Unequally into Us: Characteristics of Individuals in Asymmetrically Committed Relationships

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Abstract

This study examined characteristics of individuals that are associated with being in asymmetrically committed relationships (ACRs), defined as romantic relationships in which there was a substantial difference in the commitment levels of the partners. These ACRs were studied in a national sample of unmarried, opposite-sex romantic relationships (N = 315 couples). Perceiving oneself as having more potential alternative partners was associated with increased odds of being the less committed partner in an ACR compared to not being in an ACR, as was being more attachment avoidant, having more prior relationship partners, and having a history of extradyadic sex during the present relationship. Additionally, having parents who never married was associated with being the less committed partner in an ACR but parental divorce was not. Although fewer characteristics were associated with being the more committed partner within an ACR, more attachment anxiety was associated with increased odds of being in such a position compared to not being in an ACR. We also address how some findings change when controlling for commitment levels. Overall, the findings advance understanding of commitment in romantic relationships, particularly when there are substantial asymmetries involved. Implications for both research on asymmetrical commitment as well as practice (e.g., therapy or relationship education) are discussed.

Unequally into Us: Characteristics of Individuals in Asymmetrically Committed Relationships

The history of romantic, marital, and sexual relationships is replete with instances where the commitment levels of the two partners is unbalanced. Over the last century, scholars have written about asymmetrical commitment from various theoretical perspectives. One of the most widely recognized theorems was coined by sociologist Willard Waller (1938), known as the Principle of Least Interest: “That person is able to dictate the conditions of association whose interest in the continuation of the affair is least" (p. 191). Closely related, relationship theorists have focused on actual and perceived alternative relationship quality as a driver of power dynamics based in differential need for the present relationship to continue (e.g., Cook, Cheshire, & Gerbasi, 2006; cf. Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Peter Blau wrote that “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). As such, asymmetrical commitment has important implications for understanding relationship quality and stability.

The existence of asymmetrically committed relationships (ACRs) begs the question of who gets into such unbalanced relationships. Many complex personal and contextual factors likely play a role, and we examine a number of them in order to advance knowledge about ACRs. Although there have been a number of studies on the characteristics of relationships with asymmetrical commitment, there is little research on who ends up in such relationships. This study examined people in unmarried but ongoing relationships (with a median duration of just over two years), using a national (U.S.) sample of couples in opposite-sex relationships. Specifically, we studied whether individual characteristics (e.g., family history, attachment) are associated with it being more likely that a person will be either the more or less committed partner in ACRs, compared to not being in an ACR. Before turning our focus to personal

characteristics that may be associated with asymmetrical commitment, we briefly review the literature on the characteristics and challenges of such relationships. This provides context for understanding the importance of individual characteristics that may lead to ACRs.

Relationship Dynamics and Asymmetrical Commitment

A number of studies relying on various methods and conceptualizations have demonstrated that ACRs are lower in quality and more prone to dissolution than other relationships (e.g., Attridge, Berscheid, & Simpson et al., 1995; Drigotas, Rusbult, & Verette, 1999; Le & Agnew, 2001; Oriña et al., 2011; Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2012; Stanley et al., 2017). For example, Sprecher, Schmeeckle, and Felmlee (2006) showed that unmarried relationships with higher perceived asymmetrical involvement had lower relationship quality and were more likely to break up, particularly if the woman was the less involved partner. We found similar patterns (Stanley et al., 2017); ACRs in which the woman was the less committed partner were significantly more likely to break up within two years than other relationships. We also found that ACRs were more likely to have males who were the less committed partners than females as the less committed partners, by nearly two to one. In a study of unmarried relationships that led to marriage, Rhoades and Stanley (2014) reported that perceiving a partner to be less committed, prior to marriage, was strongly associated with lower marital quality. Thus, even though commitment is an important predictor of relationship stability (Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2010; Impett, Beals, & Peplau, 2001), mutuality in commitment is likewise important for understanding romantic relationships.

Consistent with Blau's observations noted earlier, asymmetrical commitment should not only be associated with lower quality relationships, it may also be particularly frustrating to the more committed partner. Indeed, we found that asymmetrical commitment was associated not

only with lower overall relationship adjustment but also with higher levels of negative interaction and physical aggression (Stanley et al., 2017). Even though more committed partners had high levels of commitment, we found that they also reported being more likely both to receive and perpetrate physical aggression, as compared to those not in ACRs. This finding is noteworthy because higher levels of commitment are typically associated with less aggression, as commitment inhibits it (Slotter et al., 2012).

ACRs have also been associated with relationship characteristics beyond relationship quality. For example, unmarried couples who are cohabiting or who have children together are more likely to be asymmetrically committed (Stanley et al., 2017). Further, those who cohabited prior to having clear, mutual plans for marriage were not only more likely to be asymmetrically committed, but to remain that way years into marriage (Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2006). These findings are consistent with the notion that cohabitation and having children together can lead to higher constraints that make relationships with less desirable characteristics more likely to continue due to inertia (Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2006). Regardless of plans for marriage or not, cohabitation has been associated with a substantial likelihood of asymmetrical commitment (Rhoades et al., 2012; Stanley et al., 2017). Further, ambiguous relationship formation patterns, like cohabitation before mutual plans about a future and/or marriage, should be more prone to asymmetry because the process can increase constraints prior to clarity about mutual, high levels of commitment (cf. Stanley, Rhoades, & Whitton, 2010).

Characteristics of Individuals in Asymmetrically Committed Relationships

Alternative quality. Although not unique to asymmetrical commitment, people do not stay in relationships merely because they want to stay; factors like constraints—especially lower quality of available alternatives—can explain stability in relationships with various

vulnerabilities (Johnson, Caughlin, & Huston, 1999; Stanley & Markman, 1992; Rhoades et al., 2010). Alternatives have long been believed to play an important role in commitment dynamics and asymmetry (cf. Thibaut & Kelly, 1959). Those with better alternatives, perceived or actual, may be more likely to get into relationships in which they maintain low levels of commitment. Those with poorer alternatives may also be more likely to accept a partner with marginal commitment, and be more likely to stay in such a relationship out of greater dependency. We hypothesized that perceiving oneself to have better alternatives, or reporting extradyadic involvement (reflecting a direct experience of alternatives), would be associated with being a less committed partner in an ACR (Hypothesis 1). We also hypothesized that poorer alternatives would be associated with being a more committed partner in an ACR (Hypotheses 2). All hypotheses were tested by comparing either the more or less committed partners in ACRs with those not in ACRs on the characteristics examined.

Family background. Coming from an unstable family of origin may impact asymmetry because it may result in greater insecurity about commitment and/or difficulties committing to a partner. For example, parental divorce has been found to be associated with lower levels of commitment in adult romantic relationships (Amato & DeBoer, 2001; Cui & Fincham, 2010; Whitton, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2008). Parental divorce may make individuals more tentative about commitments they make, leading them to hold back in being fully committed.

Another aspect of family background that may impact adult relationships is whether one's parents ever married. Rhoades, Stanley, Markman, and Ragan (2012) examined the adult relationships of those whose parents never married, along with those whose parents divorced or remained married. Among those whose parents never married, they found that most grew up with a single mother or in some type of step-parenting arrangement, with nearly half reporting that

their biological parents never lived together. Less than 7% who reported having unmarried parents grew up with both parents in the same household for any significant portion of their childhood. By comparison, 30% of those whose parents married but then divorced reported substantial time being raised by both parents in the same home prior to the divorce. In comparing adults based on family backgrounds, those whose parents never married tended to have the lowest relationship quality and commitment of all three groups. Since both parental divorce and parents never marrying are factors associated with lower commitment and risks for other relationship difficulties as adults, we hypothesized that those whose parents divorced or who had never married would be more likely to be a less committed partners in an ACR (Hypothesis 3).

Attachment. It is not only instability in one's family of origin that could produce difficulties forming strong commitments. Attachment has obvious overlap with family instability, but it goes beyond that to the quality of parenting received (Bowlby, 1979). Mikulincer, Florian, Cowan, and Cowan (2002), and more recently Mikulincer and Shaver (2016), provide thorough reviews of the literature on attachment dynamics in the romantic relationships of adults. They note that, in contrast to secure attachment, problems related to adult attachment dynamics revolve around the two primary forms of insecure attachment: avoidance and anxiety. Further, insecure attachment is associated with lower relationship quality, more negative expectations about partners, as well as a host of negative behaviors and outcomes.

Individuals' attachment orientations will impact commitment dynamics in relationships. Those with more secure attachment orientations are more likely to land in stable, committed relationships (e.g., Feeney, Noller, & Roberts, 2000). Moreover, the way in which attachment orientations might be associated with the formation and characteristics of ACRs is straightforward. An individual who is avoidant about attachment would be a prime candidate for

being a less committed partner in an ACR. Consistent with this, Etcheverry, Le, Wu, and Wei (2013) found a negative association between commitment and avoidant attachment in romantic relationships. Likewise, an individual with attachment anxiety should be more at risk of being a more committed partner in an ACR because of a tendency to over-invest to maintain connection.

In the one study we know of that examined attachment-linked characteristics of individuals with regard to asymmetrical commitment, Oriña, et al. (2011) documented associations between attachment-linked variables assessed in childhood and adult romantic relationships. They found that those with attachment difficulties earlier in life were more likely than others to be become the less committed partner in romantic relationships as young adults.

Stanley, Rhoades, and Fincham (2011) suggested that attachment difficulties may increase motivation to prefer ambiguity about commitment because of the types of issues just outlined. Specifically, an individual high in avoidance may prefer ambiguity for the reasons already noted. An individual high in attachment anxiety may prefer ambiguity out of fear of losing the relationship altogether if he or she pushes too hard to clarify the level of the partner's commitment. In the present study, we expected that both types of attachment insecurity will be associated with greater odds of being in an ACR. We hypothesized that those scoring higher on dimensions reflecting avoidance would be more likely to be less committed partners in an ACR (Hypothesis 4), and those scoring higher on attachment anxiety would be more likely to be more committed partners in an ACR (Hypothesis 5).

In the case of family background and attachment, it is relatively easy to conceive of a direction to the effects. That does not mean it is similarly easy to prove causality. But the constructs lend themselves to a directional theory. In the case of other variables we now discuss, the direction of causation is more obviously bi-directional at a conceptual level.

Romantic relationship history. A history of having more sexual or cohabiting partners is associated with poorer outcomes in romantic relationships and marriage (e.g., Lansford et al., 2010; Lichter, Turner, & Sassler, 2010; Fincham & May, 2017). Individuals who have difficulties forming mutually committed relationships may have more sexual and cohabiting partners in their histories because they will be in more relationships that end. This hypothesized association can be easily conceived as bidirectional: people may have vulnerabilities that made prior break-ups more likely; and a history of difficulties forming mutually committed relationships may impact the ability to build mutually high committed relationships in the future. We hypothesized having more prior cohabiting partners and/or more prior sexual partners would be associated with a greater likelihood of being in an ACR (as either a more committed partner or a less committed partner) (Hypothesis 6).

The sample used allowed us to define ACRs based on actual levels of commitment between partners. We chose to define asymmetrical commitment based on a difference of one standard deviation (or more) in partners' commitment levels. We also conducted analyses controlling for levels of commitment, which can inform interpretation about the role of the level of commitment in understanding the associations.

Method

Participants

Data from three hundred and fifteen couples (N = 630 individuals) were used for this study. These couples were drawn from a national (U.S.), longitudinal sample developed for a project on romantic relationship development. Details are available in Rhoades et al. (2010). At the time of recruitment, all participants were unmarried but in a "serious, exclusive romantic relationship" of at least two months with a member of the opposite sex. This study is based on

data collected from the first wave of the larger project.

Women were 24.80 years of age on average (18 to 40, *SD* = 4.91) and men averaged 26.97 (18 to 52, *SD* = 6.52). The median education level was 14 years (ranging from 9 to 22 years for women, *SD* = 2.23, and 7 to 24 years for men, *SD* = 2.51). Median annual income was $10,000 to $14,999 for women and $20,000 to $29,999 for men. Most participants were employed (77% of women and 83% of men). Regarding ethnicity, the sample was 9.5% Hispanic or Latino and 90.5% not Hispanic or Latino. Regarding race, 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 income as well as race and ethnicity, the parent sample (see below) is comparable to the English-speaking population of the United States (for unmarried, similarly-aged adults). Couples were together a median of 28 months. Forty-one percent (40.63 %) of the couples were cohabiting (i.e., living together without having separate places to live).

Procedure

To recruit the sample for the parent project, a calling center used a targeted-listed sample to call households within the United States (procedures further described in Rhoades et al., 2010). This procedure was employed to reach the growing number of people who only have mobile phones, which random digit dialing methods do not reach. Respondents had to be between 18 and 34 years old, not married, and in a serious romantic relationship of at least two months duration with someone of the opposite sex. Of those who answered the phone, 2,213 met the recruiting qualifications and agreed to participate. Forms were sent to this group and 1,447 returned the time one survey (65.4%). Of those, 152 were not eligible for the study, resulting in a sample of 1,295. The parent sample of 1,295 individuals closely matched the characteristics of

those in the U.S. in this age range. A couple subsample was recruited by asking a randomly chosen subset of the 2,213 who were sent time-one forms (n = 1,143) if they would be willing to recruit their partner. Of the 1,143, 710 returned the first survey. Of those 710, 318 partners (44.8%) returned a time one survey, resulting in the couple subsample of 318. Of these, 315 had scorable data for the time-one commitment measure, which became the analytic sample (n = 315) for this study. The reason why some participants in the current sample are older than 34 years of age is that this age was the limit for those first recruited on the phone. There was no restriction on the age of their partners. All procedures were approved by a university IRB.

Measures

Commitment. Commitment was measured using the 14-item dedication scale from the Commitment Inventory (Stanley & Markman, 1992). For each item, a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) was used. An example item is "I want this relationship to stay strong no matter what rough times we encounter." Studies have consistently demonstrated the reliability and validity of this scale (e.g., Rhoades et al., 2010; Rhoades et al., 2012; Whitton et al., 2008). Item ratings are averaged for the commitment score. Higher scores indicate higher levels of commitment (M = 5.58, SD = 0.93, α = .87).

Partner's commitment scores were subtracted, and couples where the two partners differed by at least one standard deviation (.93) were classified as ACRs. This operationalization defined ACRs based on an arguably substantial difference in the commitment levels of partners. Means by subgroups were 4.43 (SD = .84) for less committed partners, 6.13 (SD = 0.67) for more committed partners, and 5.75 (SD = 0.76) for individuals not in ACRs. Thirty-five percent (35.2%) of the couples were classified as having asymmetrical commitment and 64.8% were classified as not asymmetrical.

Alternative quality. Two measures of perceived alternative quality were used based on subscales from the Commitment Inventory (Stanley & Markman, 1992), including items chosen in confirmatory factor analyses (Owen, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2011). Each item was rated on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) scale. Three items assessed the perceived *Unavailability of Partners.* An example item is "I would have trouble finding a suitable partner if this relationship ended." This measure was scored by averaging the items, with higher scores reflecting the perception of fewer alternative partners (more constraint; $M = 2.93$, $SD = 1.19$, $\alpha = .64$). Three other items were used to assess *Alternative Life Quality*, particularly focused on financial quality of life. An example item is "I would not have trouble supporting myself should this relationship end." This measure was scored by averaging the items, with higher scores indicating *less* positive alternative life quality (more constraint) should the present relationship end ($M = 2.54$, $SD = 1.19$, $\alpha = .75$).

Extradyadic sex. Participants were asked, "Have you had sexual relations with someone other than your partner since you began seriously dating?" We scored responses such that 0 represented not reporting extradyadic involvement and 1 represented reporting having engaged in sexual relations with one or more others. Thirteen percent (13.2%) of the individuals reported having had sexual relations with someone else while in the present relationship.

Family background. Respondents reported if their biological parents ever married (*Yes = 1, No = 0*) and if their parents divorced (*Yes = 1, No = 0*). Ninety percent (90%) reported that their parents had married. Twenty-nine percent (28.6%) reported that their parents had divorced.

Attachment. Attachment variables were assessed using the Adult Attachment Scale developed by Collins and Read (1990). This scale yields three subscales: difficulty with closeness, difficulty depending on others, and anxiety about being unloved or abandoned.

Difficulties with closeness and depending on others reflect attachment avoidance. Each scale has six items, answered on 5-point, Likert-type scales. These measures have demonstrated both reliability and validity (e.g., Kurdek, 2002). For all three variables, higher scores reflect more *insecure* attachment (Close, M = 2.36, SD = 0.70, α = .63; Depend, M = 2.90, SD = 0.85, α =.80; Anxious, M =2.24, SD = 0.71, α =.59). Although alpha was lower that desirable, especially for anxious attachment, the scale performed in theoretically expected ways.

Romantic relationship history. Two variables reflect relationship experiences prior to the present relationship: the number of prior sexual partners and the number of prior cohabiting partners. The average number of prior sexual partners was 6.31 (SD = 10.76), which is similar to estimates from other samples (e.g., Busby, Willoughby, & Carroll, 2013). The average number of prior cohabiting partners was .45 (SD = 1.00), with 74% reporting never having cohabited with a partner before their present relationship.

Results

Analyses of individual characteristics associated with either being a less committed partner or more committed partner were conducted using HLM 7.0 (Raudenbush, Bryk, Fai, Congdon, & du Toit, 2011) so that we could account for the dependent nature of dyadic data. Each variable was tested in separate models using the Bernoulli outcome routine (designed for dichotomous outcomes), with one model predicting being a less committed partner and the other model predicting being a more committed partner. The reference group for all analyses was individuals not in ACRs. For example, in analyses for the less committed partner, the more committed partner is not in the analysis; however, everyone not in an ACR is in the model, which is the comparison group. This analytic structure follows directly from the fact that we are modeling whether or not people are in ACRs, and, if in one, which position within an ACR they

are in. After these primary analyses, each predictor was tested again in analyses that controlled for the commitment levels of those in the analyses.[1] These models are labeled 1 and 2 for each predictor, respectively, in Table 1. In the Discussion, we will explain what we believe the controlled and uncontrolled analyses mean.

Hypothesis 1 (alternative quality and less committed partners). Hypothesis 1 received mixed support. Reporting more alternative partners to the present relationship was associated with greater odds of being a less committed partner in an ACR, compared to not being in one.[2] Reporting an extradyadic sexual relationship was also associated with greater odds of being a less committed partner in an ACR, compared to not being in one. Both these associations became non-significant when controlling for commitment. Associations with alternative life quality (financial) were not significant.

Hypothesis 2 (alternative quality and more committed partners). Hypothesis 2 found no support. Alternatives were not associated with being the more committed partner in an ACR.

Hypothesis 3 (family background). Hypothesis 3 received partial support. Having parents who never married was associated with being a less committed partner in an ACR, compared to not being in one, but parental divorce was not. The association for parents never marrying became non-significant when controlling for commitment levels. Neither parents ever marrying nor parents divorcing was associated with being a more committed partner in an ACR.

Hypothesis 4 (attachment avoidance). This hypothesis was supported. Reporting more difficulty depending on others and difficulty with closeness (dimensions reflecting avoidant

[1] In analyses not shown, we also tested findings when controlling for demographic variables to see if findings were sensitive to such controls. These variables included age, income, education, race, and length of time a couple had been together. Findings did not change appreciably when entering these control variables.
[2] While the measure is actually indicating the perceived unavailability of partners, we reverse the language here because it is more straightforward for describing the finding.

attachment) was associated with increased odds of being a less committed partner in an ACR, compared to not being in one. When controlling for commitment levels, the association for depending on others remained significant but the association for difficulty with closeness did not. Although not hypothesized, difficulty depending on others was also associated with being a more committed partner in an ACR, and remained significant controlling for commitment levels.

Hypothesis 5 (attachment anxiety). This hypothesis was supported. Reporting more anxious attachment was associated with increased odds of being a more committed partner in an ACR, compared to not being in one. The association remained significant when controlling for commitment levels. Anxious attachment was not associated with being a less committed partner.

Hypothesis 6 (prior relationship experiences). This hypothesis was supported. Three of four associations were significant, including whether or not commitment levels were controlled. Reporting more prior sexual and/or more prior cohabiting partners was associated with greater odds of being a less committed partner in an ACR, compared to not being in one. Further, reporting more prior sexual partners was associated with greater odds of being a more committed partner in an ACR, compared to not being in one.

Discussion

This study examined characteristics of individuals that may be associated with being in asymmetrically committed relationships. Being in an ACR was associated with a variety of individual characteristics and experiences, with the results suggesting at least partial support for most hypotheses and the idea that individuals in ACRs have personal characteristics associated with the likelihood of being in ACRs. Four of 10 significant associations dropped to non-significance when controlling for levels of commitment. Before discussing specific findings, we address three issues that are important in contextualizing and interpreting the results: the nature

of the sample, causality, and the meaning of controlling for levels of commitment.

First, this sample is comprised of couples in serious, ongoing, romantic relationships with a median duration of a little over two years. It is not comprised of new dating relationships. While there are some relationships of short duration in the sample, most are not. Hence, the sample cannot address questions about the dynamics of asymmetry as relationships are forming, and whether or not asymmetry existed from the earliest moments or developed over time. Nor does the sample contain married couples, so these findings may not pertain to such couples or to couples together many years longer than the present sample. While we would expect various findings to generalize to married couples (and to longer-term, unmarried relationships), the commitment dynamics of married couples can be different from unmarried couples. Nevertheless, the couples studied here are in an increasingly common stage of life: unmarried but in serious, ongoing, relatively long-term relationships.

Second, the variables we examined in association with positions within ACRs are mostly ones that reflect characteristics of individuals (e.g., attachment orientations) that would have, or could have, arisen prior to being in their present relationships (except for extra-dyadic involvement). That is, they reflect characteristics of individuals that could increase the likelihood of either landing in an ACR or being in a relationship that developed into being one over time. We cannot determine which from these data. Even in the one study in this literature that had attachment-related measures from early childhood in studying asymmetrical commitment in adult relationships, the authors noted that their findings are correlational and cannot prove causation (cf. Oriña et al., 2011).

Third, controlling for commitment led to non-significance in four out of ten analyses that were significant when it was not controlled for in the analysis. All were analyses related to the

odds of being a less committed partner in an ACR. What could this mean? It cannot mean that a couple who was asymmetrically committed no longer is, nor can it mean that the person in the less committed position is no longer in this position. Further, regardless of whether controlling for commitment changed significance, persons in the less committed position within ACRs do score higher (or lower) on the predictor in question compared to those not in ACRs. Of course, it is also worth noting that those analyses are controlling for a variable used to define if one is in an ACR, and in what position, while examining if a personal characteristic is associated with being in that position.[3]

We believe that findings that are reduced to non-significance (e.g., extra-dyadic relationships) suggest that low commitment may fully explain why the characteristic in the uncontrolled model is associated with being a less committed partner within an ACR. In analyses where controlling for commitment did not reduce the finding to non-significance, the suggestion would be that there is more than mere low commitment explaining a person's odds of being a less committed partner in an ACR. For example, consider the findings about attachment-linked characteristic of difficulty with closeness. Conceptually, we believe that a difficulty with closeness makes it harder to be strongly committed in relationships, which, in turn, increases the likelihood that when such persons are in serious, ongoing relationships, those relationships are more likely to be ACRs, primarily because of that person's low commitment. Given that much of the reasoning throughout the introduction to this paper suggests that many of these individual

[3] We believe the addition of such controls in two other studies of asymmetrical commitment (Oriña et al., 2011; Rhoades et al., 2012) served a different function than it does here; the researchers were examining the size of asymmetries as a continuous variable, and wished to know if the size of the asymmetry explained something beyond the levels of commitment. Oriña's et al.'s primary analysis further examines the interaction of the less committed partners commitment level with the size of the asymmetry, while categorizing partners as more or less committed based on any size of discrepancy. Those methods are excellent, but we preferred to examine the less and more committed partners, categorically, based on a substantial degree of asymmetry. The analyses here are not examining the degree of asymmetry, but the fact of a substantial asymmetry.

characteristics (i.e., family history and attachment variables) reflect aspects of life that may predispose people to low commitment, it should not be surprising if some findings here are reduced to non-significance when controlling for that level of commitment. We further discuss implications of controlling for commitment as we discuss specific characteristics, below.

Overall Pattern of Associations

There appear to be a greater number of significant associations for less committed partners than more committed partners in ACRs. While we did not predict this, it might be explained by relationship development being different for less and more committed partners. At any given time in an asymmetrical relationship, it seems probable that a significant number of highly committed partners will not yet have fully ascertained a discrepancy that exists—whether or not the relationship was always that way or had become that way. More committed partners do not have all the information that less committed partners might have about differential commitment because, at least in dating relationships, it will often be in the best interest of a substantially less committed partner to conceal his or her lower level of commitment. For example, as long as a less committed partner is satisfied with the current relationship continuing for a time, they may not want their partner to apprehend the discrepancy because it could foster increased conflict about the status of the relationship, or even the more committed partner leaving. The principle of least interest (Waller, 1938) is predicated on one partner having less to lose if a relationship ends, but that is not the same as wanting the relationship to end in the immediate future. In fact, it could reflect an exercise of power to string a partner along when one knows there is no future. A less committed partner could receive benefits from a relationship in which they do not see a future, particularly because their partner is more committed to them; and thus, in some situations, such a partner benefits from concealing the asymmetry. That is,

asymmetrical commitment will sometimes be supported by the maintenance of asymmetrical *information,* in which the two partners do not share the same knowledge about the relationship. In other situations, power may flow directly from flaunting a "least interest" position.

The focus of this paper is on characteristics of individuals that are associated with asymmetrical commitment, but the arguments just above draw linkages to other constructs of growing interest to researchers. First, asymmetrical information should exacerbate both relational uncertainty (Knobloch & Solomon, 2005) and commitment uncertainty (Owen et al., 2014). While there are differences in these constructs and how they are measured, both have to do with negative impacts of uncertainty over the nature of a relationship, it's future, a partner's commitment, or even one's own desires. Relationship uncertainty is associated with turmoil, particularly during times of transition (Knobloch & Theiss, 2011), and commitment uncertainty is associated with relationships being more likely to break up (Quirk et al., 2016), as is perceived fluctuations in partner commitment (Arriaga, Reed, Goodfriend, & Agnew, 2006). However, overall commitment levels may still predict relationship stability more strongly than fluctuations around commitment levels (e.g., Knopp, Rhoades, Stanley, Owen, & Markman, 2014).

When one partner is unable to declare as much commitment as the other, or has reasons to conceal a lower commitment, it has to make it harder for the other partner to predict what will happen, develop a sense of security, or decide what he or she wants. If the relationship is one of casual dating or hanging out, this may be of no lasting consequence. In fact, we believe that in many cases, clarifying what each partner fully thinks too early would cause many fledgling relationships to end, prematurely. Uncertainty should be normative early in relationships but maladaptive over time for a partner increasing their investment.

Ambiguity runs through all of these dynamics. Stanley et al. (2010) argued that the

reduction of steps and stages (scripts) for how relationships develop makes for both more freedom to explore, but also more room for uncertainty and asymmetry.

Alternative Quality

Generally, as relationships develop, commitment will grow along with reductions in both the perceived quality of alternative options (e.g., Rusbult, 1983; Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998) and the energy put into monitoring alternatives (Johnson & Rusbult, 1989; Stanley & Markman, 1992). If measured perfectly, alternative quality will be related to constraint commitment while monitoring alternative partners will be directly related to dedication commitment (Stanley & Markman, 1992). The analyses here focus on alternative quality, for example, the perceived availability of other partners; alternative monitoring, per se, was not included as a predictor because that construct is more closely aligned with how we measured commitment and defined ACRs in the first place.[4]

The fact that overall life alternatives quality (financial) was not significantly related to being a less (or more) committed partner in an ACR suggests it may not be an important factor in understanding asymmetrical commitment. In contrast, the perception of having more alternative partners available was associated with being a less committed partner in an ACR, compared to not being in an ACR. Further, so was having engaged in extradyadic sex. Both of these findings became non-significant when controlling for levels of commitment, suggesting that both findings are primarily explained by low commitment levels. Believing one has more partners available may increase the likelihood of having low commitment and, thereby, the odds of becoming a less committed partner in an ACR. Although the theoretical basis for this hypothesis specifies a

[4] In fact, two items on alternative monitoring are included in the measure of commitment (dedication) we used. As argued in Stanley and Markman (1992), it only makes sense to separate out such a construct (alternative monitoring) if conducting fine-grained analyses within the construct of dedication commitment (which is what is measured here) where one may want to differentiate constructs such as desiring a future, couple identity, and alternative monitoring.

direction, the association could also be based on the fact that lower commitment is associated with more alternative monitoring (cf. Johnson & Rusbult, 1989; Miller, 1997; Stanley, Markman, & Whitton, 2002), which could bolster awareness of options to the present relationship. Overall, the finding here regarding perceived alternative partners, but apparently not the finding for financial alternatives, is consistent with theories about how alternatives are linked both to commitment (e.g., Rusbult, 1973) and power differences in unbalanced relationships (e.g., Cook et al., 2006). In contrast, alternative quality and extradyadic sexual involvement were not associated with being the more committed partner in an ACR, so those factors may play little role in how people come to be in that position.

Family Background

Prior studies (e.g., Cui & Fincham, 2010; Whitton et al., 2008) suggested that parents' commitment levels may be transmitted across generations. We found no evidence that having parents who divorced was associated with being in ACRs. This was surprising. However, having parents who never married was associated with being a less committed partner in an ACR. The difference in these findings might be explained by evidence that having parents who never married is more strongly associated with a variety of relationship difficulties as an adult than is parental divorce, including lower levels of commitment to partners (Rhoades et al., 2012). This finding reduced to non-significance when controlling for the level of commitment, suggesting that the association may be mostly or entirely accounted for by a tendency to be less committed in relationships, consistent with the research just cited, which may, in turn, increase the likelihood of being a less committed partner in an ACR.

We offer a tentative explanation for why an association with being a less committed partner in an ACR was found for parents not having married but not for parents having divorced.

Having parents who never married is likely to be associated with greater likelihood of a complete loss of a relationship with one parent (typically, the father) whereas divorce, while still a loss, is less likely to be associated with such a complete loss. Although some subset of those whose parents never married would not have experienced parental loss (and some unmarried parents would have remained together, or otherwise maintained good co-parenting relationships), many more people whose parents never married will have lost contact with a parent.

Attachment

As hypothesized, variables reflecting avoidant attachment were associated with being a less committed partner in an ACR. This is entirely consistent with the notion that attachment avoidance could lead one to be less committed. In contrast, higher levels of anxious attachment were associated with being a more committed partner in an ACR. Of the three findings on attachment variables, only the effect for difficulty with closeness reduced to non-significance when controlling for commitment, suggesting it may primarily be associated with a disposition to low commitment that may increase the likelihood of being the less committed partner in an ACR. In contrast, the other two vulnerabilities may be related to a broader array of challenges in relationships for the individual and/or to dynamics between partners, not just low commitment.

As elsewhere, here, causation could work in either direction for all of these findings because attachment orientations not only impact adult relationships, adult relationships impact attachment orientations (Davila & Cobb, 2004). Nevertheless, it is easy to imagine that people who are more anxious about abandonment may be prone to getting involved with, and clinging to, partners who are less willing or able to commit to them. Joel, MacDonald, and Shimotomai (2011) showed that, while typically scoring high in commitment, anxiously attached individuals are often ambivalent about commitment to partners because of "dissatisfaction and worries about

negative evaluation" in their relationships (p. 51). This argument implies that those with higher levels of anxious attachment may be more likely to get into, or less likely to leave, relationships with less committed partners because there is some perceived benefit for the anxious attached person to being in such a relationship. While we believe it is the low commitment level of one partner that does most of the work of defining ACRs, it may be that higher levels of anxious attachment in some people make them more vulnerable to choosing, or remaining with, less committed partners. Of course, those with less committed partners may be anxious about attachment partly because they are with partners upon whom they cannot fully depend.

To put these findings in context, some anxiety about attachment should be common in developing relationships (Stanley, Lobitz, & Dickson, 1999), where the emergence of greater commitment and symmetry of commitment should reduce such anxiety (Eastwick & Finkel, 2008; Stanley et al., 1999; Stanley et al., 2010). However, for those who tend toward anxious attachment, and who also end up in relationships with substantially less committed partners, their attachment anxieties cannot be alleviated by evidence of mutually high commitment from their partners because it does not exist. We found that having more difficulty depending on others was also associated with being in a relationship with a less committed partner in an ACR. This could be a long-term disposition but it could also be driven by being with a less dependable partner.

Romantic Relationship History

Having a greater number of prior sexual partners was associated with increased odds of being in an ACR, either as a more committed partner or a less committed partner. Further, having a greater number of past cohabiting partners was associated with a greater likelihood of being a less committed partner in an ACR. None of these findings reduced to non-significance when controlling for levels of commitment. The increased likelihood that people with more

relationship history will be in ACRs may have to do with other characteristics that put them at risk for relationships difficulties (cf. Lichter, et al. 2010), which also increased their likelihood of being in ACRs. It is particularly obvious that causality should work in either direction for these associations. People with enduring vulnerabilities will be more likely to have unstable relationships, perhaps even including asymmetrically committed relationships, which are often less stable than more symmetrical relationships (e.g., Sprecher et al., 2006). On the other hand, those with an experience of a greater number of past relationships that ended may experience increasing difficulties finding and forming relationships with mutual and high levels of commitment, for any number of reasons.

Implications of Asymmetrical Commitment for Practice

Our comments in this section are based both on the present findings as well as the broader literature about asymmetrical commitment and relationship quality. Every couple therapist is familiar with asymmetrical commitment. Often, one partner is more committed and invested in change than the other, and it can be a challenge to work with such couples. Clearly, a couple in which both partners are experiencing a lull in commitment is different from a couple where one partner is substantially less committed to the relationship or in working toward change. This is why we focused our analyses in asymmetrical commitment defined as substantially different levels of commitment between partners. Small partner differences in the context of mutually high levels of commitment will not matter, and such couples are unlikely to present for therapy. Conversely, there are couples without significant asymmetrical commitment but where both partners have low commitment. Such relationships are likely to end, and if they present for therapy, such couples may need help more in figuring out their options, and how to move forward with the least amount of damage, than anything else.

Generally, the commitment level of the least committed partner is the most determinative of relationship outcomes (Attridge et al., 1995; Schoebi, Karney, & Bradbury, 2012; Oriña et al., 2011). That is likely true as well regarding therapy outcomes. Considering asymmetrical commitment, and each partner's contribution within it, may help inform strategies for how to help a less committed partner strengthen their investment and/or to help a more committed partner to grapple with their options for seeing change come about. It may also help to determine if a less committed partner has had long-standing issues with attachment versus if their low commitment primarily stems from dissatisfaction with their present partner over specific issues. Strategies informed by attachment-based models may be most appropriate in the former case (Johnson, 1996) while cognitive-behavioral strategies, such as building investments or reducing alternative monitoring, may be more directly applicable in the latter case (Stanley et al., 1999). Both kinds of strategies will be useful to many couples. There are also counseling strategies specific to working with asymmetrical commitment among couples on the brink of divorce, where there is one partner more leaning in and one leaning out (Doherty & Harris, 2017).

We have elsewhere argued that asymmetrical relationships are more likely to form and continue than in the past because young couples often engage in behaviors that promote what Glenn (2002) called premature entanglement (and Stanley et al. call inertia) based on the speed of transitions and the development of constraints on life options (cf. Sassler, Addo, & Lichter, 2012; Stanley et al., 2006; Stanley et al., 2017). An implication of this is that therapists are likely to see more couples now—particularly among unmarried couples in serious, ongoing relationships—in which one or both partners had not fully chosen the path they are on while each had all their options open. This dynamic could limit the sense of owning a choice to be in the relationship, thus providing a weak anchor for the type of behavioral resolve needed to make a

struggling relationship better. Further, an avoidance of clarity about mutual commitment may be particularly likely in the history of relationships involving partners with significant attachment issues (Stanley et al., 2011). It makes increasing sense when working with couples to gather history for how relationships formed (cf. Owen et al., 2014), with special attention to the timing of the development of constraints for remaining together versus dedication to being together. For some couples, a difficult or rocky history in the development of commitment might be best addressed by a narrative approach that helps a couple construct a level of resolve that may not have been fully formed in the first place (Sibley, Kimmes, & Schmidt, 2015).

There are also implications of asymmetrical commitment when therapists or relationship educators are working with individuals. In contrast to more established relationships that have a lot of constraints, developing relationships are at a stage where breaking up is relatively less costly and more easily accomplished. As such, practitioners have opportunities to help individuals fully appraise the asymmetry in their relationships—which some avoid seeing—and identify if the current path is a wise one based on the nature and prognosis of the asymmetry.

Strengths and Limitations

This study has a number of strengths. The sample is national and was robustly developed regarding recruiting methods, and having dyads allowed us to directly measure of asymmetrical commitment. Notwithstanding these strengths, there are important limitations in addition to those already noted. The data are cross-sectional; the direction of effects and causality cannot be established. It helps in this regard that some of the variables assessed could be reasonably claimed to be associated with prior causes of future behavior (e.g., family background, attachment) but there is no way to prove directionality and every reason to believe in bidirectionality. Another limitation is that all variables were measured using self-report.

Importantly, given that we are exploring something not given much attention in the existing literature on asymmetrically committed relationships, replication is needed. Also, we do not attempt to examine unique contributions among these predictors, in part, because it would be difficult to do given the overlap among several aspects of them.

Additionally, we chose a method to examine asymmetry using categories rather than defining asymmetry based on any size of difference in commitment scores between partners, no matter how small. We believe that is superior for present purposes, but the strengths of that approach also create limitations in addressing other questions such as the size of asymmetry, or how size interacts with levels of commitment. Additionally, while there is a solid theoretical background to the hypotheses tested here, there are a number of independent statistical tests, and chance could play a role in some findings. Finally, while we would argue that there is a growing need for research like this study on serious, unmarried and developing relationships, some findings may not generalize to relationships such as marriage or to newly forming relationships.

Conclusion

Future research on the science of relationships will further illuminate the development and course of asymmetrical commitment. One promising avenue may be to explore directly (such as by qualitative interviews) the motivations of individuals who tend to end up in relationships that are asymmetrically committed. For example, some may come to being a less committed partner because of attachment avoidance while others may be motivated merely to preserve power and personal options. That is just one example in which research might explore both the mechanisms of development as well as maintenance of ACRs.

Asymmetrical relationships have long been a reality, and may be increasing in prevalence (although we do not know of data that could test this). The present study contributes to a growing

literature on the implications and possible origins of such dynamics.

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Table 1

Predictors of Being a Low or High Commitment Partner in an ACR

		Being a less committed partner in an ACR			Being a more committed partner in an ACR		
Model	*Predictor*	*B*	*SE B*	*Odds Ratio*	*B*	*SE B*	*Odds Ratio*
1	Alternative Life Quality	-0.05	0.08	0.95	0.09	0.08	1.09
2	Alternative Life Quality	0.09	0.12	1.09	0.03	0.10	1.04
	Commitment	-1.88**	0.18	0.15	0.78***	0.18	2.18
1	Unavailability of Partners	-0.23**	0.08	0.80	0.08	0.07	1.08
2	Unavailability of Partners	< 0.01	0.13	1.00	-0.05	0.10	0.95
	Commitment	-1.91***	0.19	0.15	0.82***	0.19	2.27
1	Extradyadic Involvement	1.17***	0.26	3.22	0.19	0.30	1.21
2	Extradyadic Involvement	-0.03	0.39	0.97	0.58	0.32	1.79
	Commitment	-1.88***	0.19	0.15	0.85***	0.16	2.34
1	Parents Ever Married	-0.66*	0.27	0.52	-0.37	0.29	0.69
2	Parents Ever Married	-0.39	0.32	0.68	-0.42	0.38	0.36
	Commitment	-1.86***	0.17	0.16	0.81***	0.16	2.24
1	Parental Divorce	0.09	0.19	1.10	0.16	0.19	1.17
2	Parental Divorce	0.03	0.23	1.03	0.20	0.25	1.23
	Commitment	-1.87***	0.18	0.15	0.79***	0.18	2.20
1	Difficulty Depending	0.55***	0.11	1.74	0.32**	0.11	1.38
2	Difficulty Depending	0.31*	0.15	1.37	0.40**	0.14	1.50

	Own Dedication	-1.85***	0.17	0.16	0.85	0.18	2.35
1	Difficulty with Closeness	0.70***	0.13	2.02	-0.09	0.13	0.92
2	Difficulty with Closeness	0.08	0.21	1.09	0.06	0.17	1.06
	Commitment	-1.86***	0.18	0.16	0.80***	0.18	2.22
1	Anxious Attachment	0.18	0.13	1.20	0.58***	0.12	1.79
2	Anxious Attachment	-0.27	0.21	0.76	0.73***	0.17	2.07
	Commitment	-1.94***	0.19	0.14	0.91***	0.18	2.50
1	Past Sex Partners	0.03**	0.01	1.03	0.02*	0.01	1.02
2	Past Sex Partners	0.03**	0.01	1.03	0.02*	0.01	1.02
	Commitment	-1.89***	0.18	0.15	0.80***	0.16	2.23
1	Past Cohabiting Partners	0.26*	0.10	1.29	0.19	0.12	1.21
2	Past Cohabiting Partners	0.21*	0.09	1.24	0.20	0.12	1.22
	Commitment	-1.87***	0.17	0.15	0.79***	0.18	2.20

Note. Alternative Life Quality is scaled so that higher = more constraint (lower quality options).

*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.