

# Trust and Responsiveness in Strain-Test Situations: A Dyadic Perspective

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In this behavioral observation study, the authors tested predictions derived from various trust models concerning how individuals who are high vs. low in chronic trust perceive and behave during strain-test discussions with their romantic partners. Partners in 92 married/cohabitating couples identified and discussed 2 major strain-test issues in their relationship. Each partner (when in the role of asker) identified something she or he really wanted to do or accomplish that required the greatest sacrifice by his or her partner (in the responding role). Each videotaped discussion was then rated by trained coders. The results revealed that (a) high trust responders were more accommodating during the strain-test discussions than low trust responders; (b) high trust askers were more open/collaborative with the accommodation they received during the discussions than low trust askers; (c) high trust askers overestimated the amount of accommodation they received from their responding partners (relative to coder's ratings); (d) when in discussions that were more threatening, high trust askers showed a correction effect by reporting larger pre- to postdiscussion *increases* in state trust; and (e) when asked to make larger sacrifices, high trust responders showed a similar correction effect by displaying *greater* accommodation. These findings are discussed in terms of mutual responsiveness processes in relationships.

*Keywords:* trust, interdependence, accommodation, responsiveness, strain tests

All relationships involve some amount of give-and-take as partners negotiate issues in which their personal interests sometimes converge (are identical) and at other times diverge (are incompatible). Situations in which what is the best outcome for one partner involves considerable costs for the other partner are known as “strain-test” situations (Holmes, 1981; Kelley, 1979). Sally, for example, might be offered a wonderful job that would allow her to pursue her important professional goals, but would also require her to move across the country. Making this move would have many positive outcomes for Sally (the “asking” partner), but it would entail substantial costs for her romantic partner, Harry (the “responding partner”), who would have to uproot his life and relocate with her. Strain-test situations involve not only potential risks for partners in the asking and the responding roles; they also can yield long-term rewards and benefits for both partners as well as their relationship if responders make major sacrifices and decisions turn out well. If, for example, Harry agrees to move with Sally and they both like their new location, Sally should come to trust Harry even

more, given his willingness to make a major, personal sacrifice for her (Simpson, 2007a, 2007b).

In strain-test situations, responding partners are asked to set aside their personal desires (i.e., what might be the best outcome for them) and transform their motivation to focus on what is best for their partner and perhaps their relationship. They must then coordinate plans and actions with their partner to achieve their partner's noncorrespondent goals. According to interdependence theorists (e.g., Holmes, 1981; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003), strain-test situations are unique contexts in which asking partners can discern the extent to which their responding partners are fully invested in them and the relationship. Strain tests can be highly diagnostic of the responding partner's real relationship-based motives because they provide clear opportunities for the responding partner to ignore his or her own personal self-interest and engage in propartner and/or prorelationship actions. However, as we shall see, strain tests can and do elicit different patterns of thought, feeling, and behavior in people who score *high* or *low* in chronic trust.

In the present research, we had romantic partners engage in two videotaped strain-test discussions. In one discussion, the female partner (assigned to the role of “asker”) made a major request of her partner (the “responder”) that required him to consider making a large personal sacrifice. In the other discussion, the asker and responder roles were reversed. This dual-role experimental design allowed us to test a series of novel hypotheses about how the level of chronic trust of both askers and responders were associated with (a) how much the responder accommodated his or her partner's request, (b) how collaborative the asker was in response to accommodation attempts, (c) how the asker perceived the accommodation he or she received, and (d) how these variables predicted pre- to postdiscussion increases or decreases in state trust.

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### Origins of Trust in Relationships

Several models have identified the proximal processes that should contribute to the development and maintenance of trust in close relationships. Informed by interdependence theory (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Rusbult, Arriaga, & Agnew, 2001; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), Kelley and his colleagues (2003) suggest that trust is most likely to increase or deteriorate during interactions in which partners are highly interdependent and must then coordinate and exchange certain behaviors to provide each other with novel (valued) benefits. Kelley et al. (2003) claim that strain-test situations should be particularly diagnostic of how much responding partners genuinely care about their partners and relationships, given that responding partners must “act against” what is best for them in order to facilitate the personal goals of their asking partners.

Holmes and Rempel (1989) have further proposed that trust ought to increase when relationship partners address and resolve important issues that influence the degree of dependence in their relationship. For example, when partners encounter situations in which the best (most rewarding) outcome for each partner is very different (which is true of strain tests), uncertainties about what could transpire along with concerns about potential loss, exploitation, or rejection become salient. Strain-test situations are less likely to occur during the early stages of relationship development because most partners are not sufficiently interdependent to have major areas of disagreement. However, as partners encounter more noncorrespondent situations later in relationship development, they have more opportunities to provide “reciprocal reassurance” of their preresponse motives and commitment to the partner and the relationship. Holmes and Rempel (1989) hypothesize that reciprocal reassurance (and subsequent increases in trust) should be greatest when responding partners make costly personal sacrifices with “no strings attached” and display high levels of responsiveness (accommodation), especially when asking partners feel vulnerable or are highly outcome-dependent.

Individual differences in chronic trust should also play a major role in how partners think, feel, and behave in strain-test situations (see Holmes & Rempel, 1989; Simpson, 2007a, 2007b). Individuals who score high in chronic trust (i.e., those who perceive their partners as more dependable and have greater faith in them; Rempel, Holmes, & Zanna, 1985) have more optimistic and benevolent expectations about their partner’s core relationship motives (Rempel, Ross, & Holmes, 2001). They also have more integrated and well-balanced working models of relationships that are open to assimilating new information, even during difficult or stressful negotiations with their partners (Simpson, 2007a, 2007b). Thus, when strain-test situations are encountered, individuals high in chronic trust should display more positive and less negative affect, they should adjust how they respond based in part on their partner’s level of trust, and they should maintain a long-term, relationship-focused perspective (see Holmes, 1981; Holmes & Rempel, 1986). Previous research has, in fact, confirmed that high chronic trust individuals tend to evaluate their partners more positively than low chronic trust individuals do, especially when high trust individuals recall *negative* relationship experiences (Holmes & Rempel, 1989). When faced with strain-test situations, therefore, the positive, integrated, and well-balanced working models of high chronic trust individuals should allow them to be

more benevolent and more accommodating (responsive) toward their partners. Importantly, these effects should be *more pronounced* when their partners behave in a less accommodating fashion during strain-test interactions.

Low chronic trust individuals (i.e., those who perceive their partners as less dependable and have less faith in them; Rempel et al., 1985) harbor more suspicious, guarded, and cynical views of their partner’s true relationship motives and intentions (Holmes & Rempel, 1989). These negative beliefs and expectancies ought to fuel heightened perceptions of risk, especially in strain-test interactions. Given their uncertainties, individuals low in chronic trust should be more inclined to monitor their partner’s amount of accommodation and their willingness to make sacrifices for them or the relationship, even if such tests could confirm their worst fears (Simpson, 2007a, 2007b). Their vigilance and perceptions of heightened risk should also make low trust individuals more vulnerable to the negative effects of receiving lower levels of accommodation from their partners, partly because they are less likely to adopt an optimistic, long-term view of their relationships (Holmes, 1981). Given their hypervigilant, emotion-focused style of coping with relationship problems, low chronic trust individuals should amplify or perhaps create the relationship outcomes they wish to avert by questioning or testing their partner’s commitment (Murray & Holmes, 2009), sometimes to the point of driving their partners away.

Simpson (2007a, 2007b) recently developed the dyadic model of trust in relationships, which ties many of these ideas together (see Figure 1). According to this model, strain-test situations activate two interlocking cognitive processes: (a) feelings of vulnerability on the part of the asking partner, which stem from uncertainties about the responding partner’s propartner and preresponse motives, intentions, and actions, and (b) expectations about how the responding partner will respond to major requests for sacrifice, particularly in strain-test interactions in which the asking partner is outcome-dependent and decisions that would promote the asker’s best interests are at odds with those that would benefit his or her responding partner (Holmes, 1981; Simpson, 2007a). When the responding partner promotes the asking partner’s best interests (rather than his or her own) by displaying higher levels of accommodation, both partners should experience state-based increases in trust. As shown in Figure 1, *each partner’s* level of chronic trust should affect whether and how each partner (a) decides to enter strain-test situations; (b) successfully transforms his or her motivation to be more propartner and/or preresponse; (c) perceives his or her partner’s motives, goals, and intentions during strain-test interactions; and (d) experiences increases or decreases in state trust.

### A Model of Mutual Responsiveness

Integrating components of earlier models, Murray and Holmes (2009) have developed a model of mutual responsiveness in relationships that explains how situational, individual, and dyadic factors should influence affective, cognitive, and behavioral contingencies in extreme mixed-motive (i.e., strain-test) situations. One novel contribution of this model is that it highlights the role that self-protection and connection motives ought to assume in the development or deterioration of trust, especially in strain-test situations.

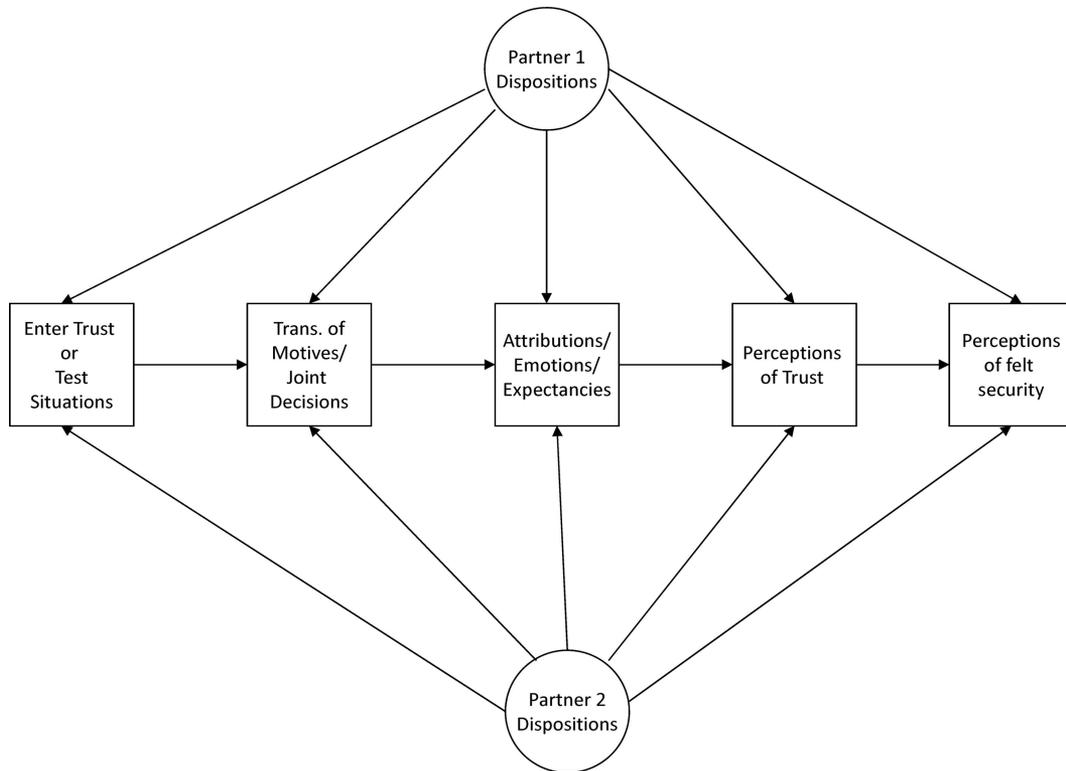


Figure 1. The dyadic model of trust in relationships (Simpson, 2007a). Trans. = Transformation.

According to the mutual responsiveness model, partners in the asking role in mixed-motive (strain-test) situations should worry that their responding partner's self-interest may prevail if they (askers) request major concessions. This in turn makes asking partners feel vulnerable to possible rejection (Enfield & Levinson, 2006; Tomasello, Carpenter, Call, Behne, & Moll, 2005), which only heightens their perceptions of risk and threat in these interactions. Strain-test situations, in other words, accentuate the fundamental conflict between seeking connection and allowing the self to be vulnerable versus protecting the self and avoiding possible rejection. This is a conflict that both partners—askers as well as responders—must attempt to resolve. Askers find themselves in an especially precarious position in strain-test situations because they also run the risk of being rejected by the one person who may be their principle source of comfort and support—their current romantic partner.

Besides incurring the costs associated with making a major personal sacrifice, responders also risk losing their autonomy and independence, given that making major concessions often increases both responder's and asker's dependence on the relationship. To resolve this dilemma, asking and responding partners should enact behaviors associated with self-protective or connection motivations. Askers, for example, can lessen the risk of possible rejection by not making overly major requests or by gradually reducing their requests as strain-test discussions unfold. Responders can lessen the risk of potentially losing their autonomy and independence by not accommodating during strain-test discussions or by trying to negotiate smaller concessions. However, asking and responding partners can also circumvent or override the

tendency to protect themselves in strain-test situations by taking the risks necessary to increase their level of trust in their partner/relationship (Murray & Holmes, 2009). Higher levels of accommodation by responders and greater active collaboration with accommodation overtures by askers should reflect a stronger connection motivation, particularly in strain-test situations.

According to Murray and Holmes (2009), situational, individual-difference, and relationship-based variables should all systematically affect perceptions of risk during strain-test interactions. One of the most relevant situational factors is the discrepancy between the potential outcomes for each partner, which should depend in part on the amount of sacrifice requested by the asking partner. Strain-test situations can also vary in their objective risks, with some being inherently more risky than others, such as when the potential gains versus losses for each partner are widely discrepant at the beginning of a discussion. For this reason, strain-test discussions in which the asking partner requests a very difficult or lengthy sacrifice should elicit greater perceived risk, especially in the responding partner. These situations also pose a unique approach-avoidance goal conflict, requiring that each partner pursue either connectedness goals (by increasing dependence on the partner) or self-protection goals (by decreasing dependence on the partner).

Consistent with Holmes and Rempel (1989) and Simpson (2007a, 2007b), Murray and Holmes (2009) also propose that individual differences in chronic trust should affect risk perceptions. Individuals high in chronic trust should see greater opportunities for gains than losses in most strain-test situations by envisioning how their partners and/or relationships might improve

over time, even if they must make major sacrifices and endure considerable costs initially. This preresolution orientation should increase the likelihood that high chronic trust people will act on their connectedness motives, *especially in situations that threaten their relationships* (cf. Holmes & Rempel, 1989). In such situations, high chronic trust individuals should be able to bypass the motivation to self-protect in favor of pursuing connection motives, allowing them to act on their strong connection motivation. This shift in motivation, which should also help to maintain and nurture communal relationships (Clark & Mills, 1993), has been demonstrated cognitively (e.g., Cavallo, Fitzsimons, & Holmes, 2009), but has not been documented *behaviorally* in previous research. Situational factors and chronic trust might also interact to predict the willingness of responding partners to make sacrifices and accommodate their asking partners' requests more fully. For example, high chronic trust responders who are asked to make larger sacrifices might display relatively more accommodation during strain-test discussions.

Relationship factors should also be implicated in these processes. Over time, patterns of responsiveness by both partners in a relationship create a unique "relationship personality" (Murray & Holmes, 2009) that guides future expectancies, especially when partners encounter strain-test situations. Askers, for example, make subjective assessments of their responding partner's goals and motivations based on what their partners do in these situations. Perceptions of a responding partner's motivation are also likely to be influenced by one's own chronic trust and situational factors, especially the amount of sacrifice that the responding partner is willing to make. For example, askers who discuss a strain-test issue with a responding partner who is low in chronic trust (and may have behaved in a self-protective manner in the past) should perceive relatively greater risk. As a result, the asker's *partner's* level of chronic trust might also affect perceptions and reactions during strain-test discussions as much as—or in conjunction with—the asker's own level of chronic trust, reflecting the inherently dyadic nature of strain-test situations (see Simpson, 2007a, 2007b).

During strain tests, high chronic trust partners may also increase their dependence on the partner and/or relationship and then justify their dependence-increasing actions (Murray & Holmes, 2009). For example, if moving to a new city turns out well, Harry (the responder) should value Sally (the asker) even more after he has made this large sacrifice for her, partly to justify his initially costly decision. High chronic trust askers are more likely to expect that their responding partners will be more accommodating and responsive to their requests, allowing them to act on their strong connection goals (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003; Murray, Holmes, & Collins, 2006). Because of this, askers high in chronic trust should show a shift from an avoidance motivation to an approach motivation to facilitate these expectancies. Low chronic trust askers, however, should act in line with their self-protection goals. For low trust askers, suspending self-interested motives should be much more difficult to do, especially when facing possible rejection by one's partner given how hurtful partner nonaccommodation can be (Murray, Bellavia, Rose, & Griffin, 2003). High-chronic trust individuals, therefore, should be better able to correct (overtly) the automatic impulse to self-protect in strain-test situations.

Recent experimental research has demonstrated this correction process in people who are likely to score higher in chronic trust. Cavallo et al. (2009) found that high self-esteem partners (who tend to score higher in trust) show increases in approach motivation following threats to their romantic relationships. This suggests that high chronic trust individuals might also bypass self-protection tendencies in strain-test interactions and display behaviors that communicate their desire for connection with their partners.

### The Present Study and Hypotheses

Several studies have provided indirect evidence for portions of the mutual responsiveness model, the dyadic model of trust in relationships, and how transformation of motivation builds and maintains trust in romantic relationships (see Murray & Holmes, 2009; Simpson, 2007a; Wieselquist, Rusbult, Foster, & Agnew, 1999). No study, however, has examined couples spontaneously discussing strain-test relationship dilemmas, and no behavioral evidence of these theoretically important effects has been marshaled to date.

In the present study, we first had married/cohabitating partners independently complete a battery of personality and relationship measures, including a measure of each partner's chronic trust. One week later, each couple came to the lab and was asked to identify and discuss two major strain-test issues in their relationship. In one discussion, the female partner was assigned to the role of "asker," and her male partner was assigned to the role of "responder." In the other discussion, the roles were reversed. Each asker was instructed to identify something that he or she really wanted to do that would require the *greatest sacrifice* by his or her responding partner. Each videotaped discussion lasted 6–7 min. Each partner also reported how much he or she trusted his or her partner (on state-trust measures), both immediately before and immediately after each discussion. Following each discussion, each partner also reported how he or she behaved in the role to which he or she had been assigned (asker or responder) and how he or she perceived his or her partner's behavior. When the entire study was finished, trained observers coded the behavior of each partner within each discussion in terms of his or her amount of accommodation (when in the responding role) and amount of collaboration in response to the accommodation (when in the asking role).

We tested six hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 1 (H1):* Responding partners who score higher in chronic trust should display more *accommodation* (both observer rated and partner reported) during their strain-test discussions than low chronic trust responders.

*Hypothesis 2 (H2):* High chronic trust askers should display greater collaboration with their responding partners during their strain-test discussions than low chronic trust askers.

*Hypothesis 3 (H3):* High chronic trust askers should also be more likely to overestimate the amount of accommodation that their responding partners display during their strain-test discussions than low chronic trust askers.

*Hypothesis 4 (H4):* When in "high-risk" situations (i.e., when the responding partner is either lower in chronic trust or

behaves in a less accommodating manner), high chronic trust askers should report larger pre- to postdiscussion *increases* in state trust than low chronic trust askers.

*Hypothesis 5 (H5):* The level of sacrifice requested should moderate the effects of chronic trust, such that greater sacrifice should prompt low chronic trust responders to be less accommodating, whereas it should prompt high chronic trust responders to be *more* accommodating.

*Hypothesis 6 (H6):* The relation between responder's chronic trust and asker's changes in state trust should be mediated by responder's accommodation, such that responder's who are higher in chronic trust should behave in a more accommodating manner, which in turn should predict increases in asker's state trust levels.

## Method

### Participants

Married/cohabitating heterosexual couples ( $N = 92$  couples) were recruited from the community to participate in this study. Each couple was married or had been cohabitating for at least 3 years ( $M = 6.97$  years,  $SD = 4.48$ ; 85% were married). The mean age of the women was 30.71 years ( $SD = 7.18$ , range = 20–62); the mean age of the men was 32.48 years ( $SD = 9.19$ , range = 21–64). The ethnic breakdown was 76% European American/White, 12% Asian/Pacific Islander, 4% Latino/Hispanic American, 3% African American, and 5% multiracial/"other." Each couple was paid \$100 for participating.

### Procedure and Measures

**Phase 1: Questionnaires.** Each partner first privately completed an online survey that contained demographic, individual-difference, and relationship measures. Chronic trust, the focal individual-difference measure in this study, was assessed by the Trust Scale (the 17-item measure; see Rempel et al., 1985). This well-validated scale measures the degree to which individuals believe they can depend on and have faith in their current romantic partner. Cronbach's alphas were .89 and .91 for males and females, respectively.

Discriminant analyses were also conducted to assure that our effects were not attributable to differences in relationship satisfaction or relationship length. Relationship satisfaction was measured using the Satisfaction subscale of the Perceived Relationship Quality Components Scale (PRQC; Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000). Cronbach's alphas were .92 and .97 for males and females, respectively. Relationship length was assessed by the question: "How long have you been in your current relationship?" (reported in years and months).

We also tested whether our effects might be attributable to self-esteem, attachment anxiety, or attachment avoidance. Self-esteem was measured using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (SES; Rosenberg, 1965). Adult romantic attachment orientations were measured using the Adult Attachment Scale (AAQ; Simpson, Rholes, & Phillips, 1996). For the SES, Cronbach's alphas were .82 and .84 for males and females, respectively. For attachment

anxiety and avoidance assessed by the AAQ, alphas ranged from .76 to .86 for men and women on the two attachment scales.

**Phase 2: Lab strain-test discussion task.** One week later, each couple came to the lab to engage in two videotaped strain-test discussions. Each dyad member first chose a goal that would require his or her partner to make a *major* personal sacrifice or concession of some sort (see below). Each couple then discussed each partner's goal for 6–7 min in two separate discussions. In each discussion, the partner who proposed the goal (i.e., the person requesting a major sacrifice from his or her partner) was the "asker," and the partner who was being asked to make the sacrifice was the "responder." Before the first discussion, participants were given the following instructions:

Married and committed partners have to work together to decide how to spend their time, money, and energy, and every committed relationship involves a fair amount of give and take. We are interested in how couples discuss situations in which one partner wants to do something that involves a sacrifice for the other partner. For example, you might like to spend your weekend golfing, which means that you have less time on the weekend for your partner or family. Other examples might be a job you really want, an activity you really like to do, a place you'd really like to visit, a place you'd like to live, something important that you want to achieve, or a major purchase that is appealing to one of you, but has little value for the other. Basically, we'd like you to choose something that you want to do that involves sacrifice or costs for your partner. It could be something current, or something you anticipate happening in the near future. It can be something you have already discussed or something you haven't discussed. You may be able to think of more than one appropriate topic. If that is the case, please choose the one that is most important, and that requires the **greatest sacrifice** from your partner. I am going to have you fill out a form that asks each of you to write a short description of the situation you'd like to discuss and then answer a few questions about it. Do each of you understand what kind of discussion topic we'd like you to select?

The most commonly chosen strain-test discussion topics were relocation (e.g., moving to pursue a professional goal), getting additional schooling, making an expensive purchase, making an occupational change, pursuing a major hobby, or taking a trip (that was undesirable to the responder).

Couples were randomly assigned to have either the female partner or the male partner be the "asker" in the first discussion. The roles were reversed in the second discussion. Because discussion order did not have any effects on the outcomes, it is not discussed further.

Immediately before and immediately after each discussion, each partner also privately completed a state measure of trust. Three items from the Trust subscale of the PRQC assessed state trust ("How much can you *trust/count on/depend on* your partner *right now, at this moment?*"). Cronbach's alphas were .84 and .96 for males and females, respectively.

Before each discussion, responders were told of the goal that their asking partner had chosen to discuss. A one-item measure (for responders: "How negative or costly is [your partner] attaining this goal for you?"; for askers: "How negative or costly is attaining this goal for your partner?") assessed the degree of sacrifice requested. Because these measures were highly correlated ( $r = .73$ ), a composite score was computed by

averaging the asker's and the responder's perceptions of sacrifice for each discussion topic. This measure served as our estimate of the degree of sacrifice requested in each strain-test discussion. Examples of sacrifices rated lower in magnitude included: "I want to meditate every Wednesday and take a dance class one night per week" and "I would like to engage in more strenuous activities in the outdoors and have a more disciplined workout schedule." Examples of sacrifices rated higher in magnitude included: "I would like a long-term opportunity to work in a third-world country without my partner" and "I would like to live in the United States after I complete my degree, and she [the partner] wants to live near her friends and family in [another country]."

Following each strain-test discussion, the asking partner completed a four-item scale that assessed the level of accommodation he or she perceived during the discussion (e.g., "How helpful was your partner in thinking of ways s/he might help you achieve the goal?", "How willing was your partner to make personal sacrifices to help you reach your goal?"). Cronbach's alphas were .92 and .89 for males and females, respectively.

**Phase 3: Behavioral coding.** Each videotaped discussion (two for each couple) was then rated by 10 trained observers, all of whom were blind to all hypotheses and other data. Following extensive training, five observers rated the behavior of each *responding* partner on their level of accommodation. *Responder accommodation* was defined as involving any of three types of positive actions: (a) saying or doing things to help the asking partner make, or move forward with, plans that supported his or her goal; (b) treating the discussion as an opportunity for cooperation and joint planning; and (c) attempting to mesh, blend, or fit the partner's future goal/objectives with one's own. *Responder nonaccommodation* was defined as involving either of two types of negative actions (reverse coded): (d) using destructive or critical language and (e) framing or reframing the discussion as a "me versus you" conflict. These behavioral codes were developed on the basis of theory and previous research on accommodation (e.g., Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003). Each behavior was rated on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*Not at all*) to 7 (*A great deal*). The interrater reliabilities for each of the five rated accommodation items were high ( $\alpha$ s were .86, .90, .91, .93, and .90 for each rated item, respectively). Because the five items were highly correlated ( $r$ s = .46–.76), they were summed to form an Accommodation Scale ( $\alpha$  = .90).

The asking partner's level of collaboration with accommodation was coded by a different set of five independent observers using the same type of 1–7 rating scales. Specifically, these coders rated the collaboration of each asker on five positive behaviors (openness to the responder's accommodation attempts, acknowledgement of the responder's sacrifice, the asker's confidence that his or her goal would be supported, whether askers presented the topic as a mutual goal, and the asker's attempts to help the responding partner be supportive) and one reverse-keyed negative behavior (the asker framing or reframing the discussion as a "me vs. you" conflict). The interrater reliabilities were high for each item ( $\alpha$ s = .87, .85, .81, .76, .81, and .88, respectively). Because the six items were highly correlated ( $r$ s = .71–.92), they were summed to create a Collaboration Scale ( $\alpha$  = .82).

## Results

### Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics for all the primary variables in the study are reported in Table 1.<sup>1</sup> As expected, accommodation was significantly and positively correlated with changes in state trust for both askers ( $r$  = .35) and responders ( $r$  = .24). Responder chronic trust was also significantly and positively correlated with coder's accommodation ratings ( $r$  = .41). Asker chronic trust was significantly and positively correlated with coder's collaboration ratings ( $r$  = .33). To ensure that the strain-test discussions involved a reasonable level of sacrifice, we examined the mean level of sacrifice reported by both asking and responding partners. On average, responders reported 4.5 and askers reported 4.4 on the 1-to 7-point Likert-type scale (where 1 = *not very much sacrifice* and 7 = *very much sacrifice*).

### Data Analytic Strategy

To address the nonindependence of the data, we used the actor-partner interdependence model (APIM; Kashy & Kenny, 2000; Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). Prior to analysis, all independent variables were grand-mean centered (Aiken & West, 1991), and all dependent variables were left uncentered. In the APIM, *actor variables* reflect the association between actors' independent variable scores and actors' dependent variable scores, statistically controlling for their partners' scores on the independent variable. *Partner variables* reflect the association between partners' independent variable scores and actors' dependent variable scores, statistically controlling for actors' independent variable scores. In the present analyses, actor variables refer to the *asking* partners' variables, and partner variables refer to the *responding* partners' variables. Gender (coded 1 if female, -1 if male) was included as an independent variable in all of the initial models reported below. Because no significant gender interactions were found, gender was excluded from the final set of analyses. Discussion order (i.e., whether a partner was in the asking role first and the responding role second, or vice versa) also did not interact with any of the predictor variables, so it is not discussed further.

**Are high trust partners more accommodating and more collaborative with accommodation (H1 and H2)?** To test the first two hypotheses, we entered actor (asker) and partner (responder) chronic trust and the Actor  $\times$  Partner chronic trust interaction as predictor variables to predict responders' degree of observer-rated accommodation (H1) in an APIM model. We entered the same predictors in a separate APIM model to predict askers' level of observer-rated collaboration (H2). As predicted, for both accommodation and collaboration, significant main effects emerged for actor chronic trust and partner chronic trust. As shown in Table 2, responders who scored higher in chronic trust

<sup>1</sup> Although greater accommodation by responding partners should also predict increases in state trust in asking and responding partners (Simpson, 2007a), we focused on whether greater accommodation predicted increases in state trust among askers in the present study. As shown in Table 1, greater accommodation by responders predicted increases in state trust in askers. Moreover, as reported in the Results section, responders who accommodated more also experienced increases in state trust.

Table 1  
Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations for Focal Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Chronic trust	—	.48***	.31**	.51***	.20	.52***	-.16
2. Accommodation	.30**	—	.57***	.46***	.09	.33**	-.06
3. Collaboration	.36***	.68***	—	.31**	.04	.35***	-.19
4. Asker state trust	.22*	.21*	.25*	—	-.07	.23*	-.12
5. Sacrifice	.19	.02	.08	-.09	—	.05	-.10
6. Relationship satisfaction	.75***	.40***	.38***	.30**	.03	—	-.19
7. Relationship length	-.15	-.20	-.09	.03	.02	-.15	—
<i>M</i> (males)	5.57	8.91	17.43	-.01	9.71	6.01	6.39
<i>SD</i> (males)	1.03	5.98	3.36	.45	2.23	1.13	4.48
<i>M</i> (females)	5.60	9.50	17.46	.02	9.28	5.96	6.64
<i>SD</i> (females)	0.97	6.10	3.62	.37	2.33	1.04	4.50
Possible range	1-7	-10-26	-2-34	-2.29-1.09	1-7	1-7	3-15

Note. Correlations for men are reported above the diagonal; correlations for women are reported below the diagonal.

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

were rated by observers as behaving in a more accommodating manner during their strain-test discussions. In addition, askers who scored higher in chronic trust were rated as being more collaborative with their responding partners during their strain-test discussions. There were no significant Actor (asker)  $\times$  Partner (responder) Trust interactions.<sup>2</sup>

**Do high trust partners overestimate the accommodation they receive (H3)?** We also predicted that high chronic trust askers would overestimate the amount of accommodation they received, relative to coders' accommodation ratings. To test this prediction, we created the dependent variable by regressing each asker's ratings of his or her partner's degree of accommodation onto the coders' ratings of his or her partner's accommodation. These residual scores reflect each asker's underestimation or overestimation of his or her responding partner's accommodation during the strain-test discussions. We entered asker chronic trust, responder chronic trust, and the interaction between these two variables as independent variables in this APIM model, with the residual scores treated as the dependent variable. As shown in Table 2, there was a significant main effect for asker chronic trust, confirming that individuals who scored higher in chronic trust tended to *overestimate* their partner's amount of accommodation relative to coders' accommodation ratings. A significant main effect for responder chronic trust also emerged, indicating that responders who scored higher in chronic trust tended to be "overestimated" compared with coder's ratings in terms of their level of accommodation. There was no significant Actor (asker)  $\times$  Partner (responder) Trust interaction.

**Do high trust askers experience increases in state trust when their responding partners are less accommodating (H4)?** Although strain-test situations are primarily defined in terms of the responder's role (i.e., the responder's level of accommodating behavior), the actions of both partners should affect what transpires in these discussions (Simpson, 2007a, 2007b). Therefore, to test H4, we ran an APIM model that contained the following predictor variables: actor (asker) and partner (responder) chronic trust, coders' accommodation ratings of the responding partner, coders' collaboration ratings of the asking partner, and all two-way interactions. Accommodation ratings and partner chronic trust

were included because they should be indicators of risk in strain-test discussions (Murray & Holmes, 2009). To determine whether these theoretically relevant predictors tapped risk in these discussions, we first examined the correlations between accommodation ratings, partner chronic trust scores, and pre- to post-discussion changes in negative affect (i.e., residualized scores). Both lower coder accommodation ratings and lower partner chronic trust were associated with pre- to post-discussion increases in negative affect ( $r_s = -.41$  and  $-.15$ , respectively). Thus, both measures were included as predictors in the model to index the level of risk in each discussion. Given our H4 prediction, we also included two three-way interaction terms in the model (Asker Chronic Trust  $\times$  Responder Chronic Trust  $\times$  Coder's Accommodation ratings, and Asker Chronic Trust  $\times$  Responder Chronic Trust  $\times$  Coder's Collaboration ratings). The dependent variable was pre- to post-discussion changes (reported by askers) on the state trust measure, which was created by partialing each asker's preinteraction state trust ratings from her or his postinteraction state trust ratings.

No significant main effects emerged, but two significant two-way interactions and a marginally significant three-way interaction were found (see Table 3). The significant two-way Asker Chronic Trust  $\times$  Responder Accommodation interaction, shown in Figure 2, indicated that the level of state trust of low chronic trust askers changed depending on the amount of observer-rated accommodation they received from their responding partners. High chronic trust askers reported increases in state trust, regardless of their partners' amount of observer-rated accommodation. However, consistent with H4, high chronic trust askers reported larger increases in state trust when they were *less accommodated*. Simple slopes analyses revealed marginally significant slopes for both high and low chronic trust asker's changes in state trust (for low chronic trust askers,  $b = -.05$ ,  $t(166) = -1.69$ ,  $p = .09$ ; for high chronic trust askers,  $b = -.07$ ,  $t(166) = -1.78$ ,  $p = .08$ ). In

<sup>2</sup> In additional analyses, asker chronic trust, responder chronic trust, and Asker Chronic Trust  $\times$  Responder Chronic Trust were entered as predictors of responder self-ratings of accommodation. Responder chronic trust also significantly predicted responder self-ratings of accommodation.

Table 2  
*Effects of Asker and Responder Trust on Accommodation and Collaboration (Separate Models)*

APIM parameter	Accommodation			Collaboration			Under/overestimation		
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>t</i> ( <i>df</i> )	<i>b</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>t</i> ( <i>df</i> )	<i>b</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>t</i> ( <i>df</i> )
Intercept	9.28	.48	19.16 (88)	17.54	.31	56.56 (87)	.01	.35	0.02 (88)
Asker trust	1.50**	.46	3.22 (177)	.64*	.27	2.41 (170)	.95*	.39	2.44 (167)
Responder trust	1.72***	.47	3.70 (177)	.86**	.27	3.22 (170)	.85*	.39	2.17 (167)
Asker Trust × Responder Trust	−.09	.35	−0.26 (89)	−.15	.22	−0.68 (88)	.01	.25	0.04 (89)

Note. APIM = actor-partner interdependence model.  
 \*  $p \leq .05$ . \*\*  $p \leq .01$ . \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$ .

summary, relative to low chronic trust askers, high trust askers reported larger increases in state trust when interacting with *less* accommodating partners.

The significant Asker Chronic Trust × Asker Collaboration interaction, shown in Figure 3, revealed that askers who were low in chronic trust reported decreases in state trust if they were rated by coders as less collaborative with their partner's accommodation, but they reported increases in state trust if they were rated as more collaborative during the strain-test discussions. In other words, changes in state trust varied according to the level of collaboration that askers displayed. High chronic trust askers showed an entirely different pattern. They experienced increases in state trust at all levels of collaboration, but the largest increases in state trust occurred when high trust askers were rated as being *least* collaborative. Simple slopes analyses indicated that high chronic trust askers reported increases in state trust after discussions in which they were less collaborative ( $b = -.16$ ,  $t(166) = -1.98$ ,  $p = .05$ ), whereas the reverse was true of low chronic trust askers ( $b = -.10$ ,  $t(166) = -1.90$ ,  $p = .06$ ).

Finally, there was a marginally significant Asker Chronic Trust × Responder Chronic Trust × Responder Accommodation

three-way interaction. This dyadic effect indicates that when responders displayed less accommodation, high trust askers tended to report increases in state trust (similar to the two-way interaction reported above). This “correction effect” was most pronounced for askers who had strain-test discussions with low trust responders. That is, in situations that involve the greatest risk—receiving low accommodation from low trust responders, which should induce the impulse to “self-protect” and diminish state trust in many people—high trust askers displayed an overcorrection effect by increasing their level of state trust. None of the simple slopes in this three-way interaction were significant.

**Do high trust people accommodate more when strain tests involve greater sacrifice (H5)?** To test Hypothesis 5, we ran an APIM model that included the following predictor variables: actor and partner chronic trust, sacrifice (the composite measure of asker-reported and responder-reported sacrifice requested), and all two-way interactions. The dependent variable was coders' ratings of responder's amount of accommodation. These results are summarized in Table 4. We found the predicted Responder Chronic Trust × Sacrifice interaction. Simple slopes analyses indicated that low chronic trust responders were less accommodating when they

Table 3  
*Effects of Asker Trust, Responder Trust, Accommodation, and Collaboration on Changes in State Trust*

APIM parameter	State trust		
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>t</i> ( <i>df</i> )
Intercept	.04	.03	1.16 (83)
Asker chronic trust	.04	.03	1.15 (162)
Responder chronic trust	.02	.03	0.71 (163)
Asker's collaboration (observer ratings)	.01	.03	1.27 (163)
Responder's accommodation (observer ratings)	.01	.01	1.22 (164)
Asker's collaboration (observer ratings) × Responder's accommodation (observer ratings)	.00	.00	1.00 (144)
Asker Chronic Trust × Responder Chronic Trust	−.01	.02	−0.25 (101)
Asker Chronic Trust × Responder's Accommodation (observer ratings)	−.01*	.01	−1.97 (160)
Responder Chronic Trust × Responder's Accommodation (observer ratings)	−.00	.01	−0.29 (160)
Asker Chronic Trust × Asker's Collaboration (observer ratings)	−.03*	.01	−2.15 (166)
Responder Chronic Trust × Asker's Collaboration (observer ratings)	.02	.01	1.68 (166)
Asker Chronic Trust × Responder Chronic Trust × Responder's accommodation (observer ratings)	.01†	.00	1.90 (159)
Asker Chronic Trust × Responder Chronic Trust × Asker's collaboration (observer ratings)	−.01	.01	−1.47 (166)

Note. APIM = actor-partner interdependence model.  
 †  $p \leq .10$ . \*  $p \leq .05$ .

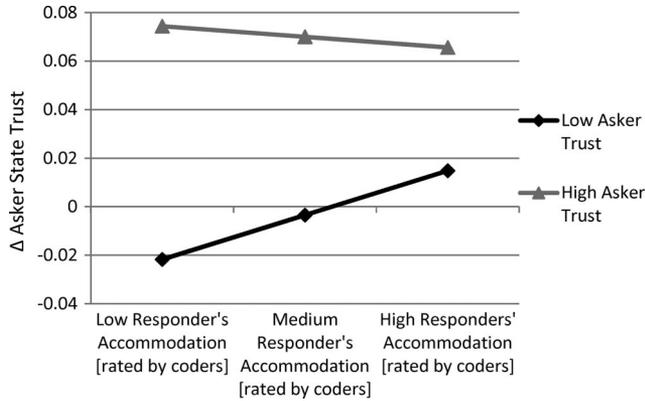


Figure 2. Interaction between asker chronic trust and responder accommodation (observer rated) predicting change in asker state trust. Regression lines are plotted for individuals scoring one standard deviation above and below the sample means on asker chronic trust and responder accommodation.

were asked to make larger sacrifices ( $b = 2.34, t(135) = 3.16, p = .002$ ). High chronic trust responders showed the opposite pattern, accommodating even *more* when they were asked to make larger sacrifices ( $b = 3.38, t(135) = 3.25, p = .002$ ) (see Figure 4).<sup>3</sup>

Main effects for asker chronic trust and partner chronic trust also emerged, revealing that more trusting responders were rated as more accommodating in general. Finally, a significant interaction between asker chronic trust and sacrifice was found. As shown in Figure 5, high trust askers received more accommodation overall, particularly in lower sacrifice discussions. Low trust askers received less accommodation in low-sacrifice discussions than in high-sacrifice ones, in which they tended to receive an average amount of accommodation.

**What mediates the connection between responder's chronic trust and asker's pre- to postdiscussion changes in state trust (H6)?** To test whether the link between responder's chronic trust and asker's changes in state trust were mediated by responder's level of accommodation during the strain-test discussions (H6), we conducted mediation tests following the recommenda-

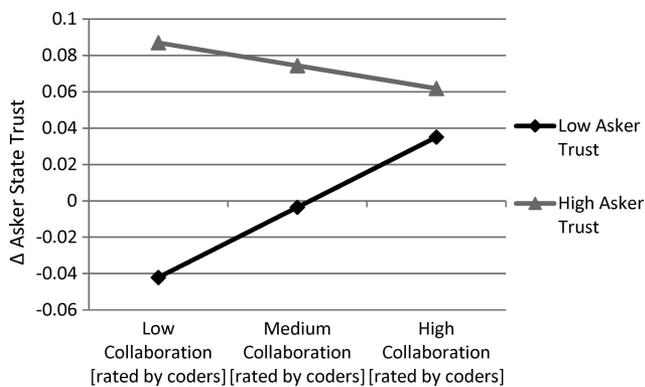


Figure 3. Interaction between asker chronic trust and asker collaboration (observer rated) predicting change in asker state trust. Regression lines are plotted for individuals scoring one standard deviation above and below the sample means on asker chronic trust and asker collaboration.

Table 4  
Effects of Asker Trust, Responder Trust, and Level of Sacrifice on Accommodation Behavior

APIM parameter	Responder's accommodation (observer ratings)		
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>t</i> ( <i>df</i> )
Intercept	9.46	.49	19.45 (88)
Asker chronic trust	1.23***	.46	2.65 (174)
Responder chronic trust	1.91***	.45	4.21 (174)
Total sacrifice	-.05	.17	-0.29 (170)
Asker chronic trust × Responder chronic trust	-.23	.35	-0.64 (91)
Asker chronic trust × Total sacrifice	-.52***	.16	-3.30 (135)
Responder chronic trust × Total sacrifice	.52***	.15	3.41 (135)

Note. APIM = actor-partner interdependence model.  
\*  $p \leq .05$ . \*\*  $p \leq .01$ . \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$ .

tions of Baron and Kenny (1986). Given our hypothesis, we were particularly interested in whether the amount of observer-rated accommodation displayed by responders mediated this connection. All of the conditions required to test for mediation were present. As shown in Figure 6, higher responder chronic trust predicted pre- to postdiscussion increases in their asking partner's state trust, responder's chronic trust predicted greater observer-rated responder accommodation during the discussion, and greater responder accommodation predicted increases in asker's state trust, controlling for responder's chronic trust. The link between responder's chronic trust and changes in asker's state trust revealed partial mediation (Sobel's  $z = 2.36, p < .02$ ). Thus, responders who entered the strain-test discussions trusting their partners more were more accommodating, which in turn led their asking partners to experience increases in state trust.

Our six hypotheses and the results are summarized in Table 5.

**Discriminant Validity Analyses**

In a final series of analyses, we reran each of the analyses reported above, statistically controlling for the length and satisfaction of each relationship. We did this to ensure that our effects were not attributable to how long partners had been involved or how satisfied they were in their relationships. When we reran each of the analyses reported above, all of the predicted effects remained significant ( $p < .05$ ) or marginally significant ( $p < .10$ ). Thus, the effects reported above are not attributable to how long partners had been involved or how satisfied they were in their relationships.

We next statistically controlled each partner's scores on self-esteem, attachment anxiety, and attachment avoidance (in separate analyses), given that each of these measures is correlated with chronic trust. When we did so, 16 of the 21 statistically significant

<sup>3</sup> The composite sacrifice measure was also significantly correlated with asker's level of chronic trust, such that high trust askers requested larger sacrifices than did low trust askers.

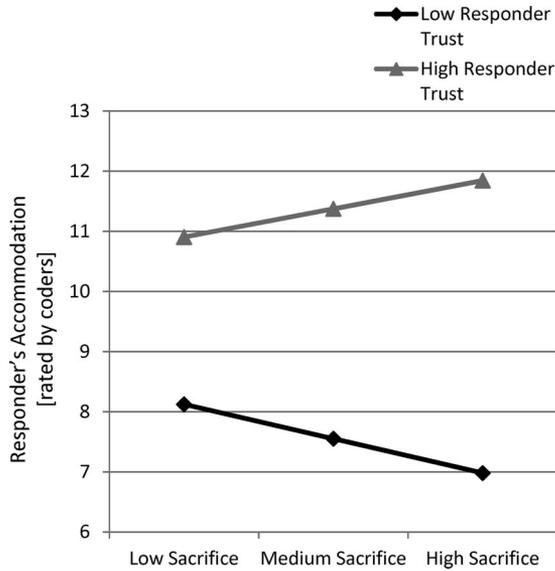


Figure 4. Interaction between responder chronic trust and level of sacrifice predicting responder accommodation (observer rated). Regression lines are plotted for individuals scoring one standard deviation above and below the sample means on responder chronic trust and level of sacrifice.

effects reported above remained significant or marginally significant. In summary, the effects reported above do not appear to be attributable to variance that chronic trust shares with any of these other constructs.

### Discussion

This is the first behavioral observation study to test how differences in chronic trust affect the way in which romantic partners think, feel, and behave during actual strain-test discussions. Strain tests are a specific—and often very intense—form of relationship conflict. They are unique among the many different types of interactions that couples often have, such as deciding what to do during everyday discussions, resolving personal or relational conflicts, providing support, or sharing in a partner’s good news. Unlike typical relationship conflicts, strain tests may sometimes reveal new or undisclosed points of major disagreement between partners, making these interactions especially uncensored, heated, and quite personal. In strain-test interactions, one individual asks his or her partner to consider making a major sacrifice that would be good for the individual (the asker) and perhaps the relationship in the long run, but would require substantial personal sacrifice by the partner (the responder). This distinct feature of strain tests—the stark noncorrespondence of immediate, personal outcomes between relationship partners—explains why they can be diagnostic of what an individual who is requesting a sacrifice can expect from his or her responding partner in the future (Holmes, 1981; Simpson, 2007a). These situations also create strong approach-avoidance goal conflicts (Murray & Holmes, 2009) that, as we have seen, are resolved very differently by partners who are high or low in chronic trust. Our study provides a novel set of behavioral observation findings that illustrate these critical differences.

Nearly all of our hypotheses were supported. As predicted, when in the responding role (i.e., when being asked to make a sacrifice), individuals higher in chronic trust displayed more accommodation (rated by observers) during their strain-test discussions than did low chronic trust responders. When in the asking role (i.e., requesting a sacrifice from their partners), high chronic trust partners were rated as more collaborative with the overtures of their responding partners. Moreover, high trust askers perceptually *overestimated* their responding partner’s level of accommodation relative to observers’ accommodation ratings of their partners. That is, high chronic trust askers appeared to “protect” their connection motivations by overestimating their partner’s amount of accommodation during these relatively risky discussions. Consistent with findings reported by Holmes and Rempel (1989) and Murray and Holmes’ (2009) mutual responsiveness model, high-chronic trust askers were also more likely to report pre- to post-discussion increases in state trust when their responding partners behaved in a *less* accommodating fashion or when they were lower in chronic trust. High chronic trust responders also accommodated more when their partners requested larger sacrifices, once again showing an “overcorrection” effect. These effects remained significant when the length and satisfaction of each relationship was statistically controlled. The majority of these effects also remained significant when we controlled for each participant’s self-esteem and attachment orientations.

Further analyses revealed that the connection between the responding partner’s level of chronic trust and pre- to postdiscussion changes in state trust reported by his or her asking partner was mediated by the amount of observer-rated accommodation displayed by the responding partner. In particular, responding partners who were more trusting displayed greater accommodation, which in turn predicted increases in the asking partner’s state trust. These mediation results identify one possible pathway through which the behavior of high trust responders are likely to generate increases in state trust in asking partners.

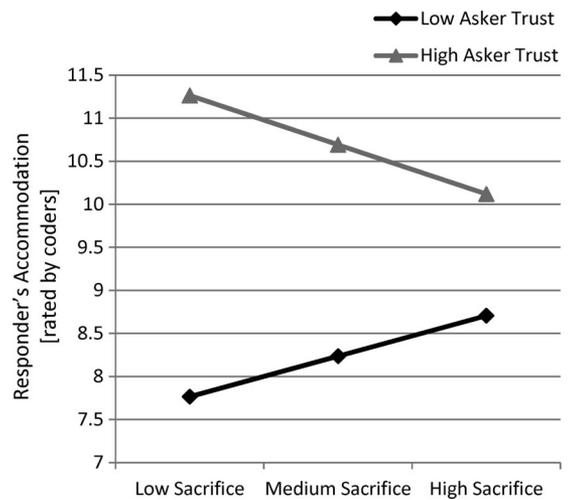


Figure 5. Interaction between asker chronic trust and level of sacrifice predicting responder accommodation (observer rated). Regression lines are plotted for individuals scoring one standard deviation above and below the sample means on asker chronic trust and level of sacrifice.

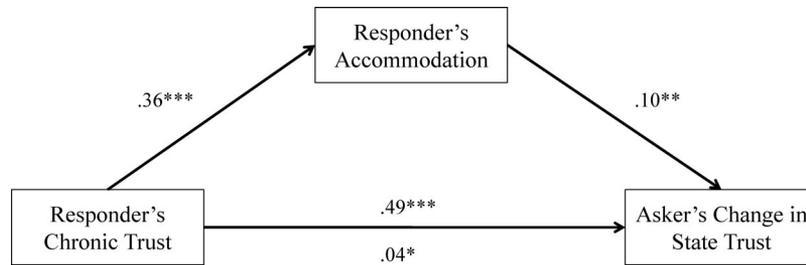


Figure 6. Mediation model of the association between responder chronic trust and asker change in state trust, mediated by observer rating of responder accommodation. The beta weights are standardized. \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

A few unanticipated findings also emerged. For instance, high-chronic trust askers received more accommodation from their responding partners, and high chronic trust responders had more collaborative asking partners. These two partner effects make sense because more trusting individuals should elicit greater cooperation and accommodation when they make major requests of their partners, and they should also make their partners feel more open and receptive to feedback when responding to major partner requests (Simpson, 2007a). High chronic trust responders were also overestimated by their asking partners in the amount of accommodation they were perceived to deliver in their strain-test discussions. One explanation for this finding may be that the

partners of high trust responders were more confident that they (high trust responders) would eventually come through with the promises or agreements they made during their strain-test discussions. Although these partner effects were not anticipated a priori, they complement our other hypothesized findings and fit well with a dyadic view of how relationship partners negotiate strain-test situations. These partner effects indicate that behavioral, cognitive, and emotional responses during strain-test interactions need to be viewed as dyadic phenomena; one cannot understand or explain how each relationship partner is likely to react in strain tests without knowledge of *who* each partner is and *how* she or he is behaving.

Table 5  
Summary of Hypotheses and Results

Hypothesis	Result
H1: High chronic trust responders should display more accommodation (observer rated and partner reported) during strain-test discussions than low trust responders.	Higher responder chronic trust predicted greater observer-rated accommodation.
H2: High chronic trust askers should display greater collaboration with their responding partners during strain-test discussions than low trust askers.	Higher asker chronic trust predicted greater observer-rated collaboration.
H3: High chronic trust askers should overestimate the amount of accommodation their responding partners display during strain-test discussions than low trust askers.	Both higher asker and higher responder chronic trust predicted overestimation of accommodation by responders.
H4: When in "high-risk" situations (i.e., when the responding partner is lower in chronic trust or behaves in a less accommodating way), high chronic trust askers should report larger pre- to postdiscussion increases in state trust than low trust askers.	Two two-way interactions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Asker Chronic Trust <math>\times</math> Responder Accommodation predicted pre- to postdiscussion changes in state trust. High chronic trust askers reported increases in state trust, regardless of the level of accommodation from their responding partners. Low chronic trust asker's state trust changed, depending on the amount of accommodation they received from responding partners.</li> <li>● Low chronic trust askers reported decreases in state trust when they were less collaborative, but increases when they were more collaborative. High chronic trust askers experienced increases in state trust at all levels of collaboration, with the largest increases occurring when high trust askers were <i>least</i> collaborative.</li> </ul>
H5: The level of sacrifice requested should moderate the effects of chronic trust, such that greater sacrifice prompts low trust responders to be less accommodating, whereas it prompts high trust responders to be <i>more</i> accommodating.	Low chronic trust responders accommodated less when they were asked to make larger sacrifices, whereas high chronic trust responders accommodated <i>more</i> .
H6: The relation between responder's chronic trust and asker's postdiscussion changes in state trust should be mediated by responder's level of accommodation.	Responder's accommodation mediated the link between responder's chronic trust and asker's postdiscussion changes in state trust.

Note. H1–H6 = Hypothesis 1–Hypothesis 6.

## The Present Findings in the Context of Theory and Research on Trust

Our results are consistent with and extend prior theory and research on how individual differences in chronic trust affect romantic relationships. Individuals who score higher in chronic trust tend to have positive, well-integrated, and balanced working models of themselves and their romantic partners (Rempel et al., 2001; Simpson, 2007a). These positive models allow high trust individuals to develop and maintain benevolent, optimistic expectations of their partners and relationships, especially in relationship-threatening contexts such as strain tests. The positive nature of their models permits high trust individuals to take “leaps of faith” and to adopt longer term, more relationship-centered views of their partners and relationships (Kelley, 1983). This relationship-centered focus facilitates high trust partners’ abilities to disregard self-protective motives, allowing them to engage in greater accommodation and collaboration in strain-test discussions.

Evidence of this longer term, relationship-centered orientation is apparent in the interaction findings reported in Figure 2. Unlike low trust askers, changes in state trust among high trust askers were not as strongly tied to the amount of accommodation that their responding partners actually gave them in the strain-test discussions. High trust askers, in other words, did not base their changes in state trust on merely what was happening during their discussions. Rather, they seemed more focused on achieving their longer term partner and relationship goals. In uncertain, risky situations such as strain tests, high trust individuals maintain faith in their partner’s willingness to forgo their own self-interest, whereas low trust individuals view this issue as an “open question” and seek additional evidence of actual accommodation before they can bolster their fragile faith in their partners (Holmes & Rempel, 1989; Simpson, 2007a).

The story for those low in chronic trust is quite different. Most low chronic trust individuals involved in long-term relationships actually fit the profile of “medium-trust” people because they score near the middle of trust scales (see Simpson, 2007a). This was true of our sample. Lower chronic trust (i.e., medium trust) romantic partners tend to harbor cautious views of their partners and relationships, especially their partner’s underlying relationship goals, motives, and intentions (Holmes & Rempel, 1989). Such nagging uncertainties often elicit distress-maintaining attributions in which the implications of even slightly negative, negligent, or ambiguous partner behaviors, such as less-than-expected levels of partner collaboration or accommodation, are perceived as harbingers of relationship downturns. Indeed, in two daily diary studies, Campbell, Simpson, Boldry, and Harris (2010) found that individuals who trusted their romantic partners less reported greater variability in perceptions of daily relationship quality over 2–3 weeks and perceived daily relationship conflicts as more negative and damaging. Greater variability in daily relationship perceptions also predicted higher levels of self-reported distress, more observer-rated negative behavior, and less positive behavior during a postdiary videotaped conflict resolution discussion task. These cognitive and behavioral tendencies are likely to be exacerbated by the shorter term, less relationship-centered orientation that most low trust people adopt toward their partners and relationships (Holmes, 1981).

The adoption of a short-term, “myopic” focus is also likely to breed less optimistic and less benevolent perceptions and behaviors with reference to both the partner and the relationship (Kelley, 1983), especially in risky strain-test situations. Signs of this orientation were not only evident in how low trust askers and responders behaved during their strain-test discussions; they were also apparent in the state trust interaction findings depicted in Figure 2. Contrary to high trust askers, lower trust askers’ changes in state trust were more aligned with how much accommodation they received during their strain-test discussions. If low trust askers received more accommodation, they reported increases in state trust in a tit-for-tat manner; if they received less accommodation, they reported declines in state trust.<sup>4</sup> Low trust askers, therefore, appeared to be operating from a self-protective stance, calibrating their level of state trust to what happened in their interactions and perhaps gauging the status of their relationship on this event.

Findings from past trust-relationship research both support and are consistent with these conjectures. For example, high chronic trust individuals do report harboring more optimistic and benevolent expectations of their partner’s relationship motives, they make more positive attributions for their partner’s questionable behaviors, and they have better integrated and well-balanced working models of their partners and relationships that remain open to assimilating new partner and relationship information (Rempel et al., 2001). High trust individuals also ignore or discount their partner’s minor relationship transgressions, which decreases their negative affect when their partners misbehave (Holmes & Rempel, 1989), and they view their partners more positively, especially when they remember *negative* relationship experiences (Holmes & Rempel, 1989). Individuals who score higher in trust on implicit trust measures are less likely to report distancing themselves from their partners when doubts about their partner’s trustworthiness are induced (Murray et al., 2011). And when high trust individuals think about relationship threats, they often take into account their partner’s needs, desires, goals, and motives within the broader context of the important, long-term relationship goals of both partners (see Holmes, 1991).

The present study extends our knowledge and understanding of how chronic trust impacts relationships by documenting *in actual strain-test interactions* that high chronic trust askers behave in a more collaborative fashion to accommodation attempts from their partners, “overperceive” their partner’s level of accommodation (relative to trained observers), and experience increases in state trust, especially when their partners behave in a less accommodating way or are lower in chronic trust. Moreover, high trust responders behave in a more accommodating manner, particularly when larger sacrifices are being asked of them. All of these findings are consistent with the overarching premise that high-chronic trust people adopt a longer term, more relationship-centered view of their partners and relationships and modulate

<sup>4</sup> Alternatively, low chronic trust askers might enter a self-protective mindset when they ask their partners to make a major sacrifice. If their partners are highly accommodating, this could remind low trust askers of their dependence on their partners, leading them to increase their state trust judgments (see Murray & Holmes, 2009). We could not test this alternative model in the present study.

their behavior in strain-test interactions to facilitate their connection goals.

Individuals lower in chronic trust have more negative and less coherent working models of themselves, their partners, and their relationships in which personal and relationship hopes and fears are often intermingled in paradoxical and contradictory ways (see Simpson, 2007a). When low trust individuals recall positive relationship events, they often report perceiving their partner's actions somewhat positively, yet also make cynical attributions for the "true" motives governing their partner's actions (Holmes & Rempel, 1986; Rempel et al., 2001). Because of this tendency, even relatively positive partner behaviors can trigger worries about what might eventually "go wrong" in the minds of low trust persons, a process that can block or derail the development of trust (Simpson, 2007a). Consequently, when low trust individuals encounter relationship-threatening events such as strain-test discussions, they should have a more myopic, less relationship-centered perspective (Holmes, 1991; Kelley, 1983). Consistent with past theory and research on trust, we found that low chronic trust askers were less collaborative with the accommodation attempts of their responding partners, they did not "overperceive" their partners' level of accommodation, and they did not experience increases in state trust when their partners were less accommodating or lower in chronic trust. Furthermore, low trust responders behaved in a less accommodating manner, particularly when their partners requested larger sacrifices. All of these findings are consistent with the adoption of a myopic, less relationship-centered viewpoint and the pursuit of self-protection goals.

Besides supporting predictions from Simpson's (2007a, 2007b) dyadic model of trust in relationships as well as Murray and Holmes' (2009) mutual responsiveness model, the present findings also confirm that changes in state trust are jointly determined by features of strain tests (the amount of sacrifice requested by askers), the self (one's chronic trust level), and the partner (the partner's chronic trust level). The interaction between asker's chronic trust, responder's chronic trust, and responder's observed accommodation illustrates this point. High chronic trust askers calibrated their postdiscussion level of state trust based not only on their own level of chronic trust and the amount of accommodation they received from their partners but also on their partner's level of chronic trust. This broadly calibrated response pattern could increase relationship stability over time as couples confront and negotiate additional noncorrespondent issues. Low-chronic trust individuals, in contrast, displayed a very different state trust response pattern. Their changes in state trust were contingent primarily on the amount of accommodation they actually received from their partners during the strain-test discussion *per se*. This "accommodation focused" response pattern could destabilize the relationships of low chronic trust people, especially if their perceptions of state trust fluctuate as they encounter different noncorrespondent issues with their partners across time.

It is conceivable that high chronic trust responders and askers are more flexible and creative when trying to resolve strain-test dilemmas. The dual pathway to creativity model (De Dreu, Baas, & Nijstad, 2008) could account for some of our effects. According to this model, if individuals frame a difficult or challenging event (i.e., being asked to make a major sacrifice) in a positive manner, they exhibit greater cognitive flexibility and more creative and original solutions to pressing problems. Conversely, if individuals

frame difficult or challenging events in more negative or threatening ways, they show less cognitive flexibility, greater perseverance, and less inventive solutions to problems. This "dual pathway" model might partially explain why high chronic trust askers and responders had relatively better strain-test discussions; their more positive construal and approach allowed them to think and problem solve more flexibly and more creatively, which may have produced better "partner-integrated" solutions to their strain-test dilemmas.

## Limitations and Conclusions

Although this study makes several novel and important contributions to the trust literature, it has some limitations. First, our sample of couples had been together for 3–15 years. Thus, we do not know whether the effects documented in this study necessarily generalize to romantic relationships that are newer (under 3 years) or more long term (over 15 years). Second, because we examined predominately White, middle-class, heterosexual couples, we do not know whether our findings would generalize to more diverse populations. Third, the present study is correlational in nature, so causal conclusions cannot be made. Fourth, although our effects remained robust after controlling for relationship length and satisfaction, the anchors (endpoints) on the Chronic Trust scale might be interpreted somewhat differently by people who are high versus low in relationship satisfaction. Fifth, we asked all couples to discuss strain-test issues, meaning that we did not (and could not) examine the earliest stage of Simpson's (2007a, 2007b) dyadic model of trust in relationships, which involves decisions about whether strain-test situations should even be entered. Some couples may routinely avoid discussing—or may never discuss—certain strain-test issues in their relationships. Future research should track the natural occurrence and outcomes of strain-test discussions in couples' daily interactions over time using daily diary or experience-sampling methods.

To conclude, chronic trust is powerfully related to how relationship partners think, feel, and behave in strain-test interactions, both when requesting sacrifices of their partners and when responding to sacrifice requests from their partners. One can neither fully predict nor fully understand relationship partners' degree of accommodation, their level of collaboration, their perceptions of their partners' level of accommodation, or their changes in state trust without knowing the chronic trust of each relationship partner. For individuals who are higher in chronic trust, strain-test situations provide a unique opportunity to accommodate their partners, collaborate with their requests, and experience increases in state levels of trust, even when their partners are not overly accommodating. For those who are lower in chronic trust, however, strain-test situations present real challenges—and perhaps impediments—to their relationships.

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