

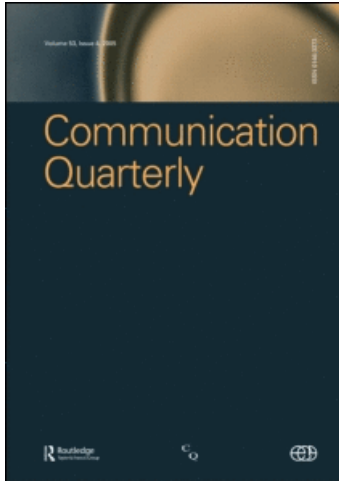
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### Can't Live With Them or Can't Live Without Them?: The Effects of Betrayal on Relational Outcomes in College Dating Relationships

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# Can't Live With Them or Can't Live Without Them?: The Effects of Betrayal on Relational Outcomes in College Dating Relationships

Merissa H. Ferrara & Timothy R. Levine

*Relational satisfaction and stability following discovered incidents of relational betrayal were investigated. Predictions from Social Exchange Theory, specifically Rusbult's Investment Model, were tested along with the effects of communication strategies. Participants (N = 155) completed a questionnaire about a recalled betrayal. Inconsistent with the investment model, relational satisfaction was the best predictor of relational stability. Generally, the more committed and invested the offender, the more likely the reported use of communication repair strategies. The likelihood of apologies, accepting responsibility, and promising change also increased with the severity of the betrayal. Only promising change was related to post-betrayal relational satisfaction.*

*Keywords:* Communication Repair Strategies; Investment; Social Exchange; Transgression

The old phrase, “Can’t live with them. Can’t live without them!,” may have some validity. Research suggests that, although intimacy stemming from close relationships is essential for maintaining individual health, reducing the detrimental effects of stress, and enhancing psychological well being (Duck, 1994), intimacy and closeness

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also create the potential for great personal risk (Jones & Burdette, 1994; Lawson, 1988; Nunnally, Chilman, & Cox, 1988). Our important relational partners (e.g., friends, family members, lovers) can be the cause of much pain, stress, and discontent (Miller, Mongeau, & Sleight, 1986). Given their potentially serious consequences, sources of relational discomfort merit further investigation.

Betrayal, or disloyalty in an intimate relationship, is one type of relational transgression that can adversely affect individuals and relationships. There exist, however, noteworthy gaps in the betrayal literature. As Shackelford and Buss (1996) noted, betrayal research has often lacked theoretical direction. Theories add structure to research, specify which variables are important, allow one to make specific predictions about human behavior, and help explain research results. Thus, testing theoretical predictions in the context of betrayal should facilitate the understanding of the consequences of betrayal. Further, the relational outcomes associated with betrayal are described in the literature, but little is known about how to predict whether the betrayal will result in termination of the relationship. Theory is needed to select among variables that might affect relational outcomes and to explain why some betrayals and not others lead to relational termination. As Metts (1994) put it, "A transgression (e.g., betrayal) need not destroy an otherwise viable and satisfying relationship. The fact that it sometimes does is perhaps the clearest signal that additional research into the coping process is necessary" (p. 238). Finally, also absent from the literature is systematic consideration of communication strategies specifically aimed at achieving relational repair and forgiveness, and whether these strategies can mitigate the destructive consequences of betrayal.

The purpose of this investigation is to explain and predict relational satisfaction and stability following incidents of discovered betrayal by proposing the investment model and various communication strategies as factors related to betrayal outcomes. The investment model is based on principles of social exchange and it has been used to examine romantic relationships, emotion-arousing events, and breakup decisions (e.g., Drigotas, Safstrom, & Gentilla, 1999; Rusbult & Martz, 1995). This article also explores the nature of forgiveness, and if communication can lead to forgiveness and prevent post-betrayal relational termination.

## **Betrayal**

Betrayal is defined as being unfaithful to relational expectations (Feldman, Cauffman, Jensen, & Arnett, 2000). Individuals develop expectations of what is generally valued in relationships and what they expect from specific relationships. Relational expectations may be mutually or independently defined. Thus, betrayal is in the eye of the beholder, and what one individual perceives as betrayal may not necessarily be thought of as disloyalty by the other.

Some studies provide evidence that memorable episodes of betrayal in close relationships can be recalled. Jones and Burdette (1994), for example, asked participants to recall instances of betrayal, and approximately one half of the participants (45%) indicated that they were disloyal to at least one member of their social network. Slightly

more than one half of the participants (52%) felt betrayed by their more intimate relationships. Romantic partners or spouses were most frequently reported as sources or victims of betrayal. Feldman and Cauffman (1998), investigating the prevalence of sexual betrayal between adolescent dating partners, found that almost two-thirds of the adolescent respondents had either been the perpetrator, the distressed, or both.

What individuals count as an incident of betrayal in relationships has also been investigated. Roscoe, Cavanaugh, and Kennedy (1988), for example, asked participants to describe unfaithful behaviors. The five behavior categories, ranked by prevalence, included the following (see Roscoe et al., 1988):

1. Dating or spending time with another.
2. Sexual infidelity.
3. Omissions from partner.
4. Betrayal of confidence.
5. Emotional involvement with another.

Jones and Burdette (1994) included a broader range of relational types. They concluded that ten behaviors counted as instances of betrayal: extramarital affair (or cheating), lies, betrayed confidence, two-timing, jilting (rejection), lack of support, ignoring, excessive criticism, gossip, and miscellaneous.

Regardless of betrayal type, betrayals typically elicit predominantly negative emotions from the victim (Metts, 1994; Planalp & Honeycutt, 1985). Jones and Burdette (1994), for example, found that one half of the disloyal respondents revealed that the relationship worsened or terminated. Approximately 40% of the disloyal respondents reported initial harm but also a subsequent return to the pre-betrayal state; the remainder reported that the relationship had improved because of the betrayal. When participants who were betrayed were asked to assess relationship outcomes, the percentages changed considerably—90% worsened, 5% remained the same, and 2% improved.

McCornack and Levine (1990) investigated the determinants of relationship termination after deception is detected finding the more serious the lie, the more likely the relationship ended. As they noted, “more than two-thirds of the subjects who reported that their relationships had terminated since the time that the lie was discovered reported that the discovery of the lie played a direct role in their decision to end the relationship” (p. 131). Most of the participants who said that the relationship ended stated that they initiated the termination.

## Forgiveness

Efforts to repair the relationship, however, can diminish the emotional intensity experienced following betrayal (Jones & Burdette, 1994). Research on forgiveness (McCullough et al., 1998; Nelson, 1993; Roloff & Janiszewski, 1989; Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991) reflects more positive relational outcomes. Forgiving is defined as the forgoing of vengeful behavior (Heider, 1958).

Clearly, the probability of forgiveness rests, to a great extent, on the nature of the offense. The perceived seriousness of the offense, and its immediate implications to

the relationship, influences forgiveness (Girard & Mullet, 1997; McCullough et al., 1998; Ohbuchi, Kameda, & Agarie, 1989). As one might expect, the greater the perceived severity, the more difficult it is to forgive. Further, people are likely to forgive when they experience low motivation to avoid the other and low motivation to seek revenge (McCullough et al., 1998). The literature reveals that partners are “more willing to forgive one another for interpersonal offenses in relationships that are characterized by high satisfaction, closeness, and commitment” (McCullough et al., 1998, p. 1590). Roloff and Janiszewski (1989) observed that the only offenses more likely to be forgiven in less intimate relationships than in highly committed relationships were denials to perform low-cost favors (e.g., picking a person up from work or cleaning the house). Similarly, McCullough et al. (1998) found a positive relationship between forgiving and the relational dyadic satisfaction–commitment, concluding that forgiving as a “motivational transformation occurs more readily in satisfactory, committed relationships” (p. 1593).

Rusbult et al. (1991) and McCullough et al. (1998) suggested several reasons why forgiveness is more likely to occur in close relationships than less close relationships. First, intimate couples have much invested in the relationship and gain many resources from the relationship, motivating them to keep the relationship intact. Second, persons who express high levels of relational commitment may be willing to overlook certain offenses, to maximize the likelihood of keeping the relationship intact. Third, the closer two people are in a relationship, the more likely self and other interests merge. Fourth, offended individuals in high-quality relationships should have more shared history and have access to inner thoughts, feelings, and motivations of their partners, as well as knowledge of partner’s shortcomings. Thus, they may be better able to empathize with their relational partners. Finally, in a high-quality relationship, the victim might be more likely to apologize or communicate remorse. Thus, the transgressor may value the relationship, and actively and successfully exert effort to minimize the negative relational consequences of their act. Consistent with this, the relational status following a transgression revelation has been found to depend on whether the offender offers an apology and pursues forgiveness (McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997).

Consistent with this last reason, this research posits that communication strategies are a factor of forgiveness. What the betrayer says when addressing the victim after the event may affect relational outcomes, and several methods of verbal repair are possible. Account messages involve justifications and excuses in which the disloyal individual reframes the event and lowers personal responsibility (Scott & Lyman, 1968). Apologies accept responsibility for the event and express remorse. A commitment to change statement like, “This will never happen again,” or a reaffirmation of the value of the relationship may also affect whether the couple terminates the relationship. In an effort to explore the effectiveness of communication in maintaining a relationship after betrayal, a research question is proposed:

- RQ1: Does the reported use of communication strategies (including justification, apology, a promise to change, accept responsibility, and enhance relational importance) affect relational stability after a betrayal occurred?

Given the aforementioned observations concerning betrayal, the negative emotions it arouses, and the reasons for forgiveness, it is not surprising that decisions about staying or leaving a relationship can be difficult. People at every level of relational closeness report intrusive thoughts and images of the offender and their hurtful acts, particularly those in closer relationships (McCullough et al., 1998). In fact, there is a direct relation between closeness and the negative emotions experienced (McCornack & Levine, 1990).

It is interesting to note that not only are individuals more likely to feel hurt by those closest to them, but they are also more likely to forgive them as well. Research shows that people in close relationships can overcome hurtful acts and continue to grow closer. "Pre-offense closeness appears to be associated with current closeness because relational closeness facilitates prosocial processes in the offender (apology) and the offended partner (empathy) that foster the reestablishment of closeness" (McCullough et al., 1998, p. 1593). Thus, a paradox is apparent. People are most likely to forgive the very people who hurt them most.

Given that people should avoid matters that cause the most pain, an interesting question is posed: "Why do some people stay if they were hurt so badly?" The need for theory application is clear. Theory can provide structure and offer predictions based on the current literature. The following section explores the investment model in an effort to provide reasoning as to why this paradox occurs, and suggests several hypotheses concerning relational decision-making and relational outcomes.

### The Investment Model

Social exchange theorists maintain that people are motivated to maximize rewards and to minimize costs. When determining whether to remain in a relationship, people analyze the ratio of rewards to costs. If the rewards exceed the costs, they are likely to continue the relationship. Thibaut and Kelley (1959) proposed an exchange theory based on interdependence. People are interdependent to the extent that they control the amount of rewards and costs of another who, in turn, controls the amount of rewards and costs returned.

Inspired by social exchange and interdependence theory, Rusbult (1980) created the investment model of commitment. As an extension of social exchange theories, the investment model specifies three predictions. First, the investment model holds that relational stability is most directly determined by feelings of commitment (Rusbult & Martz, 1995). Second, the investment model specifies satisfaction as an indirect determinant of relational stability, mediated through commitment. Extensive literature has revealed that the degree of satisfaction in a relationship is the main determinant of whether one remains in the relationship (i.e., Kelly & Thibaut, 1978; Rusbult, 1983; Simpson, 1987). Staying in a satisfying relationship is simple and rational. Research on married couples supports this idea. Happy couples have been shown to treat each other in more rewarding ways than do unhappy couples (Gottman, 1979).

Investment is the third factor. Investment researchers claim that a primary reason why people remain during unhappy times is because they have much invested in the relationship. Commitment is affected not just by the outcome value (satisfaction in relation to comparison level [CL]) of the current relationship and alternatives, but also by investment size. Commitment increases over time because as the resources put into the relationship accumulate, the cost of withdrawing from the relationship increases (Rusbult, 1980). Thus, a person may not end a relationship following a betrayal because they are sufficiently invested in that relationship.

### *Theory Components*

Commitment is a mediating construct in the model. Commitment is defined as the degree to which individuals intend to maintain relationships, feel psychologically attached to the relationship, and sustain a long-term orientation. Commitment is inversely related to the probability that people will leave the relationship. Satisfaction level, investment size, and the quality of alternatives are three elements that affect the commitment level of a relationship (Floyd & Wasner, 1994; Rusbult, 1980, 1983; Rusbult & Martz, 1995).

Satisfaction pertains to the amount of positive affect associated with the relationship. Because it is simple to remain in a satisfying relationship, commitment should be positively correlated with satisfaction. The level of satisfaction is determined by the rewards obtained relative to expectations—that is, satisfaction is a function of the desirability of outcomes (i.e., the long-term average of rewards minus costs) experienced in relation to the generalized expectations regarding the quality of the relationship, or CL. Social comparison or prior experiences dictate what individuals internalize as the minimal standard for a rewarding relationship. To the extent to which the outcomes of their current relationship are greater than what they expect out of a relationship, then they are satisfied (Kelly & Thibaut, 1978). The more satisfied individuals are in their relationships, the more committed they will be (Rusbult, 1980). However, the investment model proposes that people can sometimes feel strongly committed to unsatisfying relationships because commitment also rests on alternatives and investments.

Comparison level for alternatives (CLalt) is defined as perceived outcomes people believe they would receive if not in this relationship, and is one of three predictors of commitment in this model. CLalt has an inverse direct relationship with commitment, which, in turn, affects relational stability. When attractive alternatives are available, lower commitment levels result, especially after a negative event like betrayal. On the other hand, when individuals fear that they would have undesirable or limited options should the relationship end, they are more likely to feel strong commitment to the relationship even in the face of a negative event (Rusbult, 1983; Rusbult & Martz, 1995).

Investments refer to the amount and magnitude of resources put into the relationship. Direct investments include time, disclosure, and money. Other investments, such as mutual friends and shared possessions, evolve as extraneous resources

become associated with the relationship. Investments enhance the commitment to the relationship because these investments are lost if the relationship is terminated. Commitment tends to be higher with those who have been in the relationship longer, who report higher levels of disclosure, and who have more joint possessions. The literature on forgiveness is consistent with the importance of considering investment size because people who are in relationships longer tend to see a long-term future, and are more likely to forgive the offender (McCullough et al., 1998).

### *Theory Implications and Predictions*

From a social exchange perspective, an act of betrayal should be a cost. The magnitude of that cost should depend on perceptions of the severity of the betrayal. Betrayed individuals should reassess the outcomes of the relationship in relation to CL, CLalt, and investment level. Betrayal severity should be negatively related to outcomes, such that the more hurt felt by the victim, the lower the outcomes. Satisfaction is determined by both outcomes and CL. Thus, the CL should interact with betrayal severity to affect satisfaction. Once betrayal is uncovered, commitment to the relationship is evaluated by reconsidering satisfaction, alternatives, and investment. In accordance with the model, several hypotheses are proposed.

The investment model predicts the following:

- H1: Betrayal severity interacts with CL to create a negative multiplicative effect on level of satisfaction.
- H2: Satisfaction (H2a) and investment size (H2b) have positive direct effects on commitment, whereas CLalt (H2c) is inversely related to commitment.
- H3: The effects of satisfaction, investment size, and CLalt on relationship stability are mediated through commitment, which has a direct effect on stability.

### **Communication Strategies and Exchange**

A final issue to be investigated is the relation between reported communication strategy usage and the relational characteristics specified by exchange theory. One might expect betrayal perpetrators in otherwise more satisfied, committed, and invested relationships to be more active in seeking forgiveness and repair than those in relatively less satisfied, committed, and invested relationships. In fact, it is likely that if committed, invested relationships are to survive a betrayal, communication is essential to achieve repair. How the motivation to repair might affect specific strategy use, however, is an empirical question. Also of interest is how betrayal severity might affect specific communication repair strategies. Thus, a second research question explores the relationship between communication repair strategies and the variables in the investment model:

- RQ2: Are levels of betrayal severity, relational satisfaction, commitment, and investment associated with the reported use of apologies, justifications, promises to change, statements of relational value, and taking responsibility?



## Method

### Participants

The participants were 165 students enrolled in undergraduate communication courses at a large, Midwestern university. Respondents participated on a voluntary basis, signing up for the study in advance. Respondents fulfilled mandatory research points or extra credit for their efforts. When signing up, participants were told that their responses would be confidential and would be analyzed only after participants signed the institutional review board approved consent form.

Of the total number of participants, 93% ( $N=155$ ) could recall and report extensively on romantic relationships involving betrayal, and only data from those participants were analyzed. Those remaining ranged in age from 18 to 31 years ( $M=21$ ,  $SD=1.7$ ), and 65% were women. Relationships labeled exclusively dating accounted for the highest proportion of relationships (73.7%), followed by casual dating (23.1%), married (1.3%), and other (1.9). Most of the relationships were formed well before the betrayal occurred ( $M=22.8$  months,  $SD=20.5$ ), and had existed romantically for some time before the event as well ( $M=13.5$  months,  $SD=12.5$ ). On average, the participants reported a betrayal event that occurred 22.8 months earlier ( $SD=19.9$ ).

### Procedures

Participants were asked to recall a recent situation in which a relational partner had betrayed him or her. Betrayal was defined to participants as when someone was disloyal and violated their trust. Participants completed an extensive questionnaire. Following the completion of the questionnaire, participants were thanked and reassured that their answers would remain confidential. Participants not recalling a betrayal episode were offered an alternate task for equal credit.

Each participant received a packet of questionnaires containing scales assessing commitment level, investment, CLalt, CL, information importance (perceived betrayal severity), communication strategy ratings, satisfaction, and stability. They completed commitment, investment, CLalt, and CL measures about the relationship prior to the betrayal, and then completed the communication strategies, satisfaction, and stability scales evaluating their relationship after the betrayal occurred.

### Measures

Commitment level refers to the intentions to remain in the relationship after the betrayal incident. A five-item, 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 7 (*strongly disagree*), modified from Parks and Floyd's (1996) level of development in online relationships scales, was used. For this study, acceptable internal consistency was obtained for the measure of commitment ( $\alpha = .86$ ).

The measurement of investment size was based on previous research (Rusbult, 1983; Rusbult & Martz, 1995). In previous studies, investment size was measured

with 9-point rating scales, with reliabilities ranging from  $\alpha = .41$  to  $.94$ . Modifications for this study were made. Nine items using 7-point Likert scales ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) were used in this study. The questions evaluated objective investments (e.g., hours per week spent together, activities unique to the relationship) and subjective investments (e.g., rating of shared memories, how much would be or was lost if the relationship terminated). For this study, acceptable internal consistency was obtained for the measure of investment ( $\alpha = .83$ ).

The quality of relationship alternatives measure was developed for this investigation. This scale consisted of five Likert-type items, using a 7-point response format ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). One sample item used was, "I could have done better than this relationship." For this study, minimally acceptable internal consistency was obtained for the measure of CLalt ( $\alpha = .62$ ).

The measurement of CL was developed for the purpose of this investigation. Five general questions assessed CL on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). One sample item for this scale was, "Generally, I have high standards for my romantic relationships." For this study, minimally acceptable internal consistency was obtained for the measure of CL ( $\alpha = .68$ ).

Measures of the various communication strategies were created for the purpose of this investigation. Apology was tested through a two-item, 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). "My partner said they were sorry that the betrayal happened" was one item used to measure apology. For this study, acceptable internal consistency was obtained for this measure ( $\alpha = .93$ ). Responsibility acceptance was tested with a two-item, 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). "My partner took the blame for the betrayal" was one item used to measure responsibility acceptance. For this study, acceptable internal consistency was obtained for this measure ( $\alpha = .91$ ). The measurement of the communication strategy justification was comprised of a two-item, 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). "My partner offered excuses for why they betrayed me" was one item used to measure justification. For this study, acceptable internal consistency was obtained for this measure ( $\alpha = .83$ ). The measurement of the communication strategy promise change was accomplished with a two-item, 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). "My partner promised that they would make changes in their behavior" was one item used to measure promise change. For this study, acceptable internal consistency was obtained for this measure ( $\alpha = .90$ ). Relationship importance was assessed with a two-item, 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). "My partner told me how important the relationship was to them" was one item used to measure relationship importance. For this study, acceptable internal consistency was obtained for this measure ( $\alpha = .92$ ).

Satisfaction with the relationship was measured by combining two different scales; the first is a five-item, 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*), created by Ohira (2001). The second part of the scale, following previous research (e.g., Rusbult, 1980), consisted of three items that assessed global satisfaction with the current relationship. The items were measured on a 7-point Likert

scale ranging from 1 (*not satisfied*) to 7 (*very satisfied*). For example, “I was happy with the state of our relationship,” “Our relationship was fulfilling,” and “I felt content in the relationship” were all items used to measure satisfaction. For this study, acceptable internal consistency was obtained for the combined measure of satisfaction ( $\alpha = .95$ ).

Relationship stability was measured through a dichotomous, one-item measure (i.e., “Are you still romantically involved with this person?”) and an open-ended question describing the nature of the relationship after the betrayal occurred. In addition, participants completed open-ended questions describing the nature of the relationship prior to betrayal, the betrayal event, when the betrayal occurred, relationship length, and how the betrayal was discovered. Also, participants completed dichotomous, one-item measures to assess whether they had been betrayed before, if the same person had betrayed them, and if they had betrayed this person in the past.

## Results

### *Communication Strategies*

RQ1 addressed the relation between reported use of communication strategies (apology, responsibility acceptance, justification, promise change, and value relationship) and relational stability. When considering the zero-order correlations (i.e., Pearson’s correlation coefficients), apology,  $r(153) = .17, p = .04$ ; promise to change,  $r(153) = .26, p = .001$ ; and value the relationship,  $r(153) = .22, p = .007$ , are all significantly correlated with relational stability. Therefore, the more the betrayers apologize, promise to change, and state that they value the relationship, the better chance they have of keeping the relationship intact. Communication justifying the betrayal and accepting responsibility did not have significant effects on relational stability and were trivial in size.

Because the communication strategies were highly correlated,<sup>1</sup> it was possible that the zero-order correlations reported earlier might be spurious. Therefore, relational stability was regressed onto each strategy with logistic regression. Together as a block, the communication strategies predicted relational termination,  $\chi^2(5, N = 155) = 13.06, p = .03 (R^2 = .08)$ . None of the unique effects for individual strategies, however, were statistically significant when controlling for the other strategies. This may suggest that when it comes to saving a relationship post-betrayal, multiple strategies may be effective, and perhaps specifically what is said (within some limitations) is less important than general communicative effort toward saving the relationship.

RQ2 addressed potential association between the investment model variables and various communication strategies. As can be seen in Table 1, commitment and investment levels were positively associated with almost all message use ratings ( $r = .14, p = .08$  to  $r = .42, p < .001$ ). Betrayal severity was positively associated with apology ( $r = .17$ ), promising change ( $r = .19$ ), and accepting responsibility ( $r = .16$ ). Only promising change was significantly associated with satisfaction ( $r = .16$ ).

**Table 1** Correlations Between Communication Strategies and Investment Model Variables

| Variable            | Severity | Commitment | Investment | Satisfaction |
|---------------------|----------|------------|------------|--------------|
| Apology             | .17*     | .22*       | .24*       | .06          |
| Justification       | .12      | .14        | .25*       | .03          |
| Promise change      | .19*     | .28*       | .32*       | .16*         |
| Value relationship  | .13      | .25*       | .42*       | .12          |
| Take responsibility | .16*     | .21*       | .21*       | .06          |

\* $p < .05$  ( $df = 154$ ).

### Investment Model

*H1* posited that CL and betrayal severity interact to have a multiplicative inverse affect on satisfaction level. The predicted interaction was tested with a product-term regression analysis. The main effects for CL and betrayal severity on satisfaction were entered on a first step, and the product of the predictors, which models the interaction, was entered on a second step. The data were not consistent with *H1*, as the product-term reflecting the predicted interaction was not statically significant ( $\beta = -.63$ ,  $t(151) = -1.05$ ,  $p = .30$ ). Instead, both main effects were significant: severity ( $\beta = -.24$ ,  $t(152) = -3.02$ ,  $p = .003$ ; and CL ( $\beta = -.19$ ),  $t(152) = -2.47$ ,  $p = .015$ ).

It was further hypothesized, based on the investment model, that higher levels of satisfaction (*H2a*), more investment (*H2b*), and fewer perceived relationship alternatives (*H2c*) would predict greater levels of commitment. These predictions were tested with regression analysis. The effect of satisfaction on commitment was not significant ( $\beta = -.06$ ),  $t(151) = -1.16$ ,  $p = .24$ . The effect for CLalt on commitment was not significant ( $\beta = -.07$ ),  $t(151) = -1.22$ ,  $p = .22$ . Investment level, however, was highly predictive of commitment ( $\beta = .77$ ),  $t(151) = 14.44$ ,  $p < .001$ . Thus, *H2a* and *H2c* were not consistent with the data, whereas *H2b* was found to be consistent with the data.

*H3* proposed that the effects of satisfaction, investment size, and CLalt on relationship stability are mediated through commitment. The effect of commitment on relational stability was calculated with regression analysis. Commitment was only marginally (only significant if a one-tailed test is applied) predictive of relationship stability ( $\beta = -.13$ ),  $t(151) = -1.67$ ,  $p = .10$ . Although commitment was marginally correlated with relational stability, neither satisfaction nor CLalt were correlated with the mediating variable, commitment. Therefore, *H3* was not consistent with the data.

In addition, the causal chain predicted was tested with path analysis using PACKAGE (Hunter, Cohen, & Nicol, 1982). The path coefficients for betrayal severity to satisfaction,  $\beta(152) = -.24$ ,  $p < .05$ ; and for CL to satisfaction,  $\beta(152) = -.19$ ,  $p < .05$ , were statistically significant. Path coefficients for satisfaction on commitment,  $\beta(151) = -.06$ ,  $p = ns$ ; and CLalt on commitment,  $\beta(151) = -.07$ ,  $p = ns$ , were

not statistically significant. The path coefficient for investment to commitment was statistically significant and substantial,  $\beta(151) = .76, p < .05$ . The path coefficient for commitment to relational stability was not statistically significant,  $r(153) = -.13, p < .05$ . Because there were several path coefficients that were not statistically significant, it was clear that the model did not fit. Further, the chi-square goodness-of-fit test confirmed that the data were significantly discrepant from the model,  $\chi^2(9, N = 155) = 32.94, p < .05$ .

### *Supplemental Analyses*

Supplemental analyses were conducted to test the relative predictive utility of the communication variables versus the investment variables in predicting relational stability. For this purpose, two logistic regression analyses were conducted. In each, the communication strategies were entered into the equation in a block, and the investment variables were entered in a second block. In the first logistic regression, the communication variables were added first, and in the second, the investment model variables were added first.

The results of the logistic regression were different depending on which block was entered first. When the communication variables were run as the first block, they were significant predictors of relational stability,  $\chi^2(5, N = 155) = 13.06, p = .02$ . The investment variables contributed significantly to the prediction of stability beyond the communication strategies,  $\chi^2(5, N = 155) = 42.60, p = .001$ ; and the combined model was also significant,  $\chi^2(11, N = 155) = 55.67, p = .001$ . However, when the investment model variables,  $\chi^2(5, N = 155) = 52.45, p = .001$ , were run as the first block and the communication strategies as the second block,  $\chi^2(5, N = 155) = 3.2, p = .67$ , only investment model variables were significant. This means that the communication variables are significant predictors of relational stability, but not when controlling for the investment model variables. The investment model variables, however, explain variance above and beyond the communication variables. However, of all the investment model variables, only satisfaction predicted relational stability when controlling for other variables,  $\beta(157) = .50, p < .001$ . Because communication strategies were associated with the investment model variables, the data suggest that the effects of communication strategies on stability may be mediated by relational satisfaction, or perhaps both communication strategy usage and relational stability are consequences of relational satisfaction.

The logistic regression also provided the discriminant function for accurate prediction of relational stability based on the communication strategies and the investment model variables. The discriminant function correctly classified 58.6% of the still-togethers and 94.4% of the breakups. The overall percentage of correctly classified cases was 87.7%. Although this number appears impressive, 81.3% accuracy could be obtained by simply predicting that the relationships would break up in every case. Thus, although the investment model variables and communication strategies together produced a statistically significant discriminant function, the increase in predictive power was meager.

## Discussion

When asking people to tell a story that involves betrayal, most people can offer several, first listing the one that hurt the most (Jones & Burdette, 1994). The literature reveals a variety of betrayal types, from spending time with another, to secret telling, to excessive criticism. People can pinpoint the level of predominately negative emotions the betrayal event evoked and freely offer explanations for why the betrayer did it (Jones & Burdette, 1994).

The literature shows evidence of the paradox that people are most hurt by those closest to them, and are nevertheless most likely to forgive these people. Thus, the phrase, "Can't live with them, Can't live without them?," was introduced to capture what factors make individuals, hurt by betrayal, more likely to stay in their relationships. This study sought to test the variables in the investment model and explore the effect of communication variables on relational stability after a betrayal event, applying them to the area of romantic betrayal to see if they could predict stay or leave behavior.

One hundred fifty-five undergraduates completed a questionnaire reporting on a recalled relationship involving betrayal. Answers to the questionnaire were analyzed to evaluate the research question about communication strategies and the hypotheses based on the structure of the investment model. This research reveals several interesting findings that merit future exploration.

The first research question asked about the relationship between communication strategies (e.g., justification, apology, promise to change, accepted responsibility, and relational importance) and relational stability after betrayal occurred. Most of the participants reported listening to some sort of communication strategy, if not a combination of several (apology,  $M=4.8$ ,  $SD=1.2$ ; justification,  $M=4.5$ ,  $SD=2.12$ ; promise to change,  $M=4.2$ ,  $SD=2.31$ ; value relationship,  $M=4.7$ ,  $SD=2.2$ , all on 7-point scales). Those who stayed together were more likely to report having heard several from their partners. In fact, when evaluating each communication strategy on its own merit, each did not uniquely predict relational stability. However, when taken in groups, betrayers who offered an apology, promised to change their ways (or never do it again), and stated that they valued the relationship were more successful at preserving the relationship. Surprisingly, neither betrayers who attempted to justify the betrayal act nor those who accepted responsibility improved their chances of saving the relationship. Thus, other-centered or relationship-centered strategies seem to be more effective.

The results relevant to *RQ2* concerning the association among the communication strategies and the investment model variables suggested that more committed and invested betrayal perpetrators are more likely to use each of the communication strategies included in this study. Betrayal severity was also positively associated with accepting responsibility, apologizing, and promising change. These data make intuitive sense in that more serious offenses should require greater efforts toward repair if the relationship is to survive, and people who are more committed and invested in the relationship should be more motivated to put forth such effort. It is interesting to note that only promising change was significantly related to relational satisfaction.

This is important because satisfaction was found to be the most important determinant of relational stability in this study.

In sum, these results suggest that efforts to communicate after the betrayal can aid in repairing the relationship, although the statistical relations may be indirect. Hurt parties want the responsible individual to come to them for forgiveness (McCullough et al., 1998). Similarly, the resultant behavior is dependent on whether the offender offers an apology and pursues forgiveness (McCullough et al., 1997). According to this research, the betrayed are not swayed by hearing the reasons for the betrayer's behavior. Perhaps when betrayers clearly state that they are sorry, that they will not repeat the act, and that they realize how important the relationship is, empathy is evoked in the victim. Increases in victim empathy improve the chances of forgiveness (McCullough et al., 1998). Additional research is needed to further divulge successful relationships and their forgiveness tactics, as well as exploring negative communication strategies such as blaming or telling someone to "get over it" that were suggested as occurring through the open-ended discussions.

When controlling for the investment variables, the communication variables were not significant predictors of relational stability. This means that the communication variables do not serve as direct predictors of relational stability, and the investment model variables explain the variance above and beyond what the communication variables predict. As a set, the investment model variables are a more direct route at predicting relational termination. This does not imply, however, that the investment model functioned as specified, nor that communication is unimportant.

It was posited in the first hypothesis that the degree of betrayal severity would interact with CLs to have an inverse effect on the reported amount of satisfaction. Betrayal severity and CLs did inversely affect levels of satisfaction, but there was no interaction effect. Therefore, independently, the greater betrayal perceived by the victim, the more unhappy or unsatisfied the individuals reported to be. It was previously determined that betrayal events aroused mostly negative emotions (Jones & Burdette, 1994), and here the assumption that the severity of betrayal events causes increases in overall relational dissatisfaction is demonstrated.

Likewise, the higher standards expressed in CLs, the more dissatisfied the individuals were with the relationship after betrayal was discovered. As expected, people have standards for what they want their relationships to be like, and betrayal is not something they value. It would be interesting for future research to examine how CLs adjust after betrayal occurs, and if people increase or lower their expectations for future partners.

The second hypothesis predicted that satisfaction level and investment size would have a direct effect on commitment, and that CLalt would have an inverse effect on commitment. The data were partially consistent with these predictions. Levels of investment were highly related to levels of commitment. People were more strongly tied to their relationships to the extent that their actual investments (e.g., time, energy, money) were greater. However, this research failed to find that satisfaction or CLalt were related to reports of commitment. Thus, neither unhappiness nor viable alternative options lowered individual commitment to a relationship. Instead, putting a lot of resources into the relationship was the primary determinant of commitment.

These results have interesting theoretical implications. The two variables that were added to the original Thibaut and Kelley (1959) social exchange model (i.e., commitment and investment) were highly correlated with one another, whereas two original variables (i.e., satisfaction and alternatives) had little bearing on commitment. Previous researchers who found that all of the variables affected commitment have largely limited their research to abusive relationships (e.g., Rusbult, 1983; Rusbult & Martz, 1995; Truman-Schram, Cann, Calhoun, & Vanwallendael, 2000), suggesting that this model may only work in this specific area of research. Future research should test the scope of this model.

The third hypothesis predicted that effects of satisfaction, investment size, and CLalt on relational stability are mediated through commitment, which has direct effects on stability. The model assumption that commitment is a direct predictor of relational stability was only marginally supported by the data. Rusbult et al. (1991) suggested that people in highly committed relationships would look at long-term orientation and overlook offenses like betrayal for the good of the relationship. This did not occur within this sample. The majority of both highly and loosely committed individuals terminated the relationship after the betrayal occurred.

Commitment as a mediator is controversial. There are mixed results in the literature regarding its success as a predictor of relational stability (e.g., Rusbult, 1983; Rusbult & Martz, 1995; Truman-Schram et al., 2000). Drigotas et al. (1999) reported that commitment level at Time one successfully predicted the emotional and physical intimacy and relational stability at Time two. Truman-Schram et al. reported that investment size, perceived alternatives, and positive feelings for partner significantly affected commitment, but commitment did not affect *stay* or *leave* behavior. On the other hand, some prior research has proven a strong link between commitment and stay or leave behavior (Rusbult, 1983; Rusbult & Martz, 1995). Rusbult and Martz found the mediation role of commitment on stay versus leave behavior highly significant when running causal model analysis on abusive marital relationship stability. Regardless of the successful studies reporting commitment's direct relationship with stability, there are enough studies like this one to suggest that the investment model should be used with caution, and that moderators likely exist.

Other results also merit discussion. The presence of the satisfaction–relational stability link is the most noteworthy finding. The most consistent predictor of relational termination was the evaluation of satisfaction. Whereas this finding may seem obvious, it is theoretically provocative, and not necessarily intuitive when considering the other variables involved. For example, investment model researchers (e.g., Rusbult, 1980, 1983; Rusbult & Martz, 1995) have downplayed the importance of this original social exchange variable, focusing instead on investment and commitment. This research implies that it is easy to remain in a happy relationship; it is easy for that happy relationship to turn sour after betrayal occurs; and easy to leave it based on the simple explanation of dissatisfaction, without evaluating other variables like investment and commitment. Nevertheless, if the relationship remains happy or if happiness is regained, then chances for relational survival are maximized.



### Limitations

Several limitations of this study qualify these findings and hopefully guide future research. The first limitation involves the use of college students as participants. Because the participants were college students, most lacked a formal commitment such as marriage, and most lacked mutual investments such as co-ownership of real estate, children together, and so forth. A greater range in levels of commitment and investment might have led to different findings. How such differences would play out, however, is not obvious. Generally, the greater the commitment and the investment, the greater the cost of relationship termination, but also the greater the perception of the severity of betrayal. Thus, as investments and commitment increase, betrayals likely become more severe and hurtful while pressures to maintain the relationship, despite the transgression, increase as well. The primary finding of this study is that happy relationships are more likely to survive a betrayal. We would expect this finding to generalize beyond college student populations. Factors such as investment, commitment, and alternatives, however, might gain predictive power in marriage relationships.

Second, having participants recall and evaluate a relationship after the betrayal event may affect reporting accuracy. Recall procedures have ecological validity advantages over projection (i.e., hypothetical situations) methods, but suffer from concerns over recall accuracy. Future research might construct a longitudinal study, testing participants at various points before and after betrayal occurs. This would minimize distortion attributable to retrospection.

Third, 22.8 months ( $SD = 19.9$ ) between the betrayal event and survey completion was much longer than desired. Future investigators should be cautious using these results because the recall latency could have affected response accuracy. McCornack and Levine (1990), for example, used a one-month recall limit to make sure that the emotion was still fresh, yet enough time had passed to adequately evaluate the relational impact of the discovered betrayal. The primary implication of the relatively long delay between the time of the betrayal and the time the survey was completed is likely that serious and highly memorable betrayal were likely sampled.

A related limitation that merits discussion is the variable relational stability. Because the majority of the participants (81%) reported that their relationships ended after the betrayal, there was little to compare and even less to discover about which variables are better predictors of relational stability. By limiting the amount that the variables vary, there is a restriction on the amount that they can covary. This probably resulted in the path coefficients being attenuated. Future investigators should aim for an equal number of cases where the relationship terminated and where the relationship remained intact.

### Conclusion

When asked “Can’t live with them or can’t live without them?” about relational stability after being betrayed by a romantic partner, most participants, regardless of the amount invested, commitment level, and alternatives said, “I can live without

them.” Because betrayal severity negatively affected relational satisfaction, and satisfaction was the strongest link to relational stability, the increasing seriousness of the betrayal worsened relational satisfaction, and this lack of relational satisfaction led to breakups. The investment model was unsuccessful, leading these authors to encourage researchers to test other models on larger samples, particularly the traditional Kelley and Thibaut (1959) social exchange theory, along with communication strategies that might facilitate forgiveness.

## Note

- [1] All of the communication strategies, except justification, were highly intercorrelated (i.e.,  $r < .50$ ) with each other. Examination of the inter-item correlation matrix and reliabilities suggested that the strategies were separate, but highly related, constructs rather than a single, broader construct. For example, combining the strategies resulted in a reduction in reliability. Therefore, an analytic approach of loading the strategies in as a block in logistic regression was adopted rather than just examining zero-order correlations, treating each variable as an independent predictor in regression, or summing the strategy ratings to form a single variable.

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