

## Resisting Temptation: Devaluation of Alternative Partners as a Means of Maintaining Commitment in Close Relationships

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This work tested the hypothesis that persons who are more committed to their relationships devalue potential alternative partners, especially attractive and threatening alternatives. In Study 1, a longitudinal study, perceived quality of alternatives decreased over time among stayers but increased for leavers. In Study 2, a computer dating service paradigm, more committed persons exhibited greatest devaluation of alternatives under conditions of high threat—when personally evaluating extremely attractive alternative partners. In Study 3, a simulation experiment, the tendency to reject and devalue alternatives was greater under conditions of high commitment. In all three studies, tendencies to devalue were more strongly linked to commitment than to satisfaction.

Virtue consists, not in abstaining from vice, but in not desiring it.  
—George Bernard Shaw,  
*Maxims for Revolutionists*

P and O meet, fall in love, become committed, and live happily ever after. Is that the end of the story? Probably not. First, it is likely that P's and O's feelings of commitment to their relationship will vary over time, sometimes falling to "threatenable" low levels. Second, it is likely that P and O will occasionally encounter attractive alternative partners who challenge their commitment. Thus, it is important to gain a greater understanding of the processes by which individuals attempt to maintain committed relationships. Given that most extant theories of developing relationships treat the phenomenon of commitment as an *outcome* (Johnson, 1973; Lund, 1985; Rusbult, 1980)—as a dependent variable of interest in and of itself—little is known about the dynamics by which persons protect and maintain their commitments. As Kelley (1983) noted, it is important that the "processes that promote the person's being in a state in which the causal conditions favoring continued membership stably outweigh those acting against it" (p. 296) be explored.

When highly committed persons are confronted with attractive alternative partners, what are their options? By what processes do individuals manage to maintain commitment? Of course, one option is to surrender to temptation, enjoy the alternative, and suffer the damage. For some relationships, the damage may be slight. However, when individuals believe that the

enjoyment of an alternative relationship, even if brief and superficial, may hurt their partners or harm their relationships—and they wish to avoid such damage—their options include the following: P can invest numerous irretrievable resources in the relationship with O, so as to create barriers against the alternative. P and O can pledge their mutual fidelity—perhaps even publicly—and rely on virtue to assist them in weathering the storm. O can adopt a broad time perspective, recognizing that although enjoyment of the alternative might bring short-term pleasure, long-term gratification requires fidelity. These and other mechanisms may be helpful in the struggle with temptation. The current research concerns yet another means of dealing with temptation and maintaining commitment to ongoing relationships: devaluation of attractive alternative partners.

Social scientists have long recognized that one of the major threats to the stability of a relationship is the presence of an attractive alternative (Kelley, 1983; Leik & Leik, 1977; Rusbult, 1983; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Indeed, research on commitment in close relationships has demonstrated that persons who believe they have attractive alternatives report lower commitment to maintain their current relationships; individuals with less attractive alternatives are more likely to retain strong commitment (Rusbult, 1980). More important, it has been demonstrated that perceived quality of alternatives decreases considerably with increased involvement: In a longitudinal study of dating relationships, Rusbult (1983) found that as individuals became increasingly involved with their partners, they described their alternatives in increasingly negative terms. These findings suggest that *changes* in evaluations of alternative partners may play a role in maintaining commitment to current partners. Through what process do such changes come about?

Rusbult (1983) argued that the tendency of committed persons to report decreased attraction to alternatives may be due to two processes: First, it may be that alternatives really do decline over time; alternative partners may be reluctant to ap-

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proach a committed individual because of awareness of his or her involvement. As Kelley (1983) noted, "other persons who might have been available as partners now take themselves out of the running and look elsewhere for associations" (p. 305). A second, cognitive explanation argues for changes in individuals' thoughts regarding available alternatives. Many theorists have argued that committed persons may maintain stable relationships by devaluing alternative partners (Kanter, 1968; Kelley, 1983; Leik & Leik, 1977; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). As Thibaut and Kelley (1959) proposed, "[conflict] can be reduced by diminishing the value of the unattainable [person] . . . by taking a 'sour grapes' attitude toward the rewarding aspects of the interaction or by emphasizing the negative, cost-increasing aspects of it" (p. 175). If alternative partners merely look less appealing to the committed individual, the relationship is protected. In indirect support of this assertion, Kanter (1968) found that in utopian communities, outsiders are described in negative terms and alternatives are renounced. Such processes presumably ensure continued commitment to the community. Unfortunately, devaluation of alternatives in romantic relationships has not heretofore been examined.

At least two lines of reasoning would lead one to predict that highly committed persons may devalue alternatives. First, a motivational explanation—such as that proffered by dissonance theory—would suggest that when important beliefs are in conflict, changes in cognitions may occur toward the goal of restoring consonance (Festinger, 1957; Greenwald & Ronis, 1978). The committed person's belief that "I am a loyal and committed partner" would be dissonant with the belief "I am attracted to an alternative partner." One means of decreasing such conflict is to reduce the perceived attractiveness of the alternative, by disparaging some personal quality of the alternative or by devaluing something about the relationship that might be established with that person. The cognition "That person would probably cheat on me and make me blue" is not dissonant with a belief that one is a loyal and committed partner. For less committed persons, attraction to an alternative produces little conflict, so devaluation of that person is unnecessary. Thus, motivational explanations argue that the tendency to devalue alternatives emerges from the desire to protect an ongoing commitment.

A second account of this process is more of a perceptual explanation, and it rests on the concept of comparison level, or expectations regarding the quality of close relationships (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Persons with high comparison levels should view alternatives as less appealing than should persons with low expectations. Indeed, Kenrick and Gutierrez (1980) found that men who were exposed to extremely attractive women later judged potential blind dates as less attractive than did a comparable control group. Given that committed persons are often very satisfied with their relationships, and given that persons may use their current relationships as a standard for comparison, more committed individuals should be more likely to judge that alternatives fall short of expectations. Indeed, Thibaut and Kelley (1959) argued that comparison level is "conditioned partly by outcomes in the present relationship" (p. 82) and that "the more satisfactory any given relationship has been found to be, the higher will be the comparison level for evaluating any new relationship" (p. 95). The comparison-level expla-

nation thus argues that the tendency to devalue alternatives emerges from the experience of happiness and satisfaction in an ongoing relationship.

Thus, two lines of reasoning—one motivational and the other perceptual—support the assertion that more highly committed persons may devalue alternative partners. The comparison-level account implies more of a perceptual phenomenon, whereby alternatives "look less good" to the highly committed because their expectations have been inflated as a consequence of involvement in a very satisfying relationship. The motivational explanation (e.g., a dissonance account) implies that the presence of an attractive alternative produces conflict for the committed individual, and that this conflict may be reduced or eliminated by devaluing that alternative. One might further reason that tendencies to devalue alternatives should be greatest when the alternative produces greater conflict.

Conflict should be increased by at least two factors. First, more tempting alternatives should induce greater conflict. Indeed, research on postdecisional spreading of alternatives demonstrates that when an alternative is very attractive in comparison to the chosen option, tendencies to disparage the nonchosen alternative are greater (Brehm, 1956). Second, more available alternatives should induce greater tension. Devaluation of alternatives by committed persons should be most pronounced when the alternative is a realistic threat. Although one may acknowledge that a remote and unattainable alternative is attractive, no tension is experienced because that person is no real threat to one's current relationship. It is when one is faced with an actual choice between a partner and an alternative—when one must actively consider the possibility of forming a relationship with another—that threat should be greatest and devaluation of alternatives should be most pronounced.

Thus, we predict that greater commitment is associated with tendencies to devalue alternative partners, and that this process is most marked when the alternative poses the greatest threat to the current relationship: when the alternative is exceptionally attractive, and when the individual is faced with an actual opportunity to become involved with that person. We also attempt to determine whether this process is more closely tied to feelings of satisfaction—a finding that would imply a simple perceptual process whereby devaluation results from reduced comparison level—or whether this process is more closely tied to feelings of commitment—a finding that would imply a motivated process based more on the experience of threat to an ongoing commitment.

Three complementary studies explore this phenomenon. Study 1 uses data from a 7-month longitudinal study to examine reactions to alternatives as they exist in everyday life. Study 2 examines the impact of variations in commitment and satisfaction on evaluations of potential dating partners who vary in attractiveness and degree of threat. Study 3 actively manipulates commitment and satisfaction in a simulation experiment and obtains evaluations of attractive and threatening alternatives. Together, the three studies maximize both internal and external validity and should provide a good test of our hypothesis.

### Study 1

Study 1 is a reanalysis of data obtained in Rusbult's (1983) 7-month longitudinal study of college-age dating relationships.

We examined several measures of perceived quality of alternatives, the goal being to determine the strength of the link between increasing commitment to current partners and declining evaluations of alternatives, especially tendencies to devalue actual alternative partners. We also examine the impact of satisfaction level on evaluations of alternatives.

### Method

**Subjects and procedure.** Subjects were 17 men and 17 women at Franklin and Marshall College who volunteered to participate in response to flyers placed in their campus mailboxes. Out of 119 volunteers, actual subjects were selected on the basis of sex (half were men and half were women) and initial duration of the relationship (5 men and 5 women in the 0–2 week category; 4 men and 4 women in the 2–4, 4–6, and 6–8 week categories). Only one partner in a relationship was allowed to participate. Subjects' mean age was 19.79, and the mean duration of their relationships at the start of the study was 4.15 weeks. Subjects were paid \$2.50 for each questionnaire they completed.

The study began near the start of the 1977–1978 academic year, and participation concluded when the relationship ended or the study itself ended. One man dropped out of the study at Time 2, and 2 men and 1 woman stopped responding at Time 8 (spring break). Of the remaining 30 subjects, 10 persons' relationships ended (4 men and 6 women), and 20 subjects responded throughout (10 men and 10 women). Subjects returned questionnaires through campus mail within 4 days of their receipt. If the subject did not return a questionnaire within 7 days of the time it was mailed, he or she was sent a reminder. This procedure was altered only twice: during winter break (1978), when questionnaires with stamped return envelopes were mailed to subjects' off-campus addresses, and during the "radiation vacation" occasioned by the 1979 Three Mile Island incident, when questionnaires were delayed 4 days because the college was closed.

**Questionnaires.** The questionnaires were modeled after the instrument used by Rusbult (1980). For each model variable, subjects first completed items that represented concrete operationalizations of the variable and then answered global measures tapping that variable. The concrete measures prepared subjects to answer the global questions and "taught" them the meaning of the global items. Complete information regarding the questionnaire is presented in Rusbult (1983).

Four concrete and two global items measured alternative quality. Two concrete items obtained evaluations of actual alternative partners: "In terms of the sorts of rewards and costs discussed above (e.g., intelligence, sense of humor, physical attractiveness), how appealing are the people other than your partner with whom you could become involved?" (1 = *very*, 9 = *not at all*; reversed) and "In terms of the sorts of rewards and costs discussed above, how difficult would it be to replace your partner?" (1 = *impossible*, 9 = *not at all difficult*). Two concrete items obtained evaluations of the alternative of spending time without a romantic partner: "How important is it to you to be involved in a relationship?" (1 = *not at all*, 9 = *extremely*; reversed) and "To what extent can you be happy when you are not involved in a romantic relationship?" (1 = *I can be very happy*, 9 = *I am extremely unhappy*; reversed). The global measures were "In general, how appealing are your alternatives (dating another person or other persons or being without a romantic involvement)?" (1 = *not at all appealing*, 9 = *extremely appealing*) and "All things considered, how do your alternatives compare to your current relationship?" (1 = *this is much better*, 9 = *alternatives are much better*).

Only global measures of satisfaction and commitment were obtained. The satisfaction measures were "How much do you like your partner?" (1 = *not at all*, 9 = *very much*), "To what extent are you attracted to your partner?" (1 = *not at all*, 9 = *extremely*), and "To what degree are you satisfied with your relationship?" (1 = *not at all*, 9 = *extremely*).

The commitment measures were "How likely is it that you will end your relationship in the near future?" (1 = *not at all likely*, 9 = *extremely likely*; reversed), "For what length of time would you like your relationship to last?" (1 = *week or so*, 9 = *lifetime*), "How attractive an alternative would you require before adopting it and ending your relationship?" (1 = *moderately attractive alternative*, 9 = *extremely attractive alternative*), "To what extent are you 'attached' to your partner?" (1 = *not at all*, 9 = *extremely*), and "To what extent are you committed to your relationship?" (1 = *not at all*, 9 = *extremely*).

**Reliability of measures.** We computed reliability coefficients for the set of items designed to measure each construct. These analyses revealed sizable alphas for the global measures of satisfaction (.89), commitment (.90), and alternative quality (.84) and for the pairs of concrete measures designed to measure evaluations of actual alternative partners (.84) and evaluations of spending time alone (.81). Therefore, a single averaged measure of each construct was formed.

### Results

**Changes over time in evaluations of alternatives.** We performed regression analyses that included the two measures of evaluations of alternatives as dependent variables and time as an independent variable. To control for the nonindependence of multiple measures obtained over time from a given individual, subject number was included as a categorical variable (Cohen & Cohen, 1975). As reported in Rusbult (1983), these analyses revealed that perceived quality of alternatives declined significantly over time ( $\beta = -0.179$ ,  $p < .002$ ). Does this effect result from a tendency to evaluate alternative partners more negatively as a result of increasing commitment? We reasoned that if the current model has merit, the decline in perceived quality of alternatives should occur for perceptions of potential alternative partners, but not necessarily for feelings regarding spending time alone (i.e., noninvolvement). That is, an actual "in the flesh" challenger is presumably more threatening than the option of solitude. Furthermore, the decline in evaluations of alternative partners should be stronger for persons who remained committed to their relationships throughout the study than for persons who ended their relationships; those who remained committed should be more likely to have engaged in devaluation of alternatives.

Following these lines of reasoning, we regressed evaluations of actual alternative partners and evaluations of spending time alone onto time, including subject number as a categorical variable. To determine whether changes over time differed for "stayers" and "leavers," the regression models also included terms for stayer-versus-leaver and the Stayer-Leaver  $\times$  Time interaction (0 = stayers, 1 = leavers). The results of these analyses are summarized in Table 1. Consistent with the logic outlined earlier, the analyses revealed that in predicting evaluations of alternative partners, the unstandardized regression coefficient for time was significantly negative ( $B = -0.125$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Furthermore, the unstandardized regression coefficient for the Stayer-Leaver  $\times$  Time interaction was significantly positive ( $B = 0.449$ ,  $p < .001$ ); this decline was significantly less acute for leavers.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, as can be seen in Figure 1, whereas stayers' evalua-

<sup>1</sup> Further analyses were performed that included main effects and interactions involving gender (0 = women, 1 = men). These analyses revealed that although both male and female stayers' evaluations of alter-

Table 1  
Evaluations of Actual Alternative Partners as a Function of Time, Commitment Level, and Satisfaction Level: Study 1

| Multiple regression analyses                             | B        | R    | F     | df      | p <  |
|--|----------|------|-------|---------|------|
| Changes over time in evaluations of alternative partners |          |      |       |         |      |
| Time   | -0.125** | .885 | 29.91 | 32, 263 | .001 |
| Stayer-Leaver  | 0.000    |      |       |         |      |
| Time × Stayer-Leaver                                     | 0.449**  |      |       |         |      |
| Commitment and satisfaction with alternative partners    |          |      |       |         |      |
| Commitment level   | -0.185** | .924 | 48.64 | 35, 291 | .001 |
| Satisfaction level                                       | -0.176** |      |       |         |      |
| Commitment level only                                    | -0.462** | .921 | 48.22 | 34, 292 | .001 |
| Satisfaction level only                                  | -0.242** | .910 | 41.31 | 34, 292 | .001 |

Note. Changes over time in evaluations of alternative partners rows report the results of an analysis using evaluations of alternative partners as the criterion and using time, stayer versus leaver (stayer = 0, leaver = 1), and the Time × Stayer-Leaver interaction as predictors. Commitment and satisfaction with alternative partners rows report the results of three analyses using evaluations of alternative partners as the criterion: one with commitment as the predictor, one with satisfaction as the predictor, and one with both factors as predictors.

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

tions of alternative partners declined significantly ( $B = -0.125$ ,  $p < .001$ ), leavers' evaluations of alternative partners actually increased over time ( $B = 0.324$ ,  $p < .001$ ). As expected, the link between time and evaluations of spending time alone was not significant; evaluations of spending time alone did not decline significantly over time ( $B = -0.041$ ,  $p < .187$ ). However, the Leaver × Time interaction was significant ( $B = 0.272$ ,  $p < .024$ ); leavers' evaluations of spending time alone declined significantly less than did those of other subjects.

Do these findings represent devaluation of alternatives among the highly committed or enhancement of alternatives among less committed persons? As can be seen in Figure 1, both processes appear to be operating: At Time 1, leavers and stayers rated alternative partners at or just below 5, the scale midpoint. Over time, stayers' evaluations declined to about 3, whereas leavers' evaluations rose to about 6. As reported earlier, both slopes differed significantly from 0 ( $-0.125$  for stayers vs.  $.324$  for leavers). Also, posthoc comparisons revealed that whereas the Time 11-12 ratings of alternative partners provided by stayers were significantly below the scale midpoint, those for leavers did not differ significantly from the midpoint ( $M_s = 2.56$  for stayers and  $5.68$  for leavers).

native partners declined over time, women's evaluations declined significantly more than did those of men (evaluations of alternatives term,  $B = -0.305$ ,  $p < .001$ ; for the Sex × Evaluations of Alternatives interaction,  $B = 0.156$ ,  $p < .026$ ). Both slopes are thus negative and differ significantly from zero (for women,  $B = -0.305$ ,  $p < .01$ ; for men,  $B = -0.149$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

*Commitment, satisfaction, and evaluations of alternatives.* Are evaluations of alternative partners directly linked to feelings of commitment to current relationships? We examined the relation between commitment and evaluations of alternatives by regressing evaluations of actual alternative partners and evaluations of spending time alone onto commitment, including subject number as a categorical variable.<sup>2</sup> Consistent with predictions, the link with commitment was significant for evaluations of alternative partners ( $B = -0.462$ ,  $p < .001$ ), but not for spending time alone ( $B = -0.027$ ,  $p < .321$ ).<sup>3</sup> To determine whether commitment or satisfaction more directly mediates tendencies to devalue alternatives, we performed further analyses that included the satisfaction variable. As for commitment, the link with satisfaction was significant for evaluations of alternative partners ( $B = -0.242$ ,  $p < .001$ ), but not for spending time alone ( $B = -0.047$ ,  $p < .301$ ).

As the satisfaction and commitment measures were moderately collinear, we performed simultaneous regressions to determine which construct more powerfully mediates devaluation, including both predictor variables. The model that included both commitment and satisfaction did not significantly predict subjects' evaluations of spending time alone (commitment  $B = -0.023$ ,  $p < .431$ ; satisfaction  $B = -0.011$ ,  $p < .857$ ), but both variables contributed significantly to predicting evaluations of actual alternative partners (commitment  $B = -0.185$ ,  $p < .001$ ; satisfaction  $B = -0.176$ ,  $p < .001$ ). We used Cramer's (1972) model comparison procedures to determine whether this two-factor model predicted evaluations better than did either single-factor model. The two-factor model was significantly more powerful than either single-factor model (respective  $F_s = 11.96$  and  $51.82$ ), and the commitment variable appears to be the more potent mediator: In predicting evaluations of alternative partners, including satisfaction along with commitment in the regression model increased the model's predictive power by only 0.6% over that provided by commitment alone.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The summed commitment variable included one measure that refers directly to alternatives to the current relationship: "How attractive an alternative would you require before adopting it and ending your relationship?" To determine whether these effects occurred simply because items referring to alternatives appeared on both sides of the regression equation, we calculated a four-item commitment scale, excluding the aforementioned measure, and obtained similar findings (for evaluations of alternative partners,  $B = -0.240$ ,  $p < .001$ ; for evaluations of spending time alone,  $B = -0.029$ ,  $p < .293$ ).

<sup>3</sup> We performed further analyses, including terms to examine main effects and interactions involving gender. These analyses revealed that although commitment was significantly negatively related to evaluations of alternative partners for both women and men, this effect was stronger among men (evaluations of alternatives for the whole sample,  $B = -0.212$ ,  $p < .001$ ; for the Sex × Evaluations of Alternatives interaction,  $B = -0.127$ ,  $p < .003$ ). Both slopes are thus negative and differ significantly from zero (for women,  $B = -0.212$ ,  $p < .01$ ; for men,  $B = -0.339$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

<sup>4</sup> The summed measure of evaluations of alternative partners included one item that asked for direct comparisons to the current partner: "In terms of the sorts of rewards and costs discussed above, how difficult would it be to replace your partner?" To determine whether evaluations of alternative partners declined over time among the highly committed, independent of possible changes over time in feelings regarding the current partner, we repeated all of our analyses, excluding

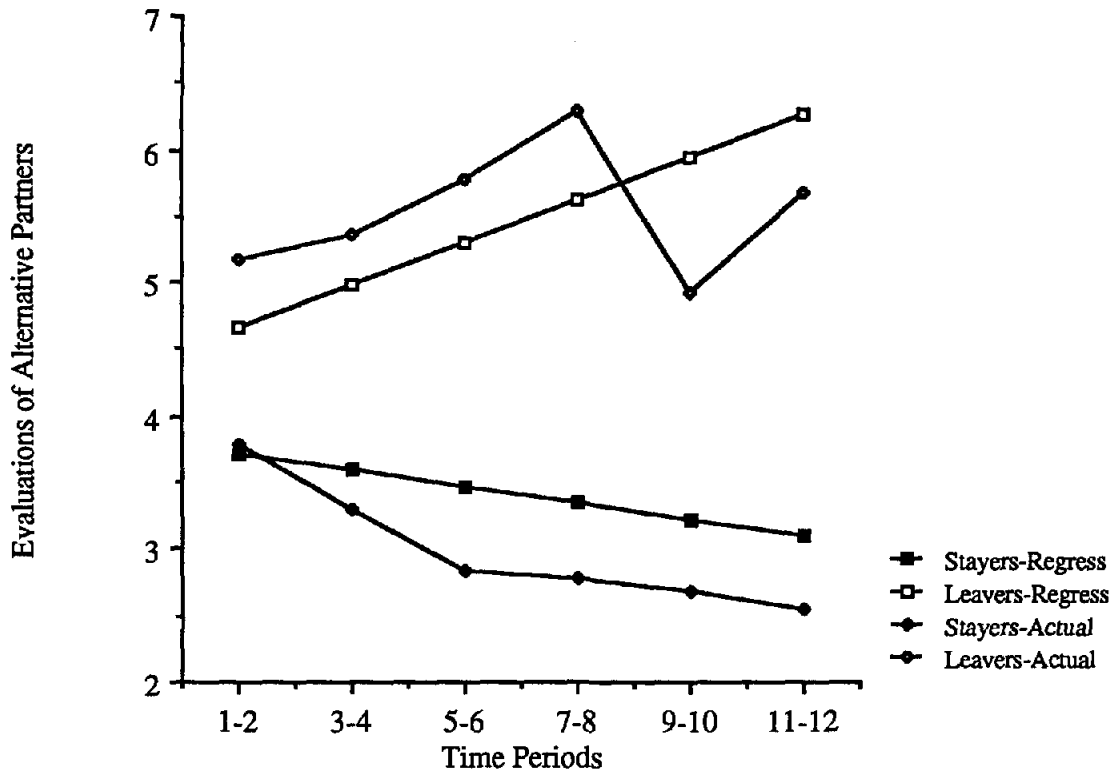


Figure 1. Changes over time in evaluations of alternative partners for stayers and leavers—actual data and regression (Regress) analysis results: Study 1.

### Discussion

Thus, over time in a relationship, perceptions of alternatives become increasingly less favorable. This change occurs with respect to evaluations of actual alternative partners, but not for evaluations of spending time alone (i.e., the option of noninvolvement). The tendency to evaluate potential alternative partners in increasingly negative ways is significantly less pronounced among persons for whom the alternative is less threatening: those who eventually end their relationships. Indeed, among leavers, evaluations of alternative partners actually become more positive over time. Of course, it is possible that the causal ordering of these factors is reversed. It may be that feelings about noninvolvement can wax and wane without having any necessary implications for staying in or leaving the current relationship, whereas changes in feelings regarding actual alternative partners lead more directly to changes in desire to stick with or end a relationship.

We also found that although evaluations of alternative partners are negatively related to both commitment and satisfaction, it appears that commitment more directly mediates the tendency to evaluate potential alternative partners negatively. These results are consistent with our prediction that the highly committed devalue alternatives as a means of protecting their ongoing relationships. However, these findings do not provide

an active test of this hypothesis, the Study 1 results are merely suggestive with respect to the validity of this prediction, in that we have no evidence that tendencies to devalue alternatives result from experienced threat or that the causal ordering is that argued herein. Studies 2 and 3 attempt to address these issues.

### Study 2

Study 2 extends Study 1 by exploring devaluation of potential alternative partners among the highly committed under conditions of high threat: when confronted with the realistic possibility of forming a relationship with a highly attractive alternative partner. In this experiment, we used a computer dating service paradigm to manipulate two independent variables, attractiveness of alternative (high, medium, or low) and personal versus impersonal evaluations of the target. Subjects completed a questionnaire that obtained information regarding their satisfaction with and commitment to current relationships and evaluated a potential date, an "early applicant for the dating service."

### Method

**Subjects.** Subjects were 278 undergraduates (117 men and 161 women) who participated in partial fulfillment of the requirements for introductory psychology courses at the University of Kentucky. Participation was limited to those who were currently involved in heterosexual dating relationships. We randomly assigned 4–12 same-sex persons recruited for each session to one of six conditions. The data from 5 non-White subjects (4 women and 1 man) were eliminated from the analyses

this item, and obtained very similar findings (e.g., examining changes over time, time,  $B = -0.456, p < .001$ ; leavers  $B = 0.516, p < .012$ ).

as target dates were White, and we feared that some students might unilaterally reject dates of a different race.

**Procedure.** Subjects were told that the purpose of the study was to assess attitudes regarding the establishment of a campus-based computer dating service. A professor in the psychology department was said to have begun collecting applications for such a service while assessing student interest. Subjects completed questionnaires concerning attitudes about a dating service, satisfaction with and commitment to their current relationships, and evaluations of a target date, an early applicant for the service. Because the questionnaire that assessed attitudes about a computer dating service was included only to increase the credence of the cover story, it is not described. The order in which subjects completed the primary tasks—describing their current relationships and evaluating the alternative date—was counterbalanced across conditions.

Each subject was presented with a 3- × 5-in. photo of a fictitious early applicant for the service, along with a faked application form. The form presented some sketchy personal information about the applicant, including self-reported personality traits (11 nine-point bipolar scales) and reported interest in a variety of activities (12 nine-point scales). The applicants were described moderately favorably: as relatively cooperative, calm, happy, imaginative, active, good, flexible, relaxed, brave, strong, and sincere. Applicants also indicated that they were interested in the following activities: trying new things, meeting new people, music, travel, sports, reading, movies, dancing, parties, dining out, concerts, and picnics. This information was constant across targets. Each subject evaluated only one applicant, a target date of the opposite sex.

The target date's physical attractiveness was varied to manipulate alternative attractiveness. Thirty-six photographs (18 photographs of men and 18 of women) from the yearbook of a midwestern university were enlarged to 3- × 5-in. photos. Twenty-four undergraduates (12 women and 12 men) rated the attractiveness of each of 9 photos of a person of the opposite sex on a 9-point scale (1 = *very unattractive*, 9 = *very attractive*). On the basis of these data, we selected photographs of four highly attractive targets ( $M = 7.29$ ), four moderately attractive targets ( $M = 4.80$ ), and four unattractive targets ( $M = 1.75$ ; 2 women and 2 men at each level of attractiveness).<sup>5</sup> Within each condition, subjects were randomly assigned to one of two opposite-sex target dates.

Personal versus impersonal evaluation of alternatives was manipulated by varying the stated purpose of subjects' judgments. All subjects were told that the researchers needed to obtain ratings of several early applicants for the service. However, subjects in the personal evaluation condition were asked to complete the questionnaire indicating how they personally felt about that person. These subjects were told that if they later decided to participate in the dating service, this information would be used to match them with potential dates. In the impersonal evaluation condition, subjects were asked to complete the questionnaire as they believed the average university student would; that is, they were asked to report on how the typical undergraduate would feel about the target. They were told that if they later decided to participate in the dating service, this information would not be used to match them with potential dates. To reinforce this verbal manipulation, the two otherwise identical questionnaires were respectively labeled either *Personal Attitudes About X* or *Average Student's Attitudes About X*. The manipulation thus included two features, a manipulation of opportunity to date the target partner in the future and a manipulation of point of view. We used this manipulation to make the personal evaluation condition especially potent; however, it is possible that these two conditions differed not only in terms of threat, but also in terms of a more subtle judgmental factor: own point of view versus others' point of view. This potential confound should be kept in mind in evaluating the findings.

**Dependent measures.** Subjects' feelings about their current relationships were obtained in the Current Dating Relationship Questionnaire. This questionnaire included 23 items that assessed feelings about con-

crete aspects of the partner and relationship, 4 items that assessed satisfaction, 4 items that assessed commitment, and 3 general information items. The concrete items (e.g., rated intelligence, sense of humor) were included as a means of involving subjects in the process of thinking about their partners and relationships and are not discussed further.

The satisfaction measures were as follows: "In general, to what degree are you attracted to your partner?" (1 = *not at all*, 9 = *extremely*), "In general, to what extent are you satisfied with your relationship?" (1 = *extremely*, 9 = *not at all*; reversed), "All things considered, how strong are your feelings for your partner?" (1 = *love my partner very much*, 9 = *don't love my partner very much*; reversed), and "All things considered, how does your relationship compare to other people's relationships?" (1 = *much better than most*, 9 = *much worse than most*; reversed). The commitment measures were "In general, to what extent do you feel committed to maintaining your relationship?" (1 = *extremely*, 9 = *not at all*; reversed), "In general, for how much longer do you want your relationship to last?" (1 = *week or so*, 9 = *decades*), "All things considered, how likely is it that your relationship will end in the near future?" (1 = *extremely likely to end*, 9 = *not at all likely to end*), and "All things considered, to what extent do you feel 'attached' to your partner (for better or worse, whether you are satisfied or not)?" (1 = *extremely attached*, 9 = *not at all attached*; reversed). The general information items assessed level of involvement (married, engaged, living together, dating steadily, dating occasionally, dating casually), duration of relationship (fill in), and whether the relationship was exclusive ("do you see only each other?"; *no* or *yes*).

The questionnaire that obtained judgments of the target date included 19 concrete evaluations of the target date, three measures of anticipated satisfaction, and one measure of desire to date the target. The 19 specific items—9-point Likert-type scales—were designed to assess specific methods of devaluation. To simplify the analyses we divided the items into three categories, roughly following the so-called stage theories of developing relationships (Kerckhoff & Davis, 1962; Levinger & Snoek, 1972; Lewis, 1973; Murstein, 1970; Reiss, 1960). The "early-stage" items obtained ratings of relatively superficial features: evaluations of the alternative's intelligence, sense of humor, and possession of attractive personal qualities, as well as evaluations of how well friends would like the alternative and how well the alternative would accept the subject's friends. The "middle-stage" items obtained ratings of the relationship that might be formed with the alternative: similarity of attitudes and interests, how much fun it would be to spend time with the alternative, how reliable and dependable the alternative would be, whether the alternative would flirt with others, and whether the alternative would be willing to spend time with the subject. The "later-stage" items concerned issues thought to be related to long-term compatibility: would the two have complementary needs, would the alternative live up to agreements developed in the relationship, would the alternative be sexually faithful, would the alternative treat the subject well, would there be open communication between the two, would the alternative be easy to confide in, would the alternative be supportive in times of trouble, and would the alternative freely provide emotional support. The measures of anticipated satisfaction were 9-point Likert-type scales: "In general, to what degree are you attracted to X?" (1 = *not at all*, 9 = *extremely*), "In general, how do you think a relationship with X would compare to your current relationship?" (1 = *much better than current relationship*, 9 = *much worse than current relationship*; re-

<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, subjects in Study 2 rated the applicants they evaluated on a 9-point Likert-type scale: "How physically attractive is X?" (1 = *not at all*, 9 = *extremely*). A three-level (low, moderate, or high attractiveness) analysis of variance (ANOVA) performed on this item revealed that the three conditions differed significantly in judged attractiveness; the respective  $M$ s were 2.87, 5.53, and 7.50,  $F(2, 264) = 228.18$ ,  $p < .001$ .

versed), and "All things considered, to what extent do you think you would have a satisfying relationship with X?" (1 = *not at all satisfying*, 9 = *extremely satisfying*). The desire to date the target item was a forced-choice scale: "Do you want to go on a date with X?" (1 = *yes, definitely*, 2 = *perhaps*, 3 = *no, definitely not*, reversed).

**Reliability and validity of measures.** The reliability of the multiple-item measures was assessed by calculating alphas for the items associated with each construct. Sizable coefficients were obtained for the measures of commitment to current relationship (.82), satisfaction with current relationship (.79), and anticipated satisfaction with target date (.90), as well as for the early-stage (.63), middle-stage (.58), and later-stage (.69) evaluation of alternative items. Therefore, a single summed measure of each construct was formed. To assess the validity of our measure of commitment to current relationships, we calculated zero-order correlations between the commitment measure and several more objective measures of relationship stability. As expected, commitment level was significantly correlated with reported level of involvement ( $r = .56$ ), reports of how exclusive the relationship was ( $r = .41$ ), and reports of relationship duration ( $r = .29$ ).

## Results

*Do highly committed persons reject and devalue alternatives under conditions of high threat?* We performed a series of regression analyses that included the following terms: commitment level, personal versus impersonal evaluation (0 = impersonal, 1 = personal), and alternative attractiveness (0 = low, 1 = moderate, 2 = high). We also included interaction terms representing the impact of commitment within the most threatening conditions: the Commitment  $\times$  Personal Evaluation interaction (Commitment Level  $\times$  Personal-Impersonal Evaluations) and the Commitment  $\times$  Alternative Attractiveness interaction (Commitment Level  $\times$  Alternative Attractiveness Level).<sup>6</sup> We performed separate analyses for five dependent measures. The results of these analyses are summarized in Table 2, and the results for the first of these dependent variables—anticipated satisfaction with the alternative—are displayed in Figure 2.

It is clear that in the absence of threat—that is, before we take into account the Commitment  $\times$  High Threat interactions—degree of commitment to current partners has little bearing on how subjects reacted to potential alternative partners (see Commitment level rows in Table 2). Only two of these standardized regression coefficients were significant—for evaluations with respect to early-stage and later-stage variables—and in both cases, the impact of commitment on ratings of alternatives was positive.

Is devaluation by those who are highly committed stronger under conditions of greater threat? There are at least two sources of threat to the stability of a relationship. The first is the presence of a very attractive alternative. Consistent with predictions, all five standardized regression coefficients for the Commitment  $\times$  Alternative Attractiveness interaction were negative and statistically significant; the tendency of committed persons to devalue alternatives was greater to the degree that the alternative was more attractive (see Commitment  $\times$  Alternative Attractiveness rows of Table 2). A second threat to the stability of a relationship is the presence of a realistic challenger. As predicted, all five coefficients for the Commitment  $\times$  Personal Evaluations interaction were negative, but only three were statistically significant; the tendency of committed persons to devalue alternatives was generally greater when faced with an ac-

tual opportunity to date the alternative, but this effect was inconsistently observed (see Commitment  $\times$  Personal Evaluations rows of Table 2).

We calculated commitment slopes for all six experimental conditions and found that within the personal evaluation of highly attractive alternatives condition, four of five commitment slopes were negative and statistically significant (the respective  $t$ s were  $-5.41$ ,  $-0.64$ ,  $-3.67$ ,  $-2.07$ , and  $-2.23$ ). It is interesting to note that the devaluation of threatening alternatives occurred with respect to our measures of early-, middle-, and later-stage factors; devaluation processes were not limited to any one category of measure.

Not surprisingly, these analyses also revealed that on average, subjects more favorably evaluated alternatives to the degree that the alternative was more attractive: All five coefficients for the alternative attractiveness effect were positive and statistically significant (see Alternative attractiveness rows of Table 2). There was also weak evidence that on average subjects more favorably evaluated alternatives when making personal evaluations: All five coefficients for the personal evaluation effect were positive, although only two were statistically significant (see Personal evaluations rows of Table 2).

Do these findings represent devaluation of alternatives by highly committed persons, or do they represent enhancement of alternatives by less committed persons? One way to address this question is to examine the absolute value of subjects' ratings of alternatives, calculated on the basis of unstandardized coefficients from the regression analyses. First, do less committed persons bolster alternatives? Within the most threatening experimental condition—personal evaluation of highly attractive alternatives—low commitment subjects' evaluations were at or above the midpoint for each scale. However, their scores were certainly not at the ceiling. Low commitment subjects' personal ratings on 9-point scales of highly attractive alternatives were 6.44 for anticipated satisfaction, 6.36 for early-stage variables, 6.24 for middle-stage variables, and 6.51 for later-stage variables, and their desire to date the alternative was 2.43 on a 3-point scale. These ratings hardly seem wildly inflated.

Second, do the highly committed devalue alternatives? Calculations based on the regression results reveal that the ratings of alternatives provided by the most highly committed persons in the personal evaluation, highly attractive alternative condition were close to or below the midpoint of each scale and were similar to the ratings of low and moderate attractiveness targets. The mean scores of the most committed subjects in the personal evaluation, highly attractive alternative condition and of the most committed subjects in the moderate and low alternative attractiveness conditions were, respectively, 3.49, 3.59, and 3.68 for anticipated satisfaction; 1.35, 1.40, and 1.45 for desire to

<sup>6</sup> We performed preliminary analyses that included several additional terms: the Commitment  $\times$  Highest Threat interaction (Commitment  $\times$  Personal-Impersonal Evaluation  $\times$  High Alternative Attractiveness), order of evaluations (the counterbalancing factor; 0 = current partner evaluated first, 1 = alternative evaluated first), photograph (photograph 0 or 1 within each attractiveness of alternative condition), as well as all main effects and interactions involving gender (0 = women, 1 = men). These analyses revealed few significant effects and no consistent pattern of results, so these terms were excluded from the main analyses.

Table 2  
*Evaluations of Alternative Partners as a Function of Personal Versus Impersonal Evaluation, Attractiveness of Alternative, and Degree of Commitment to Current Relationships: Study 2*

| Multiple regression analyses  | <i>B</i> | <i>R</i> | <i>F</i> | <i>df</i> | <i>p</i> < |
|---|----------|----------|----------|-----------|------------|
| <b>Anticipated satisfaction with alternative partner from</b>         |          |          |          |           |            |
| Alternative attractiveness  | 1.983**  | .446     | 12.79    | 5, 257    | .001       |
| Personal evaluations  | 0.230    |          |          |           |            |
| Commitment level  | 0.083    |          |          |           |            |
| Commitment × Personal Evaluations                                     | -0.291*  |          |          |           |            |
| Commitment × Alternative Attractiveness                               | -1.683** |          |          |           |            |
| <b>Desire to date alternative partner from</b>                        |          |          |          |           |            |
| Alternative attractiveness  | 2.007**  | .414     | 10.62    | 5, 257    | .001       |
| Personal evaluations  | 0.426**  |          |          |           |            |
| Commitment level  | 0.198    |          |          |           |            |
| Commitment × Personal Evaluations                                     | -0.560** |          |          |           |            |
| Commitment × Alternative Attractiveness                               | -1.776** |          |          |           |            |
| <b>Evaluations of alternative partner—Later-stage variables from</b>  |          |          |          |           |            |
| Alternative attractiveness  | 1.915**  | .335     | 6.49     | 5, 256    | .001       |
| Personal evaluations  | 0.381**  |          |          |           |            |
| Commitment level  | 0.364**  |          |          |           |            |
| Commitment × Personal Evaluations                                     | -0.456** |          |          |           |            |
| Commitment × Alternative Attractiveness                               | -1.695** |          |          |           |            |
| <b>Evaluations of alternative partner—Middle-stage variables from</b> |          |          |          |           |            |
| Alternative attractiveness  | 0.820**  | .171     | 1.54     | 5, 256    | .177       |
| Personal evaluations  | 0.200    |          |          |           |            |
| Commitment level  | 0.146    |          |          |           |            |
| Commitment × Personal Evaluations                                     | -0.219   |          |          |           |            |
| Commitment × Alternative Attractiveness                               | -0.690** |          |          |           |            |
| <b>Evaluations of alternative partner—Early-stage variables from</b>  |          |          |          |           |            |
| Alternative attractiveness  | 1.594**  | .248     | 3.36     | 5, 256    | .006       |
| Personal evaluations  | 0.178    |          |          |           |            |
| Commitment level  | 0.255*   |          |          |           |            |
| Commitment × Personal Evaluations                                     | -0.215   |          |          |           |            |
| Commitment × Alternative Attractiveness                               | -1.436** |          |          |           |            |

Note. These findings summarize the results of five-factor regression analyses for each of five dependent variables.

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

date; 6.13, 6.21, and 6.29 for early-stage variables; 5.98, 6.00, and 6.02 for middle-stage variables; and 6.07, 6.14, and 6.22 for later-stage variables. That highly committed persons' evaluations of exceptionally attractive alternatives were quite similar to their contemporaries' ratings of low and moderately attractive alternatives suggests some degree of devaluation. However,

as we do not have ratings of our targets from impartial, presumably objective judges, it is difficult to determine unequivocally whether the reported interactions occurred because less committed persons bolstered available alternatives or because highly committed persons devalued alternatives.

*Impact of satisfaction level.* To assess the impact of satisfaction with current relationships on evaluations of alternatives, we added the satisfaction measure—as well as all relevant interaction terms (e.g., Satisfaction × Personal Evaluations, Satisfaction × High Alternative Attractiveness)—to each of the regression models described earlier, and compared these results with those presented in Table 2 (Cramer, 1972). The addition of satisfaction interaction terms did not significantly improve the prediction of any of the five measures. Adding the simple satisfaction term significantly improved only one of five models—that predicting anticipated satisfaction (satisfaction  $\beta = -0.195$ ,  $p < .004$ ). Furthermore, if we replicate the analyses reported in Table 2, using satisfaction rather than commitment terms, and then add the commitment terms to each model, the addition of commitment terms significantly improves the prediction of all five measures. Thus, as for Study 1, it appears that the tendency to devalue alternatives is more directly mediated by feelings of commitment than by feelings of satisfaction with current relationships.

### Discussion

Thus, the impact of commitment level on evaluations of alternatives was more marked under conditions of greatest threat: when confronted with highly attractive alternative partners rather than when confronted with alternatives of moderate or low attractiveness and when making personal rather than impersonal evaluations. Although there was some evidence that level of satisfaction with current relationships influenced evaluations of alternatives, the tendency to devalue alternative partners appears to be most directly mediated by variations in commitment to current relationships.

However, because the Study 2 manipulation of personal versus impersonal evaluation included two features—a manipulation of opportunity to date the alternative partner plus a manipulation of point of view (own versus average student)—and because the overall impact of this factor was relatively weak, it is difficult to interpret our findings regarding the personal versus impersonal factor. Also, as Studies 1 and 2 examined the effects of commitment as an attribute variable, it is difficult to know whether our findings resulted from feelings of threat resulting from desire to maintain current relationships or from some other personal attribute that is frequently confounded with commitment. We attempted to address these two problems in Study 3.

### Study 3

Study 3 extends Studies 1 and 2 by actively manipulating satisfaction and commitment in a role-playing experiment, thus enabling examination of the effects of variations in commitment while holding level of satisfaction with current relationships relatively constant. All subjects were personally confronted with an opportunity to become involved with an alter-



native partner. Subjects role played the part of an essay protagonist faced with an opportunity to meet and interact with an attractive alternative partner and indicated degree of attraction to and interest in that person.

### Method

**Subjects.** Subjects were 76 undergraduates (28 men and 48 women) who participated in the experiment in partial fulfillment of the requirements for introductory psychology courses at Illinois State University. We randomly assigned the 4–12 persons recruited for each session to one of four experimental conditions (7 men and 12 women within each condition).

**Procedure.** Subjects read essays describing fictional situations and were asked to place themselves in the position of the essay protagonist. Essays read by men and women were identical except for changes in the sex of the protagonist, current partner, and alternative partner. Sarah—the protagonist in women's essays—was described as a 21-year-old college student who enjoys a reasonably satisfying life both socially and academically. For the past 3 months Sarah has been dating Robert. However, at a social gathering Sarah notices an extremely attractive man looking at her from across the room. From the way he's looking at her, Sarah assumes that he's attracted to her. What does Sarah think about this situation? Does she want to approach this stranger? Does she want him to approach her? The essay ended with the following sentence: "Think about this situation for a few minutes, reading this essay a second time if necessary, and then complete the questionnaire."

Commitment level was manipulated through variations in descriptions of the protagonist's interest in maintaining an exclusive relation-

ship with the current partner. In the high-commitment condition, the essays stated that "you enjoy being involved in this exclusive relationship . . . find it to be fulfilling in many ways . . . you would like to maintain this relationship." In contrast, the low-commitment condition essays stated that "you don't really want to be involved in an exclusive relationship . . . believe it would be more fulfilling to date different people . . . you do not want it to be an exclusive relationship." Satisfaction level was manipulated through variations in descriptions of the protagonist's feelings regarding the current partner and relationship. In the high-satisfaction condition, the essays stated that "Robert is extremely attractive and intelligent and has a very pleasant personality . . . terrific sense of humor . . . enjoys all the same activities as you, so when you and he go out you always have a good time . . . relationship has been very gratifying." In the low-satisfaction condition, the essays stated that "you don't find Robert particularly attractive . . . [he] does not have much of a sense of humor . . . does enjoy some of the same activities as you . . . when you and he go out you usually have a good time . . . relationship has been acceptable."

**Dependent measures.** The questionnaire included 6 seven-point Likert-type items designed to assess the effectiveness of the manipulations of commitment and satisfaction, and 3 items to measure attraction to the alternative, as well as 15 five-point Likert scales that measured tendencies to devalue the alternative. The commitment manipulation checks were "To what extent are you committed to maintaining your relationship with Robert?" (1 = *extremely*, 7 = *not at all*; reversed), "How much longer do you want your relationship with Robert to last?" (1 = *a very short time*, 7 = *a very long time*), and "How attached are you to your relationship with Robert?" (1 = *extremely*, 7 = *not at all*; reversed). The satisfaction manipulation checks were "In general, how

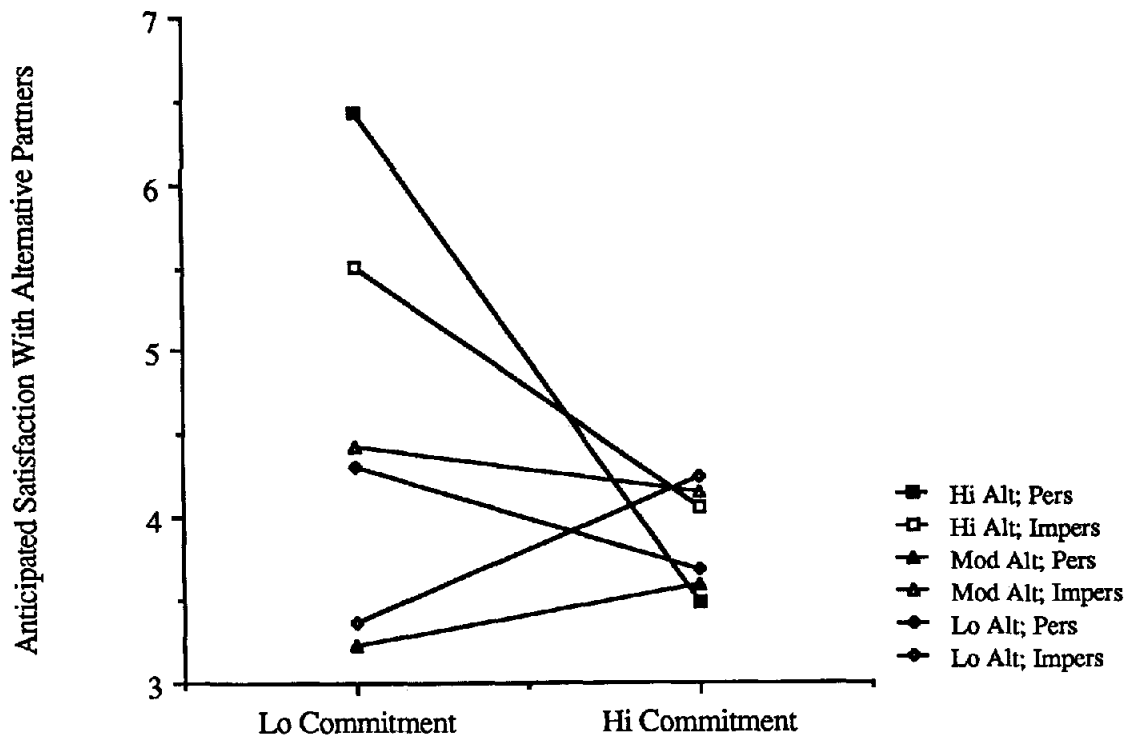


Figure 2. Anticipated satisfaction with alternative partners as a function of commitment to current relationships, alternative attractiveness, and personal versus impersonal evaluation—regression analysis results: Study 2. (Hi Alt = high alternative attractiveness, Pers = personal evaluation, Impers = impersonal evaluation, Mod Alt = moderate alternative attractiveness, Lo Alt = low alternative attractiveness.)

does Robert compare to your ideal partner?" (1 = *just like ideal*, 7 = *not at all like ideal*; reversed), "In general, how satisfying is your relationship with Robert?" (1 = *extremely*, 7 = *not at all*; reversed), and "In general, how attracted are you to Robert?" (1 = *extremely*, 7 = *not at all*; reversed). The measures of attraction to the alternative were "Generally, how attracted are you to Mr. K?" (the stranger; 1 = *extremely*, 7 = *not at all*; reversed), "Would you approach Mr. K or hope he would approach you at the social gathering?" (0 = *yes, definitely*, 1 = *no, definitely not*; reversed), and "Would you want to go on a date with Mr. K?" (0 = *yes, definitely*, 1 = *no, definitely not*; reversed).

The 5-point Likert scales that assessed devaluation of alternatives asked subjects to judge the likelihood that the alternative possessed each of 15 qualities. As in Study 2, these variables were divided into three categories based roughly on extant stage theories of developing relationships. The early-stage variables asked subjects to assess the likelihood that the alternative was intelligent, had a good sense of humor, had a pleasant personality, had an outgoing personality, and was easy to get along with. The middle-stage variables asked subjects to assess the likelihood that a relationship with the alternative would possess several qualities: would the two have similar attitudes and interests, would the alternative be comfortable to be around, and would the alternative partner be honest, sincere, reliable, and dependable. The later-stage items concerned issues thought to be related to long-term compatibility: would the alternative partner be a caring person, be sexually faithful, treat the subject well, provide emotional support, and be unselfish in a relationship.

*Reliability of measures.* The reliability of the multiple-item measures was assessed by calculating alphas for the items associated with each set. We obtained sizable coefficients for the commitment (.81) and satisfaction manipulation checks (.88) and the sets of items designed to obtain early-stage (.47), middle-stage (.60), and later-stage (.73) evaluations of alternative partners. Therefore, a single averaged measure of each construct was formed.

## Results

*Manipulation checks.* A two-factor ANOVA was performed on the commitment and satisfaction manipulation checks. Compared with low-commitment subjects, those in the high-commitment condition reported greater attachment to, commitment to, and desire to continue their relationships (the respective *M*s were 3.26 and 5.20),  $F(1, 72) = 86.56, p < .001$ . Compared with low-satisfaction subjects, those in the high-satisfaction condition reported greater attraction to their partners, satisfaction with their relationships, and more favorable comparisons to their ideal (the respective *M*s were 3.47 and 5.91),  $F(1, 72) = 206.62, p < .001$ . Furthermore, the Satisfaction  $\times$  Commitment interaction was not significant for the manipulation checks of commitment,  $F(1, 72) = 0.75, p < .388$ , or satisfaction,  $F(1, 72) = 1.26, p < .266$ . Unfortunately, our manipulations were not entirely independent: the commitment variable significantly influenced the satisfaction manipulation check,  $F(1, 72) = 5.60, p < .021$ , and the satisfaction variable significantly influenced the commitment manipulation check,  $F(1, 72) = 4.92, p < .030$ . These effects are relatively weak in comparison to the effect of each independent variable on its respective manipulation check and are about equal in strength. Nevertheless, because our manipulations were not entirely orthogonal, we modified our data analysis strategy.

*Do highly committed and highly satisfied persons devalue alternatives?* We initially analyzed our data by using analysis of variance and discovered that variations in commitment sig-

nificantly influenced all six measures of attraction to the alternative,  $F_s(1, 72) = 27.63, 8.76, 23.65, 18.11, 24.43, \text{ and } 20.67$ , whereas variations in satisfaction significantly influenced only three of six measures,  $F_s(1, 72) = 7.43, 0.00, 6.63, 0.59, 0.10, \text{ and } 9.71$ , all interactions *ns*. However, because our manipulations were not orthogonal, it is possible that the observed commitment effects are accounted for by the fact that the commitment conditions also differed in satisfaction, and it is possible that the satisfaction effects are accounted for by the fact that the satisfaction conditions also differed in commitment. Therefore, we changed our approach to the analysis of the data.

To control for the confounding of satisfaction and commitment, we analyzed the data by using regression procedures, including the satisfaction and commitment manipulation checks as covariates. First, we performed simple regression analyses, including the commitment and satisfaction main effects (0 = low, 1 = high) and the Commitment  $\times$  Satisfaction interaction term. As none of the interaction terms were significant, we dropped them from the model, and simple main effect models were tested. All six models were significant (the respective *R*s were .570, .539, .327, .454, .504, and .542). The results of these analyses are summarized in Table 3. These findings are the same as those for the ANOVA, as the analyses are identical.

To assess the impact of commitment independent of the extent to which it is confounded with satisfaction, we performed regression analyses that included two terms, the commitment main effect (0 or 1) and the satisfaction manipulation check (actual scores, ranging from 1 to 7). All six models were significant (the respective *R*s were .602, .514, .327, .457, .503, and .547). As displayed in Table 3, even when the effects of satisfaction were taken into consideration, commitment significantly influenced all six measures of attraction to the alternative, with high-commitment subjects reporting significantly lower attraction to the alternative (see the Commitment covarying satisfaction manipulation check column). To assess the impact of satisfaction independent of the extent to which it is confounded with commitment, we performed parallel analyses that included the satisfaction main effect and the commitment manipulation check. Five of six models were significant (the respective *R*s were .426, .491, .238, .466, .501, and .559). As summarized in Table 3, when the effects of commitment were taken into consideration, satisfaction had a significant negative effect on only one dependent measure, attraction to the alternative (see the Satisfaction covarying commitment manipulation check column).<sup>7</sup> Thus, commitment to relationships is clearly more consistently related to tendencies to devalue alternatives than is satisfaction with relationships.

Do these findings represent devaluation of alternatives

<sup>7</sup> We performed additional regression analyses that included (a) the commitment and satisfaction main effects (0 or 1) plus the satisfaction manipulation check, and (b) the satisfaction and commitment main effects (0 or 1) plus the commitment manipulation check. These analyses revealed the same pattern of results: All six of the analyses of commitment effects revealed significant effects of commitment, and only one of six analyses of satisfaction effects revealed a significant effect of satisfaction. Furthermore, we performed analyses that included main effect and interactions for subject sex, and none of these analyses revealed significant effects involving the subject sex variable.

**Table 3**  
*Evaluations of Alternative Partners as a Function of Satisfaction Level and Commitment Level: Study 3*

| Dependent measure         | Two-factor regressions |                      | Commitment covarying satisfaction manipulation check | Satisfaction covarying commitment manipulation check |
|---------------------------|------------------------|----------------------|--|--|
|                           | Commitment $\beta$     | Satisfaction $\beta$ |  |  |
| Attraction to alternative | -.506**                | -.262**              | -.534**  | -.364**  |
| Desire to approach        | -.327**                | .000                 | -.327**  | .072   |
| Desire to date            | -.476**                | -.252**              | -.459**  | -.124  |
| Later-stage variables     | -.447**                | -.080                | -.438**  | .059   |
| Middle-stage variables    | -.503**                | -.033                | -.500**  | .119   |
| Early-stage variables     | -.447**                | -.306**              | -.419**  | -.164+   |

*Note.* For the two-factor regressions, table values are the standardized coefficients for each independent variable. The fourth column lists the standardized coefficients in analyses of commitment effects controlling for variations in degree of satisfaction (i.e., including the satisfaction manipulation check). The last column lists standardized coefficients in analyses of satisfaction effects controlling for variations in degree of commitment (i.e., including the commitment manipulation check).

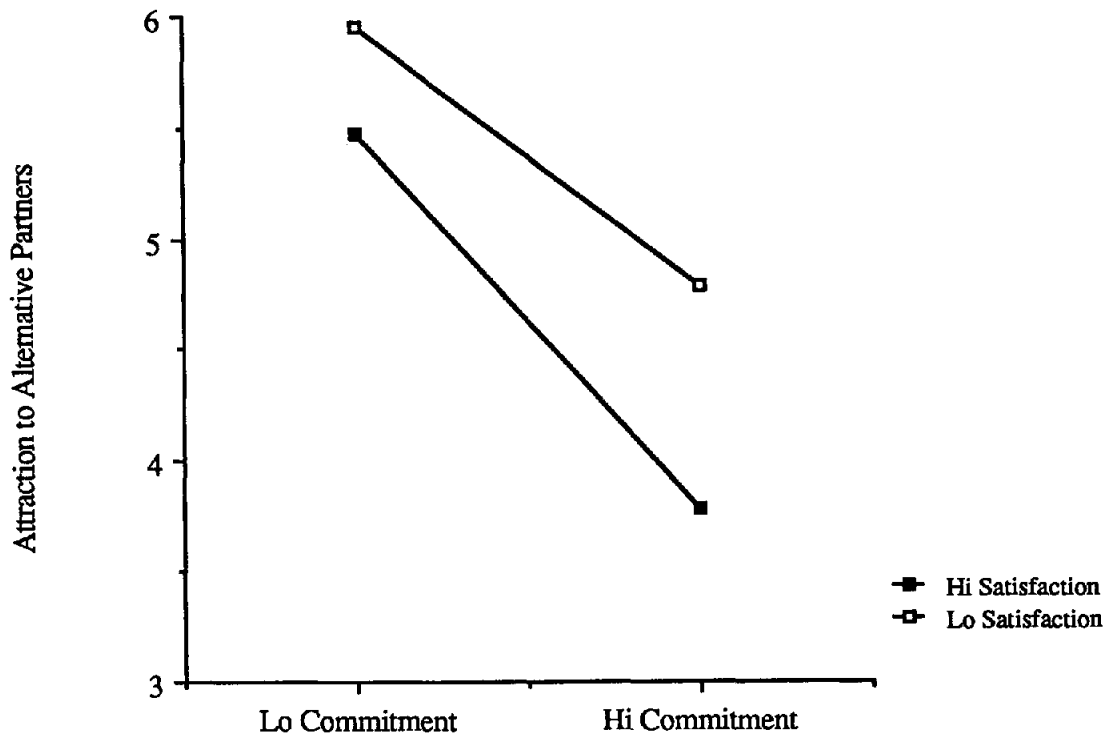
\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

among the committed, or do they represent enhancement of alternatives among the less committed? We addressed this question by examining the absolute value of subjects' assessments of potential alternative partners. (Figure 3 displays means for the first of six measures.) Among low-commitment subjects, all six ratings of alternatives were above the midpoint for each scale (4.07 on a 7-point scale; 0.92 and 0.79 on 0-1 scales; 4.10, 3.32, and 3.39 on 5-point scales). Among high-commitment subjects, five of six ratings of alternatives were below the midpoint for each scale (2.56 on a 7-point scale; 0.46 and 0.48 on 0-1 scales; 2.87, 2.75, and 3.65 on 5-point scales). When one considers that the alternative partner was described as "extremely attractive,"

it is notable that low-commitment subjects' ratings were not higher (i.e., closer to the ceiling of each scale), and it is impressive that high-commitment subjects' ratings were generally at or below the scale midpoints. However, as we do not have ratings of the alternative partner from impartial judges, it is impossible to determine unequivocally whether the reported effects occurred because less-committed persons bolstered alternatives or because highly committed persons devalued alternatives.

#### Discussion

Thus, in the Study 3 simulation experiment, persons who were more committed to their current relationships reported



*Figure 3.* Attraction to alternative partners as a function of commitment and satisfaction levels—actual data: Study 3.

lower attraction to the alternative partner, lower desire to date the alternative, lower interest in approaching or being approached by the alternative, and lower evaluations of the alternative with respect to early-, middle-, and later-stage variables. These effects were weaker for the satisfaction variable; only one of six dependent variables revealed significant effects as a function of variations in satisfaction level. Thus, as in Studies 1 and 2, it once again appears that tendencies toward devaluation of alternatives are more powerfully linked to feelings of commitment to ongoing relationships than to feelings of satisfaction.

### General Discussion

The present research was designed to demonstrate that in comparison to less-committed persons, individuals who are highly committed to their current partners reject and devalue alternative partners, particularly under conditions of high threat. Consistent with predictions, Study 1 demonstrated that in comparison to persons who ultimately ended their relationships, those whose relationships persisted evidenced an increasing tendency to evaluate alternative partners negatively. As expected, this tendency was most directly mediated by feelings of commitment. However, although the Study 1 findings are consistent with the assertion that the highly committed devalue alternatives as a response to experienced threat, this study does not provide a direct test of this hypothesis. Therefore, Study 2 effected two manipulations of threat to current relationships. The Study 2 dating service experiment demonstrated that in comparison to less-committed persons, the highly committed reported lower attraction to alternatives. As predicted, this tendency was greatest when the alternative was very attractive and subjects were faced with actual opportunities to date that person. However, the Study 2 manipulation of personal versus impersonal evaluations of alternatives varied both opportunity to date the alternative and point of view. Also, as in Study 1, in Study 2 commitment was explored as an attribute variable. The Study 3 simulation experiment extended the findings of Studies 1 and 2 by demonstrating that when level of satisfaction was controlled, evaluations of attractive alternatives were lower among persons who were strongly committed to their current relationships; that is, variations in commitment influenced evaluations of alternative partners independent of degree of satisfaction with the current relationship. Thus, the present research provides very good support for our hypotheses.

In all three studies, we also examined the effects of satisfaction on devaluation of alternatives. All three studies provided some evidence of a link between satisfaction and tendencies to negatively evaluate alternatives, but in all three studies this link was stronger for commitment than for satisfaction. One is tempted to conclude that commitment is the more powerful source of tendencies to devalue threatening alternatives. However, such a conclusion must be tempered by recognition that the more consistent and powerful effects of commitment may have resulted from differential reliability in the two variables in Studies 1 and 2, from differential variability in the two variables in Studies 1 and 2, or from differentially powerful manipulations of the two variables in Study 3. Thus, the most prudent conclusion at present is that commitment fairly clearly medi-

ates tendencies to devalue alternatives, but that level of satisfaction may also play some role in this process.

Several strengths and limitations of the present work should be noted: The primary strength of Study 1 is that it examined changes over time in evaluations of alternative partners; real changes in ongoing relationships were explored. The primary strength of Study 2 is that it examined reactions to threatening alternatives in a very realistic setting, the context of a computer dating service. That persons who were committed to real, ongoing relationships devalued attractive and threatening alternatives in such a context increases confidence in the obtained findings. The primary strength of Study 3 is that it came as close as is possible to the ideal of the laboratory experiment and thus provided good evidence regarding the causal link between commitment and tendencies to devalue alternatives. Given that one cannot actively manipulate individuals' commitment in ongoing relationships, the simulation experiment may be the closest feasible approximation of causal evidence.

However, for all three studies we could construct plausible alternative explanations for the obtained findings. First, it could be that in Study 1, alternative partners actually became less favorable over the course of a relationship (e.g., alternatives may have taken themselves out of the running). However, this interpretation seems less plausible as we observed the same phenomenon in Studies 2 and 3, where alternatives did not become less attractive over time. Second, it could be that in Studies 1 and 2—where commitment was explored as an attribute variable—the observed effect was produced by another personal attribute that is confounded with commitment (e.g., an openness to intimacy, a longstanding habit of attachment, general lack of interest in dating around). However, given that we observed the same phenomenon in Study 3—where commitment level was actively manipulated—this interpretation seems somewhat less plausible. Third, it could be that in Study 2, committed subjects diminished their evaluations of alternative partners as a deliberate strategy to lessen the likelihood that they would be paired with a partner from the dating service: not meeting is an excellent way to avoid temptation. Alternatively, rather than reacting to the experience of high threat, committed persons could have merely been reporting that they realistically viewed the alternative as an unpromising person to become involved with, especially if they had concerns about their own value as a romantic partner. It could even be that committed subjects in Study 2 were showing generosity: By providing low evaluations of alternatives, they effectively boosted others' chances of being paired with the alternative and maximized the odds that the alternative would be paired with someone who was actively interested in forming a relationship. However, the fact that Study 3 subjects evidenced the same behavior makes this interpretation less convincing: in Study 3 there was no need to persuade a dating service not to pair oneself with the alternative, and there were no visible (and potentially more interested and needy) competitors for the affections of the alternative. Fourth, it could be that in Study 3, our role-playing subjects merely behaved in a way that is consistent with stereotypes regarding appropriate behavior in committed relationships. However, in light of the consistency of these findings with those of Studies 1 and 2, this interpretation seems somewhat less likely. Ultimately, however, although we can counter each of these alternative explanations, it is clear

that future research will need to explore the merit of these and other alternative accounts of our findings.

Two important questions remain to be addressed. First, with respect to all three studies, we must ask whether the observed findings resulted from devaluation of alternatives by highly committed persons or from enhancement by the less committed. It could be that low-commitment persons have no barriers against interest in alternative partners and therefore come to idealize alternatives. We tried to address this possibility in all three studies, examining the absolute levels of ratings made by low- and high-commitment individuals. On average, low-commitment persons' evaluations of alternatives were above the median of our rating scales, but did not seem especially high; these ratings were certainly not at the ceiling of our scales. Also, on average, high-commitment persons' ratings of alternatives were typically at or below the scale midpoints. Indeed, in Study 2, high-commitment subjects operating under conditions of high threat rated extremely attractive alternatives at about the same level as did comparable subjects who rated alternatives of only moderate and low attractiveness. The consistency of our findings across a variety of measures using diverse methodologies has convinced us that the best explanation of our findings is the one proffered herein; however, in the final analysis, this question remains to be further explored in future work.

A second important question concerns the motivational underpinnings of this phenomenon: Do our findings result from committed persons' attempts to deal with the conflict they experience when confronted with a real and tempting challenge to their ongoing relationships, as a motivational explanation would imply (e.g., dissonance theory)? Alternatively, do our findings stem from a simple perceptual phenomenon whereby alternatives look less favorable merely because they are being compared with a very gratifying current relationship, as the concept of comparison level would imply? This question becomes especially important when one considers that the Study 2 manipulation of personal versus impersonal evaluation varied both threat (i.e., opportunity to date the alternative) and standard of comparison (i.e., own versus others' standards). We do not believe that this question can be answered unequivocally on the basis of the present research, although we have tried to provide evidence relevant to this issue. First, Study 2 demonstrated an interaction of commitment level with alternative attractiveness. If devaluation resulted from a simple perceptual phenomenon, shouldn't we have observed a simple main effect of commitment level; shouldn't all alternatives—whether so-so or excruciatingly tempting—be shifted downward  $n$  units by committed persons? In contrast, a more motivational account would argue that tendencies to devalue should be differentially aroused as a function of the degree to which a given alternative is threatening, which is what we observed in our research. Second, let us address findings regarding the relative effectiveness of commitment and satisfaction in predicting evaluations of alternatives. As the perceptual account proposes that devaluation results from unfavorable comparison to a very gratifying current relationship, shouldn't this approach predict a stronger effect of satisfaction than of commitment? In contrast, a motivational account would propose that devaluation results from threats to feelings of commitment, which is what we observed in our research. Thus, we believe that our findings are more

consistent with a motivational explanation, but the final answer may require further empirical work.

Several directions for future research seem promising: First, it would be interesting to determine whether devaluation of threatening alternatives is a mechanism aimed primarily at keeping one's own mind (and heart) straight, or whether it is a means of preparing oneself to actively reject an alternative suitor. If this phenomenon occurs only when an alternative actively pursues the individual, then the process would seem to serve the latter function (i.e., "if you'll stay away from me, I won't put you down"). However, to the extent that this phenomenon occurs in the absence of a pressing need to push away an ardent suitor, the process would seem to serve the function of bolstering feelings of certainty and confidence in the rightness of one's commitment decision. Second, it would be interesting to explore the limits of this effect. One interesting boundary case might be that of open relationships—relationships in which partners agree that "meaningless" sexual encounters outside of the relationship are not to be regarded as threats to their commitment. Do partners in open relationships manage to pursue encounters with alternatives without rendering those encounters unthreatening, or is devaluation especially pronounced because threat to the current relationship is great? Third, it would be interesting to examine the possibility that people assure their partners of their commitment by "defusing" alternatives the partner finds to be threatening—ex-spouses, first loves, attractive coworkers, and so on (e.g., "he was handsome, but he was a terrible lover"; "she's got a magnificent vitae and great legs, but she has no sense of humor").

## Conclusions

The current work contributes to the understanding of the maintenance of stable relationships by demonstrating the tendency of committed persons to view alternatives—especially alternatives who are very attractive, tempting, and available—in somewhat less enthusiastic and favorable terms than do less-committed persons. These findings suggest that one important process by which individuals resist temptation and protect their current relationships may be that of burning their bridges: driving away threatening alternatives, or at least driving threatening alternatives from their minds. This process would seem to serve the broader function of enhancing individual well-being by reducing internal conflict, in that the end product of this form of cognitive activity is that the individual is able to avoid difficult and anxiety-provoking choices. Rather than being faced with the necessity of denying oneself the enjoyment of a very attractive alternative partner—or enjoying such an alternative and facing possible harm to the current relationship or ending the current relationship and developing a new relationship with the alternative—individuals are able to achieve peace of mind by simply rendering alternatives harmless and putting potential alternative partners out of their minds. Thus, these findings contribute to the understanding of the dynamics by which individuals react to and evaluate potential alternative partners and point to the importance of cognitive processes in the maintenance of committed close relationships.

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