
On-again/off-again dating relationships: How are they different from other dating relationships?

RENÉ M. DAILEY, ABIGAIL PFIESTER, BORAE JIN, GARY BECK, AND
GRETCHEN CLARK
University of Texas at Austin

Abstract

This article explores the understudied yet prevalent phenomenon of on-again/off-again (on-off) dating relationships. Study 1 ($N = 445$ U.S. college students) showed that almost two thirds of participants had experienced an on-off relationship. Analyses of open-ended responses about relationship experiences showed on-off partners were less likely to report positives (e.g., love and understanding from partners) and more likely to report negatives (e.g., communication problems, uncertainty) than partners who had not broken up and renewed. Study 2 ($N = 236$), employing quantitative measures, substantiated these findings and further showed a greater number of renewals was associated with greater negatives and fewer positives. Results highlight the need for further investigation regarding on-off relationships, and theories potentially useful in explaining these relationships are discussed.

A great deal of research focuses on the progression of romantic relationships (for a review, see Surra, Gray, Boettcher, Cottle, & West, 2006). Researchers focusing on the progression of romantic relationships, however, tend to conceptualize these relationships as developing, stable, or dissolved. More simply, although various conceptualizations of relational stability exist, researchers typically operationalize stability in dating relationships as a dichotomous variable: Relationships are categorized as either intact or terminated (Agnew, Arriaga, & Goodfriend, 2006; Karney, Bradbury, & Johnson, 1999). Yet, in reality, many couples may dissolve their relationships but later rec-

oncile, often cycling through the breakup and renewal process several times. Hence, relational stability is likely more complex than currently defined.

Although similar phenomena such as marrying the same partner more than once have received scholarly attention (e.g., Brody, Neubaum, & Forehand, 1988), dating relationships typically referred to as “on-again/off-again” (on-off) have yet to be incorporated into relational research or theories of relational development, stability, and dissolution. It is important to understand these relationships, as they may require a different model to describe and explain their relationship progression. In addition, an examination of on-off relationships may provide additional insights into what factors predict long-term stability as well as permanent dissolution for all dating relationships. There are practical reasons to examine on-off relationships as well. For example, breakups are distressing, particularly when commitment, satisfaction, and closeness are high and when perceptions of alternative partners and controllability of the dissolution are low (Frazier & Cook, 1993; Simpson, 1987;

René M. Dailey, Abigail Pfister, Borae Jin, Gary Beck, and Gretchen Clark, Communication Studies Department, University of Texas at Austin.

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Correspondence should be addressed to René Dailey, Department of Communication Studies, University of Texas at Austin, 1 University Station A1105, Austin, TX 78712-0115, e-mail: rdailey@mail.utexas.edu.

Sprecher, Felmlee, Metts, Fehr, & Vanni, 1998). Multiple breakups within one relationship may exacerbate this stress, and the anxieties or uncertainties breakups create may affect subsequent stages of the relationship. Partners in on-off relationships may also experience unique stressors that are important to consider in terms of their relationship experiences and mental health. Hence, understanding these relationships offers refinements in the conceptualization of relational stability, greater precision in theoretical models of romantic relationships, and practical insights related to on-off relationships as well as dating relationships in general.

Previous studies have found tangentially that on-off relationships do occur (e.g., Baxter & Bullis, 1986; Cupach & Metts, 2002; Davis, Ace, & Andra, 2000; Kirkpatrick & Hazan, 1994; Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Palarea, Cohen, & Rohling, 2000) with prevalence ranging from 3% to 40%. A few studies have examined strategies partners use to reconcile dating relationships (i.e., Bevan, Cameron, & Dillow, 2003; Patterson & O'Hair, 1992), and a recent qualitative analysis explored on-off partners' reasons for breakups and renewals (Dailey, Rossetto, Pfister, & Surra, in press). Research, however, has not explicitly examined how on-off relationships may differ from those that do not break up and renew.

The purpose of this study was thus to obtain a broad overview of on-off relationships to identify relational theories that may be most useful in explaining these relationships. In addition to obtaining descriptive information about on-off relationships (i.e., prevalence, average number of renewals, lengths of stages of being together and apart), our goal was to assess whether on-off partners reported different relational experiences than partners whose relationships have not broken up and renewed. To be comprehensive, our working definition of on-off relationships encompasses committed, dating relationships that have broken up and renewed at least once. For the purposes of this article, we label relationships that have not renewed as *noncyclical*, including those that have never broken up and those that have permanently ended after one breakup. Although all relationships have fluctuations and cycles, we define

cycle as including both an "on" and "off" stage, and thus use the term *noncyclical* only to indicate that a relationship has not entered a second cycle (i.e., experienced a renewal).

To compare on-off and noncyclical relationships at the point in which they are likely most similar, we focused on the initial stage of relationships as well as partners' first or only breakup. If differences emerge between relationship types, this not only shows on-off relationships warrant more research but provides a heuristic springboard for theoretical investigations of these relationships and the nature of relational instability more generally.

Relational development

As in all dating relationships, couples in on-off relationships must go through an initial process of relational development. Research has found several factors that facilitate relational development such as physical attractiveness (Sprecher, 1989; Walster, Aronson, Abrahams, & Rottman, 1966) and similarity (e.g., Byrne, 1997) as well as the partner's social competence (Krueger & Caspi, 1993), warmth and kindness (Sprecher, 1998), and ability to provide greater security (Latty-Mann & Davis, 1996). Beyond initiating the relationship, models of relationship development (e.g., Altman & Taylor, 1973; Knapp & Vangelisti, 2005) characterize the initial stages of relationships as entailing increasing amounts of self-disclosure and intimacy as well as increasingly personal, flexible, and spontaneous communication.

Based on this research, factors considered positive in the initial stage of relationships may include having similar interests, the partner's physical attractiveness, having a sense of security, or getting to know the partner. On-off partners, however, may report positive aspects that differ quantitatively or qualitatively. In addition, although the focus in research on positive factors of relational development is intuitive given that individuals do not typically initiate relationships that are not rewarding (see Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), factors distinguishing on-off relationships also may emerge as initial negative aspects or costs. For example, factors considered negative in the initial stage

of relationships may include not enough time spent together, unpredictability of the partner's behavior, or uncertainty about the status of the relationship. Again, on-off partners may note different types or different frequencies of initial negative aspects than noncyclical partners. Thus, our first and second research questions address whether on-off partners' reports of initial positive, as well as negative, factors differ from noncyclical partners' reports.

Relational dissolution

Research on romantic relationships has also examined the process of relational dissolution. Building on extant knowledge, we were interested in discerning whether on-off partners have different reasons for dissolving their relationships, use different strategies to dissolve their relationships, or have different perceptions of the breakups as compared to partners who permanently end their relationships.

Reasons for dissolution

Interdependence theories (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) generally suggest individuals terminate their relationships when they perceive better alternatives, fewer investments, and lower outcomes than they believe they deserve. Research has also examined specific reasons leading to relational dissolution. Although differences exist, the various typologies regarding reasons for dissolution share similar factors such as problems in communicating, negative attributes of partners, partners wanting more independence, exploring alternative partners, and external factors such as disapproval from family or friends and work schedules (cf. Baxter, 1986; Cupach & Metts, 1986; Dailey et al., in press; Felmlee, Sprecher, & Bassin, 1990; Hill, Rubin, & Peplau, 1976; Sprecher, 1994; Stephen, 1987). Unknown, however, is whether partners from on-off relationships report similar prevalence rates of these reasons, and furthermore, whether they report unique reasons for dissolution. For example, on-off partners may report needing a break from the relationship to work on personal or relational difficulties. Hence, our third research question pertains to whether partners from on-off

relationships report different reasons for dissolution than partners from permanently ended relationships.

Dissolution interactions

In research assessing strategies used to disengage from relationships, several studies have found strategies including withdrawal/avoidance, de-escalation, justification, positive tone, and negative identity management (Baxter, 1982, 1984; Cody, 1982; for an overview of strategies, see also Guerrero, Andersen, & Afifi, 2007). One factor that may be related to renewals is the strategy used to dissolve the relationship. Perhaps on-off partners use more indirect strategies such as pseudo de-escalation, a strategy that proposes reducing the intimacy in the relationship (e.g., "Let's just be friends"; "Let's take a break"; see Baxter, 1985). Partners may employ strategies such as this when they fully intend to terminate the relationship or when they truly want to take a break and leave the possibility of renewing open. Regardless, more indirect strategies may create confusion for the rejected partner regarding relational status. Indeed, Baxter (1984) found only 22% of partners experiencing an indirect dissolution strategy perceived that the relationship had been terminated.

Hence, the dissolution strategies used may, in part, explain Dailey and colleagues' (in press) finding in their qualitative analysis that on-off partners often had uncertainty regarding their relational status. Relational uncertainty, defined by Knobloch and Solomon (1999) as the "degree of confidence people have in their perceptions of involvements within close relationships" (p. 264) is positively related to topic avoidance, particularly when talking about the state of the relationship (Afifi & Burgoon, 1998; Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004). Knobloch and Solomon (2005) also argued that relational uncertainty generally hinders partners' ability to process relational information. As such, on-off couples may be particularly uncertain about relational status after interactions that potentially signify breakups. Thus, we included additional research questions addressing whether on-off partners and noncyclical partners who

have permanently ended their relationships use different dissolution strategies (fourth research question) and have different perceptions about their relational status following dissolution interactions (fifth research question).

Dissolution initiation

Research on relational dissolution shows that most breakups are unilateral; typically 20% or less of respondents report their breakups were mutual (e.g., Hill et al., 1976; Sprecher, 1994; Sprecher et al., 1998). Although this research suggests a low prevalence of mutual dissolutions overall, on-off relationships perhaps exhibit an even lower frequency of mutual breakups than other relationships, which may be a reason for reconciliation. Specifically, one partner who wishes to continue the relationship may instigate some renewals and make reconciliation attempts after the breakup. In support of this, Cupach and Metts (2002) found that partners were more persistent in reconciliation attempts when dissolutions were unilateral. Furthermore, two thirds of Patterson and O'Hair's (1992) participants reported using unilateral strategies to reconcile the relationship. Thus, our final research question addresses potential differences in dissolution initiation between partners from on-off and permanently terminated relationships (sixth research question).

The current study thus aims to provide a descriptive understanding of on-off relationships and a broad assessment of how these relationships differ from noncyclical relationships. This information will reveal specific relational theories that may best aid in explaining the multiple transitions as well as partners' experiences in these relationships.

Study 1

Method

Participants

A total of 445 college students from a large Southwestern university in the United States received extra credit in communication courses for completing an online survey regarding dating relationships. Two thirds of the sample were female ($n = 289, 64.9\%$), and

participants ranged in age from 18 to 47 ($M = 19.74, SD = 2.86$). A little more than half of the sample were Caucasian ($n = 245, 55.1\%$), 88 (19.8%) were Asian or Pacific Islander, 55 (12.4%) were Hispanic or Latino/Latina, 29 (6.5%) were African American or Black, 26 (5.8%) indicated other or multiple ethnicities, and 2 declined to report ethnicity. Most individuals reported on heterosexual relationships (96.7%). A younger sample was appropriate for the current analysis, as Kalish (1997) found that most rekindled relationships (i.e., reconciling after 5 or more years) initially started before partners were 22 years of age; hence, many on-off relationships may occur when individuals are young adults. Furthermore, on-off relationships may be particularly prevalent in college student samples. Students may perceive they have access to more alternative partners, which may facilitate breakups (see Thibaut & Kelley, 1959); furthermore, because they are typically part of the same community for several years, they have more opportunities for postdissolution contact, which may facilitate renewals.

Procedures

We provided a secure survey link to interested participants through e-mail. The first page of the survey provided consent information. An initial question asked participants if they had experienced an on-off relationship:

Were you ever, or are you currently, involved in a committed dating relationship that was "on-again/off-again"? In other words, were you or are you in a committed dating relationship where you broke up and got back together at least once?

Because previous research does not offer a clear definition of breakups (see Agnew et al., 2006), we allowed participants to self-define breakups, as well as a renewals, in their relationships. If participants reported having experienced an on-off relationship, the survey asked them to report on their most recent on-off relationship regardless of when it occurred. The survey instructed those who had not experienced an on-off relationship to report on their current or most recent romantic relationship.

Based on a relationship status question, 90 on-off participants were currently dating (hereafter labeled *current on-off partners*) and 183 were not currently dating (hereafter labeled *past on-off partners*). Of those who had not experienced an on-off relationship, 61 were currently dating (hereafter labeled *current noncyclical*) and 58 were not currently dating (hereafter labeled *past noncyclical*). A group of 53 individuals indicated not having had a committed romantic relationship and completed sections of the survey pertaining to a nondating topic. We excluded these individuals from the analyses with the exception of assessing the prevalence of on-off relationships. Without these individuals, the sample size was 392. Demographic characteristics of this smaller sample are highly similar to those of the full sample.

In addition to asking on-off partners the number of times they renewed the relationship and the lengths of their “on” and “off” stages, the survey included questions about their experiences in up to three phases—a phase including both an on time and an off time. With the exception of describing on-off relationships, the current article focuses on on-off partners’ reports of the first phase only, when they are likely most comparable to noncyclical relationships. Dailey, Jin, Pfiester, and Beck (2008) report analyses spanning all three phases.

We asked all participants reporting on a romantic relationship to indicate the total length of their relationship (regardless of whether they had periods in which they were not dating). We also asked all participants open-ended questions about the initial positive and negative aspects of their relationship. Because on-off and noncyclical relationships could differ in a diversity of ways, we employed open-ended questions to allow any potential differences to emerge rather than isolating a few aspects through quantitative measures. In addition, on-off partners and partners who permanently terminated their relationships answered open-ended questions regarding their first or only breakup. Specifically, they described the breakup interaction and the reasons for the breakup. We also asked participants who initiated the breakup (self, partner, mutual) as well as two questions regarding

their perceptions after the breakup (on a 7-point scale from 1 = *not at all* to 7 = *very much*): “To what degree were you sure you were no longer dating?” and “To what degree did you think you would get back together?” We created these items for the purposes of this study to focus on perceptions of relational status following a breakup and used single items to avoid fatigue effects in the larger survey.

Coding of the open-ended questions

Four of the five authors coded the four open-ended questions (i.e., initial positive aspects, initial negative aspects, reasons for dissolution, and dissolution strategies); two pairs of coders coded two questions each. Coders were blind to participants’ relationship type (i.e., on-off status, relational status). Although most responses were relatively short (e.g., contained in a sentence), the first author unitized longer responses (20.1% across the questions) into thought units to allow participants’ responses to reflect multiple ideas. Coders resolved any discrepancies in how many thought units responses represented through discussion.

Coders independently developed a list of potential categories based on all of the responses for each question. Each pair of coders then met with the first author to create a final coding scheme for each question. The first author created a coding manual and provided it to the coders along with an electronic coding booklet. Coders categorized an initial portion of the coding (approximately 20%) for each question to calculate preliminary reliability. If reliability was sufficient, coders completed the coding for that question. When reliability was insufficient, coders met to clarify the categories before coding the entire set of responses. We assessed reliability through Cohen’s kappa (κ), which corrects for chance. The reliability estimates for the four questions ranged from .62 to .73, which indicate acceptable reliability (see Banerjee, Capozzoli, McSweeney, & Sinha, 1999). Coders met a final time to resolve any differences in the coding.

Initial positive aspects of relationships. Participants ($n = 377$) reported from one to eight

Table 1. *Initial positive aspects of relationships: Number and percentage of participants reporting each category (Study 1)*

| Positive aspect | Frequency | Description | Examples |
|--|-------------|---|---|
| Companionship and security | 121 (32.1%) | Relationship provided general companionship, security, or comfort | "I like having someone always to turn to, someone who loves me always"; "We felt so comfortable together"; "I enjoy his company and the sense of comfort that comes with knowing someone a long time" |
| Partner personality | 121 (32.1%) | Partner had desirable characteristics (e.g., sense of humor, caring, honesty) | "He is very down to earth"; "Caring, funny"; "He was always very supportive, rational, kind, and generous" |
| Excitement and novelty | 104 (27.6%) | The relationship or partner was new, exciting, or interesting | "Everything was new and fun"; "He was really fun to hang out with"; "Adventure, unexpected activities, passion, getting to know each other" |
| Communication and understanding | 101 (22.7%) | Participants felt understood by their partner; partners communicated well | "She was really understanding, liked me for me; "We were also very open and understanding with each other"; "We can easily talk to each other about anything" |
| Chemistry | 38 (10.1%) | Partners meshed well together, "clicked," or got along well together | "We connected so well"; "I loved the fact that we fit together perfectly"; "We have good chemistry together" |
| Similarity | 34 (9.0%) | Partners had similar beliefs or activities; partners enjoyed the same things | "He shared a lot of my values"; "We have similar goals and aspirations"; "We had a lot of the same interests" |
| Physical attraction and physical relations | 33 (8.8%) | Partner was physically attractive; physical relations were good | "Devastating good looks"; "The sex was great"; "The affection, the romance" |
| Friendship | 28 (7.4%) | Participants enjoyed the friendship with their partner | "He became my best friend; "Had a solid friendship" |

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

| Positive aspect | Frequency | Description | Examples |
|----------------------------|-----------|---|--|
| Overall positive appraisal | 21 (5.6%) | Relationship was described as generally positive or that everything about the relationship was good | “It was a good healthy relationship”; “Every thing”; “It was wonderful” |
| Casual nature | 20 (5.3%) | Relationship described as casual or not serious | “Casualty, open door policy”; “Really laid back, no pressure” |
| Love | 18 (4.8%) | Participants emphasized the love for their partner; enjoyed being in love | “We were VERY much in love”; “We were both mutually in love with each other” |

initial positive aspects in their relationships (*Mdn* and mode = 1.00). Coders categorized the 653 total aspects into 11 categories ($\kappa = .73$) and labeled 14 of these aspects as miscellaneous. See Table 1 for a list and description of these categories as well as their frequencies.

Initial negative aspects of relationships. Participants ($n = 370$) listed one to three initial negative aspects in their relationships (*Mdn* and mode = 1.00). Coders categorized the 428 total aspects into six categories and an additional none/minimal category ($\kappa = .72$), and they coded two of the aspects as miscellaneous. See Table 2 for a list and description of these categories.

Reasons for dissolution. On-off and past noncyclical participants also reported the reasons for the first or only breakup ($n = 316$). These participants listed from one to four reasons (*Mdn* and mode = 1.00). Coders categorized the 385 total reasons into 12 categories ($\kappa = .71$) and coded one of the reasons as miscellaneous and another as uncodable; four responses indicated that the participants did not recall the reason. See Table 3 for the categories and their frequencies.

Dissolution strategies. Participants’ dissolution strategies were largely similar to previous strategy categorizations; as such, we used an amalgamation of strategies across typologies (e.g., Baxter, 1982, 1985; Cody, 1982; Guerrero et al., 2007) as our coding categories. We considered participants’ responses as reflecting only one strategy, and coders categorized the 321 responses into 10 categories ($\kappa = .62$) and labeled 3 of these as miscellaneous and 3 as uncodable; 1 response indicated the participant did not recall the strategy used. See Table 4 for a description and prevalence of each dissolution strategy.

Preliminary analyses

Because the sample size of past on-off partners ($n = 183$) was substantially larger than the other three groups, we took a random sample of this group (50%) to approximate the number of current on-off partners (new $n =$

Table 2. *Initial negative aspects of relationships: Number and percentage of participants reporting each category (Study 1)*

| Negative aspect | Frequency | Description | Examples |
|---------------------------------|-------------|--|--|
| Negative behavior | 138 (37.3%) | Behavior by the participant, partner, or both that made the relationship less satisfying (e.g., fighting, annoying habits, how partners treated each other, substance use) | <p>“We had a lot of immature, stupid fights”;</p> <p>“He could be really selfish at times”;</p> <p>“She became a little cling”;</p> <p>“She didn’t always treat me well. She took advantage of my being nice”</p> |
| Third party/external | 100 (27.0%) | External forces that made the relationship difficult (e.g., long-distance, friends or family not approving of the partner, or work schedules); this category does not include the influence of alternative romantic partners | <p>“We lived three hours away. Time together is limited”;</p> <p>“He was one of my friend’s ex and my parents didn’t approve of him after they found out”;</p> <p>“His mom did not approve of him dating me which was a huge stress on the relationship”</p> |
| Unbalanced needs/expectations | 61 (16.5%) | Mismatched expectations or involvement in the relationship; partners having different commitment levels; partners being at different places in the relationship | <p>“I think he loves me more than I love him”;</p> <p>“I was busy and she wasn’t. Time conflicts”;</p> <p>“He was younger, not at the same stage in life as I was, came from a less stable family life growing up”</p> |
| Distrust/insecurity | 47 (12.7%) | Distrust or jealousy about the partner or the relationship; insecurity about the stability of the relationship | <p>“He was extremely jealous and controlling and was constantly mad at me”;</p> <p>“He was obsessive and got really jealous of other guys”</p> |
| None/minimal | 33 (8.9%) | None or few negative aspects reported | <p>“No major negative aspects”;</p> <p>“Relatively none”;</p> <p>“There wasn’t a whole lot I can complain about”</p> |
| Personal dissatisfaction | 35 (9.5%) | General dissatisfaction with the relationship or the partner | <p>“We did not really click”;</p> <p>“Occasional monotony of being around same person all the time”;</p> <p>“He began to annoy me”</p> |
| Cheating/exploring alternatives | 12 (3.2%) | Infidelity, physical contact, or flirting with another person by participant, partner, or both | <p>“He made out with another girl”;</p> <p>“And he wasn’t faithful”;</p> <p>“She was flirtatious with everyone she met”</p> |

Table 3. Reasons for dissolution: Number and percentage of participants reporting each category (Study 1)

| Reason | Frequency | Description | Examples |
|----------------------------------|------------|--|--|
| Physical distance | 58 (18.4%) | Issues related to being in a long-distance relationship | “It was impossible to carry on a good relationship in separate cities”; “We went to different colleges, and neither one of us wanted to do a long-distance relationship” |
| Unbalanced needs or expectations | 49 (15.5%) | Mismatched expectations or involvement; partners were at different places or wanted different things from the relationship | “We just were not on the same level. I did not like him as much as [he liked] me”; “Moved in together too soon, had different goals in life”; “She wanted a ring and I wanted a degree” |
| Third party or external forces | 45 (14.2%) | External forces that made the relationship more difficult (e.g., work, friends or family disapproval); excludes alternative partners | “Her friends were lying to her about me”; “Friends influenced his decisions and his mother also was a big factor”; “He got very busy” |
| Communication problems | 43 (13.6%) | Communication problems or high degree of conflict; not communicating effectively | “We couldn’t communicate effectively”; “Lack of communication”; “We both did things that hurt the other person, and eventually fighting began to consume our entire relationship” |
| Negative behavior | 37 (11.7%) | Negative behavior by the participant, partner, or both | “Because he didn’t give me the respect I deserved”; “He was too controlling and drank too much”; “She became too overbearing and would spy on me” |
| Seeking alternatives | 32 (10.1%) | Seeking alternative partners; wanting to explore other options | “We started seeing other people”; “I thought I may have feelings for another guy”; “I also felt that by dating my boyfriend, I was missing out on potential relationships with men that I would meet in college” |
| Negative change in relationship | 31 (9.8%) | A loss or decrease of previous feelings (e.g., loss of attraction, love, interest in partner) | “I wasn’t attracted to him like I had been”; “She got bored”; “The connection was no longer there” |
| Needed independence | 26 (8.2%) | One or both partners needed more independence; wanting less responsibility or commitment to the relationship | “Too much time commitment”; “My partner wanted to experience new things”; “We thought it would be best for both of us to figure out exactly what we wanted” |

(continued)

Table 3. (continued)

| Reason | Frequency | Description | Examples |
|---------------------------------|-----------|---|---|
| Cheating | 23 (7.3%) | Infidelity or physical contact with another person by the participant, partner, or both | “She found out that I had cheated on her with another girl”; “I couldn’t be faithful”; “He cheated and felt guilty” |
| Relationship had run its course | 19 (6.0%) | Relationship had naturally come to an end; both knew the relationship would not work | “We grew apart”; “Just was time to move on”; “We both knew it wasn’t going anywhere” |
| Trust issues | 11 (3.5%) | Insecurity about the relationship; distrusting the partner | “He wasn’t honest with me”; “There were certain trust issues that were broken” |
| Lying | 5 (1.6%) | Participant or partner lied or gave a false impression of themselves | “He lied about things that he did”; “Because I found out he had lied about something huge . . . [he] had literally fabricated a part of his life” |

92), and we used this sample in all analyses comparing the relationship types. Preliminary analyses showed participant sex and age were related to only a few of the variables included in the analyses; as such, we did not include them as controls.¹

Results and discussion

Describing on-off relationships

Of the total sample of 445 participants, 61.6% ($n = 274$) had experienced an on-off relationship. In other words, in at least one of their dating relationships they had broken up and renewed with the same partner. Of these 274, 66 (24.1%) reported they had broken up and renewed only once, 81 (29.6%) reported renewing twice with the same partner, 59 (22.2%) reported three, and 64 (23.6%) reported four or more; 3 participants did not report number of renewals. Excluding 1 outlier of 30 renewals, the average number of renewals was 2.77 ($SD = 1.81$, range = 1–10, Mdn and mode = 2.00), but the number of renewals did not vary by whether on-off partners were currently together or apart, $t(176) = 1.25$, $p = .21$.

The length of on-off partners’ first on stage ($n = 265$) ranged from 1 week to 42 months ($M = 7.74$ months, $SD = 7.02$, $Mdn = 5.00$, mode = 2.00). The second ($n = 187$) ranged from 2 days to 48 months ($M = 5.61$ months, $SD = 6.84$, $Mdn = 3.00$, mode = 1.00), and

1. Sex was related to the blame game dissolution strategy, $\chi^2(1) = 4.03$, $p = .05$; the initial negative aspect unbalanced expectations, $\chi^2(1) = 4.08$, $p = .04$; the initial positive aspects excitement/novelty, $\chi^2(1) = 11.90$, $p < .01$; physical attractiveness, $\chi^2(1) = 16.60$, $p < .01$; and personality, $\chi^2(1) = 7.79$, $p = .01$. Females were more likely to cite these categories with the exception of partner physical attractiveness. Age was related to the initial positives of partner physical attractiveness ($r = .13$, $p = .02$) and similarity ($r = .13$, $p = .01$), the initial negatives of third-party influences ($r = -.11$, $p = .04$) and unbalanced expectations ($r = .16$, $p < .01$), and the dissolution reason of unbalanced expectations ($r = .15$, $p = .01$). Although the age variable was skewed, transformations of this variable yielded the same results and thus we presented the correlations with the raw data. Because sex and age were related to only a few of the variables and preliminary analyses suggested that these variables did not affect the results of the main analyses, we did not include sex and age as controls in the analyses.

Table 4. Dissolution strategies: Number and percentage of participants reporting each category (Study 1)

| Strategy | Frequency | Description | Examples |
|----------------------|------------|--|---|
| Direct dump | 79 (24.6%) | The receiving partner has no chance to negotiate or repair the relationship | “I sat her down and told her that we should break up”; “I just told him that I really liked him but I thought it was best if we just stop talking”; “She told me only by saying we should stop going out, or something to that effect” |
| Justifications | 78 (24.3%) | Partner that leaves provides explanation for the relational dissolution | “I went to visit him and told him that I didn’t want to date my freshman year and that he was getting too serious for me. We both were pretty upset and cried. He told me that he didn’t want to break up”; “He just told me he felt trapped and needed to figure out some things. Also that he needed time. Pretty much told me we were both too young to know exactly what we wanted” |
| Negotiated farewell | 53 (16.5%) | Partners mutually realize the relationship should end; no blaming involved | “We mutually and calmly agreed to take some time off due to the frequent arguments”; “We just said it was time to move on and both agreed” |
| Pseudo de-escalation | 28 (8.7%) | One partner suggests taking a break, perhaps intending to terminate the relationship | “I told her we should take a break”; “I just told her that I wanted to give each other some space for the time being”; “She said she didn’t know what she wanted and needed time apart to think” |
| Blame game | 22 (6.9%) | Partners blame each other; relationship ends in conflict | “We got in a fight and said many things that made each other mad”; “He said some things that really hurt me and my defense mechanism just lead us to that” |

(continued)

Table 4. (continued)

| Strategy | Frequency | Description | Examples |
|-----------------------|-----------|--|---|
| Avoidance | 20 (6.2%) | One partner withdraws from the relationship | “I stopped talking to him”; “He stopped talking to me. We never broke up. One day he was talking to me and the next day he wouldn’t return my calls” |
| Dating others | 13 (4.0%) | One partner suggests dating other people | “I think we should take a break. I want to date other people”; “We were both going out of town for spring break, and she made it clear she wanted to hook up with random guys without having to feel guilty about being in a relationship” |
| Relational talk trick | 10 (3.1%) | One partner discusses a problem in the relationship as a guise to show the relationship is irreparable | “I called her and said we needed to talk. Then I continued on to say that I thought the long distance relationship wasn’t working”; “Well I told him that I needed to talk about our relationship, and that we were better off being friends” |
| Fade away | 8 (2.5%) | Both partners gradually drift apart | “We didn’t actually say we were breaking up, it just kind of happened because we were both busy”; “We didn’t get to see much of each other and after time we didn’t get to talk to each other as much” |
| Relational ruses | 3 (0.9%) | Using manipulation or bullying partner into a breakup; using third parties to reveal breakup | “He told me online, quickly, and wouldn’t tell me why. The he finally answered my call and explained that I had deceived him, but wouldn’t let me know how. I had to find out the next day from friends” |

the third ($n = 71$) ranged from 2 days to 72 months ($M = 8.80$ months, $SD = 13.07$, $Mdn = 4.00$, mode = 2.00). The length of the first off stage ($n = 221$) ranged from less than 1 day to 36 months ($M = 2.63$ months, $SD = 4.36$, Mdn and mode = 1.00), and the second ($n = 93$) ranged from less than 1 day to 18 months ($M = 2.17$ months, $SD = 3.27$, $Mdn = 1.00$, mode = 2.00).

We employed analyses of variance (ANOVAs) to compare the lengths of the on-off and noncyclical relationships. In these analyses, we excluded outliers in the length variables (i.e., z scores greater than 3; $n = 6$) from the analyses to obtain more normal distributions. When assessing the length of time between the initiation of the relationship and the first (on-off) or only (permanently terminated) breakup, $F(2, 219) = 3.22$, $p = .04$, $\eta^2 = .03$, post hoc tests showed that current on-off partners reported a greater length of time before the breakup ($M = 8.17$ months, $SD = 6.74$) as compared to those from past noncyclical relationships ($M = 5.63$, $SD = 4.44$); past on-off relationships ($M = 6.86$, $SD = 5.37$) were not significantly different from either group. Second, when assessing the total length of the relationship, $F(3, 282) = 26.30$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .22$, post hoc tests revealed that current on-off partners reported a significantly greater length of relationship ($M = 27.34$ months, $SD = 17.16$) than both past on-off partners ($M = 19.95$, $SD = 14.10$) and current noncyclical relationships ($M = 18.14$, $SD = 14.00$), and all three of these types reported significantly greater lengths than past noncyclical partners ($M = 5.63$, $SD = 4.44$).

Comparing on-off and noncyclical partners' reports of their relational experiences

Research Question 1 pertained to whether the four relationship types varied in their reports of initial positive aspects in their relationships. We conducted separate chi-squares for each positive aspect category so participants' responses would not be limited to one aspect if they reported multiple aspects. Two aspects showed a significant chi-square value: Current noncyclical partners reported both love and communication and understanding more frequently than the other three groups (see

Table 5). Given that positive communication and responsiveness are hallmarks of satisfying relationships (e.g., Gottman, 1994; Reis, Clark, & Holmes, 2004), it is not surprising that current partners noted these positive aspects more than partners who were not together. Expartners may have more negative views of their previous relationships due to the negative interactions and emotions associated with dissolutions (e.g., Simpson, 1987; Sprecher et al., 1998). Reporting negative characteristics may also save face or provide justification for why the relationship dissolved (see, e.g., Baxter, 1986; Duck, 1982). The interesting difference, however, is that even on-off partners who were currently together cited these positives less often than current noncyclical partners; current on-off partners' reports were equivalent to those of past on-off partners. This may also suggest relational status did not bias on-off partners' responses.

Research Question 2 pertained to whether the four relationship types varied in their reports of initial negative aspects. Separate chi-square analyses showed that current noncyclical partners reported third-party involvement or external factors more frequently than the other three groups (see Table 5). Hence, interfering schedules or disapproval by family members or friends seemed to be an obstacle for partners in current noncyclical relationships more than the other relationships, including on-off partners who were also currently together. Alternatively, this finding could indicate that the negative aspects noncyclical partners experience stem primarily from outside forces rather than from factors within the relationship.

Past noncyclical and both groups of on-off participants described the reasons for their first or only breakup (Research Question 3). Chi-square analyses showed the frequency of several factors varied by relationship type, particularly between past noncyclical relationships and both on-off groups (see Table 5). Past noncyclical partners reported physical distance and how the relationship had run its course more often than did on-off partners. In contrast, on-off partners noted communication problems and negative behavior more often than did past noncyclical partners, although

Table 5. Prevalence of open-ended question categories by relationship type: Study 1

| Categories | Past on-off (<i>n</i> = 92) | Current on-off (<i>n</i> = 90) | Past noncyclical (<i>n</i> = 58) | Current noncyclical (<i>n</i> = 61) | χ^2 |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|---|--|-------------------|
| Initial positive aspects | | | | | |
| Communication | 23.6% | 23.3% | 21.2% | 50.9% | 17.59*** |
| Love | 2.2% | 2.3% | 0.0% | 8.8% | 7.98* |
| Initial negative aspects | | | | | |
| Third party/external | 25.3% | 20.9% | 20.8% | 44.6% | 11.49* |
| Dissolution reasons | | | | | |
| Physical distance | 17.8% | 11.9% | 34.0% | — | 10.36*** |
| Communication problems | 23.3% | 11.9% | 5.7% | — | 9.17*** |
| Negative behavior | 14.4% | 15.5% | 3.8% | — | 4.73 [†] |
| Relationship had run its course | 5.6% | 1.2% | 18.9% | — | 16.01*** |
| Dissolution strategies | | | | | |
| Justifications | 22.7% | 31.0% | 9.6% | — | 8.32* |
| Negotiated farewell | 18.2% | 16.7% | 34.6% | — | 7.05* |
| Pseudo de-escalation | 12.5% | 8.3% | 1.9% | — | 4.71 [†] |
| Dating others | 2.3% | 1.2% | 9.6% | — | 7.33* |
| Fade away | 1.1% | 0.0% | 5.8% | — | 6.44* |

Note. Only categories with significant differences are reported. Percentages indicate the percentage of respondents from each group noting the category.

[†]*p* < .10. **p* < .05. ****p* < .001.

the chi-square for negative behavior only approached significance.

In assessing the association between relationship type and the dissolution strategies employed (Research Question 4), four strategies had significant chi-square values and an additional strategy approached significance (see Table 5). Based on the percentages, past noncyclical partners reported using the negotiated farewell, fade away, and dating others strategies more than both groups of on-off partners. In contrast, both on-off groups reported using the justifications and pseudo de-escalation strategies more than past noncyclical partners. The results for the fade-away strategy, however, are speculative, as the prevalence of the use of this strategy was relatively low.

We conducted ANOVAs to compare relationship types in terms of partners' certainty that they were no longer dating and perceived chance of renewal after their first or only breakup (Research Question 5). For certainty about relationship status, past noncyclical partners reported significantly greater cer-

tainty ($M = 6.25$, $SD = 1.22$) than both past on-off partners ($M = 5.18$, $SD = 1.83$) and current on-off partners ($M = 5.15$, $SD = 1.81$), $F(2, 228) = 8.21$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .07$. We found similar results for chance of renewal, $F(2, 228) = 24.39$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .18$; past noncyclical partners ($M = 2.89$, $SD = 1.48$) reported a lower chance of renewing than both past on-off partners ($M = 4.33$, $SD = 1.43$) and current on-off partners ($M = 4.59$, $SD = 1.48$). Together, these analyses show on-off partners had more uncertainty regarding the state of their relationship after breakups than past noncyclical partners, even regarding their initial breakup. The similarity between the two on-off groups again suggests relational status was not biasing their reports.

Analysis of Research Question 6 showed that reports of who initiated the breakup varied by relationship type, $\chi^2(4) = 25.01$, $p < .01$. Past noncyclical partners were more likely to report a mutual decision (43.4% as compared to 23.5% for past on-off partners and 9.6% for

current on-off partners), whereas on-off partners were more likely to report the decision was their own (51.8% and 62.7% for past and current on-off partners, respectively, as compared to 26.4% for past noncyclical partners). Reports that the breakup was the partner's decision did not largely vary; past noncyclical partners were slightly more likely to report it was their partner's decision (30.2%) than current (27.7%) and past on-off (24.7%) partners.

Taken together, these analyses generally show that on-off partners appear to report lower relational quality in the initial phase of their relationships as compared to noncyclical partners. Furthermore, on-off partners tended to cite different reasons and strategies regarding their first dissolution as compared to noncyclical partners' only dissolution. Hence, differences emerged even at the points in which on-off and noncyclical relationships should be most comparable. In addition, the current data suggest these differences are not largely due to whether participants reported on current or dissolved relationships; on-off participant responses were largely similar regardless of their relational status.

Study 2

Study 1 was an essential first step in describing on-off relationships and how they differ from noncyclical relationships. Study 1, however, had several methodological limitations. First, we asked all participants who had experienced an on-off relationship to report on an on-off relationship regardless of when it occurred or whether it was a current or a previous relationship. This was necessary as we did not know the prevalence of on-off relationships; if the prevalence had been low, the sample size of this relationship type would have needed to be maximized. Yet, this may have required some participants to report on a past relationship they could not recall well, or some may have chosen an atypical relationship if they had had more than one on-off relationship. Second, we could not assess the reliability and validity of the single-item measures. Third, the coding of the open-ended questions did not yield high reliabilities. Moreover, we coded the data using general categories, whereas identifying specific

characteristics within each category would be beneficial in further distinguishing on-off relationships from noncyclical relationships. Hence, Study 2 addresses these limitations to substantiate and extend the findings of Study 1.

Because Study 1 revealed a relatively high prevalence of on-off relationships, we used a different method in Study 2 to allow a more fair comparison between on-off and noncyclical relationships. Specifically, we first asked participants to report on their current or most recent relationship and subsequently asked whether this relationship had an on-off nature. To parallel Study 1, we asked those reporting on dissolved relationships to provide retrospective reports of their experiences while dating to assess initial positive and negative aspects of their relationships as well as their first or only breakup. To extend Study 1, we asked those currently involved, regardless of on-off status, to report on their present perspectives of their relationships. This allowed an analysis of whether on-off partners report differences regarding the current nature of their relationships as compared to those who have not experienced a breakup and renewal.

In addition, to substantiate the analyses of Study 1, we employed quantitative scales to assess how on-off and noncyclical partners may differ in reports of positive aspects of relationships (i.e., love for their partner, validation from partner, relational satisfaction), negative aspects of relationships (i.e., conflict ineffectiveness, partner aggressiveness), the role of external forces, and relational uncertainty. To further extend Study 1, we conducted a more sophisticated analysis of the cyclical nature of relationships; rather than dichotomizing partners into on-off and noncyclical groups, participants' relationships were characterized by the number of renewals in their relationship.

In addition to the results from Study 1, other research suggests that greater fluctuations in relationships are associated with lower relational quality. For example, Arriaga (2001) found fluctuations in satisfaction were related to lower commitment. Surra and Hughes (1997) also found that couples with more extreme fluctuations in commitment (i.e., event driven) reported more conflict and ambivalence as well as less satisfaction than couples with more

steady and gradual increases in commitment (i.e., relationship driven). Thus, given that a greater number of renewals is likely associated with less stability and greater tumult in relationships, we hypothesized that as the number of renewals increased, partners would report less relational satisfaction, less love for their partners, less validation from their partners, greater aggressiveness from their partner, greater conflict ineffectiveness, less relational certainty, and less influence from external forces.

Method

Description of the participants and procedure

A different sample of 258 college students from a large Southwestern university in the United States received extra credit in communication courses for completing an online survey regarding their current or most recent dating relationship. Similar to Study 1, we excluded a group of individuals ($n = 22$, 8.5%) who reported not having had a committed, romantic relationship; the resulting sample size for the analyses was 236.

Demographic characteristics of this sample were similar to Study 1. Two thirds of the sample were female ($n = 148$; 62.7%). Half of the sample were Caucasian ($n = 119$; 50.4%), 55 (23.3%) were Asian or Pacific Islander, 43 (18.2%) were Hispanic or Latino/Latina, 14 (5.9%) were African American or Black, 4 (1.7%) indicated other or multiple ethnicities, and 1 declined to report ethnicity. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 34 ($M = 19.40$, $SD = 1.78$), and most individuals reported on heterosexual relationships (98.3%).

About equal numbers reported on current and past relationships; 128 (54.2%) were in a current relationship and 108 (45.8%) reported on a dissolved relationship. A little less than half ($n = 93$, 39.4%) reported that their relationship (whether current or past) had an on-off nature. Similar to Study 1, on-off partners reported an average of 2.53 renewals in the relationship ($SD = 1.65$, $Mdn = 2$, range = 1 to 10), and this did not vary by relationship status, $t(90) = -0.11$, $p = .92$. Overall, 76 (32.2%) reported on a current noncyclical rela-

tionship, 67 (28.4%) reported on a past noncyclical relationship, 52 (22.0%) reported on a current on-off relationship, and 41 (17.4%) reported on a past on-off relationship.

Of those reporting on a current relationship, most were seriously dating ($n = 98$; 78.4%), 22 (17.6%) were casually dating, and 5 were engaged; none were married. Of those reporting on a past relationship, 21 (19.4%) were currently close or best friends with their former partner, 29 (26.9%) were friends but not close, 4 (3.7%) occasionally dated, 25 (23.1%) were now like acquaintances, 5 (2.8%) were more like enemies, and 26 (24.1%) reported no contact. Chi-square analyses showed that neither past partners' status, $\chi^2(5) = 4.80$, $p = .44$, nor current partners' status, $\chi^2(2) = 2.19$, $p = .34$, varied by on-off status.

Total relationship length across all participants averaged 15.41 months ($SD = 14.77$, $Mdn = 11.50$, range = < 1 to 84 months). An ANOVA showed that this length varied by on-off status ($M_{\text{on-off}} = 23.69$, $SD = 17.44$; $M_{\text{noncyclical}} = 10.37$, $SD = 9.99$), $F(1, 226) = 57.19$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .20$, and relationship status ($M_{\text{current}} = 17.93$, $SD = 14.66$; $M_{\text{past}} = 12.50$, $SD = 14.41$), $F(1, 226) = 7.19$, $p = .01$, $\eta^2 = .03$, but their interaction was not significant, $F(1, 226) = 1.60$, $p = .21$, $\eta^2 = .01$.

Measures

When necessary, we modified instructions and items to reflect the status of the relationship (e.g., items were phrased in the past tense for partners reporting on past relationships). We initially estimated reliability (Cronbach's α) of the scales for past and current partners separately to ensure that the scales could reliably assess current partners' perceptions of their relationships as well as partners' perceptions of dissolved relationships. Because the reliability coefficients for both groups were equivalent for all scales, we report coefficients of the combined sample.

Positive aspects of relationships. Nine semantic differential items from Huston, McHale, and Crouter's (1986) scale assessed relational satisfaction. (e.g., miserable to enjoyable, discouraging to hopeful; $\alpha = .89$).

In addition, a modified version of Ellis's (2002) confirmation scale assessed individuals' perception of validation from their partners. Ellis originally developed the scale to assess parental confirmation, but items are applicable to romantic relationships as well. To decrease fatigue effects, we assessed 14 of the 28 items (e.g., "My partner makes statements that communicate my feelings were valid and real") on a scale from 1 (*never*) to 7 (*always*), and the items showed high reliability ($\alpha = .88$). Finally, Acker and Davis's (1992) 19-item scale based on Sternberg's (1986) triangular theory of love assessed individuals' love for their partner (on a scale from 1 = *not at all* to 7 = *extremely*). Three dimensions of love are included in the scale:² intimacy (three items; e.g., "I feel emotionally close to my partner"; $\alpha = .85$), passion (six items; e.g., "I adore my partner"; $\alpha = .91$), and commitment (six items; e.g., "I expect my love for my partner to last for the rest of my life"; $\alpha = .96$). We combined items so that higher scores reflect greater satisfaction ($M = 5.33$, $SD = 1.07$), validation ($M = 5.32$, $SD = 0.95$), intimacy ($M = 5.92$, $SD = 1.17$), passion ($M = 5.26$, $SD = 1.36$), and commitment ($M = 4.92$, $SD = 1.84$).

Negative aspects of relationships. Kurdek's (1994) ineffective arguing scale assessed participants' perceptions of their conflict ineffectiveness (e.g., "Our arguments are left hanging and unresolved") on a Likert scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The eight items showed high reliability ($\alpha = .87$). In addition, five items from Linder, Crick, and Collins's (2002) aggression scale assessed individuals' perceptions of their partner's aggression toward them. We measured

the items (e.g., "My romantic partner has threatened to break up with me in order to get what s/he wants"; $\alpha = .80$) on a Likert scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). We combined items so that higher scores indicate greater conflict ineffectiveness ($M = 3.12$, $SD = 1.30$) and partner aggression ($M = 2.41$, $SD = 1.34$).

Relational uncertainty. Knobloch and Solomon's (1999) 16-item scale measured participants' relationship uncertainty on a 6-point scale from 1 (*completely or almost completely uncertain*) to 6 (*completely or almost completely certain*). To parallel the analyses of Study 1, which compared on-off partners' first breakup with past noncyclical partners' only breakup, we asked those reporting on past relationships to report on their certainty about the relationship after their first or only breakup. To extend Study 1, we asked current partners to report on their current relational certainty. We reflected and combined the items ($\alpha = .97$) so that higher scores indicate greater uncertainty ($M = 2.64$, $SD = 1.31$).

External forces and social network influences. Sprecher and Felmlee's (2000) social network approval/disapproval scale assessed family and friend approval of the relationship. Higher scores of the combined eight items reflect greater approval ($\alpha = .86$; $M = 5.37$, $SD = 1.14$). In addition, we created six items for this study to assess the degree to which geographic distance (three items; e.g., "Living closer would have made things easier in our relationship"; $\alpha = .90$) and school or work schedules (three items; e.g., "Our work/school schedules created problems in our relationship"; $\alpha = .87$) influenced participants' relationships. We measured these items on a Likert scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Combined, higher scores reflect that distance ($M = 4.23$, $SD = 2.17$) and schedules ($M = 3.62$, $SD = 1.87$) posed greater obstacles.

Results and discussion

We employed hierarchical regressions to assess the relationship between the number of renewals (ranging from 0, for noncyclical

2. Because the subscales were highly correlated ($r_s > .80$), we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis to determine if the subscales should be used separately or if the items reflected a unidimensional construct of love. Although neither the three-factor model nor a unidimensional model showed acceptable fit, the three-factor model showed slightly better fit and was thus modified to achieve acceptable fit. We dropped four items: two from the intimacy scale, one from the passion scale, and one from the commitment scale, $\chi^2(82) = 199.76$, $p < .01$, comparative fit index = .97, root mean square error of approximation = .08.

relationships, to 10) and the dependent variables. Because the number of renewals variable was skewed, we transformed it using its square root before conducting the analyses. Because of their relationships with the dependent variables, we included several control variables, sex, age, and relationship length, in the analyses.³ In addition, to assess whether the nature of the relationships between number of renewals and the dependent variables varied by status (past vs. current), we included this variable and its interaction with the number of renewals in the model.

We conducted separate regressions for each dependent variable. The first step included the controls of sex, age, and relationship length; the second step included relationship status; the third step included number of renewals; and the fourth step included the interaction term for status and renewals. The results for the regressions are reported in Table 6; for brevity, the control variables are not shown. (The results for the control variables in the first step can be obtained from the first author.) Most of the analyses intuitively show that current partners have more positive perceptions of their relationships than those reporting on past relationships. Yet, because the focus is on how relationship characteristics vary by the number of renewals, the description of the results centers on this variable and the three significant interactions that emerged between relationship status and renewals. To determine the nature of these interactions, we calculated separate regression lines for past and current partners (see Aiken & West, 1991).

Results of the analyses regarding number of renewals largely support and extend the findings from Study 1. First, as the number of renewals increased, partners reported less positive behaviors in their relationships. For example, number of renewals was negatively related to validation from partners. In addition, number of renewals interacted with relationship status to predict satisfaction and the love scales of passion and commitment. The nature of the interactions for satisfaction and commitment were similar: Past partners' satisfaction and commitment did not vary by number of renewals (i.e., slopes = .04 and .06, respectively), but current partners' satisfaction (slope = $-.54$) and commitment (slope = $-.44$) decreased as number of renewals increased, falling almost to the level of past partners' satisfaction and commitment. For passion, although current partners reported more passion overall, current partners' passion decreased (slope = $-.37$), but past partners' passion increased (slope = .21), as the number of renewals increased. Hence, this finding for past partners may suggest individuals who feel more passion for their partners are more likely to renew. In addition, the nonsignificant results for the intimacy component of love may suggest a ceiling effect for intimacy; in other words, once partners have reached a certain level of intimacy, it may not significantly increase regardless of how many times partners renew.

Number of renewals was also positively related to negative aspects of relationships. Specifically, those reporting more renewals also reported more ineffective conflict and more aggression from their partners. To assess relationship uncertainty, we conducted separate analyses based on relationship status because current partners reported on their current relationship uncertainty and past partners reported on their uncertainty following their first or only breakup. For those in current relationships, number of renewals was positively related to their uncertainty. Thus, even while dating, on-off partners reported less certainty about the definition, norms, and future of their relationship, and this uncertainty was higher for those who had renewed more frequently. For past partners, the overall F test was not

3. Participant sex was related to all of the dependent variables ($r_s = .14$ to $.34$, $p_s < .04$) except conflict effectiveness and the external factor of schedules ($r_s < .11$, $p_s > .05$). Participant age was related to four of the dependent variables: social network approval ($r = -.14$, $p = .03$), the external factor of schedules ($r = .14$, $p = .03$), the intimacy scale of love ($r = -.20$, $p < .01$), and the passion scale of love ($r = .15$, $p = .03$). The total length of relationship, transformed (i.e., square root) before conducting analyses because of its skewness, was related to five of the dependent variables: satisfaction ($r = .19$, $p < .01$); intimacy ($r = .33$, $p < .01$), passion ($r = .36$, $p < .01$), and commitment ($r = .49$, $p < .01$) scales of love; and relational uncertainty ($r = -.21$, $p < .01$). To maintain consistency across the analyses, we included all three variables as controls in all the regressions.

Table 6. Regression results predicting relationship characteristics by relational status and number of renewals: Study 2

| Predictors ^a | Step 2 β | Step 3 β | Step 4 β | ΔF | ΔR ² | Overall F | Overall R ² |
|----------------------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|-----------------|-----------|------------------------|
| Satisfaction | | | | | | 15.70*** | .30 |
| Relationship status | .41*** | .38*** | .55*** | 42.54*** | .15 | | |
| Number of renewals | | -.22*** | .47* | 11.33*** | .04 | | |
| Status × Renewals | | | -.72*** | 13.92*** | .05 | | |
| Love: Intimacy | | | | | | 18.31*** | .35 |
| Relationship status | .41*** | .40*** | .45*** | 49.12*** | .15 | | |
| Number of renewals | | -.03 | .14 | 0.28 | .00 | | |
| Status × Renewals | | | -.18 | 0.92 | .00 | | |
| Love: Passion | | | | | | 16.96*** | .33 |
| Relationship status | .39*** | .38*** | .51*** | 45.54*** | .14 | | |
| Number of renewals | | -.07 | .46* | 1.21 | .00 | | |
| Status × Renewals | | | -.55** | 8.19** | .03 | | |
| Love: Commitment | | | | | | 25.97*** | .43 |
| Relationship status | .41*** | .39*** | .48*** | 54.54*** | .15 | | |
| Number of renewals | | -.10 | .24 | 2.79 | .01 | | |
| Status × Renewals | | | -.35* | 3.89* | .01 | | |
| Validation | | | | | | 7.24*** | .17 |
| Relationship status | .25*** | .23*** | .30*** | 14.53*** | .06 | | |
| Number of renewals | | -.18* | .12 | 5.97* | .02 | | |
| Status × Renewals | | | -.31 | 2.11 | .01 | | |
| Conflict ineffectiveness | | | | | | 9.86*** | .22 |
| Relationship status | .31*** | .27*** | .33*** | 22.33*** | .09 | | |
| Number of renewals | | -.33*** | -.07 | 22.35*** | .08 | | |
| Status × Renewals | | | -.27 | 1.67 | .01 | | |
| Partner aggressiveness | | | | | | 10.57*** | .23 |
| Relationship status | -.22*** | -.19*** | -.14 | 11.98*** | .05 | | |
| Number of renewals | | .24*** | .44* | 11.96*** | .04 | | |
| Status × Renewals | | | -.22 | 1.14 | .00 | | |
| External forces: Distance | | | | | | 1.32 | .04 |
| Relationship status | .11 | .12 | .06 | 2.54 | .01 | | |
| Number of renewals | | .07 | -.17 | 0.78 | .00 | | |
| Status × Renewals | | | .25 | 1.20 | .01 | | |
| External forces: Schedules | | | | | | 2.36* | .06 |
| Relationship status | -.06 | -.04 | -.07 | 0.71 | .00 | | |
| Number of renewals | | .12 | .02 | 2.51 | .01 | | |
| Status × Renewals | | | .11 | 0.23 | .00 | | |
| Social network | | | | | | 12.62*** | .27 |
| Relationship status | .40*** | .37*** | .44*** | 40.93*** | .15 | | |
| Number of renewals | | -.21** | .08 | 9.33** | .03 | | |
| Status × Renewals | | | -.30 | 2.29 | .01 | | |
| Uncertainty (past) | | | | | | 1.59 | .07 |
| Number of renewals | .32* | — | — | 5.31* | .06 | | |
| Uncertainty (current) | | | | | | 7.21*** | .20 |
| Number of renewals | .30*** | — | — | 11.32*** | .08 | | |

Note. For relationship status: 1 = *past* and 2 = *current*. Because of random missing data, degrees of freedom ranged from 6 and 208 to 6 and 218 except for the relationship uncertainty analyses, which was 4 and 91 for past partners and 4 and 114 for current partners.

^aResults for the control variables in Step 1 (i.e., sex, age, and relationship length) can be obtained from the first author.

p* < .05. *p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

significant; the main effect for renewals, however, suggests having more renewals was associated with more uncertainty about the state of the relationship after the breakup.

Contrary to predictions based on Study 1, the external factors of geographic distance and partners' schedules were not related to number of renewals. These nonsignificant results, however, indicate that these external factors were no more an issue for those with one or multiple renewals as those having no renewals. In contrast, those with more renewals did report less approval of the relationship from family and friends. Yet, because the data are correlational in nature, we cannot determine whether the lower social network approval may be the result or cause of the number of renewals.

General Discussion

The current work assessed on-off relationships, an understudied phenomenon that researchers have not yet incorporated into models of relational development and dissolution. Despite the similarities between on-off relationships and those that have not broken up and renewed (i.e., noncyclical), important differences emerged in both studies indicating that on-off relationships are distinct from noncyclical relationships, and the data show these differences in participants' retrospective reports of the initial phase of their relationships and in perceptions of their current relationships. Furthermore, some of the relationships classified here as noncyclical may develop an on-off nature in the future; as such, our findings may be conservative estimates of the differences between on-off and noncyclical relationships.

Although previous research has established that on-off relationships occur (e.g., Cupach & Metts, 2002; Davis et al., 2000), the current data provide a more detailed picture of these relationships. First, this is a common phenomenon. Almost two thirds of the sample in Study 1 had experienced an on-off relationship at some point in their dating experiences, and about 40% of participants in Study 2 reported their current or more recent relationship had an on-off nature; the majority of these individuals in both studies reported two or more renewals with the same partner. Second, the dissolutions

were not typically fleeting or quickly overturned; most partners were disengaged from the relationship 1 to 2 months before renewing. Third, these relationships tended to span a long period; on average, these relationships lasted 2 years, which was as long as or longer than noncyclical relationships.

Beyond describing these relationships, a major purpose of this study was to assess whether on-off partners reported differences regarding relational experiences as compared to partners from relationships without an on-off nature. Overall, as compared to noncyclical partners, on-off partners were less likely to report positive characteristics in the initial phase of their relationship (Study 1) and while currently dating (Study 2). Study 2 further showed that those who had experienced more renewals reported lower levels of validation from partners, love for their partners, and relational satisfaction, particularly for current partners. On-off partners were also more likely to note negative characteristics in their relationships, with those having experienced more renewals reporting more negative views of their relationships (Study 2).

In addition, although one possible explanation of why on-off relationships occur is external factors such as geographic distance, partners' schedules, or disapproving family or friends (i.e., external forces separated them despite their desire to continue the relationship), the data here suggest external forces were not more predominant in on-off relationships. Although those with more renewals reported less social network approval (Study 2), the remaining evidence suggests on-off partners experienced similar or fewer external obstacles as compared to noncyclical partners. In combination, the findings from both studies point to an important implication: Factors internal to the relationship (satisfaction, commitment, behaviors exhibited within the relationship) reflect the differences between on-off and noncyclical relationships better than factors external to the relationship.

Given that on-off partners report more problems and fewer positives than partners from relationships that do not have a cyclical nature (even in the initial stage), why do they reconcile these relationships? One potential

explanation stemming from the current data is that the vast majority of breakups in on-off relationships are not mutual, and thus, one partner presumably wants to continue the relationship after breakups. This is consistent with Cupach and Metts's (2002) finding that reconciliation attempts were more likely when dissolutions were unilateral. Past noncyclical partners, in contrast, reported that almost half of their breakups were mutual decisions. The dissolution strategies used also reflect this difference in dissolution initiation; as compared to on-off partners, noncyclical partners reported greater use of mutual disengagements, whether through gradual avoidance (e.g., the fade away) or through a positively toned discussion (e.g., negotiated farewell).

Another contributing factor to the occurrence of on-off relationships may be on-off partners' greater uncertainty about their relational status following breakups as compared to noncyclical partners. Their greater uncertainty may be related to the strategies used to dissolve the relationship. Not surprisingly, on-off partners reported pseudo de-escalation (e.g., "Let's take a break") strategies more than noncyclical partners. The data do not allow a distinction between those who wanted to take a break from those who intended to terminate the relationship permanently, yet, regardless of intent, this strategy likely produces ambiguity about the status of the relationship. As Lee (1984) found in his analysis of relational dissolution, couples who "scaled down" rather than quickly severing ties reported greater confusion about the relationship. On-off partners, however, were also more likely to use justifications. This may be due to the predominance of unilateral dissolutions; partners ending the relationship may have felt obligated to provide, or the rejected partners may have demanded, an explanation. Yet, with their greater relational uncertainty, on-off partners may be less able to interpret these justifications as indicating a breakup (see Knobloch & Solomon, 2005).

Relational theories and models to explore regarding on-off relationships

Given the dearth of research on relationships that break up and renew, the initial, descriptive

information obtained here was necessary to provide a foundation for identifying theories or relational models that may be most helpful in understanding and explaining on-off relationships. For example, given that on-off partners reported more negative communication patterns, assessing their relational maintenance behaviors (e.g., Stafford & Canary, 1991) may be beneficial. First, similar to previous research that shows negative relationships between relational uncertainty and maintenance behaviors (e.g., Dainton, 2003; Guerrero & Chavez, 2005), on-off partners' use of maintenance strategies while dating may be related to their relational uncertainty. Second, Guerrero, Eloy, and Wabnick (1993) found infrequent use of constructive strategies (e.g., positivity, assurances, sharing tasks) was associated with relational de-escalation; as such, the communication difficulties and negative behavior reported by on-off partners may involve a decreased or infrequent use of these constructive strategies while dating. Third, because of on-off partners' tendency to continue contact after they have dissolved the relationship (Dailey et al., in press), assessing partners' use of relational maintenance strategies in their postdissolution relationships may provide clues on how they sustain their relationships and how these behaviors may contribute to renewals.

In addition, employing the relational turbulence model (see Solomon & Knobloch, 2004) may provide insight into on-off partners' uncertainty. This model suggests partners have an increased reactivity to relationship events as their relationships progress from casual to serious, primarily because of the uncertainty or ambiguity about the status of their relationship. Perhaps this transition period is the point at which many on-off relationships first break up. Moreover, when assessing specific interactions, Knobloch and Solomon (2005) found relational uncertainty was positively related to perceptions of the interactions being difficult. Thus, the uncertainty felt by on-off partners may also be related to the communication problems they reported.

Employing interdependence theories (see Rusbult & Buunk, 1993; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959; see also Dailey et al., in press) may also

be beneficial in explaining on-off relationships. Interdependence theories suggest partners have greater stability and commitment to their relationships when they perceive a lower quality of alternatives, are satisfied, and have larger investments in the relationship. As compared to noncyclical partners, on-off partners reported less satisfaction (Study 2) but did not report differences in the role of alternatives regarding dissolutions (Study 1). Hence, associations among predictors of relationship termination may vary by on-off status or the number of renewals partners' experience.

Pursuing these avenues of research not only provide greater understanding of on-off relationships but offer greater precision regarding current theoretical models of romantic relationships. Because on-off relationships appear to be prevalent, research that does not distinguish on-off relationships from relationships without a cyclical nature may yield results that mask or exaggerate certain phenomena in dating relationships. For instance, the turbulence experienced in the transition from casual to serious dating may be greater for those in on-off relationships because of their higher uncertainty. Or perhaps the relationship between uncertainty and relational maintenance behaviors are moderated by the number of renewals partners have experienced. In addition, the findings here regarding instability in relational status may suggest that other types of instability are associated with relational quality as well. For example, Arriaga (2001) found that fluctuations in satisfaction were related to lower commitment and a greater likelihood of dissolution in romantic relationships. Hence, incorporating instability of relational status, as well as other forms of instability, within current relational theories and models may provide greater predictive and explanatory power.

In addition, although further research is needed to provide specific recommendations for couples experiencing these relationships, the current data provide initial practical applications. For example, because the differences that distinguished on-off and noncyclical relationships were primarily processes internal to the relationship rather than external, partners wishing to change the nature of their relationships will likely need to change their commu-

nication and behavior patterns, such as engaging in conflict more constructively, using less aggression, or validating each other more. Furthermore, those renewing relationships multiple times should expect lower levels of positive and higher levels of negative aspects. These partners may also find that family members and friends are less supportive of the relationship with repeated renewals.

Partners may also need to be aware of how uncertainty influences their relationships. Given that relational uncertainty is positively related to topic avoidance about the state of the relationship (Afifi & Burgoon, 1998; Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004), some partners may want to sustain their uncertainty about relational status to maintain their relationship. In other words, open discussions of relational status may have negative consequences for the relationship. Yet, those who want to reduce their uncertainty may benefit from explicit discussions of their relational status particularly at turning points in their relationships. In addition, those who wish to end the relationship permanently may need to be explicit in their desires to decrease uncertainty about relational status for the other partner. Ultimately, additional research will provide greater insights into managing on-off relationships as well as identifying which relationships may become stable and which may end permanently.

Limitations

We outlined several of the limitations of Study 1 at the beginning of Study 2, but additional limitations of both studies should be noted. Although there is an advantage in allowing participants to self-define breakups and renewals (i.e., assessing participants' own perceptions of these transitions), a limitation of this is that individuals' definitions and experiences of breakups and renewals may vary drastically. For example, the wide range of lengths of "on" and "off" stages reflects one aspect of the diversity of these experiences, and other aspects likely influence partners' reports of their relationships (e.g., if a transgression led to the breakup, the emotions experienced after the breakup). In the current analyses, however, a breakup lasting only 1 day was treated the

same as a breakup lasting years. The same was true for renewals.

We also used a broad definition of on-off relationships including all relationships that had broken up and renewed at least once. As shown in Study 2, couples renewing once may be different from couples renewing multiple times. Thus, different types of on-off relationships may exist that we did not distinguish here. Furthermore, we did not assess potential variation in stability among noncyclical relationships. In other words, relational status (i.e., together or terminated) is not the only indicator of relational stability, and all relationships fluctuate in their stability whether reflected in satisfaction, commitment, or other relational characteristics. Although the current work acknowledges that stability is more complex than typically conceptualized, a measurement of stability beyond changes in relational status is needed.

Another limitation is that we only assessed one partner's perceptions of his or her relationships; whereas one partner may label an episode as a breakup, the other partner may not. The current studies also provided only a one-time assessment of relationships. In addition, with the exception of current partners in Study 2, we asked participants to provide retrospective reports of the initial stage of their relationships. Given the findings of Study 2 in which negative aspects reportedly increased and positives aspects decreased with additional renewals, partners' reports may be biased by current status or number of transitions experienced. Furthermore, although we controlled relational status in the analyses of Study 2, we compared both current and retrospective reports of relationship experiences, which may be qualitatively different, in the same analyses. Study 1 also focused on the first phase of on-off relationships, which highlights only a portion of the cyclical picture of these relationships. Hence, longitudinal investigations that obtain reports from both partners across multiple stages in their relationships would address these limitations and provide a greater understanding of the progression of breakups and renewals.

We also conducted numerous statistical tests in both studies, which increased Type I error. In addition, the use of convenience samples affects the general applicability of the

data; on-off relationships may be more or less prevalent in college samples, and different processes may occur for on-off partners at different life stages. In addition, although we focused on dating relationships, other factors may be playing a role in marital relationships that dissolve and renew.

Conclusion

Much still needs to be learned about on-off dating relationships and partners' experiences in these relationships. This work is the first comprehensive description of on-off relationships and it was a necessary first step in understanding this understudied yet common phenomenon in dating relationships. Findings from both studies highlight that as compared to partners in noncyclical relationships, on-off partners reported lower relational quality and greater communication difficulties, which may be exacerbated by additional transitions. As such, further investigation of on-off relationships is needed to understand why partners return to previously unsuccessful relationships despite their lower overall quality. Ultimately, future research examining these relationships will provide a greater theoretical understanding of relational stability as well as practical insights for on-off and dating relationships in general.

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