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Commitment and Trust in Young Adult Friendships

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Abstract

Given the importance of maintaining mutuality in interdependent relationships, the goal of the present research was to determine if interpersonal trust serves as a gauge of partners' commitment within young adults' close friendships. It was hypothesized that individuals trust their friends to the degree that their friends are committed to their relationship, and that individuals' perceptions of their friends' commitment mediates this association. A correlational design was employed and measures were obtained from both members of 60 same-sex friendship dyads. A multilevel modeling approach was used to perform a mediational analysis of model variables; the hypotheses were confirmed. Furthermore, it was revealed that friends demonstrate a moderate degree of mutual commitment in their relationships. Potential avenues for future research regarding the development and consequences of trust in close friendships are discussed.

Keywords: trust; commitment; young adults; friendship.

Partners in close relationships can find themselves in a risky situation. As we become committed to our partners, we become dependent on our partners to fulfill our needs. The more we commit ourselves, the more we have to lose if a relationship ends. Thus, close partners may monitor each other for signs of commitment. If an individual perceives that his or her partner is committed, then the individual can trust the partner to act in the best interest of the individual and the relationship. Although the association between commitment and trust in dating and married relationships has been examined empirically, this association has yet to be examined in another important type of close relationship in young adults' lives: close friendships. The purpose of this paper is to do so.

Commitment in Close Relationships

Rusbult (1980a, 1983) defines commitment as a long-term orientation toward a relationship, including the intent to persist in the relationship and feelings of psychological attachment to the partner – it is the subjective experience of dependence on the relationship. Rusbult and her colleagues have demonstrated that commitment is a highly reliable predictor of persistence in romantic relationships (Drigotas & Rusbult, 1992; Rusbult, 1983; Rusbult & Martz, 1995; Van Lange, Rusbult, Drigotas, Arriaga, Witcher, & Cox, 1997) – that is, to the degree that partners are committed, they are motivated to maintain and stay in their relationships.

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Given the important role that commitment plays in maintaining relationships, it would be adaptive for interdependent partners to develop a mechanism by which they can gauge each other's commitment to the relationship. With commitment comes risk – needing a partner and relying on the relationship for one's own well-being leaves an individual vulnerable. That vulnerability is assuaged to the degree that the partner is vulnerable, as well. If an individual perceives that the partner is committed, then the risks associated with one's own commitment should be lessened. Furthermore, prior research has demonstrated that, in addition to strength of individuals' commitment to a relationship, mutuality of commitment is a reliable predictor of healthy couple functioning (Drigotas, Rusbult, & Verette, 1999). Mutuality of commitment implies a balance of power; that is, to the degree that close partners are equally committed, they possess equal power over one another's personal well-being. In order to sustain mutual levels of commitment it is necessary to have knowledge of both one's own and the partner's commitment levels; thus, Rusbult and her colleagues have argued that an implicit gauge of the partner's feelings of commitment would have functional value, and we propose that that gauge is interpersonal trust (Rusbult, Wieselquist, Foster, & Witcher, 1999; Wieselquist, Rusbult, Foster, & Agnew, 1999).

Interpersonal Trust

Interpersonal trust has been defined as the expectation that a partner can be relied upon to be responsive to one's needs, both in the present and in the future (Holmes & Rempel, 1989; Rempel, Holmes, & Zanna, 1985). As such, Holmes and his colleagues have characterized trust as an interpersonal phenomenon – a quality that is specific to a particular relationship with a particular partner. These authors explain that relationship-specific trust includes three components, each of which is necessary for strong feelings of trust to develop. Predictability leads the way to dependability, which lays the groundwork for faith. Predictability refers to the consistency of the partner's behavior. The partner must be observed to be behaviorally consistent before he or she can be regarded as trustworthy. After the predictability of a partner is determined, the focus shifts from the partner's overt behavior to his or her dispositions. If a partner is perceived as being reliable and honest, then the partner is seen to be dependable. Dependability lays the groundwork for the emergence of faith. An individual makes a "leap of faith" when he or she moves beyond the relatively visible evidence of trustworthiness based on the partner's observed behavior and inferred dispositions. Faith refers to an individual's confidence that his or her partner will behave in a caring manner and be responsive to the individual's needs, now and in the future.

Two longitudinal studies – one involving dating relationships and one involving marital relationships – examined the hypothesis that individuals develop trust in their partners to the extent that their partners are committed to their relationship (Wieselquist et al., 1999). Consistent with expectations, results of these studies revealed a strong, positive association between a partner's commitment and an individuals' trust in the partner. For dating and married relationships, trust serves as an implicit gauge of the partner's commitment to the relationship.

Commitment and Trust in Friendships

Might commitment and trust be related in friendships as they are in other types of close relationships? On the one hand, there are important differences between friendships and romantic relationships (Brehm, Miller, Perlman, & Campbell, 2002). For instance, most friendships do not involve sexual intimacy, do not require exclusive loyalty, and do not involve as much emotional investment as romantic relationships. In general, friendships typically involve less strict standards of conduct than do romantic relationships. Thus, it is possible that a partner's commitment is less important in determining trust of our friends, than it is in determining trust of our romantic partners.

On the other hand, both romantic relationships and friendships share some important similarities, particularly related to general interdependence processes. For instance, research has demonstrated the same positive association between equity and commitment in both dating relationships and same-sex friendships (Winn, Crawford, & Fischer, 1991). Research on the investment model of commitment has demonstrated that satisfaction with the relationship, quality of alternatives to the relationship, and amount of investments put into the relationship are some of the main determinants of commitment, not only for dating and marital relationships (Rusbult, 1980a; 1983; Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991), but for same-sex friendships (Rusbult, 1980b) and cross-sex friendships (Lin & Rusbult, 1995), as well. Research on the betrayal of trust has demonstrated that trust is crucial to the maintenance of both romantic relationships and friendships (Jones & Burdette, 1994; Shakelford & Buss, 1996). Also, Holmes and his colleagues' conceptualization of interpersonal trust has been demonstrated empirically to apply to dating and marital relationships (Rempel et al., 1985; Wieselquist et al., 1999), as well as opposite-sex friendships (Smith, 1998). Given such similarities, it is reasonable to hypothesize that the association between commitment and trust in close relationships is a general one – common to both romantic relationships and friendships.

The Present Study

The purpose of the present study is to empirically examine the association between commitment and trust in same-sex friendships. A correlational research design was

employed in which friendship partners answered questions regarding their relationships. Consistent with the idea that interpersonal trust serves as a gauge of a partner's commitment to a relationship, it is hypothesized that an individual will trust a friend to the degree that the friend is committed to the relationship. Furthermore, it is likely that an individual's perception of the friend's commitment is a more proximal predictor of the individual's trust than is the friend's own report of commitment. Thus, it is hypothesized that the association between a friend's report of commitment and an individual's trust in the friend is mediated by the individual's perception of the friend's commitment.

Method

Participants

Sixty same-sex pairs of friends (55 pairs of women and 5 pairs of men) participated in the study.¹ Individuals were recruited from introductory psychology and human development courses at a small, regional university located in the northeastern United States. They were asked to bring their best, same-sex friend with them to the research session. In return for their participation, all participants were entered into a random drawing for a \$50 gift certificate to the campus bookstore.

The mean age of participants was 19.31 years ($SD = 2.25$ years). Most were first or second-year students (61% first-year, 23% second-year, 11% third-year, 4% fourth-year, and 1% other). Most participants described themselves as Caucasian (3% African American, 92% Caucasian, 1% Hispanic American, 1% Native American, and 3% other). At the time of the research session the median duration of their friendships was 9 months ($M = 19.53$ months, $SD = 29.14$ months). The majority of participants described their relationships as very good friendships (31% best friends, 56% very good friends, 13% good friends, and 0% acquaintances).

Procedure and Measures

This study made use of a self-report questionnaire regarding each participant's relationship with the friend that he or she brought to the research session; thus, all measures were obtained from both partners within each friendship. The questionnaire included measures of demographics, commitment to the friendship, perception of the partner's commitment to the friendship, and interpersonal trust level, as well as a number of measures that are unrelated to the concerns of the present study. Upon arrival to the research session, participants were given instructions, including assurances that their friend would not see their responses and that their responses would remain confidential, and a

request to respond honestly to all of the questions. After the participants completed their questionnaires, they were debriefed and thanked for their cooperation.

Participants were asked to respond to questionnaire items with a 9-point scale (0 = do not agree at all, 4 = agree somewhat, 8 = agree completely). The commitment level measure was based on Rusbult's (1983) 15-item scale. Given that Rusbult's measure was designed to assess commitment in romantic relationships, the items were modified to apply to friendships (e.g., "I would feel very upset if our friendship were to end in the near future;" "I am committed to maintaining our friendship;" "I want our friendship to last for a very long time."). Calculation of Cronbach's alpha revealed adequate inter-item reliability ($\alpha = .90$); thus, a single measure of commitment level was developed by averaging the responses of each participant ($M=6.08$, $SD=1.13$).

Perception of the friend's commitment was measured with the same 15 items, modified to describe how the participants perceived their partner's commitment to the friendship (e.g., "My friend would feel very upset if our friendship were to end in the near future."). Calculation of Cronbach's alpha revealed adequate inter-item reliability ($\alpha = .91$); thus, a single measure of perception of the friend's commitment level was developed by averaging the responses of each participant ($M=5.58$, $SD=1.33$).

An 11-item measure of trust level was comprised of the most reliable items from each of the subscales of the instrument developed by Rempel and his colleagues (Rempel et al., 1985). The items were modified to apply to friendships. Four items each were included to measure predictability and dependability, and three items were included to measure faith (e.g., "My friend behaves in a very consistent manner;" "I can rely on my friend to keep the promises he/she makes to me;" "Though times may change and the future is uncertain, I know my friend will always be ready and willing to offer me strength and support."). Calculation of Cronbach's alpha revealed adequate inter-item reliability ($\alpha = .84$); thus, a single measure of trust level was developed by averaging the responses of each participant ($M=6.28$, $SD=1.09$).

Results

Degree of Nonindependence/Mutuality Between Friends

Given that data were collected from both partners within friendships, it is important to measure the degree to which friends' responses are nonindependent before performing statistical tests of the hypotheses. In the present study, partners are indistinguishable – that is, there is no variable, such as sex, to distinguish between the individuals in each dyad. In such a case, Kenny, Kashy, and Cook (2006) recommend calculating intraclass correlations to assess nonindependence of partners' responses. After centering the variables, a multilevel

modeling approach was used to calculate an intraclass correlation for each variable. For commitment level $rI(60) = .52, p < .05$, for perception of the friend's commitment level $rI(60) = .43, p < .05$, and for trust level $rI(60) = .44, p < .05$. The medium-to-large, significant intraclass correlations for all three variables suggest that partners' responses are nonindependent. Furthermore, these results indicate that, to a moderate degree, friends demonstrate mutuality of commitment and trust in their relationships.

Multilevel Regression Analyses Examining the Association Between Commitment and Trust

Given that friends' responses are nonindependent, it is not appropriate to use conventional regression with the individual participant as the unit of analysis. Instead, a multilevel modeling (a.k.a., hierarchical linear modeling) approach was used in which friendship dyad was the upper-level unit and individual participant was the lower-level unit of analysis. A series of multilevel regressions was performed to examine the association between an individual's trust in the friend and the friend's commitment to their relationship. Specifically, a model was examined in which an individual's perception of the friend's commitment mediates the relation between a friend's own report of commitment to the friendship and an individual's trust in the friend. A summary of the results is presented in the table.2

For multilevel models it is necessary to calculate what is sometimes called a pseudo- R^2 to estimate the proportion of the outcome variable that can be accounted for by the predictor variable(s); this can be done with the following equation (Kenny et al., 2006, p. 95):

$$R^2 = 1 - \frac{s_{dd} + s_e^2}{s_{dd'} + s_e'^2}$$

where s_{dd} is the dyad covariance and s_e^2 is the error variance for the model with the predictor variable(s) included, and $s_{dd'}$ is the dyad covariance and $s_e'^2$ is the error variance for the unrestricted model [i.e., excluding the predictor variable(s)]. A pseudo- R^2 was calculated for each regression analysis. Also, unstandardized regression coefficients and standard errors are reported because they are needed to test the significance of the proposed mediation effect (Baron & Kenny, 1986).

To begin, when individuals' trust level was regressed onto their perceptions of their friends' commitment, a significant association was revealed – the more individuals perceived their friends to be committed to the relationship, the more they trusted their friends. Next, Baron and Kenny's (1986) three steps were performed to examine the role that an

individual's perception of the friend's commitment may play in mediating the relation between the friend's report of own commitment and the individual's trust in the friend. First, a significant association was revealed between friends' reports of their own commitment and individuals' trust – the more committed friends reported they were, the more individuals trusted their friends. Second, a significant association was revealed between friends' reports of their own commitment and individuals' perceptions of their friends' commitment – to some degree, individuals were able to accurately perceive their friends' level of commitment to their relationship. Third, a multiple regression was performed with individuals' perception of their friends' commitment and friends' reports of their own commitment as simultaneous predictors of individuals' trust level. In this case, perception of the partner's commitment remained a significant predictor, but the friend's report of own commitment did not remain a significant predictor of trust level. Also, it is interesting to note that the R^2 when perception of the friend's commitment was the sole predictor and the R^2 when the friend's report of own commitment was added as a predictor are the same (i.e., $R^2 = .41$). In addition, as recommended by Preacher and Leonardelli (2006), the Aroian version of the Sobel test was performed to test the significance of the mediated effect. The result was $z = 6.82$, $p < .001$, suggesting that it is very likely that an individual's perception of the friend's commitment does mediate the relation between the friend's own report of commitment and the individual's trust in the friend.

Discussion

When we trust our friends we have confidence that we can rely on them to care about us and be responsive to our needs, now and in the future (Holmes & Rempel, 1989; Rempel et al., 1985). When we perceive a friend to be committed to our relationship, we know that the friend relies on the relationship and wants it to last into the future (Rusbult, 1980b). Thus, we may develop trust in our friends when we believe that they are committed to the friendship – the general goal of the present research was to examine this assertion. Specifically, it was hypothesized that an individual will trust a friend to the degree that the friend is committed to the relationship. Furthermore, it was predicted that the association between a friend's report of commitment and an individual's trust in the friend would be mediated by the individual's perception of the friend's commitment. Results of a series of multilevel regression analyses confirmed this hypothesis – an individual's trust in a friend is positively associated with both the friend's own report of commitment and the individual's perception of the friend's commitment, but the individual's perception of the friend's commitment appears to be a more proximal predictor of the individual's trust in the friend. However, it is important to note that individuals' perceptions of their partners' commitment

and their partners' own reports of commitment were significantly positively associated, suggesting that individuals' perceptions are at least partly grounded in their partners' reality. Furthermore, because data were collected from both partners within friendships, it was possible to examine the degree to which friendships possess mutuality of commitment. A large positive intraclass correlation between partners' reports of commitment suggests that these friends are similar in how committed they are to each other – friends demonstrate mutuality of commitment, just as partners do in stable dating and married relationships (Drigotas et al, 1999).

An important implication of these results is that, despite the many differences between friendships and romantic relationships, friends and romantic partners may maintain mutual interdependence in a similar manner. Just as trust serves as an implicit gauge of a partner's commitment in dating and married relationships (Wieselquist et al., 1999), it also does so in friendships. A goal of future research might be to explore whether maintaining mutuality is as important to the health of long-term friendships as it is to health of lasting romantic relationships (Drigotas et al., 1999).

There are a few limitations of the present study that should be addressed. One concern involves the fact that self-report data were used. The fact that participants were assured that all of their responses would be kept strictly confidential should have decreased the likelihood that participant bias had an impact on their responses. Still, a goal for future research might be to use behavioral measures, which may be less reactive to participant bias, to examine the association between commitment and trust. For instance, previous research using the PDG-alt – a three-option version of the prisoners' dilemma game that includes a cooperative choice, a competitive choice, and a withdrawal choice – has shown that participants' self-reported trust is associated with choosing the cooperative option (Schopler, Insko, Drigotas, Wieselquist, Pemberton, & Cox, 1995). Future research might explore whether interpersonal trust in friendships could be measured with this sort of behavioral measure.

Although the present study identifies a link between an individual's trust in a friend and the friend's commitment to the relationship, it does not address how an individual comes to recognize the friend's commitment. Previous research with dating and married couples suggests that because committed partners want their relationships to persist, they are motivated to enact personally costly behaviors for the sake of maintaining their relationships (Rusbult, Olsen, Davis, & Hannon, 2001). Thus, these relationship maintenance behaviors are diagnostic of partners' commitment (cf. Holmes & Rempel, 1989). When individuals in dating and marital relationships recognize their partners enacting relationship maintenance behaviors, their trust in their partners increases

(Wieselquist et al., 1999). A goal of future research might be to determine if the same type of process helps friends to recognize each other's commitment.

Another interesting avenue of future research might be an examination of the consequences of trust (and the lack of trust) on the willingness of friends to become more (or less) interdependent. Research on dating and marital relationships suggests that as trust increases, partners become more dependent and committed to their relationships, and as trust decreases, partner become less dependent and committed (Wieselquist et al., 1999). Perhaps friendships grow and deteriorate in a similar manner.

Conclusion

Being committed to a relationship places individuals in a vulnerable position because they come to depend on their partners for their own, personal well-being. Partners who are mutually committed to each other are less vulnerable because they both rely on each other – they strike a balance in dependence and power. Thus, it is beneficial for partners to have the ability to gauge each other's level of commitment. The present research has provided preliminary evidence that we trust our friends to the degree that we recognize that they are committed to our relationships; that is, trust serves a gauge of a friend's commitment. In so doing, this research has identified a mechanism by which close friends may maintain mutual interdependence in their relationships, and it has provided a starting point for future research on the development and consequences of trust in close friendships. Furthermore, this research suggests that despite the many differences between friendships and romantic relationships, they may be very similar in the basic nature of their interdependence.

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Footnotes

¹ I considered excluding males' data, given the fact that there were relatively few pairs of male friends. However, analyses performed including male participants' data and analyses performed excluding male participants' data revealed the same pattern of results. Thus, I have chosen to report the results of analyses using the full data set, including data obtained from both male and female participants.

² Given the possibility that duration of the friendship could play an important role in the proposed associations, all of the analyses were performed including duration of the friendship as a predictor. However, duration of the friendship was not a significant predictor in any of the analyses. Therefore, duration of friendship results are not included in the summary table.

Table

Results of Multilevel Regression Analyses Examining the Associations Among Friend's Report of Own Commitment, Individual's Perception of the Friend's Commitment, and the Individual's Trust in the Friend

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>R</i> ²
Predicting Trust from:				
Perception of Friend's Commitment	.53	.06	8.65**	.41
Predicting Trust from:				
Friend's Commitment	.23	.09	2.55*	.08
Predicting Percep. of Friend's Comm. from:				
Friend's Commitment	.95	.06	15.83**	.23
Predicting Trust from:				
Perception of Friend's Commitment	.53	.07	8.14**	.41
Friend's Commitment	-.02	.08	-.28	

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