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Commitment-motivated benign appraisals of partner transgressions: Do they facilitate accommodation?

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ABSTRACT

The current investigation examines the hypothesis that commitment predicts increasingly benign appraisals of partner transgressions and that this may in turn lead to greater accommodation. A survey of 226 students in heterosexual dating relationships was conducted. Commitment, the perceived severity of partner transgressions, and accommodation were assessed. Commitment was significantly associated with the discrepancy between participant severity ratings and that of objective raters. Commitment predicted these benign appraisals more for objectively less severe transgressions. Although the commitment–accommodation association was replicated, benign appraisals did not mediate this relationship. However, benign appraisals were differentially associated with voice and loyalty responses, whereby voice was associated with decreased benign appraisals and loyalty with increased benign appraisals.

KEY WORDS: accommodation • benign appraisals • commitment • partner transgressions

Romantic relationships are normally characterized by loving and pleasant experiences that motivate the cultivation and maintenance of those relationships. Yet often, it is in this kind of relationship that individuals feel most free to behave in ways that undermine its prosperity. Consider an individual whom, after having a bad day at work, snaps at his or her partner (regardless of any provocation). How will the partner behave in response to such bad behaviour? More immediately, how will the partner perceive

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and construe such an outburst? And fundamentally, what motivates a partner to respond in such a way as to promote the maintenance of the relationship?

One way in which individuals may respond to such an outburst is to inhibit their urge to snap back at their partner and instead respond by asking their partner to discuss their day at work. Another might be to ignore the outburst altogether without harbouring any ill will towards their partner. Individuals' ability to engage in such constructive behaviour when their partner has behaved poorly may be due, at least in part, to the manner in which they perceive their partner's behaviour. Perhaps if individuals construe the outburst as a relatively minor transgression, not worthy of a retaliatory response, they may be able to respond with constructive behaviour. Such an appraisal may rely on the extent to which individuals are committed to their relationship. The more committed individuals are to their romantic relationship, the more one may expect them to perceive such partner transgressions as relatively less severe than they might have otherwise, and in turn respond more constructively to their partner.

The tendency to inhibit negative or retaliatory responses and instead engage in constructive behaviours when one's partner has behaved poorly has been referred to conceptually as *accommodation* (Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991). The current research looks at the perceived severity of partner transgressions as a potential mediator of the impact of commitment on accommodation in heterosexual dating relationships. It draws upon the theoretical foundations of commitment (e.g. interdependence theory) in examining associations among commitment, the perceived severity of partner transgressions and accommodation.

Interdependence theory and accommodation

When individuals are confronted with their partner's transgression, they are also faced with a response dilemma. The individuals have been offended, and at a gut level, their instinct is to respond to their partner in kind. In interdependence theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) such a response is known as the *given preference*, or the behavioural preference that is dictated by self-interest. Accommodation processes, however, rely on the *effective preference*, or the preference that is based on the concern for the longevity and overall well-being of the relationship. According to interdependence theory, the shift from the given preference to the effective preference is based on the *transformation of motivation*.

This transformation process is determined largely by the extent to which individuals are dependent on their romantic relationship or the extent to which individuals need their romantic relationship. Thibaut and Kelley (1959) first outlined two key components of *dependence*. First, individuals must derive *satisfaction* from their romantic relationship. That is, they must perceive that the current or potential rewards to be derived from the relationship outweigh the current or potential costs of staying in the relationship. Second, individuals must perceive a low *quality of alternatives*

to the relationship. That is, they must perceive that other potential alternatives to being in the relationship will not afford them the level of happiness that they derive from their current relationship.

Rusbult's (1980) investment model added a third component to dependence that could explain how individuals manage to sustain their relationships despite fluctuations in satisfaction or quality of alternatives. This third component is known as *investment size*, and it refers to the numerous investments an individual can make in their romantic relationship that have the potential to increase their dependence on that particular relationship (see also Staw, 1976; Teger, 1980). Interdependence theory proposes that these three components taken together determine the overall level of dependence that individuals have on their romantic relationship and, thereby, determine (to a large extent) the fate of the relationship.

Commitment and relationship maintenance

Critical to the current investigation is psychological *commitment*, which is an 'emergent property' of dependence (Agnew, Van Lange, Rusbult, & Langston, 1998). People commit to relationships and other life goals that reflect their values (Lydon & Zanna, 1990), identity (Burke & Reitzes, 1991) or self-definition (Gollwitzer & Wicklund, 1985), which have all been summarized by Brickman (1987) as the meaning that a relationship provides for a person's life. With so much at stake in a committed relationship (because of dependency and meaning), a person is motivated to engage in numerous behaviours (even those that sacrifice self-interest) because they ultimately serve to promote and protect the relationship.

For example, Van Lange et al. (1997) found that the higher individuals' commitment level, the more they exhibited a willingness to sacrifice (were willing to forego self-interest in order to preserve their relationship). Similarly, Rusbult et al. (1991) found that individuals who scored higher on commitment were more likely to engage in the aforementioned relationship maintenance response termed accommodation.

Not only is commitment associated with what people do to maintain their relationship, but it is also associated with the ways in which people think about their relationship. For example, commitment has been found to increase *cognitive interdependence* or the collective mental representation of self-and-other. Agnew et al. (1998) found that commitment to close relationships significantly predicted the spontaneous use of plural pronouns (such as *we*, *us*, *our* or *ours*) when participants were asked to list their thoughts regarding their relationship, thus indicating a pluralistic mental representation of the relationship. They found similar effects on the Inclusion of Other in the Self Scale (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992), which utilizes a graphical representation of the self and other involving two circles with varying degrees of overlap. Again, more committed participants were more likely to indicate a greater overlap of self and other, indicating more psychological interconnectedness. Theoretically, by thinking of the self-and-other as interdependent or by identifying strongly

with the partner and the relationship, an individual should be more inclined to engage in pro-relationship acts simply because the individual's well-being is tied to the well-being of the relationship (Wieselquist, Rusbult, Foster, & Agnew, 1999). Therefore, a committed individual is able to engage in a transformation of motivation from the given preference to the effective preference because they are able to see the behaviour serving the effective preference as also serving their self-interest.

Commitment and interpersonal perception

Another way in which commitment tends to influence the way in which individuals think about their romantic relationship is in regard to illusions or biases to see the relationship in a more positive light. Martz et al. (1998) found that, when participants were asked to compare their relationship with that of a friend or peer, commitment significantly predicted the positivity of an individual's evaluation of their relationship, their optimism regarding the future of that relationship, and their perceptions of control over the fate of the relationship.

The influence of commitment on relationship cognitions is most apparent when an individual is faced with a relationship threat. For example, Gagné and Lydon (2001) found that when participants were asked to deliberate about an important relationship goal, commitment predicted an increase in idealized partner perceptions. More specifically, committed individuals rated their partners as more physically attractive, intelligent, warm, and funny, than a typical dating partner of the same sex and age as their partner. This perceived superiority effect among the highly committed was significantly greater when the participant was deliberating about an important relationship goal than in a control condition. The authors reasoned that weighing the pros and cons of a relationship goal (e.g. deliberating about maintaining one's relationship) had introduced a certain level of relationship threat that the participants dealt with by boosting their positive illusions of their partner.

Just as relationship commitment promotes thinking about the partner in an overly positive manner, so too does commitment motivate the denigration of potential alternative dating partners. In a study purportedly designed to assess attitudes toward a computer dating service, Johnson and Rusbult (1989) found that when asked to assess the physical attractiveness, sense of humour, intelligence, and so on, of an attractive alternative dating partner, committed participants devalued and derogated the attractive alternative. Lydon, Meana, Sepinwall, Richards, and Mayman (1999) conducted a similar study utilizing the same computer dating service paradigm but employing different levels of relationship threat. In this study, participants devalued the attractive alternative when their commitment level was specifically calibrated with the level of threat posed by the alternative (i.e. highly committed individuals only devalued the alternative when the level of threat was also very high).

Commitment motivates such a strong response to potential alternative partners that it has also been found to influence whether or not available

alternatives in the environment are even perceived. Jemmott, Ashby, and Lindenfeld (1989) found that more highly committed individuals tend to underestimate the availability of potential alternative dating partners as a means of reducing relationship threat. That is, when university students were asked how many members of the opposite sex they estimated were on campus for every hundred members of their own sex, more committed participants consistently underestimated the actual sex ratios.

Benign appraisals

Given that commitment motivates people to see the attributes of their partners and of alternatives in a relationship protective manner, it is also possible that this process guides perceptions of behaviour in relationship-threatening situations. Pierce, Lydon, and Yang (2001) conducted a study of family caregivers of persons diagnosed with dementia in which they examined the caregiver's perceptions of the difficult situations that were likely to arise as part of their caregiving. It was found that those caregivers who scored highly on a subtype of relationship commitment, moral commitment or a sense of duty and obligation, were more likely to appraise these difficult situations as challenges rather than threats. It was suggested that this biased construal might help to explain the persistence they exhibited in caring for their family members with dementia. In a similar vein, Lydon, Pierce, and O'Regan (1997) found that in response to a relationship-threatening situation (when students faced the adversity of a long-distance dating relationship), commitment predicted increased appraisals of investment in the relationship and relationship meaning (the extent to which the relationship is perceived as expressing one's core beliefs, values, and identities) measured during the period of separation.

Previous research on accommodation has examined the link between commitment and behavioural responses to partner transgressions (Rusbult et al., 1991). Yet, there is also evidence that commitment is associated with attributional explanations for *why* a partner transgression has occurred; and in fact, these causal attributions appear to mediate the commitment–accommodation relationship (Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, & Hannon, 2002). Arriaga and Rusbult (1998) state that when faced with a partner's transgression 'accommodation involves experiencing the partner's behaviour in a relatively more benign manner, consequently developing a preference for behaviour that departs from immediate self-interest' (p. 930). Yet, to date, no study has examined whether commitment is associated with perceptions of *what* has happened when a partner transgresses (i.e. benign appraisals) and what influence benign appraisals might have on accommodation. Given the findings that commitment motivates biased construals of both the relationship partner and facets of the romantic relationship, we reasoned that commitment should motivate these biased appraisals in response to partner transgressions. We hypothesized that commitment would serve to promote a more benign appraisal of the relationship threat as a means of protecting the relationship. We conceptualized these benign appraisals as a first line of defence in response to partner transgressions.

More specifically, we hypothesized that the discrepancy between a participant's rating of the severity of their partner's transgression and that of objective raters would be positively associated with the level of their commitment to the relationship. That is, commitment should motivate people to see their partner's transgressions as less negative than objective observers rate the same transgressions. Theoretically, by perceiving their partner's transgression as less negative, a person might, therefore, be more tolerant of it and, in turn, report a greater willingness to accommodate.

Alternatively, benign appraisals and accommodation may serve as two independent mechanisms by which a committed individual defuses potential harm to the relationship engendered by the partner's transgression. That is, in some situations, benign appraisals might adequately address the partner transgression, thereby decreasing the motivation to accommodate. Whereas the former pattern suggests that benign appraisals will mediate the link between commitment and accommodation, the latter pattern suggests two independent effects of commitment.

Goals of the current study

The current study was aimed at answering the following research questions: When faced with a partner's transgression, does an individual's commitment motivate a benign appraisal whereby they view their partner's transgression as less severe than they would otherwise? We expected that benign appraisals, operationalized as the discrepancy between a participant's severity rating of their partner's transgression and that of objective raters', would be predicted by that individual's relationship commitment score. Second, does this biased appraisal of the transgression as being less severe lead them to be more accommodating (i.e. inhibit destructive responses and respond in a more constructive manner)? We hypothesized that the previously observed relationship between commitment and accommodation would be, at least partially, mediated by benign appraisals of the partner's transgression.

Method

Participants

Two hundred and eighty-six participants (141 males and 145 females) with a mean age of 22.5 years and who were all involved in a heterosexual romantic relationship (for a mean length of 2 years, 1 month, and 10 days) were recruited from both the McGill University campus and surrounding areas of Montreal. Participants kindly agreed to take part in the study without compensation.

Procedure

Participants were approached by surveyors and asked to complete a short survey regarding romantic relationships. These participants were recruited while alone, in quiet surroundings, and when they did not appear busy (e.g. while having a cup of coffee at a campus cafeteria). After the participant had

completed an informed consent, the variables of interest were assessed in the following order: relationship commitment, the partner's recent transgression, the participant's subjective appraisal of the severity of that transgression, and accommodative responses on the part of the participant. The survey was placed in a sealed envelope and the participant was thanked for their time.

Materials

Commitment. A 14-item relationship attitudes scale which included the 6-item Assessment of Relationship Commitment (ARC), constructed and used by Gagné and Lydon (2003), in which participants were asked the extent to which they felt committed to, attached to, devoted to, loyal to, dedicated to, and invested in, their relationship. These items were scored on a 9-point scale and higher scores indicated higher commitment levels. Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .90.

Transgressions. Participants were directed to think of an instance of a partner transgression that had occurred within the preceding month. Consistent with Finkel et al. (2002), a partner transgression was defined as: 'When someone you are dating acts in a way that does not meet with your expectations of how they should behave in a relationship.' They were then asked to write a full description of the incident so that someone who was not there would understand exactly what had transpired. However, they were asked to limit themselves to only the details of their partner's transgression (and not what they may have felt at the time, etc).

Examples of the more severe transgressions reported include accounts of the partner going out without telling the participant and staying out until a very late hour or the partner refusing to comply with a trivial request that would prevent the participant from being late for a very important meeting. Examples of the less severe transgressions reported include accounts of the partner being late to pick the participant up from a long day at work (without an excuse for their tardiness) or the partner not doing a household chore they were supposed to.

Forty-two of the initial 286 participants did not follow the instructions adequately in reporting a partner transgression. For example, some reported a transgression that they themselves had committed, a transgression that had occurred more than one month ago, or about general relationship concerns rather than a specific transgression, and consequently they were omitted from the analyses.

Subjective severity. Participants were asked to rate the severity of their partner's transgression on a scale of 1–7 where 1 = *not at all severe*, 4 = *moderately severe*, and 7 = *very severe*.

Objective severity. Three independent, objective raters assessed the severity of each participant's partner's transgression using the same scale as the participant. Two of these raters were research assistants who had completed undergraduate degrees in psychology, whereas the third was a graduate student in social psychology. Consistent with Finkel et al. (2002), raters were trained to assess the severity of the participant's descriptions of their partner's betrayals.

Raters were unaware of the participant's emotional and behavioural reactions to their partner's transgression, as well as the participant's rating of the severity of their partner's transgression. They were instructed not to rate the severity of the betrayal in the context of either their own or the participant's relationship, but rather, in the context of a typical dating relationship. An inter-rater reliability coefficient of .78 was obtained using the Spearman–Brown method.

Benign appraisals. Benign appraisals were examined in two ways. One was to examine subjective appraisals of severity statistically controlling for objective ratings of severity. The other method was to calculate a discrepancy score by subtracting the participant's severity rating from the mean of the objective raters' severity assessments (for a participant's particular reported transgression). Thus, higher scores indicated more benign appraisals of partner transgressions. One hundred and twenty participants made severity ratings that were either benign or on par with those of the objective raters. The remaining 106 appraised the severity of their partner's transgression as more severe than the objective raters did.

Accommodation. Rusbult et al. (1991) refer to accommodation as 'one's willingness . . . to enhance tendencies toward constructive reactions (voice and loyalty) and inhibit impulses towards destructive reactions (exit and neglect)' (p. 53). Participants were instructed to indicate how they had responded to their partner's transgression by rating themselves on 16 items based in part on the exit–voice–loyalty–neglect measure constructed and utilized by Rusbult, Johnson, and Morrow (1986). These items included both constructive and destructive responses crossed with active and passive responses. More specifically, *voice* involves actively seeking to improve the relationship, *loyalty* involves passively waiting for conditions to improve, *exit* involves actively destroying the relationship, whereas *neglect* involves passively allowing the relationship to deteriorate (p. 745). There were four items of each response type to allow for different ways of engaging in each response. For example, voice was measured by endorsement of: 'you took your partner aside and told him/her how they had upset you', or 'you suggested changes in your relationship to solve the problem'. Loyalty was measured by endorsement of: 'you laughed and pretended it did not bother you', or 'you said nothing and simply forgave your partner'. Exit was measured by endorsement of: 'you considered dating other people', or 'you got angry and ended the conversation'. Neglect was measured by endorsement of: 'for the rest of the time you were together you didn't act as friendly or affectionately as you usually do', or 'you refused to talk to your partner about what was bothering you'. Participants were asked to rate the extent to which they engaged in each response by scoring themselves on a scale of 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely*). This method of assessing accommodation, via endorsement of specific examples of response styles, has been utilized in the accommodation literature (Finkel et al., 2002; Lydon, 1999; Rusbult et al., 1991). A full list of these items, the response type each represents, and the order in which they appeared are given in the Appendix.

Accommodation was scored (as in Wieselquist et al., 1999) by subtracting tendencies to respond destructively (exit and neglect) from tendencies to respond constructively (voice and loyalty). Cronbach's alpha coefficients were computed to ascertain the internal consistency of the subscales. The alphas

were .62, .65, .68 and .62 for voice, loyalty, exit, and neglect respectively (all at acceptable levels of inter-item correlation). These reliability alphas were respectable given that each subscale included items that assessed very different behaviours even if they could all be classified as one response type. For example, a person could engage in exit by either considering dating other people or physically storming off. It is possible that a person could have engaged in one response without the other even though they both represent a form of exit.

Results

All the reported analyses are based on a final sample of 226 participants (101 males and 125 females). Eighteen participants were excluded because they either reported that no transgression had occurred in the past month or they simply failed to complete the entire questionnaire rendering us unable to compute commitment, severity discrepancy, or accommodation scores. The original sample and the final sample did not differ significantly in terms of age or length of romantic relationship. The remaining participants had a mean age of 22.31 years and a mean relationship length of 2 years and 4 days.

Commitment, objective severity, subjective severity and accommodation

The mean commitment score for the sample (drawn from 6 items on a scale of 1 to 9 with a minimum possible score of 6 and a maximum possible score of 54) was 46.01 ($SD = 7.09$). The mean severity rating given by the participant, on a scale from 1 (*not at all severe*) to 7 (*very severe*), was 4.26 ($SD = 1.45$). On a scale from 1 (*not at all severe*) to 7 (*very severe*), the mean severity rating for each rater was 4.63 ($SD = 0.94$), 3.96 ($SD = 1.14$) and 4.37 ($SD = 0.86$), for an overall mean of 4.32 ($SD = 0.81$).

The mean accommodation for the sample (with a minimum possible score of -12 indicating a destructive response and a maximum possible score of +12 indicating a constructive response) was 3.89 ($SD = 12.07$). Paired samples *t*-tests revealed that participants were more likely to engage in voice than in any other response type when comparing voice ($M = 15.54$, $SD = 5.32$) and loyalty ($M = 11.25$, $SD = 4.90$), $t(225) = 8.18$, $p < .01$, voice and neglect ($M = 11.60$, $SD = 4.98$), $t(225) = 8.09$, $p < .01$, and voice and exit ($M = 11.34$, $SD = 5.38$), $t(225) = 9.22$, $p < .01$. None of the other pairs of means were significantly different.

The correlations among commitment, objective severity (severity assessed by objective raters), subjective severity (severity assessed by participants), and accommodation are given in Table 1. Commitment was uncorrelated with objective severity ratings indicating that the objective severity of the transgressions reported did not differ for those with higher versus lower commitment levels. As one might expect, objective severity was significantly and negatively correlated with accommodation. Consistent with our hypothesis, commitment was significantly and negatively correlated with subjective severity. That is, those more committed to their relationship perceived their partner's transgression as less severe than those who were less committed. Commitment was also significantly and positively correlated with accommodation, replicating prior research.

TABLE 1
Correlations: Commitment, objective severity, subjective severity and accommodation

| | Commitment | Objective Severity | Subjective Severity |
|---------------------|------------|--------------------|---------------------|
| Objective Severity | -.12 | - | - |
| Subjective Severity | -.22** | .35** | - |
| Accommodation | .37** | -.34** | -.34** |

Note. *N* = 226.

**Significant at the .01 level (two-tailed).

The pattern of correlations with accommodation, broken down by its constructive and destructive dimensions, as well as by voice, loyalty, exit, and neglect, may be found in Table 2. As expected, commitment was significantly and positively associated with constructive reactions and significantly and negatively associated with destructive reactions to a partner's transgression. Again, as one might expect, objective severity was significantly and negatively correlated with constructive reactions but significantly and positively correlated with destructive reactions. The differences observed between the correlations that objective and subjective severity had with voice and loyalty suggest that subjective severity may differentially influence these two types of responding. This pattern will be addressed by further analyses later on in this section.

Commitment and benign appraisals

The hypothesized association between commitment and benign appraisals of partner transgressions (operationalized as severity discrepancy scores) was tested in two ways. First a regression analysis was performed entering commitment as a predictor of severity discrepancy scores. Commitment was found to significantly predict a discrepancy between participant ratings of severity and

TABLE 2
Correlations: Commitment, objective severity, subjective severity and accommodation (constructive vs. destructive reactions and the voice, loyalty, exit, neglect typology)

| | Commitment | Objective Severity | Subjective Severity |
|--------------|------------|--------------------|---------------------|
| Constructive | .27** | -.19** | -.18** |
| Destructive | -.29** | .31** | .32** |
| Voice | .15* | -.12 | .06 |
| Loyalty | .19* | -.12 | -.30** |
| Exit | -.24** | .34** | .32** |
| Neglect | -.29** | .22** | .24** |

Note. *N* = 226.

*Significant at the .05 level; **Significant at the .01 level (both two-tailed).

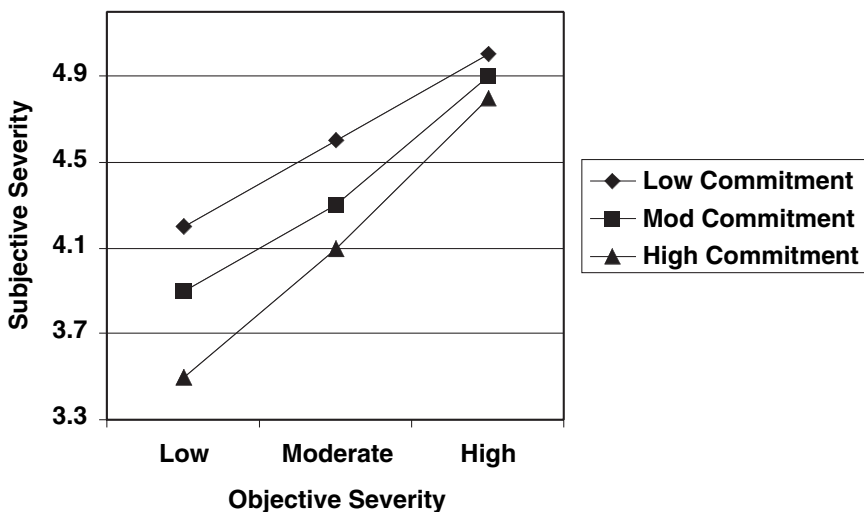
objective ratings of severity, $\beta = .16$, $t(224) = 2.44$, $p < .05$. That is, the more committed the individual, the less severe they rated their partner's transgression to be (relative to the assessment by the objective raters). The second way in which this was tested was by entering commitment and objective ratings of transgression severity simultaneously in a regression analysis predicting subjective ratings. Commitment predicted subjective ratings, controlling for objective ratings, $\beta = -.18$, $t(223) = -2.93$, $p < .01$.

In addition, this second analysis allowed us to assess whether the association between commitment and subjective appraisals might be stronger depending upon the objective level of transgression severity. In order to test for this interaction between commitment and objective severity in predicting subjective appraisals of severity, the product of commitment and objective severity was entered in the second step of the regression after the main effects for each were entered in the first step. As seen in Figure 1, this analysis revealed that the difference in subjective appraisals between low and high commitment was most pronounced under relatively low levels of objective severity, interaction effect $\beta = .56$, $t(222) = 1.86$, $p = .06$. Those highly committed to their dating relationships exhibited less of a benign appraisal effect for transgressions that were high in severity.

Benign appraisals and overall accommodation

In order to examine the hypothesis that benign appraisals of partner transgressions may lead to accommodation, a regression analysis was performed to predict accommodation from severity discrepancy. Severity discrepancy was found to significantly predict accommodation, $\beta = .15$, $t(224) = 2.33$, $p < .05$. However, when this regression analysis was conducted controlling for commitment, the severity discrepancy no longer predicted accommodation, $\beta = .10$, $t(223) = 1.54$, *ns*, and commitment still remained a significant predictor, $\beta = .36$,

FIGURE 1
Predicting subjective severity from objective severity and commitment level.



$t(223) = 5.66, p < .01$. This finding indicates that the effect commitment has on overall accommodation is either direct or at least not mediated by benign appraisals.

Commitment, benign appraisals, and voice, loyalty, exit and neglect

The same analysis was conducted with the voice, loyalty, exit and neglect dimensions separately to examine whether benign appraisals differentially contributed to any of these individual response styles. Again, after having observed the differences between the correlations for objective and subjective severity and voice and loyalty, we suspected that benign appraisals might differentially influence these two types of responding. First, a regression analysis was performed to predict voice from commitment and severity discrepancy. Commitment predicted voice, $\beta = .15, t(224) = 2.32, p < .05$, and commitment did not decrease as a predictor when controlling for severity discrepancy, $\beta = .18, t(223) = 2.70, p < .05$. Severity discrepancy was negatively associated with voice, $\beta = -.13, t(224) = -1.98, p < .05$, and interestingly, this association did not decrease when controlling for commitment, $\beta = -.16, t(223) = -2.41, p < .05$. Thus, benign appraisals did not account for why those most committed to their relationship reported the strongest voice response to partner transgressions. In fact, it was when people did not make benign appraisals that they were then more likely to engage in the *active*, constructive voice response.

Next, a regression analysis was performed to predict loyalty from severity discrepancy. Commitment predicted loyalty, $\beta = .19, t(224) = 2.91, p < .01$, but in this case commitment decreased slightly as a predictor when controlling for severity discrepancy, $\beta = .16, t(223) = 2.41, p < .05$. Severity discrepancy was positively associated with loyalty, $\beta = .24, t(224) = 3.71, p < .01$, and again, this association remained highly significant when controlling for commitment, $\beta = .22, t(223) = 3.31, p < .01$.

Although commitment remained a significant predictor of loyalty controlling for severity discrepancy, the size of the effect decreased. Given this and the fact that both commitment and severity discrepancy were associated both with loyalty and with each other, the preconditions for mediation were met. Therefore, the Sobel Test (MacKinnon, Warsi, & Dwyer, 1995) was used to formally assess mediation. This test assessed whether the reduction in the influence of the IV on the DV (in this case commitment to the loyalty response) with the addition of the mediator (benign appraisals) was in fact statistically significant. This test did confirm a partial mediation effect (*partial* to the extent that commitment remained a significant predictor) for benign appraisals, $t(223) = 1.96, p < .05$. This finding suggests that the effect that commitment has on loyalty (the *passive*, constructive response) results to some extent from a more benign appraisal of the partner's transgression.

We conducted similar analyses for the destructive dimensions of exit and neglect. Severity discrepancy was found to significantly predict exit, $\beta = -.14, t(224) = -2.11, p < .05$. However, when this regression analysis was conducted controlling for commitment, the severity discrepancy no longer predicted exit, $\beta = -.10, t(223) = -1.58, ns$, and commitment still remained a significant predictor, $\beta = -.22, t(223) = -3.42, p < .01$. Conversely, severity discrepancy did not significantly predict neglect, $\beta = -.13, t(224) = -1.88, ns$, even when commitment was not included in the model. However, commitment did significantly predict neglect, $\beta = -.29, t(224) = -4.47, p < .01$.

In order to examine whether any of these findings were qualified by gender

differences in responding, we reproduced all of the analyses taking gender into account. None of these regressions yielded significant results either for the main effect of gender or an interaction between gender and commitment.

Discussion

The purpose of the current research was to examine another possible pathway from commitment to relationship maintenance. Our hypothesis was that committed individuals might form more benign appraisals of relationship threatening situations in order to promote the well-being of their intimate relationships. More specifically, we hypothesized that commitment would predict a positive discrepancy between a participant's rating of the severity of their partner's transgression and that of objective raters. We did in fact find that more highly committed individuals were more likely to underestimate the severity of their partner's transgressions (just as less committed individuals were less likely to do the same). In essence, when individuals are faced with a partner transgression, the perception of what happened may precede the cognitive attributional processes that assess why it happened, or behavioural relationship maintenance responses (e.g. forgiveness or accommodation) that specify what to do about it. In this case, the benign appraisal of the partner's transgression may be best thought of as a first line of defence in the service of relationship maintenance.

The basic finding that commitment predicts benign appraisals was qualified by a marginally significant interaction between commitment and objective severity whereby more highly committed individuals made more benign appraisals under low levels of severity. This interaction may reflect the fact that the participants in this study were students in dating relationships. Lydon (1999) has suggested that, as a group, high-commitment daters are better conceptualized as moderately committed in an absolute sense. In the Lydon et al. (1999) study, moderately committed individuals failed to devalue the attractive alternative under very high levels of threat (i.e. when the attractive alternative was both single and interested in the participant). It is possible that in this study, very high levels of relationship threat may have overcome the participant's level of commitment and prevented them from making a benign appraisal of the transgression.

Moreover, the reduction in benign appraisals under high levels of objective severity may reflect the fact that there are limits to motivated perception in the service of a relationship. Some acts may have been so clearly and objectively negative that relationship motives may not prompt the individual to reappraise the severity. Take the example of a reported transgression in which the partner committed an act of blatant infidelity in the very presence of the participant. It seems unlikely that even a married and highly committed individual would be able to make a benign appraisal of this person's transgression. Yet, it may be under these precise circumstances that

the committed are willing to accommodate even if they have not perceptually minimized the transgression. Furthermore, it may not be advantageous to the maintenance of a relationship to minimize the severity of a partner's transgression when it is unambiguously severe because that might impede positive steps that might be taken to ensure that such a transgression does not recur.

Given that commitment promotes accommodation, we also wanted to examine whether increased benign appraisals could account for a greater willingness to accommodate on the part of the participant. However, the results did not indicate that the effect of commitment on overall accommodation is through the benign appraisal of the transgression as less severe. The data support the interpretation that one possible response to a partner transgression is to minimize one's appraisal of the severity of the transgression. However, commitment leads to accommodation even in cases in which an individual does not exhibit benign appraisals.

Yet, we did find that the effect commitment has on particular styles of accommodation could be attributed, at least in part, to benign appraisals. It appears that, as one might expect, benign appraisals of partner transgressions mediate the association between commitment and the passive constructive problem-solving approach (loyalty). It seems logical that if commitment motivates an individual to perceive their partner's transgression as less severe then this will translate into a more passive response whereby the individual may simply wait for the conditions in their relationship to improve. It also seems reasonable that when one's partner's transgression is perceived as more severe, the more likely an individual will be to engage in the active constructive voice response; and this is precisely what we found.

Limitations and directions for future research

There are some limitations to the current investigation. First, because our sample consisted mainly of university students, who as we have said may best be thought of as only moderately committed in an absolute sense, it would be valuable in future research to study highly committed married couples and track the natural occurrence of partner transgressions, severity appraisals and accommodation, using an experience sampling methodology. Possibly, because married couples have undertaken a legal commitment to their romantic relationships, they may display different responses under high levels of threat. However, as stated earlier, it seems unlikely that even married and highly committed couples would be able to make benign appraisals of the most severe partner transgressions. Further research might be aimed at replicating our findings with this particular sample.

Moreover, because benign appraisals may operate quickly, effortlessly, and automatically as a first line of defence in response to partner transgressions, our self-report and explicit measure of commitment may underestimate the magnitude of commitment's effect on these benign appraisals. Fletcher and Fincham (1991) have suggested that cognitive attributional processes in intimate relationships occur rather effortlessly. In addition,

they have proposed that some distal context variables, such as personality characteristics that affect such attributions, may vary in their accessibility (the extent to which they are cued by the situation). Consequently, these variables may exhibit varied and differential contributions to automatic attributions. For example, an attitude or motive such as commitment that is low in accessibility is less likely to influence automatic attributions despite absolute levels of commitment. Similarly, we would expect commitment accessibility to influence subjective perceptions of severity in an analogous manner. Therefore, an implicit measure of commitment may account for significant additional variance in benign appraisals.

Also, it must be acknowledged that instructing our participants to write only about their partner's transgression, in order to rule out experimenter bias, limited our ability to assess the impact benign appraisals may have on other processes. For example, Finkel et al. (2002) assessed attributions for the partner's transgression, whereas we assessed benign appraisals. Further research might be aimed at assessing how these processes might be associated. It is possible that benign appraisals have an impact on attributions for partner transgressions. It seems plausible that having made a benign appraisal, an individual might be more willing to attribute their partner's poor behaviour to situational factors. Yet, it is also possible that benign appraisals and benevolent attributions work as two independent processes, each having the potential to defuse relationship threats.

Conclusion

Despite these limitations, in this study a method was developed to assess benign appraisals, and this measure of benign appraisals was associated with relevant relationship characteristics and responses to conflict in the context of intimate relationships. Interestingly, this study demonstrates a concept that has largely been adopted in the health psychology literature. Folkman, Lazarus, Gruen, and DeLongis (1986) have conceptualized *primary appraisals* (which involve assessments of harm/loss, threat or challenge), as an initial response to stressors. These appraisals have been found to be influenced by personality characteristics. For example, *hardiness* (a sense of commitment, belief in control and a willingness to undertake challenge) has been found to influence these appraisals. Taylor (1999) has therefore suggested that the fact that hardy individuals tend to make more favourable primary appraisals may account for the finding that hardiness predicts more effective problem-solving strategies in response to stress (Kobasa, 1979). Analogously, commitment is a force that compels individuals to engage in behaviours that protect their relationship from threats. This study has found that commitment also motivates perceptual processes that promote the well-being of a romantic relationship. Interestingly, it has shown that benign appraisals of relationship-threatening situations may be a method of protecting intimate relationships. It might seem counterintuitive that such distorted appraisals are healthy for romantic relationships, but just as having overly positive partner illusions is healthy for the well-being of a romantic relationship (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996), so too

may viewing one's partners transgressions through a rose-tinted lens aid the welfare of one's relationship.

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Appendix

Accommodation items

1. You laughed and pretended it did not bother you. (loyalty)
2. You told your partner you were upset and left. (exit)
3. You took your partner aside and told him/her how they had upset you. (voice)
4. For the rest of the time you were together you didn't act as friendly or affectionately as you usually do. (neglect)
5. You said nothing and simply forgave your partner. (loyalty)
6. You got angry and told your partner that he/she was very inconsiderate. (exit)
7. You muttered a snide remark under your breath and ignored your partner for a while. (neglect)
8. You refrained from yelling and told your partner that you didn't appreciate his/her actions. (voice)
9. You got angry and ended the conversation. (exit)
10. You forgave your partner and continued with the conversation. (loyalty)
11. You calmly discussed the situation to prevent repetition of the event. (voice)

12. You complained to your partner and were distant for the rest of the conversation. (neglect)
13. You considered dating other people. (exit)
14. You suggested changes in your relationship to solve the problem. (voice)
15. You refused to talk to your partner about what was bothering you. (neglect)
16. You accepted your partner's faults/weaknesses and did not try to change him/her. (loyalty)