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Relationship regulation in the face of eye candy: a motivated cognition framework for understanding responses to attractive alternatives

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The ability to maintain a satisfying and stable romantic relationship may promote health and well-being, yet, the stability of an ongoing relationship may sometimes be challenged by the availability of attractive alternative partners. We review recent findings demonstrating that people — deliberately and automatically — display a number of strategies that help them protect their current relationship from attractive alternatives. For example, romantically involved individuals typically tend to derogate the physical attractiveness of potential alternative partners. We review different theoretical perspectives that explain *why* this occurs, and discuss possible mechanisms pertaining to *how* this occurs, focusing in particular on the independent and possibly interactive roles of motivation and self-regulatory capacity.

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Introduction

We see evidence every day of people succumbing to temptations, be it unhealthy fattening foods, impulse buying, substance abuse, or infidelity. Remarkably though people often resist these temptations. How does this happen? Close relationships researchers have studied this extensively in the context of attractive alternative romantic partners. We briefly review a variety of social psychological theories that have addressed in this issue and then we distil from them underlying common elements that point us to a potentially integrative fundamental framework for understanding responses to attractive alternatives. Drawing on classic [1,2] and contemporary [3,4] theories of motivated cognition, we describe

how responses to attractive alternative relationship partners can be understood in terms of the intricate intertwining of motivation and cognition to produce successful self regulation of temptation. We describe recent research on how cognitive resources afford individuals with pro relationship motivation the ability to enact strategies in response to attractive alternatives. We then outline how these strategies can become automatically activated, having important implications for our theoretical understanding of how goals override temptations, and having important ecological implications for understanding how intimates regulate their relationships in the real world *sans* the luxury of cognitive resources.

The availability of attractive alternatives is an important phenomenon to study for both practical and theoretical reasons. First, the availability of attractive alternatives predicts dating breakup [5] and divorce [6]. Second, it presents a self control conflict between a temptation and a long term goal [7]. Third, in outlining a taxonomy of relationship maintenance responses to potential threats to the relationship (i.e. things people do to help maintain their relationship) theorists have noted that attractive alternatives elicit a full range of relationship maintenance processes — attention, attribution, evaluation and behavior [8].

Indeed, there is now ample empirical evidence indicating that romantically involved individuals bias their responses regarding attractive alternative partners [9]. Individuals in a committed relationship tend to be inattentive to alternatives [10,11,12,13], make attributions that minimize the threat [14], judge or actually perceive the alternative as less attractive [15–17], suppress thoughts about romantic alternatives [18], avoid the alternative [19], selectively remember negatives more than positives about attractive alternatives [20], or show less signs of interest in an interaction with an attractive alternative [21]. In addition, romantically involved individuals may be motivated to structure their environments to reduce temptation. We know for example that people highly motivated to maintain their relationship are quicker to reveal their relationship status to an attractive alternative [11]. Together, such findings suggest that people regulate their responses to attractive alternative partners, presumably to protect the current relationship.

A variety of theories have been used to explain *why* these regulatory responses to attractive alternatives may occur. First, according to evolutionary psychological theory,

cognition and behavior are shaped by evolutionary pressures to increase reproductive success. Although a superficial analysis of this may suggest that men should be procreating with as many females as possible and that females should always opt for the most reproductively fit male available at ovulation, strategic pluralism [22] and dynamic evolutionary theory [23] present a more nuanced functional account that recognizes the adaptive value of long term relationships and of mate retention [18]. Thus, according to this perspective, responses to attractive alternatives that protect the ongoing relationship may be adaptive.

Second, interdependence theory, and the investment model that is derived from it [24,25], emphasize the dependency on the partner and the relationship for positive outcomes. Although a social exchange theory, suggesting a rational calculus to some extent, the investment model illustrates how sunken costs [26] may be conceptualized as irretrievable investments that promote commitment and thereby motivate behaviors that help maintain the relationship. One among these is the devaluation of attractive alternatives.

Third, as a seemingly contrastive theory, cognitive dissonance is sometimes described as a theory of rationalization. It theorizes that the perception of choosing a partner and the effort put into a relationship motivate justification to devalue alternatives [27,28]. Similar to the investment model, it emphasizes commitment [29,30] as a key psychological mediator of evaluations of alternatives.

Despite differences among these and other theories addressing relationship protection in the face of attractive alternatives, a common thread is that all these posit (for different reasons) that an individual in a committed relationship should be *motivated* to maintain the relationship. In turn the individual will be motivated to construe attractive alternatives as potential threats to relationship maintenance which consequently will lead to cognitive, affective and behavioral responses that dampen the threat of the tempting alternative.

Two key questions are: (1) when does motivation help fend off temptation? and (2) *how* does it help? As theory [1,31,32] and research [33*,34] indicate, the availability of regulatory resources provides an opportunity for the motivation (or goal) to maintain the relationship to override the temptation of an attractive alternative [35]. In line with this view, Ritter and colleagues [34] demonstrated that contextual constraints on regulatory resources undermine the devaluation of attractive alternatives. Romantically committed individuals, as compared to uninvolved individuals, gave lower attractiveness ratings to attractive alternative partners (i.e. the derogation effect), but this effect disappeared when under time pressure or when depleted. Similarly, individual differences in regulatory

ability predict who among intimates will resist the temptation of attractive alternatives. Specifically, Pronk and colleagues [33*] found that romantically involved heterosexual males relatively high (versus low) in executive control displayed less overt signs of interest (i.e. flirted less) during an interaction with an attractive female.

These studies on when or for whom motivation will lead one to resist temptation have spawned recent neuroimaging research aimed at identifying more precisely how one resists temptation. In one study avoidance responses toward attractive alternatives were associated with activation in brain areas implicated in self-regulatory control (i.e. right ventrolateral prefrontal cortex) [36]. Additional analyses revealed that, upon seeing an attractive alternative, brain responses implicated in self regulation were stronger to the extent that participants were more strongly committed to the current partner. Thus, in answer to the question *how* motivation helps to fend off attractive alternatives, these findings suggest that cognitive regulatory resources, dispositionally or contextually available, help committed individuals to regulate and inhibit their responses toward attractive others and to override the temptation.

In addition to this resource dependent path to regulating alternatives, we suggest that relationship protective responses toward attractive alternatives may become automatized through learning and repeated associations of 'If threat then defend the relationship'. How might this work? An individual needs to (1) identify explicitly or implicitly that there is a threat, (2) be equipped with strategies to deal with the threat and (3) be able to enact the strategies. If the individual does not recognize and identify a situation as threatening, obviously relationship protective strategies are not activated, even if such strategies are well learned and accessible [7]. There are likely chronic and contextual factors that contribute to the identification of a potential threat. When the level of threat is calibrated with the level of motivation (e.g. relationship commitment) people are expected to construe threat, and then enact procedures such as devaluing the attractiveness of the alternative [37]. However, it is also possible that one may underestimate the threat by construing the situation in isolation as a negligible threat [7]. As a result there would be no triggering of a relationship protective response. Consistent with this point, a study demonstrated that the automatic attentional bias away from attractive others was triggered when threat was primed but was not triggered when there was no a priori prime identifying the situation as a temptation situation [11*].

Motivation should lead not only to detection of threat but also to the development of the strategies to resist temptation. Thus, when people experience the threat of an alternative, initially they may be motivated to exert

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