

RUINING IT FOR BOTH OF US: THE DISRUPTIVE ROLE OF LOW-TRUST PARTNERS ON CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

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Employing a behavioral observation paradigm, we tested whether high-trust partners buffered the reactions of low-trust partners during a conflict discussion to create more positive post-conflict outcomes, or whether low-trust partners pulled down high-trust partners to create more negative post-conflict outcomes. Ninety-five married couples discussed a conflict and reported felt closeness to their partners both pre- and post-discussion. As hypothesized, low-trust partners were more influential than high-trust partners. When at least one relationship partner was low in trust, both partners felt less close following the conflict discussions. Partners felt increased closeness following conflict only when both partners scored high in trust. Observer-rated behaviors of forgiveness and contempt both mediated the link between dyadic trust and felt closeness. These findings extend our understanding of trust in romantic relationships by identifying some of the behavioral consequences of being high versus low in trust, and by illuminating the importance of viewing trust dyadically to achieve a fuller understanding of how romantic couples manage conflict.

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Individuals who trust their romantic partners more tend to view and approach their relationships in a more constructive, benevolent manner than low-trust individuals (Holmes & Rempel, 1989; Simpson, 2007a), and romantic relationships are more likely to thrive when both partners score higher on trust. In many relationships, however, partners differ in the degree to which they trust one another (Simpson, 2007b). For these relationships to function well, the high-trust partner must continue to view and approach the relationship in a positive and constructive manner, even if his or her low-trust partner does not, particularly during stressful or difficult situations. This type of dyadic focus—whether lower levels of trust by just one partner in a romantic relationship are enough to destabilize the relationship, or whether one high-trust partner can keep it happy and afloat—has seldom been addressed in the literature, either theoretically or empirically.

Consider a hypothetical couple—Lowell and Heidi. Lowell has relatively low trust in Heidi and their relationship, whereas Heidi has relatively high trust in Lowell and their relationship. During dinner one evening, Lowell mentions a relationship issue that he finds particularly unsatisfactory—that Heidi spends too much time with her friends instead of with him—which results in a conflict. Two predictions can be generated about how Lowell and Heidi's disparate levels of trust might impact their relationship in this conflict situation. A romantic at heart might anticipate that Heidi's high trust will buffer Lowell's low trust, resulting in a reasonably good, constructive discussion with generally positive conflict resolution outcomes. Because high-trust individuals typically approach their relationships with a more positive, constructive orientation, Heidi's high trust may steer the conversation in a more positive direction, leading Lowell to feel good about Heidi and their relationship together. A cynic, in contrast, might anticipate that Lowell's low trust will overwhelm Heidi's good, constructive intentions, resulting in a poorer discussion with more negative outcomes. Because low-trust individuals approach their relationships in a more negative, defensive way, Lowell's low level of trust could make the discussion less constructive and more dysfunctional, with Lowell eventually becoming so negative that resolution becomes impossible.

In the current behavioral observation study, we test a series of hypotheses, informed by prior theory and research on trust, to determine whether high-trust romantic partners or low-trust romantic partners who are trying to resolve a relationship-based problem have greater impact on a critical relationship outcome—changes in perceptions of closeness to the partner pre-to-post-conflict. Specifically, we examine whether discrepant levels of trust between romantic partners are systematically associated with certain thoughts, perceptions, and behaviors in each partner during videotaped conflict resolution discussions, given that the consequences of trust should be especially evident in conflict situations (Kelley et al., 2003).

THE NATURE AND CENTRALITY OF TRUST

Trust is a multi-component construct that various researchers have defined somewhat differently (see, for example, Bacharach & Gambetta, 2001; Hardin, 2003;

Kramer & Carnevale, 2001; Rempel, Holmes, & Zanna, 1985; Rotter, 1971). Morton Deutsch (1973) offered one of the most succinct and evocative definitions of trust, claiming that trust is the “confidence that [one] will find what is desired [from another] rather than what is feared” (p. 148).

Some basic amount of trust is essential for romantic relationships to form, develop, and remain stable (Simpson, 2007a). Because romantic partners typically serve as the primary source of emotional comfort and support for most adults (Fraley & Davis, 1997; Hazan & Shaver, 1987), relationships become unstable and less satisfying when one or both partners are not confident that sufficient care and support will be provided when it is needed. As romantic relationships develop, most couples face myriad situations in which individuals need to believe that their partners harbor good intentions with regard to them and their relationship. These situations can be major in scope (such as when one partner wants a child without knowing whether his/her partner feels the same way) or minor in scope (such as when one partner gets a new haircut without knowing whether his/her partner will like it). Entering these situations—particularly the major ones—requires a leap of faith that exposing oneself to vulnerability will most likely result in “finding what is desired” (e.g., the partner enthusiastically agrees about wanting a child) rather than “finding what is feared” (e.g., the partner refuses to consider having a child). Trust, therefore, is a central component of nearly all good, well-functioning relationships because it allows individuals to pursue their loftiest hopes without being impeded by their deepest anxieties (Simpson, 2007a, 2007b).

Individuals who trust their partners more—who have greater confidence that their partners will behave for their own good and/or for the good of the relationship—typically approach relationship difficulties in a more constructive, positive, and benevolent fashion (Holmes & Rempel, 1989). High-trust individuals, for instance, tend to make benevolent attributions about their partners even in questionable circumstances (Rempel, Ross, & Holmes, 2001), display more positive affect and less negative affect when resolving relationship conflicts (Holmes & Rempel, 1986), and minimize the impact of potentially negative relationship events by adopting a long-term, “big-picture” view of their partner’s goals, intentions, and actions (Holmes & Rempel, 1989; Rempel et al., 2001). Low-trust individuals, on the other hand, are less inclined to display these relationship-promoting tactics. Instead, they hold pessimistic views of their partners and often engage in tactics that ultimately harm or destabilize their relationships (Holmes & Rempel, 1989). For example, low-trust individuals tend to believe that their romantic partners are concealing negative events from them, which results in low-trust individuals actually concealing negative events from their partners, thereby sustaining a climate of mistrust (Uysal, Lin, & Bush, 2012). These tendencies have negative effects on relationship outcomes, as evidenced by the fact that low-trust individuals tend to report lower commitment to their partners, worse relationship quality, and more unstable evaluations of relationship quality over time (Campbell, Simpson, Boldry, & Rubin, 2010; Wieselquist, 2009; Wieselquist, Rusbult, Foster, & Agnew, 1999).

A DYADIC VIEW OF TRUST

In general, high-trust individuals typically have relationships that are happy and function well, whereas low-trust individuals tend to have less satisfactory relationships that function more poorly. The impact of trust becomes murkier, however, when high-trust and low-trust individuals are considered as a dyad, especially in stressful situations.

Historically, many relationship researchers have relied fairly heavily on individual-centered paradigms and models, despite the fact that relationships are inherently dyadic in nature (Kashy & Kenny, 2000; Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). Valuable insights can (and have) been gained by using individual-centered paradigms, but individual-centered paradigms and models do not (and cannot) capture the dynamics of the full relationship. This may be especially true of research on trust.

The Dyadic Model of Trust (Simpson, 2007a, 2007b; see Figure 1) acknowledges the joint influence of each partner's level of trust on important relationship outcomes, some of which are shown on the right side of the Figure. When relationship partners enter relationship-diagnostic situations (e.g., when trying to resolve an important conflict), both partners' trust-relevant dispositions and behaviors can affect each of the stages depicted in the model. High-trust individuals, for example, should typically be more willing to enter these "trust/test situations"; they should more readily transform their motivation from a purely self-focus to a partner-focus and/or relationship-focus; they should generate more positive and benevolent attributions, emotions, and expectancies regarding the partner, the relationship, or the discussion at hand; and thus experience increased levels of state trust and felt security (i.e., feel closer to the partner following the discussion). Low-trust individuals, in contrast, should typically have the opposite set of perceptions and reactions. According to the model, both partners' perceptions of trust should also influence the way partners behave, especially in situations where higher levels of trust are needed to achieve positive, mutually beneficial goals and outcomes. Even if one partner fully trusts the other, the other partner's lack of trust can theoretically derail positive outcomes at any stage of the model.

For example, even if Heidi trusts Lowell completely, the potential benefits of her high trust may be rendered moot if Lowell's low level of trust leads him to thwart or block Heidi's efforts to steer the conflict in a more positive or constructive direction during their discussion. Within an individual framework that focuses only on Heidi (or the mean level of trust between the partners), we might be confused by the couple's less-than-satisfactory eventual conflict outcome. However, by considering both partners' levels of trust, we can more fully understand and appreciate the broader context that underlies their joint response to the conflict situation.

TRUST IN CONFLICT SITUATIONS

Conflict is a context in which the consequences of one partner being low in trust should be especially salient. From the perspective of interdependence theory, in-

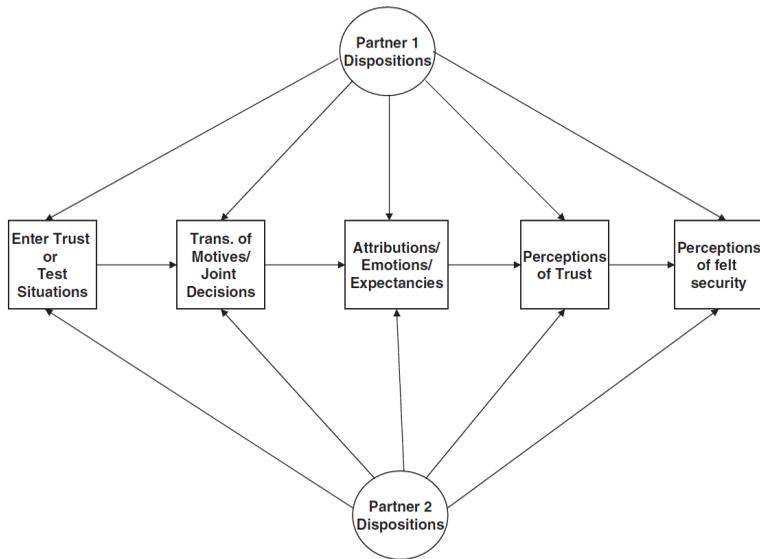


FIGURE 1. The Dyadic Model of Trust in Relationships (Simpson, 2007a, 2007b).

dividuals in romantic relationships will inevitably encounter situations in which their own best outcomes are at odds with those their partner would ideally prefer (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Rusbult, 1980; Rusbult, Arriaga, & Agnew, 2001; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). To ensure positive joint outcomes, particularly in conflict situations, partners must negotiate a solution that maximizes the well-being of the relationship as a whole instead of their own personal preferences (Holmes, 1981; Kelley, 1979). If one partner prioritizes individual-centered outcomes over partner-centered and/or relationship-centered outcomes, the partner could be conveying that s/he does not value his/her partner and/or the relationship (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003).

Because the best personal outcomes for each partner are often non-correspondent, poorly handled conflict can result in one or both partners feeling worse about the other and/or the relationship than they did before the conflict occurred (Braiker & Kelley, 1979). The occurrence of conflict, however, is not inherently bad or dysfunctional (McGonagle, Kessler, & Schilling, 1992; McNulty, 2010). Instead, the quality of a romantic relationship depends in part on the particular behaviors that each partner displays when engaged in conflict discussions. High-functioning couples, for example, usually navigate the volatility of conflict well, adopting more constructive behaviors that can at times improve the quality and functioning of the relationship (Rusbult, Zembrodt, & Gunn, 1982). Low-functioning couples, by comparison, are more susceptible to the volatility of conflict and often allow tensions to boil over into other relationship domains. As a result, their destructive behavior often harms their relationships (Gottman, 1994; Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998). To the extent that low-trust individuals approach their relationships in a less constructive fashion, the inherent volatility of conflict ought to

exacerbate the harmful cognitive and behavioral tendencies of low-trust partners, resulting in poor relationship outcomes.

Shallcross and Simpson (2012) examined the role of trust in one specific non-correspondent situation—strain tests. In strain tests, one partner (the asker) proposes a personal goal that s/he would like to pursue that will require a major sacrifice from the partner (the responder). The asker, for example, may want to take a new job in a new city, which would require the responding partner to give up his/her current job and move. Shallcross and Simpson (2012) found that high-trust responders were more collaborative and accommodating during these strain-test discussions. Furthermore, chronic levels of asker trust predicted changes in asker's state trust from pre-to-post discussion, such that low-trust askers reported increases in state trust only when their partners behaved positively during the discussions, whereas high-trust askers reported increases in state trust regardless of their partner's behavior. Thus, as long as one partner was high in trust, strain test discussions tended to have positive outcomes.

Strain tests are different than relationship conflicts in that each partner has a unique, specific role in strain tests: One partner is the asker, and the other is the responder. This situation is much more demanding for responders because, unlike askers, responders must undergo considerable transformation of motivation and potentially give up much more of their personal self-interest in order for the discussion to be constructive. During most relationship conflicts, however, both partners have relatively equal roles and are under the same pressure to promote their needs while simultaneously trying to be responsive to their partner's needs. Accordingly, if either one of the partners is low in trust, s/he should be in a good position to "drag down" the goals and constructive tone of the conflict discussion. Shallcross and Simpson (2012) did not test whether the asker's behavior affected discussions because askers' behavior is less relevant in strain tests. However, it is important to consider the influence of both partners in conflict discussions. Shallcross and Simpson (2012) also examined changes in only state trust as a relationship outcome (see Figure 1). The impact of conflict discussions on other important relationship outcomes remains unknown. Given that perceived closeness is a key component of the Dyadic Model of Trust (Simpson, 2007a, 2007b), the lack of research examining pre-to-post-discussion changes in perceptions of closeness is a significant gap in the literature.

Campbell and colleagues (2010) found evidence of this "dragging down" phenomenon in a daily-diary study. Specifically, low-trust romantic partners reported daily relationship conflicts to be more negative, serious, and hurtful, and they believed these conflicts would have more negative long-term consequences for their relationship. Although Campbell and colleagues (2010) found that low trust was associated with worse outcomes following daily conflicts, they did not address how low levels of trust generate these outcomes (i.e., the specific behaviors enacted by low-trust partners during actual conflict discussions). Thus, we do not know whether a conflict discussion between two partners who trust each other a great deal looks different than a discussion between partners in which at least one person scores low on trust. It also remains unclear how and why lower levels of

trust result in worse conflict discussion outcomes and, ultimately, poorer relationship outcomes.

By using a behavioral-observation paradigm in which we observed romantic partners as they engaged in conflict discussions, we could identify the specific proximate behaviors that mediate the link between partners' trust and pre-to-post conflict outcomes. The relationships literature has already shown how much influence one partner can wield in shaping the overall climate in couple interactions, with more constructive partners usually helping both dyad members behave more positively and constructively (e.g., Knee, Lonsbary, Canevello, & Patrick, 2005; Srivastava, McGonigal, Richards, Butler, & Gross, 2006), and with less constructive partners leading both members to act more negatively (e.g., Campbell, Simpson, Kashy, & Rholes, 2001; Papp & Witt, 2010). Although high-trust partners could encourage both relationship partners to behave more positively, we anticipated that low-trust partners would either thwart the enactment of positive conflict resolution behaviors and/or facilitate the enactment of negative conflict resolution behaviors. We made this prediction in part because past research has shown that negativity is more powerful than positivity in most interpersonal domains (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Fickener, & Vohs, 2001). Even though several behaviors might affect the success of conflict resolution, we focused on two—forgiveness and contempt—since theory and research indicate that these behaviors should be especially important in affecting post-conflict outcomes.

Forgiveness. Forgiveness is the intentional process through which victims of an offense become less motivated to think, act, and behave negatively toward the offender (Fincham, Hall, & Beach, 2006). Previous research has documented a positive connection between the enactment of forgiveness behaviors and better conflict resolution in relationships (Fincham, Beach, & Davila, 2004). Not only does the ability to forgive result in more short-term positive outcomes following conflict, but the display of forgiveness behaviors also predicts better long-term outcomes such as greater relationship satisfaction (Fincham, 2000), higher commitment (Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, & Hannon, 2002), and less probable relationship dissolution (Salvatore, Kuo, Steele, Simpson, & Collins, 2011).

We spotlight forgiveness because higher levels of trust are likely to be required for partners to engage in forgiveness acts. Forgiveness reflects a prioritization of partner-centered and/or relationship-centered motives over individual-centered motives because the offender is not necessarily entitled to being forgiven (Exline & Baumeister, 2000). Within a romantic relationship, an individual who displays forgiveness is willing to overlook the past offenses of his/her partner—despite not having to do so—to maintain relationship harmony. Higher levels of trust are necessary because there is always the possibility that the forgiven partner could exploit the current situation or take advantage of the forgiving partner's demonstrated generosity in the future (McNulty, 2010).

Conflict can be perceived by one partner as a specific "offense" that is being committed by the other partner, who is demanding an outcome that runs counter to what the offended partner desires. Low-trust partners may create a relationship climate in which forgiveness is less likely to occur during conflict by choosing to focus on perceived "offenses" rather than look past them and resolve the con-

flict mutually and successfully. Indeed, Molden and Finkel (2010) found that less interpersonal trust is associated with less forgiveness following perceived transgressions by romantic partners. Furthermore, Luchies and colleagues (2013) found that individuals low in trust are more likely to remember partner transgressions as more frequent, severe, and consequential than high-trust individuals, who remember partner transgressions in a more benign and forgiving manner. Neither of these studies, however, examined the dyadic influence of trust on forgiveness, nor did they assess the expression of forgiveness in observed conflict discussions.

Contempt. Failure to extend forgiveness when warranted is a passive and destructive conflict tactic, but conflict tactics can also be active and destructive (Rusbult, Zembrodt, & Gunn, 1982). Low levels of trust should not only make the enactment of passively destructive behaviors (such as failures to forgive) more likely; they should make actively destructive conflict behavior more likely as well. According to Gottman (1994), no conflict behavior is more destructive than displays of contempt.

Gottman (1994) identified key behaviors commonly witnessed during conflicts when relationships are low in quality and headed toward dissolution. He posited and documented that contempt is the single best predictor of eventual relationship dissolution. Contempt involves orienting to a partner from a position of superiority. More overt forms of contempt include exaggerated displays of disgust, such as rolling of the eyes or ad hominem insults. Contempt, however, is often displayed covertly, such as refusing to acknowledge the validity of a partner's views (e.g., "You're being irrational!" or "Stop being dumb!"). Through being contemptuous, one negates the partner's views and opinions by sending the message that those views and opinions do not matter, and that one's own viewpoints and opinions are much more important, communicating that individual-centered outcomes are being prioritized. These actions make it difficult for conflicts to be resolved in a constructive manner because the partner toward whom contempt is directed may correctly assume that his/her words are falling on deaf ears.

THE CURRENT STUDY AND HYPOTHESES

In this study, married partners came into the lab and first reported how much they trusted their partner and how close they felt to him/her. Each couple then chose a topic of disagreement in their relationship, after which they engaged in a 7-minute conflict discussion during which they tried to resolve the disagreement. Immediately after the discussion, each partner rated how close s/he felt to his/her partner to assess whether the conflict predicted pre-to-post discussion changes in how close each partner felt to the other. Trained observers then watched and rated the conflict discussions for the level of forgiveness and contempt displayed by each partner.

Guided by prior theory and research on trust (e.g., Simpson, 2007a, 2007b), we hypothesized that individuals who scored higher in trust would emerge from their conflict discussions feeling closer to their partners (Hypothesis 1; H1). We also hypothesized that individuals who had partners who scored higher in trust would report higher levels of felt closeness (Hypothesis 2; H2). We treated felt closeness

as our primary outcome variable because of its correspondence with the Dyadic Model of Trust (see Simpson 2007a, 2007b).

In addition, we hypothesized that there would be an interaction between actor trust and partner trust. Specifically, we predicted that if at least one partner in the relationship scored low in trust, they would steer the discussion in a more negative direction such that both partners would report reduced felt closeness following the discussion (Hypothesis 3; H3). In these couples, low-trust individuals should be less receptive to the conflict resolution behaviors that might be enacted by high-trust individuals, creating a less constructive climate that reduces felt closeness in both partners.

Finally, because forgiveness and contempt are strong predictors of post-conflict outcomes, we hypothesized that the predicted effects of different levels of trust between partners should be explained by the degree to which partners displayed forgiveness and/or contempt behaviors during the conflict discussions. Specifically, we hypothesized that the partner's level of both observer-rated forgiveness (Hypothesis 4; H4) and contempt (Hypothesis 5; H5) should mediate the relation between the actor-by-partner-trust interaction term and the actor's reported level of felt closeness following the conflict discussion.

METHODS

PARTICIPANTS

Prospective couples responded either to fliers posted around the community or to advertisements placed in a local newspaper. To participate, couples were required to have been married for at least one year. Interested couples contacted a research assistant by telephone and were scheduled for a laboratory session. Couples were paid \$50.00 for their participation. Our sample consisted of 95 married couples (minus one female partner in one couple, who did not want to release her data). The average age of the husbands and wives was 32.73 and 31.50 years, respectively. Seventy percent of the participants classified themselves as Caucasian, 22% as Hispanic, and 8% as African American. The average length of marriage was 69.47 months.

MEASURES AND PROCEDURES

Upon arriving at the lab, each couple was told about the purpose of the study and asked to provide informed consent. Each spouse then completed a pre-interaction questionnaire (privately in different rooms) to ensure that partners did not communicate. As part of this questionnaire, each partner completed the Trust Scale (Rempel et al., 1985) and the pre-interaction measure of perceived closeness (i.e., the Inclusion of Other in the Self Scale [IOS]; Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992). Both partners also completed the Hendrick Satisfaction Scale (Hendrick, 1988) to allow us to statistically control for satisfaction.

The Trust Scale is a 17-item measure that taps into the amount of trust in relationships (Rempel et al., 1985). Specifically, it assesses the degree to which individuals feel as if their partners are predictable (e.g., "My partner behaves in a very consistent manner"); believe their partners are dependable (e.g., "I can rely on my partner to keep the promises s/he makes to me"); and have faith that their partners will continue to act in a beneficent manner (e.g., "Though times may change and the future is uncertain, I know my partner will always be ready and willing to offer me strength and support"). The 17 items were keyed in the proper direction and aggregated ($\alpha = .90$), with higher scores indicating greater trust.

The IOS is a single-item measure that assesses the extent to which individuals feel psychologically close to their partners (Aron et al., 1992). The scale provides participants with seven pairs of overlapping circles, with each pair varying in the degree to which the circles overlap. Participants are asked to choose the pair of circles that best captures how close they feel to their romantic partner. The scale has good test-retest reliability and good convergent, discriminant, predictive, and construct validity (see Aron et al., 1992). The IOS is also a good measure of short-term changes in perceived closeness, reflecting the degree to which people feel content and emotionally interconnected with their partners/relationships at a given point in time (Simpson, Rholes, & Phillips, 1996). Higher scores on the IOS indicate feeling subjectively closer to one's partner.

Once both spouses finished the pre-interaction questionnaire, they were lead to the room where their conflict discussion took place. At this point, the experimenter read the following instructions:¹

"In all relationships, there are times when both partners don't necessarily agree or see eye-to-eye. Your spouse may have a habit, attitude, or behavior that you find troublesome. In this study, we are investigating how married couples discuss problems and disagreements in their relationship. To do this, we are going to videotape the two of you [with your consent] discussing a current, unresolved problem in your relationship. No one will be watching you during your interaction. Your videotape will be coded at a later point in time by trained raters. During the videotaping session, we will tape you for about 7–8 minutes while you talk about a major (or a minor) problem involving intimacy (or jealousy). Before you begin this discussion, we would like you both to identify some problems on these sheets."

1. To capture a wide range of conflicts that couples encounter in their daily lives, half the sample was randomly assigned to discuss a major relationship-based conflict, and half the sample was randomly assigned to discuss a more minor (but still contentious) relationship-based conflict. In addition, half the sample was randomly assigned to discuss a conflict pertaining to intimacy issues, and half the sample was randomly assigned to discuss a conflict pertaining to jealousy issues. We included these experimental manipulations as covariates in the analyses. The main effects of both severity and topic were not significant when entered as covariates. Moreover, there were no significant interactions between the experimental manipulations and either actor trust or partner trust.

Each spouse then independently listed up to four topic-relevant problems. When both spouses finished creating their lists, each spouse examined his or her partner's list, and each couple then agreed on which specific issue to discuss. The couple was left alone to discuss the issue, and their discussion was videotaped using a split-screen camera system. Each couple was asked to state the problem they had agreed to discuss at the start of their interaction so it would be clear to the raters (who would later code the videotapes) what the primary issue was. At the 7-minute mark, each couple was notified via intercom that they needed to conclude their discussion.

After the experiment ended, participants completed a brief battery of post-interaction measures that once again included the IOS. Because participants completed the IOS immediately before and immediately after their conflict discussion, this allowed us to assess changes in closeness scores attributable to the discussion. Specifically, to operationalize change in closeness, we regressed post-interaction IOS scores onto pre-interaction IOS scores for each participant and saved the unstandardized residuals.

BEHAVIORAL CODING

Each discussion was then coded for the extent to which each partner displayed forgiveness and contempt behaviors toward his/her partner while discussing the conflict. Five trained raters independently rated (on 1 to 7 scales) the extent to which: (1) each partner "acted in a forgiving manner" toward his/her partner, and (2) each partner "negated [his/her partner's] views," which is a primary component of contempt. Coders were given clear and detailed definitions of each construct as part of their extensive training. Inter-rater reliabilities for both ratings were above .70.

RESULTS

DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

We first calculated descriptive statistics for the independent and dependent variables, which are presented in Table 1. Means are reported using the original metric of each scale, with trust scores potentially ranging from 17 to 119. At the mean level, participants showed little (although negative) pre-to-post conflict change on the IOS, but there was noticeable variability in IOS residual scores.² Participants generally reported relatively high mean levels of trust, and they displayed average levels of forgiveness and relatively low levels of contempt.

2. The accepted method of creating residual scores necessitates that the mean is 0. However, we also created a raw difference-score variable by subtracting pre-discussion closeness from post-discussion closeness. The mean for that variable was -0.10, indicating small reductions in closeness at the aggregate level.

TABLE 1. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
(1) Actor IOS Residual Score	—	.20**	.20**	.22**	.33**	-.17*	-.29**	.00
(2) Actor Trust		—	.44**	.31**	.30**	-.26**	-.37**	-.01
(3) Partner Trust			—	.30**	.31**	-.36**	-.26**	.01
(4) Actor Forgiveness				—	.64**	-.58**	-.35**	-.11
(5) Partner Forgiveness					—	-.35**	-.58**	.11
(6) Actor Contempt						—	.50**	.16*
(7) Partner Contempt							—	-.17*
(8) Actor Sex								—
Mean	.00	95.88	95.88	3.60	3.60	2.53	2.53	—
SD	1.04	17.31	17.31	.66	.66	.70	.70	—
Range (min)	-3.90	30.0	30.0	1.20	1.20	1.60	1.60	—
Range (max)	3.07	119.0	119.0	5.60	5.60	5.00	5.00	—

Note. For actor sex, -1 = male and 1 = female. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

The zero-order correlations between the variables are also reported in Table 1. There were significant correlations between each of the predictor variables and changes in closeness from before to after the conflict (all in the predicted directions), offering preliminary evidence that trust is related to the predicted conflict outcomes as anticipated. Moreover, forgiveness ratings and contempt ratings were significantly correlated with both trust and changes in closeness, suggesting that forgiveness and contempt were both viable as mediating variables. We also calculated correlations with gender. Males were more likely than females to display contempt during their conflict discussions.

We next looked for evidence of dyadic interdependence in the responses of the relationship partners. As expected, there were significant between-partner correlations for trust scores, forgiveness scores, and contempt scores, as well as correlations between these predictors and actor IOS residual scores (see Table 1). Thus, there was evidence of statistical interdependence within couples.

APIM ANALYSES

Due to the dyadic interdependence in the data, we used the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM; Kashy & Kenny, 2000) to analyze the data. The APIM allows one to estimate the degree to which dyad members' responses or behaviors are associated with factors attributable to the actor (the individual providing the response/behavior) and to the actor's partner. The APIM, therefore, estimates both actor effects (the effect that an individual's predictor-variable score has on

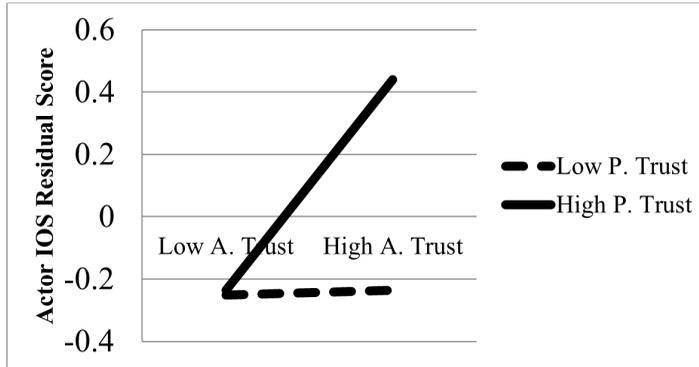


FIGURE 2. The interaction of actor trust and partner trust predicting changes in actors' pre-to-post IOS conflict discussion scores. Values are plotted for individuals scoring one standard deviation below and above the mean for each predictor variable. The value of 0 on the x-axis represents no pre-to-post discussion changes in IOS scores.

his/her own outcome score) and partner effects (the effect that an individual's partner's predictor-variable score has on the actor's outcome score). Because the APIM approach models the statistical interdependence that naturally exists between relationship partners, it provides separate and statistically independent tests of actor and partner paths. Specifically, the effects of the actor's independent-variable score on the actor's dependent measure control for the partner's independent-variable score, and vice versa. Using this approach, the dyad is treated as the unit of analysis, and actor and partner effects are tested with the proper degrees of freedom. This approach also allows for the proper testing of interactions between actor and partner effects.

We tested the effects of actor and partner trust on actor IOS residual scores by including them as predictor variables in APIM Mixed Modeling analyses. Furthermore, we investigated the dyadic influence of actor trust and partner trust on actor IOS residual scores by multiplying actor-trust and partner-trust scores and including this interaction term in the APIM mixed regression models. We also included the covariate of sex, as recommended for APIM analyses treating couples as distinguishable dyads (see Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). Finally, we included the covariates of condition topic (intimacy vs. jealousy) and condition severity (minor vs. major) to control for any influence these experimental manipulations might have had on our findings. Trust scores were treated as mixed variables, and the covariates were treated as between-dyads variables. All predictor variables were effect coded (-1 vs. 1) or standardized (Aiken & West, 1991). Analyses were run in SPSS v18.

MAIN AND INTERACTION EFFECTS

When we entered the predictor variables of actor trust, partner trust, the interaction of actor trust and partner trust, and the covariates of condition topic, condition severity, and actor sex into the APIM regression model, we found support for

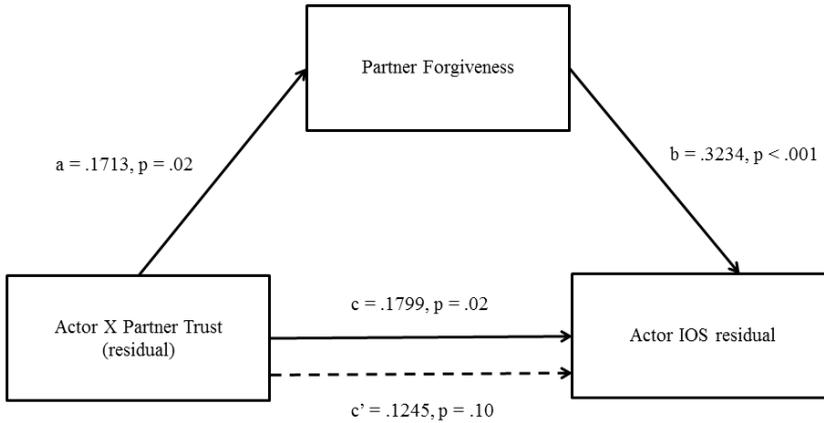


FIGURE 3. Mediation model showing direct and indirect effects of actor by partner trust on actors' IOS pre-to-post conflict discussion change scores, with partner forgiveness as the mediator. The reported values are unstandardized coefficients from linear regressions.

the main effects of actor trust (H1) and partner trust (H2) on actor IOS residual scores. Specifically, actor IOS residual scores were significantly predicted by both actor trust, $b = .171, t(172.76) = 2.14, p = .03, \omega^2 = .02$, and partner trust, $b = .179, t(158.55) = 2.31, p = .02, \omega^2 = .02$. The beta weights indicate that each standard deviation increase in actor trust or partner trust resulted in an increase of .171 and .179 units, respectively, in actor IOS residual scores from before to after the conflict discussion. This change may appear to be small, but our dependent measure was the residual scores representing pre-to-post discussion changes in IOS, which typically are small in size.³

The interaction term was marginally significant in predicting actor changes in IOS, $b = .165, t(87.84) = 1.90, p = .06, \omega^2 = .03$, consistent with the hypothesis that actor trust and partner trust should interact to influence changes in actor's IOS scores (H3). This effect, however, was driven by couples in which both partners scored high in trust (see Figure 2). When at least one partner scored low in trust, actor's IOS residual scores were negative. But when both partners scored high in trust, actor's IOS residual scores were positive, indicating something unique about the nature of the discussions between two high-trust partners (versus those involving at least one low-trust partner), which resulted in increased felt closeness.⁴

In addition, we wanted to ensure that the interaction between actor trust and partner trust was distinctive, and that it was not driven by overall marital satisfaction (which was assessed by the Hendrick Satisfaction Scale). Including satisfaction in the model did not change the significance of the actor-by-partner trust interaction. Satisfaction, therefore, is not considered further in the analyses reported below.

3. Condition topic ($p = .16$), condition severity ($p = .46$), and sex ($p = .96$) did not predict significant changes in actor's IOS scores.

4. Although we accounted for the potential confound of dyadic trust on initial levels of closeness by creating residual scores, we also ran the base model with actor's pre-discussion IOS scores as the outcome. This interaction was not significant ($p = .49$).

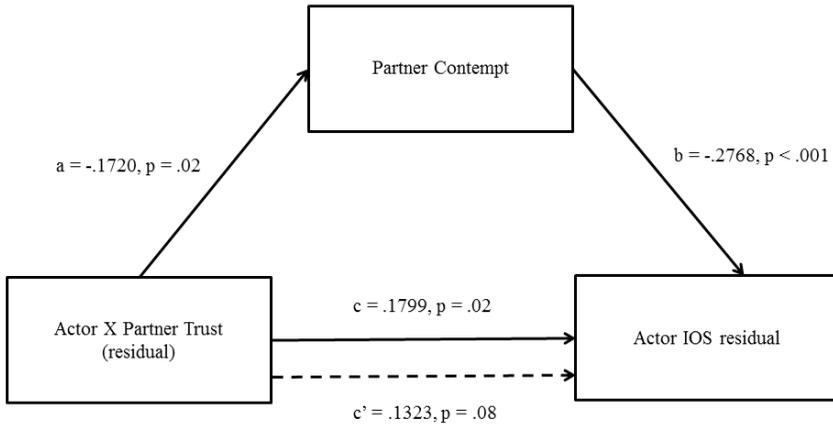


FIGURE 4. Mediation model showing direct and indirect effects of actor by partner trust on actors' IOS pre-to-post conflict discussion change scores, with partner contempt as the mediator. The reported values are unstandardized coefficients from linear regressions.

Most importantly, simple-slope analyses indicated that high-trust actors reported significantly larger increases in IOS when they had high-trust partners than when they had low-trust partners, $b = .34$, $t(87.84) = 2.58$, $p = .01$. No other simple slopes were significant, including the difference between low-trust actors involved with low-trust partners versus low-trust actors involved with high-trust partners.

MEDIATION EFFECTS

We also hypothesized that the discussions of couples in which at least one partner scored low in trust would be those in which individuals faced less forgiveness (H4) and more contempt (H5) from their partners. To test for these mediated moderation effects, we used the bootstrapping procedure recommended by Preacher and Hayes (2004, 2008). This procedure involves estimating the strength of the indirect effect (i.e., the ab path) by comparing it to a sampling distribution created through repeated resampling of the data set. Whereas Sobel's (1982) test assumes that this sampling distribution is normal, the bootstrapping procedure is robust to non-normality, resulting in less biased confidence intervals (MacKinnon, Lockwood, & Williams, 2004). In our analyses, we used 5,000 bootstrap resamples and 95% confidence intervals.

For both mediators, the indirect effect was significant and the direct effect was reduced to nonsignificance. As shown in Figure 3, the indirect effect of the actor-trust-by-partner-trust interaction on changes in actor's IOS via partner's amount of displayed forgiveness was significant: $ab = .0546$, $SE = .0310$, 95% CI [.0142, .1509]; the direct effect was $b = .1245$, $SE = .0747$, $t(187) = 1.67$, $p = .10$. As shown in Figure 4, the indirect effect through the amount of contempt exhibited by partners was also significant: $ab = .0472$, $SE = .0297$, 95% CI [.0084, .1357]; the direct effect was $b = .1323$, $SE = .0758$, $t(187) = 1.75$, $p = .08$. Thus, in separate mediation models, both the amount of forgiveness and the amount of contempt displayed by the

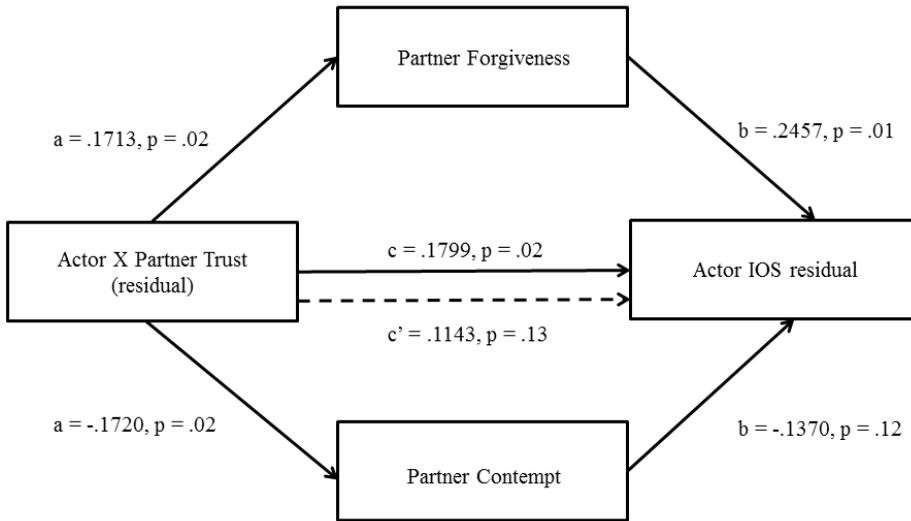


FIGURE 5. Combined mediation model showing direct and indirect effects of actor by partner trust on actors' IOS pre-to-post conflict discussion change scores, with both partner forgiveness and partner contempt as the mediators. The reported values are unstandardized coefficients from linear regressions.

partner partially mediated the link between the actor-by-partner-trust interaction term and pre-to-post conflict discussion changes in actor's IOS scores.⁵

Finally, we tested whether the two mediators had separate influences when examined simultaneously as mediators. As shown in Figure 5, this indirect effect was also significant: $ab = .0647$, $SE = .0344$, 95% CI [.0176, .1651]; the direct effect was $b = .1143$, $SE = .0747$, $t(187) = 1.53$, $p = .13$.

With regard to forgiveness, the actor-by-partner-trust interaction was positively related to partner's forgiveness behavior, such that couples in which both members scored higher in trust showed more forgiveness behaviors. Forgiveness behaviors were, in turn, positively related to actor's IOS residual scores, with more forgiveness by one partner resulting in increased perceived closeness in the other partner. Thus, high-trust dyads displayed more forgiveness behaviors and experienced increases in closeness.

With regard to contempt, the interaction between actor trust and partner trust was negatively related to the partner's contempt behavior, such that couples in which both members scored higher in trust displayed fewer contempt behaviors. Contempt behaviors were negatively related to actor's IOS residual scores, indicating that more contempt by one partner led to decreases in perceived closeness in the other partner. High-trust dyads, in other words, exhibited less contempt behaviors and experienced increases in closeness.

5. We utilized the APIM mixed-model approach to create residual scores for the actor-by-partner-trust interaction term (i.e., by partialing out the rest of the base model), thereby accounting for the dyadic nature of the data in our mediation models.

DISCUSSION

The Dyadic Model of Trust (Simpson, 2007a, 2007b) suggests that trust in relationships should be studied dyadically. Although pockets of empirical work have begun to consider trust from a dyadic perspective (e.g., Campbell et al., 2010; Shallcross & Simpson, 2012), prior research has not examined whether or how one partner's level of trust interacts with the other partner's level of trust to forecast important relationship outcomes. The current behavioral observation study fills this gap by not only examining how relationship partners' levels of trust interact to predict relationship outcomes following conflict discussions, but also by identifying the specific behaviors that high- and low-trust partners display during conflict discussions that may contribute to these outcomes.

Most of our hypotheses were supported. Each partner's level of trust predicted changes in his/her felt closeness from before to immediately after the conflict discussion. However, as also predicted, both partners' levels of trust had to be considered to fully comprehend changes in closeness during conflict. Specifically, a marginally significant interaction between actor trust and partner trust indicated that both partners had to score relatively high in trust for partners to experience increases in closeness at the end of their conflict discussions. If just one partner was low in trust, the conflict discussion resulted in more negative outcomes, with both partners feeling less close. Moreover, having just one low-trust partner led to an equally bad outcome as when both partners scored low on trust. High-trust partners, in other words, were unable to "compensate" for their low-trust partners' actions during the conflict discussions.

We also found that just one low-trust partner can generate negative outcomes by displaying certain kinds of behaviors that ultimately harm most relationships. Within dyads that had at least one low-trust partner, these low-trust partners led actors to feel less close following conflict because they (low-trust partners) were less likely to display forgiveness and more likely to exhibit contempt during their conflict discussions. These mediation results document two separate, theoretically anticipated behavioral pathways through which low-trust partners can exert negative influence on their relationships. Importantly, both partner contempt and partner forgiveness had unique effects, even when they were examined as mediators simultaneously.

THE FINDINGS IN BROADER CONTEXT

Despite considerable theoretical interest, empirical work documenting how trust "translates" into important relationship outcomes is still in a nascent state. Because high-trust individuals have more positive working models of themselves and their romantic partners, they are more inclined to adopt a long-term view of their relationships (Holmes & Rempel, 1989; Simpson, 2007a, 2007b). As such, they are more willing to prioritize relationship-oriented over self-interested outcomes, which leads to more constructive conflict resolution and partners feeling closer

to one another. Low-trust individuals, in contrast, harbor more negative working models of themselves and others, which causes them to adopt a more short-term orientation toward their relationships. This, in turn, leads them to prioritize self-interested over relationship-oriented outcomes, which then generates more dysfunctional conflict-resolution behaviors that result in reduced closeness. Our results provide evidence supporting this scenario. We also extend the literature by identifying two specific behaviors enacted by low-trust individuals in conflict settings that may contribute to generating their poorer relationship outcomes.

The current research also extends the Dyadic Model of Trust by empirically confirming that trust is a dyadic phenomenon. According to the model, one must consider how actor trust and partner trust both influence outcomes at each stage of the model (see Figure 1). We offer an addendum to the model: Actor trust and partner trust must be examined not only separately, but also jointly, in order to fully comprehend certain relationship outcomes. Thus, we clarify and extend the Dyadic Model of Trust not only by showing that actor- and partner-trust effects independently influence conflict outcomes (in this case, felt closeness), but also by documenting key actor-by-partner-trust effects in which the influence of low-trust partners can negate the impact of high-trust individuals almost entirely.

Indeed, despite attempts by many high-trust partners to make the most of a difficult conflict discussion, the powerful negative working models of low-trust partners appeared to permeate our conflict discussions so thoroughly that forgiveness was impeded and contempt was facilitated, despite the good intentions and efforts of many high-trust partners. This does not mean that individuals who score low in trust inevitably poison their relationships. According to the Dyadic Model of Trust (Simpson, 2007b), positive interactions during conflict situations can produce increases in state trust, meaning that individuals can enter a relationship with lower levels of trust, but gradually become higher in trust following repeated interactions with a partner who navigates conflict discussions in a highly sensitive, constructive, and skillful manner. This is consistent with attachment theory, whereby individuals who have insecure attachment orientations can become more secure if they have later attachment figures who modify their working models in positive ways (e.g., Simpson, Collins, Tran, & Haydon, 2007). However, it can be difficult to maintain constructive tactics in the face of strong, persistent negativity (Campbell, Simpson, Kashy, & Rholes, 2001; Pastor, 1981), and good intentions often succumb to harsh behavioral realities. Low-trust individuals, in other words, can experience positive relationship outcomes, but they may need a special romantic partner who is aware of the low-trust partner's worries and concerns, knows how to "manage" him/her during conflicts or disagreements, and can regulate his/her own thoughts, emotions, and behavior during these events.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Although this study fills several gaps in the trust literature, there are a few limitations that should be addressed by future research. First, we recruited married

couples, and our sample was predominantly White. As such, we do not know whether our results generalize to dating couples and/or individuals of minority descent, although we have no reason to question the generalizability of our findings. Second, causal inferences cannot be made given the correlational design of the study. Third, we focused on changes in closeness because it is a major outcome in the Dyadic Model of Trust, but other outcomes can and should be studied (e.g., changes in state trust, changes in commitment). Fourth, future research should test the intermediate stages of the Dyadic Model of Trust (see Figure 1). According to the model, for example, low-trust partners may often overwhelm high-trust partners and cause both partners to: (1) show less transformation of motivation, approaching conflict with more selfish rather than partner-focused or relationship-focused motives, and/or (2) make less generous attributions about their partners during conflict discussions. These ideas merit future research.

Another direction for future research is to explore the generalizability of these findings in other relationship contexts by considering some of the situational moderators that might result in different patterns of influence besides the low-trust “dragging down” pattern found in this study. Robinson and Cameron (2012), for example, found main effects of both actor self-esteem and partner self-esteem in predicting relationship commitment and satisfaction, but no significant interaction between actor self-esteem and partner self-esteem. This reflects an additive pattern in which both partners exert relatively separate influence on the relationship, and where neither partner’s influence overwhelms the other’s. It is important to note that Robinson and Cameron (2012) examined global relationship outcomes rather than relationship outcomes in specific situations, which suggests that the level of measurement might be an important moderator that affects whether one finds interactive versus additive effects.

Furthermore, because the discussions in the current research focused on topics of conflict, the situation was most likely threatening to both partners, making it easier for one partner to “drag down” the discussion and more difficult for either partner to accommodate the other. In other situations that are less mutually threatening or in which partners have different roles, one may be more likely to see buffering effects for trust and other relationship perceptions instead. For example, Shallcross, Howland, Bemis, Simpson, and Frazier (2011) found a dual-risk pattern for attachment insecurity in capitalization discussions, such that couples with two insecure partners had the lowest levels of responsiveness while discussing positive events. Because insecure/insecure dyads fared worse than secure/insecure dyads, this implies that insecure partners can be “buffered” by secure partners and can show greater responsiveness when discussing positive events than if their partners are also insecure (see also Simpson & Overall, 2014). Because capitalization situations lack the threat inherent in most relationship conflicts (Gable, Gonzaga, & Strachman, 2006), this could explain why different dyadic effects emerged in this capitalization study. Future research should identify which situational features allow for one partner’s negative perceptions and behaviors to be more influential and which situational features permit the other partner’s positive perceptions and behaviors to exert greater influence.

Finally, it is easy to overlook the first step of the Dyadic Model of Trust, in which couples choose whether or not to even enter trust-diagnostic situations (which include relationship conflicts). Although some conflict is inevitable in almost all relationships, couples that have one low-trust partner might compensate by routinely avoiding conflict altogether. In fact, our analyses revealed that actor trust and partner trust did not interact to influence initial levels of relationship closeness, perhaps because couples with at least one low-trust partner preserved relationship closeness by proactively avoiding those situations in which low-trust partners could exert their destructive influence (see Footnote 4). Thus, one cannot assume that low-trust partners will always have a negative impact on long-term relationship outcomes. Future research should track the natural occurrence and course of conflict-discussion outcomes in couples' daily interactions over time using daily diary or experience-sampling methods.

CONCLUSION

In the social psychological literature, there is a general premise that "bad is stronger than good," meaning that negative influences tend to have greater impact than positive influences on most life domains (Baumeister et al., 2001). Trust in romantic relationships is not an exception to this rule, as the findings of the current study demonstrate. When married couples discuss a conflict, having just one low-trust partner in the mix is sufficient to create a climate in which forgiveness is displayed less and contempt is enacted more during conflict, and in which partners then feel less close to each other. This is true even when low-trust partners are paired with high-trust partners. If low-trust partners want to enjoy higher quality romantic relationships, they must learn to temper their destructive conflict tendencies and tactics, and they cannot necessarily rely on their well-intentioned partners to compensate for their actions.

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