



Articles

Who Does the Work? Partner Perceptions of the Initiation and Maintenance of Romantic Relationships

Susan Sprecher^{*a}, Pamela Regan^b, Terri Orbuch^c

[a] Illinois State University, Normal, IL, USA. [b] California State University-Los Angeles, Los Angeles, CA, USA. [c] Oakland University, Rochester, MI, USA.

Abstract

The contributions and effort that partners perceive each other to have made to the initiation and maintenance of their relationship may have significant individual and interpersonal consequences. Yet relatively little empirical research has explored such perceptions. The primary goal of the present investigation was to examine how both members of a sample of heterosexual romantic couples (N = 96 couples) perceived the balance of work in regard to both the initiation and the maintenance of their relationship. A second goal was to examine gender differences and similarities in perceptions of relationship work. A third goal was to explore relational outcomes (i.e., satisfaction and commitment) associated with these perceptions, and whether the link between perceptions and relationship outcomes differs as a function of partner gender. As expected, most participants (approximately 70%) perceived balance (equal sharing) in the work of maintaining the relationship. However, a majority (approximately 64%) perceived the work of relationship initiation as imbalanced (i.e., one partner contributing more than the other). Perceptions of balance versus imbalance in the work of relationship maintenance (but not initiation) were associated with satisfaction and commitment to the relationship. Interestingly, the pattern of association was different for men and women. The findings are discussed in terms of equity theory, as well as other theoretical frameworks.

Keywords: relationship initiation, relationship maintenance, balance of work, equity, gender differences

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*Corresponding author at: Department of Sociology & Anthropology, Illinois State University, Normal, IL 61790, USA. E-mail: sprecher@ilstu.edu



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It is a commonly held maxim that it takes two people to make a relationship work. Relationship scholars agree (see Berscheid & Regan, 2005). Although it is possible (and actually quite common) for one person to become romantically attracted to another who does not reciprocate those feelings (or who is unaware that such feelings exist; see Baumeister, Wotman, & Stillwell, 1993), a “relationship” by definition requires some degree of mutual effort and investment from both partners over the lifespan of their union (Kelley et al., 1983). Specifically, assuming an interactional environment in which individuals are free to select potential dates or mates, both partners likely need to feel sufficient levels of attraction to initiate romantic interactions and both likely need to find their early interactions sufficiently pleasant or fulfilling to maintain their association. In addition, both partners are likely to contribute to and manage the progression of the relationship as it becomes characterized by greater commitment, and – once the relationship is established – both are likely to work to maintain the stability and satisfaction of their association over time (Hatfield & Rapson, 2012; Sprecher & Schwartz, 1994).

Although mutual effort and investment in relationships may be essential for relationships to develop and progress, the work of the relationship may, nonetheless, not always be equally shared. As is true of other areas of work in romantic relationships that generally require contributions by both members (e.g., division of household labor, childcare), the work of relationship initiation and maintenance may sometimes be done more by one partner than the other. Moreover, close relationship partners may fall prey to various attentional, perceptual, attributional, and other cognitive biases that make it difficult for them to agree about the balance of work in the initiation and maintenance of their relationship. These global perceptions about the distribution of the work of relationship initiation and maintenance can become part of couples' narratives or stories of their relationship (e.g., [Custer, Holmberg, Blair, & Orbuch, 2008](#)) and influence how they feel about each other and their union. No prior study, however, has considered the perceptions of both members of couples in regard to the work of both the initiation stage and the maintenance stage and whether these perceptions are associated with relational outcomes. Indeed, researchers have generally neglected the study of perceptions of relationship initiation work, despite widespread recognition of the importance of the initiation phase for later relational outcomes (see [Berscheid & Regan, 2005](#); [Clark, Shaver, & Abrahams, 1999](#)).

The goals of this investigation were to examine: (1) relationship members' perceptions of the balance of work at both the initiation and the maintenance stages of their relationship; (2) whether one gender in heterosexual, romantic relationships is perceived as doing more of the work of relationship initiation and relationship maintenance; and (3) relational outcomes (e.g., satisfaction) associated with the perceptions of balance versus imbalance in the work of relationship initiation and maintenance.

Perceived (Im)Balance of Relationship Work

The first issue we examine is the degree to which partners view the work of relationship initiation and maintenance as balanced (i.e., shared equally) versus imbalanced. Because mutuality, egalitarianism, and equity constitute common ideals that most people value and strive to achieve in their close romantic relationships (e.g., [Canary & Stafford, 1992](#); [Dainton & Stafford, 1993](#); [Haas & Stafford, 1998](#)), we hypothesize that our participants will be more likely to perceive balanced than imbalanced sharing of relationship work, at both the initiation stage (*H1a*) and the maintenance stage (*H1b*). However, we recognize that there are many reasons that the workload of the relationship, particularly at initiation, could be perceived as imbalanced with one partner viewed as doing more work than the other. For example, one partner may have been more instrumental in moving the relationship from casual dating to exclusive and serious dating due to greater initial attraction, lesser fear of rejection, and various personality attributes (e.g., attachment security, extraversion) associated with a willingness to make romantic overtures ([Bredow, Cate, & Huston, 2008](#)).

Once a relationship is initiated, however, it may be difficult for it to continue unless both partners are perceived as contributing approximately equally to its care and maintenance. Therefore, we expect to find greater reported balance in the work of the current, maintenance stage than of the initiation stage (*H2*). We also explore whether (im)balance in the work of the initiation stage is associated with (im)balance in the work of the maintenance stage; i.e., is the partner who is viewed as doing more work at one stage likely to be viewed as doing more work at the other stage? (*RQ1*).

Gender and Perceived (Im)Balance

When relationship partners perceive the work in their relationship as imbalanced, is one gender more likely to be perceived as doing more of the work? Gender differences in relationship experiences and outcomes have long

been of interest to relationship scholars (e.g., [Canary, Emmers-Sommer, & Faulkner, 1997](#); [Impett & Peplau, 2006](#)). Although it is generally agreed that the interpersonal events, experiences, and outcomes of men and women are very similar, they nonetheless are far from identical ([Vangelisti & Daly, 1997](#)). In particular, consistent gender differences have been found that have implications for how the balance of work in the relationship is likely to be perceived.

For example, prior research has revealed that men are more likely than women to report engaging in various direct relationship initiation activities, including asking for a date, paying for the first date(s), making initial sexual overtures, and saying the first “I love you” ([Ackerman, Griskevicius, & Li, 2011](#); [Bredow et al., 2008](#); [Clark et al., 1999](#); [Custer et al., 2008](#)). Conversely, women are more likely to engage in indirect strategies of relationship initiation (e.g., nonverbal cues of interest) (e.g., [Clark et al., 1999](#)). Consistent with these findings, cultural scripts for dating have historically, in most societies, granted men a larger role in relationship initiation than women ([Ömür & Büyükşahin-Sunal, 2015](#); [Eaton & Rose, 2011, 2012](#); [Rose & Frieze, 1993](#)). Those same scripts have emphasized women’s (relative to men’s) role in relationship maintenance and, in fact, research finds that women are more likely than men to engage in such maintenance behaviors as spending time thinking about the relationship, providing social support, and conducting relationship talk ([Cross & Madson, 1997](#); [Dainton & Stafford, 1993](#)). Although gender differences have been found in specific behaviors involved in initiating and maintaining relationships, a very different research question is whether it is the male partner or the female partner who is more likely to be identified as working harder at the initiation and maintenance of relationships, when the assessments are made holistically.

Only one study to date has specifically explored partners’ global perceptions of relationship work, and that study focused exclusively on relationship initiation. Using a methodology similar to that used in the present study, [Guynn, Brooks, and Sprecher \(2008\)](#) asked a sample of 455 college students involved in romantic relationships and a separate sample of 75 male-female dating couples to report who did the work of the initiation of their relationship. Among the findings were that perceived imbalance with respect to the work of relationship initiation was common, that women were more likely than men to perceive their partners as having done more work than they did themselves, and that overall there were no gender differences in perceptions of who did more work. This prior investigation, however, did not also explore perceptions of the work of the current, maintenance stage of the relationship.

Therefore, an interesting empirical question is: when relationship work is perceived to be imbalanced (at the initiation and maintenance stages), which gender is perceived to be doing more of the work? We hypothesize that male partners will be more likely than female partners to be perceived as doing the work of relationship initiation (*H3*), but that female partners will be more likely than male partners to be perceived as doing the work of relationship maintenance (*H4*).

Satisfaction, Commitment and Perceived (Im)Balance

The third issue we examine is how the perceived balance of the work of relationship initiation and maintenance is associated with relationship satisfaction and commitment. Our correlational study cannot address causality, but we speculate that satisfaction and commitment can be both a consequence of perceiving balance in the relationship and can contribute to the perception of balanced work. In both cases, we would expect positive associations. For example, equity theory (e.g., [Hatfield & Rapson, 2012](#)) suggests that partners pay attention to the contributions they make to, and benefits they receive from, their relationship. According to this perspective, partners are most likely to experience positive interpersonal outcomes (e.g., satisfaction and commitment) when their relationship is characterized by equity – that is, when partners perceive themselves as contributing mutually and equally to

the relationship (Bodi, Mikula, & Riederer, 2010; Guerrero, La Valley, & Farinelli, 2008; Kuijer, Buunk, Ybema, & Wobbles, 2002). An alternative causal direction is also possible (e.g., Grote & Clark, 2001), however. That is, people who experience high levels of satisfaction and commitment in their relationship may notice and give credit for their partner's contributions and, consequently, perceive balance in the work of the relationship. Irrespective of the nature of the causal connection between perceptions of the balance of relationship work and relationship outcomes, we predict that partners who perceive balance in the work of their relationship will report higher levels of satisfaction and commitment than partners who perceive imbalance (*H5*).

An interesting follow-up question, however, is which type of imbalance – the perception of doing more work or the perception of doing less work than one's partner – is associated with greater relationship satisfaction and commitment (*RQ2*). There are theoretical reasons to predict a positive association between either type of imbalance and relationship outcomes. For example, partners who believe that they did more of the work of relationship initiation may come to feel especially committed to their relationship, as would be predicted by a cognitive dissonance framework on justifying effort (e.g., Aronson & Mills, 1959). Similarly, people who conclude that they are doing more work currently to maintain their relationship may, through the lens of self-perception processes (Bem, 1967), infer an internal state of high satisfaction and commitment in their relationship based on the self-observation of their hard work (a behavior). On the other hand, satisfaction and commitment could be experienced as a consequence of perceiving that one's partner is working harder than oneself, perhaps as a reflection of gratitude to the partner. An equity theory perspective (e.g., Hatfield & Rapson, 2012) would also suggest that perceiving the partner as working harder than the self would be associated with more positive feelings in the relationship than perceiving the self as working harder than the partner. Past research has shown that being the advantaged partner in the relationship (i.e., making fewer contributions and/or receiving more benefits relative to the partner) is associated with more positive outcomes than being the disadvantaged partner (see Guerrero et al., 2008; Kamo, 1993).

In the only other study, to our knowledge, that has examined this issue, Guynn et al. (2008) found that those who reported balance in the work of relationship initiation scored higher on single-item measures of satisfaction and commitment than those who reported imbalance in the work of relationship initiation (recall, however, that their study did not examine perceptions of the work of relationship maintenance).

In sum, the purposes of this study were to examine how romantic partners perceive the balance of work in the initiation stage and the maintenance stage of their relationships, whether gender is associated with these perceptions, and how perceptions of who does the work are associated with relationship satisfaction and commitment.

Method

Overview

The data set (a convenience sample) utilized in the present investigation was collected for multiple purposes at a large university located in the Midwestern United States (data examining a different issue were published in Sprecher, 2013). The sample for the analysis consisted of 96 heterosexual romantic couples (192 participants), after eliminating one couple who was an outlier on age and four couples who were lesbian. The mean age of the participants was 22.62 years ($SD = 4.10$ years; range was 19 to 48). A majority of the participants (67%) were in a seriously dating relationship. Eight percent were in a casual dating relationship, 9% were in a cohabiting relationship, 7% were engaged, and 7% were married. (In some couples, the partners did not agree on the stage of

their relationship. The most common discrepancy was that one partner said seriously dating and the other said cohabiting. When there was a discrepancy, we assigned the couples the more advanced relationship stage of the two responses).

Procedure

Couples were recruited through announcements made in classes and signs placed around campus. A time was scheduled for couples to come to a university building to complete a survey. The partners were separated in a large classroom, where each partner completed a survey. Typically, several couples arrived at the same time to complete the survey.

Measures

Perceived Balance of Work in the Relationship

Early in the survey, participants were asked, "Who would you say worked harder to initiate the relationship?" A 7-point response scale followed that included the anchors: 1 = *I did much more than my partner*; 4 = *equal*; and 7 = *My partner did much more than me*. Later in the survey, participants were asked, "Who would you say is working harder to maintain the relationship?" This item was followed by a similar 7-point response scale except that the anchors were in present tense (e.g., *I am much more than my partner*). It was decided not to further define *work* for the participants in order not to constrain what they would consider as actions that were instrumental in each of the relationship stages. Furthermore, we believe that the balance of work of relationship initiation and maintenance is a construct that is appropriate to measure with a single global item; and, in fact, a single item can have advantages when the question has high face validity (e.g., [Gardner, Cummings, Dunham, & Pierce, 1998](#)).

Because the mid-point of the response options for each item was equal or balanced work with both low and high scores indicating imbalance, for some of the analyses we recoded participants' responses into three categories: (1) self did more work (a response of 1, 2, or 3 on the 7-point scale); (2) work was shared equally (the response of 4); and (3) partner did more work (a response of 5, 6, or 7).

Relationship Satisfaction

Participants completed the [Hendrick \(1988\)](#) 7-item Relationship Assessment Scale, a general measure of relationship satisfaction. Sample items included, "How good is your relationship compared to most?" and "In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?" Although the specific anchors varied across items, higher scores indicated greater satisfaction. Cronbach's alpha was .86.

Relationship Commitment

Participants completed the [Rusbult, Martz, and Agnew \(1998\)](#) 7-item Commitment Scale. Sample items included, "How much do you want your relationship to last a very long time?" and "How likely is it that you would date someone other than your partner within the next year?" (reverse scored). Each item was followed by a 7-point response scale anchored by 1 = *not at all* and 7 = *very much*. Cronbach's alpha was .94.

Results

Perceived (Im)Balance

Figure 1 presents the percentages of participants who reported that they (the self) did more work, that work was equally shared, or that the partner did more work, respectively, at both the initiation stage and the maintenance stage. We had predicted that more participants would perceive balance (mutual sharing) than would perceive imbalance in regard to the work of both relationship initiation and relationship maintenance. Only one of these hypotheses was supported. Contrary to *H1a*, a greater percentage of participants perceived that one partner did more of the work of relationship initiation (64.2%) than said the work was balanced or mutually shared (35.8%), $X^2(1) = 15.35, p < .001$. However, support was found for *H1b*; specifically, a greater percentage of participants reported that the work of relationship maintenance was balanced (shared equally between partners; 67.7%) than said the work was imbalanced (not shared equally; 32.3%), $X^2(1) = 24.08, p < .001$. Moreover, in support of *H2*, a significantly greater proportion of participants perceived balance (mutual sharing of work) in the current maintenance stage than in the earlier initiation stage (67.7% vs. 35.8%, $z = 4.21, p < .001$).

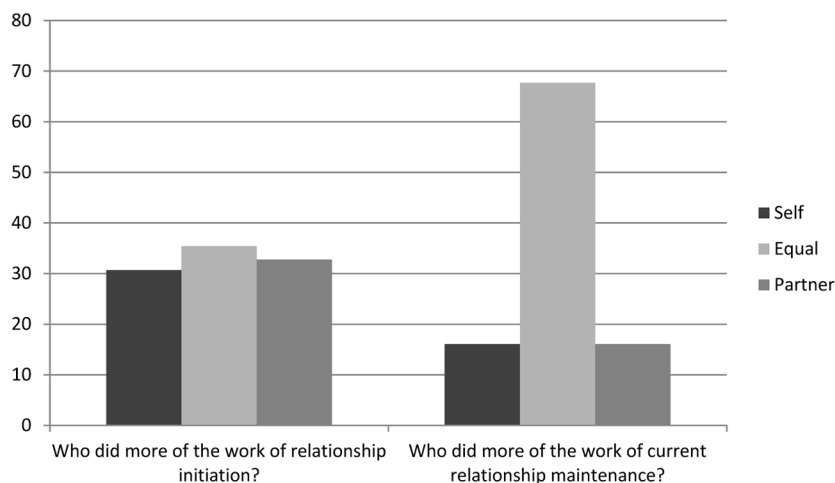


Figure 1. Percentage distributions of who did more of the work of relationship initiation and maintenance.

We also examined the association between responses to the two work questions to see whether those who reported imbalance at the initiation stage were also more likely to report imbalance at the maintenance stage (*RQ1*). Responses to the two original 7-point scale items were not significantly correlated for the total sample ($r(190) = -.05, p \text{ ns}$); similar analyses conducted for male and female partners separately also revealed non-significant correlations ($r(95) = -.10$ for men and $r(95) = .00$ for women, both $p \text{ ns}$). Moreover, Chi-square tests conducted on the three recoded response categories (self did more work, partner did more work, partners shared work equally) indicated no significant association between the initiation and maintenance workload items for the total sample ($X^2(4) = 7.69, p \text{ ns}$), or for men and women separately ($p \text{ ns}$). In sum, perceptions of the work balance at the initiation stage were independent of perceptions of the work balance in the maintenance stage.

Gender Effects

Next, we examined whether there were differences in the degree to which the male partner versus the female partner was perceived as doing more of the work of relationship initiation and maintenance. In regard to relationship

initiation, slightly more of both men (31.6%) and women (38.9%) perceived the male partner as having worked harder than perceived the female partner as having worked harder (27.4% of men, 30.5% of women). However, a series of z-tests for proportions failed to yield any significant differences; therefore, no support was found for *H3* (see [Table 1](#)).

Table 1

Male and Female Partners' Perceptions of the Balance of Work in Their Romantic Relationship (Percentage Reporting Each Perception)

Perception Type	Male Partner Did More Work	Partners Shared Work Equally	Female Partner Did More Work
Relationship Initiation			
Male partners' perceptions	31.6%	41.1%	27.4%
Female partners' perceptions	38.9%	30.5%	30.5%
Relationship Maintenance			
Male partners' perceptions	17.7%	63.5%	18.8%
Female partners' perceptions	13.5%	71.9%	14.6%

Note. Percentages within rows may not sum to 100.00% due to rounding errors.

In addition, no support was found for *H4*; the relationship partners did not view the female partner as having contributed more of the work of relationship maintenance than the male partner (see [Table 1](#)). The majority of our male (63.5%) and female (71.9%) participants perceived the work of relationship maintenance as being shared equally between themselves and their partners; of those who perceived imbalance, approximately the same percentage viewed the male partner as doing more work as viewed the female partner as doing more work (17.7% vs. 18.8% for male participants; and 13.5% vs. 14.6% for female participants).

An additional analysis determined that the partners agreed about their assessments of who did more work in the relationship. To examine this, we first recoded the items to refer to the same person (the male) as doing more of the work, and then correlated these recoded items between the partners. The correlations between the partners' scores on the two work items, recoded so that the higher number indicated that the male was described as doing more work, were positive and strong, both at the initiation stage ($r(95) = .61, p < .001$) and at the maintenance stage ($r(96) = .57, p < .001$).

Satisfaction and Commitment

We now turn to our second research question, which is whether those who perceived balance in the work of their relationship reported more satisfaction and commitment than those who perceived imbalance (*H5*), and, second, whether – among those who perceived imbalance – the perception of the self or the perception of the partner as doing more work was differentially associated with satisfaction and commitment (*RQ2*). To address these issues, we utilized univariate analyses of variance (ANOVAs) with Bonferroni-protected follow-up comparisons on the outcome measures, with work perception (self did more work, partner did more work, work was shared equally) serving as the grouping variable. We conducted these analyses separately for male and female partners because of potential nonindependence in the partners' data. The results are presented in [Table 2](#).

Table 2

Satisfaction and Commitment (Means and Standard Deviations) as a Function of Perception of Balance of Work in the Relationship

Perception Type	Self Worked More	Both Worked Equally	Partner Worked More	F
Work of Relationship Initiation				
Male Partners	(n = 30)	(n = 39)	(n = 26)	
Satisfaction	6.08 (0.84)	5.93 (1.15)	6.04 (0.55)	0.23
Commitment	6.13 (1.36)	6.16 (1.42)	6.31 (0.64)	0.17
Female Partners	(n = 29)	(n = 29)	(n = 37)	
Satisfaction	6.18 (0.63)	6.17 (1.00)	6.01 (0.89)	0.42
Commitment	6.43 (0.66)	6.41 (1.02)	6.40 (0.97)	1.00
Work of Relationship Maintenance				
Male Partners	(n = 17)	(n = 61)	(n = 18)	
Satisfaction	5.99 (0.61) _a	6.26 (0.64) _b	5.16 (1.35) _{ab}	12.81**
Commitment	6.50 (0.60) _a	6.55 (0.61) _b	4.72 (1.96) _{ab}	24.23**
Female Partners	(n = 14)	(n = 69)	(n = 13)	
Satisfaction	5.13 (1.32) _{ab}	6.36 (0.47) _{a+}	5.87 (1.00) _{b+}	17.13**
Commitment	5.98 (1.25) ₊	6.56 (0.63) ₊	6.00 (1.38)	4.13*

Note. Shared subscripted letters within each row indicate Bonferroni comparisons that are significant at $p < .05$; + indicates a near-significant difference ($p < .10$). Two participants (1 male and 1 female) were missing responses to the question about who worked harder at the initiation of the relationship.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .001$.

The first thing to note in Table 2 is that perceived balance of work for relationship initiation was not associated with current satisfaction or commitment. That is, the ANOVAs revealed no differences in current satisfaction and commitment for either male partners or female partners as a function of whether they perceived the self as doing more of the initiation work, the partner doing more, or the initiation work as having been shared equally (all ps ns).

Significant differences were found, however, in satisfaction and commitment as a function of the perceived balance of work of relationship maintenance. Interestingly, the pattern of results differed for men and women. Among men, those who perceived equal sharing of the work of relationship maintenance reported significantly greater satisfaction and commitment than those who perceived the partner as having worked more (both $ps < .001$). Furthermore, men who reported that they themselves worked harder reported significantly greater satisfaction and commitment than men who reported that their partner worked harder (both $ps < .05$). Thus, among men, those who perceived that their partners worked harder reported the least satisfaction and commitment.

A different pattern was found for women. Unlike men, women who viewed their partner as working harder to maintain the relationship reported significantly more satisfaction than those who reported they themselves worked harder ($p < .05$). In addition, women who perceived an equal balance of work reported significantly greater satisfaction than those who viewed themselves as having worked harder than their partner ($p < .001$). Thus, among women, those who perceived that they worked harder than their partners reported the least satisfaction. Finally, among women, there were no significant differences in commitment between any two of the three groups, although there was a non-significant ($p < .10$) trend for women who reported equal work in relationship maintenance to have higher commitment scores than those who said they worked harder.

Discussion

Although research on relationship endings has established that ex-partners often report that the dissolution phase is non-mutual, with one partner doing more of the work than the other (e.g., [Attridge, Berscheid, & Simpson, 1995](#); [Sprecher, 1994](#)), much less is known about how couples perceive the balance of work at the *initiation* and *maintenance* stages.

Perceived (Im)Balance and Effects of Gender

Because most people value equality and strive for mutuality in their close relationships (e.g., [Canary & Stafford, 1992](#)), we expected that our participants would overwhelmingly perceive balance – that is, an equal sharing of work between themselves and their partner. However, this hypothesis was only partially supported. As predicted, the large majority of our participants (almost 70%) reported that they shared equally with their partners in the work of *maintaining* the relationship. This result is in accord with earlier research that has explored the process of relationship intensification, or the ways in which individuals work to move their relationship further along a developmental trajectory to increased commitment. That small but reliable body of work reveals that both men and women often actively and mutually engage in a variety of tactics to promote and intensify, and possibly to maintain, their romantic relationships ([Clark et al., 1999](#); [Tolhuizen, 1989](#)). Although we had speculated that when members perceive imbalance in the work of relationship maintenance they would be more likely to view the female partner than the male partner as working harder, no support was found for this supposition. Thus, although some prior research suggests that women engage in *specific* relationship maintenance behaviors to a greater degree than do men (e.g., [Dainton & Stafford, 1993](#)), our results suggest that when partners consider the work of relationship maintenance in its entirety (holistically, rather than as a series of discrete behaviors), both partners (male and female) perceive mutuality or balance.

The work of relationship *initiation*, however, was not perceived as balanced by our participants. Contrary to our expectation, the majority (almost two-thirds) of the participants reported that one person worked harder than the other at this phase of relationship development. We had speculated that – when there was perceived imbalance – men would be perceived as doing more of the initiation work than women; however, this hypothesis was not supported. Roughly equal proportions of the participants said that the female partner did more initiation work as said that the male partner did more initiation work. This result is interesting when considered in light of prior research on heterosexual dating, which consistently reveals that men report a greater willingness to make direct romantic overtures and a higher frequency of actual (overt) relationship initiations than women ([Clark et al., 1999](#); [Eaton & Rose, 2011, 2012](#); [Green & Sandos, 1983](#); [Holmberg, Orbuch, & Veroff, 2004](#); [McNamara & Grossman, 1991](#); [Spreadbury, 1982](#)). However, prior research also indicates that women tend to employ indirect strategies when attempting to communicate romantic interest and initiate a romantic relationship (e.g., [Clark et al., 1999](#)). We propose, and our results suggest, that in their global assessments of the relationship work of a male partner versus a female partner, people may “count” different activities for each gender. In sum, while it may take two to make a relationship work, it really only requires one partner to kick start that relationship – and in our sample of heterosexual couples, that person is as likely to be the female partner as it is to be the male partner (at least according to participants’ self-reports).

Outcomes of Perceived (Im)Balance

Another major goal of this investigation was to explore the associations of perceptions of balance versus imbalance in relationship work with two important relational outcomes – satisfaction and commitment. We had predicted that partners who perceived balance (i.e., mutual sharing of relationship work) would report higher levels of satisfaction and commitment than would partners who perceived imbalance. This hypothesis was partially supported. Although no association was found between perceptions of the work of relationship *initiation* and these relational outcomes, a significant association was found between perceptions of the work of relationship *maintenance* and these relational outcomes. Interestingly, the pattern of association was different for male and female partners. Specifically, men who believed that they worked more than (or as much as) their partner on relationship maintenance reported experiencing greater satisfaction with and commitment to their relationship than men who believed that their partner worked more than they did. The opposite pattern was found for women (although only for satisfaction). Women who perceived themselves as working more than their partner to maintain their relationship reported lower satisfaction than women who perceived their partners as working more than (or as hard as) they did. Another way of interpreting this pattern of results is that in our sample of heterosexual couples, both genders evaluated their relationships as more satisfying to the extent that the male partner contributed equally or more to relationship maintenance than the female partner.

These gender-related differences are interesting when considered in light of prior theory and research on equity. According to equity and social exchange theories of relationship development (see [Hatfield & Rapson, 2012](#); [Sprecher & Schwartz, 1994](#)), partners are predicted to be most satisfied with and committed to a relationship when they view it as equitable – that is, when both partners are perceived as making relatively equal investments or contributions to the relationship (and as receiving relatively equal benefits from that relationships) – and evidence has been found in support of this supposition (e.g., [Canary & Stafford, 1992](#); [Dainton & Stafford, 1993](#); [Haas & Stafford, 1998](#); [Sprecher, 1992](#); [Weigel, Bennett, & Ballard-Reisch, 2006](#)).

However, the results of the present study suggest that the association between perceptions of (in)equity (here, with respect to doing the “work” of relationship maintenance) and positive relational outcomes is different for men than for women in heterosexual unions. For the male participants in our study, the perception of one particular type of inequity in the work of relationship maintenance (over-benefit, or believing that the partner contributes more to relationship maintenance than the self) was associated with lower satisfaction and commitment. However, for female participants, the other type of inequity in the work of relationship maintenance (under-benefit, or believing that the partner contributes less to relationship maintenance than the self) was associated with lower satisfaction.

The origins of this gender difference are unclear. There is some evidence that men are more likely than women to adopt an agapic (unconditional, selfless) orientation to romantic relationships, whereas women are more likely than men to adopt a more practical, conditional orientation (e.g., [Hendrick & Hendrick, 1987, 1995, 2002](#); [Sprecher & Toro-Morn, 2002](#)). To the extent that men endorse a selfless, “all-giving” approach to love, they may experience less satisfaction when finding themselves in an interpersonal situation that overbenefits them relative to their partner. Similarly, to the extent that women endorse a practical, more conditional approach to love, an interpersonal situation in which they are underbenefited relative to their partner is likely to result in dissatisfaction. As we did not collect information about our participants’ general beliefs and attitudes about love and romantic relationships, these suppositions remain speculative. Further, we do not know the causal nature of the links between our relationship outcomes and perceptions of work (in)equity. Nonetheless, regardless of its origin, the gender difference we found certainly warrants future investigation, including in research that examines balance (or equity)

not only in relationship initiation and maintenance, but also in other areas of the relationship (resources contributed, household chores, etc.).

Strengths, Limitations, and Future Research

This study helped to fill a gap in the literature concerning the degree to which the work of relationship initiation and maintenance is perceived to be balanced (versus imbalanced) between partners in romantic heterosexual relationships and whether these workload perceptions are associated with relationship outcomes. One of the primary strengths of this investigation was that assessments about work balance were obtained from both partners in relationships and in regard to two stages in their relationship – retrospectively about the initiation stage and concurrently about the maintenance stage. In addition, the study contributes to the literature by examining whether gender of partner is associated with perceptions of relationship work and whether the correlation between perceptions of relationship work and interpersonal outcomes differs as a function of gender.

As is the case for all empirical investigations, there were limitations to our study. First, we utilized a convenience sample of university students; as such, our results may not generalize to the wider population of heterosexual couples in ongoing romantic relationships. Relatedly, these results may not generalize to relationships in societies that are more traditional (and less egalitarian) with respect to gender roles than the United States. In addition, because the question about balance of work for the initiation stage was retrospective, it is possible that participants' reports about that stage of their relationship may not have been as accurate or precise as their reports about the current, maintenance stage. And finally, our correlational study cannot address issues of causality; that is, we cannot know whether perceptions of balance versus imbalance in relationship work contribute to feelings of satisfaction and commitment, or whether feelings of satisfaction and commitment influence perceptions of mutuality with respect to relationship work. Moreover, there may be other relational outcomes (e.g., love, conflict, communication) or individual variables (e.g., ethnicity, sexual orientation) not addressed in the present investigation, which might influence the links between these perceptions, satisfaction, and commitment.

We encourage future research to examine these and other issues, particularly the degree to which views of the balance of work in the relationship are relatively consistent versus change over time. In addition, although our global item about work balance (which did not ask about specific work activities related to relationship initiation and maintenance) has the benefit of allowing the participants to consider the behaviors important to them, future research could also ask more specifically about what behaviors partners engage in as part of their contribution to the work of the relationship initiation and maintenance. The field is also ripe for the development of a multi-item scale to measure balance in the work of various facets of relationship initiation and maintenance. And finally, insofar as scripts and normative expectations for romantic relationships vary across cultures, future research might fruitfully explore partners' perceptions of the work of their relationship in different world regions.

Conclusions

The burgeoning field of close relationships has given less attention to the initiation of relationships than to their development, maintenance, and dissolution. However, as noted by [Berscheid and Regan \(2005\)](#), “to understand why others currently are in the relationships they are – and to understand why we ourselves developed the relationships we did – it is usually necessary to retrace the history of the relationship back to its very beginning and to identify the causal conditions that were in force at the time (p. 159).” When we retraced the history of a sample of heterosexual couples back to the beginning of their relationship, by asking who had done the work of relationship initiation, we found that partners were more likely to say that one partner had worked harder than the other than

to say that the partners had mutually shared the work. Furthermore, neither gender was perceived as more likely than the other to have worked harder. These results suggest that the successful development of a relationship, at least in its nascent stages, may depend primarily on the efforts of one partner (as opposed to both partners). However, the same cannot be said with respect to perceptions of the maintenance of the relationship. We found that partners perceived the work of relationship maintenance as more balanced than imbalanced, suggesting that mutuality is the key to successful relationship progression beyond beginning phases. Indeed, such mutual effort in maintenance work is important. In general, those who were most satisfied with and committed to their relationships were those who believed that the current work of the relationship was shared equally.

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Competing Interests

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