

Wanting to Stay and Wanting to Go: Unpacking the Content and Structure of Relationship Stay/Leave Decision Processes

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Samantha Joel¹, Geoff MacDonald², and Elizabeth Page-Gould²

Abstract

The present research examined the subjective experience of deciding whether or not to end a romantic relationship. In Study 1, open-ended reasons for wanting to stay in a relationship versus leave were provided by three samples and categorized by trained coders, resulting in 27 distinct reasons for wanting to stay (e.g., emotional intimacy, investment) and 23 reasons for wanting to leave (e.g., conflict, breach of trust). In Study 2, we examined endorsement of specific stay/leave reasons among participants currently contemplating either a breakup or a divorce. Most stay and leave reasons mapped onto global ratings of satisfaction and commitment. Attachment anxiety was associated with stronger endorsement of many reasons for wanting to both stay and leave. Further, many participants were simultaneously motivated to both stay in their relationships and leave, suggesting that ambivalence is a common experience for those who are thinking about ending their relationships.

Keywords

romantic relationships, judgment and decision-making, motivation/goals, breakups, divorce

Deciding whether to end a relationship can be an agonizing experience. On the one hand, people have a strong drive to maintain attachments to romantic partners (Fraley, Brumbaugh, & Marks, 2005). People may wish to maintain their relationship due to approach-based reasons such as feelings of love and closeness with their partner (e.g., Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992; Simpson, 1987), or due to avoidance-based reasons such as lacking alternatives to their current partner (Rusbult, 1980, 1983). On the other hand, many couples face serious relationship problems that can make even longstanding relationships feel unsalvageable. Relationships often dissolve due to important issues such as infidelity (e.g., Hall & Fincham, 2006), alcohol abuse (e.g., Collins, Ellickson, & Klein, 2007), low sexual satisfaction (e.g., Sprecher, 2002), and unmet emotional needs (e.g., Connolly & McIsaac, 2009).

These specific considerations regarding maintaining or ending a relationship have the potential to operate simultaneously within a relationship and may thus exert conflicting pressures on relationship satisfaction, commitment, and stay/leave decisions. For example, a relationship may involve both a high degree of closeness *and* the occurrence of infidelity; high investment *and* low sexual satisfaction; or low quality of alternatives *and* the presence of alcohol abuse. Over and above whether a person ultimately chooses to stay or leave, the degree of ambivalence experienced regarding the choice may have important psychological implications for the decision-maker. Research from the fields of both judgment and decision-making (JDM; e.g., van Harreveld, Rutjens,

Rotteveel, Nordgren, & van der Pligt, 2009) and close relationships (e.g., Uchino et al., 2012) shows that ambivalence is a deeply unpleasant experience with negative consequences for health and well-being. Conflicting feelings about relationships are difficult to capture with global constructs (e.g., Joel, MacDonald, & Shimotomai, 2011); however, examining the concrete factors that play into people's thought processes may reveal the specific sources of decision conflict that can make stay/leave decisions so challenging.

Specific Reasons for Wanting to Stay and Wanting to Leave

People put considerable conscious thought into romantic relationship stay/leave decisions. Dissolution consideration—active thinking about ending the relationship—is a crucial mediating step between low commitment and breakups (VanderDrift, Agnew, & Wilson, 2009). But what, exactly, are people deliberating about? Some studies have explored people's specific reasons for ending their relationships; that is, the

¹ Department of Psychology, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT, USA

² University of Toronto, Toronto, ON, Canada

Corresponding Author:

Samantha Joel, Department of Psychology, University of Utah, 380 South 1530 East, Salt Lake City, UT 84112, USA.

Email: samantha.joel@psych.utah.edu

causes of the breakup (Connolly & McIsaac, 2009; Sprecher, 1994) or the divorce from the participant's perspective (Cohen & Finzi-Dottan, 2012; Hopper, 1993). However, these studies rely on retrospective reports, meaning that the reasons provided are likely to have been reconstructed post-hoc (Amato & Previti, 2003; Hopper, 1993). Examining how people find meaning in the wake of relationship dissolution is valuable in its own right (e.g., Park, 2010); however, these narratives do not necessarily reflect the deliberative processes that preceded the breakup. The first goal of the present article was thus descriptive: What is the content of people's stay/leave decision processes? In three of five samples, we addressed the limitations of retrospective accounts by recruiting potential breakup initiators prospectively—when they were still deciding whether to stay or leave—and examined their specific reasons both for wanting to stay and wanting to leave.

A second goal of the present research was to examine how specific stay/leave reasons would map onto global, theoretically driven representations of relationship quality. Work on stay/leave decisions has been powerfully informed by the investment model (Rusbult, 1983), which posits that people are dependent on and thus committed to the relationship to the extent that relationship satisfaction is high, the quality of relationship alternatives is low, and important relationship investments have been made that would be lost if the relationship ended. The predictive power of the investment model has been replicated extensively: Commitment is one of the best psychological predictors of whether a relationship remains intact long-term (Le & Agnew, 2003; Le, Dove, Agnew, Korn, & Mutso, 2010). However, beyond its predictive validity, the investment model offers intriguing insights about the stay/leave decision process, as people are proposed to make careful trade-offs between rewards and costs to arrive at overall evaluations of relationship quality. This relative weighting of different features of the relationship suggests a potential for decision conflict that is not necessarily captured by the global investment model constructs.

Stay/Leave Decision Conflict

Taking a fine-grained approach to stay/leave decisions allows for an examination of decision conflict, experienced subjectively as feelings of ambivalence about whether to stay or leave. Ambivalence in the context of close relationships is linked to a range of negative health outcomes (Holt-Lunstad, Uchino, Smith, & Hicks, 2007; Uchino et al., 2012). For example, one study showed that simultaneous feelings of positivity and negativity toward a spouse are associated with higher risk of coronary artery disease (Uchino, Smith, & Berg, 2014). In the context of JDM research, ambivalence predicts physiological arousal and negative emotions (van Harreveld et al., 2009), more thorough, careful processing of information (Maio, Bell, & Esses, 1996; Nordgren, van Harreveld, & van der Pligt, 2006), and greater susceptibility to persuasion (Armitage & Conner, 2000). Together, these literatures suggest that ambivalence over stay/leave decisions is likely to be unpleasant, difficult, and detrimental to the self.

Anxiously attached individuals—those who are chronically concerned about the availability of close others (Hazan & Shaver, 1987)—may be particularly prone to ambivalence over whether to remain with their romantic partners. Anxiously attached individuals tend to hold conflicting attitudes toward partners (MacDonald, Locke, Spielmann, & Joel, 2013; Mikulincer, Shaver, Bar-On, & Ein-Dor, 2010) and toward commitment specifically (Joel et al., 2011). On one hand, anxiously attached individuals strongly desire committed relationships (Feeney & Noller, 1990), and they tend to rely heavily on their partners for validation (e.g., Collins & Read, 1990; Shaver, Schachner, & Mikulincer, 2005); these factors may motivate anxiously attached individuals to stay with their partners. On the other hand, anxiously attached individuals are prone to many sources of relationship negativity, such as conflict (e.g., Campbell, Simpson, Boldry, & Kashy, 2005), and rejection concerns (e.g., Downey & Feldman, 1996), which may simultaneously motivate anxiously attached individuals to end their relationships.

We examined the prevalence of conflicting pressures on stay/leave decisions in the present article. We predicted that many participants—particularly anxiously attached individuals—would simultaneously possess many reasons for wanting to both stay in their relationships and leave, indicative of ambivalence, rather than possessing few reasons for wanting to stay or leave, indicative of indifference. By examining the specific concerns that are salient to decision-makers, we hoped to identify competing relationship pressures that can make stay/leave decisions especially challenging.

The Present Research

The present research integrates close relationships and JDM approaches (Joel, MacDonald, & Plaks, 2013) to examine the content and structure of people's stay/leave decision processes. In Study 1, we approached this research question qualitatively, with minimal assumptions about which relationship issues would be most salient to people. Three samples of participants generated reasons to stay in a relationship versus leave, which were categorized by trained coders. In Study 2, we converted the stay/leave reasons identified in Study 1 into quantitative scale items and administered them to two samples of people currently questioning their relationships. We suspected that relationship satisfaction and commitment would be associated with many reasons to both stay *and* leave, demonstrating how specific relationship features can exert conflicting pressures on global relationship assessments. We predicted that attachment anxiety would be associated with many reasons to both stay and leave, indicative of ambivalence. Finally, we predicted that a high percentage of participants would be simultaneously motivated to both stay in their relationships and leave, demonstrating the prevalence of ambivalence more generally among people who are thinking about ending their relationships. Materials for all studies can be viewed at <https://osf.io/u9dfx/>, and additional demographic information can be viewed in the Supplemental Materials.

Study I

Method

Participants and Procedure

The initial study was conducted by sampling from three populations. Participants were told that the researchers wanted to understand what motivates people to stay in relationships versus leave. Sample A participants generated stay reasons (“What are some reasons someone might give for wanting to stay with their romantic partner?”), followed by leave reasons. Participants in the other samples were given similar instructions, worded to be about their own former (Sample B), or current (Sample C) relationship experiences.

Sample A. Undergraduate students generated reasons why a person might be motivated to stay in a relationship versus leave. A total of 135 students (64 men) with an average age of 20 years ($SD = 1.92$) participated for course credit during the Winter 2010 semester; 65 participants were single and 70 were in romantic relationships (mean relationship length = 17 months, $SD = 20.86$). Participants provided an average of 7.10 stay reasons ($SD = 3.92$), and 6.57 leave reasons ($SD = 3.78$), with 132 participants (98%) providing at least one of each.

Sample B. We recruited 137 undergraduate students over the course of two semesters (Fall 2010 and Winter 2011) who had previously contemplated a breakup. One did not provide open-ended responses, leaving 136 participants (46 men) with an average age of 19.5 years ($SD = 8.81$); 74 participants were single, 36 were still with the partners they contemplated leaving, and 26 were in new relationships. Of those in relationships, 59 were dating, two were common-law, and one was married. Participants’ breakup contemplation experiences had occurred an average of 11 months prior to study participation ($SD = 13.52$ months), at which point they had a mean relationship length of 16 months ($SD = 16.21$ months). Participants provided an average of 3.31 stay reasons ($SD = 1.99$), and leave reasons ($SD = 1.83$), with 134 participants (99%) providing at least one of each.

Sample C. The third sample consisted of American Mechanical Turk workers who were *currently* contemplating a breakup. Participants “currently questioning whether or not to stay in their romantic relationships” were recruited over a 3-week period in Summer 2011 and were compensated 35 cents for participating. A total of 175 participant responses were read and coded.¹ Of those participants, 4 provided meaningless answers (e.g., one participant wrote “e” in response to each question) and were discarded. The final sample was 171 participants (63 men) with an average age of 31.7 years ($SD = 10.69$). Participants had been in their relationship for an average of 46 months ($SD = 58.36$); 124 were dating, 13 were common-law, 30 were married, and 4 declined to answer. Participants provided an average of 3.68 stay reasons ($SD = 2.06$), and 3.54 leave reasons ($SD = 1.76$), with 167 participants (98%) providing at least one of each.

Coding Strategy

The first author and a research colleague read a random subset of Sample A responses and created a coding scheme of stay and leave reasons based on recurring themes. Inverse stay and leave reasons were used wherever possible. For example, “Partner Personality” was included as both a stay reason (desirable traits) and as a leave reason (undesirable traits). The resulting coding scheme included 25 different reasons for wanting to stay and 23 reasons for wanting to leave, as well as an uncodable category for particularly idiosyncratic or ambiguous responses.

Two research assistants, blind to the hypotheses of the study, coded the open-ended responses from each sample using the coding scheme. Based on new recurring themes in Samples B and C, the coders added two stay reasons—concern for the partner (e.g., not wanting to hurt partner) and optimism (e.g., hope that the partner will change)—and two new leave reasons—concern for the partner (e.g., not wanting to hold the partner back) and general frustration (e.g., feeling irritated by the partner). We tested interrater agreement using a two-way mixed, absolute agreement, single-measures intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC), appropriate for count data (McGraw & Wong, 1996). Interrater reliability ranged from $ICC = .92$ to $.99$ across the three samples. Disagreements were resolved by the first author.

Results and Discussion

Reasons to stay in a relationship versus leave are listed in Tables 1 and 2, respectively. Across samples, the most common reason for wanting to stay in a relationship was emotional intimacy (e.g., feeling close to the partner), mentioned by 66% of Sample A, 50% of Sample B, and 53% of Sample C. Breach of trust (e.g., partner being deceptive or unfaithful) was commonly mentioned across all three samples as a reason for leaving the relationship (47% of Sample A, 21% of Sample B; 30% of Sample C).

Many of the reasons mentioned by participants for wanting to stay versus leave mirror constructs that psychologists have studied in the context of relationship stability. Investment was represented by stay categories such as “logistical barriers” and “habituation,” whereas quality of alternatives was represented by the leave category “pursuit of other opportunities” (Rusbult, 1983). Social network support (Lehmiller & Agnew, 2006) was represented both as a reason to stay (“social pressures”) and as a reason to leave (“social consequences”). Responsiveness (Reis, Clark, & Holmes, 2004) was represented by the stay category “validation” and by the leave category “lack of validation.” Self-expansion (Aron & Aron, 1986) was represented by the stay category “improvement of self” and by the leave category “hindering of self-improvement.” Relationship expectations (Lemay, 2016) were represented by the stay category “optimism” and the leave category “problems with long-term prospects.” These data therefore suggest that contemporary theorizing on relationship maintenance reflects not just

Table 1. Reasons for Wanting to Stay in Romantic Relationships.

Category	Description (As Used by Coders)	Participants With at least One Response Coded in the Category			Total responses coded in the category		
		Sample A (N = 135)	Sample B (N = 136)	Sample C (N = 171)	Sample A (N = 970)	Sample B (N = 450)	Sample C (N = 630)
Emotional Intimacy	For example, you love each other, you feel close, you can share things with them, you have a great connection, you share an attachment or bond, friendship	89 (66%)	68 (50%)	90 (53%)	130 (13%)	84 (19%)	104 (20%)
Emotional Investment	For example, not wanting to lose out on what you've already put into the relationship, nostalgia over the time you've already shared together—here, the emphasis has to be on not wanting to lose investments rather than on a general avoidance of change	15 (11%)	34 (28%)	39 (23%)	18 (2%)	38 (8%)	47 (9%)
Family Duty	Commitment or feelings of obligation to family, have to stay for the marriage/kids/family, marriage, divorce is wrong, anything with an empathic or moral tone related to family commitment	32 (24%)	0 (0%)	34 (20%)	39 (4%)	0 (0%)	39 (7%)
Partner's Personality	Listing desirable qualities that the partner has that could draw you to stay. Please note that personality traits are coded separately	15 (11%)	33 (24%)	30 (18%)	37 (4%)	57 (13%)	61 (12%)
Enjoyment	You have a lot of fun together, you have great conversation, you enjoy spending time together, you're drawn to each other, you look forward to doing exciting new things together	28 (21%)	21 (15%)	27 (16%)	35 (3%)	24 (5%)	35 (7%)
Emotional Security	Anything related to feeling safe and supported, for example, to be cared for, to be taken care of, they're always there for you, you can rely on them	66 (49%)	21 (15%)	26 (15%)	86 (9%)	26 (6%)	32 (6%)
Physical Intimacy	For example, sex, cuddling, physical closeness—note that this covers mutual intimacy	47 (35%)	7 (5%)	22 (13%)	55 (6%)	7 (2%)	22 (4%)
Financial Benefits	For example, money, material things, financial prospects that are associated with staying in a relationship	40 (30%)	0 (0%)	22 (13%)	41 (4%)	0 (0%)	23 (4%)
Compatibility	For example, you have the same interests, same hobbies, you get along well	22 (16%)	12 (9%)	21 (13%)	28 (3%)	16 (4%)	24 (5%)
Concern for Partner	For example, guilt, not wanting to hurt partner, partner needs you, committed to partner. Anything with an empathic or moral tone related to concern for partner	NA	20 (15%)	20 (12%)	NA	21 (5%)	17 (3%)
Optimism	Optimism in the relationship, hope that the partner will change, hope that the relationship will improve, belief that things will get better. Future-oriented.	NA	22 (16%)	19 (11%)	NA	23 (5%)	19 (4%)
Validation	For example, they make you feel good about yourself, they understand you, they respect you, they "get" you. Anything related to "belonging"	33 (24%)	6 (4%)	18 (11%)	39 (4%)	6 (1%)	19 (4%)
Dependence	For example, to avoid being alone, single, need for a partner or a relationship, attachment, neediness, dependence on the partner or relationship. The emphasis is on the need to be in a relationship or the fear of not being in a relationship or being alone	50 (37%)	20 (15%)	17 (10%)	68 (7%)	23 (5%)	21 (4%)
Attraction	They're good-looking, you find them attractive, you're attracted to them, you feel a "spark." Covers physical aspects of the partner	29 (21%)	15 (11%)	14 (8%)	33 (3%)	15 (3%)	15 (3%)
General satisfaction	Involves general satisfaction with the relationship or the partner. Relationship makes me happy, partner is "the one," references to soul mates	34 (25%)	13 (10%)	14 (8%)	42 (4%)	14 (3%)	14 (3%)

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

Category	Description (As Used by Coders)	Participants With at least One Response Coded in the Category			Total responses coded in the category		
		Sample A (N = 135)	Sample B (N = 136)	Sample C (N = 171)	Sample A (N = 970)	Sample B (N = 450)	Sample C (N = 630)
Comparison of alternatives	Fear of not finding anyone else (e.g., there probably isn't anyone else better, at some point you have to settle, this is as good as it gets)	24 (18%)	7 (5%)	13 (8%)	27 (3%)	7 (2%)	14 (3%)
Logistical barriers	Involves shared assets. For example, breaking up would involve mundane hassles like having to move, having to split up your stuff, who's going to get the pet?, etc.	7 (5%)	2 (1%)	12 (7%)	8 (1%)	2 (.4%)	13 (2%)
Fear of uncertainty	Need to avoid change due to fear of unknown. For example, reference to a fear of the unknown, fear of change. The focus is on the threat, scariness of leaving because of not knowing what will happen.	7 (5%)	5 (4%)	11 (6%)	7 (1%)	5 (1%)	11 (2%)
Social connections	For example, relationships with partner's family, friends	8 (6%)	14 (10%)	11 (6%)	8 (1%)	15 (3%)	12 (2%)
Comfort	Comfort undefined, without elaboration. Anything related to comfort in a relationship, for example, comfort, feeling comfortable, they are comfortable	23 (17%)	11 (8%)	11 (6%)	24 (2%)	11 (2%)	11 (2%)
Habituation	Reluctance to change, satisfaction with the way things are. For example, you're used to being with the person, it's easier than looking for someone else—anything suggesting a lack of motivation to change	25 (19%)	9 (7%)	9 (5%)	27 (3%)	9 (2%)	9 (2%)
Companionship	For example, to have someone to do things with, to have someone to share experiences with. The emphasis is on wanting "someone" rather than the qualities of the relationship with this person specifically	23 (17%)	8 (6%)	7 (4%)	27 (3%)	9 (2%)	7 (1%)
Long-term orientation	For example, you have dreams together, you've talked about building a life together, you can see a future with your partner specifically potential/future investment into the notion of what could be. Less pragmatic/more abstract than prospects, more about the hopes that you've built with the person	15 (11%)	5 (4%)	5 (3%)	16 (2%)	5 (1%)	5 (1%)
Long-term prospects	How the relationship fits in with other life goals, for example, they would make a good husband/wife, you have the same long-term goals, you both want children, they will be able to support you financially. The emphasis is on the compatibility in terms of long-term goals	8 (6%)	0 (0%)	5 (3%)	9 (1%)	0 (0%)	6 (1%)
Social pressure	For example, your parents or friends would disapprove of a breakup, it would make things awkward with mutual friends, you feel like everyone expects you to be in a relationship, people expect you to stay	33 (24%)	10 (7%)	3 (2%)	41 (4%)	11 (2%)	3 (.6%)
Self-improvement	For example, partner makes me want to be a better person, is a good influence on me	10 (7%)	1 (1%)	2 (1%)	11 (1%)	1 (.2%)	3 (.6%)
Social status	For example, status from the relationship, popularity, prestige, it makes you look good to be with this person, how this relationship will help you advance career-wise	18 (13%)	3 (2%)	1 (.6%)	20 (2%)	3 (.7%)	1 (.2%)
Uncodable	It's ambiguous what they mean, or none of the categories fit	62 (46%)	16 (13%)	33 (19%)	94 (10%)	18 (4%)	43 (8%)

Note. Reasons are listed from most to least commonly mentioned among participants in Sample C (those currently contemplating a breakup).

Table 2. Reasons for Wanting to Leave Romantic Relationships.

Category	Description (As Used by Coders)	Participants With At Least One Response Coded in the Category			Total responses coded in the category		
		Sample A (N = 135)	Sample B (N = 136)	Sample C (N = 171)	Sample A (N = 887)	Sample B (N = 451)	Sample C (N = 605)
Partner's personality	Partner flaws that could make a person want to leave. For example, this person is lazy, boring, too flaky. Has to be about the partner him or herself and not a product of the two individuals or the relationship as a whole	29 (22%)	27 (20%)	51 (30%)	46 (5%)	39 (9%)	90 (15%)
Breach of trust	The partner was deceptive, the partner cheated or was suspected of cheating, couldn't trust the partner.	64 (47%)	28 (21%)	51 (30%)	79 (9%)	36 (8%)	67 (11%)
Partner withdrawal	The partner is no longer supportive, no longer committed, seems to be losing interest, isn't affectionate anymore. Different from loss of attraction or emotional distance in that it is clearly the partner who is withdrawing	16 (12%)	14 (10%)	30 (18%)	18 (2%)	15 (3%)	37 (6%)
External reason	Environmental influences, for example, someone had to move away. Anything that's outside the relationship or outside of both partners' control	25 (19%)	53 (39%)	29 (17%)	28 (3%)	57 (12%)	30 (5%)
Physical distance	Bad sex life, no sex life, not enough physical affection	29 (22%)	9 (7%)	28 (16%)	31 (3%)	9 (2%)	30 (5%)
Conflict	Too much arguing, we aren't getting along, fighting all the time—different from incompatibility in that the emphasis is on the frequency and unpleasantness of the conflict as opposed to a root "lack of fit" problem	40 (30%)	25 (18%)	27 (16%)	40 (5%)	27 (6%)	28 (5%)
Incompatibility	You don't see eye-to-eye, different lifestyles, you have different values, diverging personalities, you don't get along	54 (40%)	17 (13%)	27 (16%)	72 (8%)	22 (5%)	32 (5%)
Emotional distance	Feelings of distance, we never talk anymore, fell out of love, we just grew apart, not enough closeness	55 (41%)	37 (27%)	24 (14%)	68 (8%)	41 (9%)	30 (5%)
Lack of validation	For example, you don't feel appreciated, respected, understood, you don't feel heard, you feel taken for granted	13 (10%)	9 (7%)	22 (13%)	13 (1%)	9 (2%)	26 (4%)
Lack of financial benefits	Lack of financial benefits or prospects (i.e., money, material things) associated with being in a relationship	12 (9%)	0 (0%)	19 (11%)	12 (1%)	0 (0%)	19 (4%)
Lack of enjoyment	The relationship got stale, boring, you're no longer getting anything out of it, things aren't fun anymore	40 (30%)	11 (8%)	18 (11%)	46 (5%)	12 (3%)	22 (4%)
Problems with long-term prospects	One person wants kids and another doesn't, long-term goals diverge, they won't make a good parent, doesn't fit with your other life plans	30 (22%)	12 (9%)	17 (10%)	33 (4%)	13 (3%)	17 (3%)
General dissatisfaction	Involves general dissatisfaction with the relationship or the partner. For example, relationship makes me unhappy, unsatisfied with relationship, references to partner not being "the one" or not being soul mates	21 (16%)	11 (8%)	17 (10%)	22 (2%)	12 (3%)	17 (3%)
Inequity	The relationship is one-sided or unbalanced, one member of the relationship is under-benefitted, there is unfairness	8 (6%)	9 (7%)	16 (9%)	8 (1%)	9 (2%)	18 (3%)
Social consequences	Your parents disapprove, the relationship is harming your friendships—social pressure to leave, not getting along with partner's friends or family	38 (28%)	13 (10%)	16 (9%)	46 (5%)	20 (4%)	22 (4%)
Dealbreaker	Addiction, abuse, legal issues, psychological problems, partner was controlling—the emphasis should be on partner's problems. With the exception of cheating or lying, which goes under trust	45 (33%)	13 (10%)	14 (8%)	55 (6%)	19 (4%)	16 (3%)

(continued)

Table 2. (continued)

Category	Description (As Used by Coders)	Participants With At Least One Response Coded in the Category			Total responses coded in the category		
		Sample A (N = 135)	Sample B (N = 136)	Sample C (N = 171)	Sample A (N = 887)	Sample B (N = 451)	Sample C (N = 605)
Loss of attraction	The chemistry or the “spark” is gone, you aren’t attracted to him or her anymore, you don’t “click.” Covers physical attributes of the partner	28 (21%)	12 (9%)	13 (8%)	30 (3%)	12 (3%)	13 (2%)
General frustration	For example, “partner gets on my nerves,” “annoyed,” “partner irritates me,” “frustrated by partner,” and so on. Refers to general frustration rather than frustration related to specific personality trait or behaviors of the partner	NA	NA	10 (6%)	NA	NA	11 (2%)
Too demanding	The relationship is emotionally taxing, demanding, or exhausting. For example, the relationship is taking too much time, they don’t have time for the relationship, the partner needed a lot of attention.	18 (13%)	12 (9%)	8 (5%)	20 (2%)	13 (3%)	8 (1%)
Alternative partner	Someone fell in love with someone else, someone is leaving the current relationship for someone else, you believe you can get someone better	51 (38%)	11 (8%)	8 (5%)	60 (7%)	11 (2%)	8 (1%)
Pursuit of other opportunities	For example, you want more excitement or personal growth, want the freedom of singlehood—just not alternative partners which goes above	19 (14%)	9 (7%)	8 (5%)	20 (2%)	14 (3%)	9 (2%)
Discomfort with commitment	You feel it is moving too fast, feel smothered or trapped, need space, it is getting too serious, need to be alone, want to be single—the emphasis is on the self, instead of the partner	22 (16%)	7 (5%)	7 (4%)	29 (3%)	8 (2%)	9 (2%)
Hindering self-improvement	For example, partner is a bad influence, I dislike myself when I’m around my partner	4 (3%)	9 (7%)	4 (2%)	4 (.5%)	10 (2%)	4 (.7%)
Violation of expectations	This person is not who you thought you were, things have changed, the partner has changed, this relationship isn’t what you thought it was going to be. General “this isn’t what I signed up for” comparisons that don’t fit in the other, more specific categories	24 (18%)	7 (5%)	1 (.6%)	29 (3%)	8 (2%)	1 (.2%)
Concern for partner	For example, I don’t want to hold him/her back	NA	2 (1%)	0 (0%)	NA	2 (.4%)	0 (0%)
Uncodable	It’s ambiguous what they mean, or none of the categories fit	50 (37%)	29 (21%)	37 (22%)	78 (9%)	33 (7%)	41 (7%)

underlying constructs that ultimately predict relationship outcomes, but also specific aspects of relationships that people consciously deliberate about in the context of stay/leave decisions.

Many of the stay reasons identified did not have leave counterparts (range across samples = 44–46%), and many of the leave reasons did not have stay counterparts (range = 39–46%). For example, in Sample A, 37% of participants mentioned dependence on the relationship as a reason to stay, but no one mentioned a lack of dependence as a reason to leave. Across samples, many participants mentioned breach of trust as a reason to leave (47% of Sample A; 21% of Sample B; 30% of Sample C). However, no one listed sexual faithfulness as a reason to stay. The fact that many reasons to stay were qualitatively distinct from reasons to leave suggests that people may think about staying

and leaving as relatively separate options, each with their own advantages and disadvantages.

Study 2

The stay/leave reasons identified in Study 1 were converted into quantitative items and administered to people who were trying to decide whether to end either their dating relationships (Sample D) or their marriages (Sample E). We examined associations between specific stay/leave reasons and global relationship constructs as well as attachment style. We expected that relationship satisfaction and commitment would be associated with high endorsement of stay reasons and low endorsement of leave reasons, suggesting that positive and negative aspects of the relationship jointly contribute to these global assessments of the relationship. We further hypothesized that

anxiously attached individuals, who are particularly prone to relationship ambivalence (e.g., Mikulincer et al., 2010), would more strongly endorse numerous specific reasons to both stay and reasons to leave. Finally, we expected that many participants would report simultaneous motivation to both stay and leave, indicative of conflicting pressures on their stay/leave decisions.

Method

Participants

Both samples were U.S. residents recruited online and compensated 40 cents through Mechanical Turk in Winter 2012. We chose a target N of 150 participants per sample so as to recruit them within a semester.

Sample D: Dating individuals considering breakups. Participants were told, “to be eligible to participate, you must *currently* be trying to decide whether or not to stay in your current dating relationship.” We recruited 153 participants over a 7-week period, of whom 32 were excluded because they admitted that they responded carelessly (3), were not contemplating a breakup (23), or were married rather than dating (6). The final sample consisted of 121 participants (43 male) with a mean age of 28 ($SD = 8.81$) and a mean relationship length of 22 months ($SD = 19.46$). This sample size can detect a correlation of .25 with 79% power.

Sample E: Married individuals considering separation/divorce. Participants were told, “To be eligible to participate, you must *currently* be trying to decide whether or not to stay in your marriage.” We recruited 146 participants over a 10-week period, of whom 40 were excluded because they admitted that they responded carelessly (4), were not contemplating divorce (14), or were dating rather than married (22). The final sample consisted of 106 participants (29 male) with a mean age of 28 ($SD = 11.38$) and a mean relationship length of 9 years ($SD = 115.77$ months). This sample size can detect a correlation of .25 with 74% power.

Materials

Attachment style. Participants completed an 18-item measure of attachment anxiety (Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000, e.g., “I worry that romantic partners won’t care about me as much as I care about them,” $\alpha_s = .90, .91$), and an 18-item measure of attachment avoidance (e.g., “I am nervous when partners get too close to me,” $\alpha_s = .90$), on a 7-point scale (1 = *completely disagree* to 7 = *completely agree*).

Investment model. Participants completed 5-item measures of satisfaction (e.g., “Our relationship makes me very happy,” $\alpha_s = .90, .92$), investment (e.g., “I have put a great deal into our relationship that I would lose if the relationship were to end,” $\alpha_s = .84$), and quality of alternatives (e.g., “If I weren’t with my dating partner, I would do fine—I’d find another appealing

person to date,” $\alpha_s = .83, .91$), and a 7-item commitment measure (e.g., “I want our relationship to last forever,” $\alpha_s = .81, .90$; Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998).

Dissolution consideration. Participants completed a 5-item dissolution consideration scale (Vanderdrift et al., 2009; e.g., “I have been thinking about ending our romantic relationship,” $\alpha_s = .85, .83$).

Stay/leave reasons. Participants were asked to consider their reasons for wanting to stay in their relationships, followed by reasons for wanting to leave. Each of the 27 stay categories and 23 leave categories created in Study 1 was presented to participants in the form of a term followed by a definition (e.g., “Loss of attraction: the chemistry or the “spark” is gone, you aren’t attracted to your partner anymore”). Instructions were tailored for each sample (see Verbatim Materials). Items were rated on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all a factor* to 7 = *Is a major contributing factor*).

Results and Discussion

Endorsement of Stay/Leave Reasons

Stay and leave reason means and correlations with relevant relationship constructs are provided in Tables 3 and 4. Strongly endorsed reasons for wanting to end the relationship were largely the same across the two samples: emotional distance, inequity, partner’s personality, and violation of expectations were all in the top five most endorsed reasons for both samples. However, stay reasons differed considerably across samples. Participants contemplating a breakup were most strongly motivated to stay in their relationships for approach-based reasons, such as positive aspects of the partner’s personality, emotional intimacy, and enjoyment. In contrast, the participants contemplating a divorce were most strongly motivated to stay for avoidance-based reasons, such as investment, family responsibilities, fear of uncertainty, and logistical barriers. Considerable research has examined the dissolution barriers faced by married individuals (see Frye, McNulty, & Karney, 2008, for discussion); the present data suggest that these barriers are salient to people questioning their marriages.

As predicted, satisfaction and commitment were associated with stronger endorsement of most stay reasons and weaker endorsement of most leave reasons across samples. These findings suggest that the presence of reasons to both stay and leave—for example, family responsibilities combined with emotional distance, or emotional intimacy combined with concerns about inequity—exerts conflicting pressures on relationship quality and stability.

Anxiously attached individuals contemplating a breakup were more likely to endorse six specific reasons for staying (e.g., companionship, habituation), and 12 specific reasons for leaving (e.g., emotional distance, lack of validation), compared to less anxious individuals. Anxiously attached individuals contemplating a divorce were more likely to endorse four

Table 3. Associations Between Specific Reasons to Stay in a Relationship and Relevant Relationship Constructs in Study 2.

Stay Reason	Sample	Mean	Attachment		Satisfaction	Investment	Quality of		Dissolution Consideration
			Anxiety	Avoidance			Alternatives	Commitment	
Partner's personality	D	5.17***	.11	-.16	.24**	.15	-.10	.23*	.06
	E	4.35	.27**	-.33***	.39***	.45***	-.16	.48***	-.26**
Emotional intimacy	D	4.96***	.07	-.50***	.42***	.32***	-.12	.45***	-.05
	E	3.89	.04	-.17+	.33*	.27**	-.02	.38***	-.19*
Comfort	D	4.88**	.04	-.38***	.43***	.27***	-.06	.33***	-.18+
	E	4.21	.08	-.39***	.36***	.34***	-.02	.50***	-.16
Companionship	D	4.87	.22*	-.31***	.28**	.39***	-.22*	.39***	-.001
	E	4.69	.23*	-.42***	.33**	.47***	.004	.47***	-.11
Enjoyment	D	4.84**	.10	-.29**	.32***	.17+	-.18+	.31***	-.05
	E	4.13	.17+	-.27**	.36***	.32**	-.09	.44***	-.22*
Investments	D	4.79	.11	-.30***	.10	.45***	-.11	.20*	.10
	E	5.23	.08	-.21*	.15	.53***	-.11	.33**	.23*
Physical intimacy	D	4.72***	.14	-.25**	.24**	.13	.06	.30***	-.04
	E	3.39	.12	-.10	.43***	.14	-.06	.25**	-.11
Attraction	D	4.67***	.02	-.32***	.27**	.15	-.16+	.31**	-.03
	E	3.71	.17+	-.16	.34***	.21*	-.002	.34***	-.16
Compatibility	D	4.67***	-.06	-.30**	.32***	.19*	-.11	.18+	-.14
	E	3.81	.26**	-.19+	.27**	.34***	-.12	.41***	-.18+
Emotional security	D	4.60**	.04	-.42***	.36***	.27***	-.08	.35***	-.003
	E	3.89	.16	-.20*	.27**	.33**	-.13	.36***	-.21*
Habituation	D	4.52	.30***	-.06	.00	.27**	.08	.14	.04
	E	4.89	.07	-.31**	.14	.40***	-.08	.37***	.17
Validation	D	4.49**	-.05	-.33***	.39***	.17+	-.15	.27***	-.11
	E	3.74	.15	-.12	.33**	.25*	-.04	.34***	-.24*
Long-term orientation	D	4.49	.11	-.40***	.23*	.31***	-.11	.39***	.00
	E	4.30	.10	-.36***	.39***	.53***	-.18+	.60***	-.26**
Fear of uncertainty	D	4.47+	.24**	-.22*	.02	.50***	-.10	.25***	.12
	E	5.02	.15	-.10	.09	.34***	.09	.24*	.17+
Concern for partner	D	4.45	.19*	-.14	.15	.37***	.19*	.16+	.09
	E	4.62	-.02	-.14	.30**	.31**	.05	.23*	-.007
Optimism	D	4.37	.06	-.34***	.35***	.27**	-.07	.28**	-.01
	E	4.29	.11	-.28***	.38***	.37***	-.18+	.46***	-.20*
General satisfaction	D	4.31**	.13	-.37***	.49***	.34***	-.31**	.53***	-.27**
	E	3.73	.19+	-.29**	.43***	.42***	-.16	.59***	-.27**
Improvement of self	D	4.12***	-.003	-.25**	.44***	.15	-.19*	.22*	-.09
	E	3.31	.19+	-.13	.41***	.22*	.02	.28**	-.25*
Long-term prospects	D	4.11	.04	-.29***	.31***	.21*	.03	.25**	-.05
	E	4.06	.11	-.37***	.34***	.43***	-.19+	.60***	-.17+
Dependence	D	4.03	.43***	-.16+	.03	.30**	-.09	.34***	.08
	E	4.15	.23*	-.34***	.31**	.33**	.20	.43***	-.11
Logistical barriers	D	3.88**	.11	-.08	-.01	.40***	.18+	.04	.04
	E	4.92	.11	-.32**	.13	.32**	.16	.18+	.21*
Comparison to alternatives	D	3.77	.07	-.06	.24**	.16+	.13	.09	-.02
	E	4.22	.04	-.24*	-.02	.14	-.09	.19	.03
Social connections	D	3.51	.01	-.15	.40***	.33***	.07	.20*	-.10
	E	3.51	.04	-.28*	.27**	.26**	.12	.24*	-.09
Finances	D	3.46***	.05	-.02	.01	.17+	.27**	-.07	.14
	E	4.61	.15	-.11	-.07	.23*	.19+	.14	.03
Social status	D	3.35	.26**	.06	.13	.05	.10	.08	-.01
	E	3.12	.19+	-.13	.41***	.22*	.02	.28**	-.25*
Social pressures	D	3.23**	.11	-.08	.35***	.33***	.08	.11	-.13
	E	4.06	-.01	-.16	.12	.15	.11	.004	.07
Family responsibilities	D	3.15***	.09	-.06	.14	.29**	.26**	.07	.07
	E	5.10	-.12	-.18+	.10	.34***	.03	.15	.30**

Note. Asterisks in the "Mean" column represent independent-samples *t* tests comparing mean endorsement between Samples D and E. ****p* < .001. ***p* < .01. **p* < .05. +*p* < .10.

Table 4. Associations Between Specific Reasons to Leave a Relationship and Relevant Relationship Constructs in Study 2.

Leave Reason	Sample	Mean	Attachment		Quality of			Dissolution	
			Anxiety	Avoidance	Satisfaction	Investment	Alternatives	Commitment	Consideration
Emotional distance	D	4.73+	.29**	.01	-.38***	.02	.09	-.13	.52***
	E	5.19	.11	.11	-.39***	-.02	.09	-.16	.44***
Partner's personality	D	4.67	.18+	.03	-.38***	-.03	.31***	-.24**	.48***
	E	5.00	.06	-.07	-.13	-.02	.03	.04	.27**
Inequity	D	4.63	.24**	.11	-.43***	.02	.13	-.18*	.43***
	E	5.05	.08	.09	-.29**	.00	.19	-.12	.37***
Violation of expectations	D	4.55	.24**	.11	-.24**	-.03	.10	-.08	.41***
	E	4.84	.19+	.02	-.32**	-.07	.17	-.30**	.37**
Too demanding	D	4.52	.27**	.11	-.27**	.04	.22*	-.07	.45***
	E	4.59	.13	.11	-.13	-.17+	.05	-.10	.28**
Lack of validation	D	4.50+	.39***	.03	-.40***	-.01	.26**	-.17+	.45***
	E	5.01	.13	-.007	-.31**	.06	.09	-.02	.37***
Incompatibility	D	4.47	.27**	.05	-.25**	.03	.15	-.10	.39***
	E	4.72	-.08	.06	-.20*	-.11	.28**	-.24*	.40***
Conflict	D	4.41	.16+	-.02	-.33***	.19*	.02	-.03	.45***
	E	4.55	.08	.12	-.29**	-.16	.10	-.17+	.19+
Problems with long-term prospects	D	4.39	.06	.18+	-.08	-.15	.05	-.18*	.26**
	E	4.35	.09	.18	-.28**	-.24*	-.02	-.28**	.12
Pursuit of other opportunities	D	4.37	.08	.22*	-.23*	-.16+	.32***	-.32***	.37***
	E	4.40	-.02	.25**	-.23*	-.28**	.35***	-.35***	.23*
General dissatisfaction	D	4.31+	.14	.05	-.27**	-.04	.27**	-.29**	.49***
	E	4.76	.12	.16	-.42***	-.19*	.45***	.51***	.27**
Lack of enjoyment	D	4.24+	.18*	.19*	-.44***	-.13	.34***	-.32***	.49***
	E	4.66	.02	.06	-.23*	-.26**	.32**	-.36***	.24*
Breach of trust	D	4.21	.35***	.03	-.15+	-.01	.01	-.11	.36***
	E	3.92	.44***	.16	-.25**	-.17+	-.07	-.04	.19+
Partner withdrawal	D	4.13+	.44***	.04	-.18	.05	.13	.01	.29**
	E	4.64	.32**	.18*	-.37***	-.28**	.02	-.30**	.12
Dealbreaker	D	4.10	.18+	.16+	-.32***	-.12	.21*	-.30**	.41***
	E	3.78	.34**	.28**	-.32**	-.32**	-.04	-.21*	.14
Finances	D	4.01	.14	.17+	-.37***	-.08	.29**	-.30**	.38***
	E	4.47	.01	.27**	-.16+	-.14	.22*	-.17+	.25*
Romantic alternatives	D	4.00	.13	.21*	-.20*	-.16+	.38***	-.37***	.42***
	E	4.24	.08	.17	-.23*	-.28**	.57***	-.42***	.21*
Hindering of self-improvement	D	3.93	.18+	.15+	-.30**	.07	.31**	-.25**	.43***
	E	4.34	.08	.23*	-.38***	-.19*	.18	-.21*	.25*
Physical distance	D	3.75**	.21*	.10	-.13	-.01	.11	-.12	.22*
	E	4.49	.12	.04	-.27**	-.09	.27**	-.22*	.18+
Loss of attraction	D	3.74*	.02	.19*	-.17+	-.17+	.36***	-.44***	.30***
	E	4.48	.09	-.01	-.30**	-.15	.30**	-.41***	.28**
Too much commitment	D	3.57*	.03	.18+	-.10	-.13	.28***	-.30***	.28***
	E	2.94	.10	.33**	-.04	-.40**	.23*	-.34***	.18+
External reason	D	3.49	.21*	.14	-.03	-.09	.14	-.26**	.19*
	E	3.04	.11	.25*	.008	-.25*	.01	-.25*	.13
Social consequences	D	3.45	.24**	.10	-.16+	-.07	.08	-.20*	.17+
	E	3.08	-.01	.28**	-.16+	-.26**	.01	-.29**	.18+

reasons for staying (e.g., companionship, partner's personality), and three reasons for leaving (partner withdrawal, breach of trust, dealbreaker). Attachment anxiety was not negatively associated with any of the reasons to stay or leave in either sample. These findings support the hypothesis that anxiously attached individuals are prone to stay/leave decision conflict.

We did not have any specific hypotheses regarding attachment avoidance. However, avoidance was negatively associated with most reasons for staying in the relationship in each

sample (e.g., optimism, emotional intimacy, comfort, companionship) and was not positively associated with any stay reasons in either sample. Avoidant attachment was also positively associated with several leave reasons in each sample (e.g., lack of enjoyment and loss of attraction in the breakup contemplation sample; hindering of self-improvement and too much commitment in the divorce contemplation sample). These findings are consistent with the notion that avoidant individuals are pessimistic about their relationships (Birnie, McClure, Lydon, & Holmberg, 2009) and tend to defensively

Table 5. Associations between Stay/Leave Dimensions and Relevant Relationship Constructs in Each Sample.

Dimension	Mean	Sample	Attachment		Quality of		Dissolution		
			Anxiety	Avoidance	Satisfaction	Investment	Alternatives	Commitment	Consideration
Approach-based	4.60***	D	.08	-.49***	.51***	.33***	-.16+	.47***	-.10
motivation to stay	3.92	E	.21*	-.34***	.49***	.46***	-.12	.59***	-.27**
Avoidance-based	4.05***	D	.30***	-.23*	.20*	.58***	.12	.27**	.09
motivation to stay	4.57	E	.12	-.35***	.25**	.49***	.09	.35***	.14
Motivation to leave	4.18	D	.23*	.29**	-.48***	-.35***	.32**	-.46***	.49***
	4.33	E	.33***	.18*	-.40***	-.07	.33***	-.33***	.61***

guard themselves against intimacy (Spielmann, Maxwell, MacDonald, & Baratta, 2013).

Structure of Stay/Leave Reasons

We conducted exploratory factor analyses with varimax rotation to examine how the 27 stay reasons and 23 leave reasons collapse into fewer dimensions. Samples were combined for better statistical power. An initial scree plot suggested that three factors were appropriate for the data. The three factors each had eigenvalues larger than 3 and explained 20%, 15%, and 7% of the variance, respectively. See Supplemental Table S1 for the rotated three-factor solution including all loadings and cross-loadings higher than .40. Highly loading items were averaged into their three components: approach-based motivation to stay (14 items, $\alpha = .92$, $M = 4.25$, $SD = 1.23$), avoidance-based motivation to stay (11 items, $\alpha = .83$, $M = 4.32$, $SD = 1.18$), and motivation to leave (23 items, $\alpha = .90$, $M = 4.26$, $SD = 1.07$). See Table 5 for associations between the resulting stay/leave dimensions and relationship constructs. Motivation to leave was negatively correlated with approach-based stay motivation ($r = -.23$, $p < .001$), and positively correlated with avoidance-based stay motivation ($r = .13$, $p = .05$). Approach- and avoidance-based stay motivation were positively correlated ($r = .35$, $p < .001$). Independent-samples t tests revealed that the breakup contemplation sample endorsed approach-based stay motivation more strongly than the divorce contemplation sample, $t(247) = 4.44$, $p < .001$, $MD = .67$, 95% confidence interval [.37, .96], whereas the divorce contemplation sample endorsed avoidance-based stay motivation more strongly than the breakup contemplation sample, $t(247) = -3.59$, $p < .001$, $MD = -.52$, 95% CI [-.81, -.24]. There was no difference between samples in endorsement of leave motivation, $t(247) = -1.11$, $p = .27$, $MD = -.15$, 95% CI [-.42, .12]. No gender differences emerged in endorsement of any of the three stay/leave dimensions, $t_s(245) < |.50|$, $p_s > .60$.

Finally, we examined the prevalence of ambivalence across samples. Ambivalence was defined as simultaneous endorsement of the leave dimension and at least one of the two stay dimensions (approach or avoidance) with means above the scale midpoint; 121 participants (47% in Sample D, 52% in Sample E) met this definition of ambivalence. We further classified 18 participants with below-midpoint endorsement on all three stay/leave dimensions as indifferent (8% in Sample D,

6% in Sample E). The remaining 110 participants (47% of Sample D, 41% of Sample E) were neither ambivalent nor indifferent. We used a multivariate analysis of variance to examine whether the two attachment dimensions differed among participants classified as ambivalent, indifferent, or neither, which was significant, Wilks' Lambda = .87, $F(4, 490) = 8.65$, $p < .001$. Multiple comparisons with Tukey's HSD revealed that ambivalent participants were more anxiously attached compared to indifferent participants, $MD = .104$, 95% CI [.37, 1.70], $p = .001$, and compared to those who were neither ambivalent nor indifferent, $MD = .61$, 95% CI [.27, .96], $p < .001$. Further, indifferent participants were more avoidantly attached compared to ambivalent participants, $MD = .70$, 95% CI [.07, 1.34], $p = .02$, and compared to those who were neither, $MD = .78$, 95% CI [.15, 1.42], $p = .01$. No other group differences emerged.

We also used above-midpoint endorsement on all three stay/leave dimensions as an alternative, more stringent definition of ambivalence. A total of 72 participants (27% in Sample D, 30% in Sample E) met this definition of ambivalence; above results were unchanged when this definition was used.

General Discussion

This research examined the subjective experience of deciding whether to end a relationship. We coded qualitative responses from three samples of participants in Study 1, revealing 27 different reasons for wanting to stay in a relationship (e.g., emotional intimacy, investment), and 23 reasons for wanting to leave (e.g., infidelity, conflict). In Study 2, we converted these stay/leave reasons into quantitative scales and presented them to participants currently contemplating either a breakup or a divorce. Many specific stay reasons and leave reasons jointly contributed to global ratings of relationship satisfaction and commitment, suggesting that people weigh out these potentially competing relationship factors to arrive at an overall assessment of the relationship (e.g., Rusbult, 1983; Thibaut & Kelly, 1959). Attachment anxiety was simultaneously, positively associated with several specific reasons for wanting to stay (e.g., companionship, dependence), and leave (e.g., Breach of trust, partner withdrawal). Furthermore, 49% of participants reported higher-than-midpoint motivation to both stay and leave, demonstrating the prevalence of stay/leave decision conflict.

Examining both stay and leave motivation separately allows the researcher to distinguish between indifference (i.e., weak motivation to stay and leave) and ambivalence (i.e., strong motivation to stay and leave). Our results suggest that ambivalence is common among people questioning their relationships, particularly for anxiously attached individuals. Future work should examine the consequences of stay/leave ambivalence, which are likely to be negative: Ambivalence is associated with anxiety and discomfort (van Harrefeld et al., 2009) as well as negative health outcomes in the context of close relationships (e.g., Uchino et al., 2014). For people who experience stay/leave ambivalence and ultimately choose to leave, lingering feelings of doubt regarding their decision may hinder their breakup recovery process. Indeed, this possibility may shed some light on the counterintuitive finding that breakups are as difficult for initiators as they are for noninitiators (e.g., Eastwick, Finkel, Krishnamurti, & Loewenstein, 2008; Sbarra, 2006). Alternatively, for people who experience ambivalence and ultimately choose to stay in the relationship, lingering doubts about the relationship could continue to negatively impact their relationship.

The prevalence of ambivalence in the context of stay/leave decisions may also inform research on on-again/off-again relationships: the common phenomenon of relationships cycling through multiple breakups and reconciliations (Dailey, Middleton, & Green, 2012; Dailey, Rosetto, Pfiester, & Surra, 1999). Ambivalent individuals are keenly motivated to resolve their ambivalence (see van Harrefeld et al., 2009, for review), such that they are more likely to alter their attitudes in response to new information (e.g., Armitage & Conner, 2000; Bell & Esses, 2002). If ambivalence is common in the context of stay/leave decisions, this may help to explain why so many individuals break up with their partners only to later reconcile, sometimes repeatedly (see Dailey et al., 2012, for a related discussion). Further, the associations between stay/leave ambivalence and attachment anxiety may help to explain why anxiously attached individuals are particularly prone to on-off relationships (Kirkpatrick & Hazan, 1994), and why they prefer breakup strategies that leave the door open for later reconciliation (Collins & Gillath, 2012).

Study 2 results showed that reasons to stay in a relationship could be meaningfully grouped into approach- versus avoidance-based reasons. This finding aligns with research on the rewards versus constraints that compel people to maintain their relationships (e.g., Frank & Brandstatter, 2002; Frye et al., 2008; Levinger, 1976; Strachman & Gable, 2006). In future work, it may be worth distinguishing between people who are ambivalent about staying in their relationship for approach reasons (staying and leaving are both highly appealing), versus avoidance reasons (staying and leaving are both highly unappealing). Broadly, avoidance-avoidance conflicts are more difficult to resolve than approach-approach conflicts (Houston & Sherman, 1995; Houston, Sherman, & Baker, 1991; Miller, 1944), and relationship choices have worse outcomes when made for avoidance reasons rather than approach

reasons (e.g., Impett, Gable, & Peplau, 2005). These findings suggest that stay/leave decision conflict involving mostly avoidance-based factors may be more detrimental than decision conflict involving approach-based factors.

In sum, this research provides an in-depth examination of stay/leave relationship decisions and the potential for stay/leave decision conflict. Study 1 produced a comprehensive list of relationship factors that people consciously consider when deciding whether to end their relationship. Study 2 supported the intuitive notion that stay/leave decisions are difficult to make, with many participants simultaneously endorsing many reasons to both stay and leave. Future research should examine how people ultimately resolve these conflicting pressures, as well as the consequences that they may have for health and well-being.

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Supplemental Material

The supplemental material is available in the online version of the article.

Note

1. We initially planned to conduct a follow-up with Sample 3 participants. Because of the time-intensive nature of the coding, we only coded responses from participants willing to complete the follow-up ($N = 176$). Unfortunately, follow-up attrition was high (49%), and the resulting N was too small to be reliable (e.g., commitment did not predict breakups). Thus, follow-up data are not included in the manuscript.

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Author Biographies

Samantha Joel is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Utah. Her research examines how people make decisions about romantic relationships.

Geoff MacDonald is a Professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Toronto. His research focuses on adult attachment, intimacy, and social pain.

Elizabeth Page-Gould is the Canada Research Chair of Social Psychophysiology and an Associate Professor at the University of Toronto. Her research examines the nature and outcomes of social interactions between friends and strangers, particularly when those social interactions occur between members of different social groups. Elizabeth takes a multimethod approach to her research, frequently combining behavioral, self-report, and physiological measures to capture a rich picture of social situations.

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