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# Need Fulfillment and Stay-Leave Behavior: On the Diagnosticity of Personal and Relational Needs.

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Need Fulfillment and Stay-Leave Behavior:  
On the Diagnosticity of Personal and Relational Needs

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Abstract

Need fulfillment has been found to be associated with numerous positive relationship outcomes, but its impact on stay-leave behavior is less clear. In the current study, we considered whether the fulfillment of different needs might differentially affect stay-leave behavior. We distinguished between needs that are personal in nature and those that are relational in nature. Central to our theoretical analysis is the interdependence-based contention that the fulfillment of different kinds of needs provides diagnostic information regarding a partner's motives and intentions regarding a relationship. Using two-wave longitudinal data obtained from romantically involved participants, we tested the relative fit of two alternative models that specified the associations between the fulfillment of different kinds of needs, commitment, and stay-leave behavior. Consistent with an interdependence approach, we found that the influence of the fulfillment of personal needs on stay-leave behavior was mediated by commitment, whereas the fulfillment of relational needs directly influenced stay-leave behavior. Implications for relationship functioning are considered.

Keywords: commitment, dissolution, interdependence, need fulfillment, stay-leave behavior

## Need Fulfillment and Stay-Leave Behavior: On the Diagnosticity Personal and Relational Needs

Need fulfillment has been found to be associated with numerous positive relationship outcomes. Some outcomes of need fulfillment benefit the relationship through their impact on the individual partners, such as greater satisfaction after a disagreement with a partner (Patrick, Knee, Canevello, & Lonsbary, 2007) and greater daily experiences of positive emotions (Le & Agnew, 2001). Other outcomes of need fulfillment benefit the relationship more directly, such as increased commitment to the relationship (Drigotas & Rusbult, 1992), and more secure attachment within the relationship (La Guardia, Ryan, Couchman, & Deci, 2000).

With regard to relationship breakup (i.e., whether the romantic relationship remained intact or dissolved over time), the research on the role of need fulfillment is less clear. In their tests of a predictive model of romantic relationship breakup, Drigotas and Rusbult (1992) were unable to identify a consistent mediator of the association between need fulfillment and breakup. This led the authors to infer that not all needs may relate equally to the decision to either stay in or leave a relationship. Slotter and Finkel (2009) found further evidence that not all needs contribute similarly to breakup, finding that fulfillment of companionship needs interacts with attachment anxiety to predict dissolution, but that fulfillment of the needs for autonomy and competency did not. To date, an examination of the mechanisms that distinguish fulfillment of some needs from others in the prediction of breakup has yet to be conducted. The aim of the current study was to consider how the fulfillment of different needs might differentially affect stay-leave behavior, a construct related to breakup that incorporates information about whether the behaviors necessary to end the relationship (i.e., deciding to end the relationship, suggesting breakup, and initiating the breakup) were enacted by the individual or his or her former partner.

*Personal versus relational need fulfillment*

Need fulfillment is a rich area in relationship research, with all major relationship theories contributing to the literature, most by defining an overarching need or set of needs that motivate interpersonal behavior. Some of the needs defined are personal in nature, such as achievement and independence (Kumashiro, Rusbult, & Finkel, 2008), but despite being self-focused, much extant research supports the notion that fulfillment of these needs is beneficial to relationship functioning. For example, self-expansion theory holds that individuals have a need to expand their sense of self, including their physical influence, cognitive complexity, social identity, and global awareness (Aron, Aron, & Norman, 2004). Fulfillment of the need for self-expansion has been shown to be associated with various positive relationship outcomes, including decreased attention paid to alternative partners (VanderDrift, Lewandowski, & Agnew, 2011), decreased susceptibility to infidelity (Lewandowski & Ackerman, 2006), and greater feelings of attraction and passionate love for a partner (Aron & Aron, 1986).

Self-determination theory (SDT) also identifies an overarching set of needs that motivates interpersonal behavior (Deci & Ryan, 1985). According to SDT, the personal needs for competence (i.e., the need to feel effective) and autonomy (i.e., the need to feel volitional) are essential human needs (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Fulfillment of each of these personal needs in the context of a romantic relationship has been shown to be associated with intrinsic motivation to maintain the relationship, which is in turn associated with many positive relationship outcomes such as happiness (Blais, Sabourin, Boucher, & Vallerand, 1990), post-disagreement relationship satisfaction (Patrick et al., 2007), and active coping strategies in the face of relationship problems (Knee, Patrick, Veitor, Neighbors, & Nanayakkara, 2002). However, an important distinction between need fulfillment from the SDT perspective, compared to that of self-expansion theory, is that unlike self-expansion theory, SDT holds that there is a third need,

relatedness (i.e., the need to feel connected), that is social in nature and that must be fulfilled within interpersonal interaction. Often it is the case that fulfillment of relatedness needs is the strongest predictor of relationship-specific outcomes (compared to fulfillment of autonomy and competency needs; Patrick et al., 2007).

The notion that individuals seek fulfillment of needs that are relational in nature, along with needs that are more self-focused, is not unique to SDT. In fact, it has been hypothesized that a general relational need, the need to belong, is a powerful, fundamental human motivation, and that a sense of belonging is associated with numerous health, adjustment, and well-being consequences (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). In terms of relational theories, attachment theory also identifies a set of overarching needs that relationships gratify, but unlike both self-expansion theory and SDT, the needs implicated as important by attachment theory are all relational in nature. These needs are for care-giving, felt security, and sexual gratification (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003). Fulfillment of these needs is associated with higher quality relationships characterized by more trust and satisfaction (Simpson, 1990), positive interpretations of relationship events (Collins, 1996), and stability (Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994).

*Diagnostic situations, symbolic outcomes, and need fulfillment*

Interdependence theory is unique from the aforementioned theories in that it does not identify an overarching need (or needs) that motivates interpersonal behavior (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003), but instead details the function of need fulfillment in relationships. It is assumed that humans have diverse instrumental and social needs, some of which are pervasive, and others of which are unique to specific situations and partners (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003). According to this theory, need fulfillment provides many of the most important outcomes derived from close relationships (Le & Agnew, 2001).

When considering the outcomes associated with need fulfillment, often research details the *concrete outcomes* associated with fulfillment, which are the direct experiences of pleasure or pain. A prototypic example of a concrete outcome is the construct of satisfaction, which refers to the degree of positive affect associated with a relationship (Rusbult, 1980). Relationships are experienced as pleasurable (i.e., satisfying) to the extent that they gratify important needs, and not pleasurable to the extent that they fail to gratify or are antithetical to important needs (Drigotas & Rusbult, 1992). The amount of pleasure an individual experiences in a relationship is positively associated with his or her level of commitment to the relationship (Le & Agnew, 2003), which research indicates is one of the most proximal predictors of relationship persistence (VanderDrift, Agnew, & Wilson, 2009).

According to interdependence theory, interactions provide not only concrete outcomes, but also have the potential to provide symbolic outcomes, which rest on the broader implications of interaction (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003). *Symbolic outcomes* provide information regarding a partner's dependability, willingness to sacrifice on behalf of the individual, and readiness to be relied upon for the fulfillment of important needs in the future. Symbolic outcomes are derived primarily in instances in which to provide a partner with a desirable consequence the individual must deviate from his or her own best interest (Kelley et al., 2003). Situations that afford the possibility for symbolic outcomes are called *diagnostic situations*, to indicate that an actor's motivation can be inferred, or diagnosed, based on his or her choice in such situations. In situations that do not afford symbolic outcomes (i.e., situations without conflicting interests), the actor's motivation cannot be unambiguously deduced, as he or she may have chosen a particular action for either considerate or self-interested reasons (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003). Constructs in the literature that could be used to measure symbolic outcomes are not as obvious as the

constructs appropriate to measuring concrete outcomes, but it is possible to consider measures that tap the qualities of symbolic outcomes. If an individual has indeed reaped information regarding a partner's dependability from a situation (i.e., the situation provided symbolic outcomes), then we can assume that he or she will weight that situation heavily in important relationship decisions. In other words, if an event has provided symbolic outcomes, the individual will have taken important information from that event, and as such, that event would be influential in relational decision making. As such, a measure of how influential an event was in important relationship decisions is a reasonable measure of the symbolic outcomes derived.

In terms of need fulfillment, some needs are inherently relational; that is, they must be met in the context of an interpersonal interaction (e.g., companionship, sexual contact, caregiving; Hazan & Shaver, 1994; Le & Agnew, 2001). Fulfillment of relational needs promotes relationships by contributing to the achievement of relationship-oriented goals (e.g., relationship maintenance activities, intrinsic motivation to remain in the relationship; Kumashiro et al., 2008; Patrick et al., 2007), and, more central to the current examination, by providing a wealth of positive concrete outcomes for both partners (positive emotions, satisfaction; Hazan & Shaver, 1994; Le & Agnew, 2001). As such, when romantic partners help each other seek fulfillment of relational goals, they are benefitting their relationship and, by extension, themselves. Insofar as this is the case, the motivation behind providing relational need fulfillment cannot be deduced, as a partner could meet these needs for reasons that are other-oriented, self-oriented, or both. Thus, as these needs are not fulfilled in diagnostic situations, they do not provide an opportunity for symbolic outcomes.

Other needs are personal and more self-focused, meaning an individual can achieve need fulfillment outside of an interpersonal interaction (e.g., self-expansion, autonomy; Patrick et al.,



2007; Slotter & Finkel, 2009). Often, personal and relational needs can be fulfilled simultaneously and harmoniously. However, sometimes, due to the behaviors necessary for fulfillment of the two types of needs being contradictory or because of the finite nature of time, energy, and resources, the pursuit of fulfillment of one type of needs may conflict with fulfillment of the other (Kumashiro et al., 2008). As such, when romantic partners help each other seek fulfillment of personal goals, it may be the case that they forego their own best interest (i.e., fulfillment of their own personal needs or both partners' relational needs). Insofar as that is the case in a given interaction, this can be considered a diagnostic situation and the partner's motivation can be deduced. When partners do forego their own best interests, individuals are especially likely to feel a sense of assurance, as if it is safe to become committed to their partners (Murray, Holmes, & Collins, 2006). In that way, diagnostic situations yield information necessary to form commitment to a relationship (i.e., they inform the individual of his or her partner's intentions to provide need fulfillment in the future).

### *The Current Study*

The aim of the current study was to explore the association of need fulfillment with stay-leave behavior, to clarify why past work has found that not all needs relate similarly to the decision to either stay in or leave a relationship (Drigotas & Rusbult, 1992). To do so, we first assessed whether the theoretical distinction between fulfillment of personal needs and relational needs was supported empirically by submitting the reported fulfillment of various needs to an exploratory factor analysis. Next, we examined whether distinguishing between personal and relational needs clarifies how need fulfillment and commitment are associated in the prediction of stay-leave behavior. To begin, we tested whether the fulfillment of personal needs provides both symbolic outcomes (which we operationalized as weighting the fulfillment of these needs

especially heavily in relationship decision making, such as the decision to end the relationship) and concrete outcomes (which we operationalized as relational satisfaction; *Hypothesis 1*), whereas the fulfillment of relational needs provide only concrete outcomes (*Hypothesis 2*).

Insofar as we find support for these hypotheses, then the distinguishing characteristic between personal and relational need fulfillment is that personal need fulfillment provides information as to whether it is safe to become committed to the relationship or not (i.e., symbolic outcomes), whereas relational need fulfillment does not. This is because fulfillment of individuals' relational needs does not occur in diagnostic situations (i.e., the partners' motives for providing need fulfillment cannot be ascertained), and as such, their partners could have acted for reasons of self-interest, other-interest, or both. Individuals' personal needs can be fulfilled in diagnostic situations, however, meaning that the partners acted for reasons of the individuals' self-interest, rather than the partners' own self-interest. When a partner acts for the individual's self interest, symbolic outcomes are produced, which lead individuals to feel secure in becoming committed to that partner (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003). Thus, we expected that individuals whose partners help them fulfill their personal needs would become more committed to the relationship, which in turn would lead to those individuals remaining in their relationships.

*Hypothesis 3: The impact of personal need fulfillment on stay-leave behavior will be mediated by commitment level.*

In contrast, insofar as we find support for our underlying assumptions, individuals whose partners fulfill relational needs do not glean symbolic outcomes, or information regarding whether it is safe to become committed to the relationship or not. For that reason, relational need fulfillment does not provide information that would be expected to directly increase commitment, but does provide the direct experience of pleasure. Thus, we expected that

individuals whose partners help them fulfill relational needs will be more likely to persist in their relationships than will those whose partners do not due to the concrete outcomes associated with relational need fulfillment, but that this effect would be through general relationship improvement, not through its impact on commitment. As such,

*Hypothesis 4: Relational need fulfillment will exert a direct effect on stay-leave behavior, unmediated by commitment level.*

Using two-wave longitudinal data obtained from romantically involved participants, we tested these hypotheses. More specifically, we tested the relative fit of two alternative models that specified the associations between the fulfillment of different kinds of needs, commitment, and relationship persistence.

## Method

### *Design and Participants*

This study used a two-wave longitudinal design of individuals who were currently involved in romantic relationships at Time 1. Approximately four months after participation at Time 1, participants were contacted and asked to complete a follow-up questionnaire. Only those participants who completed both Time 1 and Time 2 were included in the analyses ( $N = 405$ ; 43% male). Note that analyses of demographic differences between those participants who completed only Time 1 measures ( $n = 501$ ) and those who completed both Time 1 and Time 2 measures yielded non-significant findings (e.g., age, relationship duration). At Time 1, the average duration of relationship was 16.32 months ( $SD = 14.8$ ), most participants indicated that they were involved in an exclusive dating relationship (93%, with 7% casually dating), participants' ages ranged from 18 to 30 years ( $M = 19.39$ ,  $SD = 1.4$ ), and the majority indicated

that they were White (83.9%, with 8.4% Asian, 3.7% Black, and 4.0% Hispanic). None of the participants were involved in romantic relationships with other participants in the sample.

*Procedure.* Participants signed up for a particular time to complete the study through the university subject pool website. All participants completed the measures described below in partial fulfillment of an introductory psychology course requirement. They completed the measures in large computer labs across campus, after which they were debriefed and thanked for their time.

Approximately four months after participating at Time 1 ( $M = 4.32$  months,  $SD = .38$ ), participants were contacted via email individually and invited to return to the questionnaire website to complete a Time 2 questionnaire. They were reminded of their Time 1 partner's first name prior to completing the measures described below. Participants were allowed to complete Time 2 at whatever time they chose from any location with Internet access. At Time 2, 117 (29.0%) of the participants indicated they were no longer dating their Time 1 romantic partner, whereas 288 indicated they were still involved with their Time 1 partner.

### *Time 1 Measures*

Satisfaction with the relationship was used as a measure of a concrete outcome because it taps the direct experience of pleasure or pain in a relationship. Commitment was measured to test its hypothesized role as mediator between need fulfillment and stay-leave behavior.

Satisfaction and commitment were both assessed with the relevant subscales from the Investment Model Scale (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998). Each of the five items administered to assess satisfaction and the seven items administered to measure commitment were rated by participants on a scale from 1 ("do not agree at all") to 9 ("agree completely"). Consistent with past uses of the Investment Model Scale, reliability was high (satisfaction  $\alpha = .93$ ; commitment  $\alpha = .91$ ).

Need fulfillment was assessed by presenting each participant with seven specific needs, identified in past research, in the following format: “My needs for  $x$  are fulfilled by my relationship with my current partner.” Participants were asked to indicate their agreement with this statement on a scale from 1 (“not at all fulfilled”) to 9 (“completely fulfilled”). The needs presented were: companionship (sharing time and activities), sexual contact (having physical intimacy), security (feeling supported, protected), care-giving (giving support, protection), self-expansion (having new and exciting experiences), self-improvement (experiencing personal growth), and independence (having my own space and making my own decisions). The name of each need and the brief description in parentheses following the need name were both presented to help ensure each need was understandable to participants. These particular needs were selected due to their prominence in past work involving need fulfillment (Drigotas & Rusbult, 1992; Le & Agnew, 2001). From attachment theory, fulfillment of the needs of care-giving, felt security, and sexual gratification are associated with higher quality relationships (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003), whereas fulfillment of the needs of independence, companionship, and self-improvement are important from an SDT perspective (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Finally, fulfillment of the need for self-expansion has been shown to benefit relational functioning (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992).

To create scales tapping personal versus relational need fulfillment, responses to the seven questions on need fulfillment were subjected to exploratory factor analysis using the maximum likelihood method to extract the factors. Eigenvalues of 11.29 and 2.00, accounting for 100% of the variance, suggested the presence of two meaningful factors, so two factors were retained. As the factors were moderately correlated ( $r = .57$ ), a Promax (oblique) rotation was conducted. For interpretability, the power of the rotation was increased from the default value of

3 to 5. Increasing the power of a rotation provides the advantage of greater differentiation of the factors, but does cause the inter-factor correlations to increase. In this case, the inter-factor correlation increased, but was not sufficiently high to cause concern ( $r = .67$ ).

In interpreting the rotated factor pattern, an item was determined to load on a particular factor if the factor loading was greater than .60 for that factor and less than .40 for the other. Using these criteria, fulfillment of the needs for companionship, sexual contact, security, and care-giving were found to load on the first factor, which we labeled “Relational Needs.” Fulfillment of the needs for independence, self-expansion, and self-improvement were found to load on the second factor, which we labeled “Personal Needs.” The needs and corresponding factor loadings are presented in Table 1. The results suggest that relational and personal need fulfillment represent distinct factors, so averaged scores were created for each construct and used in hypothesis testing.

### *Time 2 Measures*

At Time 2, participants were asked the following question to assess stay/leave behavior: “Are you still romantically involved with this person?” Possible responses were “No, we are not romantically involved (i.e., we broke up)” and “Yes, we are still romantically involved.” Participants who answered “no” completed a subscale from the Assessment of Relationship Changes (Agnew, Arriaga, & Goodfriend, 2006). The relevant subscale included one question regarding deciding to leave the relationship (“In the end, who made the final decision to end your romantic relationship?”), one question regarding initiating dissolution (“Who was the person who first said something or did something that initiated the end to your romantic relationship?”) and one question regarding suggesting dissolution (“Who first suggested ending your romantic relationship?”). The response options for these items were “You” or “Your Partner,” and were

coded such that “You” was 1 and “Your partner” was 0. The mean of these three items was calculated and used as an overall action index, ranging from 0 (no action taken toward dissolution by participant) to 1 (all actions taken toward dissolution by participant). Participants who reported that their relationship had not ended by Time 2 were assigned a 0 on the action index, as having not dissolved indicated no action toward dissolution was taken. Combining the three individual leave behaviors formed a reliable scale ( $\alpha = .88$ ).

Participants whose relationships had broken up also answered an additional seven questions regarding how much they believed lack of fulfillment of each need caused them to leave the relationship. Specifically, participants rated their agreement to the statement: “We broke up because I felt that my  $x$  needs were not being met,” on a scale from 1 (“do not agree at all”) to 9 (“agree completely”), where  $x$  represents each of the seven needs examined. We used responses to these items to create two scales analogous to the previous need fulfillment scales (i.e., personal and relational) to provide a gauge regarding the extent to which a partner’s need fulfillment provided symbolic outcomes (i.e., figured prominently in the participant’s relationship decision-making). See Table 2 for coefficient alphas, means, and standard deviations for all study measures.

## Results

### *Testing Hypotheses 1 and 2*

Hypothesis 1 holds that personal need fulfillment will be significantly associated with concrete outcomes as well as with symbolic outcomes. We conducted separate simple regression analyses to test this hypothesis with SAS 9.2 PROC GLM using standardized predictor and outcome variables. Results supported this hypothesis: personal need fulfillment was positively associated with level of concurrent relationship satisfaction ( $\beta = .635, t(403) = 16.51, p < .001$ )

and negatively associated with the amount ex-partners attributed their dissolution to lack of personal need fulfillment ( $\beta = -.204, t(108) = -2.17, p < .05$ ).

Furthermore, Hypothesis 2 holds that relational need fulfillment will be significantly associated with concrete outcomes, but not with symbolic outcomes. Again, we conducted separate simple regression analyses for this hypothesis with SAS 9.2 PROC GLM using standardized predictor and outcome variables. Results supported this hypothesis: Relational need fulfillment was positively associated with level of concurrent satisfaction ( $\beta = .765, t(403) = 23.87, p < .001$ ) but was not significantly associated with the amount ex-partners attributed their dissolution to lack of relational need fulfillment ( $\beta = -.167, t(108) = -1.76, p = .08$ ).

We also compared the amount ex-partners attributed their dissolution to lack of relational need fulfillment to the amount they attributed it to personal need fulfillment. Results from a paired *t*-test revealed that ex-partners cited significantly higher levels of causation attributed to lack of personal need fulfillment ( $M = 4.18, SD = 2.42$ ) than they did to lack of relational need fulfillment ( $M = 3.74, SD = 2.16; t(110) = 2.23, p < .05$ ).

#### *Testing Hypotheses 3 and 4*

Hypotheses 3 and 4 held that whereas personal need fulfillment leads to commitment, which in turn leads to stay-leave behavior, relational need fulfillment exerts an unmediated effect on stay-leave behavior.<sup>1</sup> To test this notion, we entered all variables into a full structural model using SAS 9.2 PROC CALIS. For all tests, model fit was estimated using maximum likelihood (ML) techniques and assessed following the recommendations of Hu and Bentler (1999) with the Chi-Square statistic, the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), and the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR). These recommendations hold that models with an RMSEA less than or equal to .06, a CFI greater than



or equal to .95, and a SRMR less than or equal to .09 demonstrate excellent fit to the data. We examined the two structural models presented in Figure 1. The first model we examined we call the traditional model as it represents the typical treatment of need fulfillment in which both types of needs (allowed to covary) impact an individual's level of commitment which, in turn, impacts persistence (See Figure 1, Panel A). This model did not fit the data well ( $\chi^2(86) = 538.92, p < .001$ ; RMSEA = .12; CFI = .88; SRMR = .21). Next, we tested our hypothesized model, in which personal need fulfillment influences commitment which, in turn, influence persistence, whereas relational need fulfillment influences stay-leave behavior directly (See Figure 1, Panel B). The fit of this model to the data was adequate ( $\chi^2(86) = 344.98, p < .001$ ; RMSEA = .09; CFI = .93; SRMR = .06). To determine whether the hypothesized model was superior to the traditional model, a simple chi-square difference test was not justifiable, given that these two models were not nested (i.e., their degrees of freedom were identical). A more appropriate test is to compute and compare Akaike's Information Criteria (AIC; Akaike, 1987) for each model. As a rule of thumb, researchers can conclude that a model with an AIC at least 10 points lower than an alternative is a better fitting model than the alternative (p. 70; Burnham & Anderson, 2002). The AIC value for our hypothesized model was substantially lower than the AIC value for the traditional model (206.58 and 384.47, respectively; difference = 177.89). Taken together, the results support Hypotheses 3 and 4, in which personal need fulfillment leads to commitment, which in turn leads to stay-leave behavior, whereas relational need fulfillment exerts an unmediated effect on stay-leave behavior.<sup>2</sup>

#### *Ancillary Analyses*

Empirical tests of the Investment Model often find that satisfaction is a strong predictor of commitment (Le & Agnew, 2003). Theoretically, relational satisfaction is defined as an

individual's experiences of pleasure in his or her relationship, but often is operationalized as the extent to which relationships gratify important needs (Rusbult, 1980). Because of these notions, we decided to test whether including satisfaction in the hypothesized models also yields support for our hypotheses. To do so, we examined the same two models, tested using the same analytic strategy, but this time with satisfaction as a precursor to commitment in both. Specifically, the first model we tested (the traditional model) examined whether personal and relational need fulfillment (allowed to covary) contribute to satisfaction, which in turn leads to commitment, which leads to stay-leave behavior. This model did not fit the data well ( $\chi^2(163) = 794.09, p < .001$ ; RMSEA = .11; CFI = .89; SRMR = .21). Next, we tested our hypothesized model, in which personal need fulfillment contributes to satisfaction, which in turn leads to commitment, which leads to stay-leave behavior whereas relational need fulfillment exerts a direct effect on stay-leave behavior. The fit of this model to the data was adequate ( $\chi^2(162) = 635.13, p < .001$ ; RMSEA = .09; CFI = .92; SRMR = .06). Further, the AIC of the hypothesized model was substantially lower than the fit of the traditional model (311.13 and 468.08, respectively; difference = 156.95). Taken together, our hypothesized model, in which the two types of needs impact stay-leave behavior differently, remains a better model than one in which the two types of needs exert an identical influence on stay-leave behavior.<sup>3</sup>

### Discussion

We began this work with the goal of determining how need fulfillment within relationships contributes to relationship persistence. In past work, the association has been unclear; in some instances commitment subsumes the impact of need fulfillment on stay-leave behavior, but in other instances need fulfillment exerts a direct effect on stay-leave behavior (Drigotas & Rusbult, 1992). We sought to better understand the impact of need fulfillment, in an

attempt to clarify its role in stay-leave behavior. To begin, we sought to organize the myriad needs deemed important to relationship functioning and found evidence that distinguishing the needs that are personal in nature from those that are relational was not only empirically supported, but provided insight into how need fulfillment contributes to relationship persistence. Specifically, we found that the fulfillment of personal needs contributes to commitment, which in turn leads to stay-leave behavior, whereas fulfillment of relational needs directly influences stay-leave decisions (i.e., the impact of their fulfillment on stay-leave behavior is not mediated by commitment).

We hypothesized that the fulfillment of personal needs uniquely provides symbolic outcomes, which are those derived from diagnostic situations in which the actor's motivation can be deduced (Kelley et al., 2003). Symbolic outcomes rest on the broader implications of the interaction, and provide information regarding a partner's willingness to sacrifice on behalf of the individual (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003). As such, we expected that personal need fulfillment would highly impact an individual's decisions regarding the future of the relationship. We expected, and found evidence, that because personal need fulfillment provides the opportunity for symbolic outcomes, partners would consider their partners' help with personal need fulfillment when making decisions regarding the future of the relationship.

By emphasizing the unique qualities of symbolic outcomes, we do not mean to minimize the importance of concrete outcomes to relationship functioning. As summarized in the introduction, the fulfillment of all types of needs has been shown in past work to be associated with numerous positive relationship outcomes (Le & Agnew, 2001; Simpson, 1990). Our results are consistent with this notion as well: Both personal and relational need fulfillment yielded concrete outcomes in our sample. We examined satisfaction as a concrete outcome, but we do

not assume this is the only outcome that need fulfillment yields. As past work has found, we would expect a host of positive outcomes for both the individual whose partner contributes to his or her need fulfillment, as well as for the relationship.

We believed the association between commitment and relationship persistence would be clarified by considering that the fulfillment of only some needs is diagnostic, and perhaps only diagnostic need fulfillment exerts its impact on stay-leave behavior through its impact on commitment. Commitment has been described in previous work as a vulnerable state, as becoming committed to a partner is functionally similar to depending on them for the fulfillment of important needs (Drigotas, Rusbult, & Verette, 1999; Murray et al., 2006). As the symbolic outcomes associated with personal need fulfillment provide information relevant to whether a partner can be relied upon for the fulfillment of important needs in the future, we predicted that fulfillment of these needs would lead an individual to feel safe to become committed to his or her partner, which in turn would lead to relationship persistence. Indeed, results indicated that the impact of fulfillment (or lack thereof) of personal needs on relationship persistence is mediated by commitment level. Fulfillment of relational needs, on the other hand, does not provide information that would necessarily influence commitment, as it does not occur in situations in which a partner's motivations for the behavior can be deduced. Rather, it provides concrete outcomes that contribute more broadly to the relationship. Thus, we expected, and our results corroborated, that relational need fulfillment exerts a direct effect on relationship persistence, unmediated by commitment.

According to interdependence theory, it is not the "power of the situation" that drives behavior, cognition, and affect in individuals, but rather "the power of what the person makes of the situation," (Kelley et al., 2003; p. 7). Our hypotheses, and indeed conclusions based on our

results, inherently corroborate this tenet. It is not simply important to understand that a partner has fulfilled one's need, but instead it is also important to understand what the individual has made of his or her partner helping to fulfill those needs. Past work on need fulfillment has ascertained that not all needs contribute similarly to stay-leave decisions (e.g., Drigotas & Rusbult, 1992; Slotter & Finkel, 2009). We, too, have found evidence of this, but importantly, have suggested an approach by which to categorize particular needs based on what individuals glean from their partners' fulfillment of those needs. The benefit of this is that we are now able to measure not only the situation (i.e., that a partner helps or fails to help an individual fulfill his or her needs), but also can predict what the individual will make of that situation (i.e., fulfillment of personal needs, but not relational needs, provide information regarding a partner's dependability and willingness to sacrifice for the individual). The implications for relationship theory are potentially quite large, as having a predictable understanding what an individual will make of need fulfillment can inform numerous avenues of both basic and applied research.

For example, past work has shown that balance among need fulfillment, along with the overall amount of fulfillment, is an important predictor of well-being (Sheldon & Niemiec, 2006). If an individual's need for self-expansion is sated, for instance, but his or her need for companionship is not, that individual will be less satisfied than they would be if they had balanced fulfillment of their needs, even if they received slightly less fulfillment of their need for self-expansion to achieve that balance. We propose that perhaps the benefits of balance can be achieved by having balanced personal and relational need fulfillment, rather than balanced individual need fulfillment. We argue that it may be possible to achieve balance, and thus optimal well-being, by achieving fulfillment of some personal and some relational needs, even if fulfillment of all needs is not possible. The results of the current study suggest that relational

need fulfillment is necessary for optimal relationship functioning due to the wealth of concrete outcomes conferred to both partners by the fulfillment. Personal need fulfillment, despite only conferring concrete outcomes to the receiving partner, is also necessary for optimal relationship functioning, as it provides information necessary to develop commitment. This suggests that having a balance of both personal and relational needs is necessary to achieve the full benefits of need fulfillment.

There are two notes of qualification regarding our results. The first is in regard to the measurement of symbolic outcomes. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to measure the important theoretical construct of symbolic outcomes. We did so by tapping how influential the lack of need fulfillment was in the decision to terminate the relationship. We believe this measure has intuitive appeal: If an individual derived important information about his or her partner's likely behavior in the future from the currently perceived lack of need fulfillment, this information would weigh heavily in that individual's decisions regarding the future of the relationship. This measure is not without limitations, however. Most notably, it relies on retrospective report and assumes individuals have accurate insight into their decision making process. Thus, it is important to interpret the results regarding symbolic outcomes cautiously. Given the empirical support for our theoretically derived hypotheses, we feel encouraged by this operationalization of symbolic outcomes.

The second note is that it is important to view these results as an examination of the impact of a partner helping to fulfill an individual's needs, rather than as an examination of the impact of need fulfillment more broadly. We measured whether individuals felt their partners helped them fulfill their needs, but did not measure whether their needs were fulfilled. All of the needs we examined, with the possible exception of sexual contact, could have been fulfilled

outside of the romantic relationship on which our participants reported. Individuals can fulfill their needs for independence without assistance from anyone, for example, or they can have their need for companionship fulfilled by a friend rather than their partner. We do not mean to imply that fulfillment of these needs must occur within a romantic relationship to be beneficial. Moreover, we do not believe our results indicate what happens for individuals who lack fulfillment of important needs. Instead, we believe our results clarify what outcomes need fulfillment within a relationship yield for that relationship.

### *Conclusion*

Need fulfillment is a central component of relationships, providing individuals with motivation to form and maintain close relationships with others. The positive outcomes of need fulfillment within relationships, as well as the negative outcomes of lack of fulfillment, are well documented in the literature. We sought to build upon that literature and suggest an organization system for the myriad needs deemed important. This organization divides those needs that provide the opportunity for symbolic and concrete outcomes from those that provide only the latter. This organization provides a greater understanding of how need fulfillment contributes to stay-leave behavior: the impact of personal need fulfillment on stay-leave behavior is mediated by commitment, whereas the impact of relational need fulfillment exerts a direct effect on stay-leave behavior. Future work may benefit by employing this two-domain distinction in achieving a greater understanding of the role of need fulfillment within relationships.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Prior to examining the structural equation models, we ran regression models examining whether both types of needs were significantly associated with stay-leave behavior, and if so, whether commitment subsumed this effect when included in the model. As seen in Table 3, both types of needs are significantly associated with stay-leave behavior, and consistent with Hypotheses 3 and 4, personal need fulfillment fails to exert an influence above and beyond commitment, whereas relational need fulfillment does.

<sup>2</sup>We additionally asked participants how important it was to them for these needs to be fulfilled in their relationship. Specifically, we asked them: “How important is it to you that  $x$  needs are fulfilled in your relationship with your current partner?” where  $x$  represents each of the needs we examined on a 9-point scale ranging from 1 (“not at all”) to 9 (“extremely”). We created scales matching the need fulfillment scales, so we have a scale for importance of personal need fulfillment and a scale for importance of relational need fulfillment. We then reran all analyses controlling for the effects of the relevant scale (e.g., for analyses involving personal need fulfillment we controlled for the importance personal need fulfillment). The pattern of results was identical. We also considered the possibility that the importance of need fulfillment may moderate the associations between need fulfillment and the outcomes we tested (i.e., satisfaction, reasons for breakup, stay-leave behavior). In no case was the moderation significant. Thus, the results found with regard to need fulfillment hold, regardless of participants’ endorsements of how important it is for them to have this fulfillment within their relationship.

<sup>3</sup>We ran all models using the dichotomous breakup measure more traditionally used in such analyses (i.e., whether the relationship remained intact or not). The pattern of results is consistent with the one presented using our measure of stay-leave behavior. Importantly, the fit of the



hypothesized model was significantly better than the fit of the traditional model (AIC = 225.65 and 404.72, respectively; difference = 179.07). Full results using the dichotomous measure of breakup can be obtained from the authors.

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Table 1

Exploratory Factor Analysis Factor Loadings for Need Fulfillment Items at Time 1

Factor		
1	2	Scale Item
Factor 1: Relational Needs		
.90	-.10	Care-giving
.83	-.02	Security
.78	-.16	Sexual contact
.72	.03	Companionship
Factor 2: Personal Needs		
-.31	.87	Independence
.22	.73	Self-improvement
.28	.60	Self-expansion

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics of Study Measures

Measure / Item	$\alpha$	Mean	Standard Deviation
Time 1 Measures			
Relational Needs	.84	7.83	1.29
Companionship	-	7.68	1.53
Sexual Contact	-	7.81	1.75
Security	-	7.79	1.55
Care-giving	-	7.85	1.42
Personal Needs	.80	7.40	1.47
Independence	-	7.31	1.77
Self-Expansion	-	7.33	1.82
Self-Improvement	-	7.55	1.63
Commitment	.91	7.40	1.67
Satisfaction	.93	7.62	1.33
Time 2 Measures			
Reason for Dissolution:			
Relational Needs	.86	3.74	2.17
Companionship	-	4.24	2.60
Sexual Contact	-	3.09	2.47
Security	-	3.82	2.63
Care-giving	-	3.73	2.67
Personal Needs	.84	4.19	2.43
Independence	-	3.78	2.84
Self-Expansion	-	4.49	2.84
Self-Improvement	-	4.21	2.68

Table 3

Multiple Regression Analyses Predicting Stay-Leave Behavior

	$\beta$	t	p<	$R^2$	F	df	p<
Model 1: Step 1				.04	17.90	403	.001
Personal Need Fulfillment	-0.21	-4.23	.001				
Model 1: Step 2				.14	33.93	402	.001
Personal Need Fulfillment	0.00	-0.08	> .90				
Commitment	-0.38	-6.92	.001				
Model 2: Step 1				.10	47.10	403	.001
Relational Need Fulfillment	-0.32	-6.86	.001				
Model 1: Step 2				.16	38.11	402	.001
Relational Need Fulfillment	-0.15	-2.68	.01				
Commitment	-0.29	-5.12	.001				



Figure Caption

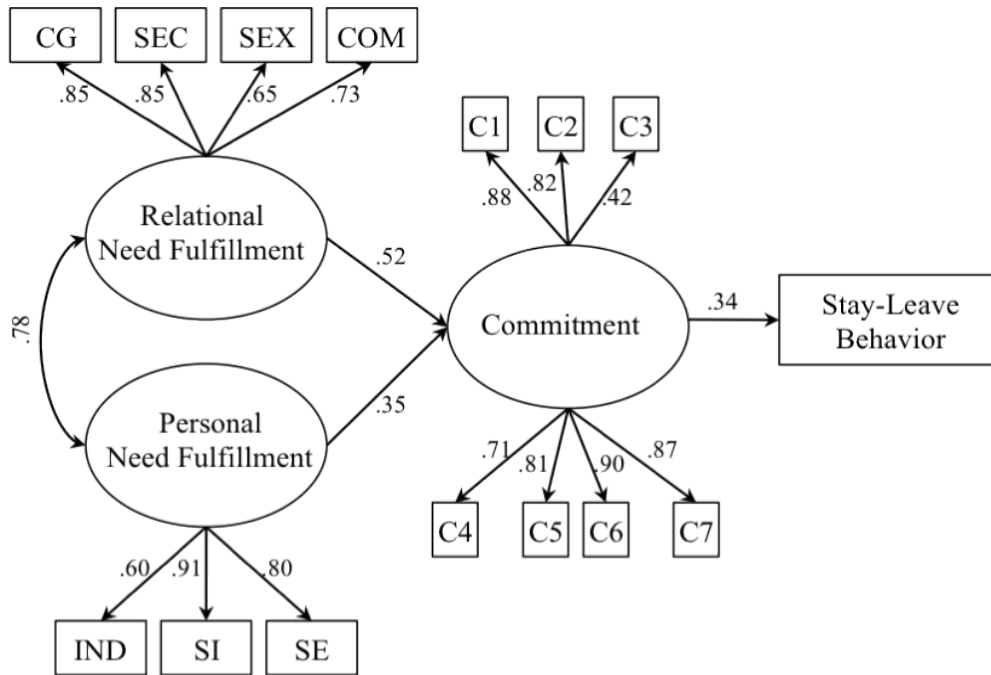
Figure 1. Association between need fulfillment, commitment level, and relationship persistence.

CG = Care-giving; SEC = Security; SEX = Sexual contact; COM = Companionship; IND =

Independence; SI = Self-improvement; SE = Self-expansion. All paths significant at  $p < .05$ .

Figure 1

Panel A: Traditional model



Panel B: Hypothesized model

