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Stay/leave ambivalence predicts day-to-day fluctuations in commitment and intentions to end the relationship

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One Foot Out the Door: Stay/Leave Ambivalence Predicts Day-to-Day Fluctuations in Commitment and Intentions to End the Relationship

Samantha Joel

Western University

Sarah C. E. Stanton

University of Edinburgh

Elizabeth Page-Gould and Geoff MacDonald

University of Toronto

Keywords: *romantic relationships, decision making, ambivalence, temporal fluctuation, dissolution, breakups, commitment*

Correspondence regarding this article should be addressed to Samantha Joel, Psychology Department, Western University, 1151 Richmond Street, London Ontario, N6G 2V4.

Abstract

Why do some people maintain stable feelings of commitment toward their partners, whereas others' feelings wax and wane from day to day? The current paper draws insight from decision conflict research suggesting that individuals torn between decision options are particularly susceptible to attitude change. In three samples, we validated a **stay/leave ambivalence** scale to capture internal conflict about whether to remain in versus exit a relationship. In two dyadic daily experience studies, individuals who felt more ambivalent about their relationships experienced greater daily fluctuation in commitment and breakup contemplation compared to less ambivalent individuals. Ambivalent individuals' relationship intentions were also more strongly tied to their daily experiences, such that they felt more motivated to stay on days with greater relationship positivity, and more motivated to leave on days with greater relationship negativity. We discuss implications of these results for ambivalent individuals, their partners, and our understanding of stay/leave decision processes.

Keywords: Ambivalence, temporal fluctuations, relationship evaluations, commitment, breakup intentions

One Foot Out the Door: Stay/Leave Ambivalence Predicts Day-to-Day Fluctuations in Commitment and Intentions to End the Relationship

Love is not love/ Which alters when it alteration finds,/ Or bends with the remover to remove./ O no, it is an ever-fixed mark/ That looks on tempests and is never shaken.

- Shakespeare, Sonnet 116, 1-8.

This sonnet captures the idea that romantic commitment necessarily includes a component of temporal consistency. Commitment to a partner that persists over time, particularly through relationship conflict and strain, is meaningfully different from commitment that fluctuates greatly from day to day. Temporal fluctuations in relationship evaluations have negative consequences not only for the relationship, but for personal wellbeing as well (Arriaga, 2001; Arriaga, Reed, Goodfriend, & Agnew, 2006; Campbell, Simpson, Boldry, & Rubin, 2010; Knopp, Rhoades, Stanley, Owen, & Markman, 2014; Whitton, Rhoades, & Whisman, 2014; Whitton & Whisman, 2010). In the current paper, we draw from decision conflict research to help explain why some individuals' evaluations of their relationships are less stable than others.

When a person is ambivalent about a decision—meaning that they simultaneously hold strong, opposing attitudes toward their decision options—their feelings about that decision are particularly susceptible to influence and change (e.g., Armitage & Conner, 2000; Hodson, Maio, and Esses 2001). Extending this research to the domain of romantic relationships (Joel, MacDonald, & Plaks, 2013), we predicted that when people feel ambivalent about whether to remain in a relationship, that decision conflict is reflected in the stability of their commitment. Specifically, when people feel internally conflicted about whether to stay in a relationship or leave, their intentions to stay or leave may be

particularly likely to move around as a function of their daily relationship experiences. *Negative* relationship experiences should push more (versus less) ambivalent individuals toward *leaving* the relationship, whereas *positive* relationship experiences should pull more (versus less) ambivalent individuals toward *remaining* in the relationship. Overall, we argue that fluctuating relationship perceptions and intentions may be an important part of the stay/leave decision process, as ambivalent individuals seek relational information to help them reach a decision one way or the other.

Why Do Some People's Relationship Evaluations Fluctuate More than Others?

People whose relationship evaluations are more variable from day to day, week to week, or month to month have been repeatedly found to experience worse relationship outcomes compared to individuals whose relationship views are more stable (Arriaga, 2001; Arriaga et al., 2006; Knopp et al., 2006; 2014; Ogolsky, Surra, & Monk, 2016). For example, in two studies, fluctuating relationship satisfaction among undergraduates in new dating relationships were associated with lower commitment and a higher likelihood of breaking up over a nine-week period, above and beyond initial satisfaction levels (Arriaga, 2001). Fluctuating relationship evaluations are also associated with lower well-being (Whitton & Whisman, 2010; Whitton et al., 2014). In one study, participants in dating relationships reported on relationship quality every four months for 20 months (Whitton et al., 2014). Above and beyond initial relationship quality and overall slope, variability in relationship quality was associated with higher psychological distress, increases in distress over time, lower life satisfaction, and decreases in life satisfaction over time. Taken together, the literature suggests that temporal fluctuations in relationship evaluations have downstream consequences for both relational and personal well-being.

We propose that ambivalence offers a novel explanation for how relationship evaluations fluctuate. Ambivalence is the psychological state in which an individual holds strong, simultaneous positive and negative feelings toward an attitude object (Kaplan, 1972; Thompson, Zanna, & Griffin, 1995). Ambivalence is a highly aversive, unpleasant experience that people are motivated to avoid (Nordgren, van Harreveld, & van der Pligt, 2006; van Harreveld et al., 2015), and ambivalence leads to a host of behavioral and cognitive outcomes. For example, ambivalent individuals tend to process information more effortfully and deliberatively (Maio, Bell, & Esses, 1996; van Harreveld, van der Pligt, de Vries, Wenneker, & Verhue, 2004). Ambivalent individuals also exhibit motivated information seeking, such that they look for any opportunities to reduce or resolve their ambivalence (Nordgren et al., 2006). Ambivalence may be particularly unpleasant when a person feels pressure to take one side or the other by making a decision (van Harreveld, van der Pligt, & de Liver, 2009). When people experience ambivalence toward a decision, sometimes referred to as decision conflict, they may try to delay or postpone the decision while attempting to resolve the ambivalence (e.g., Durso, Briñol, & Petty, 2016).

Previous research has conceptualized relational ambivalence as the state of holding simultaneous positive and negative feelings about the romantic partner generally (e.g., Mikulincer, Shaver, Bar-On, & Ein-Dor, 2010; Thompson & Holmes, 1996; Uchino, Smith, & Berg, 2014). However, drawing on the findings described above, we propose that relationship evaluations should be at their most malleable specifically during a state of decision conflict; i.e., when people are actively trying to arrive at a relational choice. Indeed, relationship transitions—such as the period in which a relationship shifts from being casual to committed—have previously been shown to be characterized by higher levels of

uncertainty about the relationship (Solomon & Knobloch, 2001), as well as greater sensitivity to negative relationship information (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004). Although uncertainty (a lack of confidence in one's feelings) is distinct from ambivalence (the presence of strong, conflicting feelings), these findings are consistent with the idea that people are particularly prone to tumultuous feelings when they are trying to make a relationship decision (e.g., "Am I committed to this partnership or not?").

One particularly consequential relationship decision dilemma is whether or not to end the relationship. People often consider ending long-term relationships due to any number of factors, such as infidelity (e.g., Hall & Fincham, 2006), alcohol abuse (e.g., Collins, Ellickson, & Klein, 2007), or unmet psychological needs (e.g., Connolly & McIsaac, 2009; Sprecher, 2002). However, even relationships with serious problems tend to have positive aspects as well. People's reasons for wanting to stay in a relationship are distinct from their reasons for wanting to leave (Machia & Ogolsky, 2020), and people who are currently thinking about ending either their relationships have been shown to simultaneously hold many reasons for wanting to both stay and leave (Joel, MacDonald, & Page-Gould, 2018). Related work suggests that people frequently engage in on-again/off-again relationships, whereby they repeatedly break up and reconcile with the same romantic partner (e.g., Dailey, Rosetto, Pfiester, & Surra, 2009). That is, people frequently choose to end a relationship only to change their mind and revert their choice, consistent with the idea that conflicting feelings are a common part of the stay/leave decision process.

In the present paper, we use the term *stay/leave ambivalence* to refer to this experience of holding strong, conflicting feelings about whether to continue a romantic relationship. Relatedly, we use the term *commitment* to refer to a person's overall intention

to persist with the relationship, consistent with the Investment Model framework (Rusbult, 1980). Although ambivalent individuals are likely to have lower commitment to their relationships, lower-commitment individuals are not necessarily ambivalent (e.g., they may be intent on leaving, or indifferent about whether their relationship continues). Relative to individuals who are not ambivalent, people who are conflicted about whether to stay or leave should be highly motivated to resolve their ambivalence and arrive at a decision. As such, they should be particularly sensitive to relationship-relevant information, both negative and positive, that could help them make a choice. The specific information that they receive is likely to vary from day to day, resulting in fluctuating levels of commitment as well as dissolution consideration. On a day when an ambivalent person experiences relationship negativity (e.g., an argument with their partner), they may take that negativity as a sign that they ought to end their relationship, and experience particularly low commitment toward their partner. However, the next day, they may experience more relationship positivity; perhaps their partner surprises them with a nice dinner or expresses support for one of their goals. The ambivalent person may take these experiences as cause for optimism, leading them to experience higher-than-usual commitment toward their partner. Fluctuating relationship evaluations, then, may be a normative part of the stay/leave decision process, as people alternately consider their reasons for staying versus leaving.

Present Research Overview

In the present research, we tested whether a brief measure of stay/leave ambivalence, developed and validated in three cross-sectional samples (Study 1), would predict fluctuating relationship intentions in two dyadic daily experience studies (Studies 2

and 3). We predicted that greater stay/leave ambivalence would be associated with greater day-to-day fluctuations in intentions to remain in the relationship (commitment), as well as thoughts about exiting the relationship (dissolution consideration: VanderDrift et al., 2009).

We also examined whether ambivalence might help to explain *how* relationship fluctuations occur. Research in other decision contexts suggests that ambivalent individuals draw heavily on new information that they encounter, both positive and negative, to help them resolve their mixed feelings (cf. Nordgren et al., 2006; van Harreveld et al., 2009). Extending these findings to relationships, when people feel ambivalent about whether to remain in their relationships, their relationship intentions should be particularly tied to the relatively minor ups and downs of everyday life. Specifically, we predicted that on days when highly ambivalent people experience more negative relationship events, they would experience particularly *low* commitment and *high* dissolution consideration, relative to days with less relational negativity. Conversely, we predicted that on days when highly ambivalent people experience more positive relationship events, they would experience *higher* commitment and *lower* dissolution consideration, relative to days with less relational positivity. These associations should be weaker for less ambivalent individuals, because they are not trying to use their daily relationship experiences as a barometer to help them arrive at a decision.

Some evidence suggests that relationship evaluations are particularly likely to fluctuate when people have reasons to feel less secure in their relationships (Campbell et al., 2010; Cooper, Totenhagen, McDaniel, & Curran, 2018).Therefore, we tested whether the effects of ambivalence would emerge above and beyond attachment anxiety (Studies 2 and

3), trust (Study 2), and felt security (Study 3). We also explored whether stay/leave ambivalence captures a different relationship state from low relationship commitment. Although all highly ambivalent people should feel relatively less committed to their relationships, not all low-commitment individuals feel ambivalent about their relationships. As such, we expected ambivalence to be a stronger predictor of relationship fluctuations than low relationship commitment. These analyses are described in full in the supplemental materials, and summarized in the main text.

Study 1 (Samples A and B), Study 2, and Study 3 were all approved by the University of Toronto Office of Research Ethics. Study 1, Sample C was approved by the University of Edinburgh Psychology Research Ethics Committee. All participants provided informed consent prior to their participation in the research. All materials and data can be found on the Open Science Framework (OSF) at https://osf.io/qwcja/.

Study 1

Research on intentions to remain in a relationship has traditionally used single, unidimensional scales (e.g., commitment, Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998), which cannot tease apart ambivalence from indifference regarding the decision to stay versus leave. Thus, our first objective was to create the Stay/Leave Ambivalence Scale (SLAS), a face-valid measure capturing the experience of being torn about whether to remain in a current romantic relationship.

The attitudinal ambivalence literature makes a distinction between *potential* ambivalence, or the extent to which participants hold similarly strong positive and negative evaluations about the same attitude object, and *felt* ambivalence, or the subjective experience of feeling ambivalent (Bassili, 1996; Priester & Petty, 1996; Newby-Clark,

McGregor, & Zanna, 2002). That subjective experience is the aspect of ambivalence most directly associated with discomfort and motivated attitude change (e.g., van Harreveld et al., 2009). Therefore, in designing the current scale, we sought to specifically capture felt ambivalence about stay/leave decisions. To generate relevant items, we borrowed language from the ambivalence literature describing the overall subjective experience of ambivalence (feeling torn, conflicted, indecisive, etc.), and adapted it to topic of stay/leave decisions.

We validated the scale using three samples of US participants recruited online. People who are considering ending their relationships tend to have good reasons for doing so (Joel et al., 2018). We therefore expected stay/leave ambivalence to be indicative of relatively low relationship quality (e.g., low satisfaction, low commitment). Further, decisional ambivalence tends to prompt considerable deliberation as the decision maker attempts to resolve their ambivalence and arrive at a choice (e.g., Maio et al., 1996). As such, we expected that higher scores on the SLAS would be uniquely associated with more active thoughts about breaking up (dissolution consideration). Decisional ambivalence is also associated with anticipated regret, as ambivalent decision-makers worry that any decision they make will be the wrong one (e.g., Itzchakov & van Harreveld, 2018). As such, we predicted that higher SLAS scores would predict concerns over regretting relationship decisions. Drawing on past work on the negative health effects of relational ambivalence (e.g., Uchino et al., 2014), we further expected that higher SLAS scores would predict poorer self-reported health. Finally, we expected that scores on the SLAS would be particularly high among anxiously attached individuals, given their proneness to

ambivalence about romantic partners (Mikulincer et al., 2010) and stay/leave decisions (Joel et al., 2018).

Method

Participants

We recruited three samples of individuals in romantic relationships online. ***Sample A*** was originally comprised of 388 American participants recruited on Amazon.com's Mechanical Turk in 2011.[1] Of those participants, 16 were excluded because they indicated that they were currently single. The final Sample A consisted of 372 participants (130 men) with an average age of 31 years (range = 18 to 80, *SD* = 9.75), and an average relationship length of 5 years (range = 2 months to 45 years, *SD* = 76 months). A total of 19 participants were casually dating, 171 were seriously dating, 42 were engaged, 17 were common-law, and 123 were married; 25% had one or more children.

Sample B was originally comprised of 204 American participants, also recruited on Mechanical Turk in 2011.[1] Six participants were excluded because they were single, and 11 participants were excluded because they had also been a part of Sample A (as evidenced by their Worker IDs). The final Sample B consisted of 187 participants (64 men) with an average age of 31.5 years (range = 18 to 66, *SD* = 11.00), and an average relationship length of 5 years (range = 1 month to 30 years, *SD* = 67 months). A total of 13 participants were casually dating, 76 were seriously dating, 17 were engaged, 10 were common-law, and 71 were married; 32% had one or more children.

Sample C was originally comprised of 402 American participants recruited via Qualtrics panels in 2018. Fourteen participants were excluded based on questionable response patterns (e.g., entering a relationship length close to or longer than their reported

age). The final Sample C consisted of 388 participants (69 men) with an average age of 44 years (range = 25 to 71, *SD* = 9.64), and an average relationship length of 15.6 years (range = 1 month to 48 years, *SD* = 123 months). A total of 45 participants were seriously dating, 13 were engaged, 21 were common-law, and 309 were married. Participants identified primarily as White (66%) Black (17%), Latinx (10%), and Asian (5%).

Measures

Verbatim materials files, including the exact wording and scale anchors, can be found at https://osf.io/nhxm5/.

Stay/Leave Ambivalence Scale (SLAS). In Sample A, participants completed 10 items created by the researchers that assessed the extent to which they felt ambivalent about staying in their romantic relationships (e.g., "I find it difficult to decide how I feel about this relationship", α = .96; *M* = 2.89, *SD* = 1.63, skew = .58; see Table 1). For Samples B (α = .93, *M* = 2.86, *SD* = 1.73, skew = .5) and C (α = .88, *M* = 2.41, *SD* = 1.54, skew = .82), participants completed the final 4-item scale (bolded in Table 1). Sample B also included an additional item that was ultimately dropped.

Relationship Quality. In Samples A and B, relationship quality was captured with the Investment Model Scale (Rusbult et al., 1998), which includes five-item satisfaction (Sample A α = .95, Sample B α = .96), investment (Sample A α = .84, Sample B α = .86), and quality of alternatives subscales (Sample A α = .85, Sample B α = .89), and a seven-item commitment subscale (Sample A α = .95, Sample B α = .91). In Sample C, participants completed one satisfaction item ("How satisfied are you with your relationship?") and one commitment item ("How committed are you to your relationship?", Fletcher, Simpson, and Thomas, 2000).

Relational Ambivalence. Ambivalence toward the partner more generally was measured in Sample B with the Ambivalence in Relationships Survey (AIRS; Thomson & Holmes, 1996; as adapted in Mikulincer et al., 2010). Participants rated their partners on six personal attributes (e.g., sexual passion, sociability) in terms of the attribute's positive effects (α = .79), and negative effects (α = .85). Ambivalence was calculated using the formula from Thompson et al. (1995): $\frac{(P+N)}{2} - |P - N|$. That is, for each partner attribute we took the average of the positive and negative ratings and divided it by the absolute difference between those ratings to obtain an overall ambivalence score (α = .84).

Dissolution Consideration. Dissolution consideration was captured with four items in Sample A (Booth, Johnson, & Edwards, 1983; Impett et al. 2010; e.g., "Have you discussed breaking up with a close friend?", α = .80), and five items in Sample B (e.g., "I have been close to telling my romantic partner that I want to end our relationship", α = .96; VanderDrift et al.,2009).

Regret Proneness. Sample B included a version of the regret proneness scale (Schwartz, Ward, Monterosso, Lyubomirsky, White, & Lehman, 2002) adapted to represent people's tendencies to regret relational decisions specifically (Joel, MacDonald, & Plaks, 2012), with items like, "Once I made a decision about a relationship, I don't look back" (α = .86).

Physical Health. Sample C included four items that assess *overall perceptions of health* (e.g., "I am as healthy as anybody I know", α = .85; Stewart, Hays, & Ware, 1988).

Attachment Style. Samples A and B included 18-item measures of *attachment anxiety* (e.g., "I worry that romantic partners won't care about me as much as I care about them", Sample A α = .94, Sample B α = .94), and *attachment avoidance* (e.g., "I am nervous

when partners get too close to me", Sample A α = .94, Sample B α = .94; ECR-R; Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000). Sample C included six-item measures of attachment anxiety items (α = .77) and avoidance (α = .82; ECR-S; Wei, Russell, Mallinckrodt, & Vogel, 2007).

Results

Creating the Stay/Leave Ambivalence Scale (SLAS)

We first conducted an exploratory factor analysis on the initial 10 items included in Sample A. Principal axis factoring yielded a single-factor solution, which accounted for 73% of the total variance. Factor loadings, means, and standard deviations can be seen Table 1. The reliability of the 10-item scale was high, Cronbach's α = .96, and all loadings were higher than .65. To produce a relatively short final scale, we retained only four of the highest-loading items plus the highest-loading reverse-scored item. These five remaining items were administered to Sample B (α = .95).

We next tested how well these five items loaded onto a single factor using confirmatory factor analyses, via the "lavaan" package in R (Rosseel, 2012). In Sample B, we tested a model in which a single latent factor predicted each of the five higher-loading SLAS items. This model yielded acceptable fit in Sample B, χ^2 (5) = 9.00, p = .11, CFI = .99, SRMR = .02.[2] We chose to remove one additional item ("I find it difficult to decide how I feel about this relationship") so that a larger percentage of the final scale items would directly reference stay/leave decisions. The four-item model yielded acceptable fit as well, χ^2 (2) = 2.00, p = .37, CFI = 1.00, SRMR = .007. We therefore retained only those four items in the final version of the SLAS. The final retained items are bolded in Table 1. This final four-item version of SLAS was administered to Sample C, χ^2 (2) = 12.23, p = .002, CFI = .99, SRMR = .03.

Table 1: Stay/Leave Ambivalence Scale items (retained items are bolded)

Scale Item	Loading	M	SD
I flip back and forth about whether or not this relationship should last.	**.91**	**2.67**	**1.89**
I know exactly how I feel about this relationship. (reverse-scored)	**-.75**	**5.03**	**1.87**
My feelings about this relationship change frequently.	**.87**	**2.97**	**1.90**
I'm still trying to decide whether or not this relationship is right for me.	**.90**	**2.67**	**1.90**
Sometimes I feel that my partner is right for me, but other times I'm not so sure.	.77	3.44	1.93
I can't decide whether I want to stay with my partner in the long-run.	.85	2.54	1.93
I can't seem to make up my mind about what I want out of this relationship.	.87	2.70	1.89
My feelings about this relationship rarely waver (reverse-scored).	-.68	4.74	1.94
I find it difficult to decide how I feel about this relationship.	.90	2.72	1.91
I don't always know where I want this relationship to go.	.84	2.85	1.96

Deciding whether to end a relationship may be a qualitatively different experience for dating individuals compared to married individuals (e.g., Joel et al., 2018), given that married individuals often face many concrete barriers to ending their relationships (Frye, McNulty, & Karney, 2008). We explored whether SLAS was equivalently measuring the same construct for dating versus married individuals by conducting a series of multi-group CFAs (Kline, 2016). Specifically, we compared Sample B's dating participants (n = 105) to married participants (including common-law, n = 81), and Sample C's dating (n = 58) versus married participants (n = 330). For each sample, we began by modelling each group separately (configural invariance), then proceeded to test for weak (constrained loadings across groups) and strong (constrained intercepts) invariance as each respective threshold was met. Results can be seen in Table 2. In both samples, constraining the item loadings to be equivalent across dating versus married participants did not significantly reduce model fit compared to when the loadings were allowed to vary freely, providing evidence of weak invariance. Further constraining the item intercepts to be equivalent also did not reduce factor fit, providing evidence of strong invariance. These results suggest that SLAS is capturing a similar construct when administered to either dating or married participants.

We also conducted measurement invariance tests by gender and age. In sum, the SLAS showed strong measurement invariance across age groups, but not by gender. We obtained evidence of weak invariance for gender in Sample B and configural invariance in Sample C, suggesting that men and women may not be interpreting the SLAS items in the same way. Details are available in the supplemental materials.

Table 2: Results of Invariance Testing for Dating Versus Married Individuals

Sample	Model	χ^2	*df*	$\Delta\chi^2$	Δ *df*	*p*	CFI	SRMR	BIC
	Configural	14.17	4				.98	.02	2492.12
B	Weak	19.40	7	5.23	3	.16	.98	.04	2481.69
	Strong	25.40	10	5.99	3	.11	.98	.05	2472.02
	Configural	16.65	4				.99	.02	5310.26
C	Weak	17.24	7	.59	3	.90	.99	.03	5292.97
	Strong	18.23	10	.98	3	.81	.99	.03	5276.07

Establishing Convergent and Discriminant Validity

See Table 3 for correlations between SLAS and other relevant constructs. Consistent with previous research (e.g., Joel et al., 2012; 2018; Mikulincer et al. 2010), anxiously attached individuals experienced more ambivalence. The SLAS was also associated with attachment avoidance. The SLAS was negatively associated with all indicators of high relationship quality (commitment, satisfaction, and investment), and positively associated with all indicators of low relationship quality (quality of alternatives, dissolution consideration, and general relational ambivalence).

Table 3: Correlations between ambivalence and other relational and decisional constructs in Study 1

	SLAS (Sample A)	SLAS (Sample B)	SLAS (Sample C)
Commitment	-.65***	-.56***	-.45***
Satisfaction	-.64***	-.61***	-.53***
Investment	-.38***	-.35***	
Quality of Alternatives	.51***	.53***	
Relational Ambivalence (AIRS)		.45***	
Dissolution Consideration	.58***	.62***	
Interpersonal Regret Proneness		.46***	
Global Health Perceptions			-.29***
Attachment Anxiety	.52***	.57***	.40***
Attachment Avoidance	.54***	.51***	.52***

We next compared the unique properties of SLAS—designed to capture internal conflict about whether to remain in a relationship—to commitment, which captures intentions to remain in the relationship, and the established AIR scale, which captures ambivalence regarding the romantic partner more generally. We conducted a series of regression analyses in which stay/leave ambivalence, commitment, and AIRS (Sample B only) were included as simultaneous predictors. As dependent variables, we included relationship satisfaction, dissolution consideration, interpersonal regret proneness and

global health perceptions, for every sample in which they were measured. Results can be seen in Table 4. Indeed, SLAS was independently associated with lower satisfaction, higher dissolution consideration, higher interpersonal regret proneness, and lower global health perceptions.

Discussion

In addition to satisfactory psychometric properties, the SLAS had expected associations with related relational, cognitive, and personal constructs. Beyond commitment, higher SLAS scores were uniquely associated with lower satisfaction (all three samples), more active thoughts about ending the relationship (Samples A and B), proneness to regret over relationship decisions (Sample B), and lower global health perceptions (Sample C). These findings are consistent with past research on the particular challenges of both decisional ambivalence (van Harreveld et al., 2009), and relational ambivalence (e.g., Uchino et al., 2014). Measurement invariance tests showed evidence of strong invariance by relationship status, suggesting that SLAS is capturing a similar construct when administered to either dating or married participants. However, these results may not generalize to cultures that allow for less post-marriage mobility (i.e., divorce). We also failed to find evidence of strong invariance for gender, suggesting that comparing SLAS means for men versus women is not advisable.

Table 4. Unique associations between SLAS and relational and personal wellbeing in Study 1

	Satisfaction			Dissolution Consideration			Interpersonal Regret Proneness			Global Health Perceptions		
Predictor	*b*	*SE*	*p*	*b*	*SE*	*p*	*b*	*SE*	*p*	*b*	*SE*	*p*
Sample A												
Commitment	.48	.05	< .001	-.05	.02	.01						
SLAS	-.41	.05	< .001	.18	.02	< .001						
Sample B												
Commitment	.56	.07	< .001	-.51	.05	< .001	.05	.07	.49			
Relational Ambivalence	-.09	.06	.13	.14	.04	.001	.03	.06	.59			
SLAS	-.34	.07	< .001	.21	.05	< .001	.39	.07	< .001			
Sample C												
Commitment	.81	.07	< .001							.05	.05	.31
SLAS	-.49	.07	< .001							-.17	.04	< .001

Study 2

We next examined whether stay/leave ambivalence might predict the phenomenon of fluctuating relationship intentions. In Study 2, couples in romantic relationships first completed a background survey, which included the stay/leave ambivalence scale. Next, they completed short surveys every day for 15 days, in which they reported on both positive relationship events (e.g., kind things their partner did for them) and negative relationship events (conflict) that occurred that day. They also reported on their relationship intentions that day, operationalized as feelings of commitment as well as dissolution consideration (i.e., active thoughts about ending the relationship).

Extending on past research on decisional ambivalence (e.g., Nordgren et al., 2006; van Harreveld et al., 2009), we theorized that people who are torn about whether to end their relationships would be motivated to seek out information that might help them resolve their ambivalence. Daily relationship experiences—both positive and negative—should thus be particularly influential for highly ambivalent individuals. Specifically, we predicted that people who were more ambivalent about whether to remain in their relationships would experience greater fluctuations in both commitment and dissolution consideration from day to day, compared to individuals with less ambivalence. We further predicted that more ambivalent individuals would feel particularly motivated to end their relationships on days with high conflict and low positivity, but less motivated to end their relationships on days with low conflict and high positivity. We theorized that this pattern of results would not be explained by more general relationship constructs such as attachment anxiety, trust, or commitment.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Couples were recruited online (e.g., craigslist.org) with posts targeting major cities in the United States and Canada in 2014. Couples were required to live in North America, live together, and be at least 18 years of age in order to participate. We recruited cohabiting couples because such couples tend to interact regularly enough to be able to report on their relationship experiences each day. Participants were compensated up to $42 per person ($84 per couple) for completing all components of the study.

A research assistant phoned interested participants to confirm that they met these recruitment criteria. Of the 68 couples originally recruited, one or both members of ten couples withdrew before completing the first daily survey. Four additional couples were excluded because their time stamps indicated that the same person was filling out the surveys for both members of the couple. The final sample included 54 couples (108 participants). Participants were an average of 25 years old (range = 18 to 47 years; SD = 6.45) and had been in their relationships for an average of 3 years (range = two months to ten years, SD = 28.02 months). Their average income was $18,321 (range = 0 to $100,000; *SD* = $21,184). Three of the couples were same-sex couples (each included two women). This sample provides 75% power to detect actor effects of .25 (a moderate to small effect size) in a standard Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (conducted with APIM Power by Kenny & Ackerman, 2020).

After completing a background questionnaire online, participants were emailed a survey at 5pm each evening for 15 consecutive days. Three of the surveys (the first, eighth, and last survey) included additional weekly measures collected for other research

purposes. Participants completed an average of 13 out of 15 daily surveys (range = 5 to 15, *SD* = 2.18).

Background Measures

The Investment Model Scale (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998) was measured as in Study 1. Five items captured satisfaction (*M* = 5.89, *SD* = 1.17, α = .91), five items captured investment (*M* = 5.46, *SD* = 1.17, α = .81), five items captured quality of alternatives (*M* = 3.27, *SD* = 1.43, α = .83), and seven items captured commitment (*M* = 6.17, *SD* = 1.11, α = .91) on a 7-point scale, 1 = *Disagree Completely*, 7 = *Agree Completely*.

Stay/leave ambivalence was measured with the final four items validated in Study 1. In response to the prompt, "To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following items?" participants rated items such as "I flip back and forth about whether or not this relationship should last" on a 7-point scale from *1 =Completely Disagree* to *7 = Completely Agree* (*M* = 2.40, *SD* = 1.43, α = .84, skew = 1.1).

A variety of other measures were collected at background and at the weekly level for other research purposes. For a complete list, please see https://osf.io/eu5c3/.

Daily Measures

Each day, participants were given the prompt, "How did you feel about your relationship TODAY?" Followed by a one-item measure of each construct of interest: ***satisfaction*** ("Today, I felt satisfied with our relationship", *M* = 5.98, *SD* = 1.32), ***commitment*** ("Today, I felt committed to maintaining my relationship with my partner", *M* = 6.11, *SD* = 1.24), ***dissolution consideration*** ("Today, I had thoughts about ending my relationship with my partner", *M* = 1.97, *SD* = 1.82), and ***perceived partner commitment*** ("Today, I felt like my partner was very committed to maintaining our relationship", *M*

=6.13 , *SD* = 1.19), each rated on a 7-point scale, 1 = *Strongly Disagree*, 7 = *Strongly Agree*.

Conflict was measured daily with the item, "How much conflict did you experience with your partner today?" (*M* = 1.74, *SD* = 1.39), on a 7-point scale, 1 = *No conflict,* 7 = *A great deal of conflict*.

Finally, ***positive relationship behaviors*** were measured with a list of 21 positive, specific behaviors that people can perform for their partners from day to day (e.g., "Listened attentively when my partner talked to me", "Complimented my partner", "Showed support for my partner's interests or projects). Participants first rated the extent to which they performed each behavior for their partner that day (*M* =5.53, *SD* = 1.23, α =.96); then, participants rated the extent to which their partner performed each behavior for them that day (*M* =5.38, *SD* = 1.34, α = .97).

Results

Fluctuating Relationship Intentions

We examined whether stay/leave ambivalence predicted greater fluctuation in commitment and thoughts about exiting the relationship from day to day. Day-to-day fluctuation was represented by each participant's standard deviation on the dependent measure of interest across the 15 diary days (see Campbell et al., 2010; Kernis, Grannemann, & Barclay, 1989 for similar approaches). As each person had only one fluctuation score for each measure, these analyses were conducted at the person level. The sole predictor in all models was stay/leave ambivalence, grand-mean-centred. Hypotheses were tested with two-level multilevel models (participants nested within couples) with random intercepts estimated for each couple. Dyads were treated as indistinguishable in all analyses. Each model was tested using the "lme4" package in R (Bates, Maechler, Bolker, &

Walker, 2015). Indeed, stay/leave ambivalence predicted greater fluctuation in commitment from day to day, $b = .12$, $SE = .03$, $t(101.59) = 3.52$, $p < .001$. Further, ambivalence predicted greater fluctuation in dissolution consideration from day to day, $b = .19$, $SE = .06$, $t(101.51) = 3.37$, $p = .001$.

Fluctuations in Response to Positive and Negative Relational Experiences

We next tested whether stay/leave ambivalence predicted greater fluctuation in commitment and dissolution consideration from day to day in response to positive and negative daily relationship experiences. These analyses were conducted at the daily level. Each variable measured at the daily level was person-mean-centred (also referred to as group-mean-centering), such that scores represent a person's score on a given day, relative to a *typical* day for that individual. For example, person-mean-centered conflict scores represent whether a given individual experienced more or less conflict than usual, relative to a typical day for that individual. All models testing this hypothesis were cross-nested two-level models (days nested within individuals and also within couples) with random intercepts estimated for each grouping factor.

Fluctuation in Response to Negative Experiences. We conducted two models examining fluctuation in relationship perceptions in response to relationship conflict. We entered daily conflict (person-mean-centred), ambivalence (grand-mean-centred), and their two-way interaction as predictors. The dependent measures were daily commitment and dissolution consideration, respectively (all person-mean-centred). For each significant interaction, we conducted simple effects by examining the impact of daily conflict on relationship perceptions at one SD above or below the mean on ambivalence (Cohen, Cohen, Aiken, & West, 2013).

Results can be seen in Table 5. Ambivalence indeed moderated the impact of daily conflict on both relationship intention variables. Simple effects tests showed that in general, people felt less committed to their relationships (see Figure 1) and more likely to be actively contemplating a breakup (see Figure 2) on days when they experienced more relationship conflict compared to less. However, these effects were attenuated for individuals low on ambivalence, and magnified for individuals high on ambivalence. Put differently, individuals experiencing high levels of ambivalence about whether to stay in their relationships had more fluctuation in their relationship intentions in response to the presence or absence of relationship conflict.

Table 5. Ambivalence moderates the impact of relationship conflict on daily relationship intentions in Study 2

	Daily Commitment			Daily Dissolution Consideration		
Predictor	*b*	*SE*	*p*	*b*	*SE*	*p*
Interaction Testing						
Daily conflict	-.19	.02	< .001	.24	.03	< .001
Ambivalence	.0009	.01	.95	.0005	.02	.98
Conflict*Ambivalence	-.04	.01	< .001	.05	.02	.004
At -1SD Ambivalence						
Daily conflict	-.13	.03	< .001	.17	.04	< .001
At +1SD Ambivalence						

Daily conflict	-.25	.02	< .001	.32	.03	< .001
BIC		3122.37			4501.23	

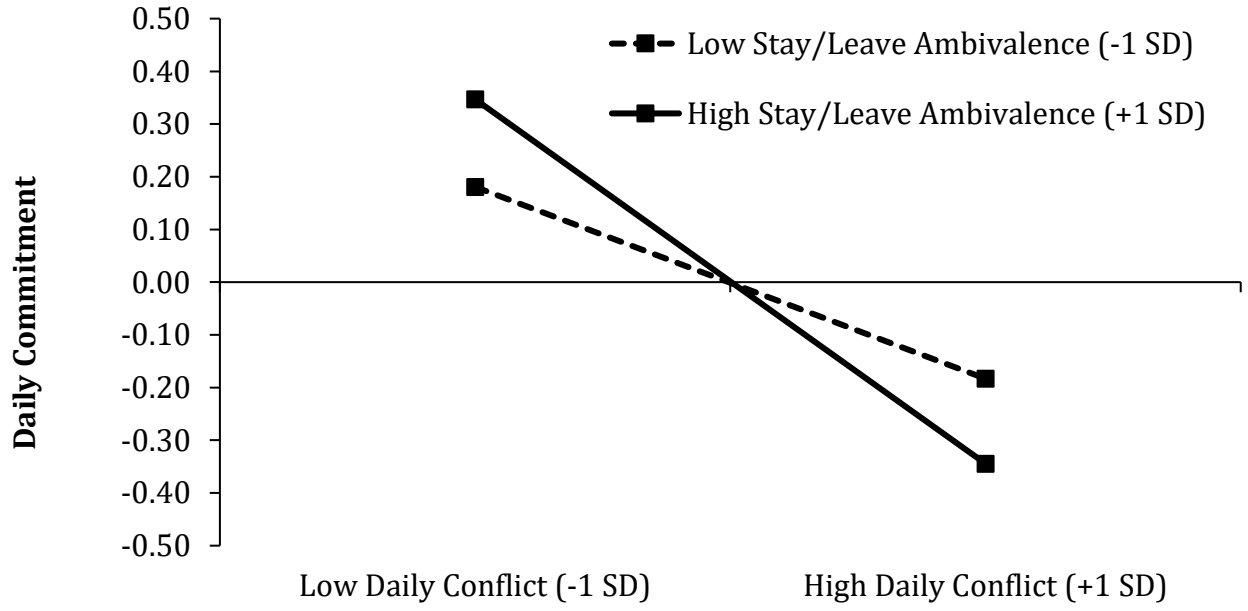

Figure 1. Effect of conflict on daily commitment for individuals with low versus high ambivalence in Study 2

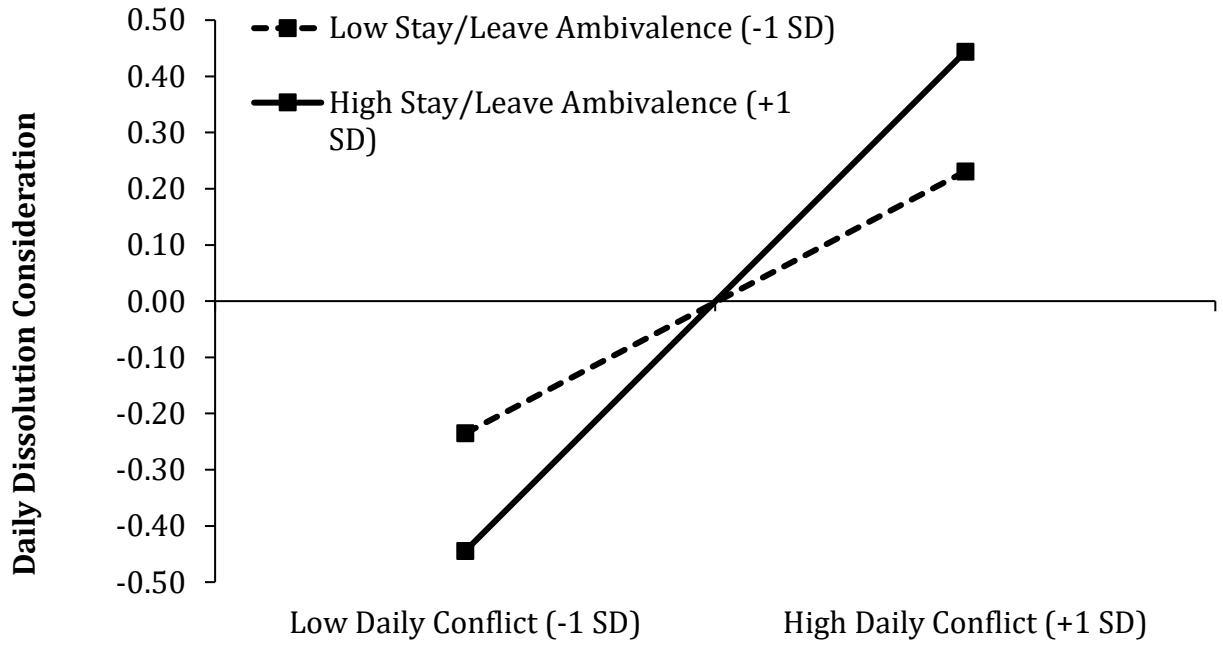

Figure 2. Effect of conflict on daily dissolution consideration for individuals with low versus high ambivalence in Study 2

Fluctuation in Response to Positive Experiences. We next conducted those same two models again, substituting conflict with daily positive behaviors (person-mean-centered). Results can be seen in Table 6. Ambivalence moderated the impact of perceived positive behaviors on both relationship intention variables. Simple effects tests showed that perceived positive behaviors were generally strongly associated with daily relationship intentions, such that participants felt more committed (Figure 3) and were less likely to be contemplating a breakup (Figure 4) on days when they perceived that the partner had performed more positive relationship behaviors. However, as with conflict, these effects were attenuated for those low on ambivalence, and magnified for those high on ambivalence.

Table 6. Ambivalence moderates the impact of perceived positive relationship behaviors on daily relationship intentions in Study 2

	Daily Commitment			Daily Dissolution Consideration		
Predictor	*b*	*SE*	*p*	*b*	*SE*	*p*
Interaction Testing						
Daily positive behaviors	.37	.02	< .001	-.20	.04	< .001
Ambivalence	-.0001	.01	.99	-.004	.02	.86
Positive behaviors* Ambivalence	.07	.01	< .001	-.10	.02	< .001
At -1SD Ambivalence						
Daily positive behaviors	.27	.03	< .001	-.05	.06	.36
At +1SD Ambivalence						
Daily positive behaviors	.48	.02	< .001	-.35	.04	< .001
BIC	2926.88			4547.84		

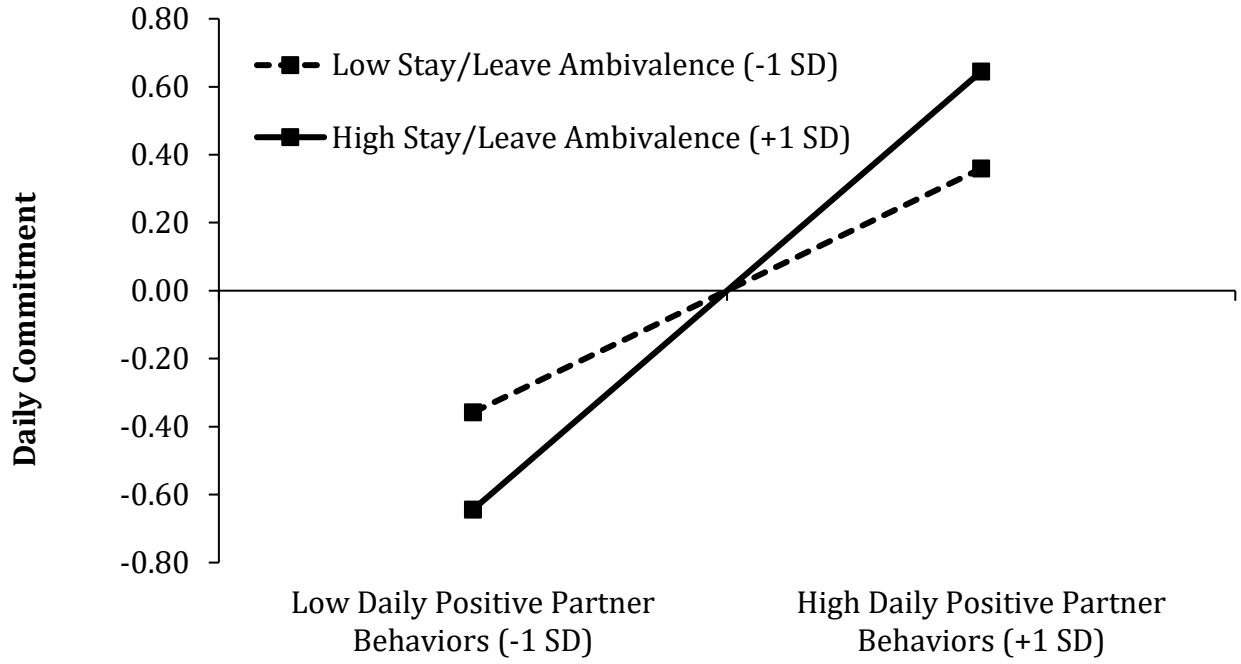

Figure 3. Effect of positive behaviors on daily commitment for individuals with low versus high ambivalence in Study 2

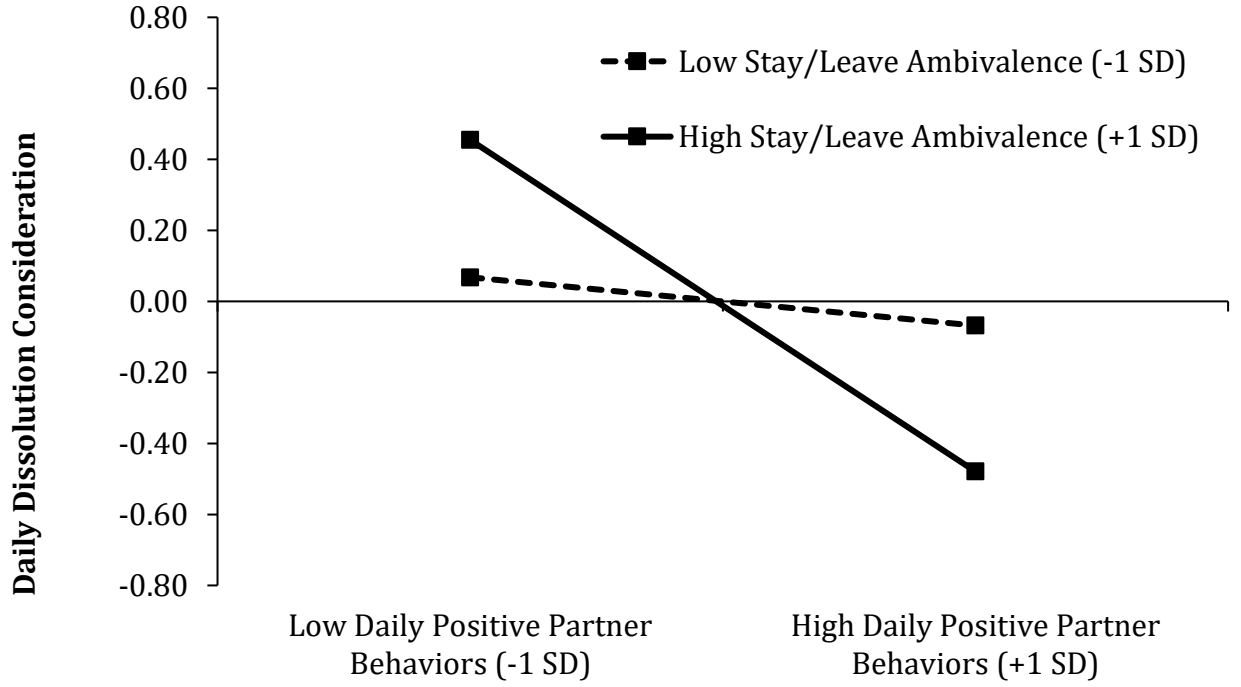

Figure 4. Effect of positive behaviors on daily dissolution consideration for individuals with low versus high ambivalence in Study 2

Subsidiary Analyses

We conducted several additional analyses to explore the robustness of the current effects, reported in full in the supplement. The results obtained with stay/leave ambivalence did not emerge for either trust or attachment anxiety; of twelve models tested, three were significant, one of which was inconsistent with previous studies. The results also did not extend to low-commitment individuals: commitment did not predict fluctuating relationship intentions, nor the association between relationship intentions and daily positive and negative relationship experiences. The effects of stay/leave ambivalence were generally robust over and above trust, attachment anxiety, and commitment

To ensure that the current results were not due to content overlap with certain items in the SLAS (e.g., "My feelings about this relationship change frequently"), we calculated an alternative measure of stay/leave ambivalence by applying the Thompson et al. (1995) ambivalence formula to baseline commitment and dissolution consideration. In attitudinal terms, this alternative measure captures potential ambivalence—the presence of strong, simultaneous positive and negative evaluations about the attitude object—rather than felt ambivalence, or the subjective experience of feeling torn (Bassili, 1996; Newby-Clark et al., 2002). Highly similar results were obtained regardless of which operationalization of the construct was used.

Study 2 Discussion

More ambivalent individuals—those who were torn about whether they wanted to remain in their relationships or not—experienced greater fluctuations in relationship satisfaction, commitment, and dissolution consideration from day to day, compared to individuals who were less ambivalent about their relationships. Further, more ambivalent

individuals' evaluations of their relationships were more malleable in response to specific relationship events each day. More ambivalent individuals had weaker intentions to maintain their relationships in response to negative events (relationship conflict), and stronger intentions to maintain their relationships in response to positive events (desirable behaviors from the romantic partner), to a greater extent than individuals who were less ambivalent. These results were robust across two different operationalizations of stay/leave ambivalence, and they were not obtained among individuals with high attachment anxiety, low trust, or low commitment to their partners. In sum, fluctuating and malleable relationship evaluations emerged specifically among people who felt torn about whether to remain with their romantic partners.

Study 3

The goal of Study 3 was to test whether the pattern of results from Study 2 would replicate in a new sample of married couples. Both partners first completed a background survey online, followed by a short survey each day for 14 days. As of the date that we preregistered our hypotheses on OSF (August 23, 2018, https://osf.io/uzj9a), all Study 3 data had been collected, downloaded from Qualtrics, and cleaned. However, the background survey data had not yet been merged with the diary data, and no analyses had been conducted that required both data files. We expected the pattern of results obtained in Study 2 to emerge again in Study 3, such that individuals who felt more ambivalent about whether to stay in their marriages would experience more fluctuating and malleable relationship intentions from day to day. All preregistered analyses were conducted as planned (confirmatory). Non-preregistered analyses are labelled as exploratory.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Couples were recruited from the [BLINDED] through posters and locally-targeted online ads from 2013-2016. Participants were required to currently be married and have access to the internet in the evenings. Both partners were emailed a background survey capturing a variety of individual differences and relationship quality measures. Couples next came into the lab for a 2-hour session conducted for other research purposes. Because the lab session included activities not relevant to the present analyses (e.g., physiological measures, videotaped discussions about marriage), participants were required to be married, to have a body mass index between 18 and 27, not be pregnant, and not have any heart conditions (e.g., pacemaker). Next, participants were emailed a short survey to complete at 5pm each day for 14 consecutive days. Participants were compensated up to $70 per person ($140 per couple) for completing all components of the study.

A total of 125 individuals completed the background survey, of whom 27 did not complete the daily component and could not be included in the analyses. The final sample consisted of 49 couples who completed an average of 13 out of 14 daily diaries (range = 7 to 14, *SD* = 2). Participants were an average of 33 years old (range = 21 to 66 years; *SD* = 9.22) and had been in their relationships for an average of 8 years (range = nine months to 33 years, *SD* = 6.8 years). Their average household income was $67,903 (range = 0 to $450,000; *SD* = $57,946). Participants primarily identified as European (33%), Canadian (12%), Latinx or Central American (12%), South Asian (12%), East Asian (10%), or African (8%). One of the couples was a same-sex couple (two men); the remainder were opposite-sex couples. Simulated power analyses (Lane & Hennes, 2018) suggested that this sample

size provides 91% power to detect daily interaction effects such as those presented in Study 2. These analyses were conducted using the properties (e.g., effect sizes, variances) of the first such model reported in Study 2 (ambivalence*conflict predicting daily commitment, presented in Table 4).

Background Measures

Stay/leave ambivalence was measured with the same four items used in Study 2. Notably, even though the Study 3 sample consisted of more established couples, responses still covered nearly the full range of the scale (M = 1.76, SD = 1.04, range = 1 to 6.50, α = .79, skew = 2.01).

Investment Model. The Investment Model Scale (Rusbult et al., 1998) was measured as in Studies 1 and 2, with five items capturing satisfaction (α = .91), five items capturing investment (α = .73), five items capturing quality of alternatives (α = .81), and seven items capturing commitment. However, the reliability of the seven-item commitment scale was concerningly low (α = .48). A closer look at the raw responses suggested that some participants did not notice the negating language of the two reverse-scored items (e.g., the "not" in "I would not feel very upset if our relationship were to end"). Removing these two items improved the scale's reliability (α = .74). Thus, the present analyses include only a five-item version of commitment, with no reverse-scored items.

A variety of other measures were collected at background for other research purposes. For a complete list, please see https://osf.io/82mxy/.

Daily Measures

Each day, participants were given the prompt, "How did you feel about your relationship TODAY?" Followed by brief measures of each construct of interest.

Daily relationship experiences were measured with six positive items (e.g., "Close to my partner", "In love with my partner") and six negative items (e.g., "Had a lot of conflict with my partner", "Disappointed with my partner") adapted from Impett, Javam, Le, Asyabi-Eshghi, and Kogan (2013). We aggregated each set of six items to create a positive experiences score (M = 5.80, SD = 1.26, α = .94) and a negative experiences score (M = 1.77, SD = 1.11, α = .88) for each day for each participant.

Commitment was measured with three items, adapted from the investment model scale (Rusbult et al., 1998). The items were, "Today, I felt committed to maintaining my relationship with my partner", "Today, I felt very attached to our relationship - strongly linked to my partner" And "Today, I wanted our relationship to last forever" (M = 6.20, SD = 1.17, α = .93).

Dissolution consideration was measured with three items adapted from the dissolution consideration scale (VanderDrift et al., 2009). The items were, "Today, I thought about ending our romantic relationship", "Today, I found myself wishing that my partner and I weren't romantically involved", and "Today, it came to mind that I should break up with my partner" (M = 1.23, SD = .82, α = .97).

Results

Fluctuating Relationship Intentions (Confirmatory)

As in Study 2, we first examined whether stay/leave ambivalence predicted greater fluctuation in intentions to stay in the relationship from day to day. Stay/leave ambivalence was grand-mean-centered and entered as the sole predictor in the model. The dependent measures were day-to-day fluctuation in commitment and dissolution consideration, represented by each person's standard deviation on the dependent measure of interest

across the 15 diary days (Campbell et al., 2010; Kernis et al., 1989). Analyses were conducted at the person level with two-level multilevel models (participants nested within couples), using the "lme4" package in R (Bates et al., 2015). Results showed that indeed, stay/leave ambivalence predicted greater fluctuation in daily commitment, $b = .17$, $SE = .05$, $t(93.92) = 3.63$, $p < .001$, and daily dissolution consideration, $b = .25$, $SE = .06$, $t(90.59) = 4.43$, $p < .001$.

Fluctuation in Response to Relationship Experiences (Confirmatory)

We next tested whether stay/leave ambivalence predicted greater fluctuation in commitment and dissolution consideration from day to day in response to positive and negative daily relationship experiences. All variables collected at the daily level were person-mean-centered to allow us to examine within-person changes from day to day. Analyses were conducted at the daily level (up to 14 rows per participant), and all models were cross-nested two-level models (days nested within individuals and also within couples) with random intercepts estimated for each grouping factor.

Fluctuation in Response to Negative Relationship Experiences. We conducted two models examining fluctuation in relationship perceptions in response to negative relationship experiences. We entered daily negative relationship experiences (person-mean-centred), ambivalence (grand-mean-centred), and their two-way interaction as predictors, predicting daily commitment and dissolution consideration, respectively (all person-mean-centred).

Results can be seen in Table 7. Ambivalence marginally moderated the impact of negative relationship experiences on daily commitment, and significantly moderated the impact of negative relationship experiences on daily dissolution consideration. Simple

effects tests showed that in general, people felt less committed to their relationships (Figure 5) and more likely to be actively contemplating a breakup (Figure 6) on days when they experienced more negativity in their relationship compared to less. However, these effects were attenuated for less ambivalent individuals, and magnified for more ambivalent individuals. Put differently, people who felt highly ambivalent about whether to stay in their relationships had more fluctuation in their relationship intentions (particularly breakup intentions) in response to the presence or absence of relationship negativity.

Table 7. Ambivalence moderates the impact of negative relationship experiences on daily relationship intentions in Study 3

	Daily Commitment			Daily Dissolution Consideration		
Predictor	*b*	*SE*	*p*	*b*	*SE*	*p*
Interaction Testing						
Daily negative experiences	-.55	.03	< .001	.44	.03	< .001
Ambivalence	.001	.02	.93	.0001	.02	.99
Daily negative experiences* Ambivalence	-.03	.02	.09	.09	.02	< .001
At -1SD Ambivalence						
Daily negative experiences	-.52	.03	< .001	.34	.04	< .001
At +1SD Ambivalence						
Daily negative experiences	-.57	.02	< .001	.53	.02	< .001

BIC	2209.92	2363.31

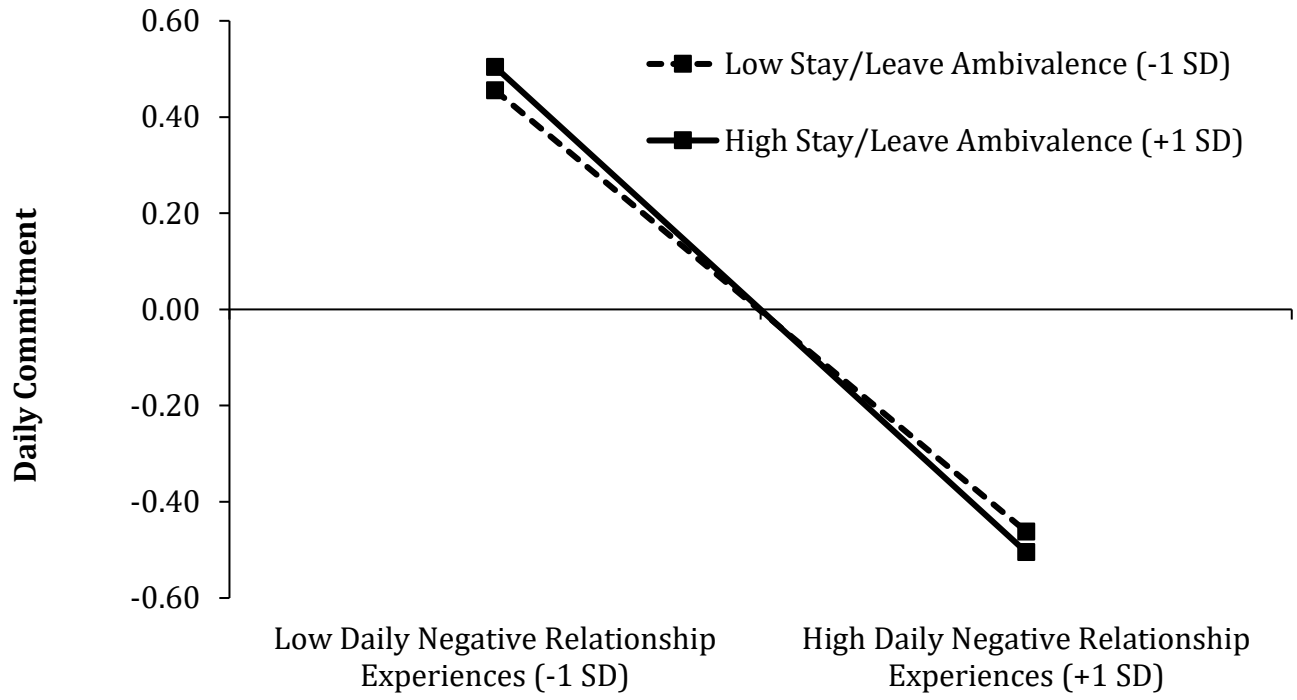

Figure 5. Effect of relationship negativity on daily commitment for individuals with low versus high ambivalence in Study 3

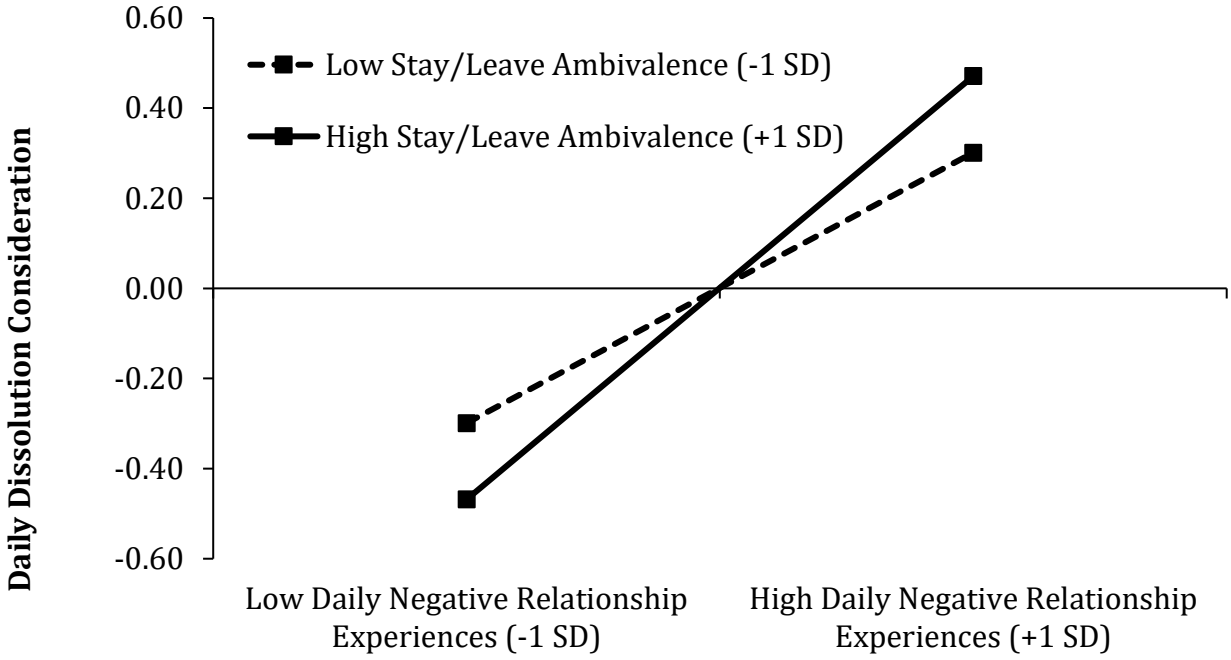

Figure 6. Effect of relationship negativity on daily dissolution consideration for individuals with low versus high ambivalence in Study 3

Fluctuation in Response to Positive Relationship Experiences. We next conducted those two models again, replacing conflict with positive relationship experiences as a predictor. Results can be seen in Table 8. Ambivalence significantly moderated the impact of positive relationship experiences on both daily commitment and daily dissolution consideration. Simple effects tests showed that people generally felt less committed (Figure 7) and more motivated to dissolve their relationships (Figure 8) on days when they experienced less positivity rather than more, but these effects were attenuated for individuals low on ambivalence and magnified for individuals high on ambivalence.

Subsidiary Analyses

As in Study 3, additional analyses are reported in full in the supplemental materials. The current findings again could not be explained by relationship insecurities, operationalized in this study as attachment anxiety and felt security. Of the twelve key

models tested, two were significant in the anticipated direction, and two were marginal in the opposite direction. The effects of stay/leave ambivalence were generally robust over and above attachment anxiety, felt security, and commitment. However, a similar pattern of results observed for low-commitment individuals, even when SLAS was included as a predictor in the models. These results suggest that the current effects may not be entirely unique to ambivalent individuals, at least among married individuals.

To ensure that the current results were not dependent on the measure of stay/leave ambivalence that was used, we conducted the key models again, substituting SLAS with a different operationalization of stay/leave ambivalence, as in Study 2. The same pattern of results emerged regardless of which measure was used, with five out of six models producing significant results in the expected direction.

Table 8. Ambivalence moderates the impact of positive relationship experiences on daily relationship intentions in Study 3

	Daily Commitment			Daily Dissolution Consideration		
Predictor	*b*	*SE*	*p*	*b*	*SE*	*p*
Interaction Testing						
Daily positive experiences	.49	.02	< .001	-.31	.02	< .001
Ambivalence	.0002	.01	.99	.00001	.02	> .99
Daily positive experiences* Ambivalence	.12	.01	< .001	-.14	.02	< .001
At -1SD Ambivalence						

Daily positive experiences	.36	.03	< .001	-.16	.03	< .001
At +1SD Ambivalence						
Daily positive experiences	.61	.02	< .001	-.45	.02	< .001
BIC		2052.25			2481.48	

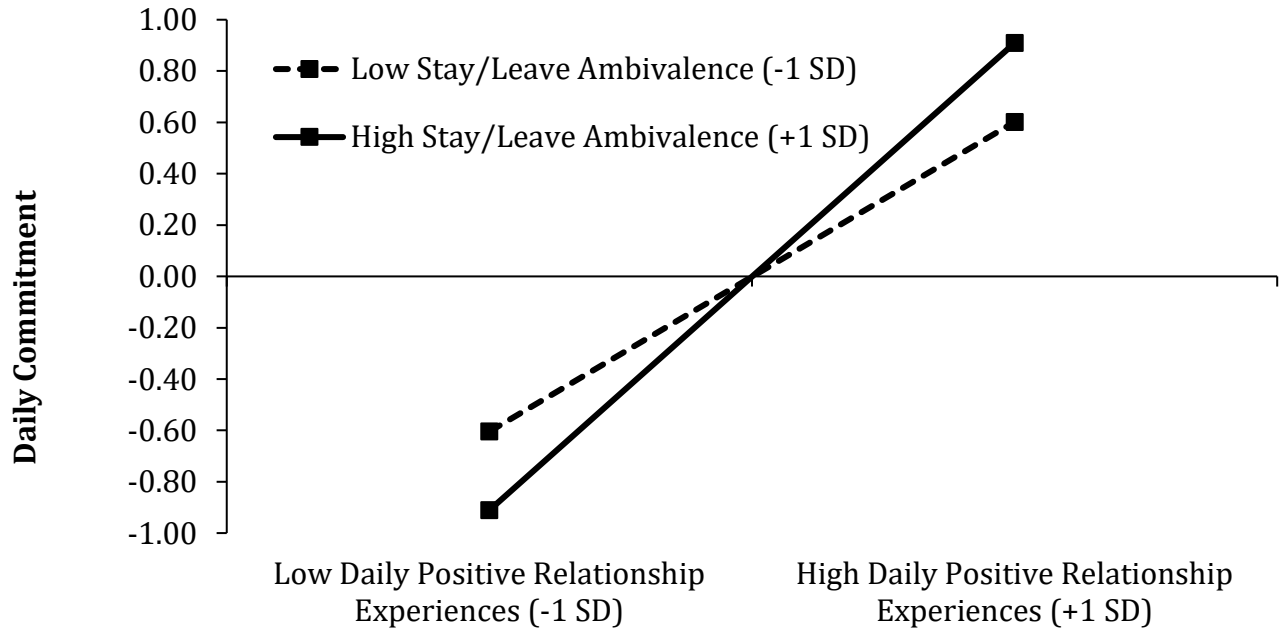

Figure 7. Effect of relationship positivity on daily commitment for individuals with low versus high ambivalence in Study 3

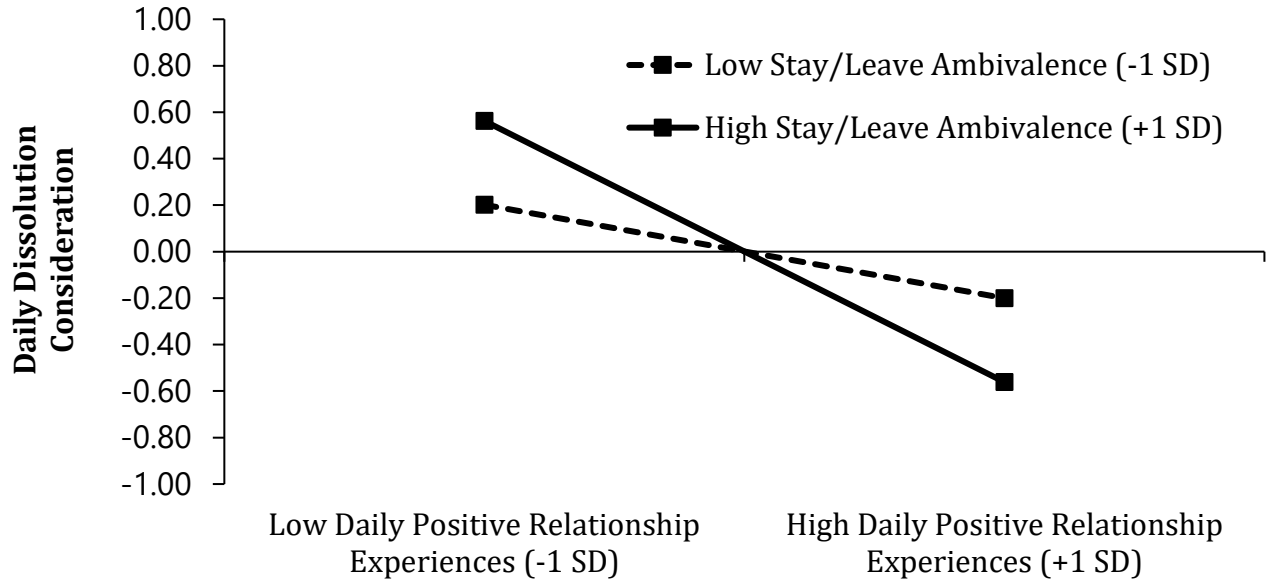

Figure 8. Effect of relationship positivity on daily dissolution consideration for individuals with low versus high ambivalence in Study 3

Study 3 Discussion

Study 3 replicated the key findings from Study 2. Individuals who felt ambivalent about whether to stay in their relationships experienced greater fluctuation in relationship commitment and dissolution consideration from day to day, compared to less ambivalent individuals. These effects emerged across two different operationalizations of stay/leave ambivalence. In subsidiary analyses, the effects could not be explained by attachment anxiety or felt security, neither of which predicted fluctuating relationship intentions. We did find, however, that individuals with lower commitment tended to experience greater day-to-day fluctuation in their intentions to remain in the relationship, similar to the results obtained with highly ambivalent individuals. Follow-up analyses suggested that these effects emerged independently from the effects of ambivalence.

General Discussion

People often struggle to decide whether their current romantic partner is the right long-term partner for them. Drawing on research on attitudinal ambivalence (e.g., Maio et al., 1996; van Harreveld et al., 2004; van Harreveld et al., 2009), we theorized that such individuals may frequently draw upon new relational information to help resolve the ambivalence and reach a decision. Everyday relationship ups and downs may thus be particularly influential in shaping the stay/leave intentions of ambivalent individuals. We tested these hypotheses with three studies. Across three separate samples in Study 1, we validated the Stay/Leave Ambivalence Scale (SLAS) to capture the subjective experience of being torn about whether or not to end a relationship. In Studies 2 and 3, we administered this scale to dating couples who then reported on their relationship experiences and perceptions daily for two weeks. In both studies, more ambivalent individuals' stay/leave intentions (commitment and thoughts about breaking up) tended to fluctuate more from day to day, and were more strongly tied to daily positive and negative relationship events, compared to the intentions of less ambivalent individuals.

Advancing Our Understanding of Why Relationship Intentions Fluctuate

The current findings support ambivalence as a novel explanation for why intentions to remain in a relationship can wax and wane from day to day. People may experience fluctuating relationship intentions because they are actively trying to make a decision about whether they are in the right relationship, such that their relationship attitudes are more susceptible to change. For example, imagine that Rachel is currently trying to decide whether Amir is the right partner for her. If, while Rachel is in that malleable attitudinal state (Armitage & Conner, 2000; Hodson et al., 2001), Amir does something that bothers

her (e.g., buys something they can't afford), that experience may prompt Rachel to think about all of the relationship's problems (e.g., they frequently argue about money) and conclude that he is not the right partner for her. If, on the other hand, Amir performs a kind or thoughtful gesture (e.g., calls Rachel's mom on her birthday), Rachel may instead be prompted to think about all of Amir's positive qualities (e.g., he gets along well with her friends and family), and perhaps experience a renewed commitment to making the relationship work. As both positive and negative events continue to occur over time, this sensitivity results in greater fluctuations in stay/leave intentions for individuals who are more ambivalent about their relationships compared to less.

To date, the dominant explanation for fluctuating relationship perceptions has been hypervigilance to threat. Individuals who doubt their partners' regard for them (e.g., those with high attachment anxiety or low trust; Cooper et al., 2018; Campbell et al., 2010) are theorized to be particularly attentive to cues of their partners' concern for them (or lack thereof). The presence or absence of these cues from day to day then leads to greater fluctuations in their feelings toward their relationship over time. In our subsidiary analyses (see the Online Supplement), we found weak and conflicting evidence for this mechanism in the present paper, suggesting that further work is needed to tease apart how insecure individuals experience relationship fluctuations and under what circumstances.

Advancing Our Understanding of Stay/Leave Ambivalence as a Construct

The current project introduces a new, four-item stay/leave ambivalence scale (SLAS). The scale is designed to capture the global, subjective experience of feeling torn or conflicted about whether to stay in a relationship. However, we also directly calculated participants' simultaneous motivation to both stay and leave by entering participants'

commitment scores (stay motivation) and dissolution consideration scores (leave motivation) into an ambivalence formula (Thompson et al., 1995). To use the parlance of the attitudinal ambivalence literature, the SLAS captures *felt* ambivalence (e.g., Jamieson, 1993), whereas stay/leave ambivalence captured with the Thompson et al. formula captures *potential* ambivalence (e.g., Kaplan, 1972). Discomfort is theorized to arise specifically when people are aware of their ambivalence (e.g., van Harreveld et al., 2009). That subjective experience was of primary interest for this project, which is why we designed SLAS to capture felt ambivalence. However, SLAS was highly correlated with the alternative, potential ambivalence measure (r = .74 in Study 2 and r = .81 in Study 3), and the same pattern of results emerged regardless of which measure was used. Either operationalization may be useful for researchers looking to advance our understanding of stay/leave decision processes. In the future, researchers may wish to explore whether felt versus potential ambivalence is a valid distinction in the context of relationship decisions. Can people hold ambivalent attitudes about whether to stay in their relationship and not be consciously aware of them?

Another related construct is relational ambivalence, defined as holding simultaneous positive and negative feelings about the partner (e.g., Mikulincer et al., 2010; Uchino et al., 2014). For example, the Ambivalence in Relationships Survey (AIRS) asks participants to rate their partner on several personality attributes, and then separately rate how beneficial and harmful each attribute is to the relationship. Relational ambivalence differs from SLAS in that it captures ambivalent feelings about the partner as a person, rather than about the decision to remain with in a relationship with them. This distinction is important because ambivalence is theorized to be particularly uncomfortable when it

concerns a decision that must be made (e.g., van Harreveld et al., 2009; Durso et al., 2016). In Study 1, we examined whether SLAS captured relational decision conflict specifically, rather than ambivalent feelings more broadly, by also measuring relational regret proneness, or the tendency to regret relationship decisions that one has made. Indeed, although AIRS and SLAS were correlated at .45, SLAS was uniquely associated with regret proneness whereas AIRS was not. Thus, SLAS captures a more specific construct that may be helpful for research on decision processes and decision conflict, rather than attitudes toward the partner more broadly.

Yet another related construct is uncertainty. Uncertainty is theoretically distinct from ambivalence in that it represents a lack of knowledge or information, rather than conflicting feelings (Gross et al., 1995). In the context of relationship outcomes, uncertainty should represent a hazy sense of the future (e.g., "Will the relationship improve or deteriorate over time? Will my partner choose to end the relationship? What would my life be like without my partner?"), whereas ambivalence concerns an indecisiveness over one's own behavior (i.e., "Should I choose to stay or leave?"). In practice, however, this distinction may not come through in measures designed to capture these constructs. For example, the Commitment Uncertainty Short Scale (Quirk et al., 2016) appears to partially tap into decision conflict, with items such as, "My level of commitment in this relationship has been wavering". Given the content overlap, it seems highly likely that the current findings would hold if the SLAS was substituted with the CUSS.

Advancing Our Understanding of Low Commitment

The current findings offer a fresh perspective on the subjective experiences of individuals with low commitment. Lower commitment is generally associated with worse

relationship behaviors, such as more destructive responses to conflict (e.g., Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991), and a lower willingness to make sacrifices for the partner (Wieselquist, Rusbult, Foster, & Agnew, 1999). Lower commitment particularly for the relatively less-committed partner in the dyad—referred to as the weak-link partner—has been associated with more conflict (Stanley et al., 2017), greater hostility during conflict (Oriña et al., 2011), and a greater likelihood of breakup over time (Attridge, Berscheid, & Simpson, 1995).

But what does low commitment mean in the context of relationship research? Dyadic samples typically have a restricted range of commitment scores, with most participants reporting high commitment to their partners (e.g., overall means of 5.89, 5.27, and 5.58 on 7-point scales, respectively; Oriña et al., 2011; Attridge et al., 1995; Stanley et al., 2017). Thus, findings on "low commitment" typically involve participants with commitment scores in the middle of the scale range (e.g., a 4 on a 7-point scale). In existing literature, low commitment is often conceptualized as indifference, consistent with the principle of least interest (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). For example, weak-link partners have been described as being "relatively disinterested in whether the relationship lives or dies" (Attridge et al., 1995 p. 255) and "in a stronger position to dictate important terms and conditions with the relationship" (Oriña et al., 2011 p. 909). However, the idea that at least some low-commitment individuals may be ambivalent rather than indifferent paints their behavior in a very different light. Rather than holding the powerful position of having little to lose from leaving the relationship, these individuals may instead feel trapped between two unattractive options, with much to lose from both leaving and staying. These conflicting feelings are likely to be highly stressful (e.g., van Harreveld et al., 2009a; Uchino

et al., 2014). Thus, the current findings may help to explain the negative relational consequences of low commitment (e.g., Stanley et al., 2017).

Limitations and Future Directions

The current research has several limitations that could be improved upon in future work. First, both studies examined couples daily over two weeks, which is a brief period of time, particularly in the context of a marriage. Relatedly, stay/leave ambivalence was measured only once in each study, precluding any examination of changes in ambivalence over time. Future research should explore how stay/leave ambivalence unfolds over a longer time course. How much time do people tend to spend questioning their relationships before their ambivalence is ultimately resolved—weeks, months, or even years? What catalysts tend to tip the person's decision in one direction versus another? The answers to these questions could inform applied researchers, therapists, and policy makers aiming to reduce relationship distress and its many downstream consequences.

The present research examined both less-established couples (Study 2; average relationship length of three years) and more-established couples (Study 3; married couples with an average relationship length of eight years). Key effects were obtained in both samples, suggesting that highly ambivalent individuals' tendency to have fluctuating relationship intentions may generalize across multiple relationship stages. However, an important limitation is that both samples were recruited from North America (Henrich, Hein, & Norenzayan, 2010). The samples were reasonably diverse in terms of age and ethnicity; however, it is unclear whether the current findings would generalize to couples in other cultures, particularly cultures with stronger divorce taboos (e.g., Furtado, Marcén, & Sevilla, 2013).

Conclusions

Why are some people's evaluations of their relationships less stable than others? Two dyadic daily diaries suggest that some people's relationship evaluations wax and wane from day to day because they are actively trying to decide whether their current relationship is the right relationship for them. While in this malleable decision state, daily relationship ups and downs push their feelings back and forth between wanting to stay and wanting to leave. Contrary to a portrayal of low-commitment individuals as being aloof and disinterested, this experience of stay/leave ambivalence is likely to be highly distressing, with negative implications for health and well-being.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Footnotes

1. When these data were collected in 2011, Mechanical Turk was a relatively new service that had been recently shown to produce reliable data (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011).
2. RMSEA values are not reported, as recent simulation models have shown them to be inaccurate for small *df* models (Kenny, Kaniskan, & McCoach, 2014).