



# Loneliness Predicts Insensitivity to Partner Commitment

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## ABSTRACT

People attend to their partners' pro-relationship behaviors (or commitment signals) which in turn leads to a positive adjustment in perceived strength of interpersonal bonds. This bond-confirming effect is stronger when the commitment signal entails some high cost (e.g., receiving an expensive birthday present), and by contrast, it is weaker when the commitment signal entails a low cost (e.g., receiving a wish of "Happy Birthday"). The present study explored how loneliness moderates sensitivity to commitment signals as well as their absence (i.e., situations where partners fail to signal commitment despite the demands of the situation). Studies with a Japanese student sample (Study 1), a Japanese community sample (Study 2), and an American sample drawn from users of Amazon Mechanical Turk (Study 3) found that loneliness is associated with an insensitivity to commitment signals: The lonelier the participant, the less likely he or she was to positively adjust perceived bond strength in response to a commitment signal. This relative insensitivity was observed irrespective of the costliness of the signal. On the other hand, loneliness did not predict differences in sensitivity to the absence of commitment signals. Implications of these results for the loneliness literature are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Dependable interpersonal relationships are an essential part of human life. Not surprisingly, being socially isolated is associated with a multitude of negative outcomes. To take just a few examples, socially isolated individuals are less happy (Argyle, 1987; Myers & Diener, 1995) and less healthy (House, Landis, & Umberson, 1988; Uchino, Uno, & Holt-Lunstad, 1999), and social isolation is associated with a higher risk of mortality (Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010) even after controlling for potentially confounding variables, such as gender, age, and marital status. Moreover, research suggests that, aside from objective social isolation, subjective social isolation (or a feeling of loneliness) may be sufficient to cause various detrimental outcomes related to health and well-being (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2009; Holt-Lunstad, Smith, Baker, Harris, & Stephenson, 2015). This is important because loneliness does not appear to be related to objective social isolation as tightly as we expect. In one study, the correlation was as small as 0.20 (Coyle & Dugan, 2012). Indeed, many people feel lonely despite being surrounded by others. How might this be so? Some of the answer, it appears, lays in the fact that many social partners are decidedly "fair-weather." According to Tooby and Cosmides (1996), fair-weather friends are self-interested partners who reap benefits from the relationship but never repay.

One way to distinguish true friends from fair-weather friends involves placing a person in a difficult or stressful situation, and then

observing that person's willingness to stay in the relationship. This is known as a strain test in social psychology (Kelley, 1983; Shallcross & Simpson, 2012; Simpson, 2007) and a bond test in biology (Maestriperi, 2012; Zahavi, 1977), respectively. If a friend or romantic partner, after being elicited to do so, performs some high-cost pro-relationship behavior (e.g., taking time off work to help a partner move, nursing an ill partner back to health, etc.), that person can be trusted as someone who is "tried and true." The same also holds for when a high-cost pro-relationship behavior is spontaneously performed in absence of request or implicit solicitation. In both cases, the partner's willingness to provide instrumental or emotional support reflects their valuation of the relationship, and those who value the relationship are unlikely to exploit it. Therefore, making costly sacrifices for the sake of a relationship predicts various positive outcomes such as commitment, adjustment, and satisfaction (Stanley, Whitton, Sadberry, Clements, & Markman, 2006; Van Lange et al., 1997).

Some low-cost pro-relationship behaviors have also been demonstrated to enhance the perceived strength of interpersonal bonds. For example, actively sharing in a partner's positive experiences (or capitalization) strengthens bonds (Gable & Reis, 2010), and even minor benevolent interactions, such as giving complimentary remarks, seem to increase partner satisfaction (Matsumura & Ohtsubo, 2012). This may be because even apparently non-costly behaviors still require some inherent cost, which in turn honestly signals an interest in the target person (Ohtsubo et al., 2014; Ohtsubo & Tamada, 2016): By simply paying attention to your partner, you can share in achievements and commiserate in failures in a timely fashion, but as attention is a limited resource, this necessarily entails a cost in terms of lost opportunity.

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Based on the above arguments, Yamaguchi, Smith, and Ohtsubo (2015) maintained that people utilize their partners' pro-relationship behaviors as commitment signals to adjust the perceived strength of bonds. In their pilot study (an open-ended questionnaire), participants reported various real-life events that strengthened a bond with a specific partner (either a friend or a romantic partner). Irrespective of partner type, the reported events included an array of both high-cost and low-cost commitment signals. For example, planning and hosting a surprise party is a high-cost commitment signal, whereas simply wishing "happy birthday" is a low-cost commitment signal. Subsequent vignette studies conducted in Japan and America. (Studies 1 and 2 in Yamaguchi et al., 2015) confirmed that both high-cost and low-cost commitment signals are effective to confirm the strength of a bond, although high-cost signals are more effective. In addition, failure to produce a situationally appropriate commitment signal (e.g., forgetting to give a birthday wish) was found to have a detrimental effect on relationships by causing a weaker perceived bond.

The above studies show that people use their partners' commitment signals to up- and down-regulate the perceived strength of interpersonal bonds with their relationship partners. However, what happens when a person is deeply dissatisfied with the current state of his or her social relationships? What happens when a person is lonely? As loneliness is defined as an unpleasant emotional reaction to the mismatch between one's actual and desired social contacts (Peplau & Perlman, 1982), lonely individuals may be more motivated to pay attention to their partners' commitment signals than relatively well-connected individuals. In other words, loneliness might motivate an increased sensitivity, or hypersensitivity, to the sorts of relationship relevant behaviors that are useful for distinguishing "true" from "fair-weather" partners.

**Hypothesis 1a.** *Loneliness is associated with a propensity to positively adjust perceived bond strength in response to commitment signals.*

This is in line with the *social reconnection hypothesis* (Maner, DeWall, Baumeister, & Schaller, 2007), which posits that social exclusion motivates people to reconnect with others. Although some studies support this hypothesis (e.g., Derfler-Rozin, Pillutla, & Thau, 2010; Maner et al., 2007; Romero-Canyas et al., 2010), other studies suggest the existence of a diametrically opposite pattern: Socially excluded people tend to behave in a manner that inhibits reconnection (e.g., exhibiting more aggressiveness and hostility; see Baumeister, Brewer, Tice, & Twenge, 2007, for a review).

Apart from the social exclusion literature, findings in the loneliness literature are also mixed. Although some studies have shown that lonely individuals express greater interest in social stimuli (Gardner, Pickett, Jefferis, & Knowles, 2005) and positivity bias in perceiving unacquainted others (Christensen & Kashy, 1998; but also see Tsai & Reis, 2009), other studies have shown lonely individuals demonstrate increased negativity to social stimuli (see J. T. Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2009, for a review). Vanhalst et al. (2015), for example, found that chronically lonely individuals, identified by their stable self-reported loneliness throughout a four-year assessment period, responded to positive social stimuli (i.e., hypothetical vignettes depicting social inclusion episodes) less enthusiastically than other groups of people. This effect is not restricted to the hypothetical situations. In Hawkley, Preacher, and Cacioppo's (2007) experience sampling study, lonely individuals perceived positive social interactions less favorably than non-lonely individuals. Moreover, Cacioppo, Norris, Decety, Monteleone, and Nusbaum (2009) showed that for lonely individuals, the ventral striatum (i.e., a key component of reward circuits in the brain) responded less actively to positive social stimuli than positive non-social stimuli, while the opposite pattern (i.e., positive social stimuli are more rewarding than positive non-social stimuli) was found for non-lonely individuals. If the documented hyposensitivity to positive social stimuli extends to commitment signals, the following alternative hypothesis can be derived:

**Hypothesis 1b.** *Loneliness is associated with a propensity to negatively adjust perceived bond strength in response to commitment signals.*

The first purpose of our studies is to test these two competing hypotheses. In addition, we explore whether the costliness of commitment signals (i.e., high-cost vs. low-cost) moderates the hypothesized relation between loneliness and reactions to commitment signals.

Loneliness has also been shown to affect reactions to negative stimuli. For example, studies have revealed that lonely individuals are more sensitive to social exclusion via hypothetical vignettes than non-lonely individuals (Vanhalst et al., 2015), and that loneliness predicts increased levels of negative affect after experiencing negative social interactions (Hawkley et al., 2007). Moreover, Chang and colleagues found that loneliness increases the effect of negative life events, such as being the victim of sexual assault, on suicide risk (Chang, Sanna, Hirsch, & Jeglic, 2010; Chang et al., 2015). Thus, as people perceive a partner's failure to produce a situationally appropriate commitment signal as a threat to the relationship (Yamaguchi et al., 2015), this effect may be exacerbated by loneliness.

**Hypothesis 2.** *Loneliness is associated with a propensity to negatively adjust perceived bond strength in response to an absence of commitment signals.*

The second purpose of this study is to test this hypothesis. Notably for Hypothesis 2, we do not make the distinction between high vs. low-cost commitment signals because it is impossible to determine the costliness of unperformed behaviors. For example, if your friend fails to acknowledge your birthday, this could be conceived as either a failure to deliver a birthday wish (low-cost) or a failure to buy you a birthday gift (high-cost), partly depending on your expectations and situationally appropriate norms.

To test Hypotheses 1a, 1b, and 2, we conducted two vignette studies and re-analyzed the data from a comparable vignette study (i.e., Yamaguchi et al.'s, 2015, Study 2). In all three studies, participants were asked to imagine hypothetical scenarios, each of which described a situation where their partner (either a friend or romantic partner) performed a high-cost pro-relationship act, performed a low-cost pro-relationship act, or failed to perform a pro-relationship act in a relevant situation. After reading each scenario, participants rated how much positive or negative influence each act would exert on their relationship. Study 1 was a preliminary study involving a relatively small Japanese undergraduate student sample. Study 2 was an online replication of Study 1 involving a large Japanese community sample. In Studies 1 and 2, the scenario type (high-cost commitment signal, low-cost commitment signal, or commitment signal failure) was manipulated as a within-participant factor. Study 3 extended Studies 1 and 2 in two main dimensions. It involved an American (i.e., cross-cultural) sample, which was a sample of Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) users, and manipulated the scenario type condition as a between, rather than within, -participants factor.

## 2. Study 1

### 2.1. Method

Participants were 78 undergraduates at two Japanese universities (49 females, 29 males;  $M_{age} = 19.35$  years,  $SD_{age} = 1.20$ ). Participants filled out a questionnaire in exchange for 500 Japanese yen (500 JPY  $\approx$  \$5). Study 1 employed a 2 (relationship type: friend or romantic partner)  $\times$  3 (signal: high-cost signal, low-cost signal, or signal failure) factorial design with relationship type as a between-participants factor and signal as a within-participant factor.

The first part of the questionnaire consisted of 15 hypothetical scenarios regarding commitment signals (five scenarios for the high-cost signal, low-cost signal, and signal failure conditions, respectively). Participants were asked to imagine that the events described in the

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