

**Attending to Temptation:
The Operation (and Perils) of Attention to Alternatives in Close Relationships**

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Online dating services encourage their subscribers to maintain their memberships by supplying them a steady stream of interesting potential partners. If a subscriber records the age, location, and sex of a desired partner, a large dating service (such as Yahoo Personals or Match.com) will reply with regular e-mails containing the pictures and profiles of other subscribers who meet those criteria. The customer thus routinely encounters a flow of presumably available, occasionally alluring, possible partners into his or her inbox. Now, imagine that after finding each other in such a manner, two subscribers begin a fledgling relationship that is enticing to both of them. It's a promising partnership. Their intimacy and investments increase, they become more satisfied and more interdependent, and they reach a point that is an intriguing marker of their emerging commitment to one another: They decide to cancel their subscriptions to the dating service that brought them together.

Or do they? Certainly, having found rewarding new partners, some people would prefer not to be confronted with ongoing exhibitions of tempting alternatives to their newfound mates. Absorbed by their new relationships, they would be less interested in other potential partners, at least temporarily, and their subscriptions to the dating service would no longer seem worth the cost. Other people, however, might be reluctant to cancel the parade of possibilities. With varying degrees of curiosity and attention (and probably without telling their current partners), they would continue to inspect the pictures and profiles of others, being persistently alert to new opportunities.

Clearly, people differ in their *attention to alternatives* to their present romantic relationships. The interest and eagerness with which people remain alert to, and seek information about, other possible partners varies from person to person at any point in time. Does such variability reflect the operation of stable individual differences that distinguish partners who are capable of lasting devotion and commitment from those who are characteristically more fickle and less reliable? Or, alternatively, is attention to alternatives more dynamic, changing with one's circumstances and ranging from low to high in most people across different occasions? And most importantly, does it matter? That is, does interest in one's alternatives influence one's existing relationships, or is it an innocuous entertainment that has no real effect? Research on attention to alternatives is still in its infancy, and conclusive answers to these questions are still emerging. Nevertheless, the data in hand are provocative and potentially consequential, as we will see in what follows.

The Origins of the Idea

The proposition that people often pay heed to the outcomes that may be available in alternative relationships was born in Thibaut and Kelley's (1959) seminal analysis of interdependence in their classic monograph, *The Social Psychology of Groups*. Alongside the concept of personal *comparison levels*, the idiosyncratic expectations that determine whether or not we're satisfied with the relational outcomes we receive, Thibaut and Kelley posited the existence of *comparison levels for alternatives* (or CL_{altS}), individual estimates of how well we would do if we left our current relationships. CL_{altS} were said to represent the global outcomes, the net profits or losses, people would

encounter by departing their present partnerships and embracing the best alternative option that they believed to be available to them.¹ Thus, a CL_{alt} involves both the enticing rewards offered by a new partner and the various costs such as “financial and social penalties” (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959, p. 169) that one would incur by leaving the present partner.

As a result, a CL_{alt} is a complex judgment. On the one hand, both one’s existing relationship and any potential replacement are likely to offer a wide assortment of both appealing rewards and maddening costs. By switching to a new partner, one may gain the attractions of the new partner and avoid the irritations of the old, but one also loses the desirable benefits of the old partner and suffers the nuisances of the new. The other costs of leaving may also be multifaceted; for instance, one’s investments in the existing relationship—the things one would lose by leaving (Rusbult, Arriaga, & Agnew, 2001)—can range from beloved tangible goods, such as a shared copy of The Beatles’s White Album, to intangible psychological benefits, such as admiration from one’s mother-in-law (Goodfriend & Agnew, 2004). There is much to consider. Then, on the other hand, one’s calculations of these diverse consequences are likely to be influenced by a variety of emotion-laden and motivational processes. Flushed with romantic excitement, people may blithely shrug off or ignore obvious faults of an (otherwise) tempting alternative that become painfully plain once one’s passion fades (Goodwin, Fiske, Rosen, & Rosenthal, 2002). Even the judgment of whether someone is an *available* alternative may vary with changeable influences such as one’s momentary self-regard; people with low self-respect probably underestimate their mate value and too often doubt that others will find them desirable (Kiesler & Baral, 1970).

Indeed, because the complex calculations that produce our CL_{alts} are shaped by various motivations, they can be recruited to facilitate the attainment of desired goals. In order to protect and maintain a desired relationship, for example, committed lovers may underestimate how well they could be doing with other potential partners. They judge very lovely people of the other sex to be much less attractive than do those who are less committed to an ongoing partnership (Johnson & Rusbult, 1989), but they do not differ from their uncommitted peers in their evaluations of older people of the other sex or in their judgments of same-sex peers (Simpson, Gangestad, & Lerma, 1990). People evidently appreciate gorgeous others who are no threat to their relationships, but they find ways to undervalue those who are realistic—but defensible—threats to their existing loves (Lydon, Fitzsimons, & Naidoo, 2003). By judging their alternatives to be less tempting and desirable than they actually are, people can convince themselves that the grass isn’t really greener on the other side of the fence, thereby reducing their motivation to move next door.

This is where my investigations into people’s attention to their alternatives began. Clearly, CL_{alts} were subjective perceptions that were influenced by motivational processes. What’s more, nuances like these were imagined by Thibaut and Kelley

¹ In most cases, CL_{alts} were thought to focus on particular romantic rivals to a current relationship, but Kelley and Thibaut (1978) acknowledged that simple solitude and self-sufficiency—choosing to go it alone for a time—was also a choice that could be explicitly considered.

(1959). They allowed that a CL_{alt} was a complex “cognitive construction” (p. 22), and they suggested that its contents would vary with the “salience” (p. 22) of the alternative attractions one encountered. They even implied that, in order to avoid needless frustration, people might try to distract themselves from attractive alternatives that were not realistically attainable (p. 176). Given this, I wondered: Why couldn’t people save themselves the small effort involved in derogating alternatives that might threaten a desired partnership by just ignoring those alternatives in the first place? By remaining heedless of rival attractions that might erode their commitment, people would be able to efficiently stay dedicated to those relationships they wished to sustain. I conceived of *inattention* to alternatives as a relationship maintenance mechanism that would distinguish those who were highly committed to their romantic relationships from those who were still on the prowl (Miller, Perlman, & Brehm, 2007).

Some Initial Data

In Miller (1997), I conducted a first study of attention to relationship alternatives. In part, it was a fishing expedition; I expected attentiveness to map onto other interdependency constructs in a coherent and logical manner, but I wasn’t sure what I would find. So, I threw a wide net. First, I constructed a simple six-item scale that assessed awareness of, interest in, and distraction by potential alternative partners (see Table 1). Then, I asked respondents to describe their satisfaction with, investments in, and commitment to their primary romantic relationships; they also rated the quality of their best alternative partner. The items on my “Attentiveness to Alternatives Index” displayed modest but serviceable internal consistency ($\alpha = .69$), and they all loaded on a

Table 1

The Original “Attentiveness to Alternatives Index” from Miller (1997).

Please consider how OFTEN or SELDOM each of the following statements applies to you, using this scale:

1	2	3	4	5
never	seldom	occasionally	often	always

1. I flirt with people of the opposite sex without mentioning my partner.
2. I'm interested in having an affair.
3. I go out socially with opposite-sex friends without telling my partner.
4. I am distracted by other people that I find attractive.
5. I'm very aware that there are plenty more "fish in the sea."
6. I rarely notice other good-looking or attractive people. (reverse-scored)

single factor that accounted for 71% of the variance. They also seemed to work: Attentiveness was highly related to the perceived quality of one's best alternative ($r = .56$) and the ease with which it could be obtained ($r = .61$), and attention also predicted the number of alternatives people thought they possessed ($r = .23$) and their number of recent dating relationships ($r = .25$). The more attentive people claimed to be, the easier they thought it would be to replace their current romantic partner, and the more compelling they thought the replacement would be. Further, attention to one's alternatives was negatively related to love ($r = -.59$) and liking ($r = -.39$) for one's current partner, and to satisfaction with ($r = -.58$), investment in ($r = -.52$), and commitment to ($r = -.61$) one's current relationship. These links were all substantial. The more distractible and interested in others people said they were, the less content and settled they were with their present partners.

Heartened by these patterns, I embarked on a second phase of my procedure in which I sought to obtain behavioral evidence that would support my humble scale. Two weeks after completing their surveys, many of the respondents participated in an ostensibly unrelated lab study that was purportedly examining reactions to print advertisements. Participants were asked to inspect vivid slides of underwear models and various products while their skin conductance levels were assessed—and while the milliseconds they spent scrutinizing each slide were unobtrusively counted. The participants' earlier reports of attentiveness were not related to their electrodermal responses, but the time they spent poring over attractive, scantily-clad targets of the other (but not the same) sex was. This correlation was not large ($r = .27$) and the observed behavior bore only indirectly on the participants' interest in real romantic alternatives; nevertheless, the actual actions of attentive people did differ from those of other people who were less interested in the options they possessed.

Finally, at the end of the semester, 8 weeks later, I sought to examine the predictive utility of attention to alternatives over time. I identified those participants who were no longer dating the same partner (they comprised 30% of the original sample), and I compared them to those whose relationships had continued. Notably, the data contained several important measures—satisfaction, investments, commitment—all of which meaningfully predict relational success or failure. Remarkably, however, a simultaneous discriminant analysis that employed all of these measures demonstrated that the Attention to Alternatives Index was the best predictor of relationship continuation or failure over two months' time. And to my surprise, in a subsequent stepwise analysis, attentiveness was the *only* unique predictor of relationship outcome, correctly classifying 70% of the cases. Apparently, when a person's flirtatious interest in novel partners was accounted for, classic, proven measures of relationship functioning could provide no further information regarding the chance that the person's existing relationship would be intact some weeks later. Attentiveness obviously mattered. What was going on here?

Goal-Directed Attentiveness

Clearly, we notice only some of the stimuli we encounter, and we are more likely to notice those to which we attend (Mack, 2003). This isn't news:

Everyone knows what attention is. It is the taking possession by the mind, in clear and present form, of one out of what seems several simultaneously possible objects or trains of thought. Focalization, concentration of consciousness are of its essence. It implies withdrawal from some things in order to deal effectively with others. (James, 1890, p. 403)

When our attention is focused on particular stimuli, the accuracy and speed with which we identify and evaluate them is increased. Behavioral responses are potentiated, and, on occasion, we savor the stimuli more thoroughly (LaBerge, 1995). But our attentional capacity is limited: Paying attention to one stimulus reduces the amount of awareness, consideration, and interest we can allocate to other events (Pashler, 1992).

Classic models of attention hold that it is determined both by the properties of the external stimulus, so that some events are more attention-getting than others, and by the wishes, intentions, motivations, and needs of the perceiver, so that observers with different desires notice disparate portions of a larger whole (Pashler, Johnston, & Ruthruff, 2001). Indeed, both of these influences are important; our attention can be captured against our will by novel, prominent, and compelling stimuli that we have no wish to consider (Most, Scholl, Clifford, & Simons, 2005). However, a variety of recent evidence converges on the conclusion that our motivations and interests direct our allocation of attention to a greater extent than stimulus properties do. Our awareness is more easily captured by stimuli that match the things we are looking for, and our goals can clearly shape what we (think we) see (Most et al., 2005; Pashler et al., 2001).

On occasion, we may recognize the preoccupations and motives that shape our attention. Certainly, people may be able to acknowledge their anxieties and fears, and negative affective states like these routinely regulate our foci of attention. People with health anxiety are chronically alert for potential threats to their health (Lees, Mogg, & Bradley, 2005), and those with an excessive fear of failure are quick to detect stimuli denoting disappointment and delay (Duley, Conroy, Morris, Wiley, & Janelle, 2005). More importantly for our purposes here, broader social motives direct our perceptions of our interactions, as well. Lonely people pay particular attention to the expressive nonverbal behavior they encounter in others (Gardner, Pickett, Jefferis, & Knowles, 2005), and those who fear social rejection are especially sensitive to signs of disapproval from others (Strachman & Gable, 2006).

But motivational influences on attention may also be more subtle. Our expectations can shape our preconscious attention to stimuli that are presented so rapidly that we do not consciously know what they are (or even that they exist). When women who were attuned to sexism in others were exposed to sexist subliminal cues (e.g., “ho,” “bitch,” “whore”), they reacted more quickly to them than other women did despite having no conscious awareness that the cues had ever been present (Kaiser, Vick, & Major, 2006). Alert for signs of prejudice in others, the women were evidently screening their surroundings for signals of sexism without knowing that they were doing so. This appears to be a case of *automatic vigilance* in which one’s motives create selective biases in attention that are not necessarily intended or voluntary—and of which one may be unaware (e.g., Hunt, Keogh, & French, 2006).

Analogous results have been obtained by Maner, Gailliot, and DeWall (2007), who demonstrated that people found it harder to disengage their attention from images of gorgeous women than from pictures of average women, with this difference emerging in only half a second's exposure to the images. This bias was especially evident in men with an unrestricted sociosexual orientation—those who were interested in casual sex (Simpson & Gangestad, 1991)—further suggesting that social motives guide the (almost) instantaneous operation of attention.

Indeed, motivational states related to survival and reproduction may be among the most potent influences on our attention (Neuberg, Kenrick, Maner, & Schaller, 2005). Eye-tracking methodologies find that sexually unrestricted men and women are particularly attentive to attractive, as opposed to unattractive, members of the other sex (Maner et al., 2003), and they find it especially difficult to look away from images of lovely other-sex targets when they are sexually aroused (Maner, Gailliot, Rouby, & Miller, in press). There is no doubt that “the motivation to seek mates plays a role in guiding attention toward attractive opposite-sex people” (Neuberg et al., 2005, p. 143).

Attention to Alternatives as Goal Fulfillment

Like other biases in attention, the interest and eagerness with which people monitor potential alternatives to their present relationships plausibly covaries with the strength of interpersonal motives involving mating and intimacy. Variations in motivation may arise from either individual differences or situational influences, and I consider each in turn below.

Situational influences. I initially conceived of attention to alternatives as a dynamic process that covaried with romantic contentment, and this it does seem to do. Two studies (Miller, 2002; Simeon & Miller, 2005) have since replicated the substantial inverse relationships between attentiveness and satisfaction, investments, and commitment, and these are patterns that allow the possibility that people become more attentive when they become dissatisfied with their current lot.² This may be the case, but high attentiveness probably erodes one's satisfaction, too. Jennifer Simeon and I assessed participants' attention to alternatives, satisfaction, and commitment on two occasions three months apart; we found that lower initial satisfaction did predict higher subsequent attentiveness, but higher attentiveness predicted lower satisfaction down the road, as well. (See Figure 1.) Attention to alternatives has very similar links to investments and commitment over time, so the data suggest that attentiveness is promoted by poor relational outcomes—but in turn, it undermines those outcomes and contributes to further erosion of the relationship.

² Indeed, I thought that I detected such a causal pathway after Thibaut & Kelley (1959) got me thinking, but before I collected any actual data: “During periods of blissful contentment, I was curiously heedless of the (remote) romantic possibilities presented by new potential partners, whereas, when I was disgruntled, alternative prospects (and fantasies) were more cognitively available. I thought that I was more alert and attentive to other potential attractions when I was less satisfied with what I had” (Miller, 2003, p. 285).

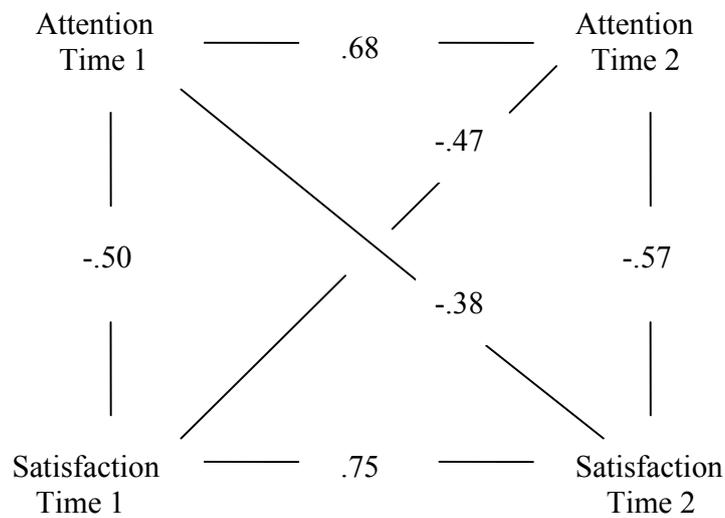


Figure 1. ($n = 167$). Cross lag panel for attention to alternatives and relationship satisfaction over three months' time. All six correlations are statistically significant, $p < .01$.

That conclusion was supported by dyadic data I obtained from both members of heterosexual dating couples (Miller, 2002). Both men and women were less satisfied with their relationships when their partners were attentive to alternatives, and each was more attentive when his or her partner was, too.

Thus, our attentiveness to our alternatives probably increases when we encounter unfavorable outcomes and begin to wish to do better. Still, changes in our circumstances undoubtedly influence some of us more than others, and attentiveness does not entirely depend on the situations we inhabit. Consider the link between attentiveness and the perceived quality of our alternatives: The positive correlation is consistent with the possibility that sensational stimuli compel our attention; after all, it's hard not to be distracted by others who are captivating and alluring. Moreover, as interdependency theory predicts (Rusbult, Drigotas, & Verette, 1994), people are less committed to their current partners when their alternatives are tempting (see Figure 2). However, attention to one's alternatives partially mediates the influence of the quality of those alternatives on one's later commitment, as Figure 2 shows (Simeon & Miller, 2005). The extent to which alluring alternatives undermine our subsequent commitment depends in part on the attention we pay them. Evidently, enchanting new potential partners cannot lure us to their side if we ignore them. Are some people really able to take no notice of such attractions when they exist?

Dispositional influences. Stable individual differences in chronic levels of attentiveness do seem to exist. Two types of data support such a conclusion. First,

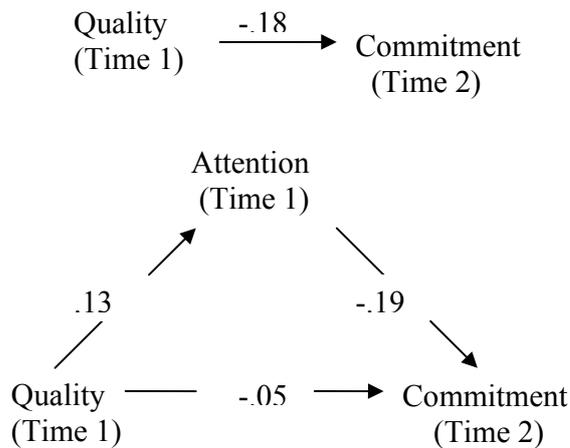


Figure 2. Attention to one's alternatives partially mediates the influence of the quality of those alternatives on later commitment (by Sobel's test, $t [167] = -7.58, p < .001$). The values in the pathways are proportions of variance accounted for.

attentiveness itself is reasonably steady over time. The 12-week rest-retest reliability of my humble Attentiveness to Alternatives Index is $r = .68$, as Figure 1 shows (Simeon & Miller, 2005). That level of stability is consistent with a dynamic process that changes with one's circumstances but that nevertheless is consistently more active in some people than in others.

Second, attentiveness maps onto several stable dispositions in a manner that suggests that it, too, is fairly constant. Attentiveness does not appear to have anything to do with extraversion, neuroticism, or openness to experience, but it shares some variance with agreeableness, and it is quite clearly negatively related to conscientiousness (see Table 2). The more dependable and reliable people are, the less heed they pay to romantic temptations that might endanger their current relationships. Attentiveness is also positively related to narcissism, and persistently higher attention to alternatives seems to be an important reason why narcissists are routinely less committed to their relationship partners than other people are (Foster, Shrira, & Campbell, 2006): Attentiveness completely mediates the link between narcissism and commitment, which disappears when attention to alternatives is taken into account (Campbell & Foster, 2002). Their grandiose sense of entitlement evidently leads narcissists to be constantly on the lookout for something (even) better, and that is one reason why they remain less devoted to the partners they already have.

Attachment styles can change with experience, but they are also moderately stable over the years (Fraley, 2002), and attentiveness is positively correlated with one of the two major dimensions of attachment, avoidance of intimacy (see Table 2). Avoidant people are discomfited by dependency on others, and they are routinely less committed to

Table 2

Correlations with Attention to Alternatives

<u>Personal Characteristic</u>	<u><i>r</i></u>
Agreeableness ^a	-.18
Conscientiousness ^a	-.27
Narcissism ^b	.27 - .36
Avoidance of Intimacy ^c	.36
Anxiety over Abandonment ^c	.15
Sociosexual Orientation ^a	.53

Note. Superscript letters denote the sources of the tabled data: ^aSimeon & Miller (2005); ^bCampbell & Foster (2002); ^cMiller (2002). Campbell and Foster (2002) reported two correlations from two different samples.

their partners than are those who are more comfortable in close, interdependent relationships—and once again, higher attentiveness may be involved. In my study of dating couples (Miller, 2002), attention to alternatives was a partial mediator of the link ($r^2 = .21$) between avoidance and commitment, which dropped substantially (to $r^2 = .06$) once attentiveness was accounted for (by Sobel's test, $t(67) = 3.88$, $p < .01$). The disquiet that characterizes avoidant attachment may well encourage a restless watchfulness, so that avoidant people are chronically more attentive to other possibilities than are those who are more comfortable with closeness. In any case, it seems that, compared to avoidant people, those who are relaxed and at ease with intimacy are less interested in monitoring the quality of their potential alternative partners, and they feel more committed to their existing partners as a result.

Finally, attentiveness goes hand in hand with an interest in casual sex. Compared to those who attach more value to monogamy, people with an unrestricted sociosexual orientation have a greater number of lifetime sex partners (Ostovich & Sabini, 2004), and, fittingly, they report more attention to their alternatives (Table 2). Longitudinal data is needed to address this question, but it is likely that unrestricted people remain chronically on the prowl, characteristically monitoring their CL_{alts} with more interest and attention than restricted people do. Indeed, the greater attentiveness in those with unrestricted sociosexuality may be a particularly good example of the manner in which dispositional influences can underlie the interpersonal motives that guide attention to alternatives. Some of us—being more conscientious, secure, and monogamous—may have little wish to open the door to temptation, whereas others of us—being less diligent and more vain—may keep shopping for better deals. There may even be a physiological foundation for such motives: When they enter romantic relationships, the testosterone

levels of restricted men drop as they settle down, but the levels of unrestricted men, along with their attention to alternatives, stay high (McIntyre et al., 2006). The amount of attention we give to alternative attractions probably depends on both the allure of the attraction and on our individual tastes, but some of us may have chronic difficulty in overlooking and ignoring temptation. And over time, our roving eyes may have several corrosive effects that erode our existing relationships.

Deleterious Effects of Attentiveness

Attentiveness puts relationships at risk, and it may do so by damaging the outcomes encountered by both the vigilant partner and his or her mate. First, it's undoubtedly obnoxious to recognize that one's partner remains alert for other attractions. If the attention is explicit—with one's partner, for instance, refusing to cancel the subscription to the dating service—the lack of commitment is plain, and perceived relational devaluation, suspicious jealousy, and a variety of other hurtful consequences may result. If the attention is less obtrusive, its effects may be more subtle but still important. Covert attentiveness may not directly insult one's partner, but I suspect that it has diffuse effects like those caused by casual cohabitation (Poponoe & Whitehead, 2002). Where attentiveness reigns, a partnership is less satisfying and the partners rehearse a relative lack of commitment (Miller, 2002). They may encounter more costs such as infidelity (Barta & Kiene, 2005), and one's partner may gradually become more attentive, too (Miller, 2002). And because they are less devoted to their current partners, attentive people will work less hard to resolve conflicts in an advantageous manner; higher CL_{alt} s encourage exit, rather than voice, when dissatisfaction looms (Rusbult, Zembrodt, & Gunn, 1982).

Moreover, attentiveness itself may carry concealed costs for those who practice it. Frustration may follow from seeking attractive alternatives and failing to find them, or finding them and being too timid, guilty, or inept to approach them successfully. Simply becoming aware that compelling alternatives exist may engender upward comparisons that foster discontent with one's present circumstances. However, lasting contentment may continually elude those whose habitual attentiveness leads them to replace their current partners: Novelty undoubtedly plays a role in making one's alternatives seem interesting (Silvia, 2005) and appealing (Dewsbury, 1981), but the passion created by novelty is inevitably eroded by time and familiarity (Vohs & Baumeister, 2004). Disenchantment and disillusionment may follow. And remarkably, those of us who are able to choose among several desirable alternatives may not be in an enviable position. An overabundance of choice can be surprisingly burdensome, inflating expectations and increasing the chances for disappointment and regret (Schwartz & Ward, 2004). In particular, people who seek to maximize their satisfaction by continually shopping for the best possible mate are likely to end up disgruntled and discontent. A study of college graduates seeking their first jobs demonstrated that those who insisted on exhausting all possibilities to find the "best" job (as opposed to seeking one that was "good enough") did obtain higher starting salaries—but they were less happy and settled in their work (Iyengar, Wells, & Schwartz, 2006). We may not be well-served by allowing our interpersonal ambitions to run amok.

Attentiveness and Self-Control

We have seen that some of us are chronically more attentive to our alternatives than others are, but anyone's attention can be "hijacked" and drawn to especially compelling stimuli against one's will (Miltner, Krieschel, Hecht, Trippe, & Weiss, 2004). Thus, attentiveness is influenced by both personal and situational influences that may be beyond our conscious control. Nevertheless, a final important aspect of attentiveness is that we are also able to *manage* our attention to a greater or lesser extent, and we are capable of regulating our attention to alternatives. The intentional control of attention is a form of self-regulation (Rueda, Posner, & Rothbart, 2004) that is a key component of the "willpower" that allows us to surmount obstacles and to resist temptations that would otherwise keep us from our desired goals (Mischel & Ayduk, 2002). People differ in their abilities to voluntarily focus, restrain, and regulate their attention (Derryberry, 2002; Luszczynska, Diehl, Gutiérrez-Doña, Kuusinen, & Schwarzer, 2004), but almost all of us are able to exert some attentional self-restraint if we have our wits about us.

That is, however, a big "if." The self-control of attention, like other forms of self-regulation, consumes a limited psychological resource (Vohs & Ciarocco, 2004). Prolonged periods of attentional control lead to depletion of our executive abilities, leaving us temporarily less able to persist at effortful tasks, to inhibit inappropriate behavior, and generally to engage in self-restraint (Baumeister, Gailliot, DeWall, & Oaten, 2006). As a result, people who have recently been controlling themselves may find it difficult to look away from alluring alternatives even when they know that their leering is perilous. After a self-control manipulation in the lab, for instance, people involved in romantic relationships were particularly likely (compared to those who were not dating anyone) to linger longer than usual over photos of swimsuit models of the other sex (Rawn & Vohs, 2006); others who had not exerted prior self-control spent less time poring over the attractive potential alternatives.

Thus, when misplaced attention to alternatives would be maladroit, most of us are probably able to ignore tempting alternatives, at least for a time. The trick may be in regulating adverse attention over an extended period, and three strategies may be profitable. First, self-regulation appears to improve with practice (Baumeister et al., 2006), so recurring efforts to distract oneself from dangerous temptations may gradually increase one's abilities to do so successfully. Practice is unlikely to make perfect, but it may enhance one's endurance. Second, avoiding situations and states (such as intoxication) that will predictably reduce one's self-control may avert unwanted lapses. Note, however, that these first two strategies both involve inhibition and self-restraint; thus, it may be more efficacious in the long run for habitually attentive people to pursue a third tactic of shaping their motives so that fidelity and relational commitment become goals of greater value. If inattention to alternatives is a desired end instead of a form of self-denial, it will obviously be easier to attain. Can education and insight regarding the risks of chronic attention to alternatives help in this regard? We do not know, but further study may illuminate the extent to which attention to alternatives can be managed and changed.

A New Attention to Alternatives Scale

To promote further work on attention to alternatives, I am developing a new scale with which to assess attentiveness. The original Attentiveness to Alternatives Index was an exploratory measure. It performed surprisingly well, but it suffered, in my view from poor internal reliability and an item (“I’m interested in having an affair”) that overlapped unrestricted sociosexuality and low commitment to too great an extent. Conceptually, I also thought that the Index glossed over nuances in attention that could be important. Specifically, being distractible when alluring alternatives present themselves seems to me to be less intentional than is active prowling for novel partners; both instill an awareness that alternatives may be available, but the former is more passive and (perhaps) innocuous, whereas the latter is playful, deliberate, and more destructive. The motivations directing each type of behavior are probably related, but distinct.

Thus, my research team³ and I wrote 55 new items addressing various aspects of attentiveness (e.g., “There’s no harm in looking”; “If my relationship were to end, I know

Table 3

The New Attention to Alternatives Scale.

Please rate how well each of these statements describes you, using this scale:

1	2	3	4	5
not at all	somewhat	moderately well	quite well	extremely well

1. I go out socially with opposite-sex friends without telling my partner.
 2. I am distracted by other people that I find attractive.
 3. I'm always on the prowl for an exciting new relationship.
 4. I take notice when an attractive person walks into the room.
 5. I'm always aware that there are a lot of other partners who are available to me.
 6. Good-looking people always catch my attention.
 7. I'd like to be asked to dinner by someone new.
 8. I always notice when a hot person walks by.
 9. I often have lunch or coffee with someone else without telling my current partner.
-

³ Many thanks to a fine crew: Kimberly Bye, Karen Bone, Katherine Castillo, Chelsea Janke, and Stefanie Urban.

who my next partner would be”) and set out to create a new scale. It is still under construction, but the present version of the new Attention to Alternatives Scale contains 9 items with satisfactory internal consistency ($\alpha = .88$) that load on two factors explaining 71% of the variance in the items. The factors are correlated ($r = .44$), but they appear to delineate two distinct facets of attention to alternatives that involve both active searching for desirable alternatives (e.g., “I’m always on the prowl for an exciting new relationship”) and more passive alertness (e.g., “Good-looking people always catch my attention”). Both facets are negatively related to satisfaction with and commitment to current relationships, and both are positively related to unrestricted sociosexuality. However, active searching is more highly related to each of these measures than passive alertness is; this suggests that attention to alternatives may in fact have discrete forms—ranging from distractibility to prowling—whose effects may influence relationships in meaningfully different ways. Future investigations will tell.

Conclusion

The pursuit of successful, satisfying intimacy is a central human endeavor, and attention to alternatives serves that end in promoting the identification of potential mates and in encouraging us to approach them. Attention can be disadvantageous, however, in undermining and endangering existing relationships. Alertness that is functional before one is paired with a partner may erode relational well-being if it continues unabated once a courtship is done. Is it possible for us to balance our desires to find desirable partners with our interest in keeping them once they are won? Clearly, people do sometimes “transcend hedonic self-interest and potential self-gratification to sustain their relationship” (Lydon et al., 2003, p. 359). Further investigation into the processes underlying attention to alternatives may provide illuminating indications of how and why this is done.

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