Risk Regulation in Close Relationships

Justin V. Cavallo
Columbia University

Sandra L. Murray
University at Buffalo – State University of New York

John G. Holmes
University of Waterloo

Romantic relationships often present people with a fundamental approach-avoidance dilemma. From the early stages of relationship initiation to the midst of marriage, people are motivated to behave in ways that increase closeness and intimacy with romantic partners. However, establishing a meaningful connection that satisfies fundamental belongingness needs (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) often requires that people think and behave in ways that give their partners great control over their outcomes. That is, they must often forgive a partner for his/her bad behavior (e.g., Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991), seek emotional support for distressing events (e.g., Collins & Feeney, 2000), or sacrifice their own goals for the sake of their partner’s (e.g., Van Lange, Rusbult, Drigotas, Arriaga, Witcher, & Cox, 1997). While such actions may ultimately facilitate a loving and caring relationship, they also heighten immediate vulnerability to a painful and potentially devastating rejection experience. A partner might exploit forgiveness by continuing to behave badly, they might rebuff or reject solicitations for social support, or they might pursue their goals single-mindedly without acknowledging or
reciprocating one’s sacrifice. Given the pain that accompanies rejection (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Eisenberger, this volume; MacDonald & Leary, 2005) and the fact that this pain is intensified as interdependence increases, people are motivated to think and behave in ways that minimize their risk.

Thus, interdependent relationships put these two fundamental motivations at odds. People must continually balance the motivation to pursue intimacy and connection with one’s partner and the motivation to protect the self from the pain and hurt of potential rejection. How do people reconcile these competing goals? In the present chapter, we detail the operation of a risk regulation system that serves to prioritize connectedness or self-protection as relationship circumstances warrant, in order to assure that people are safe from potential rejection. We detail the current theoretical model and review empirical support for its operation (Murray et al., 2006; Murray et al., 2008). We review how situations of interpersonal risk may afford opportunities for both connection and self-protection, and how automatic and controlled processes independently and interactively influence which of these competing goals is implemented. In doing so, we propose that trust has both an impulsive and reflective basis, and that these in concert allow people to negotiate the risks of interdependence by motivating them to approach their partners in the face of risk or instead, to act in ways that allow them to avoid the hurt that might accompany interdependence.

**Risky Situations and the Role of Trust**

Although the self-regulatory dilemma between connection and self-protection goals broadly underlies interdependent relationships, it is most acute in risky situations – that is, in situations that arouse concerns about a partners caring and responsiveness. People’s perception of the extent to which their romantic partner values them, cares for them, and will attend to their
needs (Reis, this volume) is central in allowing people to prioritize connection over self-protection. Concerns about a partner’s responsiveness arise when people are made to question the extent to which their partner will be responsive to them and can be elicited directly (e.g., during relationship conflict), or indirectly, such as when people are confronted with the general costs of interdependence. For example, when partners disagree on the best way to spend a Saturday afternoon, or when a partner’s penchant for generosity conflicts with one’s own frugality, people become aware that interdependence often constrains one’s autonomy. These situations lead people to question how much their partner truly values them and thus afford one of two possible motivational responses: People may draw their partner closer in the hope of assuring themselves that their partner is in fact responsive and thus that their dependence is justifiable. Alternatively, people may withdraw and distance themselves from their partners in service of minimizing the sting of rejection that may come from an unresponsive partner.

These goals compete with each other for motivational priority, as they both offer equally compelling incentives and costs for pursuing them. If one draws a partner closer, he/she may ultimately restore intimacy but they also risk the possibility of even greater hurt if a partner is truly unresponsive. If one withdraws from a partner, he/she may dull the impact of anticipated rejection but then must also forego the opportunity to establish a more loving and intimate relationship. Because approach-oriented connection goals and avoidance-oriented self-protection goals motivate behavior in opposing directions, they produce a motivational ambivalence that serve as a poor guide to self-regulation (Cacioppo, Gardner, & Berntson, 1999; Gable, Reis, & Elliot, 2000). In order to enact a clear response, people must employ a regulatory system to reconcile this tension. To assess the level of risk inherent in a given situation and to implement connection or self-protection goals accordingly, people rely on feelings of trust. Trust in a
partner’s responsiveness, caring and valuation provides assurance that one is safe in depending on one’s partner. This gives people the impetus to prioritize connection goals and pursue these goals when risk arises. People high in trust appear to respond to risk with the procedural rule “if my partner is accepting, then connect” (Murray & Holmes, 2011). They implement this rule by engaging in cognitive and behavioral strategies that allow them to cast aside potential concerns deepen their intimacy with their partners.

In contrast, those low in trust have persistent doubts that their partner truly values them and has their best interests at heart. As such, they respond to risk with pursuit of self-protection goals as reflected by the procedural contingency rule “if my partner is rejecting, then self-protect” (Murray & Holmes, 2011). In contrast, those who doubt their partner’s caring are less able to prioritize these connectedness goals. They implement this rule by distancing themselves cognitively and behaviorally from their partners, a strategy that allows them to minimize the pain of potential rejection but also requires them to forego the benefits of intimacy. Although people high and low in trust implement different procedural rules and thus prioritized different goals when risk arises, both of these regulatory strategies allow people to maintain feelings of safety and security in risky situations where their outcomes are largely tied to their partner’s thoughts and actions (Murray et al., 2008).

The divergent prioritization of connectedness and self-protection as a function of trust has been observed in both experimental studies and in real-world observational designs. In an example of the latter, Murray, Bellavia, Rose, and Griffin (2003) followed married couples over a period of 21 days. During this time, participants reported events that posed an acute threat to relationship security such as relationship conflict, or their partner behaving badly. Such events activate concerns about dependence and as such, afford the opportunity for people to respond by
pursuing connectedness goals or instead, to act self-protectively. Results revealed that participants’ feelings of trust moderated which self-regulatory response they enacted on days following these acute threats. Those who had higher trust that their partner cared about them and would be responsive to their needs reported feeling closer to their partners on days following threat. They refrained from retaliating or reciprocating a partner’s bad behavior and treated their partner as well as they had the previous day. These cognition and behaviors reflect a prioritization of connectedness goals, as highly trusting people sought to foster intimacy when concerns about interdependence arose. Conversely, those who were less trusting of their partners displayed heightened self-protection goals on days following an acute threat. They reported feeling more distant from their partners and generally treated their partners negatively. They reported not only being more abrupt with their partners, but also criticized and insulted them the following day.

Such effects have been observed even when concerns about dependence are activated in more indirect ways. People who trust their partners are more willing to support their partner’s goals when those goals require a personal sacrifice, thus placing greater control over their outcomes in their partner’s hands when they feel it is safe to do so. However, those low in trust are less willing to accommodate their partners, a regulatory strategy that serves to minimize dependence and thus protect themselves from being hurt by an uncaring partner (Shallcross & Simpson, in press).

Many investigations of risk regulation processes have used individual differences, most notably self-esteem, as a proxy for investigating the role of chronic trust in shaping responses to risk. Self-esteem is linked intricately with perceptions of relational value and may serve as a suitable proxy for people’s chronic trust in their partner’s caring (Leary & Baumeister, 2000;
Those with high self-esteem are confident in their partner’s caring and thus have high chronic trust that allows them to seek connectedness when interdependence concerns are salient. In contrast, low self-esteem people perpetually doubt how much their partner values them and as a result, prefer to prioritize self-protection goals in risky interpersonal situations. This lack of trust is often unwarranted given LSEs’ partners actual caring (Murray, Griffin, et al. 2003). However, these perceptions often lead LSEs to behave differently from HSEs when facing risky interpersonal situations.

In one engaging illustration of self-esteem’s role in risk regulation, participants and their romantic partners were asked to complete ostensibly identical questionnaires. Those in the experimental condition were tasked with listing aspects of their partner that they disliked. Their partners, however, were actually assigned to describe their dormitory room in great detail. The thoroughness with which they completed this task led participants to believe that their partner found many faults in them, activating responsiveness concerns and thus creating an interpersonally risky context (Murray, Rose, Bellavia, Holmes, & Kusche, 2002, Experiment 3). Relative to control participants, low self-esteem people (LSEs) subsequently reported less positive evaluations of their relationship and their partner and reported feeling less close to that person. When feeling rejected by their partners, they sought to protect themselves by devaluing their relationships and downplaying its importance. High self-esteem people (HSEs), in contrast, did not display these self-protective tendencies when faced with a critical partner. Instead, they evaluated their relationship similarly to control participants. In other studies (e.g., Murray et al., 2002, Experiment 2), however, HSEs facing interpersonal risk actually draw closer to their partners. They prioritize connection and intimacy as reflected by more positive evaluations of their partners and greater feelings of closeness.
These differential responses to interpersonal risk as a function of self-esteem appear to be rooted in a broader motivational system that governs sensitivity to risk and reward. That is, interpersonal risk not only leads HSEs and LSEs to self-regulate differently in relationship-specific contexts, but also affects goal pursuit more broadly outside of these contexts. In one illustration of this, participants were exposed to interpersonal risk by having them recall a time when their partner hurt or disappointed them. After activating concerns about a partner’s caring in this way, participants were asked to evaluate two possible investment opportunities being considered by university officials and were told that the proceeds would be used toward a tuition rebate. One option was presented as relatively ‘safe’ in that its success was virtually guaranteed, but that the return would be relatively small. The alternative option was presented as much less likely to succeed, but also as more lucrative if successful (thus ensuring a larger rebate). Results revealed that relative to control participants, LSE participants exposed to relationship risk become more conservative in their decision-making, preferring the safer option to the riskier but potentially more beneficial option. In contrast, HSE participants facing risk actually endorsed the riskier investment over the safer one, in hopes of obtaining its potentially larger reward (Cavallo, Fitzsimons, & Holmes, 2009, Study 4). Similar effects emerged when participants indicated their willingness to partake in risky, but potentially rewarding, recreational activities (e.g., skiing) (Cavallo et al., 2009, Study 3). Paralleling traditional risk regulation findings, interpersonal risk led LSEs to protect themselves from negative outcomes by becoming increasingly cautious whereas HSEs became increasingly motivated to pursue rewards and cast aside potential dangers. Thus, the divergent pattern or self-regulation that emerges in the face of interpersonal risk among high and low trust people appears to reflect broader motivational orientations that
shape goal pursuit in and out of relationship contexts, perhaps reflecting the fundamental importance of interpersonal risk regulation.

As one might anticipate, self-esteem is but one of the many proxies for gauging chronic feelings of trust. Individual differences in adult attachment styles, for example, have also been shown to moderate the prioritization self-protection or connection in risky interpersonal contexts. Those who are anxiously attached (less chronically trusting of their partners) respond to threatening relationship situations much in the same way that low self-esteem people do, prioritizing self-protection goals to guard themselves from the pain of anticipated rejection. For example, those high in anxiety derogate their partners and their relationships following relationship conflict (Campbell, Simpson, Boldry, & Kashy, 2005; Simpson, Rholes, & Phillips, 1996). They also exhibit greater anger at their partners in situations where they perceive them to be unresponsive (Rholes, Simpson, & Orina, 1999). Conversely, those who are securely attached (high chronic trust) act much like high self-esteem people in that they prioritize connectedness goals with their partners when the risk of dependence is made salient. They respond to conflict by evaluating their partners more positively (Simpson et al., 1996) and otherwise treat their partners as positively under risk as they do when such risk is not activated (Campbell et al., 2005).

Taken together, there is a large body of research suggesting that perceptions of trust shape people’s self-regulatory efforts when relationship situations make concerns about a partner’s responsiveness salient and thus afford opportunities to pursue conflicting goals. Those high in trust are willing to set aside the risk that they may be subject to a painful rejection experience and assure their safety by drawing their partner closer and deepening intimacy. Those low in trust are less willing to disregard these risks and instead forego opportunities for intimacy
by prioritizing goals that serve to protect themselves from the sting of rejection. However, the role of trust in moderating these responses has largely been examined by investigating people’s explicit feelings of trust and their deliberative responses to threat. More recently, we have begun to explore the role of automatic processes in shaping risk regulation experiences. This work has illuminated the dual-process nature of risk regulation processes that we detail in the next section.

**A Dual Process Model of Risk Regulation**

When goals motivate action in opposing directions, as self-protection and connection are theorized to do, they require reconciliation in order to enact a behavioral response. Most models of social cognition indicate that this reconciliation process requires the availability of executive resources. That is, when pursuing a given goal threatens one’s ability to pursue an alternative goal – as is the case with connection and self-protection goals – one must exert self-control to prioritize their preferred goal in favor of the competing goal. Controlled self-regulation such as this is dependent on people having sufficient cognitive and regulatory resources to carry out their preferred course or action (e.g., Muraven & Baumeister, 2000). Thus, while feelings of trust may serve as the impetus for people to prioritize connection or self-protection, implementing these goals may be difficult if people lack the ability to exert executive control. Put another way, deliberative feelings of trust might guide risk regulation when people’s cognitive resources are unimpeded, but may have little effect on people’s responses to risk when these resources are taxed.

Indeed, it does seem that chronic trust – as operationalized by self-esteem – is most predictive of risk regulation activity when people have sufficient ability to use their executive resources. In one recent investigation, we exposed participants to interpersonal risk by having them read a short passage indicating that people generally overestimate the quality of their
relationships (Cavallo, Holmes, Fitzsimons, Murray, & Wood, in press, Study 2). This tendency to overestimate was illustrated by providing participants with fictitious findings ostensibly derived from prior research suggesting that partners’ outward behavior often belied a lack of caring. Following this, participants were asked to learn and rehearse a short or long digit string throughout the experiment, thereby placing them under low or high cognitive load. Participants then indicated their feelings of connectedness to their partners.

Results revealed that when participants had ample executive resources available to them (i.e., were under low cognitive load), high and low self-esteem exhibited divergent patterns or risk regulation similar to those described earlier in this chapter. That is, relative to control participants, high self-esteem people exposed to relationship risk reported feeling more connected to their partners, reflecting the prioritization of connectedness goals over self-protection goals. Conversely, low self-esteem people in the interpersonal risk condition reported feeling less connected to their partners relative to control participants, reflecting the prioritization of self-protection goals in the presence of doubts about a partner’s caring. However, this pattern of results did not emerge when participants’ executive resources were taxed. When cognitive load was high, high and low self-esteem participants facing interpersonal risk did not differ from control participants in their feelings of connection to their partners, nor did they differ from each other. Thus, the presence of cognitive load reduced the impact of chronic feelings of trust on risk regulation processes.

A conceptually similar pattern of results was revealed by examining how chronic working memory capacity influences’ peoples evaluations outside of an experimental context. Individual differences in working memory capacity (WMC) are a key determinant of people’s ability to control self-regulatory behavior (Hofmann, Gschwendner, Friese, Wiers, & Schmitt,
In a naturalistic study of married couples, we examined how connected participants felt to their partners in the face of general relationship risk, as operationalized by self-reported frequency and intensity of partner conflict. Among participants who had relatively risky relationships, those with high self-esteem believed their partners were more connected to their relationships than did low self-esteem participants, reflecting a relative focus on connection over self-protection. However, this self-esteem difference only emerged among participants who had relatively high chronic WMC. Self-esteem did not predict perceived connectedness among those who had low chronic WMC, nor did it predict these evaluations for participants who had relatively little risk in their relationships (e.g., had relatively infrequent conflict). Again, the availability of executive resources appears to be critical in allowing perceptions of chronic trust to dictate goal prioritization in the face of interpersonal risk.

This finding contributes to emerging evidence indicating that reflective feelings of trust serve a secondary ‘corrective’ function. As we detail in the next section, these deliberative feelings of trust allow people to prioritize goals consistent with their overarching relational motivations when goal conflict arises. This process often involves ‘overturning’ automatic impulses elicited by certain relationship contexts when those impulses run counter to more conscious trust concerns.

**Automatic and Controlled Responses to Risk**

Interdependent situations can vary greatly in their relative risk and reward and as such, the interpersonal mind must remain flexible and efficient (Murray & Holmes, 2011). Accordingly, people often have automatic impulses to relationship situations that motivate connection or self-protection without the need for deliberative control. However, as we have detailed thus far, people also have chronic concerns that dictate how comfortable they are in
approaching their partner in risky situations. These chronic concerns appear to guide people’s self-regulation when they have sufficient ability to employ executive resources, allowing them to reconcile competing goals by shifting priority to the goal the best suits their overall motivational agenda.

Those high in chronic trust have a chronic motivational orientation toward connectedness. Their conviction in their partner’s caring makes it less risky for them to seek intimacy in precarious situations. As such, their executive control system serves as to ensure that such goals are continually prioritized. This system drives them not only to draw their partners closer in the face of responsiveness concerns, but also to ‘override’ any automatic inclinations that run counter to this overarching goal. That is, when highly risky interpersonal contexts afford greater opportunity to self-protect, highly trusting people appear to correct this impulse and instead remain connected and committed to their partners. In contrast, those low in chronic trust have a chronic motivational orientation toward self-protection. Their perpetual doubt about their partner’s caring makes it all the more risky for them to approach their partners when acute concerns arise and thus, their executive control system ensures that imperative self-protection goals have motivational priority. Even when situational risk is relatively mild and affords greater opportunity to connect with one’s partner, low trust people appear to overturn automatic impulses to connect and instead, implement goals that serve their broader motivational agenda to avoid social pain.

These corrective processes have been directly observed by examining how people override nonconsciously activated goals when those goals are incompatible with their more general motivational aims. In one such study, dating participants were primed implicitly with approach goals by completing a word categorization task that contained words associated with
connection goals (e.g., devote, promise). Following this, participants provided explicit ratings of how close they felt to their partners. Results indicated that people high and low in chronic trust (HSEs and LSEs) reacted differently to the goal prime. Relative to control participants, HSEs reported feeling closer to their partners, thus acting in a prime-congruent way. In contrast, LSEs who were primed with approach goals reported feeling less close to their partners than control participants, suggesting that they ‘overturned’ the experimentally activated goal in favor of implementing their preferred self-regulatory strategy of self-protection (Murray et al., 2008).

This effect was more dramatically demonstrated in a subsequent study in which approach goals were again primed implicitly using a word categorization task. In this iteration, however, participants not only provided explicit feelings of closeness, but also completed a measure intended to assess their implicit feelings of connection. This task assessed the speed with which participants associated positive interpersonal qualities, such as warmth and acceptance, with their partners. When primed with interpersonal approach goals, high self-esteem people again reported feeling closer to their partners than did control participants. The goal prime also affected their implicit responses in a goal-congruent way, as HSEs were faster to associate positive traits with their partners. Low self-esteem people, however, overturned the connection goals that were primed by the experimental manipulation. As in the previous study, LSEs reported feeling less close than control participants did on the explicit self-report measure. However, they were more positive than control participants were on the implicit measure of connection. This finding suggests that while the nonconscious goal prime was successful in activating an automatic impulse to draw closer to one’s partner, LSEs’ overturned this incompatible goal when making explicit responses, and instead acted self-protectively by derogating the importance of their relationships (Murray et al., 2008, Experiment 3).
These corrective processes are evident not just when incongruent goals are activated directly via an experimental manipulation, but also when relationship situations elicit automatic responses that are inconsistent with people’s chronic motivational concerns. For example, while becoming close with a partner is highly rewarding, it also imposes constraints on one’s autonomy. As interdependence increases, people must, by definition, give up control over their outcomes (Kelley, 1979; Kelley et al., 2003). To maintain commitment in the face of such autonomy concerns, people automatically activate the procedural rule “if dependent, then justify commitment” (Murray, Holmes, Aloni, Pinkus, Derrick, & Leder, 2009). When such concerns about autonomy are made salient, people automatically seek connection to their partners. For example, participants who were asked to recall a time in which they had concerns about how costly their relationship was to their goal pursuits exhibited more positive implicit evaluations of their partners regardless of chronic trust.

Again, however, chronic trust seems to moderate the extent to which people deliberately ‘correct’ for this automatic influence at the explicit level. In the same study, HSEs reported more optimism about their relationships in the autonomy-cost condition relative to control participants, thereby justifying their commitment at the explicit level as well. Because the automatically activated goal was congruent with their chronic motivations to pursue connection with their partners, HSEs had little need to correct. Thus, their automatic and controlled responses were aligned. Low self-esteem people, in contrast did appear to ‘override’ the influence of automatically activated connection goals. Relative to control participants, LSEs who recalled autonomy costs reported being less optimistic about their relationships. Facing the automatic activation of a goal that is incompatible with chronic self-protective strivings, LSE readily seized
the opportunity to counteract its influence and derogated their relationship at the explicit level (Murray, Holmes, et al., 2009).

Of course, it is not just low trust people who utilize an executive control system to prioritize chronic goal strivings. Those high in chronic trust also correct for the influence of automatically activated self-protection goals that sometimes arise in risky relationship contexts. One such instance of this occurs when people are made to feel that they are inferior to their partner. When one is equitably matched to his/her romantic partner, it is less likely that that partner will attempt to replace you with a more appealing alternative. However, when people feel that they do not match their partner, rejection becomes a very real possibility and thus presents a great deal of risk. To protect themselves from the doubts that arise with inferiority, people appear to have an automatically activated goal that serves to restore feelings of being irreplaceable and often implement this goal by taking action to make their partners more dependent on them. In one illustrative study, concerns about inferiority were aroused implicitly by having participants evaluate the effectiveness of personal ads in which the author of the ad stressed the importance of finding a partner who would be an equitable match. Relative to control participants, those who were exposed to this implicit prime later reported greater feelings of inferiority to their own romantic partners. They sought to quell these feelings by behaving in ways that would make them less replaceable, such as assuming responsibility for their partner’s day-to-day obligations and duties and restricting their partner’s social network, thereby enhancing their importance to their partners and thus ensuring their partner’s continued commitment (Murray, Aloni, Holmes, Derrick, Stinson, & Leder, 2009).

However, evidence for the ‘correction’ of this automatic impulse as a function of chronic trust was observed in a subsequent study, in which participants were explicitly primed with
inferiority and thus had greater opportunity to employ corrective processes. That is, when participants were led to believe that partners who matched were more likely to remain married, LSEs again reported desire to heighten their partner’s dependence and make themselves irreplaceable relative to control participants. Because this self-protective automatic impulse was congruent with their overarching motivational concerns, LSEs had little impetus to correct. HSEs, however, did overturn self-protective impulse aroused by the inferiority prime. Relative to control participants, they reported less desire to foster partner dependence when primed with exchange concerns. As their chronic motivational agenda is that of connection, self-protectively making their partners reliant on them incompatible with these goals and when they were able to do so, HSEs overturned this impulse.

Taken together, these results suggest that chronic trust serves an important function in shaping risk regulation processes. Specifically, it serves to ensure that chronic motivational agendas remain prioritized in risky situations. It reconciles motivational conflict in situations that afford pursuit of connection and self-protection relatively equally, and serves to ‘overturn’ automatically activated goals when those goals are incongruent with their president concerns. Importantly, this is critically dependent on having sufficient ability to correct. When executive resources are taxed, chronic trust fails to guide risk regulation and when relationship goals are activated implicitly, the ability to overturn incompatible goals is reduced. This limitation raises an important question - how do people regulate interpersonal risk when they do not have the ability to employ this secondary system? Put another way, how does risk regulation operate at the automatic level?

**Risk Regulation at the Automatic Level**
When people are unable to exert executive control, chronic trust has little bearing on people’s risk regulation behavior. There remains, however, a ‘smart’ unconscious (Murray & Holmes, 2011; Murray, Holmes, & Pinkus, 2010) that guides people toward connection or away from risk as relationship circumstances dictate. As we described in the preceding section, this unconscious is sensitive to the relative affordance of connection and self-protection goals in risky interpersonal situations. Situations that pose a relatively high degree of risk afford greater opportunity to pursue self-protection goals and thus are more likely to motivate both high and low trust people to guard themselves automatically from hurt. Consistent with this, people who were asked to recall a partner’s transgression were faster to identify self-protection words (e.g., prevent, caution) on a lexical decision task relative to those in a control condition, indicating greater automatic activation of these avoidance-directed goals. This effect was most evident among participants had not yet forgiven their partners for this transgression, and thus risk was most immediate (Murray, Derrick, Leder, & Holmes, 2008, Experiment 7).

Similarly, situations that pose a relatively mild degree of risk may afford greater opportunity to afford connectedness goals and allow people to pursue connection and intimacy with their partners automatically, irrespective of chronic trust. In one such study, participants who were primed with general interpersonal risk by recalling a time when someone other than their current romantic partner hurt or disappointed them. Although this task may have heightened rejection concerns, such concerns were not immediately tied to their partner. Participants who completed this task subsequently were faster to respond to words associated with connectedness (e.g., join, trust) relative to control participants (Murray et al., 2008; Experiment 1). A second study revealed again that participants exposed to a generalized relationship threat were more willing than control participants were to partake in activities that would foster greater
interdependence with their current romantic partners, again revealing heightened motivation for connectedness when facing relatively mild interpersonal risk. When the costs of interdependence are low, people seize opportunities to connect with romantic partners and thereby accrue the benefits that accompany it.

In more ambiguous situations, where risk and reward are commensurate with one another, people may rely on basic associations to direct self-regulatory activity. Evaluative associations that occur at the automatic level generally serve to motivate approach and avoidance behavior. Strong positive associations drive people toward those objects, whereas strong negative associations propel people away from those objects (Chen & Bargh, 1999). In a relationship context, more positive associations to one’s partner may lead people to automatically pursue connection and intimacy when risk arises, whereas more negative associations may drive people to pursue self-protection goals in the face of risk, especially when they are unable to ‘correct’ for these impulses by employing executive resources (LeBel & Campbell, 2009; Scinta & Gable, 2007).

Murray, Holmes, and Pinkus (2010) have suggested that such implicit associations are formed through actual experience. That is, they propose that relationship events that may escape conscious awareness and nonetheless encoded by a ‘smart’ unconscious and that these form the basis for people’s automatic evaluative associations with their partners. Evidence for this was acquired in a longitudinal study of newlywed couples. Murray et al. examined people’s risk regulation behavior over a 14-day span and assessed the frequency with which people found themselves in risky situations (e.g., being criticized by one’s partner, a partner failing to take one’s needs into account) and then four years later, assessed the extent to which people held positive associations toward their partner. Results revealed that the more frequently people found
themselves in risky situations, the less positive their associations were four years later. However, the way that people responded to such situations also influenced these associations. Those who were employed self-protective behaviors on days following risk (e.g., acting cold and distancing) held more negative automatic associations of their partners four years later, whereas those who pursued connectedness following risk (e.g., valuing their partner more) had more positive evaluations at Time 2. In addition, explicit feelings of love and satisfaction measured at Time 1 had no bearing on positive associations 4 years later, nor did prior risk regulation behaviors influence these feelings when they were assessed at Time 2. This suggests that risk regulation behavior may have an impact on people’s associative evaluations and thereby influence relationship behaviors, even when they appear to have little impact on explicit evaluations.

Because these implicit evaluations are rooted in actual experience, they likely serve as the basis for ‘impulsive trust’ that reflects people’s automatic tendency to prioritize connection over self-protection. Indeed, participants who had positive implicit evaluations subliminally conditioned subsequently reported trusting their partners more than control participants did (Murray et al., 2011, Study 2). As unconscious evaluations can diverge from explicit evaluations and have dissociative effects, it is likely that impulsive and reflective trust jointly regulate risk regulation behavior. Specifically, impulsive trust may attenuate the impact of reflective trust in determining how people respond to risk, particularly when people’s ability to exert executive control is undermined. This has unique implications for those low in chronic trust. That is, if people low in chronic trust have deliberative concerns about their partners caring, but at the same time hold incongruent positive attitudes toward their partners, these positive evaluations may serve to drive people toward connection when they are unable to ‘correct’ for its influence.
Murray et al. (2011) illustrated this joint regulation in a series of studies. In one such investigation, participants provided an initial measure of their impulsive trust by completing an implicit association task assessing the extent to which they had positive evaluations of their partners. Following this, participants’ reflective trust concerns were undermined by again leading them to believe that they overestimated the quality of their relationships and their partners’ responsiveness. Half of the participants then completed a task that served to reduce their ability to exert executive resources by writing story without using the letters ‘a’ or ‘n’ (Schmeichel, 2007), thereby undermining their ability to execute corrective processes. Their automatic motivation to connect with their partners was tapped using an implicit measure that again measured the speed with which they associated them with positive interpersonal traits.

Results revealed that among participants who had ample executive control, impulsive trust did not predict their automatic tendency to approach their partners in the face of reflective trust concerns. However, among participants whose executive control was undermined by the difficult writing task, impulsive trust served to regulate reflective trust concerns. Those low in impulsive trust showed much less inclination toward connection when their reflective trust was threatened relative to control participants, as might be expected. However, those high in impulsive trust actually reported greater motivation to approach their partners in the face of reflective trust concerns (relative to control). Thus, impulsive trust served as a resource that minimized the impact of conscious concerns when people had little ability to correct these impulses (Murray et al., 2011, Study 6).

Conclusion

Interpersonal risk is a ubiquitous feature of interdependent relationships and thus necessitates a complex regulatory system that governs pursuit of self-protection and connection
goals that satisfy fundamental needs. When people have sufficient cognitive resources, this system employs conscious, deliberative processes to prioritize goals that are congruent with chronic orientations toward connection or self-protection that vary as a function of chronic trust. However, impulsive trust often serves as the basis for directing goal pursuit when people’s ability to exert their resources is depleted. Impulsive trust may also shape automatic responses to risk in ways that diverge from more controlled responses. These processes allow the risk regulation system to operate dynamically to assure people that their dependence (or lack thereof) is warranted.

Romantic relationships, perhaps more than other type of close relationship, present abundant opportunity for satisfying connection needs. Obtaining the rewards however, often require people to face substantial risk, as a partner’s caring can never be absolutely guaranteed. Investigating how people regulate this risk offers the ability to learn a great deal about motivation shapes close relationships in unique and sometimes subtle ways. Examining how trust shapes self-regulation at both the automatic and controlled levels of processing, and how these self-regulatory strategies reciprocally shape feelings of trust, will develop our theoretical understanding of interpersonal relationships and perhaps a more complete model of how people regulate approach and avoidance conflicts that arise outside of relational domains.

References


