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Developmental and Dyadic Perspectives on Commitment in Adult Romantic Relationships

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Abstract

We tested hypotheses concerning the developmental roots of becoming the "weak-link" (less committed) partner in adult romantic relationships, and the associations between partners' absolute and relative levels of commitment and dyadic outcomes. We examined 78 target participants who have been studied since birth and were involved in a romantic relationship when they were 20–21 years old. As predicted, people who received lower quality support from caregivers in toddlerhood or were unable to resolve conflicts with a best friend in mid-adolescence were more likely to become the weak-link (less committed) partner in their adult romantic relationships at age 20–21. Furthermore, the lower the weak-link partner was in commitment and the greater the discrepancy in commitment between the partners, the greater the likelihood that romantic couples displayed hostility (rated by observers) during a videotaped conflict resolution task when they were 20–21 years old. These findings are discussed from developmental and dyadic perspectives.

Keywords

Commitment; relationship dissolution; romantic relationships; weak-link partners; developmental trajectories

When one surveys research on intimate relationships, some stark ironies become apparent. For example, despite suggestions that patterns of interdependence in adult relationships should be affected by earlier relationships with parents and close friends (e.g., Drigotas, Rusbult, & Verette, 1999), remarkably little is known about whether or how relationships encountered earlier in life "set the stage" for an individual's later adult relationships. In addition, even though relationships involve two people, many investigators continue to

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adopt an individual-centered perspective when thinking about and studying intrinsically *dyadic* processes and outcomes.

In this research, we adopt developmental and dyadic approaches to understanding how significant relationships earlier in life are: (a) systematically associated with *relative* levels of commitment in adult romantic relationships, and (b) how absolute and relative levels of commitment affect how couples behave in conflict resolution situations. We focus on commitment because it is a central theoretical construct in the study of relationships (Kiesler, 1971; Kelley, 1983; Rusbult, 1980) and one of the most powerful predictors of relationship disharmony and dissolution (Berscheid & Reis, 1998; Rusbult, Arriaga, & Agnew, 2001). Indeed, from a theoretical perspective, commitment may be the *best* single barometer of relationship stability (Rusbult, 1983).

Commitment should also predict how much hostility is expressed in relationships, especially when partners have incompatible goals or interests. Highly committed people are motivated to behave in an accommodative manner when trying to resolve disagreements with their partners (Rusbult, 1980, 1983). Moreover, the inability or unwillingness to behave constructively when a partner's interests diverge from one's own or when a partner behaves badly is one of the best predictors of negative relationship outcomes (see Rusbult et al., 2001).

Relationship Commitment: The Centrality of the Weak-Link Partner

According to the principle of least interest (Waller & Hill, 1951), the partner in a relationship who has less to lose if the relationship ends should be in a stronger position to dictate important terms and conditions within the relationship. According to Interdependence Theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), weak-link partners should be less dependent on the relationship for good outcomes because they are relatively less satisfied, less invested, and/or have better alternatives to the current partner/relationship than strong-link partners do.

Weak-link versus strong-link status in a relationship should predict important relationship outcomes, above and beyond the main effects associated with each partner's score on a given measure such as commitment (Attridge, Berscheid, & Simpson, 1995; Waller & Hill, 1951). Supporting this premise, Attridge et al. (1995) found that the weak-link partner in relationships predicted eventual dissolution in dating couples, above and beyond other information provided separately by each partner. This suggests that the commitment of the weak-link partner may be especially diagnostic of important relationship outcomes. Moreover, Agnew (1999) found that the "less interested" partner in each dyad (i.e., the weak-link) is more likely to determine the couple's interdependent behaviors (e.g., deciding whether and when to use condoms).

The Developmental Construction of the Weak-Link Partner

Despite the greater influence that weak-link partners have on relationship outcomes, nothing is known about the developmental course of becoming the weak-link partner in adult romantic relationships. Past research has focused almost exclusively on the proximal relationship features that shape commitment in adult romantic partnerships (Rusbult et al., 2006). In this research, we adopt a developmental perspective on how a person's prior history of close relationships relates to whether s/he is likely to become the weak-link or the strong-link partner in his/her subsequent adult romantic relationships, given that significant relationships develop in meaningful patterns across the lifespan (Collins & Sroufe, 1999; Collins & van Dulmen, 2006; Furman & Wehner, 1994; Sroufe et al., 2005). Despite important differences between involuntary, hierarchical parent-child relationships and

voluntary, egalitarian friendships and romantic relationships, behaviors across these relational domains should be similar to the extent that experiences with significant relationship partners influence one's expectations and later interactions with future partners (Carlson, Sroufe, & Egeland, 2004; Collins, 1995; Sroufe, Egeland, & Kreutzer, 1990). Because individuals adapt to new partners by assimilating new experiences to expectations developed in *past* relationships, early caregiver-child relationships and friendships should exert a particularly strong influence on an individual's later romantic relationships (Collins & Sroufe, 1999).

Past research has documented systematic connections between the quality of early parentchild relationships and expectations/interactions in later adult romantic relationships, above and beyond the contributions of proximal variables (see Sroufe et al., 2005). For example, individuals who have secure relationships with their caregivers early in life tend to experience more growth over time in their commitment to their romantic partners early in adulthood (Duemmler & Kobak, 2001). These findings suggest that important features of adult romantic relationships can be affected by the quality of an individual's prior relationship history.

To investigate who is more likely to become the weak-link versus the strong-link partner within adult romantic relationships, we examined developmentally salient socioemotional experiences with parents and friends at two earlier stages of life. We hypothesized that having unsupportive or negative interactions with significant others early in development should predict becoming the partner who is less dependent on the current romantic partner/ relationship for good outcomes. These early negative experiences may lead individuals to doubt the responsiveness and concern of close others, leading them invest less in romantic relationships. Early negative social experiences may also activate self-protective motives to avoid being hurt or receiving "poor returns" on future interpersonal investments.

The two developmental stages we examined were target participants' interactions with their mothers while doing challenging tasks at age two and targets' style of resolving conflicts with their best friend at age 16. Learning how to balance autonomy needs with intimacy needs is a critical developmental task, particularly during toddlerhood and adolescence. Both of these developmental stages are important consolidation points during which individuals must learn to become independent and effectively negotiate their own needs, desires, and personal interests with significant others. By assuming the weak-link role in later romantic relationships, individuals should have greater power within their relationships, and they should have less to lose if/when their relationships dissolve (Attridge et al., 1995).

A Dyadic Perspective on Commitment and Dyadic Hostility

Although no past research has examined whether developmental trajectories forecast who becomes the weak-link versus the strong-link partner in adult romantic relationships, we know more about ties between commitment and certain dyadic outcomes. For example, research using individual-centered models has found that more committed people (i.e., those who score higher on commitment measures) inhibit negative responses and react in more constructive and benevolent ways when their partners behave poorly than less committed people do (Arriaga & Rusbult, 1998; van Lange et al., 1997). This inhibition of negative responses, in turn, prevents or curtails escalating cycles of negative behavior in couples.

A dyad-centered perspective supplements these findings by proposing that relationship functioning should be more contingent on the weak-link partner's than on the strong-link partner's level of commitment. Moreover, the relative commitment levels of *both* partners should also affect relationship dynamics. Moving toward a dyadic perspective on commitment, Drigotas, Rusbult, and Verette (1999) claimed (but did not test) that "(w)hen

one person's level of commitment is substantially greater than (or lower than) that of his or her partner, relationships do not fare well (pp. 408–409)." This implies that the discrepancy *between* partners' commitment levels might be more consequential for relationship harmony than either partner's absolute level of commitment, *even if both partners score relatively high in commitment* (Attridge et al., 1995; Waller & Hill, 1951). This implies that lower absolute levels of commitment by one partner might not always be associated with poor relationship outcomes, and that higher absolute commitment levels might not always be tied to good outcomes.

Thus, the weak-link partner's level of commitment along with the degree of *discrepancy* between the partners' commitment scores should uniquely predict relationship outcomes. For example, if both partners are highly committed and there is little discrepancy in commitment between them, they should inhibit negative responses during conflict. If the weak-link partner is lower on commitment compared to other weak-link partners, and there is a small commitment discrepancy between the partners, both partners should be less likely to want changes from each other during conflict because neither partner should be motivated to demand change. If, however, the weak-link partner is lower on commitment and his/her strong-link partner is much more strongly committed (i.e., there is a large discrepancy in commitment), these partners should display the most dysfunctional patterns of conflict, especially the demand/withdraw pattern. Criticisms from the strong-link partner, who may want change, should be met with defensiveness from the weak-link partner, who should strive to keep the strong-link partner at bay (Eldridge & Christensen, 2002). Accordingly, we tested whether the weak-link partner's absolute level of commitment and the degree of commitment discrepancy *between* the strong-link partner and the weak-link partner predicted the degree to which each couple displayed and reciprocated cold and distancing behavior (hostility) during a videotaped conflict resolution and collaboration task.

The Current Study

The current study is based on data from the Minnesota Longitudinal Study of Risk and Adaptation (MLSRA; Sroufe et al., 2005). At age 20–21, MLSRA target participants and their romantic partners of four or more months were invited to participate in were invited to participate in a couples assessment. Targets and their partners first independently completed self-report questionnaires that assessed their current relationship and then completed a videotaped conflict resolution and collaboration discussion task. We tested three hypotheses:

Developmental Hypotheses

The quality of maternal support/caregiving observed during challenging tasks (when target participants were 24 months old) should predict targets' weak-link/strong-link status in their adult romantic relationships 20 years later. Receiving higher quality care at age two should predict a *lower* probability of being the weak-link partner in romantic relationships at ages 20–21 (Hypothesis 1). Targets' quality of conflict resolution with their best friend at age 16 should also forecast their weak-link status in later romantic relationships (Hypothesis 2). The use of functional conflict resolution tactics with a best friend at age 16, indicative of greater mutuality and interpersonal sensitivity, should predict a lower likelihood of being the weak-link partner in later romantic relationships.

Dyadic Hostility

The lower the weak-link partner's level of commitment and the greater the discrepancy between the commitment levels of partners, the greater the likelihood that the couple will display more observer-rated dyadic hostility (Hypothesis 3).

Method

Participants

The data were collected as part of the MLSRA, a prospective study of at-risk target participants and their families (Sroufe et al., 2005). Fifty-eight percent of the target participants are European-American, 14% are African-American, 3% are Native American or Latino, 16% are of mixed racial background, and 9% cannot be classifiable due to missing data on fathers' race. The full sample is 55% male and 45% female.

We focused on a subset of the full sample (N = 78 target participants), all of whom were involved in a heterosexual romantic relationship of 4 months or longer and participated in couples assessment when targets were 20–21 years old. The mean length of relationships was 27.75 months (SD = 22.01).

Developmental Precursors

Parenting Quality at 24 months—When targets were 24 months old, they engaged in four videotaped problem-solving tasks with their mothers. Because the tasks were designed to be increasingly difficult and above each child's capabilities, each toddler needed assistance from his/her mother to complete each task. Trained observers rated each caregiver's (each mother's) behavior during these interactions on a 5-point *Parenting Quality* scale that measured the quality of each parent's support/sensitivity to the child's emotional and developmental needs during the tasks. High scores were given to parents who were consistently supportive, enthusiastic, and patient throughout the tasks without being controlling or intrusive. The intraclass correlation was .82.

Friendship Conflict Resolution at Age 16—When targets were 16 years-old, they completed an hour-long audiotaped interview about their best friendship. Trained coders then rated how conflicts were typically resolved by each target with his/her best friend on a 7-point *Friendship Conflict Resolution* scale. High scores were given to targets who reported displaying mutual compromise, commitment to maintaining the friendship, and effective and fair approaches to conflict resolution. The interrater reliability was .61.

Romantic Relationship Assessments

Commitment at Age 20–21—When targets were 20–21 years-old, they and their current romantic partners independently completed relationship measures, including Lund's (1985) *Commitment Scale.* Responses were made on 7-point Likert-type scales, anchored 1 (*Not at all*) to 7 (*Very/A Lot*) ($\alpha_{female} = .66$, $\alpha_{male} = .59$).

Dyadic Hostility—Each couple engaged in a videotaped observational lab procedure. Each couple first discussed the problem that caused the *most* conflict in their relationship for 10 minutes while trying to resolve it. Each couple then discussed areas on which they agreed the most in their relationship for 4 minutes. Seven trained observers then rated each videotaped interaction on 7-point scales that assessed the level of hostility displayed in each interaction. This measure assessed the extent to which each couple displayed a cold and rejecting demeanor that reflected hopelessness and futility about the relationship (Collins et al., 1999). High scores were given to dyads where partners tried to distance themselves from each other psychological or emotionally, showed little remorse or recognition that they may have hurt their partner during the interaction, and/or expressed little or no hope of salvaging the relationship. Because the *Hostility* scale assessed the extent to which each *couple* engaged in reciprocal exchanges of hostility, both partners had to initiate and reciprocate these cold and rejecting emotions to receive the highest possible score. Couples in which neither partner engaged in hostile behaviors, or in which one partner engaged in hostile behavior while the other consistently tried to defuse hostility, received lower scores. The intraclass correlation was .96.

Results

Developmental Precursors

Descriptive statistics appear in Table 1. To test our hypotheses, we first determined whether each target participant was the weak-link or the strong-link partner in each relationship by examining both partners' scores on the Commitment Scale. If the target participant scored lower than his/her romantic partner on commitment, s/he was classified as the weak-link partner; if the target scored higher than his/her partner on commitment, s/he was classified as the strong-link partner.¹

We then regressed this dichotomous variable (i.e., target is the weak-link partner versus target is the strong-link partner) on the developmental precursors (observer-rated parenting quality at 24 months and observer-rated friendship conflict resolution at 16 years) in two separate logistic regressions. For each analysis, an odds ratio greater than 1 indicates that targets are more likely to be classified as the strong-link partner, whereas an odds ratio less than 1 indicates that targets are more likely to be the weak-link partner.²

Parenting Quality—Supporting Hypothesis 1, the quality of parenting at 24 months predicted eventual weak-link status. As shown in Table 2, as the quality of rated parenting when targets were 24 months old increased, targets were *less* likely to be the weak-link partner in their romantic relationships 20 years later.

Friendship Conflict Resolution—Supporting Hypothesis 2, the quality of friendship conflict at age 16 also predicted eventual weak-link status (see Table 2). If target participants were rated as resolving conflict with their best friend in a more mutually satisfying manner and used more effective and fair tactics, they were less likely to be the weak-link partner in their later romantic relationships.

The Weak-Link Partner and Predictions of Concurrent Dyadic Behavior

Preliminary Correlations—Partner discrepancy commitment scores were calculated by regressing the strong-link partner's scores onto the weak-link partner's scores and saving the residual values (i.e., the deviations of the fitted line from the observed line).³ We next calculated correlations between the weak-link partner's commitment score, the strong-link partner's commitment score, the discrepancy between relationship partners' commitment scores, the target participant's developmental precursors, and dyadic hostility. The results, shown in Table 3, reveal that the weak-link partner's commitment score (r = -0.32) were both negatively associated with observer-rated dyadic hostility. Thus, less commitment reported by both the weak-link partner and the strong-link partner predicted greater dyadic hostility during the romantic conflict discussions when targets were 20–21 years-old.

¹For three couples, the target could not be classified as the weak-link or the strong-link partner because both partners had identical commitment scores. These couples were dropped from the analyses. ²Secondary analyses were conducted to ensure our findings were not attributable to relationship length or the gender of the weak-link

²Secondary analyses were conducted to ensure our findings were not attributable to relationship length or the gender of the weak-link partner. All reported effects remained statistically significant when we controlled for weak-link gender, and all remained at least marginally significant when we controlled for relationship length (all ps < .06). ³Difference scores tend to be unreliable (Cohen & Cohen, 1983; Cronbach & Furby, 1970), and they are problematic because they are

³Difference scores tend to be unreliable (Cohen & Cohen, 1983; Cronbach & Furby, 1970), and they are problematic because they are correlated with the two scores that create them (i.e., the weak-link scores correlate negatively with the difference score for each dyad). On the other hand, residualized scores are widely used because they are both reliable and they are not highly correlated with the scores that create them (Williams & Zimmerman, 1982).

Predicting Dyadic Hostility

To test Hypothesis 3, we ran a hierarchical regression analysis in which observer-rated dyadic hostility was regressed on: The weak-link partner's commitment score, the strong-link partner's commitment score, and the gender of the weak-link partner (Step 1); the discrepancy between the two partners' commitment scores (Step 2); the two-way interaction between the weak-link partner's commitment score and the size of the within-couple commitment discrepancy (Step 3). To decompose the interactions, simple regression slopes were calculated at each level of a predictor at one standard deviation above and below the sample mean (Aiken & West, 1991).⁴

Only the weak-link partner's gender predicted dyadic hostility (see Table 4). When weaklink partners were female, couples displayed greater observer-rated hostility in the conflict interactions than when the weak-link partner was male. Partially supporting Hypothesis 3, a marginally significant two-way interaction emerged between the weak-link partner's commitment score and the discrepancy between the two partners' commitment scores (see Table 4). As shown in Figure 1, when there was less discrepancy between partners' commitment scores (i.e., when partners had more similar commitment scores), couples displayed moderate levels of hostility, regardless of the weak-link partner's level of commitment. However, when there was a larger discrepancy, the weak-link partner's level of commitment was associated with greater hostility. The full model accounted for 20% of the variance in observer-rated hostility.

Discussion

These findings indicate that developmental and dyadic perspectives increase our understanding of the origins and outcomes of romantic relationship commitment in early adulthood. We documented that the probability of becoming the weak-link partner in adult romantic relationships depends on the quality of important relationships experienced *earlier* in life. Individuals who received lower quality parenting from their mothers at age two or were less able to resolve conflicts effectively with their best friends at age 16 were more likely to be the relatively less committed (weak-link) partner in their adult romantic relationships at age 20–21. Thus, having poorer quality or conflictual relationships in either toddlerhood or adolescence appears to be a risk factor for becoming the weak-link partner in adult relationships.

Our findings also show that the prediction of certain dyadic outcomes can be improved when one assesses the commitment of *both partners in relation to each other*. When the weak-link partner was relatively less committed compared to other weak-link partners *and* when relationship partners' scores were highly discrepant, couples were more likely to reciprocate hostile behaviors during a conflict discussion. These results extend those of Drigotas et al. (1999) and Attridge et al. (1995) by showing that the mutuality of *both* partners' levels of commitment and the level of the weak-link partner's commitment jointly affect dyadic functioning.

Future research needs to clarify why poor parenting quality early in childhood and poor conflict negotiation at age 16 forecasts weak-link status in adult romantic relationships. We suspect that early negative social experiences instill strong self-protective motives to avoid being hurt or to forestall losing or receiving "poor returns" on future interpersonal investments. Individuals who have negative relationship histories may become dominant in

⁴Secondary analyses indicated that the effects did not change when we controlled for relationship length. Furthermore, relationship length, the interactions of the main effects with relationship length, and the interactions of the main effects with weak-link gender also did not significantly predict dyadic hostility.

their relationships, eventually becoming weak-link partners, to obtain greater power or autonomy. Having a history of unsupportive or conflictual relationships may also undermine an individual's ability to use relationship-maintenance processes effectively. Such people might be less likely to derogate attractive alternative partners (Miller, 1997; Simpson, Gangestad, & Lerma, 1990), perpetuating the belief that better potential partners are still available. Such people may also be less able to sustain positive partner illusions, which protect relationships from threats and downturns (Murray & Holmes, 1997).

On the other hand, if an individual learns how to navigate issues involving intimacy and commitment with close others successfully early in development, having a history of positive and supportive relationships may bolster his/her trust in and reliance on partners, regardless of the changes or stressors a romantic couple is likely to face. Higher levels of trust, in turn, should motivate the strong-link partner to enact more pro-relationship behaviors, thereby increasing *both* partners' commitment to the relationship across time (Simpson, 2007; Wieselquist et al., 1999).

Though not predicted, it is not surprising that greater hostility was observed when the weaklink partner was a female. Women are more likely to use language to reinforce intimacy and maintain relationships, whereas men strive to maintain independence and consolidate their status (Tannen, 1994). Thus, when female partners are the weak-link in a relationship, there should be relatively fewer attempts to reinforce intimacy and maintain the relationship.

Caveats and Conclusions

Even though they are prospective, our findings are correlational and cannot address questions of causality. For example, we do not know whether receiving lower quality parenting early in life causes people to become weak-link partners in their adult romantic relationships. Furthermore, other intervening experiences (e.g., therapy, a beneficent mentor or friend) during development might prevent individuals from becoming weak-link partners in adulthood. What our findings *do* imply is that more negative interpersonal experiences with parents or a best friend earlier in life predict eventual weak-link versus strong-link status in romantic relationships.

Our use of multiple methods and informants to assess target participants' relationships at different points of their lives strengthens our confidence in these results. These results, for example, cannot be attributed to shared method variance, and it is impressive to find theoretically meaningful associations between constructs that were measured across nearly 20 years of developmental history.

In conclusion, this research addresses a major gap in the commitment literature by elucidating how early socioemotional experiences contribute to patterns of interdependence *within* adult romantic relationships. Developmental and dyadic perspectives give a deeper and more nuanced understanding of current relationship dynamics. Our perspective and findings are also likely to have important implications for how relationship counselors and therapists view, assess, and help romantic couples achieve more positive relationship outcomes.

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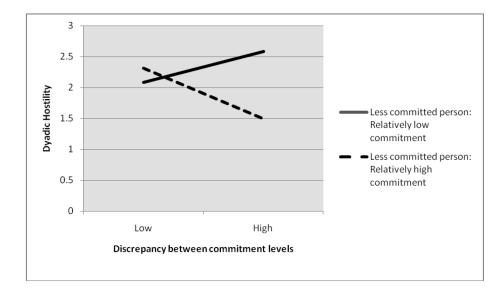


Figure 1.

The interaction of the weak-link partner's commitment and the discrepancy of partners' commitment scores predicting dyadic hostility. Predicted values are plotted for participants scoring 1 SD above and 1 SD below the sample mean on each measure.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	SD	N
Target Commitment	5.89	.79	78
Partner Commitment	5.97	.72	78
Overall parenting quality, 24 months	3.24	1.15	68
Conflict resolution with best friend, age 16	3.76	1.18	74
Dyadic Hostility	2.22	1.60	72

Note: All scales could range from 1-7

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Table 2

Predicting Weak-Link Status

	β	SE	df	Wald χ^2	SE df Wald χ^2 Odds ratio
Overall parenting quality, 24 months	.47* .23 65	.23	65	4.11	1.59
Conflict resolution with best friend, age 16 $.57^*$.25 70	.57*	.25	70	5.35	1.78
* p <.05					

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1. Weak link partner's commitment level					
2. Strong link partner's commitment level	$.71^{**}(N = 75)$	l			
3. Discrepancy of partners' commitment level	$54^{**}(N=75)$ $07(N=75)$	–.07 (N = 75)			
4. Overall parent caregiving at 24 months	.10 (N = 66)	.13 (N = 66)	$06^{**}(N=68)$	I	
5. Conflict resolution with friends at 16	.02 (N = 71)	.04 (N = 71)	–.01 (N = 74)	$.22^{*}(N = 78)$	I
6. Dyadic hostility with romantic partner at $20-21$ $34^{**}(N = 69)$ $32^{**}(N = 69)$	$34^{**}(N = 69)$	32^{**} (N = 69)	.14 (N = 72)	$32^{**}(N=64) 30^{*}(N=68)$	$30^{*}(N = 68)$
Note:		-			
$_{p<.05}^{*}$					
** <i>p</i> <.01					

Table 4

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Commitment: Predicting Dyadic Hostility

		В	S EB	β	\mathbb{R}^2
					.18
Wea	Weak-link partner's score	51	.34	24	
Stro	Strong-link partner's score	24	.40	-00	
Sex	Sex of weak-link partner	.49*	.18	.30*	
					.17
Wei	Weak-link partner's score	38	.47	17	
Stro	Strong-link partner's score	34	.47	13	
Se	Sex of weak-link partner	.49*	.19	*0£.	
Dis	Discrepancy of commitment	.26	.63	.06	
					.20
We	Weak-link partner's score	29	.47	13	
Str	Strong-link partner's score	19	.47	07	
Sez	Sex of weak-link partner	.52**	.18	.32**	
Di	Discrepancy of commitment	20	.66	05	
Le	Less committed X Discrepancy	-1.16 ^{\div}	.63	25^{+}	

Note: N= 69

 $f_{p<.06}^{\dagger}$