Trust, Variability in Relationship Evaluations, and Relationship Processes

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Little is known about why some people experience greater temporal fluctuations of relationship perceptions over short periods of time, or how these fluctuations *within* individuals are associated with relational processes that can destabilize relationships. Two studies were conducted to address these questions. In Study 1, long-term dating partners completed a 14-day diary study that assessed each partner's daily partner and relationship perceptions. Following the diary phase, each couple was videotaped trying to resolve the most important unresolved problem from the diary period. As predicted, (a) individuals who trusted their partners less reported greater variability in perceptions of relationship quality across the diary period; (b) they also perceived daily relationship-based conflict as a relatively more negative experience; and (c) greater variability in relationship perceptions predicted greater self-reported distress, more negative behavior, and less positive behavior during a postdiary conflict resolution task (rated by observers). The diary results were conceptually replicated in Study 2a, in which older cohabiting couples completed a 21-day diary. These same participants also took part in a reaction-time decision-making study (Study 2b), which revealed that individuals tend to compartmentalize positive and negative features of their partners if they (individuals) experienced greater variability in relationship quality during the 21-day diary period and were involved in higher quality relationships. These findings advance researchers' understanding of trust in intimate relationships and provide some insight into how temporal fluctuations in relationship quality may undermine relationships.

Keywords: trust, variability, relationships, perceptions, satisfaction

Trust involves the juxtaposition of peoples' loftiest hopes and aspirations in relation to their deepest worries and fears. It may be the most important ingredient for the development and maintenance of happy, well-functioning relationships (Simpson, 2007a). Several major theories, including attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) and Erickson's (1963) theory of psychosocial development, are built on the premise that having more trusting relationships early in life lay the psychological foundation for happier and better functioning relationships in adulthood.

One consequence of lower levels of trust in a relationship should be greater variability in relationship evaluations across short periods of time (Holmes & Rempel, 1989). No research to

date, however, has examined whether and how variability in relationship evaluations over time is systematically associated with the level of trust that people have for their romantic partners. This is unfortunate because, according to Kelley (1983), greater variability in relationship perceptions or evaluations over time should make relationships less happy and more unstable, partly by fueling uncertainties about the future of the relationship and partly by encouraging closer scrutiny of what might be right—and especially what could be wrong—with the current relationship. Indeed, Arriaga (2001) has found that greater variability in satisfaction across time in new relationships forecasts earlier relationship dissolution, even when controlling for mean levels of satisfaction.

Guided by recent theory and research on dyadic trust (see Simpson, 2007a, 2007b), the present research has two overarching goals. First, we wanted to test whether, why, and how individuals who report less trust in their romantic partners and relationships experience larger fluctuations in perceptions of relationship quality compared with people who report more trust. Second, we wanted to identify the psychological processes associated with the experience of greater variability in relationship evaluations over time. To achieve these goals, we conducted two diary studies and a reaction time-based decision experiment. We begin by discussing the nature of dyadic trust, including why and how it ought to be associated with the degree of variability in relationship evaluations.

Dyadic Trust and Variability in Relationship Evaluations

Dyadic trust is one of the most powerful predictors of relationship satisfaction, distress, and stability (Simpson, 1990). Trust captures the degree to which individuals believe they can count on their current relationship partner to meet their most fundamental needs and to facilitate their most important goals. The cardinal features of trust center on a partner's dependability (i.e., being able to count on him or her for comfort and support during difficult times) and faith in the partner (i.e., being confident that he or she will always be available and supportive in the future; Simpson, 2007a). The development of trust in a relationship is believed to involve a process of uncertainty reduction (Holmes & Rempel, 1989). Thus, even though individuals bring a general inclination to trust or distrust others to new relationships based on their prior relationship experiences, the level of trust within a given relationship depends largely on the attributes of the current partner and current relationship dynamics.

Holmes and Rempel (1989) proposed that people who are uncertain as to whether they can trust their partners should be more sensitive to cues of possible rejection and acceptance. Because they are unsure about whether their partners have benevolent intentions, less trusting individuals should be more motivated to implicitly or explicitly "test" for evidence of their partners' love and commitment (Simpson, 2007a). If such tests imply possible rejection, less trusting individuals should feel worse about their partners and relationships than should more trusting persons. If, however, such tests signify possible acceptance, less trusting individuals ought to feel particularly positive given that their worries have been temporarily dispelled. The relationships of less trusting people, therefore, should be less stable in part because they evaluate their partners and relationships on the basis of daily cues of perceived rejection and acceptance.

Some research provides provisional support for these conjectures. For example, individuals who report higher levels of trust tend to hold more optimistic and benevolent expectations about their partner's motives, make more positive attributions about their partner's behaviors, and have more integrated and well-balanced working models that remain open to assimilating new information (see Simpson, 2007a, for a review). More trusting persons also disregard or downplay what could be construed as negative relationship actions by their partners, minimizing the potential negative impact of minor partner indiscretions (Rempel, Ross, & Holmes, 2001). When attempting to resolve relationship conflicts, more trusting individuals report that they display more positive and less negative affect (Holmes & Rempel, 1986), and their evaluations of their partners and relationships are less strongly tied to the emotions they experience during these discussions. More trusting individuals also view their partners more positively, especially when they think of *negative* relationship experiences (Holmes & Rempel, 1989). That is, when more trusting individuals ponder relationship-threatening events, they step back and consider their partner's benevolent goals and motives within a broader, long-term perspective (Holmes, 1991), a tendency that according to Kelley (1983) should promote more stable relationship perceptions and evaluations.

Individuals involved in established romantic relationships who report less trust usually exhibit moderate levels of trust (Holmes & Rempel, 1989). Those who believe they cannot trust their partners (i.e., actual low-trust persons) often break up before entering longer term relationships. Moderately trusting persons have less coherent working models in which trust-relevant hopes and fears are interwoven (Holmes & Rempel, 1989; Mikulincer, 1998). They often become trapped in approach–avoidance conflict situations in which positive partner behaviors are viewed as hopeful signs of possible relationship improvement, but any hint of negative behavior is taken as clear evidence that relationship difficulties might be imminent. As a result, less trusting individuals who are involved in established relationships closely monitor their relationships for evidence of their partner's care, concern, and responsiveness. This hypervigilance, however, may lead them to perceive or create the negative relationship outcomes they wish to avoid, given their overreliance on the diagnostic value of negative relationship information (cf. Mikulincer, 1998; Murray, Holmes, & Collins, 2006). Moreover, when such persons recall positive relationship events, they claim to judge their partner's behavior positively, yet make cynical attributions regarding their partner's "hidden" motives (Holmes & Rempel, 1986; Rempel et al., 2001). Consequently, even relatively positive actions enacted by their partners may trigger latent worries about what eventually could go wrong, a process that impedes deeper intimacy and greater security.

A core component of trust, therefore, is the stability of relationship evaluations across time. Specifically, more trusting individuals should be able to decouple daily relationship problems from their more global partner and relationship evaluations, resulting in more stable relationship evaluations over time. Less trusting individuals, however, ought to compartmentalize positive and negative knowledge and affect about their partners, are hesitant to grant their partners credit for positive behaviors, and place blame on their partners for real or perceived relationship transgressions (Holmes & Rempel, 1989). All of these factors should generate more variable relationship evaluations across time. To date, no actual research has examined whether relationship evaluations are more stable over time in individuals who trust their partners more and whether they are more variable in individuals who trust their partners less.

Variability in Relationship Evaluations and Relationship Realities

According to interdependence theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), the ratio of perceived positive-to-negative relationship experiences during a given period of time partially determines how satisfied individuals feel about their relationships (Rusbult, Arriaga, & Agnew, 2001). Relationship evaluations tend to be more stable when the balance between the conditions that promote and hinder relationship well-being remains constant across time. Greater variability in relationship evaluations, by comparison, is likely to signal changes in the presence or severity of relationship problems relative to relationship strengths (Kelley, 1983). It may also raise uncertainties or doubts about the future of the relationship, which in turn might increase scrutiny for evidence of what the future of the relationship may or may not hold. According to this perspective, therefore, greater temporal variability in relationship evaluations may be both an outcome as well as a source of relationship difficulties.

Kelley (1983) also suggested that repeated disruptions of the pro–con balance ought to destabilize relationships, *independent* of the mean level of perceived relationship quality. This perspective has been incorporated into some theoretical accounts of relationship dysfunction (e.g., Bradbury, 1998), but it has not been the subject of much empirical work. Additionally, most longitudinal studies have tracked changes in relationship perceptions across long periods of time in the hope of identifying sequences of events that either promote or hinder relationship stability (e.g., Gottman & Levenson, 1992; Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Rusbult, 1983; Surra, Arizzi, & Asmussen, 1988).

One important study has shown that greater variability in relationship satisfaction predicts greater relationship instability over time, above and beyond average perceptions of satisfaction. Arriaga (2001) tracked individuals involved in new dating relationships for 10 weeks. Each week, they answered questions about their level of satisfaction and whether they were still dating their original partners. Greater variability in satisfaction ratings over time predicted less commitment and greater likelihood of breaking up by the end of the study, independent of mean levels of reported satisfaction. More recently, Arriaga, Reed, Goodfriend, and Agnew (2006) have found that greater fluctuations in perceived partner commitment over time predicted greater likelihood of breakup. Although these studies are a critical first step in testing Kelley's (1983) model, they assessed individuals rather than both relationship partners, and they focused primarily on a single outcome (relationship dissolution). Furthermore, this body of research has not considered what makes certain people vulnerable to perceiving greater variability in relationship evaluations. We have discussed how and why variability in relationship evaluations over time is a core component of trust, but there is no current evidence for this claim. Arriaga et al. (2006) have also argued that less trusting individuals should experience greater fluctuations in relationship evaluations, but they have not directly assessed trust in their research. Accordingly, we tested the hypothesis that the stability of relationship evaluations should be linked to how much individuals trust their partners in their relationships.

In addition, psychological processes that may undermine the stability of relationships that are linked with greater variability in relationship perceptions have not been identified. Enhanced variability in relationship evaluations represent more than a historical record of shifting perceptions of partners and relationships. They also signify *psychological turmoil* resulting from individuals being more aware of the positive and negative features of their partners/relationships and experiencing the oscillation of these positive versus negative features over short time periods. We suggest that at least four psychological processes should be associated with experiencing greater variability in relationship evaluations. First, greater variability ought to be associated with individuals being less likely to behave in a prorelationship manner (Kelley, 1983). This should be particularly true when partners engage in serious disagreements. Conflicts tend to make negative aspects of the partner and relationship more salient, which should shift the pro–con balance in a negative direction. Second, greater variability should be related to the heightened salience of potential relationship problems, given the frequent significance of these problems to the relationship over short periods of time (Holmes & Rempel, 1989; Kelley, 1983). Third, it should be associated with how individuals process positive and negative partner information, such

that more variable individuals ought to process positive and negative partner and relationship information in a more "compartmentalized" and less integrated fashion (cf. Holmes & Rempel, 1989). Fourth, greater variability should be linked to greater sensitivity (increased hypervigilance) to negative relationship information and events (Holmes & Rempel, 1989).

Study 1

Study 1 was a couples study that involved a 14-day diary (completed by both partners), after which each couple participated in a videotaped conflict resolution interaction. It was designed to test whether individuals who trust their partners less experience greater fluctuations in relationship evaluations over time and whether they are more reactive to negative relationship events, controlling for mean levels of relationship quality. Study 1 also tested whether greater day-to-day variability in relationship evaluations is associated with less functional patterns of behavior (rated by observers) when partners try to resolve a major relationship-based conflict.

More specifically, both partners in a sample of long-term dating couples first completed self-report measures and then participated in a 14-day diary study that assessed each partner's daily perceptions of his or her partner and relationship. Immediately after the 14-day diary period, each couple engaged in a videotaped conflict resolution task in the lab. For the diary portion of the study, the mean and variability of each partner's perceptions of relationship quality across the 2 weeks was calculated. For the videotaped conflict resolution task, trained observers rated each interaction on theoretically relevant scales that assessed the amount of positive and negative behavior and negative affect that each partner displayed during the interaction. Each partner also reported how distressed she or he felt during the interaction.

We tested three sets of predictions.

1. Individuals who trust their partners less should report greater variability in perceptions of relationship quality (for both themselves and their partners) during the 14-day diary period.

2. Individuals who trust their partners less should also display greater reactivity to daily negative relationship events.

3. Greater variability in perceptions of relationship quality during the diary period should forecast more negative behavior, and perhaps less positive behavior, in the conflict resolution task (rated by observers) as well as greater distress reported by each partner.

Neuroticism also is a robust predictor of relationship dissatisfaction and instability (see Karney & Bradbury, 1997; Simpson, Winterheld, & Chen, 2006, for reviews). Neuroticism, which is believed to have more of a biological basis than trust, reflects the degree to which individuals tend to be emotionally stable versus unstable across time, different partners, different types of relationships, and different social situations. Thus, to provide evidence for the discriminant predictive validity of our hypothesized trust effects, each participant's self-reported level of neuroticism in Study 1 was also assessed and statistically controlled for.

Method

Participants. One hundred three heterosexual dating couples from a large southwestern university in the United States participated in this study. Couples had been dating for a mean of 17.45 months (*SD* = 13.87). To ensure that participants were involved in fairly well-established relationships, couples had to have been dating for a minimum of 3 months. The average age of participants was 19.63 years (*SD* = 1.33) for men and 18.90 years (*SD* = 0.87) for women. Partners who were enrolled in an introductory psychology class earned partial course credit. Each couple also received a coupon for free ice cream and were enrolled in a lottery to win a free dinner for two at a local restaurant.

Procedure. The study had three phases. In Phase 1, small groups of couples completed a prediary survey, and the other phases of the study were described. In Phase 2, participants completed daily diary questionnaires each day for 14 days. In Phase 3, participants were videotaped while trying to resolve a relationship-based conflict with their partners.

Phase 1. In the initial phase of the study, small groups of couples attended scheduled lab sessions during which they completed a prediary survey. Men and women were placed in separate rooms, where they completed a series of individual-difference and relationship measures that included basic demographics, the Neuroticism subscale from the Big Five Inventory (BFI; John & Srivastava, 1999), the Perceived Relationship Quality Components Scale (PRQC; Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000), and a measure of dyadic trust (Rempel, Holmes, & Zanna, 1985). After completing these measures, participants were reunited with their partners and told that the second phase of the study would involve having them privately complete daily diary questions about their perceptions of their relationship every day for 14 consecutive days. Participants were also told that, after the diary portion of the study, they would be asked to return to the lab with their partner to engage in a short videotaped discussion of an unresolved relationship conflict. At this point, individuals were asked whether they wanted to participate in the diary portion of the study. Those who were not interested were given promised credit and excused.[1]

The second phase was then described in more detail for those who remained.[2] Participants were told to complete one diary form at the end of each day regarding their perceptions of their relationship on that day. Participants were told to separate from their partner before completing the diary questionnaire each evening and to seal each diary in an envelope provided by the experimenters to ensure confidentiality. A detailed description of the daily diary was then given. Participants were told that the diary contained questions concerning their perceptions of the quality of their relationship on that day, and questions concerning conflicts that had occurred that day. After answering all questions participants had about the diary format, the experimenter reviewed the instructions once again and asked participants to start completing their diaries that evening. Participants were encouraged to contact the experimenters at any time if any questions arose. Participants were also scheduled to attend Phase 3 of the study during the week following completion of the diary phase.

Phase 2. The second phase of the study was a 14-day period during which both members of each couple completed the daily diary measures. Participants returned to the lab each Monday, Wednesday, and Friday to drop off completed diaries and to pick up new ones during the diary period. None of the participants reported problems completing the daily diaries.

Phase 3. The third phase of the study involved a videotaped conflict resolution task. During the week following the diary period, each couple returned to the lab. Each partner was asked to identify (privately and independently) the most major unresolved problem that arose or had been discussed during the 14-day diary period. Couples were then given 5 min to jointly choose a specific unresolved conflict to discuss. Couples were instructed to "choose the most serious or prominent conflict that occurred during the 14-day diary period that wasn't completely resolved." If a couple could not identify an unresolved conflict, they were asked to select a current conflict that was unresolved. After choosing a specific conflict issue, partners were informed that they had 7 min to discuss the conflict while being videotaped by a dual camera, split-screen video system. Before they began their discussion, each partner provided consent for us to videotape and eventually code their interaction. Immediately following each discussion, both partners reported how distressed they felt during the discussion. They were then thanked and fully debriefed.

Phase 1 measures. The measures used are outlined below.

Demographics. The general background questionnaire, which was administered during the introductory session, first asked participants to provide basic demographic information (i.e., gender, age, dating status, number of months dating).

Trust. Dyadic trust was assessed by Rempel et al.'s (1985) 17-item Trust scale. This scale measures people's expectations that they can count on their partners to care for them and be responsive to their needs, both now and in the future (e.g., "I have found that my partner is unusually dependable, especially when it comes to things that are important to me"; "I can count on my partner to be concerned about my welfare"). Responses to each item were made on 7-point Likert-type scales, anchored 1 (*not at all*) and 7 (*very much*). Responses to all 17 items were averaged to form a global index of dyadic trust, with higher scores indicating more trust (α = .83 for men and .74 for women).

Perceived relationship quality. Relationship quality was assessed by Fletcher et al.'s (2000) 18-item PRQC (e.g., "How satisfied are you with your relationship?"; "How intimate is your relationship?"). Responses to each item were made on 7-point scales, anchored 1 (*not at all*) and 7 (*extremely*). These responses were averaged to form a global index of relationship quality, with higher scores indicating greater perceived relationship quality (α = .92 for men and .89 for women).

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[1] Of the 154 couples who attended an initial session, 51 decided to not participate in the remainder of the study. In most cases, participants already had received credit for participating in other studies and could not use the additional credits offered for the diary portion of this study. Several couples were also unable to commit to a 2-week diary study because they did not anticipate interacting each day due to travel or other commitments.

[2] No couples dropped out of the study after beginning the diary. We used several methods to encourage people to remain in the study. First, students who were enrolled in introductory psychology earned enough credits to satisfy their entire course requirement. Second, ice cream and lottery incentives were used. Third, all participants signed a "commitment form" indicating their intention to complete the full study. Finally, they agreed in writing when and where they would complete the diaries each day.

Neuroticism. On 5-point scales anchored 1 (*disagree strongly*) and 5 (*agree strongly*), participants reported their level of neuroticism on seven items from the BFI (John & Srivastava, 1999). The BFI is a valid and commonly used measure that has good internal consistency. Higher scores indicate greater neuroticism ($\alpha = .70$ for men and .77 for women).

Phase 2 measures. The measures are outlined below.

Daily diary: Daily relationship quality. On 7-point sales ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely*), participants were asked (a) how satisfied they felt with their relationship that day, (b) how committed they felt to their relationship that day, (c) how close they felt to their partner that day, and (d) how much love they felt toward their partner that day. Three additional questions inquired about perceptions of the future happiness and stability of the relationship. Specifically, participants were asked each day about the degree to which they felt that their relationship (a) would continue to develop positively, (b) was strong and secure, and (c) may be ending soon (reversed keyed) and measured on 7-point scales ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*). Scores from these seven items were averaged for each day to create a measure of daily relationship quality. Reliability estimates for relationship quality were derived for each partner separately for each day. The average alpha reliability coefficient across the 14 days for women was .92 (range = .89–.96), and for men was .94 (range = .91–.95). Two indexes were then created for each participant from these responses: (a) the mean level of perceived relationship quality over the 14-day diary period and (b) the standard deviation of relationship quality over the diary period (see Kernis, Grannemann, & Barclay, 1989, for a similar measure of variability of self-esteem over short periods of time; see also Graham & Clark, 2006, Study 5).

Perceptions of daily conflict. Participants then listed the details of the most serious conflict they had with their partner that day (if any) and then answered questions about their perceptions of it. In terms of the amount of conflict that occurred during the 14 days, both men ($M = 6.46$, $SD = 3.73$) and women ($M = 7.65$, $SD = 3.85$) reported conflicts occurring on approximately half of the days. All questions concerning conflicts were answered on 7-point scales ranging from 1 (*none*) to 7 (*extremely*). Participants were asked (a) how serious the conflict was for them, (b) how hurt they were by the conflict, (c) how much of a negative experience the conflict was for them, (d) the degree to which the conflict escalated beyond the original topic, and (e) the degree to which the conflict will have (negative) long-term consequences for the survival of the relationship. Scores from these five items were averaged for each day to create a measure of daily negative response to conflict. Reliability estimates for this index were derived for each partner separately for each day. The average alpha reliability coefficient across the 14 days for women was .86 (range = .76–.93) and for men was .88 (range = .84–.93).

Diary accuracy. At the end of the diary study, participants reported how difficult it was for them to complete the daily diaries on a scale ranging from 1 (*very easy*) to 7 (*very difficult*). Participants also reported how accurate their diary entries were on a scale ranging from 1 (*not accurate*) to 7 (*very accurate*). In addition, participants rated the degree to which completing the diary records interfered with their normal daily experiences or routine on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*).

Phase 3 measures. The measures used are discussed below.

Postdiscussion distress measure. Immediately after the videotaped conflict discussion, each participant answered three questions (privately and in a different room than his or her partner) about how distressed she or he felt during the conflict discussion (i.e., the degree to which she or he was upset, anxious, and stressed). Responses were made on 9-point scales ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 9 (*extremely*), which were averaged to create an index of self-perceived distress ($\alpha = .89$ for men and .83 for women).

Behavioral ratings. Following extensive training, 10 raters independently viewed each videotaped discussion and rated each partner's behavior on 20 items that focused on each partner's mood and conflict resolution behavior using 7-point scales ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*). One group of five raters made ratings on 10 items, whereas the other group of five raters made ratings on the other 10 items. Each rater viewed only one member of the couple at a time, so the ratings of each man and woman in a couple were conducted separately. Across the items, the average interrater reliability was $\alpha = .75$, with a range of .60–.83. Scores were then averaged across raters for each item. To reduce the number of items to a smaller set of interpretable factors, a factor analysis using a varimax rotation was conducted. It produced three factors comprising 17 of the 20 items.

The first factor, labeled *Destructive Interaction Style*, contained eight items: crediting negative attributes to the partner's character, responding negatively to the partner's comments, appearing angry toward the partner, being defensive, blaming the partner for the conflict, criticizing the partner, attributing negative intentions to the partner, and derogating or putting down the partner. Scores on these eight items were averaged for each participant to create an index of observer-rated destructive interaction style ($\alpha = .94$ and .94 for men and women, respectively). Higher scores indicated a more destructive interaction style.

The second factor, labeled *Positive Emotion*, contained five items: appearing happy, satisfied, positive, upset (reverse coded), and disappointed (reverse coded) during the discussion. Scores on each item were averaged for each participant to create an index of observer-rated positive emotion ($\alpha = .94$ and .91 for men and women, respectively). Higher scores reflected greater positive emotion.

The third factor, labeled *Constructive Interaction Style*, contained four items: listening to what the partner had to say, making positive comments to the partner, trying to resolve the conflict, and accepting some responsibility for the conflict. Scores on these items were averaged for each participant to create an index of constructive interaction style ($\alpha = .86$ and .87 for men and women, respectively). Higher scores reflected a more constructive style.

Results

We first examined participants' experiences completing the daily diaries. In general, participants reported that completing the diaries was not difficult, with a mean of 3.00 ($SD = 1.57$) on a 7-point scale (where 7 represented *very difficult*). No participants indicated that their diary entries were low in accuracy, with the mean accuracy rating being 5.31 ($SD = 1.32$) on a 7-point scale (where 7 represented *very accurate*). Participants also reported that completing the diary records did not interfere with their normal

daily experiences or routine ($M = 2.58$, $SD = 1.59$, on a scale where $1 = not at all$ and $7 = very much$).

Data analytic strategy. Our data analytic approach was guided by the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM; Kashy & Kenny, 2000; Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). According to the APIM, when individuals are involved in a relationship, their outcomes depend not only on their own characteristics and inputs but also on their *partner's* characteristics and inputs. For example, consider how an individual's behavior during the conflict resolution task might be influenced by variability in relationship evaluations during the diary period. One person's behavior may be associated with variability in his or her *own* reports of relationship quality, such that the person's own degree of variability in perceived relationship quality predicts that person's behavior during conflict (i.e., an *actor* effect). However, the person's conflict behavior may also be systematically related to the degree of variability in her or his *partner's* perceptions of relationship quality, with people behaving more negatively toward partners who report greater variability (i.e., a *partner* effect). The inclusion of partner effects allows us to test for the mutual influence that often exists between persons within a relationship. In addition, the APIM provides estimates of the unique contribution of actor effects controlling for partner effects, and vice versa.

We tested all of the models reported below using multilevel modeling (MLM; also known as hierarchical linear modeling; Kenny, Kashy, & Bolger, 1998; Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002) and following the suggestions of Kenny et al. (2006; see also Campbell & Kashy, 2002) regarding the use of MLM with dyadic data. In the dyadic case, MLM treats the data from each partner as nested scores within a group that has an N of 2. Gender was effect coded (-1 for men, 1 for women), and all continuous predictor variables were centered on the grand mean. All significant and marginally significant effects that emerged in all analyses are reported below.

Table 1 presents basic descriptive data for the sample. The diagonal of Table 1 includes the cross-partner correlations, the off-diagonal values are the correlations between the primary study variables across the entire sample, and the bottom two rows contain the means and standard deviations for all variables, averaged over the entire sample.

Predicting variability in ratings. The first set of analyses tested the first prediction, namely that individuals who report less trust in their partners should also report *more* variability in perceptions of relationship quality across the diary period. The dependent variable in this analysis was variability across the 14-day diary period in each individual's perceptions of relationship quality. The predictor variables included gender, actor and partner trust scores, actor and partner global relationship quality scores assessed prior to the diary period (the PRQC), and gender interactions involving actor and partner trust and actor and partner relationship quality. Actor and partner effects for relationship quality were included because measures of trust and relationship quality tend to correlate, and this approach allowed us to test the unique effects of trust independent of relationship quality. The results of these analyses are presented in Table 2.[3]

As shown in Table 2, even when global relationship quality assessed prior to the diary period is statistically controlled, significant actor and partner trust effects emerged. The actor effects reveal that individuals who reported greater trust also reported more stable relationship quality across the 14-day diary period

than was true of individuals who reported less trust. The partner effects demonstrate that individuals' reports of relationship quality were also more stable when they had more trusting partners, independent of their own reported levels of trust. However, the partner effect for trust was moderated by gender. This interaction indicated that, for men, having a more trusting partner was associated with considerably greater stability in relationship quality (for men, $b = -.248$, $SE = .068$, $p < .01$), whereas for women, having a more trusting partner had almost no effect on variability (for women, $b = .048$, $SE = .056$, $p = .39$).

Table 2 also indicates that gender interacted with the partner effect of relationship quality. In particular, women whose partners reported higher relationship quality were more stable in their daily reports of relationship quality across the diary period (for women, $b = -.257$, $SE = .068$, $p < .01$). In contrast, the stability of men's daily reports of relationship quality was not related to their female partners' overall relationship quality (for men, $b = .113$, $SE = .078$, $p = .14$).

We then recalculated the above model including actor and partner effects of neuroticism as well as interactions between neuroticism and gender. There was no evidence of an effect of neuroticism. More importantly, all of the significant effects presented in Table 2 remained significant when neuroticism was included in the model.

Predicting reactivity to relationship-based conflict. The second set of analyses tested the second prediction, namely that individuals who report less trust in their partners should also report *more* negative reactivity to relationship-based conflict. The dependent variable in this analysis was scores on the Negative Response to Conflict index assessed across the diary period. The predictor variables were the same as those in the first analysis. In this analysis, no gender interactions emerged and no interactions were found between trust and global perceptions of relationship quality. Thus, these interaction terms were removed from the final model. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 3. Consistent with predictions, people who reported lower levels of trust had higher scores on the Negative Response to Conflict index. No other significant effects emerged. Additionally, this pattern of results remained significant when neuroticism was statistically controlled.

Does variability predict behavior and self-reports of distress? The next set of analyses tested the third prediction, namely that greater variability in perceptions of relationship quality during the 14-day diary period should predict (a) more observer-rated negative behavior during the postdiary conflict discussion task and (b) greater self-reported distress by each partner. To test these predictions, we estimated four models in which we treated the three observer-rated behavioral indexes (destructive interaction style, positive emotion, and constructive interaction style) and the self-reported postdiscussion distress index as dependent variables. Models were first run with the actor and partner effects of variability in perceptions of relationship quality entered as predictors, along with the actor and partner effects of the mean

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[3] Analyses that did not include the global measure of relationship quality assessed prior to the diary period also yielded significant actor and partner effects for trust, but no gender interactions for partner effects of trust.

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Table 1
Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Among the Predictor and Outcome Measures: Study 1

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Trust	.06								
2. Global satisfaction	.61**	.39**							
3. Neuroticism	−.01	.05	−.24**						
4. Destructive behavior	−.19**	−.14*	−.23**	.71**					
5. Constructive behavior	.26**	.23**	.08	−.71**	.73**				
6. Positive emotion	.15*	.09	.33**	−.49**	.44**	.71**			
7. Postdiscuss distress	−.18**	−.11	−.28**	.29**	−.21**	−.49**	.46**		
8. Daily quality SD	−.31**	−.29**	−.13†	.24**	−.22**	−.23**	.31**	.54**	
9. Daily quality M	.47**	.58**	.01	−.11	.21**	.15*	−.15*	−.62**	.75**
M	5.60	6.12	3.37	2.62	4.06	4.25	3.25	0.45	6.38
SD	0.70	0.62	0.82	0.95	0.92	0.83	1.65	0.38	0.65

Note. Values along the diagonal are correlations between the two dyad members' scores on that variable.
† $p < .10$.   * $p < .05$.   ** $p < .01$.

level of perceived relationship quality across the diary period.[4] Interactions between variability and mean level of relationship quality were also entered in the model. In addition, gender was entered in each model, as were the interactions between gender and the other predictor variables. Because no significant interactions involving gender emerged, they were removed from the final models. The results of these analyses appear in Table 4.

The main effects of gender reported in Table 4 indicate that women were rated as behaving more destructively toward their partners during the conflict discussion and displayed marginally less positive emotion than men. Women also reported experiencing somewhat more distress during the conflict resolution discussion. Of particular interest are the actor and partner effects of variability in perceived relationship quality across the diary period. Controlling for the average levels of daily relationship quality of both partners, the actor effects suggest that individuals who reported greater variability in their day-to-day ratings of relationship quality behaved more destructively toward their partners during the conflict discussion. They also displayed marginally less positive emo-

Table 2
Predicting Variability in the Dependent Variables Across the Diary Period: Study 1

Predictor variables	Variability in daily perceptions of relationship quality		
	b	*SE*	β
Intercept	0.46	.03	.02
Gender	−0.03	.02	−.08
Actor trust	−0.14**	.04	−.26
Partner trust	−0.10*	.04	−.18
Gender × Actor Trust	−0.04	.05	−.08
Gender × Partner Trust	−0.15**	.05	−.27
Actor PRQC	−0.03	.05	−.05
Partner PRQC	−0.07	.05	−.12
Gender × Actor PRQC	0.02	.06	.04
Gender × Partner PRQC	0.19**	.06	.30

Note. We report both unstandardized (*b*) and standardized (β) regression coefficients. Gender is coded 1 = women, −1 = men. PRQC = Perceived Relationship Quality Components Scale (assessed before the diary period).
* $p < .05$.   ** $p < .01$.

tion and reported higher levels of distress. In addition, there was some evidence of partner effects for variability, such that individuals whose *partners* were more variable in daily relationship quality exhibited more destructive behavior and less constructive behavior during the discussion. Only one significant effect (a partner effect) emerged for the mean level of relationship quality reported across the diary period. Specifically, individuals whose partners reported higher average daily quality behaved more destructively during the conflict resolution discussion.[5,6]

Variability in perceptions of relationship quality might be more strongly tied to individuals' behaviors and self-reported distress, depending on their mean level of relationship quality. The inclusion of the interaction term involving the actor effect of variability and the actor effect of mean level of relationship quality along with the partner effect of variability and the partner effect of mean level of relationship quality permitted us to test this possibility. No significant interactions involving the actor effects were found. However, one significant partner interaction effect emerged predicting constructive behavior. When individuals had partners who reported higher relationship quality over the diary period (i.e., scores one standard deviation above the sample mean), the connection between their partner's variability in relationship quality and their own observed constructive interaction style was particularly strong ($b = −.928$, $SE = .319$, $p < .01$), whereas this link was less robust when individuals had partners who reported lower relationship quality (i.e., scores one standard deviation below the sample mean) ($b = −.088$, $SE = .235$, $p = .70$).

Exploratory analyses. The zero-order correlations presented in Table 1 show positive and significant correlations between trust,

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[4] We included the mean because of the confound that exists between use of the scale endpoints and variability as assessed with standard deviations (Baird, Le, & Lucas, 2006).

[5] The zero-order correlation between partner's satisfaction across the diary period and actor's negative behavior was small ($r = −.03$, *ns*). When statistically controlling for several variables simultaneously, a variable that has a small zero-order effect can sometimes become statistically significant owing to suppression effects. For this reason, we do not emphasize this particular effect.

[6] The same pattern of results for variability emerged when we did not include the means as control variables.

Table 3

Predicting Responses to Instances of Perceived Conflicts: Study 1

Predictor variables	Negative response to conflict		
	b	*SE*	β
Intercept	2.44	.07	−.02
Gender	−0.09*	.04	−.07
Trust			
Actor effect	−0.26*	.10	−.13
Partner effect	−0.16	.10	−.08
Global perceived relationship quality			
Actor effect	−0.06	.11	−.03
Partner effect	−0.03	.11	−.01

Note. We report both unstandardized (*b*) and standardized (β) regression coefficients.

the observer-rated behavioral codes, and self-reported distress. Less trusting individuals, therefore, behaved in a more destructive and less constructive manner, displayed less positive emotion, and reported greater distress after the discussion.

To determine whether trust and variability uniquely predicted these outcomes, we ran models that included the actor and partner effects of trust and variability in relationship evaluations, controlling for mean level of relationship quality. In these models, the actor effect of variability in relationship evaluations significantly predicted destructive interaction style ($b = 0.47$), $t(146) = 2.27$, $p < .05$, and self-reported distress following the interaction ($b = 1.32$), $t(184) = 3.529$, $p < .01$, and it marginally predicted observer-rated positive emotions ($b = -0.34$), $t(153) = -1.81$, $p = .10$. The partner effect of variability in relationship evaluations marginally predicted observer-rated destructive interaction style ($b = 0.35$), $t(146) = 1.71$, $p < .10$. Actor effects of trust also emerged, predicting observer-rated destructive interaction style

($b = -0.26$), $t(120) = -2.35$, $p < .05$; observer-rated constructive interaction style ($b = 0.25$), $t(123) = 2.45$, $p < .05$; and self-reported distress following the interaction ($b = -0.41$), $t(151) = -2.24$, $p < .05$. Only one partner effect of trust emerged, which predicted constructive interaction style ($b = 0.26$), $t(123) = 2.56$, $p < .05$.

In summary, these exploratory analyses indicate that actor trust as well as actor and partner variability in relationship evaluations during the diary *independently* predicted most of the social interaction outcomes, controlling for mean level of relationship quality during the diary. Thus, more turbulent relationship evaluations tend to have deleterious effects on conflict resolution outcomes, above and beyond how much individuals trust their partners.

Discussion

Study 1 supported our three sets of predictions. Consistent with the first set of predictions, individuals who trusted their partners more reported more stable relationship quality across the 14-day diary period. Their reports of relationship quality were also more stable when they had more trusting *partners*, independent of their own level of trust. These novel partner effects, however, were moderated by gender. Among men, having a more trusting partner was associated with greater reported stability of relationship quality during the diary period. Among women, this effect was not evident. Though speculative, the more "stabilizing" effect that high-trust women apparently have on their male partners' perceptions of relationship quality could be partly attributable to the fact that, in most relationships, women take a more active role in maintaining the relationship (see Acitelli, 2001). Taking a more active and direct role may allow the more positive working models and more constructive conflict resolution behaviors of high-trust women to have a stronger stabilizing effect on how their male partners think and feel about the relationship on a daily basis.

Table 4

Predicting Behavior in the Conflict Resolution Discussion and Self-Reported Distress Following the Discussion From Variability in Perceived Relationship Quality Across the Diary Period: Study 1

Predictor variable	Observer-rated destructive interaction style			Observer-rated constructive interaction style			Observer-rated positive emotions			Self-reported distress		
	b	*SE*	β	*b*	*SE*	β	*b*	*SE*	β	*b*	*SE*	β
Intercept	2.68	.12	.07	3.91	.11	−.17	4.32	.10	.09	3.16	.19	−.06
Gender	−0.15**	.04	−.15	0.01	.04	.01	0.07†	.03	.08	−0.15†	.09	−.09
Variability in perceived relationship quality across diary period												
Actor effect	0.58**	.22	.23	−0.29	.21	−.12	−0.36†	.19	−.17	1.36**	.40	.31
Partner effect	0.45*	.22	.18	−0.51*	.21	−.21	−0.20	.19	−.09	−0.07	.40	−.02
Mean level of perceived relationship quality across diary period												
Actor effect	−0.15	.13	−.01	0.22†	.13	.16	0.05	.12	.04	0.28	.27	.11
Partner effect	0.35**	.13	.24	−0.11	.13	−.08	−0.10	.12	−.08	−0.20	.27	−.08
Actor Effect of Variability × Actor Effect of Mean Level	0.24	.30	.06	−0.36	.29	−.01	0.09	.27	.03	−0.37	.53	−.06
Partner Effect of Variability × Partner Effect of Mean Level	0.16	.30	.04	−0.65*	.29	−.17	0.46	.27	.13	−0.39	.53	−.06

Note. We report both unstandardized (*b*) and standardized (β) regression coefficients.
† $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Gender also interacted with the partner effect of relationship quality. Women whose partners reported higher relationship quality experienced more stable relationship quality during the diary period, whereas the stability of men's relationship quality was not tied to their female partners' relationship quality. These differences may also reflect the gender asymmetry in relationship maintenance. To the extent that women are more invested and involved in relationship maintenance, the stability of their daily relationship quality should be more closely linked to the quality reported by their partners.

In line with the second set of predictions, individuals who reported less trust had higher scores on the Negative Response to Conflict index. Less trusting individuals, therefore, reported more extreme negative reactions to daily-based relationship conflicts, when they occurred, than more trusting individuals. This increased sensitivity to relationship-based conflict is consistent with the results showing that less trusting individuals reported greater fluctuations in their relationship quality across the diary period.

Consistent with the third set of predictions, even when the mean levels of daily relationship quality of both partners were statistically controlled, individuals who reported greater variability in their daily ratings of relationship quality behaved more destructively during the conflict resolution discussion, displayed less positive emotion, and reported greater distress. In addition, individuals whose *partners* were more variable in daily relationship quality also displayed more destructive and less constructive behaviors during the conflict discussions.

Though not a formal prediction, variability in daily perceptions of relationship quality was also related to conflict behaviors, contingent on individuals' mean relationship quality. For example, when individuals had partners who reported higher relationship quality during the diary period, the relation between their partner's variability in relationship quality and their own observer-rated constructive interaction style was stronger. These results are important because they indicate that connections between variability in perceived relationship quality and relationship behaviors are qualified by the mean level of relationship quality. When relationship quality is higher, there is a stronger link between variability in relationship quality reported by partners and constructive conflict behaviors displayed by actors. In essence, this suggests that partners have a stronger impact on how individuals behave in better relationships. We return to this issue in Study 2.

It is important to emphasize that these effects remained significant when both partners' scores on neuroticism, mean relationship quality reported during the diary period, and overall relationship quality (measured by the PRQC) were statistically controlled. This indicates that these effects are not attributable to trait-based emotional instability or relationship quality of either partner.

Study 2a

Study 1 provides good but provisional support for our primary predictions. If the effects documented in Study 1 are robust, they should also be found in a different sample of romantic couples (cohabiting couples) who are assessed over a longer diary period (21 days) using an expanded set of measures. Thus, in Study 2a, both partners in a new sample of long-term cohabiting couples were recruited to complete self-report measures and a 21-day diary that assessed each partner's daily perceptions of his or her partner

and relationship. Similar to Study 1, we calculated the mean and variability of each partner's perceptions of relationship quality across the 3 weeks. We also examined additional psychological processes that should be associated with the degree of variability in relationship evaluations across the diary period. According to Kelley (1983) and Holmes and Rempel (1989), greater variability in perceptions of relationship quality ought to be associated with three specific outcomes: (a) increased salience of relationship problems, (b) more compartmentalized partner knowledge structures, and (c) stronger beliefs that disagreements with partners threaten relationship stability.

Thus, we tested three sets of predictions.

1. Individuals who trust their partners less should report greater variability in perceptions of relationship quality (for both themselves and their partners) during the 21-day diary period.

2. Individuals who trust their partners less should also display greater reactivity to daily negative relationship events.

3. Individuals who experience greater variability in perceptions of relationship quality during the diary period should (a) report more problems in their relationships, (b) report having more compartmentalized knowledge structure of their partners, and (c) report feeling more threatened by disagreements with their partners.

Method

Participants.   Sixty-seven heterosexual couples were recruited from a University campus in Southern Ontario, Canada using ads placed in campus newspapers. Thirty couples were in an exclusive dating relationship, four couples were in a common-law relationship, seven were engaged, and 21 were married (five couples did not report their relationship status). Each participant received an honorarium of up to $50 (Canadian) that varied on the basis of the number of daily diaries that she or he completed. The average age of participants was 27.39 years for men ($SD = 9.93$; range $= 18-60$) and 25.96 years for women ($SD = 8.75$; range $= 18-58$). The average length of relationship was 48.60 months ($SD = 69.58$ months; range $= 3-400$ months).

Procedure.   Similar to Study 1, Study 2a had three phases. In Phase 1, small groups of couples completed a prediary survey and then received instructions on how to complete the diary and sign-up for a postdiary session. In Phase 2, participants completed daily diary questionnaires every day for 21 days. In Phase 3, participants returned to the lab to answer a final set of questionnaires.

Phase 1.   Couples interested in participating in the study were contacted by a member of our research team. The nature of the study was explained in detail, and a time was scheduled for each couple to come to the lab for Phase 1 of the study. In Phase 1, small groups of couples attended lab sessions during which they completed a prediary survey. Men and women were placed in separate rooms, where they completed individual-difference and relationship measures that included basic demographics, the Inclusion of the Other in Self Scale (IOS; Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992), and the measure of dyadic trust (Rempel et al., 1985).

Participants were then reunited with their partners and were told that Phase 2 of the study would involve having each partner privately complete daily diary questions about his or her perceptions of the relationship every day for 21 consecutive days online. Each participant was given an identification number and a link to a secure website where she or he would log on to complete the daily diary questions. Participants were told to complete one diary form at the end of each day regarding their perceptions of the relationship on that day. Participants were also told to separate from their partners before completing the diary questionnaire each evening. A detailed description of the daily diary was then given. Participants were told that the diary contained questions concerning their perceptions of the quality of their relationship on that day, as well as questions concerning negative events that occurred in the relationship on that day. After answering all questions participants had about the diary format, the experimenter reviewed the instructions again and asked participants to start completing their diaries that evening. Participants were encouraged to contact the experimenters at any time if any questions arose. Participants were also scheduled to attend Phase 3 of the study the week after completing the diary phase.

Phase 2. Phase 2 was a 21-day period during which both members of each couple completed the daily diary measures. A reminder e-mail was sent to each participant each day that contained a link to the secure website, the participant's identification number, and the diary number the participant was to complete that day. All diary entries were time stamped to ensure that they were completed each day. None of the participants reported problems completing the daily diaries. Overall, the average number of diaries completed was very high for both women ($M = 19.68$, $SD = 2.98$) and men ($M = 19.67$, $SD = 2.77$).

Phase 3. In Phase 3, participants completed some final questionnaires and then participated in Study 2b (see below).

Phase 1 measures. The measures used are discussed below.

Demographics. The general background questionnaire asked participants to provide basic demographic information (i.e., gender, age, dating status, number of months dating).

Trust. Participants completed Rempel et al.'s (1985) 17-item Trust scale. Responses to all items were averaged, with higher scores indicating more trust ($\alpha = .90$ for men and .90 for women).

The IOS. Participants also completed the one-item IOS scale. The IOS (Aron et al., 1992) assesses the degree to which individuals include their romantic partners in their self-concept. It measures behavioral and subjective facets of closeness and correlates positively with relationship satisfaction (Aron et al., 1992).

Phase 2 measures. The measures used are outlined in the sections below.

Daily diary: Daily relationship quality. The same seven items used to assess daily relationship quality in Study 1 were used in Study 2a. Reliability estimates for relationship quality were derived for each partner separately for each day. The average alpha reliability coefficient across the 21 days for women was .92 (range $= .87–.95$), and for men was .93 (range $= .88–.97$). Two indexes were then created for each participant from these responses: (a) the mean level of perceived relationship quality over the 21-day diary period and (b) the standard deviation of relationship quality over the period.

Perceptions of negative partner behavior. Participants were asked to recall any negative behaviors that their partners commit-

ted toward them that day. If they thought of more than one negative behavior, they were asked to answer the subsequent questions concerning the most notable negative behavior their partner directed toward them that day. Participants were first asked to provide a brief description of their partner's negative behavior, and then were asked to complete additional questions using 7-point scales ranging from 1 (*none*) to 7 (*extremely*). Participants' responses to their partners' behaviors were assessed by asking them the degree to which they felt the behavior (a) would have negative consequences for their relationship and (b) posed a serious threat to their relationship. Scores from these two items were averaged for each day to create a measure of negative response to the partner's behavior. Reliability estimates for this index were derived for each partner separately for each day. The average alpha reliability coefficient across the 21 days for women was .91 (range $= .71–.98$), and for men was .95 (range $= .86–.99$).

The next set of questions tapped participants' attributions for their partners' behavior. The generation of attribution items was developed on the basis of the research of Collins (1996). Participants' attributions regarding their partners' motivations for their negative behavior was assessed by six items: (a) my partner is losing interest in me, (b) my partner holds negative attitudes toward me, (c) my partner is trying to let me know that s/he is not happy with me, (d) my partner is trying to let me know that s/he would like me to change in some way, (e) my partner's behavior was due to something about me [the participant], and (f) my partner's behavior was due to something about the relationship. All questions were answered using 7-point scales ranging from 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 7 (*agree strongly*). Scores from these items were averaged for each day to create a measure of negative partner motivation. Reliability estimates for this index were derived for each partner separately for each day. The average alpha reliability coefficient across the 21 days for women was .80 (range $= .41–.97$), and for men was .87 (range $= .43–.99$).

The degree to which participants felt their partners' behavior represented stable underlying reasons and had global relationship implications was assessed by two items: (a) the reason for my partner's behavior is not likely to change and (b) the reason for my partner's behavior is something that affects other areas of our relationship. Both questions were answered using 7-point scales (anchored 1 = *disagree strongly*, 7 = *agree strongly*). Scores from these two items were averaged for each day to create a measure of stability and globality attributions. Reliability estimates for this index were derived for each partner separately for each day. The average alpha reliability coefficient across the 21 days for women was .80 (range $= .41–.99$), and for men was .80 (range $= .48–.99$).

Phase 3 measures. The measures are outlined below.

Current relationship problems. Participants' perceptions of specific relationship problems were measured via a modified version of the Marital Problems Inventory (Geiss & O'Leary, 1981). This measure contains 19 areas of potential problems in marriage (e.g., showing affection, communication, amount of time spent together) and asks participants to rate each item on a scale ranging from 1 (*not a problem*) to 11 (*major problem*). Three items (children, household managements, and religion) were removed from the scale for this study given that not all couples were married, living together, or had children. Additionally, pretesting suggested that religion was not a major problem for the majority of couples on campus. Responses to the 16 items were averaged, with

higher scores representing greater perceived problems with the relationship ($\alpha = .88$ for men and .85 for women).

Integration of Thoughts About Partners Scale (I-TAPS). The I-TAPS scale (Graham & Clark, 2006) assesses integrated versus segregated thinking about one's partner at a single point in time. The scale contains nine items answered on 7-point scales (anchored $1 = $ *strongly disagree*, $7 = $ *strongly agree*). Example items include "I have more than one image or view of my partner" and "Even when my partner does something to hurt me, it is easy to remind myself of his or her positive attributes" (reverse scored). Responses to the nine items were averaged, with higher scores representing a greater degree of compartmentalized thinking of the partner's positive and negative traits ($\alpha = .88$ for men and .88 for women).

Belief that disagreement is destructive. The Disagreement is Destructive subscale of the Relationship Beliefs Inventory (RBI; Eidelson & Epstein, 1982) was used to assess participants' beliefs that disagreements with their partners regarding values, attitudes, goals, or preferences pose serious threats to the security of their relationship. The scale contains seven items answered on 7-point scales (anchored $1 = $ *very false*, $6 = $ *very true*). Example items include "When my partner and I disagree, I feel like our relationship is falling apart" and "I do not doubt my partner's positive feelings for me when we argue" (reverse scored). Responses across the seven items were aggregated, with higher scores reflecting a greater belief that disagreements with partners are more threatening to the security of the relationship ($\alpha = .70$ for men and .76 for women).

Results and Discussion

Data analytic strategy. We used the same data analytic approach in Study 2a as we did in Study 1. Gender was effect coded (-1 for men, 1 for women), and all continuous predictor variables were centered on the grand mean. All significant and marginally significant effects that emerged in all analyses are reported below.

Table 5 presents basic descriptive data for the sample. The diagonal of Table 5 includes the cross-partner correlations, the off-diagonal values are the correlations between the primary study variables across the entire sample, and the bottom two rows contain the means and standard deviations for all variables, averaged over the entire sample.

Predicting variability in ratings. We tested the first prediction with the first set of analyses, namely that individuals who report less trust should also report more variability in perceptions of relationship quality across the diary period. The dependent variable in this analysis was variability across the 21-day diary period in each individual's perceptions of relationship quality. The predictor variables included gender, actor and partner trust scores, actor and partner scores on the IOS, and gender interactions involving actor and partner trust and actor and partner relationship quality. Neither gender interactions nor interactions involving the IOS scale emerged, so these interaction terms were dropped from the final model. The results of these analyses are presented in Table 6.

As shown in Table 6, significant actor and partner trust effects emerged, replicating Study 1. The actor effects indicate that individuals who reported greater trust also had more stable relationship quality across the 21-day diary period than individuals who reported lower trust. The partner effects demonstrate that individuals' reports of relationship quality were also more stable if they had more trusting partners, independent of their own reported level of trust.

Predicting responses to partner's negative behaviors. We tested the second prediction with the second set of analyses, namely that individuals reporting less trust should have more negative responses to their partner's negative behaviors, and should report less flattering attributions for their partner's behavior. The predictor variables were the same as in the first analysis. In these analyses, no gender interactions emerged, and no interactions emerged between trust and global perceptions of relationship quality. These interaction terms, therefore, were removed from the final models. The results of these analyses are presented in Table 7. One gender difference was found, indicating that men made more negative attributions for their partner's negative behaviors than did women. Consistent with Study 1, people who reported less trust also had more negative responses when they perceived their partners as behaving in a more negative manner toward them that day. Additionally, people lower in trust were more likely to make negative attributions regarding the motivations behind their

Table 5

Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Among the Predictor and Outcome Measures: Study 2

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Trust	.25**						
2. IOS	.30**	.21*					
3. Current Problems	−.40**	−.22*	.47**				
4. I-TAPS	−.54**	−.29**	.60**	.38**			
5. Disagree	−.34**	−.06	.30**	.49**	.20*		
6. Daily quality *SD*	−.33**	−.13	.44**	.50**	.43**	.51**	
7. Daily quality *M*	.51**	.25**	−.40**	−.43**	−.35**	−.55**	.62**
M	5.54	5.77	3.40	3.07	2.41	0.43	6.30
SD	0.85	1.01	1.39	1.25	0.72	0.30	0.72

Note. Values along the diagonal are correlations between the two dyad members' scores on that variable. IOS = Inclusion of the Other in Self Scale; I-TAPS = Integration of Thoughts About Partners Scale.
* $p < .05$.　** $p < .01$.

Table 6

Predicting Variability in the Dependent Variables Across the Diary Period: Study 2

Predictor variable	Variability in daily perceptions of relationship quality		
	b	SE	β
Intercept	0.43	.03	.00
Gender	0.04*	.02	.12
Actor trust	−0.07*	.03	−.20
Partner trust	−0.17***	.03	−.48
Actor IOS	−0.02	.02	−.03
Partner IOS	0.06**	.02	.19

Note. We report both unstandardized (*b*) and standardized (β) regression coefficients. Gender is coded 1 = women, −1 = men. IOS = Inclusion of Other in Self Scale (assessed before the diary period).
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

partner's negative behavior, and they felt that the reasons underlying their partner's behavior were more stable and global (i.e., affecting many areas of their relationship).

Parallel partner effects of trust also emerged in these analyses, indicating that people who had less trusting partners responded more negatively to their partner's transgressions and made more negative attributions regarding their partner's motivations underlying their partner's negative behavior. An actor effect of IOS also emerged, suggesting that people who reported greater perceived closeness made more negative attributions regarding the motivations for their partner's transgressions than did those who felt less close. This actor effect, however, did not emerge in a model where the only predictor variables were the actor and partner effects of IOS ($b = 0.11$), $t(60) = 1.24$, $p > .20$. Thus, the significant effect in the full model should be interpreted with caution.

Variability and other outcomes. We tested the third prediction with the final set of analyses, namely that greater variability in perceptions of relationship quality across the 21-day diary period should be associated with (a) greater salience of relationship problems, (b) more compartmentalized partner knowledge structures, and (c) stronger beliefs that disagreements with partners threaten relationship stability. To test these predictions, we estimated three models with scores on the Current Problems Scale

(Geiss & O'Leary, 1981), the I-TAPS, and the Disagreement is Destructive subscale as dependent variables. Each of the models was first run with the actor and partner effects of variability in perceptions of relationship quality entered as predictors, along with the actor and partner effects of the mean level of perceived relationship quality across the diary period. Interactions between variability and mean level of relationship quality were also entered in each model. In addition, gender was entered in each model, as were the interactions between gender and the other predictor variables. Because no significant interactions involving gender or the mean level of relationship quality were found, they were removed from the final models. The results of these analyses appear in Table 8.

As predicted, actor effects of variability in relationship quality emerged in all three analyses. Overall, individuals who experienced greater variability in relationship quality across the diary period reported more problems in their relationship, a more compartmentalized knowledge structure of their partners, and felt more threatened by disagreements with their partner. One partner effect of variability emerged, showing that individuals involved with partners who experienced greater variability in relationship quality across the diary period reported more compartmentalized knowledge structures of their partners. Lastly, actor effects of the mean level of relationship quality reported across the diary period emerged in two analyses. Specifically, individuals who reported higher average relationship quality across the diary period reported fewer problems in their relationships and had a less compartmentalized (more integrated) knowledge structure of their partner.

Exploratory analyses. As in Study 1, the zero-order correlations presented in Table 5 reveal significant, positive correlations between trust and the three self-reported outcomes in Study 2a. Less trusting individuals reported more problems in their relationship, more compartmentalized knowledge structures of their partners, and felt more threatened by disagreements with their partner. To test whether trust and variability uniquely predicted these outcomes, we ran models that included the actor and partner effects of both trust and variability in relationship evaluations, controlling for mean level of relationship quality. In these models, the actor effect of variability in relationship evaluations continued to significantly predict perceived relationship problems ($b = 1.19$), $t(120) = 2.65$, $p < .01$; scores on the I-TAPS scale ($b = 1.16$), $t(110) = 3.07$, $p <$

Table 7

Predicting Negative Response and Attributions for Partner's Negative Behaviors Across the Diary Period: Study 2

Predictor variable	Negative response to partner's behavior			Negative partner motivation			Stability and globality		
	b	SE	β	b	SE	β	b	SE	β
Intercept	2.53	.12	−.18	2.71	.11	−.15	3.74	.15	−.10
Gender	0.21	.10	.13	0.35***	.08	.24	0.08	.13	.05
Trust									
Actor effect	−0.42**	.14	−.21	−0.51***	.11	−.29	−0.38*	.17	−.20
Partner effect	−0.76***	.13	−.38	−0.44***	.10	−.25	−0.30†	.16	−.16
IOS									
Actor effect	0.07	.11	.04	0.29**	.09	.20	−0.05	.14	−.03
Partner effect	−0.01	.11	−.01	−0.05	.09	−.03	−0.11	.14	−.07

Note. We report both unstandardized (*b*) and standardized (β) regression coefficients.
† $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 8
Predicting Scores on the Outcomes Following the Diary Period: Study 2

Predictor variable	Problems			I-TAPS			Disagree		
	b	SE	β	*b*	SE	β	*b*	SE	β
Intercept	3.39	.13	.00	3.06	.10	−.01	2.41	.06	.00
Gender	0.08	.08	.06	0.06	.08	.05	−0.04	.06	−.05
Variability in perceived relationship quality across diary period									
Actor effect	1.36**	.43	.30	1.12**	.37	.27	0.71**	.25	.30
Partner effect	0.13	.43	.03	0.97*	.37	.24	0.23	.25	.09
Mean level of perceived relationship quality across diary period									
Actor effect	−0.35†	.19	−.18	−0.49**	.17	−.28	−0.19†	.11	−.19
Partner effect	−0.14	.19	−.07	0.26	.17	.15	0.05	.11	.05

Note. We report both unstandardized (*b*) and standardized (β) regression coefficients. I-TAPS = Integration of Thoughts About Partners Scale.
† *p* < .10.   *** *p* < .01.

.01; and beliefs that disagreements are bad for the relationship (*b* = 0.67), *t*(102) = 2.53, *p* < .05. The partner effect of variability predicting scores on the I-TAPS scale became nonsignificant (*b* = 0.40), *t*(110) = 1.06, *p* > .20. Parallel actor effects of trust also emerged in predicting perceived relationship problems (*b* = −0.41), *t*(115) = −2.63, *p* < .01; scores on the I-TAPS scale (*b* = −0.58), *t*(122) = −4.60, *p* < .001; and beliefs that disagreements are bad for the relationship (*b* = −0.18), *t*(121) = −2.09, *p* < .05. No partner effects of trust emerged.

In summary, these exploratory analyses indicate that actor trust and actor variability in relationship evaluations during the diary *independently* predicted all three Study 2a outcomes, controlling for mean level of relationship quality during the diary. That is, more turbulent relationship evaluations are associated with foreseeing more relationship problems, greater segregated thinking about one's partner, and stronger beliefs that disagreements are bad for the relationship, above and beyond how much individuals trust their partners.

Study 2b

One important and novel finding from Study 2a was that individuals who experienced greater variability in relationship quality during the diary period reported having more "compartmentalized" knowledge of their partners. According to Holmes and Rempel (1989), this mode of storing and processing relationship-relevant information may be one reason why certain people experience wider swings in daily relationship evaluations—they have more compartmentalized, segregated, and disconnected partner knowledge structures.

Study 2b was designed to test these notions experimentally. Specifically, individuals who took part in Study 2a also engaged in a reaction time decision task in which they had to decide as quickly and accurately as possible whether or not a series of words described their current partner. Each participant was presented with 10 words, five of which were positive, and five of which were negative. In one condition, the words were presented in an alternating order (i.e., positive, negative, positive, and so on). In a second condition, the words were presented in a nonalternating order (i.e., all positive words, followed by all negative words, or

vice versa). Using this paradigm, Graham and Clark (2006) have found that people who store positive and negative partner knowledge in a more compartmentalized manner (i.e., people with low self-esteem) take *longer* to make decisions when the positive and negative words are presented in an alternating order, presumably because they must switch memory stores to complete the task. Thus, in Study 2b, we predicted that individuals who reported greater variability in relationship quality during the diary period should be slower when deciding whether positive and negative words described (characterized) their current partner, particularly when the words were presented in an alternating order.

Method

Participants. The same 67 heterosexual couples who participated in Study 2a also participated in Study 2b after completing the diary portion of Study 2a.

Procedure. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions, with the partners of each couple being assigned to the same condition. The computer-based reaction time task was identical to the one developed by Graham and Clark (2006, Study 1). Participants were seated in front of a computer and told that words would appear on the screen. They were told that their task was to indicate as quickly and accurately as possible whether or not each word applied to (was characteristic of) their current partner. Participants were instructed to press the *S* key on the keyboard if the word applied to their partner and to press the *K* key if it did not. Words appeared on the screen one at a time and remained on the screen until participants responded. Response times and content (which key was pressed) were recorded on each trial. There were 10 trials, five on which the target word was positive and five on which it was negative. The positive words were *forgiving*, *caring*, *trustworthy*, *loyal*, and *understanding*. The negative words were *greedy*, *obnoxious*, *cruel*, *self-centered*, and *rejecting*. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions: the alternating word condition (in which the presentation order of the positive and negative words was PNPNPNPNPN, where P indicates positive and N indicates negative), or the segregated word condition (which had two subcategories: PPPPPNNNNN or NNNNNPPPPP). Within these con-

straints, specific words were presented in a randomly determined order (without replacement).

Following this first task, participants then completed a second reaction time task (the control task). This task was identical to the first one, except that participants were now asked to indicate whether a different set of five positive and five negative words appearing on the computer screen applied to (characterized) computers. Participants were assigned to the same alternating or nonalternating word order for both tasks. The five positive words for the computer task were *helpful*, *good*, *enjoyable*, *efficient*, and *productive*. The five negative words were *expensive*, *unreliable*, *annoying*, *confusing*, and *unpredictable*. Both tasks were conducted using DirectRT software (Jarvis, 2008).

Results and Discussion

Following the recommendations of Graham and Clark (2006), we treated the median response time for each participant for the positive and negative target words as the dependent variable. The first analysis focused on response times for the first task in which participants determined whether each positive and negative word described their partners. In this analysis, the actor and partner effects of variability in perceptions of relationship quality (collected in the diary phase of Study 2a) were entered as predictors, along with the actor and partner effects of the mean level of perceived relationship quality during the diary period (also collected in Study 2a). The experimental condition to which participants were randomly assigned (-1 = alternating, 1 = segregated) was effect coded. Interactions between variability, mean level of relationship quality, and experimental condition were also entered in the model. In addition, gender (women = 1, men = -1) was entered in each model, as were the interactions between gender and the other predictor variables. Given that gender did not interact with any of the other variables, it was dropped from the final model.

The expected two-way interaction between the actor effect of variability and experimental condition did not emerge, but a three-way interaction between the actor effects of variability and mean level of relationship quality with experimental condition did emerge (b = 440.44, SE = 202.54, β = .23, p < .05). We decomposed this interaction by assessing the two-way interaction between the actor effects of variability and mean level of relationship quality within each experimental condition. No interaction was found in the segregated condition (b = -276.53, β = $-.15$, p = .18), but, largely consistent with hypotheses, the interaction was significant in the alternating condition (b = 830.84, β = .44, p < .05).

As shown in Figure 1, this interaction is driven by the effect of variability in relationship quality for people who reported higher levels of relationship quality during the diary period (i.e., those scoring 1 SD above the mean). These individuals were slower when deciding whether the positive and negative words described their partner if they reported greater daily variability in relationship quality (1 SD above the mean). These individuals were considerably faster, however, if they reported less variability in relationship quality (1 SD below the mean). Thus, connections between variability in perceptions of relationship quality and how information about one's partner is stored and processed appear to depend on the general quality of the relationship. Specifically, individuals who have more positive relationship evaluations and less variable relationship evaluations tend to have more integrated knowledge structures of their partners. However, individuals who have positive relationship evaluations but more variable relationship evaluations have more compartmentalized knowledge structures of their partners. And when relationship evaluations are less positive, individuals have more compartmentalized knowledge structures of their partners, regardless of the variability of their relationship evaluations.

In the analysis predicting median response times in the second task in which participants determined whether each positive and
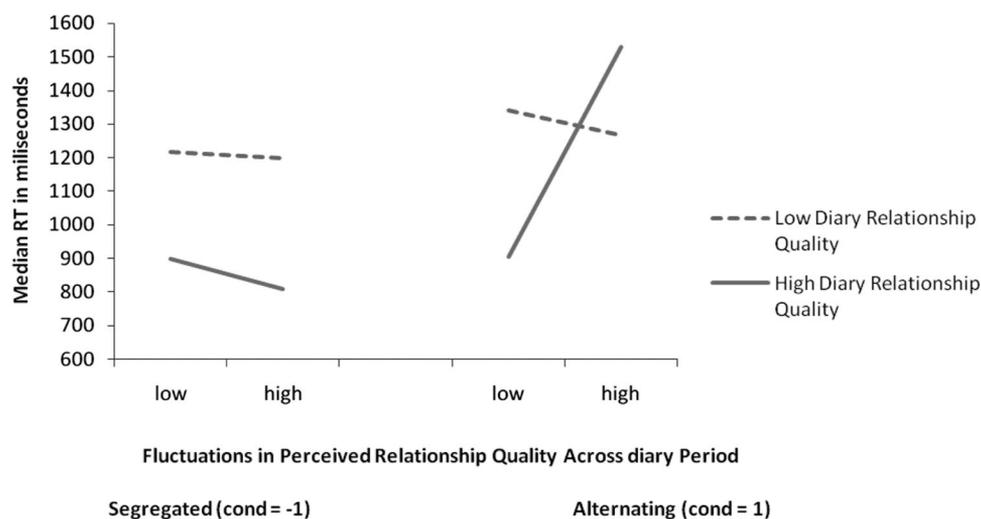

Figure 1. Interaction of experimental condition, fluctuations in relationship quality across the diary period, and mean level of relationship quality across the diary period, predicting median response times (RTs) on the decision-making task.

negative word described a computer, there were no significant predictors in the model. Deciding whether positive or negative words describe a computer, therefore, was not a function of experimental condition or people's reports of the quality of their relationship during the diary period.

General Discussion

To date, theories and models of how trust affects the way in which people think, feel, and behave in relationships has far outpaced actual empirical research (Simpson, 2007a). In addition, there has been a tendency in psychology to focus on statistical measures of central tendency, such as mean values, rather than on other important measures such as variability across time around mean values. This trend may have camouflaged certain variables that could be critical for understanding important sources of relationship quality and stability. Testing ideas proposed by Kelley (1983) and building on the important theoretical and empirical work of scholars such as Holmes and Rempel (1989) and Arriaga (2001), the present research documents several novel effects that add to researchers' understanding of how and why lower levels of trust and greater variability in daily perceptions of relationship quality are associated with poorer relationship outcomes.

Study 1 examined the role of variability in daily relationship perceptions in a 14-day diary study, which was followed by a videotaped conflict resolution discussion in which couples tried to resolve the most major problem from the diary period. Supporting the first set of predictions, individuals who trusted their partners more reported less variability in perceptions of relationship quality across the diary period, controlling for the mean level of relationship quality reported by both dyad members prior to the diary period. Moreover, the trust partner effect for men revealed that men who were involved with more trusting partners reported more stable relationship quality across time, independent of their own self-reported levels of trust. Women's reports of variability in relationship quality, however, were not directly associated with their partner's level of trust. Because women usually maintain and control the affective tone of relationships more than men (Acitelli, 2001), women's level of trust may convey doubts or happiness more directly to their partners than does men's level of trust. This conjecture is speculative, and in Study 2 the partner effect of trust was not moderated by gender. Future research should more formally test this possibility.

Supporting the second set of predictions, less trusting individuals reported greater negative reactivity to daily relationship-based conflict than did more trusting individuals. That is, less trusting individuals felt that relationship-based conflicts forecasted a relatively more destructive future for the relationship. Being more reactive to daily relationship conflicts is one way that less trusting individuals can experience greater volatility in perceptions of relationship quality over short periods of time.

Consistent with the third set of predictions, greater variability in perceptions of relationship quality during the diary period in Study 1 was associated with partners' interpersonal behaviors during the conflict resolution task, as well as self-reported distress following the task. Controlling for the mean level of relationship quality reported by both dyad members from the diary period, individuals who reported greater variability in perceptions during the diary period were rated as behaving more destructively toward their

partners during the conflict task and displayed marginally less positive emotions. Individuals who reported greater variability also reported greater distress at the conclusion of the conflict task. Furthermore, individuals whose *partners* reported being more variable during the diary period enacted more destructive behaviors during the conflict resolution task. Thus, greater day-to-day variability in relationship perceptions may reflect a systematic pattern of poor conflict resolution in relationships, which we believe was captured in the observer-rated conflict discussions.

It is important to emphasize that all of these effects held when both partners' degree of emotional stability (neuroticism) and mean levels of relationship quality (assessed both before and during the diary periods) were statistically controlled. This discriminant validity evidence suggests that the deleterious effects of greater variability in daily relationship perceptions may be directly tied to the working models and behavioral patterns of less trusting individuals.

These predictions were replicated and extended in Study 2a, which was a 21-day diary study involving cohabiting couples. Study 2a extended the Study 1 results by documenting that people experienced greater variability in relationship evaluations when they, and their partners, reported relatively lower levels of trust. They also responded to their partner's negative interpersonal behavior in a more destructive manner, feeling that these events forecasted less positive relationship futures, and attributing more negative intentions to their partner's behaviors. Additionally, individuals who experienced greater variability in relationship quality during the diary period (a) reported more problems in their relationships, (b) had more compartmentalized knowledge structure of their partners, and (c) felt more threatened by disagreements with their partners. Study 2b, in which we used a response time decision task involving the participants from Study 2a, revealed that the association between variability in daily perceptions of relationship quality and how information about one's partner is cognitively stored and processed depends on the general quality of the relationship. Specifically, when relationships are higher in quality, greater variability in relationship evaluations over time is associated with compartmentalized knowledge structures of the partner's positive and negative qualities. We are not entirely sure why this pattern of effects did not emerge for individuals who reported lower levels of relationship quality across the diary period. Future research needs to confirm whether and why these results might be specific to individuals who hold their partners or relationships in greater esteem.

In what follows, we first highlight how and why these findings extend researchers' understanding of dyadic trust. Next, we discuss how and why greater variability in daily relationship perceptions is harmful to relationships. We conclude by discussing limitations and caveats.

How do the Findings Extend Researchers' Understanding of Trust?

The results of these studies fit well with recent conceptualizations of and research on dyadic trust. According to Holmes and Rempel (1989), individuals involved in relationships defined by greater trust have more positive, well-integrated, and well-balanced working models of themselves and their partners. These largely positive and balanced working models allow more trusting

individuals to have more benevolent expectations for their partners and relationships, which should facilitate more constructive, problem-focused behavioral styles of resolving relationship problems.

In contrast, individuals involved in relationships characterized by lower levels of trust (i.e., medium-trust individuals in our samples) have more guarded views of their partners, especially their partner's global relationship goals and motives (Holmes & Rempel, 1989). As a consequence, less trusting individuals tend to monitor and occasionally test their partner's degree of support and responsiveness, even if such tests might confirm their worst fears (i.e., losing their partners/relationships; Simpson, 2007a). These chronic uncertainties should trigger or perpetuate distress-maintaining attributions, whereby the implications of ambiguous or possibly negative partner behaviors become more salient and are exaggerated. Such cognitive tendencies, in turn, may also be fueled by a short-term "myopic" analysis of the meaning of positive and negative events that occur in the relationship each day (cf. Campbell, Simpson, Boldry, & Kashy, 2005). Compared with a longer term focus devoted to achieving major relationship goals and objectives, a short-term myopic focus ought to generate anger or other dysfunctional behaviors, especially when problems or issues that could threaten the relationship arise.

Recent empirical research on trust supports many of these conjectures. More trusting individuals, for example, typically do harbor more optimistic and benevolent expectations regarding their partner's relationship motives, they make more positive attributions for their partner's behaviors, and they have more integrated and well-balanced working models that are open to assimilating new information (Rempel et al., 2001). More trusting individuals also tend to disregard, discount, or downplay their partner's negative relationship-relevant actions, which isolates and minimizes the potentially negative impact of occasional partner indiscretions (Holmes & Rempel, 1989). In addition, they evaluate their partners more positively, not only when they recall positive or neutral relationship experiences, but especially when they recount *negative* relationship experiences (Holmes & Rempel, 1989). Indeed, when more trusting individuals encounter relationship threats, they typically step back and consider their partner's broader benevolent goals and motives in the context of the longer term goals of the relationship (Holmes, 1991). Viewed together, this constellation of motivations and cognitive tendencies should "stabilize" more trusting individuals' daily perceptions of their relationships, resulting in less daily variability in relationship perceptions and more functional and constructive emotions and behaviors when major relationship conflicts surface.

Less trusting individuals involved in long-term relationships (i.e., medium-trust individuals) have more negative and less coherent working models in which relationship hopes and fears are intermingled in strange and sometimes contradictory ways with relationship goals and behaviors (Simpson, 2007a). Less trusting individuals often get trapped in strong approach/avoidance situations in which positive partner behaviors are seen as hopeful signs of possible relationship improvement, yet any hint of possible negative behavior is taken as clear evidence that relationship problems might be imminent. For this reason, less trusting individuals monitor their partners and relationships closely and may occasionally test for evidence of their partner's continued care, concern, and responsiveness (Holmes, 1991; Simpson, 2007a).

Ironically, this hypervigilance may lead less trusting individuals to perceive or unwittingly create the very negative relationship outcomes they wish to avoid.

When less trusting individuals recall positive relationship events, they often judge their partner's behavior positively yet make cynical attributions for the higher level motives that underlie their partner's actions (Holmes & Rempel, 1986; Rempel et al., 2001). In other words, less trusting individuals superficially acknowledge their partner's positive actions but do not acknowledge that their partner's motives might actually be constructive or benevolent. As a consequence, even positive partner actions may trigger latent worries about what could eventually "go wrong" in the minds of less trusting people, a process that is likely to impede or derail the development of what they crave the most—deeper intimacy and greater security. Thus, when less trusting individuals confront relationship threats, it may be more difficult for them to envision their partner's broader relationship goals and motives within a benevolent, longer term perspective (Holmes, 1991; Kelley, 1983). This cluster of motivations and cognitive tendencies ought to destabilize less trusting individuals' relationship perceptions, resulting in more daily vari\ability in relationship perceptions and more volatile and dysfunctional emotions and behaviors, particularly when relationship conflicts arise.

Variability in Relationship Perceptions and Psychological Processes in Relationships

Part of the variability in daily relationship perceptions is attributable to specific relationship-relevant characteristics of actors or their partners, such as each dyad member's level of trust. We also suspect that some of this variability stems from current events outside the relationship (e.g., stressful experiences at work, at school, etc.), events that are happening within the relationship (e.g., recent issues that heighten or dampen variability in actors or partners), or emergent properties of the relationship (e.g., specific if/then patterns of interaction, such as when the actor does X, the partner does Y, which keeps variability in relationship perceptions high or low over time). Our results, however, suggest that greater daily variability in perceptions of relationship quality can be detrimental to relationships and that trust is a central and powerful predictor of variability in relationship quality over short time periods.

From the vantage point of individuals who experience greater daily variability in relationship perceptions, the primary source of relationship dissatisfaction and instability most likely stems from the nature of their working models (see above) and how these models are translated into feelings and behaviors that further stabilize or destabilize the relationship across time. Kelley (1983) claimed that greater variability in relationship perceptions should make most relationships less happy and more unstable, partly by igniting uncertainties about the future viability of the relationship, and partly by encouraging closer scrutiny of what could be right—and especially what may be wrong—with the current partner or relationship. Greater variability in relationship evaluations may also signal changes in the presence or severity of relationship problems relative to relationship assets or strengths (Kelley, 1983). To complicate matters, greater variability may also raise questions or doubts about the future of the relationship, which may lead less trusting persons to envision negative or worst-case scenarios about

what the future may hold. Whatever the specific pathways, greater variability in relationship perceptions is likely to be both an outcome as well as a source of relationship difficulties (Kelley, 1983).

What might account for the negative reactions of the *partners* of individuals who have more variable relationship perceptions? The partners of more variable individuals are, in effect, dealing with "moving targets" in terms of trying to predict and understand when and why their highly variable mates are reacting and behaving as they are each day. Having to understand and manage a moving target every day is not only demanding cognitively and emotionally, it may also lead the partners of highly variable individuals to question what role they (partners) might be playing in causing or perpetuating turbulence within the relationship. If it is persistent, such questioning may lead the partners of highly variable people— even if they are more trusting—to focus on, monitor, and evaluate even relatively minor daily relationship events, to distort or over-interpret the meaning of ambivalent actions displayed by their partners, or to suspend making positive, benign attributions for ambiguous or questionable partner acts (cf. Kelley, 1983). The partners of individuals (actors) who report greater daily variability in relationship perceptions, in other words, may begin to think, feel, and behave more like less trusting people the longer they remain in relationships with more variable individuals.

Caveats and Conclusions

Our research findings need to be interpreted in light of some caveats. First, given the correlational nature of the data, causal conclusions cannot be made. Second, as discussed in the introduction, it is probable that connections between daily variability in relationship perceptions and relationship outcomes reflect a cyclical or reciprocal process, whereby greater perceptual variability has a negative effect on relationship quality and stability, which in turn increases variability in relationship perceptions, and so on to some stabilization point. Third, although the present results are not attributable to neuroticism or mean levels of relationship quality, other constructs that correlate with dyadic trust could explain some of our findings.

Caveats notwithstanding, this study contributes to researchers' knowledge and understanding of romantic relationships in several novel ways. It is the first research to demonstrate empirically that less trusting individuals do indeed experience greater fluctuations in relationship quality over short periods of time. Indeed, less trusting individuals are more reactive to daily negative relationship events. It also demonstrates some of the behavioral and psychological processes associated with experiencing greater variability in relationship evaluations over short periods of time, processes that are potentially destructive for the future of the relationship. In doing so, the present research indicates that variability in perceptions of relationship quality over time should not be construed or treated as error variance around a mean score; rather, it needs to be modeled as an important psychological and behavioral phenomenon in its own right.

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