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**Starting Off on the Wrong Foot: An Analysis of Mate Value, Commitment and Partner  
“Baggage” in Romantic Relationships**

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Abstract

People sometimes enter relationships that involve pre-existing challenges, or relational “baggage.” Such negative characteristics potentially lower partner resource value and challenge the relationship. This study examined how baggage and mate value are associated with other relational communication features, e.g., commitment, attachment, acquaintance. Baggage was coded into 10 recognizable categories based on participants’ 300 descriptions of significant flaws or drawbacks they perceived in partners when they entered the relationship. Reports of partner baggage were inversely related to partner mate value and commitment, although women reported consistent levels of partner baggage across relationship types, men reported less baggage as relationships developed. Baggage reports were not related to level of loneliness, attachment style, or how well individuals knew their partners.

*Keywords* Partner Baggage, Loneliness, Attachment Styles, Mate Value

High quality relationships significantly influence our overall health and well being (Burman & Margolin, 1992; Manzoli, Villari, Pironec, & Boccia, 2007). Ultimately, romantic relationships can be among the most rewarding relational experiences people will have in their life (Aune & Comstock, 1991), however, some people may accept almost any person just to be in a relationship. Most people want partners who are highly resourced and offer substantial value to a relationship, e.g., physical attractiveness, social status, and financial resources (Buss, 1989, Pines, 2001). For some individuals circumstances such as loneliness, attachment style, or false perceptions, may lead to less than optimal relational choices. Lack of knowledge about a person, or feelings of romantic desperation may cause people to begin a relationship with a person who has “baggage”. Some partners bring negative “baggage” to a relationship, in the form of past relational experiences, unhealthy lifestyles, substance abuse, debt, or other costly qualities. The baggage concept entails negative attributes and situations which create obstacles to optimal relationship outcomes. Costly mates may undermine relationships. We are all flawed in some way, but it is important to consider what flaws lead others to perceive partners as costly and, in turn, harm relational communication. It is essential to the success of interpersonal relationships to understand what factors make choosing partners with debilitating features more likely and in turn, more ineffective. This study is a preliminary investigation of the partner baggage concept in the interpersonal context.

#### *Resources and Mate Value*

Attributes vary across mates but the common theme in mate selection is the focus on positive characteristics potential partners can offer to relationships. We focus on partner virtues, while minimizing negative features. Murray, Holmes, and Griffin (1996) suggested as individuals are caught up in the experience of love they may “embellish their partners’ virtues while... turning a blind eye to their faults” (p. 1155). However, such faults do exist, and put the relationship at risk. For example, about 44% of Americans owe thousands on credit cards ([www.federalreserve.gov](http://www.federalreserve.gov)), and money problems are one of the top ten reasons for relationship termination (Noller & Fitzpatrick 1990). People suffering from alcoholism are as likely as the rest of the adult population to be married, but are significantly more likely to become separated or divorced (Halford & Osgarby, 1993). Negative qualities may come in the form of aggression. The National Violence Against Women Survey revealed about 25% of women surveyed reported they had been raped or physically assaulted in romantic relationships at some point in their lifetime (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Approximately half of adolescents in relationships experience verbal and/or physical aggression as victim, perpetrator, or both, with abuse in early dating relationships increasing the likelihood of future relationship problems (O’Keefe & Treister, 1998). Indeed, one in five undergraduate students becomes involved in abusive relationships in college (Berkel, Furlong, Hickman, & Blue 2005). So clearly, relationships encounter significant costs, many of which are apparent at the outset.

People often analyze relationships in terms of their comparative rewards versus costs. Equity theory predicts individuals report highest relationship satisfaction when they believe the ratio of inputs to outputs are equal for both partners in the relationship (Hatfield, Traupmann, Sprecher, Utne, & Hay, 1985). Although some sources indicate that receiving more resource than giving to one’s partner is aversive, most studies find that being under-rewarded produces the most negative affect (e.g., VanYperen & Buunk, 1991). Individuals who feel under-benefited compared to their partner experience more distress than those believing their benefits are proportional to their resource inputs (Buunk & VanYperen, 1991; Deutsch, 1975; Sprecher, 1998). Inequity harms relationships. Dainton (2003) found under-benefitedness negatively

related to the use of relational maintenance communication. Similarly, inequity in the distribution of household tasks decreased relationship satisfaction and increased perceptions of unfairness among cohabiting couples (Aune & Le, 2005). It seems probable that high risk partners are less desirable.

When seeking partners, some resources are favored over others (Berg & McQuinn, 1986; Buss, 1989). Sprecher, Sullivan, and Hatfield (1994) surveyed 13,000 single adults aged 19 to 35 and found that physical attractiveness and youth are especially important to men, while women prefer mates who have economic potential. Moreover, Li, Bailey, Kenrick, and Linsenmeier (2002) analyzed necessities versus luxuries in mate selection. Their study allowed participants to “purchase” mate characteristics in order to address the question, “Which consumption item is most important to you?” Women wanted men at least average in social status, while men wanted women at least average on physical attractiveness. As “budgets” increased sex differences decreased, however, even when budgets were most constrained both sexes valued intelligence and kindness in mate attributes. Ultimately, the degree to which a person possesses qualities that are desired by others determines “mate value.”

Most research attention has focused on overall mate value in terms of the rewards or benefits individuals offer to relationships. Under normal circumstances people should seek out partners who offer the highest mate value. However, there may be times when simply having any partner, regardless of the person’s characteristics, is sufficient to enter a relationship. Perhaps not knowing someone well leads to selection of partners with low mate value. Instead of looking at “valuable” relationships, it is also useful to focus attention on the costly choices some people make when entering a relationship. Acknowledging potential factors (e.g. loneliness, attachment styles, and person awareness) that may lead people into relationships with costly mates could prevent people from making poor relationship choices. In terms of partner baggage, the following research questions are asked:

RQ1: What type of partner “baggage” will individuals bring to romantic relationships?

RQ2: Will report of baggage vary across romantic relationship types?

### *Loneliness*

Loneliness may contribute to poor relational choices in that it has strong ties to many negative conditions such as depression, drug and alcohol abuse, emptiness, and apathy (Cacioppo, Huges, Waite, Hawkley, & Thisted, 2006; Prager, 1995). Loneliness is not simply being alone; but is *unwilling* solitude. It is a common, unpleasant, and distressing experience (Henson, Dybvig-Pawelko, & Canary, 2004) that can be considered a social deficit (Henson et al., 2004) with no redeeming features (Cacioppo, et al., 2006). Jones, Freeman, and Goswick (1981) state some lonely people may not have the interpersonal skills to develop close relationships, and may be surrounded by friends and family, yet still feel lonely. Or they can be alone and not be lonely at all. Hence, loneliness is distinct from social isolation (Henson et al., 2004).

Lonely individuals may create a dysfunctional cycle which perpetuates feelings of loneliness. For example, some lonely individuals become discouraged, lose motivation to be involved in new situations, and isolate themselves. Even worse, chronically lonely individuals may stop trying to form close relationships because they view themselves as interpersonally incompetent (Gottlieb, 1985). In contrast, others deal with loneliness by entering relationships with people without evaluating consequences of their involvement. They may later find themselves in unsatisfying relationships (Prager, 1995). Thus we expect people who are lonely will tolerate more negative characteristics in potential partners.

H1: Lonely individuals will report lower levels of self and partner mate value and more baggage in their romantic relationships.

### *Attachment Styles*

Given previous research indicates that individuals with differing attachment styles communicate differently in relationships, attachment style may also lead to poor choices (Dainton, 2006). Attachment theory refers to behavior oriented toward attaining or retaining closeness with others who potentially offer a sense of security, and it traces adult behavior to childhood experiences (Bowlby, 1980). “An attachment style is manifest in social interaction and includes one’s own communication, and the way the person processes and interprets others’ behavior, and the way he or she reacts to the others’ behavior” (Guerrero, 1996, p. 269).

Hazan and Shaver (1987) identified three patterns of attachment: secure, avoidant, and anxious, finding: 56% of adults classified themselves as secure, 25% as avoidant, and 19% as anxious. Bartholomew (1990) extended attachment theory to include mental models of self and others. Individuals with positive self models perceive themselves as self-sufficient, secure, and lovable, while others with negative self models view themselves as dependent, insecure, and relationally unworthy (Guerrero, 1996). People with positive mental models of others perceive relationships as positive, worthwhile, and possess an approach orientation toward intimacy, while those with negative mental models view relationships as negative, unrewarding, and have avoidant intimacy orientations. Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) suggest attachment styles influence individuals’ specific notions of self-worth and trust. For example, securely attached people have positive views of themselves and high trust in others.

In romantic relationships, secure partners describe themselves as happy, friendly, and accepting of their significant others. They believe in real love that does not end when problems arise. However, avoidant individuals often fear and avoid intimacy, finding it hard to trust and depend on others; while anxious partners have more self doubts, feel misunderstood, view their romantic relationships entailed with obsession, jealousy, emotional and sexual extremes, and strongly desire reciprocation and union (Feeney & Noller, 1990; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Attachment style clearly influences communication in romantic relationships. Jang, Smith, and Levine (2002) found secure individuals reported they were more likely to communicate directly about an issue with their partners than anxious or avoidant individuals. Thus, predictions can be made based on attachment style, mate value, and partner baggage. Given secure individuals easily become close to others and avoidant individuals are uncomfortable becoming intimate in relationships we propose the following hypotheses:

H2a: Secure individuals will perceive themselves as having significantly higher self-report mate value than will avoidant or anxious individuals.

H2b: Secure individuals will perceive their partners as having significantly higher mate value than will avoidant or anxious individuals.

Secure individuals find it easy to get close to others, depend on others, and worry less about being abandoned or getting too intimate in relationships. Avoidant individuals, in comparison, are uncomfortable being close, finding it difficult to trust and depend on others. They may be uncomfortable if others become too intimate, and often prefer to be self-reliant. Anxious individuals, however, tend rush into relationships (Guerrero, 1996), believe others are reluctant to develop intimacy with them, and often worry about rejection and abandonment (Wei et al, 2005). Because anxious individuals want to merge completely with another, and this desire can scare people away (Hazan & Shaver, 1987), it is likely anxious individuals would be more willing to be in relationships with partners who have baggage. Hence, we predict:

- H3: Anxious individuals will perceive their partners as having significantly less partner baggage than will secure or avoidant individuals.

*Personal Acquaintance*

Personal acquaintance is the degree to which an individual knows another person and centers on verbal and nonverbal immediacy behaviors. The more involved individuals are with each other (e.g., communicating personal feelings) the more they will believe they know each other (Fiske, 1980; Starzyk, Holden, Fabrigar, and MacDonald, 2006). People attempt to gather information about one another even before they initiate communication. As Fiske (1980) notes people are constantly forming impressions and making evaluations of others, and people have a tendency to automatically evaluate anyone they encounter (Castelli, Zogmaister, Smith, & Arcuru, 2004). Instead of gaining complete insight into others, people rely on categorization, for example, to apply prior knowledge about certain types of people to the perception of new ones. Once a person is categorized into a given group, the person is “tagged” with the congruent evaluation (Castelli et al., 2004). Any later encounter with the person will automatically activate the affective tag. “Attributing stable traits to another person allows the perceiver to predict that future behavior will be much like the present” (Fiske, 1980, p. 889), which will serve to lower relational uncertainty.

Person perception offers a model on how people make social evaluations. Prior research indicates people place more emphasis on negatively valenced behaviors than positively valenced information. However, extremely positive information should also carry more weight as an individual forms impressions of another. Fiske (1980) claims “both extreme and negative attributes are held to be informative, since they distinguish people” (p. 892). Not all information retrieved from the perceiver has equal weight; and people attend to the most unusual cues which are highly informative. “Attention to negativity also is literally adaptive in the sense that one survives better by avoiding negative contacts” (Fiske, 1980, p. 904). Thus, individuals are likely to first avoid entering relationships with others who have a lot of “baggage” and the amount of baggage individuals come into the relationship with should correspond negatively with perception of their overall mate value. The following hypotheses are predicted:

- H4: Perception of partners’ level of baggage will negatively correlate with perception of partners’ mate value.
- H5: Higher levels of certainty about others will positively correlate with perception of partner mate value and commitment in romantic relationships, and negatively correlate with partner baggage.
- H6: Commitment to a romantic relationship will positively correlate with partners’ mate value and negatively correlate with perception of partners’ level of baggage.

*Perception of acquaintance.* “How well do we know someone?” is an important question to ask as we enter relationships. Starzyk et al. (2006) use the term personal acquaintance “to refer to the degree to which one person is familiar with or has knowledge about another person” (p. 833). How well we know others is not always a matter of relationship duration, it can also be based on real or perceived knowledge about others. Acquaintance may encompass dimensions of relationship duration, frequency of interaction, knowledge of goals, physical intimacy, self-disclosure, and social network familiarity (Starzyk et al., 2006). In addition, women scored higher than men on the total measure indicating women believe they know their partners very well. Doss and Christensen (2006) suggest obtaining information about the frequency and acceptability of partners’ behaviors offers insight about relationships. For example, a study of

newlywed couples revealed that a reduction in positive behaviors, but not the increase of negative ones, predicted divorce (Houston, Cauglin, Houts, Smith, & George, 2001).

Both mate value and personal acquaintance research have demonstrated sex differences. For example, when selecting mates, women often have a pragmatic approach while men have a more idealized approach (Li et al., 2002). Doss and Christensen (2006) found some sex differences in partner acceptance by relational type. Men were more accepting, overall, than women when they were married to, or cohabiting with, their partners. On the other hand, women, in dating relationships were more accepting than their male counterparts. Men, across relationship types, reported their partners were enacting more of both positive (e.g., closeness behaviors) and negative (e.g., demanding behaviors) relationship communication. Although baggage encompasses more than specific partner behaviors, negative personal characteristics or contextual obstacles could also contribute to relationship assessments. Therefore, the following research question is queried:

RQ3: Do men and women significantly differ in reports of baggage across relationship types?

### Method

#### *Participants and Procedure*

Participants were 203 undergraduate ( $n = 75$  males,  $n = 127$  females,  $n = 1$  no response) students enrolled in communication courses at a public university. The packet addressed students who were currently involved in some type of romantic relationship, ranging from casual dating (i.e. little or no commitment) to engagement/marriage (i.e. stabilized, long-term commitment). Limited demographic information was addressed, including sex, participant and partner's age, and length of relationship. The participants' mean age was 21.00 ( $SD = 1.65$ ) and their partners' mean age was 22.05 ( $SD = 3.95$ ). The mean length of long-term relationships was 23.65 months ( $SD = 19.53$ ) and the mean length of casual, short-term relationships was 7.68 weeks ( $SD = 5.60$ ). For relationship types, 12.2% of the participants were in casual dating relationship, 37.4% were in serious dating relationships, and 3.1% were married or engaged. The remainder of the packet included a self- and other-report of mate value, description of partner baggage, self-report of commitment, loneliness, attachment style, and personal acquaintance. Participants completed questionnaire packets in class and received minimal course credit.

#### *Measures*

*Partner baggage.* An open-ended question was used concerning partner baggage because of the exploratory effectiveness in gathering new information. This method allows for in-depth description of the current issues. First, the survey asked participants, who were in some type of romantic relationship, to report their partners' baggage level at the start of the relationship, by rating partner baggage on a scale from 0 (no baggage) to 10 (a lot of baggage). Then, they were asked to list and describe any "baggage" they believe their partners came into the relationship with, e.g., significant flaws the person has or possible drawbacks to being in a relationship with the partner.

*Mate value.* In order to determine mate value discrepancy, participants responded to a series of items reflecting their perceptions of their own mate value, as well as their partner's mate value. The original scale (Kugeares, 2002) was revised to produce both a self-report and an other-report version. On a 9-point, Likert-type scale, participants evaluated themselves (e.g., how physically attractive do you perceive yourself to be) and also evaluated their romantic partners (e.g., how would you rate this person's financial prospects). The mate value measure previously obtained a mean of 51.68 ( $SD = 7.56$ ,  $\alpha = .78$ ) for other-report, and a mean of 47.36 ( $SD = 9.12$ ,

$\alpha = .89$ ) for the self-report version (Sidelinger & Booth-Butterfield, 2007). For this study the mate value measure had a mean of 51.82 ( $SD = 6.60$ ,  $\alpha = .78$ ) for other-report, and a mean of 48.03 ( $SD = 6.87$ ,  $\alpha = .83$ ) for the self-report version.

*Loneliness.* The 10-item, Likert-type UCLA loneliness scale addressed loneliness (Russell, 1996). Participants assessed how they feel about the loneliness statements (e.g., how often do you feel unhappy doing so many things alone) ranging from “I often feel this way” to “I never feel this way.” All items were negatively valenced with higher scores indicating more loneliness. Scores between 15 and 20 are considered a normal experience of loneliness while scores above 30 indicate individuals have severe or chronic loneliness. Coefficient alpha for this scale has ranged from .89 to .94 (Russell, 1996). The mean for this study was 18.11 ( $SD = 6.49$ ,  $\alpha = .92$ ).

*Attachment styles.* Determination of attachment style followed Hazan and Shaver’s (1987) format, asking participants to read descriptions and indicate which one best characterized the way they think, feel, and behave in close relationships. The avoidant paragraph started with, “I am somewhat uncomfortable being close to others...”; the secure paragraph began, “I find it relatively easy to get close to others and am comfortable depending on them...”; and the anxious paragraph read, “I find that others are reluctant to get as close as I would like.” For this study 58.7% of the participants were secure, 25.7% were avoidant, and 13.5% were anxious.

*Personal acquaintance.* The Personal Acquaintance Measure (PAM) assessed how well the participants know their significant others (e.g., I know what \_\_\_’s goals are). The measure incorporates both verbal and nonverbal immediacy behaviors (e.g., \_\_\_ and I are physically affectionate, \_\_\_ often hides his/her true feelings from me). The original scale had 18 Likert-type items but due to IRB concerns one item concerning physical intimacy was omitted for this study. Participants were asked to assess their perceptions, on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 “strongly disagree” to 7 “strongly agree.” Higher scores indicate more knowledge about the other person. Coefficient alpha for the total PAM scale was .90 (Starzyk et al., 2004). The mean for the total scale for this study was 69.93 ( $SD = 9.53$ ,  $\alpha = .80$ ).

*Commitment.* On a 6-point, Likert-type scale, participants reported how committed they were in their relationships and how committed they perceived their partners to be to the relationship. Previous reliability for commitment was reported at .87 (Samp and Solomon, 2001). The mean for this study was 42.2 ( $SD = 7.01$ ,  $\alpha = .91$ ).

#### *Baggage Data Coding*

Several steps were undertaken to code open-ended responses describing types of relational baggage. The multi-stage framework was based on Bulmer’s guidelines (1979), and similar to analytic induction methods used by Baxter (1992) in developing categories of romantic play, and Vangelisti, Daly, and Rudnick (1991) in studying how people invoke guilt. Initially all responses were examined and non-repetitive units were transferred to index cards by four undergraduate research assistants. The authors then sorted cards into preliminary conceptual themes. Subsequently, the deck of cards was independently sorted by three first-year graduate students, and then by an interpersonal communication faculty member to identify conceptual overlap, gaps, or unique perspectives on the emerging themes. Finally, the authors examined all sorts and organized the final baggage category structure, with examples, for coding. The 10 categories consisted of: 1) Context/external circumstances, 2) Person related context, 3) Personality traits - general, 4) Personality traits – more extreme or severe, 5) Relationship goals, 6) Physical expectations, 7) Relational history, 8) Current social/familial network, 9) General incompatibility, and 10) Other. A code book was developed grouping descriptions under specific

partner baggage categories, and defining the most prominent features of the types of baggage (see Table 1 for complete descriptions).

Table 1

*Definition of Variables and Sample Items*

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Definition</i>	<i>Sample item</i>
Context – External	Physical or situational features external to relationship that impact the relational interaction.	Long distance
Context – Person-related	Features that are a part of the individual partner, but are physical aspects of them that are relatively non-volitional.	Disability, overweight
Personality 1	Characteristics of partner's internal predispositional set; "who they are" as an individual. These are within normal range of personalities.	Egotistical
Personality 2	Personality traits that are more extreme and definitely impact the relationship in a potentially negative way.	Verbally Aggressive
Relationship Goals	What type of relationship does the person desire, where they expect or want the relationship to go. Emotional underpinnings.	Nothing long term
Physical Expectations	Level of physical intimacy or affection desired.	No sex
Relationship History	Background against which the person gauges this relationship partner. Have they had bad experiences in the past which influence expectations or behavior in this relationship?	Was cheated on before

(Table 1 continued)

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Definition</i>	<i>Sample item</i>
Current social/ Familial network	People in <u>current network</u> that impact relationship via their opinions or behaviors, either supportive or non-supportive	No relationship with parents
General Incompatibility	Partners are “dissimilar” on characteristics that become important in the relationship. There is poor meshing or coordination of their lives.	Differing opinions
Other	Types of relational baggage that cannot be placed into any of the other categories.	A lot of problems

Next, the first author and a doctoral student coded participants' responses based on similarities of statements that reflected the category descriptions. The coders cross-coded 51% of the data set to assure reliability. Intercoder reliability of the data was assessed using Scott's pi, which reached an acceptable .87 (Scott, 1955). Afterward, they discussed the results to clarify and resolve any interpretative conflicts. The first author then coded the remaining data according to those guidelines and decision rules.

### Results

The first research question focused on identifying types of partner “baggage” individuals bring to romantic relationships. Participants were asked to describe types of negative characteristics their partners came into the relationship with, which would include any significant flaws they thought their partners had at the start of the relationship. They also rated their partners' level of baggage on a scale from 0 (no baggage) to 10 (a lot of baggage); 201 participants reported some level of partner baggage ( $M = 2.55$ ,  $SD = 2.43$ ). Of the total sample, 139 participants offered 300 descriptions (Figure 1) of partner baggage, which were categorized by theme (as explained above). Those descriptions were then coded into ten categories: past history (26.3%); personality/inherent qualities (20%); context/external (16.3%); social networks (15%); personality/volitional (5.6%); context/person-related (5%); general incompatibility (5%); relationship goals (4.3%); other (1.3%); and physical expectations (1%). The most frequently mentioned types of negative baggage involved background or past experiences, dimensions of the partner's personality (e.g., being selfish or impatient), and aspects of their current social context that impinge on the relationship (e.g., separation or unsavory friends).

The second research question dealt with ratings of baggage across romantic relationship types. The results of the oneway ANOVA indicated significant differences across three relationship types: casual dating ( $M = 3.36$ ,  $SD = 2.75$ ), serious dating ( $M = 2.36$ ,  $SD = 2.31$ ), and engaged or married ( $M = 1.54$ ,  $SD = 1.86$ ),  $F(2,198) = 4.08$ ,  $p < .05$ . People tend to report more partner baggage when the relationship is less involved. However, Bonferroni *post hoc* tests

revealed only individuals in casual dating and serious dating relationships reported significantly different amounts of partner baggage ( $p < .05$ ). Individuals in engaged or married relationships did not report significantly different amounts of baggage compared to casual ( $p = .075$ ) or serious dating relationships ( $p = .88$ ). The number in the engaged/married category ( $n = 12$ ) may be too small to reveal significant differences.

The first hypothesis predicted that loneliness would be negatively linked to self and partner mate value, but positively associated with perceived baggage. Correlations revealed a negative relationships between loneliness and partner mate value,  $r = -.21, p < .05$ , and own mate value,  $r = -.544, p < .001$ . However there was no relationship between loneliness and reports of partner baggage,  $r = .122, p = .088$ . When individuals feel lonely they are more likely to perceive themselves and their mates as having low value, but loneliness did not relate to partner baggage.<sup>1</sup>

Hypothesis 2a stated secure individuals would yield higher self-report mate value scores than avoidant or anxious individuals. A oneway ANOVA revealed significant mate value differences across attachment styles: secure ( $M = 50.58, SD = 5.27$ ), avoidant ( $M = 45.68, SD = 6.21$ ), and anxious ( $M = 41.21, SD = 8.44$ ),  $F(2, 198) = 60.09, p < .0001$ . The Bonferroni post hoc procedure indicated secure individuals differed ( $p < .0001$ ) from avoidant individuals ( $M = 4.89, SD = .73$ ) and anxious individuals ( $M = 9.36, SD = .93$ ), and avoidant individuals differed ( $p < .0001$ ) from anxious individuals ( $M = 4.47, SD = 1.03$ ). Results supported this hypothesis.

Hypothesis 2b indicated secure individuals would perceive their partners as having higher mate value than would avoidant or anxious individuals. Results did not support this hypothesis,  $F(2, 198) = 1.20, p = .310$ . One's attachment style did not influence perceptions of partner mate value.

The third hypothesis predicted anxious individuals would report more partner baggage than would secure or avoidant individuals. Results did not support this hypothesis,  $F(2, 196) = 1.08, p = .342$ . Even though there were no significant differences, anxious individuals reported more partner baggage ( $M = 3.13, SD = 2.41$ ) than did secure individuals ( $M = 2.39, SD = 2.43$ ) or avoidant individuals ( $M = 2.72, SD = 2.43$ ).

The fourth hypothesis stated perceptions of partners' baggage would negatively correlate with perception of partners' mate value. Results supported the hypothesis,  $r = -.254, p < .001$ . Thus, when people perceive their partners to have more baggage, they also perceive them as having lower mate value.

Hypothesis five predicted perceived acquaintance would positively correlate with perceived partner mate value and one's own commitment, and negatively relate to partner baggage. There was a significant relationship between perception of acquaintance and partner mate value,  $r = .414, p < .001$ , as well as between perception of acquaintance and commitment,  $r = .614, p < .001$ . However, there was no relationship between perception of acquaintance and partner baggage,  $r = -.103, p = .15$ . These findings indicate when individuals believe they know their partners well, they also perceive their partners to have higher mate value and endorse a stronger commitment to their romantic relationships.

The sixth hypothesis predicted that commitment would positively correlate with partners'

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<sup>1</sup> Given the positive relationship between commitment and self-report mate value, we also examined self-report mate value across relationship types. A oneway ANOVA revealed self-report mate value significantly differed across the three relationship types: casually dating ( $M = 45.91, SD = 6.87$ ), seriously dating ( $M = 50.76, SD = 5.49$ ), and engaged/married ( $M = 49.66, SD = 5.64$ ),  $F(2, 198) = 12.09, p < .0001$ . The Bonferroni post hoc procedure only indicated casual daters differed ( $p < .0001$ ) from serious daters ( $M = -4.84, SD = .98$ ), but did not differ ( $p = .147$ ) from engaged/married individuals ( $M = -3.75, SD = 1.89$ ), and serious daters did not differ ( $p = 1.0$ ) from engaged/married individuals ( $M = 1.09, SD = .175$ ).

mate value and negatively correlated to perception of partners' level of baggage, and this was confirmed. Commitment was negatively related to partner baggage,  $r = -.253$ ,  $p < .001$ , and positively to partner mate value,  $r = .63$ ,  $p < .001$ . Results suggest people are less committed in romantic relationships when they perceive their partners as having baggage, and are more committed with partners perceived as having high mate value.

The third research question investigated sex differences in reports of baggage across relationship types. A 2 X 3 factorial design analyzed sex differences in baggage reporting across casual dating, serious dating, and engaged/married relationships. The main effect for sex was not significant,  $F(1, 194) = .004$ ,  $p = .953$ , but the main effect for relationship types was,  $F(2, 194) = 7.03$ ,  $p < .001$ , as was the interaction of sex and relationship type,  $F(2, 194) = 7.31$ ,  $p < .001$ . Overall, men and women did not differ in reporting partner baggage (female  $M = 2.51$  [ $SD = 2.43$ ]; male  $M = 2.66$  [ $SD = 2.64$ ]). However, the interaction of sex and relationship type revealed women were consistent in reporting baggage across relationship types: casual dating ( $M = 2.45$ ,  $SD = 2.30$ ), serious dating ( $M = 2.54$ ,  $SD = 2.38$ ), and engaged/married ( $M = 2.30$ ,  $SD = 1.98$ ). Men, on the other hand, reported different levels of partner baggage across relationship types: casual dating ( $M = 4.83$ ,  $SD = 2.85$ ), serious dating ( $M = 2.10$ ,  $SD = 2.18$ ), and engaged/married ( $M = .25$ ,  $SD = .5$ ). Overall, sexes were similar in reporting baggage in serious dating relationships, but men reported more partner baggage than women in casual dating relationships, and women reported more partner baggage in engaged/married relationships.<sup>2</sup>

#### Discussion

People sometimes enter into romantic relationships that entail pre-existing challenges, or relational "baggage". This study explored this phenomenon in an attempt to understand perceptions of such negative qualities, associations with perceived mate value, and how other interpersonal factors such as loneliness may affect individuals in initiating relationships with problematic partners. This is not a rare occurrence. Nearly 69% of sample described relational baggage in partners. Of the ten emergent baggage categories, based on descriptions, the three most commonly mentioned were past history (e.g., bad relationship record), personality (e.g., needy), and external context (e.g., long distance relationship). This study examined partner baggage among young adults, who for the most part, are in the early stages of relational development. Perceptions of partner baggage may change in more salient relationships. However, the overall aim of this study was to examine the baggage individuals bring into relationships. However, future research should consider how individuals communicate or reveal their in relationships. The time of discovery may negatively impact relationships, more so, than the actual baggage type.

The phenomenon of having relationships with "baggage" was not attributable to simply turning a blind eye to problems. When participants did recognize partner baggage, they also perceived their partners to have *lower* mate value. People may hold biased perceptions of their partners, creating a dissonance-like situation where the relationship with the problematic partner becomes even more important (Norton, Monin, Cooper, & Hogg, 2003). However, commitment was inversely related with partner baggage. There was a tendency for individuals to report more

<sup>2</sup> Given the positive relationship between commitment and self-report mate value, we also examined self-report mate value across relationship types. A oneway ANOVA revealed self-report mate value significantly differed across the three relationship types: casually dating ( $M = 45.91$ ,  $SD = 6.87$ ), seriously dating ( $M = 50.76$ ,  $SD = 5.49$ ), and engaged/married ( $M = 49.66$ ,  $SD = 5.64$ ),  $F(2, 198) = 12.09$ ,  $p < .0001$ . The Bonferroni post hoc procedure only indicated casual daters differed ( $p < .0001$ ) from serious daters ( $M = -4.84$ ,  $SD = .98$ ), but did not differ ( $p = .147$ ) from engaged/married individuals ( $M = -3.75$ ,  $SD = 1.89$ ), and serious daters did not differ ( $p = 1.0$ ) from engaged/married individuals ( $M = 1.09$ ,  $SD = .175$ ).

partner baggage in the less committed relationships. This outcome may have two possible explanations. First, it is likely some individuals terminate relationships with partners who have baggage. Second, as a relationship progresses and becomes more intimate, individuals may become more accepting of the baggage. Future research should longitudinally explore existing biases individuals have regarding their partners, i.e., some people may be looking for reasons to be less committed to relationships, and as a result perceive partners as being flawed.

Males and females were very similar in recounting partner baggage ( $M = 2.66$  vs.  $2.51$  respectively). However, sex-differences did emerge across relationship types in that women reported similar levels of partner baggage consistently across relationship types, while men reported the most partner baggage in casual relationships and the least in engaged or married relationships. It may be that women recognize (and accept) negative characteristics in their partners regardless of relationship level, while men, over time, view their partners as having less baggage as the relationship deepens, or, men simply terminate problematic relationships early on. We did not find male-female differences in other areas, such as overall mate value or perception of acquaintance. Thus, these data do not support an evolutionary perspective in which women should have more cautious and conservative valuations of their male partners (e.g., Buss & Barnes, 1986; Buss & Schmitt, 1993).

Relational types, or stages, were generally stronger predictors than were attachment style, commitment, etc. For example, the type of relationship predicted male-female differences in reported baggage. In comparison, the individual (vs. relational) construct of loneliness was more strongly associated with the more psychological, emotion-based concept of attachment style<sup>1</sup>.

Perceptions of one's own mate value were predictably related to attachment style with secure individuals rating significantly higher mate value than avoidant or anxious ( $M = 50.58$ ,  $45.68$ , and  $41.21$ , respectively). Similarly, people in more serious, committed relationships tended to rate themselves higher, with serious dating being the greatest<sup>2</sup>. Thus we can see a beneficial link between having a committed relationship and positivity about one's self.

Finally, the question posed early in the study was, "How desperate are people to be in relationships?" If loneliness drives us, do we tolerate more baggage? We found no link between loneliness and reports of partner baggage, although when individuals felt lonely they were more likely to perceive themselves and their mates to have lower value. Nevertheless, future research could address how personal biases toward partners may influence reports. A positive next step would include interviews to explore how partners' view baggage and their acceptance of it, as well as further analysis of the impact of various categories of relational baggage.

### *Conclusions*

In the arena of professional sports the concept of "baggage" is often mentioned, as in when Terrell Owens or Ron Artest come to a team "with baggage". Similarly, actors and other celebrities may be noted for the recognizable negative attributes they bring with them to a job, whether such negative baggage is in the form of emotional, criminal, or substance abuse problems. High profile examples may also offer highly valued rewards, forcing organizations to ponder costs and benefits of talent with "baggage." As this study indicates, the concept of baggage, or pre-existing negative mate qualities, may be less overt in interpersonal relationships, but still have impact. Future research should consider uncertainty reduction in relation to partner baggage and consider how individuals discover their partners' baggage. Under-benefited individuals are likely to view themselves at disadvantage in relationships and also likely to report being less certain about the future of the relationships (Dainton, 2003). She indicates a high level of distress due to inequity may cause a person to question the nature of the relationship.

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Individuals may use a variety of communicative strategies in order to uncover what type of baggage their partners may have as they move forward in close relationships. Moreover, we must consider the communicative impact of baggage from the perspective of the partner with baggage, the amount or type of baggage may deter individuals from self-disclosing this negative information to relational partners. Overall, baggage as an interpersonal construct may affect how individuals communicate with one another in romantic relationships.

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