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HOW I ENDED UP IN A HAPPY RELATIONSHIP: WOMEN'S PROCESS OF SUCCESSFUL PARTNERING

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Summary

Women (under the age of 40 years) in fulfilling heterosexual relationships are interviewed about their commitment process. A grounded theory analysis is conducted to develop a model of these successful commitment processes. Findings describe the qualities women attribute to their partners, external factors in their relationship formation, and processes of developing desire, making commitment decisions, resolving hesitations about commitment, and maintaining relational ease. The core category in this model, *Not just a process of choice but of acceptance and appreciation*, suggests that partnering decisions include an initial decision-making phase. Ongoing commitment decisions, however, may follow a distinctly different process in which partnering is based on faith and trust. This two-stage model of partnering integrates existing models of romantic love.

Keywords: *partnering; marriage; decision; romantic love; women*

> "Some things in life should remain unprobed by science's scalpel, and right at the top of the list of those things is the mysterious phenomenon of romantic passion. . ."
>
> Proxmire, 1980

Although Proxmire's sentiment may find sympathy in many circles, it has been ignored by the social sciences. Love, relationships, and humans beings' attachments with one another are among the most intriguing of human experiences. Many researchers have taken on the challenge to unravel answers to questions such as, "Where does love come from?" and "What brings two people together?"

There are a host of theories that frame the answers to these questions. Although a full review of the extensive literature in this area is beyond the scope of this article, the following section describes some of the responses of social science researchers who have had the daring to probe this topic and highlights the disconnection between these often discrete approaches to understanding this phenomenon.

Triadic Component Models

Several prominent theories hold in common a triadic model of the experience of being in love. Sternberg (1988) presents a classification system called the "Triangle of Love," composed of three basic elements: intimacy, passion, and commitment. Aronson (1999) describes these elements: "Intimacy refers to feelings of being close to and bonded [sic] with a partner. Passion refers to the arousal you experience toward your partner, including sexual attraction. Commitment consists of two decisions—the short-term one to love your partner and the long-term one to maintain that love and stay with your partner. . ." (p. 402). Love may be composed of one or any combination of these elements. The combination of intimacy and commitment, without passion, is termed *companionate love*. A typical romantic relationship might begin with passion, grow into romantic love, a combination of passion and intimacy, and, later, evolve into consummate love—the ultimate goal, which is composed of all three components.

Similarly, the investment model has described relational success as composed of three components built on one another (Rusbult, 1988). Satisfaction depends on the rewards minus costs in relation to a comparison level. Commitment in a relationship is dependent

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on the experience of satisfaction in relation to the investment being made and other relationship alternatives. Whether a person stays in or leaves a relationship depends, in turn, on the person's level of commitment. In a healthy romantic relationship, partners would remain present with strong commitment and satisfaction.

In a final triadic model, Clark and Pataki (1995) explain that theories on attraction typically have been informed by three recognized tendencies in human relationships. First, relationships form because of proximity. People tend to become more acquainted and involved with others who are in closer physical proximity. Second, physical attractiveness is a factor in the initiation and development of romantic relationships (Walster, Aronson, Abrahams, & Rottman, 1966). Third, similarity has been related to partnering, as described by the old adage "birds of a feather flock together." Findings suggest that pairing is increasingly likely when partners share values and attitudes (Byrne & Griffitt, 1966), personality traits (Caspi & Harbener, 1990; Marioles, Strickert, & Hammer, 1996; Rytting, Ware, & Hopkins, 1992), and economic status (Byrne, Clore, & Worchel, 1966). According to Clark and Pataki (1995) there is little evidence to support the contrary notion that opposites attract. All three of these models appear to hold that a long-term positive romantic relationship should be based on the development of a strong interpersonal connection, but the form of this bond differs considerably between models.

Models of the Capacity to Love

Developmental theorists have put forth models of love that explain how individuals would come to have the capacity for this powerful emotional tie. Attachment theory originates with Bowlby (see 1969/1982, 1973, 1980), who described the development of attachment styles of infants in their relationships with primary caregivers. Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, and Wall (1978) extended Bowlby's work by developing an assessment measure for infants' attachment styles that designated three categories of attachment: secure, anxious or ambivalent, and avoidant. Hazan and Shaver (1987) developed a questionnaire that applied this assessment and the corresponding categories of attachment style to adults. They found that the prevalence in their adult sample of the three types was roughly equivalent to those of infant samples, that adults differentiated by the three types of attachment styles "differ[ed] predictably in the way they experience romantic love" (p. 511) and that the attachment style categories

"related in theoretically meaningful ways to mental models of self and social relationships" (p. 511).

An alternate model that explains the experience of love and attraction is rooted in Skinner's theory of conditioning (e.g., Skinner, 1958). Simply stated, the theory proposes that people are attracted to persons in whose presence they receive some sort of positive reinforcement or reward (e.g., Griffitt, 1970). Although the mechanisms at play are quite different, these models both posit that there is a process of interaction and learning with objects of desire that bring about the potential for falling in love.

Genetic or Physiological Models

Other models of being in love aim to connect this process with our physical beings and ancestral history. Schachter (1964) theorized that emotion is composed of two parts: physical arousal and the labeling of physical arousal in emotional terms. Berscheid and Walster (1974) then advanced this conceptualization of emotion to explain romantic attraction, stating that feelings of love develop when there is a physical arousal and the person labels that arousal as feelings because of or directed toward the partner. An interesting finding is that the theory allows room for the possibility that physical arousal may be generated by some factor other than a person's partner, usually some other environmental stimulus. Therefore, the "misattribution of arousal" may often be involved in romantic attraction (White, Fishbein, & Rutstein, 1981).

Darwinian theory, based on natural selection, examines the forces behind procreation and survival of the species. As applied to human mating practices, it focuses on the differing qualities that men and women look for in a mate. They propose that women, desiring support through pregnancy and child rearing, are careful to select a man who will be a reliable supporter and provider. Men, however, are more apt to seek out multiple sexual partners as a genetic strategy to procreate as extensively as possible. They are expected to seek healthy, physically attractive women, whose appearance implies that they will have healthy children (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Clark & Hatfield, 1989). These theories suggest that humans have been genetically predisposed toward the experience of falling in love.

Study Objective: Modeling the Participants' Perspective

It is apparent that answers to the mystery of long-lasting love vary widely with the theoretical concerns of the investigators.

As such, our atomistic lenses can block the development of a coherent understanding of the experience of love. As well, cross-cultural studies have revealed that social and cultural norms influence the way people understand, express, and behave in matters of love (e.g., Simmons, Vom Kolke, & Shimizu, 1986). Although the experience of love appears to be a global phenomenon, the forms and structures that contain this phenomenon may differ significantly. Theorists may generate many different models of this experience based on the time, place, and question that they are confronting. A study of the holistic experience of love appears warranted and a qualitative inquiry allows the exploration of such subjective experience.

In the present study, investigators explored the experience of making a commitment within a healthy love relationship, within the context of heterosexual relationships and within a U.S. population. The question of the study was how young heterosexual women (under 40 years in age) came to be in successful committed relationships. Because of the age of the participants, success was defined as a marriage of at least 5 years in duration that was perceived as "happy" by the participant. The project began as part of a project in a graduate-level qualitative methods course. In developing such a model, the researchers aimed to better understand successful young women's experiences of partnering. This exploration affords a unique perspective into this mysterious and compelling human experience.

METHOD

Participants

The researchers interviewed 8 women between the ages of 27 and 38 ($\bar{X} = 31.62$, $s^2 = 2.72$) who had been in happy, heterosexual, romantic relationships after at least 5 years. The length of the relationships ranged from 5.5 to 20 years ($\bar{X} = 11.06$, $s^2 = 4.69$). All but one of the participants were married. Of those who were married, the length of the marriages ranged from 2.5 to 20 years ($\bar{X} = 8.38$, $s^2 = 4.62$). All of the participants had a college-level education, and most of their partners had comparable education levels. All participants came from Christian backgrounds and, with one exception, so did their partners. Three out of 8 participants had children, and 1 couple was African American and the rest were caucasian. Although the participants were residing in Memphis, Tennessee, at

the time of the interview, many said that they identified more strongly with another location as they had spent a significant amount of their lives in that location (e.g., Alabama, Texas, Illinois, Florida, Kansas, and Ohio). Their professional lives varied considerably (e.g., actress, student, medical researcher, psychologist, media, secretary). Within a grounded theory analysis, the diversity of our participants' experiences is positive, as it allows for the development of a more inclusive model (see Patton, 1990, on maximal variation).

Measures

The Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test (Locke & Wallace, 1959) was used as a quantitative screening measure to verify that participants were indeed involved in happy, romantic relationships. This test is a 15-item self-report inventory that provides a short but valid and reliable indicator of marital adjustment. It consists of 1 global adjustment scale item, 8 items measuring potential disagreement, and 6 items measuring conflict resolution, cohesion, and communication. It has a high degree of reliability ($r = .9$) as assessed by a split-half analysis corrected by the Spearman-Brown formula and is purported to be able to significantly discriminate between maladjusted and well-adjusted marriages (Locke & Wallace, 1959). In this study, all participants scored above the cutoff score of 100 ($\bar{X} = 120.5$, $s^2 = 9.83$) indicating that they perceived their romantic relationships as well adjusted.

Procedure

Recruitment. Participants were recruited through personal contacts of the researchers or by advertisements such as flyers, posted in university, hospital, and public settings, that asked women who had been in happy relationships for at least 5 years to participate in an interview about how they selected their romantic partners. Most of our participants (6 out of 8) recruited were friends or colleagues, allowing for increased comfort in relaying these in-depth intimate stories. The other 2 participants were recruited from the flyer advertisements. For their time and inconvenience, participants were offered $10. Participants self-identified as being in a successful, happy relationship.

Interviewing. Interviews were conducted privately in locations agreed on by both the participant and the interviewer. Each of the authors in this study conducted an interview with one study

participant after attending two 3-hr classes in which qualitative interviewing skills were discussed and practiced in role plays. All questions were open ended and were worded to be inclusive and relevant to each participant. Interviewers took care not to assume participant responses and avoid biasing their responses.

The primary question proposed to the participants was, "How did you come to be with your romantic partner?" Other related probes were used: "How did you come to first consider this person as a romantic prospect? What made you want to commit to your partner? If you chose to be with your partner, what was it like to make that choice? And in retrospect, would you have changed anything about the way the relationship developed?"

Grounded theory. The participants' responses to the main question of how they came together with their romantic partner were qualitatively analyzed using the grounded theory method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This original approach to grounded theory is supported by Rennie's (2000) argument that it is the form most congruent with a hermeneutic framework. The present investigation included multiple levels of analyses. Initially, each transcript was broken down into meaning units by the investigator who conducted the interview and organized into a hierarchy of categories. Meaning units were based on single ideas and reflected respondents' language as much as possible to preserve their intended meaning. Next, the investigators worked as a team to analyze the entire data set of eight interviews using the software program, Qualitative Solutions and Research (QSR*N5). Investigators entered meaning units and initial categories from their analyses into QSR*N5. All investigators reviewed all meaning units for further possible categories. Investigators then worked in pairs to conceptualize the higher order categories. On a weekly basis, investigators discussed the process of coding to arrive at a consensus. Investigators progressively built a hierarchy by organizing lower level categories into higher categories.

Credibility checks. To assess the thoroughness of the data collection, at the end of the interviews, participants were asked if there were any relevant questions that had not been asked; if they had learned anything from the interview; if they had any suggestions for conducting future interviews; and if there was anything about the interviewer that hindered them from or encouraged them to disclose information. These questions were asked to allow participants to reflect on both the information discussed in the interview

and the interpersonal process. They allowed participants to provide any further information that could be helpful and encouraged them to recognize and overcome any interpersonal process or bias that might have generated self-censorship. By requesting this feedback, interviewers increased the comprehensiveness of the interview data.

A second form of credibility was provided by the method of consensus between investigators. In this study, investigators used memos to record their experiences of coding. Weekly classroom discussions of the process and content of categorization ensued. In keeping with a constructivist hermeneutic model of inquiry, which values the possibility of many different but correct interpretations of phenomena, investigators were guided to be inclusive of alternative categories whenever they made sense to the group. Also in keeping with a hermeneutic model of analysis, the investigator who conducted the interview of a participant was considered the authority in each instance, as he or she had the lived experience of interaction with that interviewee to draw on.

Following preliminary data analyses, investigators each wrote a brief letter to their respondent describing the highest order categories in relation to the lower order categories for that interview. These letters were accompanied by questionnaires that were meant to elicit feedback about the analysis from each participant, to further inform the groups' efforts at a combined analysis. Four participants responded to two questions to gauge how well investigators represented the respondents' experiences. The first question asked participants whether the identified interview categories were coherent with their personal experience, and the second question asked whether they felt that themes contradicted their experience. Both questions used Likert-type scales in which a rating of 1 indicated *very much* and 7 indicated *not at all*. The mean rating for the first question was 1.5, and the mean rating for the second was 6.5, indicating that the categories described appeared to be consistent with the interviewees' experiences. One respondent provided additional feedback, suggesting that the interview helped her reconceptualize her relationship, in contrasting the marital connection with that of parental unconditional love.

RESULTS

In this study, the developed hierarchy consisted of six layers derived from 714 meaning units. The final hierarchy included

896 meaning units, as some meaning units were sorted into multiple categories. As the length of this article precludes the discussion of all layers of the hierarchy, the top four conceptual layers will be described. The primary level in the hierarchy consisted of six clusters of categories, which are subordinate only to the core category. These clusters, described in the following sections, join categories that share a common theme. Composing the categories are subcategories that make up the next layer of meaning in the hierarchy and are referred to within the descriptions of the category content. In other words, the levels of the hierarchy are, in turn, labeled as thus: core category, clusters, categories, and subcategories.

Assessing Partners' Attributes: Trust, Devotion, Care, Stimulation, and Exceptionality

This first cluster, assessing partners' attributes, gathered categories in which participants assessed the traits that they attributed to their partners as they considered whether or not to enter into a committed relationship. This cluster was composed of four categories (see Table 1).

Participants tended to attribute a status of exceptionality to their partners-to-be. For instance, one participant described that she "had not had great relationships before. And he was just really good to me and really a great guy. He was just not like anyone else I had ever dated" (P-01). Other participants echoed this sentiment, albeit in different terms. Their partners-to-be were more mature, more caring, and possessed unusually positive characteristics. Although the attribution of exceptionality was explicit in only four interviews, it was implicit throughout these assessments as partners were repeatedly described in superlative terms.

As well, partners were assessed in terms of their ability to communicate care and devotion. In the subcategories, women assessed their partners' responsiveness, caring, and ability to be "good to them," "nice or kind," and "emotionally available." One participant described an initial hesitation to progress in a romantic relationship because of her partner's perceived emotional unavailability. She said, "I just thought it might feed into that distance thing, and I didn't want him to be emotionally unavailable like the bad patterns, the bad relationships I'd had [sic] before" (P-01). Another described, "It is extremely comforting to know that there's going to be someone there to support you, not financially, but emotionally" (P-04).

Another related trait that was emphasized was partners' trustworthiness. Subcategories included the assessment of their relia-

TABLE 1:
Assessing Partners' Attributes: Trust, Devotion, Care, Stimulation and Exceptionality

Categories	N	Subcategories
The attribution of exceptionality	4	Being great Being unusual Being different from past partners
Evidence of care and devotion	5	Unconditional love, caring, and emotional availability Good, nice, responsive to me
Trustworthiness in relationship	7	Decisive and strong He's mature He's similar to myself He's reliable, trustworthy, and safe
Interpersonal stimulation	6	Amusing Intelligence Interesting Hesitancy if partner seemed pressured, tired, shy
Overall endorsement	8	

bility, maturity, decisiveness, and respectfulness. Participants also valued similarity to self, desiring partners who had the same worldview as they did so that they were likely to endorse converging decisions. Some women described having to overcome fears that the partner was too pessimistic or conservative before feeling comfortable in making a commitment.

Finally, interviewees described their partners' tendencies to be interpersonally stimulating. They attributed intelligence and humor to partners and described them as interesting or teasing in conversation. Women who initially viewed their partners as shy, tired, or pressured had to wrestle with these judgments before committing to their partners.

Those women who assessed their partners as lacking in the traits described appeared to use two main paths to overcome their initial reluctance—either they grew to know their partner better and reassessed them on the trait, or they reassessed the importance of that trait in relation to the other traits described. For instance, one self-described "city girl" described her process of deciding to marry a farmer despite her fears that her life would not be stimulating. "There was no guarantee that I would go and

find happiness in the city, and I had happiness here. . . when you find someone that treats you so well and cares about you. . . you want to keep that" (P-02). These courtships did not progress until a process of re-evaluation took place.

External Influences: Faith Beliefs and Other Relationships Provided Assurance of a Future

This second cluster described influences external to the relationship that influenced the participants' decisions to embark on a relationship. It contained five categories (see Table 2).

A history of friends supporting the development of the relationship was present in all of the meaning units that formed this category. One participant described, "For a few weeks, we ended up kind of hooking up with all our friends together. Before we dated alone. . . we went out as a group. . . eventually started going out on our own" (P-05).

For many participants, the approval of family members helped the process of partnering. A participant stated, "[we were] lucky that our parents get along really well and they have similar opinions about things. . . where neither of us is ever being pulled one direction or feeling as though we need to side. . . has been really important to our relationship" (P-03). This interconnection was evident as women described asking family members for their approval before partnering. One interviewee recalled her mother telling her, "[Marry] when you love somebody, you want to be with them and you can't imagine your life without them" (P-06). Family and peer advice was actively sought.

Past relationships were another interpersonal resource that participants used to assess their relationships. One woman spoke at length about how her past relationships did not help her to learn what she wanted, but to know what she did not want in a partner. Other participants described how the relationship with their partner-to-be appeared significant at the outset, as it was more substantial than other more casual relationships.

The category, *common background and values enhance trust in the relationship*, encompassed cultural, religious, and social commonalities that encouraged the participants to develop the relationship. Whether referring to shared religious or cultural roots (e.g., both descendents from Scandinavian cultures) or shared beliefs (e.g., atheism), these commonalities assured the participants that the coupling would be founded on values that they could

TABLE 2:
External Influences Provided Assurance of a Future

Categories	N	Subcategories
Friends helped us come together	2	None
Family encouragement and approval	5	Asking for parental advice about love helped us commit Family encouragement and mutual liking helped
Learning from prior relationships	5	Learned what I don't want from prior relationships In contrast with past relationships, he was special
Destiny, fate, God brought us together	6	Gradual coming together as I followed my path Knowing from the beginning it was fate-destiny God interceded or prayer influenced partnering
Common background and values	7	Common religion, ethnicity, and values create a bond Common religious faith or questioning united us Christian values viewed relationship as lifelong commitment
Overall endorsement	8	

uphold. The second subcategory was *religious values encourage taking relationship seriously*. It seemed that for some participants, their prospective partner's religious commitment assured them of their partner's value of commitment to the relationship and allowed for the development of a stronger trust in a common future.

The final category was *fate, destiny or God brought us together*. The participants who endorsed this category either thought from the beginning that the relationship was meant to be the significant commitment of her lifetime or that this pairing was brought about by prayer or by direct intercession from God. "I was a senior in high school, and dating guys that just went nowhere. I finally said, 'Lord, I'm gonna close my eyes, and I want you to bring me the person that you want me to be with'" (P-05). Tying

TABLE 3:
The Development of Desire: A Need to Be Together Interacting With Relational Needs

Categories	*N*	Subcategories
Need to be together because of attraction, curiosity, and excitement	8	Initial attraction: clearly more than friends Initial curiosity about him Loving being with him, more than with other people
Needs for relationship and love	5	Seeking an ideal relationship A need for an adoring other
Overall endorsement	8	

together the themes in this cluster is the experience of external approval and support for the relationship, which may come from a variety of sources.

The Development of Desire: A Need to Be Together Interacting With Relational Needs

The third cluster was *The development of desire* (see Table 3). Participants described an initial desire to spend time together stemming from attraction or intrigue. They described feeling love at first sight, finding certain traits to be highly attractive in their prospective partner or feeling a sense of curiosity about their partner. One participant stated, "I guess more positive emotions at the beginning of the relationship because he was different [from other men]" (P-06). These various attractions, frequently felt strongly early on in the development of the relationship, played an important role in the participants' coming together with their partners.

Participants described the desire for their partner as arising out of a pre-existing desire for a love relationship, adoration, and acceptance. One woman described her desire and need to be unconditionally loved by her partner, "I think what helped me to just make up my mind was I knew that he was somebody that was going to love me the way I was" (P-06). They wished for a sense of mutual care and love for one another. They described evaluating their growing relationship in relation to their desire for an ideal relationship. The two desires, for her partner and for a partner, seemed to be wedded, and the women referenced them together as they contemplated making a commitment to their partner.

Maintaining Ease: Communicating Acceptance and Respect

The fourth cluster described the ways women described maintaining a feeling of ease within their relationships. It consisted of four categories (see Table 4). Respondents discussed the importance of easy and enjoyable interactions with their partners. Many talked about the importance of developing a friendship within the relationship or of having had a relationship beforehand. By being themselves, the women and their partners were able to accept each other fully, knowing all of their faults. Entering into and progressing in their relationships seemed right for these participants, and details seemed to fall into place for them. For example, "We just seemed so natural together. You know, when you start completing other people's sentences, and little things like that" (P-07). They described this comfort in the relationship as an important shield against the hardships in their lives. One woman was careful to distinguish it from complacency, saying that it was, instead, a comfort that allowed her to be herself.

In terms of conflict resolution, two main strategies were described: commonalities and acceptance of differences. Commonalities in goals, interests, and recreation were described as helping to reduce the overall conflicts within the relationship. The women described consciously deciding to accept faults in their partner and differences in patterns of behaviors or relationship expectations. A participant advised, "I don't think you should go into it thinking you can change this person. . . but I think you need to go into it thinking that good and bad, you're gonna take this person for who they are" (P-01). Another interviewee said, "I realized that I needed to be able to accept that this was how he was going to handle problems to some degree and that pushing him wasn't going to make it OK. . . I just liked him so much. He was worth it" (P-01). This intentional acceptance of faults appeared to help the women remain caring in their daily interactions.

The third category, *deep communication strengthens intimacy*, consists of descriptions of the personal discussions between partners that assured the women that they could have a strong bond with their prospective partners. They described regular intimate conversation as an important skill that helped them forge a sense of commitment to one another.

In the final category in this cluster, the participants described the importance of mutual cooperation with one another. They described the importance of respect and attempts to understand one another even in the face of interpersonal stress. This dynamic

TABLE 4:
Maintaining Ease: Communicating Acceptance and Respect

Category	*N*	Subcategory
An ease in togetherness	7	Scared to shift from friends to dating Natural comfort and understanding Enjoyment in being together
Conflict resolution and acceptance of other	6	Accepting each other instead of wanting change Commonalities reduce conflict Setting own style of communication
Deep level of communication increases intimacy	2	None
Respectful cooperation when working together	4	None
Overall endorsement	7	

was described as most important in "all the decision-making parts" (P-03) because of the vulnerability that can arise in the midst of conflict. Both the explicit and implicit communication of respectful interest while working together was important to the participants, as it helped to ease their fears of decisional incompatibility, allowing them to better hear their partner's concerns.

Hesitations: Negotiating the Fear of Loss of Self
and the Desire for Adoration and Connection

In this cluster, women described their process of resolving concerns that they had about entering into a relationship with their partner (see Table 5). Most women described having little if any reluctance at entering into a committed relationship. They described strong feelings of wishing to be with their partner all the time and said that they wouldn't have done anything differently in retrospect.

Some participants, however, described premarital hesitations related to a fear of losing their identity. They worried about forsaking the development of an independent career, entering a lifelong commitment, or losing control within the relationship. Two participants described calculating their chance of success in their relationship with their partner and deciding that the marriage

TABLE 5:
Hesitations: Negotiating the Fear of Loss of Self and the Desire for Adoration

Category	N	Subcategory
Resolved hesitations: maturing, revaluing, risk management	8	Time and space to mature Revaluing different qualities in partner Risk management: minimizing my vulnerability
Hesitations: fear of loss of self or rejection pain from other	8	Fear of loss of self Fear of being hurt Hesitations because of family culture, restrictive beliefs Regrets: not dating more or not committing sooner
No hesitations: utter adoration	6	No hesitation to progress and commit Could not live without him, needed to marry No regrets: would not do anything different
Overall endorsement	8	

was a good risk. Even though "it was scary before and it was scary in that moment. I didn't know whether or not I was doing the right thing, but I decided to take a chance anyway" (P-08). She described that emotional risks could still be frightening, and that her relationship was composed of a series of such challenges.

Interviewees, in another subcategory, described a fear of being hurt or rejected by their partner-to-be. They described negative prior relationships with men that led them to expect disappointment and generated a fear of damaging a current friendship with their prospective partner. Women found ways to reduce their level of vulnerability in entering a relationship or moving to a new stage of intimacy with their partners. Two women described anxiously waiting for their partner to propose before discussing marriage.

Family concerns about partners were described in a third category. Families' worries had to be resolved, such religious beliefs about couples cohabitating. One woman expressed concerns about partnering because of her family history, which modeled divorce and conflict. Only two women expressed regrets: One regretted having little prior dating experience, and the other regretted not having made an earlier commitment to her partner.

Resolving hesitations consisted of three subcategories, all entailing a process of reconciling or accepting one's original qualms about pursuing the relationship. The subcategory *time and space to mature* was formed to reflect interviewee's reported experiences of becoming more mature with time and feeling ready to make a commitment, taking time to gain confidence in the relationship, and realizing that they wished to be with their partner after being apart for a while. By allowing themselves room to reflect on what they desired, they developed the certainty they needed to enter into a relationship. "Revaluing different qualities in partners" consisted of women changing the initial judgments they had generated about their partners. Some interviewees recognized that their partner did not possess the negative qualities that they imagined. For example, one participant stated, "And he was really funny, and so we got to be friends after that, and I had wanted to see if my first impression was off, and it was" (P-01). At other times, the women resolved their hesitation by deciding that their partner's ability to be caring toward them overshadowed less important qualities that might still be lacking.

Commitment Values and Decisions: Acting in Accordance With Personal Beliefs

Within the fifth cluster, Commitment Values and Decisions, the category of Pace of Commitment Decisions included subcategories such as Living together and marriage as steps, Developing self as an individual first and Not rushing the relationship (see Table 6). The commonality in these subcategories was the theme that women sought the development of their own values prior to their entry into couplehood or marriage. Women who cohabitated with partners before marriage interpreted this period as a time to further their sense of self before making a commitment. Women who had more traditional values about living together before marriage disagreed: "If you're going to live together... you should get married... You can't have your cake and eat it too" (P-07). Both sets of women, however, described the time before marriage as a period that allowed them to develop stronger sense of themselves before joining with a partner. The marriage was thought to initiate a deeper level of commitment requiring preparation.

The main rational for this commitment was the desire to be together more of the time. Subcategories identified variations of this motive, such as not wanting to be alone, wanting to be together, and

TABLE 6:
Commitment Values and Decisions: Act in Accord With Personal Beliefs

Category	N	Subcategory
Choice: conscious commitment versus natural flow	7	Hard to say if there was a conscious decision point It was a choice to be together, a commitment
Reasons to commit: desire to be together more	5	Desire to be together-near Practical to live together Excitement in committing to one another
Pace of commitment decisions	8	Living together and marriage as steps Developing self as an individual first Not rushing the relationship
Overall endorsement	8	

facing other practical considerations. The emotion that ran through this decision was the happiness in committing. One woman described her decision as being "95% excitement" (P-03).

Core Category: Not Just a Process of Choice but of Acceptance and Appreciation

A core category emerged from the model as a concept that organizes the clusters and the theory of a phenomenon. The core category in this model was *Not just a process of choice but of acceptance and appreciation*. It reflected a process of coming together that seemed implicit across the categories.

For these women, the act of partnering either shifted from an intellectual decision-making phase or never went through this process at all. Although the initial assessment of the partner's attributes or social commonalities might have more of an evaluative tone, that rational stance subsided as the relationship progressed, often quite quickly. For these women, transitions in the relationship to cohabitation or marriage tended to be based on the development of mutual trust rather than a critical assessment.

One participant described this reliance on acceptance and faith:

I wish I could say it was a conscious decision, I mean, it is to a degree, but I don't really think it's conscious. . . I mean, anytime you do something that is the unknown or something you're

inexperienced about, there is probably a little bit—not so much hesitation that you don't want to do it—but you're a little bit leery, or you're a little bit 'Oh my gosh, what is gonna happen next?' Maybe, here is another thing. . . maybe [it's] a loss of control, 'cause now it's not just me, it's somebody else, and we have to keep hoping that our decisions will come at the same time, and we'll feel the same way about a lot of things, but you don't know because now it's two of you. . . . It's just [like] with anything else where you feel like you have to control something. It's just learning to be open-minded and thinking more about people around you than just what you want. And luckily for us, a lot of the times what I want is usually what he wants. Thank goodness. But you know there is that apprehension that it wouldn't be. (P-03)

Other participants described the process of relinquishing conscious volition and scrutiny as well. For one, it was the process of merging identity, "It all just kinda merged together. You know, with a new romance, it's all exciting and all. And then, the rest, I think we just both kinda took it for granted that we'd be together" (P-05). For another, the process was "God leading us" to come together (P-06). For yet another, there was little deliberation of the risks involved in partnering: "I mean that [committing] really wasn't something I had to think about. I mean I just did enjoy being with him" (P-02).

The shift from a critical perspective was striking, as women corrected interviewers, repeatedly, when they tried to inquire into the process of choice.

Interviewer: How did you first decide to consider this person as a romantic prospect?
Client: I kinda went with my feelings.
Interviewer: So did it feel like a decision at all?
Client: No, it didn't feel like a decision was involved. I didn't really think about it that way. It just kinda all filtered in and made me think of him as a romantic prospect. I didn't really make a conscious decision to consider him. . . but I knew that I wanted to consider him that way, romantically, [because of] how I felt when I was around him. (P-08)

This process of uncritically accepting the other was described frequently as "natural"—with the desire to be together clearly leading to the eventual marriage. When both partners engaged in this unconditional commitment, the ensuing trust allowed for the formation of a relational interdependency in which both partners could maintain their own personal beliefs and values. The previously described fears of losing their own identities during courtship may characterize this difficult transition from one stance to the

other. As evidence of a reciprocated acceptance was generated, a sense of ease evolved within their interactions, and women reported feeling freer to assert their own needs.

This finding suggests that the decision-making models for understanding the process of partnering may not be useful past an early dating stage. This study suggests that after that point, the process may be markedly different—at least for those pairings destined to become successful relationships—and that the discourse of *choice* may lose its utility.

Interview Reflections

At the end of the interview, women were asked to reflect on the interview process and were asked what advice they might give to other women who are entering relationships. In terms of their reflection on the interview, most women described the interview as easy and quite enjoyable. Specifically, some spoke of pleasure in remembering the feelings associated with the development of their relationship. The only concerns they reported about the interview was an uncertainty whether they were answering the questions the way they were intended to be answered, likely due in part to the nonleading manner of the interviewer and the effort to use open-ended and nonleading questions as much as possible.

When participants were asked if they had advice on partnering to share, they stressed the effort required in caring for a partner, especially during difficult periods. At the same time, they emphasized that relationships should be enjoyable. In selecting the right relationship, participants advised others to take relationships slowly, paying attention to gut feelings before making commitments. Partners should have an overarching sense of mutual respect for each other and demonstrate this sentiment when interacting. Finally, the balance between holding both common interests and individual interests was emphasized. All of these subcategories of the *advice for others* category speak to the participants' perception that a balance between personal identity and couplehood needs to be maintained in a happy and lasting relationship.

DISCUSSION

Although credibility checks and the saturation of the model lend confidence to the results, this process of successful partnering was

based on the reported experiences of young heterosexual women in successful relationships, and findings should be understood within that context. As this study is a qualitative and not a comparative study, it should not be understood as a comment on the many types of relationships that were not the subject of exploration (e.g., unhappy relationships) but instead as an attempt to develop theory about the process of commitment within positive relationships.

This model does provide support for some existing theories of falling in love, however, and offers a new way of understanding these theories in relation to one another. For instance, the interviewed women endorsed aspects of love such as interpersonal bond and social network similarities as important, which can be seen as evidence for triadic component theories. These findings also support the work that suggests that social networks can act as important supporters for couples in times of conflict (e.g., Klein & Milardo, 2000; Leslie, Huston, & Johnson, 1986). As well, it describes processes of emotional connection that support attachment theory and the women's desire for devotion and stability in partners, which might be seen as support for evolutionary processes.

This study supplements this literature, however, by providing grounded definitions of these components and articulating processes that lend contextual information. For instance, intimacy, passion, and commitment, as described by Sternberg (1988), can be seen as evolving in relation to the processes described within the present model, such as external assurances, attribute assessments, desire, interpersonal ease, and the negotiation of interpersonal anxiety. In addition to providing detail on the mechanics of relational commitment processes, this research can position the evolution of these components within phases of choice or trust, within a two-stage model to be described.

A Two-Stage Model

The findings of this study indicated that the participants' experiences of being happily in love derived from processes that unfolded in a certain order. Within the process of partnering, it appeared that although many women (a) initially approached their partner from a position of appraisal, this shifted to (b) a process of unconditional acceptance early within courtship. The evaluative position was most clear in the participants' descriptions of initial assessments of their partners' attributes of trust, devotion, care, and exceptionality. Their desire to partner grew

from a need to be with that person in conjunction with an interest in having a relationship. These aspirations were supported by family, friends, and by common beliefs about partnering. After they reconciled their own personal fears of loss of self with their desire for adoration and connection, if not before then, a powerful commitment developed in which the participants abandoned their previous evaluative reserve. The relationships were described as containing the quality of ease, as facilitated by the mutual communication of acceptance and respect.

As this two-stage model stems from women's lived experience of partnering, the identified processes can unify some of the existing theories of love. The descriptions of women's experiences provide rich data that point to possibilities for new understandings. For instance, an evolutionary approach can lend meaning to the initial process of assessing a partner's attributes, whereas investment and reinforcement models can be useful in understanding the process of developing desire. Attachment theory may best explain the process of negotiating interpersonal anxieties and hesitations and the leap of faith into commitment. This model is in line with empirical research suggesting that relational processes become important at different times; for instance, that fairness is more predictive of satisfaction earlier in premarital relationships (Cate, Lloyd, & Long, 1988).

In the present model, however, the shift away from a mode of evaluative deliberation poses challenges to theories of relationship that posit an ongoing process of evaluation-based decision making in successful partnering. Triadic or evolutionary models may better account for the initial stages of courtship, when some women report holding a judicious stance in the relationship. This initial period of logical scrutiny appears to be followed by a merge and acceptance of the risks involved in coupling. This work supports Murray and Holmes's (1997) research suggesting that "positive illusions" or idealization of partners bodes well for long-term relationship satisfaction. Even when a relationship seems positive, the process of entering into this deep level of vulnerability and attachment may not be one that can be subject to an accurate rational evaluation, as so much of the future may be unknown. These illusions may be necessary for the dive into commitment and away from evaluation.

This work also resonates with Clark and Mills's (1979) categories of communal and exchange relationships. It seems that the relationships in the study began with an evaluation of the potential for

ongoing positive exchange but quickly shifted to a communal status in which partners sought to fulfill each other's needs without the expectation of receiving comparable benefits. Discourses of reasoned choice may need to be integrated with discourses of attachment to fully conceptualize women's long-term healthy relationships. Further research can assess whether this two-stage model may help to explain the difficulties in ending a destructive relationship in spite of logical reasons for its demise. It may be that a regression from a mode of abandonment to an evaluative mode of relating is in order even though this abandonment might be more adaptive within successful relationships. Within this model, dysfunctional partnering processes—either evaluation or unconditional acceptance—may be understood in relation to the health and stage of a relationship.

By studying successful partnering, researchers and clinicians can better understand the bedrock of functional relationships. Couples may discuss the process of discarding an evaluative stance in place of the acceptance of mutual vulnerability that commitment may entail. This investigation has provided a detailed framework within which the complex experience of partnering can be understood and, in doing so, has continued the endeavor to shed light on the "mysterious phenomenon of romantic passion" (Proxmire, 1980).

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