



## Articles

# "I Thought You Loved Me too?": Outcomes of Discrepant Involvement in Romantic Relationships

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## Abstract

As romantic relationships begin and evolve, it is sometimes the case that partners are discrepant in their attraction to, love for, and commitment to each other. Data were collected from 460 undergraduates who completed a 40 item Internet survey on the various types of discrepancies and outcomes for their respective relationships. Results revealed that half of participants had been in a discrepant relationship in which they were more attracted to, in love with, and committed to their partner and half were less attracted, in love and committed than a partner in a current or past relationship. Men were significantly more likely than women to report that they had been in a discrepant relationship in which they were more in love with their partner. Being more attracted and less attracted, in love with, and committed was positively associated with infidelity. Depression was positively associated with being more or less attracted to, in love with and committed. Alcohol/drug use was positively associated with being more attracted and in love with a partner, as well as being less attracted and committed to a partner. Of discrepant relationships that ended, 45% were by the respondent, 20% mutually, and 11% by the partner. Of discrepant relationships that continued, 44% of the respondents reported that the discrepancies did not matter and that the respondents were happy despite the discrepancies.

**Keywords:** alcohol, depression, discrepant relationships, infidelity, interdependence

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A recurring theme in the 2017 musical *La La Land* was the different levels of attraction, love and commitment of the central characters to each other. Numerous other television shows, novels, and films capitalize on this very real-life experience of being involved with a partner in which levels of attraction, love, and commitment are not evenly matched. That is, one partner may be more or less attracted to, in love with, or committed to the partner, in comparison to the other partner. Researchers have found that discrepancies between relationship partners with regard to intimacy, passion, and commitment were associated with lower relationship satisfaction (Acker & Davis, 1992; Sternberg & Barnes, 1985). Furthermore, researchers have discovered that larger discrepancies between individuals' ideal relationship characteristics and actual relationship characteristics were associated with lower relationship quality (Fletcher, Simpson, Thomas, & Giles, 1999). There is also evidence that when a partner's individual traits (e.g., attractiveness, kindness, economic status) do not meet their ideal standards, they report poorer relationship outcomes (Campbell, Simpson, Kashy, & Fletcher, 2001; Fletcher et al., 1999).

The purpose of the current study was to extend the existing literature by examining how discrepancies with regard to attraction, love, and commitment might be associated with specific individual and relationship outcomes. This focus on attraction, love, and commitment was rooted in Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love, in which consistency in the domains of intimacy, passion, and commitment are core dimensions in the prediction of relationship satisfaction (Sternberg & Barnes, 1985). Rather than focus on more global relationship dimensions, such as satisfaction or relationship quality, in the current study we focused on how discrepant relationships may be associated with infidelity as well as depression and alcohol/drug use. Moreover, we aimed to assess how common discrepant romantic relationships are with regard to attraction, love, and communication, and to examine the trajectories of these relationships. This more refined examination of personal and relational outcomes might further advance our understanding of how relationship discrepancies may be influential. Given that romantic relationships may have an enormous impact on mental health and drug/alcohol usage (Frost & Forrester, 2013; Levitt & Cooper, 2010), as well as the hurtful and heartbreaking nature of infidelity (Weiser, Lalasz, Weigel, & Evans, 2014), such nuanced examinations of discrepant relationship outcomes is warranted.

## Theoretical Framework

Interdependence theory lends itself to understanding the perceptions and reactions of participants in discrepant relationships (Fletcher et al., 1999). Interdependence theory "is a theory of patterns of interdependence and, assuming that these patterns play an important causal role in the processes, roles, norms of relationships, it is a theory of their consequences" (Thibaut & Kelley, 1986, p. xii). Interdependence theory postulates relationship satisfaction and continuation based on outcomes, comparison levels (CL), and comparison level alternatives (CL<sub>alt</sub>). Outcomes refer to the perceived level of rewards from the relationship (i.e., benefits minus costs of the relationship). CL can be conceptualized as an individual's ideal relationship expectations or what individuals believe they deserve in a relationship whereas CL<sub>alt</sub> is defined as individuals' perceptions of outcomes if they were to exit the relationship (Thibaut & Kelley, 1986). In a stable and satisfying relationship, individuals would report that their relationship outcomes exceed their CL and CL<sub>alt</sub>. However, individuals may still remain in relationships even if their CL exceeds their outcomes because a person still perceives low CL<sub>alt</sub>.

Discrepancies in attraction, love, and commitment to each other do not necessarily mean that a relationship is doomed. Individuals may choose to remain in discrepant relationships because the outcomes for doing so may be greater than their comparison levels or alternatives. That is, even if individuals are more or less attracted to, in love with, or committed to a partner it is possible that the overall benefits from being in the relationship may exceed their expectations, and these relationships will continue. Moreover, relationships are multidimensional and there are a multitude of ways in which individuals may construe expectations and process outcomes. Individuals may also enjoy being in a relationship in which their partner has more to lose if the relationship ends as they would have more power and influence in the relationship.

If individuals are discrepant with regard to attraction, love, or commitment, they may be vulnerable to extradyadic involvements in order to better maximize their outcomes. Drigotas, Safstrom, and Gentilia (1999) used an interdependence theory lens and found that individuals who were more invested, more satisfied, more committed, and perceived fewer alternatives were less likely to engage in infidelity behavior. Additionally, involvement in a discrepant relationship may impact an individual's mental health or drinking/drug behavior because they may be distressed about the imbalances and shortcomings of their relationship. In sum, interdependency theo-

ry offers a useful lens to explore the complex nature of relationships and highlights that discrepancies in relationships may have a variety of relationship trajectories.

## Discrepant Relationships, Infidelity, and Well-Being

Most research on discrepant romantic relationships has utilized the following two approaches. The first approach focuses on how discrepant relationships are associated with relationship satisfaction and relationship quality. The second approach investigates how discrepant partner traits are associated with relationship outcomes. [Fletcher et al. \(1999\)](#) found that the more consistent an individual's relationship ideals are with the realities of their current relationship, the happier the individual is within the relationship. Moreover, researchers have found that when individuals are closely matched in regard to the dimensions of intimacy, passion, and commitment, these individuals report greater relationship satisfaction than when they are mismatched ([Acker & Davis, 1992](#); [Sternberg & Barnes, 1985](#)).

Discrepancies in other relationship domains also appear to influence relationship quality and satisfaction. Discrepancies of sexual desire are linked to lower relationship satisfaction. [Mark and Murray \(2012\)](#) examined 133 heterosexual couples who had been in a relationship at least one year and found that the greater the sexual desire discrepancy scores with the partner, the lower the relationship satisfaction for men. [Frost, McClelland, and Dettmann \(2017\)](#) found that higher levels of sexual closeness discrepancies (i.e., gaps between individuals' actual and ideal levels of sexual closeness) were associated with lower levels of sexual satisfaction and orgasm frequency, over and above ratings of actual sexual closeness.

Other research on discrepancies in relationships have focused on one's real versus ideal partner. [Sela, Mogilski, Shackelford, Zeigler-Hill, and Fink \(2017\)](#) identified the discrepancy between the level at which one is valued by a partner and the level at which one values a partner. Partners who gave a lower evaluation to the person they were dating typically made fewer efforts to maintain the relationship. In contrast, when one felt that they were less valued and could easily be replaced, that person made a greater effort to maintain the relationship. Researchers have looked at the discrepancy between one's real and ideal partner and found less satisfaction and lower relationship quality when gaps between ideal and reality partner traits were larger ([Campbell et al., 2001](#); [Fletcher et al., 1999](#); [Lackenbauer & Campbell, 2012](#)). In other words, individuals report higher relationship quality and satisfaction when they have smaller partner discrepancies and conversely, larger partner discrepancies are associated with lower relationship quality and satisfaction. Additionally, [Campbell et al. \(2001\)](#) found that individuals who did not meet their partner's ideals reported lower relationship quality. Thus, research confirms that relationship outcomes are influenced by both partners' ideals and expectations. Therefore, relationships may be negatively impacted when one's partner falls short of their ideals and also when one falls short of their partner's ideals.

Research on how discrepancies in attraction, love, and commitment may be associated with infidelity, depression, and alcohol/drug use have yet to be examined. A more refined examination of discrepant relationships is valuable given that understanding comparisons between ideals and perceptions of current relationships may have multiple implications for the person and their relationship. [Campbell et al. \(2001\)](#) argue that, "a person who perceives his or her partner as falling short of his or her ideals, for example, may feel less satisfied with the relationship and be disappointed, whereas a person who fails to match his or her partner's ideals may feel guilty and experience threats to his or her self-esteem" (p. 460). We extended this line of thinking by arguing that

discrepancies in relationships may be associated with a greater likelihood of thinking about and engaging in infidelity as well as being depressed and using alcohol/drugs. These outcomes are commonly tied to relationship quality and satisfaction; therefore, it is possible that relationship discrepancies may be tied to additional personal and relational outcomes.

Negative relationship dynamics are a strong predictor of infidelity, even when compared to individual differences and personality traits (Fincham & May, 2017; Gibson, Thompson, & O'Sullivan, 2016; Maddox Shaw, Rhoades, Allen, Stanley, & Markman, 2013). Consistently, researchers have found that individuals who report lower satisfaction, commitment, and relationship quality, as well as greater perceived relationship alternatives are more likely to be unfaithful (Drigotas et al., 1999; Fincham & May, 2017). Gibson et al. (2016) also found that attraction to someone other than a current partner was a strong and significant predictor of infidelity.

Researchers have also confirmed that discrepancies in relationships impact an individual's mental health and well-being. Frost and Forrester (2013) found optimal mental health when individuals reported no discrepancies between their ideal and actual levels of relationship closeness. These researchers found increased depressive symptoms when individuals were either too close or not close enough with their partner. Boldero et al. (2009) also found that feelings of dejection were positively associated with discrepancies between an ideal and real relationship; specifically, the greater the difference between ideals and reality, the greater the feeling of dejection. Individuals who reported greater discrepancies in their ideal identity as a romantic partner versus perceived identity as a romantic partner reported higher levels of depressive symptoms (Marcussen & Gallagher, 2017). These findings reveal that individuals who do not feel they are meeting their partner's expectations report greater depression. Relationship context has also been found to be associated with individuals' alcohol use. Levitt and Cooper (2010) found that drinking behavior is associated with relationship functioning in a complex and bi-directional manner. One notable pattern that emerged was that negative relationship experiences increased drinking without their partner.

## Gender Dynamics

There is extant research which suggests significant gender differences with regard to attraction and love. Acker and Davis (1992) found that women, but not men, endorse lower levels of passion in relationships of longer length. Men tend to hold more romantic attitudes, believe in "love at first sight", and fall in love faster compared to women (Galperin & Haselton, 2010; Sprecher & Metts, 1999). Although gender differences are generally not found with regard to commitment (Acker & Davis, 1992), it is important to investigate such a possibility. Based on the previous research, a goal of the current research was to examine whether there are gender differences with regard to the likelihood of being in a discrepant romantic relationship.

Additionally, we explored whether gender moderates the association between discrepant relationship status and likelihood of considering and/or engaging in infidelity, being depressed, and drinking alcohol/using drugs. Researchers consistently find significant gender differences when predicting infidelity, with men being more likely to engage in infidelity although this gender gap is beginning to narrow (Fincham & May, 2017). Furthermore, gender interacts with the association between relationship quality and infidelity attitudes. Silva, Saraiva, Albuquerque, and Arantes (2017) found that as relationship quality increased so did negative views of infidelity for men, but relationship quality was unrelated to women's infidelity attitudes.

There also appear to be significant gender differences for depression rates and drug/alcohol use. Specifically, in young adulthood, men tend to report higher drinking levels compared to women whereas women tend to report higher rates of depression (Foster et al., 2014; Salk, Petersen, Abramson, & Hyde, 2016). Additionally, Levitt and Cooper (2010) found significant gender interactions, indicating that women's drinking behavior was more sensitive to reported partner intimacy whereas men's drinking behavior was not associated with felt intimacy. Based on this research, we expected men and women to exhibit different outcomes in the domains of infidelity, depression, and alcohol/drug use. Therefore, it is important to consider how gender and being in a discrepant romantic relationship may interact.

## The Current Study

Based on previous research, more information is needed about how discrepancies in relationships impact various personal and relationship domains. A major task of the current paper was to assess the frequency and dynamics of relationships that are discrepant in terms of attraction, love, and commitment. Gender differences with regard to the likelihood of being in a discrepant relationship were also explored. Finally, we examined depression, usage of drugs/alcohol, and infidelity as associated with being in a discrepant relationship and whether gender moderates these associations. Specifically, we propose the following research questions:

RQ1: How common are discrepant relationships?

RQ2: What are the trajectories and dynamics of discrepant relationships?

RQ3: Do women and men differ in their likelihood of being in a discrepant relationship?

RQ4: Is being in a discrepant relationship associated with a greater likelihood of considering or engaging in infidelity, reporting depression, and using drugs/alcohol?

RQ5: Does gender moderate these potential associations?

## Method

### Participants and Procedures

Following approval by the Institutional Review Board at a large Southeastern university for a study on "Discrepancies in Relationships," students enrolled in lower level sociology classes were asked to complete an online survey (developed by the authors). No reward, grade or otherwise, was provided for participation in the survey.

Participants were 640 undergraduate students ( $M_{\text{age}} = 19.6$  years, range = 17-44). Participants included 526 women (82.2%), 136 men (21.3%), and five individuals with additional gender identities (0.8%). The majority of participants reported their race/ethnicity as White (72.9%). The remainder of participants indicated their race/ethnicity as Black/African American (23.6%), Hispanic/Latino (5.8%), Asian/Asian American (1.7%), Native American (1.9%), and Biracial/Multiracial (3.4%). Most participants identified as heterosexual (90.3%) although individuals also identified as gay/lesbian (3.6%), bisexual (6.3%), asexual (1.3%), and queer/pansexual/sexually fluid (1.4%). In regard to relationship status, 39.5% of participants were not currently dating anyone, 12.6% were dating different people, 47.8% were dating exclusively, 5% were cohabiting, 1.7% were engaged, 1.4% married, .3% divorced and .3% widowed.

## Survey

Participants first reported demographics. Next, participants answered six questions addressing whether they had been in a relationship in which they were more attracted, in love, or committed to a partner and whether they had been in a relationship in which they were less attracted to, in love with, or committed to a partner. For example, participants respond to the questions “I have been in a relationship in which I was MORE attracted to my partner than my partner was to me”, “I have been in a relationship in which I was LESS in love with my partner than my partner with me”, and so on. Participants used a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) to respond to these six questions. Individuals who indicated strongly agree or agree were coded as having had a discrepant relationship whereas those who reported neither agree nor disagree, disagree, or strongly disagree were coded as not having had a discrepant relationship. Participants then indicated whether they viewed discrepant relationships as just as good or not as good as relationships with no discrepancies.

Next, participants responded to the items “I was open to an emotional relationship with someone else”, “I was open to a sexual relationship with someone else”, “I cheated on my partner”, “I was depressed”, and “I was abusing alcohol or other drugs” using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Participants were also given the option of N/A for these items. The definition of cheating was purposefully kept open as there is no singular definition of infidelity and great personal variation in relationship boundaries (Weiser et al., 2014). The broadest definition of infidelity is any type of secretive feelings or behavior that would cause the relationship partner distress and violate the exclusivity norms of the relationship (Weiser et al., 2014). Thus, it was up to participants to subjectively indicate whether they had cheated or not, and our participants’ reports may differ from their partners’ perspectives. Researchers also commonly categorize infidelity in terms of emotional or sexual infidelity (Blow & Hartnett, 2005), so the decision was made to separately measure participants’ consideration of these extradyadic experiences.

Participants who indicated they were less attracted, in love, or committed to a partner were then asked whether these relational qualities increased, decreased, or stayed the same. That is, whether their love, attraction, or commitment grew over time. Finally, participants were asked about the outcome of their current or most recent discrepant relationship, and if they were still together, why the relationship persisted with two closed-ended questions.

## Results

### Descriptive Analyses

Descriptive analyses were undertaken to answer Research Questions 1 and 2. Being in a discrepant relationship was a common experience with 40.2% to 50.6% of participants indicating they had a particular discrepant relationship experience (see Table 1 for the frequencies and percentages of individuals in discrepant relationships). Participants were fairly evenly divided about the quality of discrepant relationships with 49.9% of individuals indicating that discrepant relationships were “just as good as non-discrepant relationships” and 50.1% of individuals indicating that discrepant relationships were “not as good as non-discrepant relationships”. Among participants who reported they were less attracted to a partner, 44.3% reported their attraction worsened, 13.7% indicated their attraction increased, and 42.0% reported their attraction did not change. For those who reported they were less in love with a partner, 39.1% indicated the love for their partner decreased, 19.0% re-

Table 1

*Frequencies and Percentages for Individuals in Discrepant Relationships*

Item	Frequency	Percentage
<b>More Attracted to Partner</b>		
Yes	265	40.2
No	395	59.8
<b>More in Love with Partner</b>		
Yes	309	46.9
No	350	53.1
<b>More Committed to Partner</b>		
Yes	328	49.8
No	331	50.2
<b>Less Attracted to Partner</b>		
Yes	333	50.6
No	325	49.4
<b>Less in Love with Partner</b>		
Yes	316	47.9
No	344	52.1
<b>Less Committed to Partner</b>		
Yes	286	43.3
No	374	56.7

ported their love increased, and 41.9% indicated their level of love did not change. For participants who reported less commitment to a partner, 39.7% reported becoming less committed, 19.2% individuals reported their commitment increased, and 41.1% reported that their commitment did not change.

Moreover, most participants reported their most recent discrepant relationship ended as a result of them breaking it off (44.8%), although participants also indicated their partner broke it off (11.5%), the relationship mutually ended (19.6%), the relationship was still going and discrepancies were still present (5.3%), and the relationship was still going and the discrepancies disappeared (18.8%). Finally, for participants currently in a discrepant relationship, most reported that they stayed in the relationship because the discrepancy issues did not matter, and they were happy (43.5%). Other participants reported they did not have the courage to leave (9.6%), they hoped things would change (27.9%), their partner pressured them to stay in the relationship (7.6%), and that they had no other relationship alternatives (11.3%).

## Gender Comparisons

A series of logistic regressions were run to compare whether men and women differed with regard to being in a discrepant relationship to assess Research Question 3. Due to the small number of individuals with additional gender identities, these analyses were only conducted with data from individuals who reported they were cis-gender men and women. For all analyses, women were coded as 0 and men were coded as 1, and “no” was coded as 0 and “yes” was coded as 1 (see Table 2). Results revealed that men were significantly more likely to indicate they were more in love with their partner. No other significant gender differences were found with regard to being in a discrepant relationship.

Table 2

Logistic Regression Analyses for Gender Comparisons

Item	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Wald</i>	<i>OR</i>	<i>p</i>
More Attracted to Partner	-.15	.20	0.55	0.86	.457
More in Love with Partner	-.46	.20	5.43	0.63	.020
More Committed to Partner	-.24	.19	1.45	0.79	.229
Less Attracted to Partner	-.14	.19	0.52	0.87	.470
Less in Love with Partner	-.07	.19	0.12	0.94	.734
Less Committed to Partner	.25	.19	1.65	1.29	.199

## Infidelity and Well-Being

To explore Research Questions 4 and 5, six MANOVA analyses were run to investigate whether gender and being in a discrepant relationship were associated with a variety of infidelity and mental health variables (see Table 3 for all univariate results). The first MANOVA explored the main effects of gender and being more attracted in a discrepant relationship, and the interaction between these factors. The multivariate test was significant for gender [Wilks'  $\lambda = .92$ ,  $F(5, 344) = 6.20$ ,  $p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .08$ ] although the test was not significant for being more attracted [Wilks'  $\lambda = .99$ ,  $F(5, 344) = 1.76$ ,  $p = .120$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .03$ ] or the interaction [Wilks'  $\lambda = .99$ ,  $F(5, 344) = .90$ ,  $p = .480$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .01$ ]. Univariate results revealed that men reported greater mean levels of being open to a sexual relationship with someone else ( $M = 3.67$  vs. 2.65), cheating ( $M = 2.32$  vs. 1.81) and abusing alcohol or drugs ( $M = 2.19$  vs. 1.93) compared to women. Individuals who were more attracted to their partner reported higher mean levels of cheating ( $M = 2.07$  vs. 1.82), depression ( $M = 2.96$  vs. 2.52), and abusing alcohol or drugs ( $M = 2.14$  vs. 1.86) compared to those who did not have such a discrepancy.

The second MANOVA tested the main effects of gender and being more in love in a discrepant relationship, and the interaction between these factors. The multivariate tests were significant for gender [Wilks'  $\lambda = .92$ ,  $F(5, 343) = 5.99$ ,  $p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .08$ ] and for being more in love [Wilks'  $\lambda = .94$ ,  $F(5, 343) = 4.32$ ,  $p = .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .06$ ] although the interaction was not significant [Wilks'  $\lambda = .99$ ,  $F(5, 343) = .61$ ,  $p = .693$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .01$ ]. Univariate findings indicated that men reported greater mean levels of being open to a sexual relationship with someone else ( $M = 3.37$  vs. 2.66), cheating ( $M = 2.32$  vs. 1.82) and abusing alcohol or drugs ( $M = 2.19$  vs. 1.93) compared to women. Individuals who were more in love with their partner reported higher mean levels of depression ( $M = 3.04$  vs. 2.37), and abusing alcohol or drugs ( $M = 2.19$  vs. 1.77) compared to those who did not have such a discrepancy.



Table 3  
MANOVA Results for Infidelity and Mental Health Outcomes

Fixed Factor	Open Emotional			Open Sexual			Cheated			Depressed			Alcohol/Drugs		
	F	p	η <sup>2</sup>	F	p	η <sup>2</sup>	F	p	η <sup>2</sup>	F	p	η <sup>2</sup>	F	p	η <sup>2</sup>
Gender	2.93	.088	.01	17.11	< .001	.05	14.25	< .001	.04	0.01	.936	.00	4.30	.039	.01
More Attracted	1.05	.306	.00	0.22	.637	.00	4.02	.046	.01	5.46	.020	.02	4.44	.036	.00
Gender x More Attracted	1.21	.273	.00	3.56	.060	.01	0.00	.949	.00	1.18	.279	.00	0.05	.824	.00
Gender	2.95	.087	.01	17.55	< .001	.05	13.54	< .001	.04	0.13	.722	.00	5.68	.018	.02
More Love	0.05	.820	.00	0.03	.869	.00	0.12	.735	.00	16.06	< .001	.04	9.66	.002	.03
Gender x More Love	0.42	.517	.00	0.75	.386	.00	2.49	.116	.01	0.75	.386	.00	0.37	.543	.00
Gender	3.25	.072	.01	16.87	< .001	.05	14.37	< .001	.04	0.03	.874	.00	4.25	.040	.01
More Commitment	0.37	.543	.00	0.33	.565	.00	0.11	.739	.00	7.95	.005	.02	1.48	.224	.00
Gender x More Commitment	0.98	.322	.00	0.17	.684	.00	7.87	.005	.02	0.15	.698	.00	0.08	.783	.00
Gender	2.79	.096	.01	17.20	< .001	.05	14.51	< .001	.04	0.00	.997	.00	3.86	.050	.00
Less Attracted	1.18	.278	.00	0.87	.352	.00	7.95	.005	.02	8.51	.004	.02	9.66	.002	.03
Gender x Less Attracted	1.69	.194	.01	3.66	.057	.01	1.25	.264	.00	0.03	.865	.00	7.19	.008	.02
Gender	2.69	.101	.01	16.55	< .001	.05	13.29	< .001	.04	0.00	.985	.00	3.36	.068	.01
Less Love	1.22	.270	.00	1.21	.272	.00	9.02	.003	.03	16.05	< .001	.04	2.81	.095	.01
Gender x Less Love	0.55	.459	.00	1.62	.204	.01	0.83	.363	.00	0.17	.677	.00	1.45	.230	.00
Gender	2.76	.097	.01	16.06	< .001	.04	11.25	.001	.03	0.07	.787	.00	2.92	.088	.01
Less Commitment	0.92	.339	.00	3.44	.064	.01	13.32	< .001	.04	4.45	.036	.01	4.59	.033	.01
Gender x Less Commitment	0.37	.542	.00	0.78	.377	.00	0.60	.439	.00	1.71	.192	.01	0.96	.328	.00

Note. dfs ranged from (1, 559) to (1, 560).

The third MANOVA tested the main effects of gender and being more committed in a discrepant relationship, and the interaction between these factors. The multivariate tests were significant for gender [Wilks'  $\lambda = .92$ ,  $F(5, 343) = 5.98$ ,  $p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .08$ ] and for being more committed [Wilks'  $\lambda = .97$ ,  $F(5, 343) = 2.48$ ,  $p = .032$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .04$ ] although the interaction was not significant [Wilks'  $\lambda = .97$ ,  $F(5, 343) = 1.87$ ,  $p = .100$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .03$ ]. Univariate results revealed that men reported greater mean levels of being open to a sexual relationship with someone else ( $M = 3.37$  vs.  $2.66$ ), cheating ( $M = 2.32$  vs.  $1.82$ ), and abusing alcohol or drugs ( $M = 2.19$  vs.  $1.93$ ) compared to women. Individuals who were more committed to their partner reported higher mean levels of depression ( $M = 2.93$  vs.  $2.47$ ) compared to those who did not have such a discrepancy. A significant interaction was also found with regard to cheating. Pairwise comparison revealed a significant difference for men and women who were not more committed partners, with men reporting higher rates of cheating, ( $M = 2.53$  vs.  $1.61$ ,  $p < .001$ ) whereas no gender differences were found among individuals who were more committed ( $M = 2.09$  vs.  $1.96$ ,  $p = .482$ ).

The fourth MANOVA explored the main effects of gender and being less attracted in a discrepant relationship, and the interaction between these factors. The multivariate tests were significant for gender [Wilks'  $\lambda = .92$ ,  $F(5, 343) = 6.29$ ,  $p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .08$ ] and for being less attracted [Wilks'  $\lambda = .96$ ,  $F(5, 343) = 3.03$ ,  $p = .011$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .04$ ] but the interaction was not significant [Wilks'  $\lambda = .97$ ,  $F(5, 343) = 2.06$ ,  $p = .070$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .03$ ]. Univariate results revealed that men reported greater mean levels of being open to a sexual relationship with someone else ( $M = 3.38$  vs.  $2.65$ ), cheating ( $M = 2.33$  vs.  $1.91$ ), and abusing alcohol or drugs ( $M = 2.19$  vs.  $1.93$ ) compared to women. Individuals who were less attracted to their partner reported higher mean levels of cheating ( $M = 2.06$  vs.  $1.78$ ), depression ( $M = 2.91$  vs.  $2.47$ ), and drug or alcohol abuse ( $M = 2.09$  vs.  $1.86$ ) compared to those who did not have such a discrepancy. A significant interaction was also found for alcohol/drug abuse. Pairwise comparison revealed a significant difference for men and women who were less committed, with men reporting greater abuse of alcohol or drugs, ( $M = 2.58$  vs.  $1.95$ ,  $p = .001$ ) and no gender difference was found for those not in a discrepant relationship ( $M = 1.79$  vs.  $1.95$ ,  $p = .624$ ).

The fifth MANOVA tested the main effects of gender and being less in love in a discrepant relationship, and the interaction between these factors. The multivariate tests were significant for gender [Wilks'  $\lambda = .92$ ,  $F(5, 344) = 5.88$ ,  $p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .08$ ] and for being less in love [Wilks'  $\lambda = .94$ ,  $F(5, 344) = 4.24$ ,  $p = .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .06$ ] although the interaction was not significant [Wilks'  $\lambda = .99$ ,  $F(5, 344) = .79$ ,  $p = .559$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .01$ ]. Univariate results revealed that men reported greater mean levels of being open to a sexual relationship with someone else ( $M = 3.37$  vs.  $2.65$ ) and cheating ( $M = 2.32$  vs.  $1.81$ ). Individuals who were less in love with their partner reported more cheating ( $M = 2.09$  vs.  $1.75$ ) and greater depression ( $M = 3.01$  vs.  $2.37$ ).

The sixth MANOVA tested the main effects of gender and being less committed in a discrepant relationship, and the interaction between these factors. The multivariate tests were significant for gender [Wilks'  $\lambda = .93$ ,  $F(5, 344) = 5.61$ ,  $p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .08$ ] and for being less committed [Wilks'  $\lambda = .96$ ,  $F(5, 344) = 3.24$ ,  $p = .007$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .05$ ] but the interaction was not significant [Wilks'  $\lambda = .98$ ,  $F(5, 344) = 1.58$ ,  $p = .164$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .02$ ]. Univariate results revealed that men were more open to being in a sexual relationship with someone else ( $M = 3.37$  vs.  $2.65$ ) and cheating ( $M = 2.32$  vs.  $1.81$ ). Additionally, individuals who were less committed reported greater mean levels of cheating ( $M = 2.18$  vs.  $1.69$ ), depression ( $M = 2.94$  vs.  $2.52$ ), and alcohol or drug abuse ( $M = 2.11$  vs.  $1.87$ ) compared to those without that discrepancy.

## Discussion

The current study provides several meaningful insights about discrepant relationships. Foremost, being in a discrepant relationship is a common experience. Roughly half of the respondents reported either being more or less attracted, in love, and committed to a romantic partner at some point in their lives. Importantly, participants were fairly evenly divided as to whether discrepant relationships were just as good as non-discrepant relationships. Hence, about half of the participants viewed gaps in attraction, love, and committed as non-problematic. Additionally, for our participants currently in discrepant relationships, just over 40% reported that the discrepancy issues did not matter, and they were happy in their relationships. Such findings highlight that individuals' process the dynamics of their relationship differently, have diverse expectations, and use different comparison levels in regard to what they expect from a relationship.

In line with these findings, we found that there are multiple trajectories that a discrepant relationship may follow. Four in ten respondents currently in a discrepant relationship stayed in the relationship because the discrepancy issues did not matter, and they were happy. These findings suggest that gaps in attraction, love, and commitment exist in a multitude of relationship outcomes and comparison levels. Therefore, we cannot confirm that discrepancies in attraction, love, and commitment serve as a driving factor for breaking up or for continuing a relationship. Our findings also revealed that for individuals who were less attracted to, in love with, or committed to a partner, the pattern in these relationships was for these discrepancies to worsen over time or remain stable. It was the minority of cases, 13.7%-19.2%, in which participants reported increases in attraction, love, and commitment. This finding is in contrast with the approximately 28% of participants currently in a discrepant relationship who hoped those discrepancies would diminish over time. When a discrepant relationship ended, most participants ended it themselves although about 20% of participants reported that the relationship ended mutually. Unfortunately, we did not query participants who were more attracted to, in love, or committed about the trajectories of these relationships so conclusions cannot be made in that regard.

We did not find that men and women differed in their likelihood of having been in a discrepant relationship. The exception was that men were more likely to have had the experience of being more in love with their partner compared to women. Such a result is consistent with previous research that men fall in love more readily and quickly compared to women (Galperin & Haselton, 2010; Sprecher & Metts, 1999). Otherwise, men and women were equally likely to report being in a relationship in which they were more attracted and committed to their partner as well as less attracted to, in love with, and committed to their partner. At least for the young adults in the current sample, being in a discrepant relationship is a common experience across genders.

Finally, results confirmed that being in a discrepant relationship was associated with a number of specific personal and relational outcomes. Our findings suggest that being in a discrepant relationship is not significantly associated with being open to either an emotional or sexual relationship with another partner. However, individuals who were less attracted to, less in love with, and less committed to their partners were more likely to report cheating while in that discrepant relationship. This finding is consistent with interdependence theory and previous research which found that individuals who are less satisfied, committed, invested, and perceive greater relationship alternatives are more likely to engage infidelity (Drigotas et al., 1999). Future work may expand on the current study and consider how satisfaction and perceived alternatives factor into the association between relationship discrepancies and infidelity. Interestingly, individuals who were more attracted to their partner also reported greater endorsement of having cheated in their discrepant relationship. This finding may reflect the

positive association between sexual excitation and infidelity (Mark, Janssen, & Milhausen, 2011). In other words, some individuals are more sexually excited and possess stronger sexual desires compared to others. It is possible that individuals who reported being more attracted to their partner, were also more attracted to other individuals, and this is linked to greater infidelity involvement. It is curious that being in a discrepant relationship was not associated with thinking about infidelity but was associated with engaging in infidelity. Previous research has confirmed that individuals overwhelmingly expect monogamy and exclusivity in their romantic relationships, and view infidelity negatively (Gibson et al., 2016). Our participants' responses may reflect that they did not think about infidelity but may have taken the opportunity to engage in infidelity if it were an option.

Individuals who were more attracted to, more in love with, and more committed to their partners reported greater levels of depression, a pattern also found for individuals who were less attracted to, less in love with, and less committed to their partner. In sum, being in a discrepant relationship regardless of being more or less involved was associated with more negative mental health outcomes. These findings are consistent with the findings of Frost and Forrester (2013), who found that depressive symptoms increased for individuals who reported discrepancies between their ideal level of closeness and the actual level of relationship closeness. In their study, consistent with our findings, it appears that a discrepancy in either direction (being either more or less involved) can impact mental health. This finding may be explained by the fact that the discrepant relationship is not meeting one's expectations, regardless of directionality. We also found that individuals who were more attracted and more in love with their partner reported greater usage of alcohol/drugs, as did individuals who were less attracted and committed to a partner. Although not nearly as consistent as the results with depression, these findings suggest that being in a discrepant relationship, regardless of being more or less involved, can negatively impact one's mental health and well-being. Researchers find that individuals use substances in order to cope with relationship distress (Levitt & Cooper, 2010), and the current findings are consistent with this research.

Some notable gender differences emerged as well. Specifically, men consistently reported being more open to other sexual partners and engaging in infidelity across all analyses. This finding is consistent with previous infidelity research (Fincham & May, 2017) and reflects the greater sexual freedom men are afforded in accordance with sexual double standards. A less robust gender effect was found for using alcohol/drugs. In three out of six MANOVA analyses, men reported higher levels of alcohol/drug abuse. This finding should be cautiously interpreted although other researchers have previously found that men engage in higher levels of using substances (Foster et al., 2014; Levitt & Cooper, 2010). No gender effects were found for being open to an emotional relationship with someone else or depression.

Two significant interaction effects also emerged. For individuals who were not more committed to their partner (i.e., those individuals who did not report being in a discrepant relationship characterized as being more committed than their partner), men were more likely to have engaged in infidelity. In contrast, for both men and women who reported they were in a discrepant relationship in terms of being more committed (i.e., those individuals who did report being in a discrepant relationship), both genders were equally likely to indicate that they engaged in infidelity. In sum, for those who were in a discrepant relationship in which they were more committed to their partner, regardless of gender, these individuals were more likely to remain faithful. These findings highlight that relationship context is often more important to consider than individual variables, such as gender when predicting infidelity (Gibson et al., 2016; Maddox Shaw et al., 2013).

A significant interaction emerged among those who were less committed with men reporting greater usage of alcohol/drugs whereas no gender differences were found for individuals who did not indicate they were less committed. Again, it appears that relationship context is paramount for understanding how men and women may behave differently. However, our results stand in contrast to [Levitt and Cooper \(2010\)](#) who found that women tend to drink more than men when coping with relationship difficulties and feeling less connected to their partner. However, [Elliott, Easterling, and Knox \(2016\)](#) surveyed 381 undergraduates about risky romantic behavior and found that men reported drinking more alcohol than women. Future work should help to refine these patterns and to better understand how gender, relationship functioning, and substance use may be intertwined.

## Limitations and Conclusions

There are several limitations of this study. First, the convenience sample of 640 undergraduates is hardly representative of the 20.4 million college students throughout the United States ([National Center for Education Statistics, 2017](#)). Nor is the study representative of young adults in the United States in general. Future studies should utilize more representative samples in order to generalize the results.

Second, the respondents may not have been aware of discrepancies in their relationships. The degree to which a partner is attracted to, in love with and committed is a sensitive and sometimes difficult issue to reveal/discuss. Similarly, persons may feel anxious about revealing discrepant feelings to their partner. The result is that only later may partners discover in retrospect that there were discrepancies. We also assumed throughout the study that being evenly matched in terms of attraction, love, and commitment was the ideal relationship dynamic individuals would hold. Such an assumption should be more explicitly tested in order to better assimilate the current line of research into the broader literature on ideal standards and relationship discrepancies.

Third, the data for this research were quantitative with no qualitative interviews to provide insights on the raw statistics. What is it like for the partner who is more or less attracted, in love, or committed? Subsequent research may involve interviews on discrepant relationships to reveal the nuances of these relationships.

Fourth, this research is correlational and cross-sectional in nature and future work should refine the directionality of this research. For example, it is just as plausible that infidelity, depression, and alcohol/drug use could trigger changes in attraction, love, and commitment. Researchers find that depression, alcohol use, and infidelity may be antecedents, as well as consequences, of poorer relationship quality ([Fincham & May, 2017](#); [Gana, Saada, Broc, Koleck, & Untas, 2017](#); [Roberson, Lenger, Norona, & Olmstead, 2018](#)).

These findings also provide multiple insights about discrepant relationships. As a whole, our findings suggest that being in a discrepant relationship is a common experience for young adults. Likewise, these findings emphasize the importance of moving beyond global relationship evaluations to understand the numerous and multifaceted ways discrepant relationships may impact individuals. This research confirms that gaps in attraction, love, and commitment are associated with diverse outcomes including infidelity, depression, and alcohol/drug use.

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