

Predicting an end to your relationship

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Breaking up, making up, or waking up to the fact that your partner is thinking about leaving you have long been grist for songwriters, but the ups and downs of romantic relationships have also fueled psychology research.

A new paper co-authored by Kenneth Tan, an Assistant Professor of Psychology at Singapore Management University (SMU), focuses on the perception that a breakup may be looming. It is titled, "When one's [partner](#) wants out: Awareness, attachment anxiety and accuracy," and published in *European Journal of Social Psychology* .

A growing body of research suggests that beyond one's own beliefs, partner perceptions are also important in understanding the dynamics of a [relationship](#). Professor Tan and his co-authors have extended this by introducing the construct of PPDC.

"PPDC is a new construct and it is an acronym for perceived partner dissolution consideration, or the extent to which individuals perceive their partner is thinking about implementing steps or plans to terminate their relationship," Professor Tan says.

"It is an adaptation of a prior construct regarding own dissolution consideration, which is the extent to which individuals are thinking about their own steps or plans to end their relationship."

So, how does PPDC work?

"Research has shown that own dissolution consideration—that is, how salient relationship termination is for an individual while one's relationship is intact—motivates actual behaviors that lead to a breakup," Professor Tan says.

"However, even though one might be actively thinking about breakup, individuals also consider their partner's interests and thoughts before making decisions regarding their romantic relationships. As such, perceiving one's partner as considering relationship dissolution is another way to figure out if there is an [existential threat](#) to relationship stability."

Tracking accuracy

The researchers established the reliability and validity of their measure of PPDC using participants from a large US university who were involved in romantic relationships. To test tracking accuracy and directional bias, the team recruited similarly connected couples from SMU who reported on their own dissolution consideration as well as PPDC, among other variables.

The results showed that "these individuals were moderately accurate about their partner's actual dissolution consideration," Professor Tan says.

"Specifically, accuracy of perceived partner dissolution consideration is looked at in terms of the association between partner A's perception of partner B's dissolution consideration and partner B's actual dissolution consideration.

"This measure is called tracking accuracy. This is not to be confused with directional bias, which is the extent to which PPDC is over or underestimated. Importantly, bias and accuracy can co-exist at the same time.

"Most people are interested in their relationships continuing. As shown in our study, while being relatively accurate about PPDC, individuals were also likely to underestimate PPDC in general, essentially painting the relationship in a positive light, which encourages relationship stability.

Anxiously attached

Determining how PPDC accuracy is associated with attachment anxiety

was a key aim of the research.

"Attachment anxiety is an example of an insecure working model with regard to your [romantic partner](#)," Professor Tan explains.

"This is especially so when your partner is inconsistent in their care-giving towards you, resulting in you having a negative sense of self. For example, anxiously attached individuals are more likely to call or text their partner repeatedly.

"As such, anxiously attached individuals deeply desire closeness yet fear that their attempts to connect with their partners will result in abandonment, leading to hyper-vigilance and sensitivity to rejection and relationship threats. On the other hand, securely attached individuals are comfortable with closeness and do not worry about being abandoned by their partners."

"Examining this issue further, we found that compared to securely attached individuals, anxiously attached individuals were more likely to overestimate PPDC and showed even greater accuracy about PPDC," Professor Tan says.

Anxious, hyper-vigilant partners can be difficult to be around. Could their obsessive focus on PPDC actually cause a breakup?

"Currently, we do not have data specifically examining how PPDC is predictive of breakups compared with other constructs, and whether this is particularly detrimental for anxiously attached individuals," Professor Tan says.

"However, research has shown that anxiously attached individuals are more likely to engage in destructive or less constructive responses, such as more hostile behavior during conflict, as well as partner derogation

and reduced closeness, which undermine relationship quality and stability."

If people project their own dissolution intentions when wondering about their partner's intentions, how does this affect the accuracy of PPDC?

"That is a good question. We were cognisant that projection of one's own dissolution consideration could affect the accuracy of PPDC, and thus examined both projection and accuracy effects in our analysis. We found that even though individuals did project their own dissolution consideration onto their partner's intentions, they were still accurate about their partner's intentions," Professor Tan says.

Separate factors

An interesting insight from the research is that the degree of commitment between partners and their PPDC are separate factors in a potential breakup.

"Low relationship commitment can be thought about in terms of uncertainty about staying in the relationship, whereby individuals endorse both positive and negative reasons to remain in their relationship," Professor Tan says.

"However, high PPDC could motivate one to acknowledge the saliency of impending relationship dissolution. For example, it is possible to envision a situation whereby one's partner is still committed to the relationship but is actively considering relationship dissolution as they might be about to move to another country. Essentially, PPDC and commitment are correlated but still distinct constructs."

And how could the research findings play out in real life?

"For anxiously attached individuals, even though they are more accurate in detecting that their partner wants to break up with them, ironically this [accuracy](#) might lead them to engage in more destructive behaviors that could hasten the dissolution of the relationship," Professor Tan says.

"However, for securely attached individuals, being less accurate about PPDC could motivate positive illusions that help keep people in relationships.

"We expect that when we perceive that our partners are intending to break up with us, it is more likely that we would try to prepare ourselves emotionally for the impending split with self-protection measures as compared to trying to repair and maintain the relationship. This is because PPDC represents an existential relationship threat compared to low commitment, which represents uncertainty about the relationship.

"However, ultimately whether one tries to self-protect or reconnect in response to PPDC has not been shown empirically and forms the next step of our research. Beyond these responses to PPDC, we are also interested in examining how PPDC contributes to predicting actual rates of breakup among couples."

"Finally, what would be extremely interesting would be to examine if knowledge of PPDC could influence the extent to which individuals react to actual breakups and subsequent recovery. For example, knowing that your partner wants to break up with you might help you regain your sense of self more quickly after the breakup actually happens," Professor Tan says.

More information: Kenneth Tan et al, When one's partner wants out: Awareness, attachment anxiety and accuracy, *European Journal of Social Psychology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1002/ejsp.2969](https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2969)

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