23**
3. Engaged	.35**	.19**	--	-.01	-.05	-.08	.22**	-.02	.02	.23**
4. Prev Child	-.05	.24**	-.01	--	.24**	.14*	-.11	.10	.06	-.03
5. Child Tog	-.13*	.32**	-.05	.24**	--	.30**	-.31**	.15*	.14*	-.01
6. Neg Interact	-.35**	.20**	-.09	.10	.30**	--	-.62**	.29**	.35**	-.11
7. DAS	.66**	-.07	.26**	-.16**	-.24**	-.58**	--	-.26**	-.29**	.22**
8. Phys Agg To	-.23**	.08	-.10	.06	.18**	.26**	-.19**	--	.86*	-.03
9. Phys Agg Fr	-.14*	.10	-.05	.05	.29**	.36**	-.16**	.72**	--	-.04
10. Intact 2 yrs	.15**	.23**	.23**	-.03	-.01	.02	.21**	-.14*	-.09	--

Note: Women's correlations are displayed above the diagonal and men's correlations are displayed below the diagonal. Cohab = Currently cohabiting; Engaged = Currently engaged/planning marriage; Prev Child = Either partner has a child with someone else; Child Tog = Child with current partner; Neg Interact = Negative interaction; DAS = 4 item Dyadic Adjustment Scale; Phys Agg To = Minor physical aggression towards partner; Phys Agg Fr = Minor physical aggression from partner; Intact 2 yrs = With same partner 2 years from the beginning of the study.
*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$

Table 2

Relationship Characteristics of Asymmetrically Committed Relationships

			Being in an Asymmetrically Committed Relationship		
Model	*Predictor*	*Percent ACR By Predictor*[b] *(1,0)*	*B*	*SE B*	*Odds Ratio*
1	Living Together	42% vs 30%	0.51*	0.24	1.66
2	Living Together		0.65*	0.25	1.91
2	Couple Commitment		-0.92***	0.18	0.40
1	Mutual Plans to Marry	25% vs 45%	-0.91***	0.25	0.40
2	Mutual Plans to Marry		-0.48	0.27	0.62
2	Couple Commitment		-0.75***	0.19	0.48
1	Prior Children	41% vs 34%	0.30	0.27	1.35
2	Prior Children		0.25	0.29	1.29
2	Couple Commitment		-0.87***	0.17	0.42
1	Child(ren) Together	59% vs 32%	1.12**	0.35	3.06
2	Child(ren) Together		0.88*	0.37	2.42
2	Couple Commitment		-0.81***	0.18	0.45

Note. Model 1 is the predictor without controlling for levels of commitment and model 2 is the predictor while controlling for levels of commitment.
[a] e.g., 42% of couples living together and 30% of couples not living together were in ACRs.
*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$

Table 3

Means and Standard Deviations of Relationship Quality Variables by Group

	Weak-Link Partner		Non-ACR		Strong-Link Partner	
Variable	*Mean*	*SD*	*Mean*	*SD*	*Mean*	*SD*
Commitment	4.43	0.84	5.75	0.76	6.13	0.67
Negative Interaction	1.84	0.53	1.55	0.45	1.70	0.52
Relationship Adjustment	14.28	3.94	17.45	2.73	16.57	2.99
Phys Agg Toward Partner	0.70	1.25	0.34	0.82	0.56	0.90
Phys Agg From Partner	0.75	1.27	0.32	0.82	0.62	1.12

Table 4

Relationship Quality of Weak Links and those Partnered with Weak Links

		Negative Interaction		Relationship Adjustment		Phys. Agg. Toward Partner		Phys. Agg From Partner	
Model	*Predictor*	*B*	*SE B*	*B*	*SE B*	*B*	*SE B*	*B*	*SE B*
1	Being a Weak Link	0.29***	0.05	-3.19***	0.43	0.36**	0.13	0.43**	0.13
2	Being a Weak Link	0.03	0.06	0.20	0.34	0.14	0.13	0.25	0.13
2	Own Commitment	-0.20***	0.03	2.52**	0.15	-0.17**	0.06	-0.14	0.08
1	Being a Strong Link	0.15**	0.06	-0.91*	0.35	0.21*	0.10	0.30*	0.12
2	Being a Strong Link	0.22***	0.05	-1.84***	0.27	0.25*	0.10	0.32**	0.10
2	Own Commitment	-0.16***	0.03	2.30***	0.15	-0.09	0.05	-0.05	0.06

Note. Model 1 is the predictor without controlling for levels of commitment and model 2 is the predictor while controlling for levels of commitment.
*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.

Table 5

Relationship Status at Two Years Following T1 across Asymmetrical Relationship Type

Relationship Status	Male Weak Link (*n*=72)	No Weak Link (*n*=197)	Female Weak Link (*n*=37)
Not Together	21 (29.2%)	66 (33.5%)	20 (54.1%)
Together	51 (70.8%)	131 (66.5%)	17 (45.9%)

Table 6

Logistic Regression Predicting Relationship Stability from Sex of Weak-Link Partner, Controlling for Female and Male Levels of Commitment

Variables	*B*	*SE*	Wald	*p*	OR
Male Weak Link	-0.213	0.507	0.177	.674	0.81
Female Weak Link	0.481	0.594	0.655	.418	1.62
Male Commitment	0.008	0.255	0.001	.974	1.01
Female Commitment	0.897	0.275	10.615	.001	2.45
Constant	-4.488	1.076	17.41	<.001	0.01

Note. OR = odds ratio. All predictors entered simultaneously.

DV = intact (1) or not (0) at two years following T1.