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# Marginalized Relationships: The Impact of Social Disapproval on Romantic Relationship Commitment

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*Little research has examined the effects of prejudice and discrimination on people's romantic relationships. The authors explored whether belonging to a socially devalued relationship affects consequential relational phenomena. Within the framework of the Investment Model, the authors (a) tested the association between perceived relationship marginalization and relationship commitment, (b) compared investment levels of individuals involved in marginalized versus nonmarginalized relationships, and (c) explored ways in which couples may compensate for decreased investments to maintain high commitment. Consistent with hypotheses, marginalization was a significant negative predictor of commitment. Moreover, individuals in marginalized relationships invested significantly less than individuals in nonmarginalized relationships. Despite investing less, marginalized relationship partners were significantly more committed than were their nonmarginalized counterparts. Thus, marginalized partners appeared to compensate for their reduced investments, with evidence suggesting that compensation occurs via reduced perception of relationship alternatives rather than via increased perception of relationship satisfaction.*

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**Keywords:** *marginalized relationships; Investment Model; gay and lesbian; interracial; age-gap; commitment*

**A**growing amount of research is focused on the experience of prejudice from the target's perspective (e.g., Swim, Cohen, & Hyers, 1998). Such research attends to the psychological experiences of socially devalued groups, in contrast to the larger literature devoted to the "psychology of the powerful" or research focused on those who have the power to discriminate against disadvantaged groups and individuals (Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999). The increasing trend to study the target's perspective has resulted in a burgeoning literature primarily focused on how prejudice affects people at

both the individual and group levels (for a review, see Schmitt & Branscombe, 2002). Despite the recent surge in studies of this nature, however, little research has examined the effects of prejudice and discrimination on people's romantic involvements. Thus, we know virtually nothing about the implications of such negativity when directed at people's close relationships. The present research was aimed at further enhancing our understanding of the target's perspective by exploring the effects of belonging to socially devalued relationships on consequential relational phenomena.

## PREJUDICE AND CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS

It is clear that prejudice against different types of romantic relationships exists. A review of past and present public opinion survey results reveals that nontraditional relationships (e.g., same-sex relationships, younger women dating older men, interracial relationships) have been and continue to be viewed more negatively by society than traditional relationships. For instance, a 1972 Gallup poll revealed that just 29% of Americans approved of interracial (i.e., Black-White) marriages, whereas 60% disapproved ("American Society Becoming Tolerant," 1972). Although these numbers have become more favorable throughout the years, more recent polls indicate that a substantial number of people still do not support such relationships. For example, a 1991 poll

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*PSPB*, Vol. 32 No. 1, January 2006 40-51

DOI: 10.1177/0146167205278710

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indicated that although more Americans approved (48%) than disapproved (42%) of interracial marriage, there remained no overwhelming consensus on the issue (Gallup & Newport, 1991). Similarly, attitudes toward gay and lesbian marriages have typically been less than favorable, with 27% of adults supporting the legality of such relationships in 1996 and 33% in 2004 (Moore, 1996; Newport, 2004). Likewise, people generally disapprove of relationships in which one partner is significantly older than the other, with disapproval ratings increasing substantially as the age-gap between the partners increases (e.g., Banks & Arnold, 2001).

A significant amount of psychological research also supports the idea that people involved in more traditional relationships have negative attitudes toward nontraditional pairings (e.g., Christopher & Kelly, 2004; Gaines & Leaver, 2002; Herek, 2000). Such findings have led some researchers to begin to examine relational processes in nontraditional relationships. As a result, we have some understanding of the relationship workings of some specific types of nontraditional couples, such as interethnic couples (Gaines & Agnew, 2003; Gurung & Duoung, 1999; Shibazaki & Brennan, 1998) and same-sex couples (e.g., Duffy & Rusbult, 1986; Kurdek, 1991, 1992, 1995). However, researchers have not directly examined whether there is a general tendency for couples who are the targets of bias against their relationships to experience relational phenomena differently than couples who are not the targets of such bias. Nontraditional couples share in common a tendency to be viewed negatively by others, but do those involved in such relationships tend to share other characteristics as a result of these negative social perceptions?

The goal of the current research was to examine how belonging to socially devalued relationships affects people's relationship experiences. Specifically, we sought to examine whether being involved in a marginalized romantic relationship affects the degree to which a person becomes invested in and committed to his or her partner. We define *marginalized relationships* as nontraditional, romantic involvements in which couple members experience social disapproval as a result of their union. Conceptually, marginalized relationships differ from what may be considered a traditional, socially normative romantic relationship (i.e., opposite-sex, same-race partners of similar ages and backgrounds) on at least one salient dimension. Thus, prime examples of marginalized relationships include gay and lesbian, interracial, and age-gap (i.e., where one partner is significantly older than the other) involvements.

Of course, because many different types of marginalized relationships exist, not all participants in such involvements are marginalized for the same reason. For

instance, same-sex partners may be marginalized because of an aspect of their identity (i.e., their sexual orientation), whereas interracial and age-gap partners may be marginalized because of the specific persons with whom they have chosen to form a close relationship. The potential reversibility of one's status as a marginalized couple member also differs among relationship types. For example, an individual involved in an interracial relationship could end perceived marginalization by dissolving the current relationship and then selecting a partner from his or her own racial or ethnic group. In contrast, for a gay or lesbian individual, initiating a relationship with any member of his or her potential dating pool will lead to a relationship status that is marginalized. Such differences between relationship types might influence relational variables.

At the same time, numerous commonalities exist among the various types of marginalized relationships. For example, same-sex, interracial, and age-gap partners are all likely to experience less approval, acceptance, and support from social network members and society in general compared to individuals involved in more traditional romantic involvements. In addition, members of these marginalized involvements are more likely to encounter social biases when appearing in public (e.g., disapproving looks and stares, poor service). Indeed, to the extent that these relationship partners share the common experience of rejection by society, similarities may be expected on a number of relational variables. In the present research, we focused primarily on the common relational themes that may emerge as a result of belonging to socially devalued relationships while also investigating possible differences within marginalized subgroups.

The general focus of our research was on factors that promote or prevent commitment in marginalized romantic relationships. Recent research has shown that subjective norms, or the perceived views of others regarding one's relationship, are significantly associated with both relationship commitment and relationship stability within traditional romantic involvements (Etcheverry & Agnew, 2004). Thus, it is reasonable to posit that perceived marginalization may have similar or even greater effects on commitment within marginalized relationships. We also were particularly interested in the association between investments and commitment. Although the concept of investments has received attention in the social psychological literature in recent years (e.g., Goodfriend & Agnew, 2004; Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998), research in this area has focused largely on White, heterosexual, college-age students in dating relationships (see Le & Agnew, 2003, for a recent meta-analytic review). As a result, it remains unclear whether

people involved in marginalized relationships differ in the extent to which they invest in their relationships and, if so, the impact this might have on overall relationship commitment.

#### INVESTMENTS IN MARGINALIZED RELATIONSHIPS

Is there reason to suspect that marginalized couples might differ in the extent to which they invest in their relationships? Intuitively, the answer would appear to be yes. Investing in a marginalized relationship may be perceived as fueling prejudice and discrimination. For example, when an African American woman brings her European American boyfriend to a family event in an effort to increase their closeness, it may invite disapproving stares and reactions from family and friends who do not support their union. Other types of investments in a relationship (e.g., making joint purchases, moving in together) may make one's relationship more apparent to others and such increased visibility may serve to arouse preexisting biases against one's relationship.

Marginalized relationship partners also may experience societal barriers to certain types of investments, thus restricting the amount and type of investments that can be made. For example, at the present time, same-sex marriage is illegal throughout most of the United States, meaning that this investment option is unavailable to most gay and lesbian couples. Being unable to make such a significant investment in one's relationship may be expected to diminish one's overall level of commitment to the relationship. Thus, it would seem that marginalization may have a pronounced effect on investments.

The purpose of the current research was to (a) test whether perceived marginalization is associated with relationship commitment, (b) examine and compare investment levels in marginalized and nonmarginalized couples, and (c) explore ways in which couples may compensate for decreased investments and the impact this may have on overall relationship commitment. In the present study, investments were conceptualized consistent with Rusbult's (1980, 1983) Investment Model. This perspective was chosen because this model has received considerable empirical support throughout the years (Le & Agnew, 2003). The Investment Model posits that relationship commitment is a function of three independent factors: satisfaction, alternatives, and investments. Thus, because investments are one of three primary causes of commitment, a key issue in the present research was the extent to which decreased investments might adversely affect overall commitment level and/or be associated with an increase in one of the other two factors known to fuel commitment.

#### THE INVESTMENT MODEL OF COMMITMENT

The Investment Model has its origins in Interdependence Theory and incorporates interdependence constructs in its approach to understanding relationship phenomena (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Rusbult, Arriaga, & Agnew, 2001; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Interdependence Theory focuses on the interdependence structure of a particular relationship. Interdependence structure refers primarily to relationship dependence, or the extent to which individuals need their relationships (Rusbult et al., 2001). Interdependence Theory posits that relationship dependence arises from two primary factors: satisfaction level and quality of alternatives. Satisfaction level essentially refers to one's subjective evaluation of a relationship. The extent to which a relationship partner fulfills an individual's needs is a primary influence on satisfaction; that is, the more one's needs are met, the more he or she will be satisfied. In contrast, quality of alternatives refers to the desirability of one's perceived alternatives to the current relationship. The extent to which one feels that his or her needs could easily be fulfilled outside of their current relationship is an important influence on the perceived quality of alternatives. Specifically, the more one sees that his or her needs could be met better outside of his or her current relationship, the greater the perceived quality of alternatives. According to Interdependence Theory, individuals become dependent on their relationship to the extent that they feel good about their relationship (i.e., satisfaction is high) and perceive that they do not have appreciably better options to their relationship (i.e., quality of alternatives is low).

Rusbult's (1980, 1983) Investment Model extends Interdependence Theory by asserting that relationship dependence is also a function of investment size. Investments refer to both tangible (e.g., children, joint friendships) and intangible (e.g., effort, time) resources attached to a given relationship that would be lost or diminished in value if the relationship were to dissolve. Thus, according to the model, investments serve as a way to induce people to continue a relationship. That is, the more an individual has invested, the more likely it is that he or she will continue to stay in that relationship, if only to avoid losing what they have already invested. In summary, according to the Investment Model, satisfaction level, quality of alternatives, and investment size are factors that serve to increase or decrease relationship dependence. Commitment is conceptualized as the subjective experience of one's dependence. Whereas dependence refers to the structural state of a relationship, commitment refers to the subjective psychological experience of the state of dependence (Agnew, Van Lange, Rusbult, & Langston, 1998; Le & Agnew, 2001; Rusbult et al., 1998). This subjective experience includes

psychological attachment to one's partner, a long-term orientation toward the relationship, and an intention to persist in the relationship (Arriaga & Agnew, 2001). The robustness of the Investment Model has been demonstrated in numerous studies across many different contexts (Le & Agnew, 2003; Rusbult et al., 1998), with commitment found to be a strong and consistent predictor of a number of important relational consequences, including relationship persistence. Moreover, the model has been applied to several different relationship types, including friendships (Rusbult, 1980) and abusive relationships (Rusbult & Martz, 1995).

#### THE INVESTMENT MODEL AND MARGINALIZED RELATIONSHIPS

The extant literature on the Investment Model includes little research on marginalized relationships. Although past studies have examined the Investment Model within the context of gay and lesbian relationships, the samples have tended to be small (Duffy & Rusbult, 1986; Kurdek, 1991, 1995) and the questions driving the current investigation have not been addressed. Moreover, the model has not been applied to understanding commitment among other kinds of marginalized relationships, such as interracial and age-gap relationships. Thus, it is unclear if the Investment Model functions similarly in marginalized and non-marginalized couples.

We posit that marginalization affects the degree to which individuals invest in their relationships because experiencing prejudice and discrimination may serve as a deterrent to investing in a relationship. Because investments are one of the three primary bases of commitment, it would seem reasonable to surmise that decreased investments should be associated with decreased overall levels of commitment. However, some studies have suggested that couple members may compensate for lower levels of one of the bases of dependence (i.e., satisfaction, alternatives, or investments) by raising their levels of one or both of the remaining bases. For instance, a woman in an abusive relationship who is highly unsatisfied may maintain a high level of commitment to her relationship if she has substantial investments (e.g., children) and perceives her alternatives as being very poor (e.g., life in a shelter; Rusbult & Martz, 1995). Thus, assuming marginalized couples do invest less, to the extent that they compensate for decreased investments by exhibiting relatively high levels of satisfaction and/or low levels of perceived quality of alternatives, they should exhibit levels of commitment similar to non-marginalized couples. Although we suggest that some type of commitment "compensation" may occur for marginalized relationship partners, we do not intend to infer that such partners make conscious, intrapsychic

calculations about how to increase their commitment. Rather, it is more plausible that compensation occurs as the result of various forces acting on the relationship, such as marginalization, not because individuals are actively looking for ways to bolster their commitment.

#### *Hypotheses Driving the Current Research*

Individuals involved in nontraditional, romantic relationships will report significantly more marginalization than their traditional counterparts (Hypothesis 1). Moreover, perceived marginalization will be negatively associated with commitment level (Hypothesis 2a), with marginalization contributing to the prediction of commitment above and beyond the known effects of satisfaction level, quality of alternatives, and investments (Hypothesis 2b). In addition, individuals in marginalized involvements will invest less than individuals in non-marginalized involvements (Hypothesis 3). Assuming decreased investments, marginalized relationship partners will not be any less committed than nonmarginalized partners, because past research suggests that couple members compensate for lower levels of one of the bases of dependence (i.e., satisfaction, alternatives, and investments) by exhibiting relatively high levels of one or both of the remaining bases. To maintain high levels of relationship commitment, then, marginalized partners will compensate for lower investments. Thus, the *Commitment Compensation Hypothesis* is that the commitment levels of individuals in marginalized relationships will not be lower than those of individuals in nonmarginalized relationships (Hypothesis 4a) because marginalized relationship partners will compensate for reduced investments by deriving greater satisfaction from their relationship (Hypothesis 4b) and/or perceiving poorer quality alternatives to their current relationship (Hypothesis 4c). These hypotheses were tested in a cross-sectional study of individuals involved in either marginalized or nonmarginalized romantic relationships.

#### METHOD

##### *Study Focus: Same-Sex, Interracial, and Age-Gap Relationships*

The relationship types we sought to include in our marginalized sample included same-sex, interracial, and age-gap couples (we defined age-gap couples as couples in which there is a difference of more than 10 years in the ages of the partners). Although these types of relationships differ in important ways, they are similar with respect to being the target of general social disapproval. That is, although the specific characteristics (i.e., gender, race, and age) of the relationship partners that lead to marginalization differ across relationship type, all of these relationships tend to be socially devalued relative



to traditional relationships. We specifically focused on these couple types because they are likely to be the targets of social disapproval as a result of physically observable features of the partners as opposed to disapproval due to largely unobservable characteristics of partners (e.g., interfaith relationships).

#### *The Merits of Internet-Based Data Collection*

Marginalized relationship members (particularly people involved in age-gap relationships) are difficult to find within a typical U.S. college student sample. For instance, as part of our overall sample for the present study, we collected data from 100 college students. Of those 100, 14 persons reported being involved in marginalized relationships (12 interracial, 2 same-sex, and no age-gap). Although this was not an insignificant number of marginalized couple members, it was neither large nor representative enough to allow valid comparisons with nonmarginalized partners. Thus, to overcome such limitations, we used the Internet to facilitate data collection, particularly from individuals involved in marginalized relationships.

Recent research suggests that samples obtained via the Internet are similar in many ways to samples obtained using more traditional methods (see Gosling, Vazire, Srivastava, & John, 2004, for a review). Most important, research indicates that Internet-based findings are consistent with findings obtained using more typical methodologies. In addition, Internet samples have the benefit of being more diverse than college student samples in terms of age, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation. Thus, Internet samples do not appear to be any less representative than college samples, and in fact, they may be more representative. Moreover, recent research suggests that Internet samples are not plagued by false responding any more than are samples obtained using traditional pencil-and-paper methods. One drawback to collecting data via the Internet is that the same participant could potentially participate multiple times. Fortunately, there are ways to control for this problem and we took steps to do so in the present study (for a more in-depth discussion of the positives and negatives of online research, see Kraut et al., 2004).

#### *Participants*

The initial overall sample for this study consisted of 812 individuals involved in romantic relationships. Data from 712 of these participants were collected on the Internet, whereas data from the remaining 100 were collected in person from college undergraduates.

Data from some participants were excluded for various reasons. First, any participant who reported being younger than age 18 was excluded ( $n = 10$ ). Next, following the advice of Gosling et al. (2004), we examined the

Internet data for repeat Internet Protocol (IP) addresses, which were automatically recorded with the completion of each study questionnaire. IP addresses are unique identifying numbers that are associated with particular computers linked to the Internet at particular points in time. Thus, a single IP address associated with multiple questionnaire responses may be an indicator that the same individual has completed the questionnaire more than once. We excluded data when a particular IP address appeared more than once. To avoid excluding data from different persons using the same computer (e.g., friends, persons using public computers) as well as data from individuals who may have experienced a computer problem when initially completing the questionnaire which may have necessitated reconnecting, we matched demographic information (e.g., age, race, sexual orientation, gender) from responses involving the same IP address, and when matches appeared, we kept only the first (or most complete) response and deleted all other responses ( $n = 22$ ). Participants who did not provide enough useable data to allow them to be categorized as either marginalized or nonmarginalized (e.g., participants who failed to provide own or partner gender, race, age, or sexual orientation;  $n = 70$ ), as well as individuals who did not clearly fit into one of the couple types of interest (e.g., nonheterosexual persons who reported current involvement in an opposite-sex relationship;  $n = 30$ ) and persons who fit into more than one of the marginalized subgroups ( $n = 95$ ),<sup>1</sup> were excluded from analyses (many of whom did not complete the entire survey).

We categorized the remaining sample according to whether they belonged to marginalized or nonmarginalized relationships. Specifically, participants who were involved in relationships with members of the same sex ( $n = 165$ ), reported being of a different race than their partners ( $n = 89$ ), or were at least 10 years younger or older than their partners ( $n = 138$ ) were categorized as belonging to marginalized relationships and retained for analyses. Thus, the total sample size of marginalized partners was 392. Participants who reported being heterosexual (and the opposite sex of their current partner), of the same race as their partners, and 10 or fewer years younger or older than their partners were categorized as belonging to nonmarginalized relationships ( $n = 193$  participants).

Thus, the final overall sample consisted of 585 individuals in romantic relationships (392 marginalized, 193 nonmarginalized). More women than men comprised the final sample (418 women, 167 men) but the sample was diverse in terms of age ( $M = 31.23$ ,  $SD = 10.91$ ; range = 18 to 78), race/ethnicity (3.6% Asian, 7.0% Black, 84.8% Caucasian, 2.6% Hispanic, 2.1% Other), and sexual orientation (76.9% heterosexual, 18.0% homosexual, and

5.1% bisexual). In addition, the sample was diverse in terms of participants' cohabitation status (42.7% cohabiting, 57.3% not cohabiting), relationship duration ( $M = 45.82$  months,  $SD = 72.61$  months; range = less than 1 month to 720 months), and whether participants were involved in long-distance relationships, as defined by the participant (29.6% long distance, 70.4% not long distance). Participants completing the study on the Internet were not compensated for their participation, whereas participants in the college sample received research credit in partial fulfillment of requirements for an introductory psychology course.

### Measures

**Investment Model Scale.** A modified version of the Rusbult et al. (1998) Investment Model Scale was used to assess satisfaction level, quality of alternatives, investment size, and commitment level. Specifically, abridged versions of the satisfaction ( $\alpha = .90$ ), alternatives ( $\alpha = .75$ ), and commitment ( $\alpha = .96$ ) measures were used to reduce the length of the overall scale. Because participants in the online portion of this research were not compensated for their participation, minimizing the number of questions was necessary to maximize participation. Hence, Investment Model measures were shortened to three items each (down from the original five-item scales) for satisfaction and alternatives, and four items for commitment (down from the original seven-item scale). In choosing which items to include in the shortened measures, the item-total correlations were averaged across three studies for each item in the satisfaction, alternatives, and commitment scales using data from Rusbult et al. (1998). Items with the highest item-total averages were included in the present study.

For satisfaction, the selected items were as follows: "I feel satisfied with our relationship," "My relationship is much better than others' relationships," and "Our relationship makes me very happy." For alternatives, the items were as follows: "My alternatives to our relationship are close to ideal (dating another, spending time with friends or on my own, etc.)," "My alternatives are attractive to me (dating another, spending time with friends or on my own, etc.)," and "My needs for intimacy, companionship, etc. could easily be fulfilled in an alternative relationship." For commitment, the items were as follows: "I am committed to maintaining my relationship with my partner," "I feel very attached to our relationship—very strongly linked to my partner," "I want our relationship to last forever," and "I am oriented toward the long-term future of my relationship (e.g., I imagine being with my partner several years from now)." Because investments were of particular interest in the present research, the full five-item investment measure ( $\alpha = .79$ ) was used: "I have put a great deal into our rela-

tionship that I would lose if the relationship were to end," "Many aspects of my life have become linked to my partner (recreational activities, etc.) and I would lose all of this if we were to break up," "I feel very involved in our relationship—like I have put a great deal into it," "My relationships with friends and family members would be complicated if my partner and I were to break up (e.g., partner is friends with people I care about)," and "Compared to other people I know, I have invested a great deal in my relationship with my partner." All Investment Model subscale items were rated on a 9-point scale ranging from 1 (*do not agree at all*) to 9 (*agree completely*).

**Marginalization.** Participants also completed a measure of marginalization ( $\alpha = .81$ ) that was created for the present study. The marginalization measure consisted of four items designed to tap feelings of social disapproval regarding one's relationship. Social disapproval (i.e., the extent to which one perceives that one's romantic relationship is disapproved) was assessed both at the general societal and the social network (i.e., family and friends) levels. Half of the items were written to reflect approval, whereas the other half were written to reflect disapproval: "My relationship has general societal acceptance," "My family and friends approve of my relationship," "I believe that most other persons (whom I do not know) would generally disapprove of my relationship," and "My family and/or friends are not accepting of this relationship." An overall marginalization score was obtained by summing the responses to all of the items after reverse-keying the approval items. A principal components factor analysis revealed that the four items loaded on a single factor explaining 58% of the item variance. Items were rated on a 9-point scale ranging from 0 (*not true of my relationship at all*) to 8 (*very true of my relationship*).

**Demographic items.** Participants answered several demographic questions about themselves and their current partner, including questions about age, gender, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, relationship duration, cohabitation status, and whether participants were involved in a self-defined long-distance relationship.

### Procedure

Participants were able to access the Web site hosting the Internet questionnaire via links posted on various Web sites. The majority of these Web sites were obtained via online searches for "relationship discussion boards" and "relationship forums." We specifically selected sites that were described as places where individuals could go to discuss their relationships. Some sites appealed to individuals involved in marginalized relationships, whereas others appealed to individuals involved in non-marginalized relationships. Specifically, we identified

several sites with gay/lesbian clientele, interracial clientele, and age-gap clientele and posted links to our study questionnaire. In addition, we posted links on several Web sites geared toward romantic relationships in general. The study solicitation notice that was posted along with the link to the questionnaire was general in nature and informed participants that we were “interested in obtaining a better understanding of people’s close relationships” and that persons involved in any type of romantic relationship were welcome to participate.

When participants arrived at the questionnaire Web site, they were first prompted to provide their consent by clicking on a consent button. After providing consent, participants were presented with the measures described above. The questionnaire was programmed such that participants were free to skip any questions that they did not wish to answer. Participants also were told that they were free to stop participating at any time. Thus, the Internet survey was similar in most ways to a traditional paper-and-pencil survey. Once participants completed the questionnaire, they were directed to another page that thanked them for their participation.

In addition, college undergraduates were recruited to participate in a study regarding perceptions of their current romantic relationships. Following completion of a consent form, participants completed a survey identical to the Internet survey but via pencil-and-paper format. Participants were fully debriefed and thanked at the completion of the study.

## RESULTS

### *Preliminary Analyses*

Note that all analyses presented below controlled for relationship duration, cohabitation status, age, and whether participants were involved in long-distance relationships because our overall sample varied on these factors. To determine whether there was sufficient similarity on key variables to justify collapsing the three types of marginalized relationship participants into a single marginalized group, we first conducted a series of ANCOVAs to examine mean differences. We compared the three marginalized relationship subgroups (same-sex, interracial, and age-gap partners) to one another in terms of their mean levels of marginalization, commitment, and investments.

With respect to mean differences, we found that the three marginalized subgroups differed significantly only in perceptions of marginalization,  $F(6, 325) = 8.74, p < .001$ , with age-gap partners ( $M = 4.65, SE = 0.18$ ) reporting significantly higher levels of marginalization than interracial partners ( $M = 3.70, SE = 0.22, p < .001$ ) and same-sex partners ( $M = 3.74, SE = 0.16, p < .001$ ). Same-sex and interracial partners did not differ significantly in

**TABLE 1: Means of Study Variables for the Marginalized and Nonmarginalized Samples**

Variable	Marginalized Sample (n = 392)	Nonmarginalized Sample (n = 193)
Marginalization	4.10 <sub>a</sub> (0.10)	1.90 <sub>b</sub> (0.14)
Satisfaction	7.30 <sub>a</sub> (0.10)	7.34 <sub>a</sub> (0.14)
Investments	5.68 <sub>a</sub> (0.09)	6.02 <sub>b</sub> (0.14)
Alternatives	3.67 <sub>a</sub> (0.11)	4.09 <sub>b</sub> (0.16)
Commitment	8.01 <sub>a</sub> (0.10)	7.64 <sub>b</sub> (0.14)

NOTE: Differing subscripts indicate within-row significant differences ( $p < .05$ ). Values in parentheses are standard errors. All values are controlling for age, relationship duration, cohabitation status, and whether participant was involved in a long-distance relationship. The scales for all measures ranged from 1 (*do not agree at all/not true of my relationship at all*) to 9 (*agree completely/very true of my relationship*).

level of marginalization. Of importance, all three subgroups reported significantly more marginalization than did the nonmarginalized sample ( $p < .001$  for all contrasts; see Table 1). Thus, the mean differences among the marginalized subgroups on marginalization were not considered problematic with respect to hypothesis testing. There were no statistically significant mean differences among the marginalized subgroups in terms of commitment or investments.

We also examined whether there were significant differences between the marginalized subgroups with respect to the strength of associations between hypothesis-relevant variables. Of central importance, we examined whether marginalized subgroup membership moderated the association between marginalization and commitment level. Subgroup was not found to moderate this association (standardized interaction  $\beta = .02, t = .95, ns$ ). Thus, the three types of marginalized subgroups did not significantly differ from one another in the strength of the association between levels of marginalization and commitment. We also examined whether subgroup membership moderated the association between marginalization and investments. Once again, subgroup was not found to moderate the association (standardized interaction  $\beta = -.01, t = -.39, ns$ ). That is, the three groups evidenced statistically identical associations between levels of marginalization and investments. Furthermore, we also examined whether subgroup membership moderated the association between investments and commitment. Once again, subgroup was not found to moderate the association (standardized interaction  $\beta = -.05, t = -1.02, ns$ ); the three groups evidenced statistically identical associations between levels of investments and commitment. Given the general absence of significant mean differences between the marginalized relationship subgroups on key variables as well as the absence of significant differences in the strength of associations between



key variables, we combined the three subgroups into a single marginalized group that was then compared to the nonmarginalized sample. However, for Hypotheses 3 and 4, we also conducted separate analyses by subgroup to determine the extent to which these hypotheses held across the different relationship types.

*Testing Hypothesis 1:  
Perceptions of Marginalization*

To claim that belonging to a marginalized relationship has some effect on relational phenomena, it was first necessary to demonstrate that individuals in such relationships perceive their relationships as more socially marginalized than do individuals in traditional relationships. Overall, results indicated that individuals in marginalized relationships indeed perceived more marginalization than individuals in traditional relationships,  $F(5, 496) = 158.19, p < .001$ , providing strong support for Hypothesis 1 (see Table 1). Of importance, as indicated by the results presented in the preliminary analyses section above, all three subgroups reported significantly more marginalization than did the nonmarginalized sample ( $p < .001$  for all contrasts).

*Testing Hypothesis 2:  
Marginalization and Relationship Commitment*

Does the extent to which a person perceives his or her relationship to be marginalized predict his or her level of commitment to that relationship? Consistent with Hypothesis 2a, which held that greater perceived marginalization will be associated with lower levels of commitment, we found that marginalization was significantly and negatively associated with relationship commitment (standardized  $\beta = -.10, t = -2.53, p < .01$ ). Thus, individuals who perceived greater disapproval of their relationship were significantly less committed to that involvement than were those who perceived less disapproval.

Does the effect of marginalization go above and beyond the well-known combined effects of satisfaction level, quality of alternatives, and investment size in predicting commitment level? We computed a multiple regression model that simultaneously included all four of these variables as predictors of relationship commitment. Consistent with Hypothesis 2b, marginalization was found to significantly predict commitment level (standardized  $\beta = -.10, t = -2.78, p < .01$ ) in a model that also included satisfaction (standardized  $\beta = .56, t = 16.50, p < .01$ ), alternatives (standardized  $\beta = -.22, t = -7.49, p < .01$ ), and investments (standardized  $\beta = -.16, t = 4.63, p < .01$ ). Thus, perceived marginalization accounted for a significant amount of variance in commitment above and beyond that accounted for by the Investment Model predictor variables. Moreover, this finding was not

moderated by subgroup type (standardized interaction  $\beta = -.02, t = .95, ns$ ).

*Testing Hypothesis 3:  
Investments in Marginalized Relationships*

Next, we examined whether marginalized relationship partners invested less in their relationships than did their nonmarginalized counterparts. As shown in Table 1, results indicated that individuals in marginalized relationships invested significantly less in their relationships than did individuals in nonmarginalized relationships,  $F(5, 495) = 3.96, p < .05$ , supporting Hypothesis 3. Thus, belonging to a marginalized relationship was associated with decreased investments. As another means of demonstrating the relationship between marginalization and investments, we also regressed marginalization status as a dichotomous variable (marginalized vs. nonmarginalized) onto level of investments. Results indicated that being in a marginalized relationship was a significant predictor of investments ( $\beta = -.09, R^2 = .12, p < .05$ ).

We also performed analyses to examine investments within each of the three marginalized subgroups in comparison to the nonmarginalized group. Consistent with the overall results, the subgroup analyses revealed that the same-sex, interracial, and age-gap subgroups all tended to differ from the nonmarginalized sample in testing Hypothesis 3. Comparing each of the three subgroup participants' mean levels of investments to the nonmarginalized sample, we found that all three types of marginalized partners tended to invest less (same sex  $M = 5.60, SE = 0.14$ ; interracial  $M = 6.00, SE = 0.19$ ; age-gap  $M = 5.55, SE = 0.16$ ) relative to the nonmarginalized partners ( $M = 6.03, SE = 0.14$ ). However, these differences were statistically significant only for the same-sex and age-gap partners ( $p < .05$  for both contrasts). Thus, the pattern of results for each subgroup was consistent with the results from the overall analysis.

*Testing Hypothesis 4:  
Commitment Compensation in Marginalized Relationships*

What were the implications of reduced investments for relationship commitment? To begin, we found that individuals in marginalized relationships were actually significantly more committed to their relationship than were individuals in nonmarginalized relationships,  $F(5, 496) = 4.11, p < .05$ . This finding is not inconsistent with Hypothesis 4a, which predicted that marginalized partners would not be less committed than nonmarginalized partners. Given that those involved in marginalized relationships were no less committed than those in nonmarginalized relationships, it appears that some sort of compensation for their reduced level of investments occurred. In line with Hypotheses 4b and 4c, we ex-



amined their satisfaction level and the quality of their relationship alternatives. There were no significant differences between individuals in marginalized or non-marginalized relationships in terms of satisfaction,  $F(5, 496) = 0.04$ , *ns*, indicating that Hypothesis 4b was not supported. Thus, compensation did not occur via increased satisfaction. However, individuals in marginalized relationships perceived the quality of their relationship alternatives as being significantly worse than did individuals in nonmarginalized relationships,  $F(5, 490) = 4.30$ ,  $p < .05$ , supporting Hypothesis 4c (see Table 1). Thus, it appears that individuals in marginalized relationships compensated for lower investments by perceiving poorer quality alternatives to their current relationships.

We also examined the Commitment Compensation Hypotheses within each of the three marginalized subgroups separately. Results were consistent with those obtained overall. That is, consistent with Hypothesis 4a, individuals in all three marginalized subgroups were just as committed if not more so (same sex  $M = 7.76$ ,  $SE = 0.15$ ; interracial  $M = 8.09$ ,  $SE = 0.21$ ; age-gap  $M = 8.31$ ,  $SE = 0.17$ ) than individuals in nonmarginalized relationships ( $M = 7.62$ ,  $SE = 0.14$ ). However, only age-gap partners were significantly more committed (contrast  $p < .01$ ) than nonmarginalized partners. Relative to nonmarginalized partners, interracial partners were marginally more committed (contrast  $p < .07$ ), whereas same-sex partners did not significantly differ.

Consistent with the above results, all three marginalized subgroups tended to report poorer quality of alternatives to their relationship (same sex  $M = 3.84$ ,  $SE = 0.17$ ; interracial  $M = 3.70$ ,  $SE = 0.23$ ; age-gap  $M = 3.42$ ,  $SE = 0.19$ ) relative to nonmarginalized partners ( $M = 4.12$ ,  $SE = 0.16$ ). Although this result was only significant for age-gap partners ( $p < .01$ ), there were trends in the expected direction for both same-sex and interracial partners (contrast  $p < .26$  and  $p < .15$ , respectively), in line with Hypothesis 4c.

Contrary to the overall analyses, there were some significant differences between individuals in the marginalized and nonmarginalized subgroups in terms of satisfaction,  $F(7, 494) = 5.67$ ,  $p < .001$ , suggesting mixed support for Hypothesis 4b. Specifically, in support of this hypothesis, age-gap partners exhibited significantly higher satisfaction relative to nonmarginalized partners (contrast  $p < .05$ ). However, individuals in same-sex relationships exhibited reduced satisfaction relative to nonmarginalized partners (contrast  $p < .05$ ). Interracial and nonmarginalized partners did not significantly differ. Thus, with respect to all subgroup comparisons, only the analyses for Hypothesis 4b indicated results that were not entirely consistent across subgroups. Therefore, although largely similar with respect to the hypotheses

tested here, some unique differences may exist between the marginalized subgroups.

## DISCUSSION

The goal of this study was to examine how belonging to a socially devalued relationship affects consequential relational phenomena because very little is known about the effects of marginalization on close relationships. Working within the framework of the Investment Model, we developed several hypotheses regarding marginalized relationships that our results generally supported. Perceived social disapproval of one's romantic relationship was significantly associated with relational commitment. Specifically, we found that individuals who perceived greater disapproval of their relationships had significantly lower levels of commitment, suggesting that perceptions of marginalization may indeed affect how people feel about their partners. Moreover, perceived marginalization was a significant predictor of commitment above and beyond the well-established effects of satisfaction, alternatives, and investments. This finding underscores the general importance that subjective norms (i.e., perceptions of how others view one's relationship) may play in contributing to relationship commitment (Etcheverry & Agnew, 2004).

Similarly, consistent with hypotheses, individuals in marginalized relationships invested significantly less than did individuals in nonmarginalized relationships. Despite investing less, marginalized relationship partners were no less committed to their relationships than were their nonmarginalized counterparts. In fact, marginalized partners tended to have higher levels of commitment. Thus, to maintain high commitment, marginalized partners appeared to compensate for their reduced investments, with evidence suggesting that their commitment was bolstered due to lower perceptions of relationship alternatives. Given that this pattern of findings was relatively consistent across the marginalized subgroups examined in this study, it appears that there may indeed be a number of commonalities underlying marginalized relationships of various types. Our results suggest that marginalization may have both negative (reduced investments) and positive (higher commitment) implications for people's romantic involvements. Specifically, marginalization may contribute to a restriction on relational investments, which in and of itself, could adversely affect how committed one becomes to one's relationship. However, marginalized partners appear to compensate for investment deficits by perceiving the quality of alternatives to their current relationships as poor, thus bolstering commitment to their current partners.

In addition, our findings indicate that the bases of commitment, as predicted by the Investment Model,

may differ in importance across different couple types. Previous research indicated that women in relationships with violent partners remained committed despite reduced relationship satisfaction by having high investments and poor perceptions of alternatives (Rusbult & Martz, 1995). The results of the present research extend this idea of *commitment compensation* by demonstrating that individuals can make up for reduced investments by viewing their relationship alternatives particularly poorly. Thus, researchers should pay close attention to contextual factors that may influence which bases of commitment are stronger within various types of romantic relationships.

Broadly speaking, our results suggest that there are important intersections for studies of close relationships and intergroup relations, specifically issues related to prejudice and discrimination. Some research has already combined the two literatures in their approaches on particular topics. For instance, Glick and Fiske (2001) combined the close relationships and intergroup relations perspectives on gender relations in their research on ambivalent sexism. In their work, Glick and Fiske noted that prejudice researchers have emphasized factors that lead to conflict among the sexes (e.g., power differentials) across various social contexts, whereas relationships researchers have emphasized factors that attract men and women to one another in the context of intimate relations. They combined these seemingly contradictory approaches into one framework that underscores the importance of how both intimate interdependence and power differentials affect gender relations and roles. The result was ambivalent sexism theory, which posits that these two poles of gender relations lead to both hostile and benevolent ideologies about men and women that shape how members of both sexes are perceived and treated.

However, our research suggests new avenues for combining these theoretical perspectives. Specifically, the study of how various intergroup phenomena affect people's romantic relationships remains a ripe area for study. That is, there are likely numerous significant effects of prejudice, discrimination, and stereotyping on people's close relationships that have yet to be explored. Our research only provides an initial hint as to how prejudice and discrimination may ultimately influence romantic involvements. For instance, our results suggest that marginalization seems to affect people's levels of investments, alternatives, and relationship commitment. However, the implications of marginalization on other consequential relational phenomena, such as relationship stability, remain to be seen. Does marginalization influence whether individuals ultimately decide to leave their romantic involvements? The significant association between relationship commitment level and rela-

tionship stability suggest that it should (Le & Agnew, 2003). Moreover, it is likely that changing societal norms regarding people's feelings toward nontraditional relationships may have important implications for relational processes within marginalized involvements in the future. Will the relationship processes of traditional and nontraditional couples become more similar as nontraditional relationships become more socially accepted? These are issues to be attended to in future research.

### *Strengths and Limitations*

There are a number of strengths to the present study. First, this was a fairly large-scale data collection effort, particularly in terms of the marginalized relationships sample. Few studies have obtained large samples of individuals involved in same-sex, interracial, and age-gap relationships; to our knowledge, no single study has obtained sizeable samples of all three with the goal to test associations hypothesized to hold across all three samples. Second, this study was unique in that it examined macrolevel (i.e., marginalized vs. nonmarginalized) effects of prejudice and discrimination on people's romantic relationships. Previous studies have typically focused only on one specific subtype of marginalized relationship (e.g., same-sex) rather than looking across a broad range of marginalized couple types. The fact that our findings were generally consistent across a variety of relationship types indicates that there is some utility in classifying relationships in terms of a broad marginalized/nonmarginalized distinction. Moreover, our results underscore the notion that relational phenomena may be experienced similarly across different types of romantic relationships.

However, there are also limitations to the present study. First, the nonmarginalized sample consisted of more college-age students than the marginalized sample, which was somewhat more variable. However, we controlled for age, relationship duration, cohabitation status, and whether participants were involved in long-distance relationships in our analyses, all of which are important factors known to distinguish college student relationships from other relationships. In fact, in relation to some of our findings, this particular limitation may be a strength. That is, one might reasonably expect college-age students to be less invested than older persons. Thus, the fact that we found our somewhat younger nonmarginalized sample to be more invested than our somewhat older marginalized sample speaks to the strength of the impact of marginalization on investments. Another limitation of the current research is that it relied exclusively on self-report measures. Although self-reports have inherent biases (e.g., possible self-presentational concerns), they do allow for studies of

people's relational experiences that could not otherwise be conducted.

Furthermore, this study did not sample the full spectrum of marginalized relationships. That is, there are certainly other types of couples beyond those examined here that experience marginalization, such as interfaith couples (i.e., couples in which each partner has a different religious affiliation). However, members of interfaith couples and other such pairings differ from the couple types studied above in that such couples may not be as likely to experience social disapproval as a direct result of physically observable features of the partners. It is fairly obvious when one is in a same-sex, interracial, or age-gap relationship because being seen with one's partner makes one's relationship status apparent. However, for many interfaith couples, simply being seen with one's partner may not be as likely to reveal socially meaningful differences between the relationship partners. Thus, the degree to which such couples experience marginalization may differ, and as a result, the impact of marginalization on such relationships may differ as well. The degree to which the above results would generalize to less visible types of marginalized relationships remains to be seen.

Although we see the examination of macrolevel effects of prejudice on people's close relationships as a strength of the current investigation, it also may be viewed as a weakness. Looking at broad patterns across relationships may have obscured some important differences among the relationship types under study. Sensitive to this possibility, we conducted a number of analyses to assess the extent to which subgroup membership moderated our hypothesized effects. Indeed, some moderating effects were found. For instance, we found that relative to nonmarginalized partners, satisfaction was higher among age-gap partners but lower among same-sex partners. This suggests that in addition to reduced investments, same-sex partners also may need to overcome reduced satisfaction to maintain high relationship commitment. Moreover, although we may have found similarities among the marginalized subgroups, it is also possible that such similarities arose for very different reasons. For instance, we found that same-sex, interracial, and age-gap partners all tended to have reduced perceptions of relationship alternatives compared to nonmarginalized partners. However, same-sex partners may not have the option of entering into more socially acceptable relationships, whereas interracial and age-gap partners do. That is, poorer quality of alternatives may not be just a perception for same-sex partners, it also may be a reality. Despite the existence of some subgroup differences, our results suggest that marginalized relationship partners do share much in common that distinguishes them from more traditional romantic partners.

The current research represents an important step in drawing closer attention to this issue.

Finally, although our results provide evidence that marginalized partners do invest less, they do not provide a definitive explanation as to why they do so. We argue that investments are reduced as a reaction to perceived prejudice regarding the romantic involvement. However, an alternate possibility is that those involved in marginalized relationships have less access to various forms of investments because of their marginalized status and thus have fewer investments. This might be particularly the case for same-sex couple members, who are currently denied the option of legal marriage in 49 of 50 U.S. states. The absence of such an investment possibility could yield a lower overall level of investments. The measure of investments used in the current investigation, though, weighs against the likelihood of this alternative explanation. The investment items all tap what have been referred to as intangible investments (Goodfriend & Agnew, 2004), which involve resources without material being that are either directly or indirectly tied to the relationship. Examples of intangible investments include self-disclosures, effort put into the relationship, time, and shared memories. Of importance, none of the items tap tangible investments, such as marriage, an investment that is not equally available to all people. Thus, although we do not know definitively what factors participants were considering when answering the investment items, we do know that the items tapping investments were not weighted toward specific types of investments that are not available to everyone. Therefore, we suggest that the significant difference in experienced marginalization between those involved in marginalized versus nonmarginalized relationships is a reasonable explanation for the significant difference in investment levels. Future research should examine the nature of the association between perceived discrimination and investments in marginalized involvements to more fully explore these issues.

### *Conclusions*

Future studies may benefit from exploring additional intersections of research on close relationships and prejudice. Our results indicate that the social devaluation of people's romantic relationships has important implications for consequential relational phenomena, including investments, alternatives, and commitment. In addition, our results suggest that the relationship experiences of various types of marginalized couples may be more similar than we know, with the common perception of prejudice yielding both positive and negative effects on the persons involved in these close relationships.



## NOTE

1. Within the marginalized sample, we included individuals who reported being involved in same-sex relationships regardless of whether they identified as homosexual or bisexual because it is the sex of the partners in these involvements (not the sexual orientation) that leads to a visible relationship status subject to social disapproval. However, we did not include participants in the marginalized sample who fit into more than one of the marginalized subtypes of interest (e.g., persons involved in same-sex, interracial relationships). Although these people are certainly subject to marginalization, we theorized a priori that belonging to a relationship that is marginalized on multiple levels may be quite different than belonging to a relationship marginalized on only one level. Indeed, exploratory analyses revealed that individuals in relationships marginalized on multiple levels were significantly different from individuals marginalized on only one level on key variables assessed in this study.

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Received October 11, 2004

Revision accepted April 28, 2005