At the foundation of every intact romantic relationship are two people who made a series of choices to begin, advance, and maintain that particular relationship. My research centers around how people make these decisions. What are the processes through which people choose whether to pursue a new romantic interest, move in with a new dating partner, or end a struggling relationship? Because people have such a high degree of control over the choices they make, decisions like these offer a promising avenue for helping people to improve their own relationship outcomes. People may be able to achieve higher-quality long-term relationships by selectively investing in relationships that are right for them, and rejecting relationships that are not right for them.

My social psychology research program represents a broad yet systematic application of judgment and decision making (JDM) concepts and theory to the study of romantic relationships. I argue that close relationships are a JDM domain, meaning that relationship decisions share important similarities with other kinds of life decisions (e.g., Joel, MacDonald, & Plaks, 2013, *Current Directions in Psychological Science*). Integration between these two fields thus holds exciting theoretical and practical potential. From a theoretical perspective, romantic relationships provide an emotionally salient and evolutionarily relevant context in which to test the boundary conditions of decision principles. In what ways do relationship decisions function like financial or career decisions, for example, and in what ways might they be unique? From a practical perspective, we can harness JDM research approaches and techniques to examine which strategies are most likely to lead to satisfying and long-lasting relationships. Relationships have a profound impact on both physical and mental health (e.g., Holt-Lundstad, Birmingham, & Jones, 2008; Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001; Ruiz, Matthews, Scheier, & Schulz, 2006) so helping people make these relationship decisions better has the potential to do enormous good.

**Prosocial Motivation and Relationship Decisions**

Emerging research shows that most people make decisions not just selfishly but with other people’s feelings and needs in mind. My primary research program to date examines how these prosocial motives play out in the context of romantic relationship turning points. Are people prone to making relationship choices that are not in their own best interests—such as advancing and maintaining unfulfilling romantic relationships—for the sake of the partner? Romantic relationships offer a perfect context to test the boundary conditions of prosocial decision making, not only because personal stakes run high but also because relationship decisions are inherently interdependent. By definition, these decisions always impact at least one other person. My research has revealed that relationship decisions are influenced by concern for the partner throughout the progression of a relationship. People take the other’s feelings and perspectives into consideration at the initiation (Joel, Teper, & MacDonald, 2014), development (Joel, Gordon, Impett, MacDonald, & Keltner, 2013), and dissolution stages of the relationship (Joel, Impett, Spielmann, & MacDonald, in prep).

Perhaps understandably, past research on relationship initiation has implicitly assumed that mate choice is guided entirely by a sort of consumeristic self-interest, meaning that when people are uninterested in a potential suitor, they simply reject that person. I tested this assumption in
two experiments (Joel, Teper, & MacDonald, 2014, *Psychological Science*). Participants were presented with the dating profile of a person who was shown to be undesirable either because they were physically unattractive (Study 1) or because they ostensibly had traits and habits that the participant strongly disliked (“dealbreakers”; Study 2). Participants were randomly assigned to either imagine the situation (hypothetical condition) or to be told that this person was actually in the lab (real condition). I found that many participants agreed to go on dates with potential partners who they perceived to be unattractive (Study 1) or who had traits that the participants had explicitly said they did not want (Study 2) in order to avoid hurting the potential partner’s feelings. Further, I found that participants underestimated the extent to which concern for others would influence their choices, leading them to be more willing to accept advances from undesired suitors in reality than participants predicted hypothetically. Overall, the decision to accept and reject dates appears to involve more than selfish motivation. Even in the absence of a relationship tie, other-focused motives influence people to make relationship decisions that are not necessarily in their own best interests.

In another set of studies, I examined whether people take the partner’s perspectives into consideration when calibrating their commitment to the relationship. To what extent can the potential for a partner’s loss motivate people to maintain a relationship long-term? My work has shown that, over and above one’s own investments, the partner’s investments impact one’s own feelings of commitment to the relationship (Joel, Gordon, Impett, MacDonald, & Keltner, 2013, *Personality and Social Psychological Bulletin*). This research, which received a 2014 Student Publication Award from the Society for Personality and Social Psychology (SPSP), showed that people are more willing to stay in a relationship when the partner is highly invested, regardless of how satisfying the relationship is. For example, in one study, I surveyed couples daily over a two-week period. Using multilevel modelling, I showed that when people made more daily sacrifices for their partners, their partners responded with increased commitment to the relationship three months later. Importantly, these effects held even for individuals who were relatively unsatisfied with their relationships, suggesting that a partner’s investments can motivate a person to persevere with an unfulfilling relationship.

Finally, I have examined how prosocial motivation may influence the decision to end a relationship. Stay/leave decisions present a clear interdependence dilemma because ending a relationship involves inflicting a breakup on one’s partner. Especially for people who believe that a breakup would be deeply distressing to their partner, prosocial motives may discourage them from ending the relationship, even when staying with their partner is not in their own best interest. I recently examined prosocial motivation to avoid a breakup in a sample of 1281 participants in dating relationships (Joel, Impett, Spielmann, & MacDonald, in prep). I first measured participants’ perceptions of how distressing a breakup would be for their partners. Next, I tracked their relationship stay/leave decisions over a 10-week period. I found that people were less likely to choose to break up with their partners over the course of the study if they believed that doing so would be greatly distress their partners. These effects held regardless of people’s own satisfaction with the relationship, investment into the relationship, alternatives to the relationship, commitment to the relationship, and they held regardless of how much people felt their partners appreciated them. In other words, regardless of what people were personally getting out of the relationship, they took the partner’s feelings into consideration when deciding whether to end the relationship. My colleagues and I are currently conducting a preregistered replication of this study in preparation for resubmission at JPSP.
Overall, this work suggests that people take the partner’s feelings and perspectives into consideration throughout the progression of a romantic relationship, from the earliest signals of romantic interest (Joel, Teper, & MacDonald, 2014) to decisions about whether to ultimately maintain or dissolve the relationship (Joel, Impett, Spielmann, & MacDonald, in prep). Specifically, these findings suggest that people are often willing to begin, advance, and maintain relationships that are not necessarily in their own best interests for the sake of the partner.

**WE’RE NOT THAT CHOOSY: EMERGING EVIDENCE OF A PROGRESSION BIAS**

Dating is widely thought of as a “test phase” for romantic relationships, during which romantic partners carefully evaluate each other for long-term romantic fit. However, this cultural narrative assumes that people are well-equipped to reject new partners who are not a good fit. My work on prosocial motives suggests that in fact, rejecting people is hard to do, and people frequently fail to disengage from relationships that do not meet their needs. Since publishing this work, I have uncovered related results across several other lines of research. By applying JDM concepts and principles to the relationship domain, I have consistently found that judgments and decisions about relationships are biased toward relationship progression rather than relationship rejection. For example, although people tend to regret action more than inaction across many kinds of decision making dilemmas (e.g., Byrne & McElenery, 2000; Landman, 1987; Zeelenberg, van der Pligt, & Manstead, 1998), I have found that the opposite is true in the context of romantic pursuit dilemmas (Joel, Plaks, & MacDonald, in press, *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*). Being rejected by a potential partner is perceived to be less regrettable than failing to pursue the person and missing a romantic opportunity, which motivates even insecure individuals to pursue potential partners in the face of rejection concerns. In another line of work, I uncovered a boundary condition to the otherwise robust anchoring effect, wherein arbitrary numbers influence people’s judgements. Although arbitrary anchors can be used to make people think that positive relationship events are more likely to happen to them, anchors cannot be used to make people think that negative relationship events are more likely to happen (e.g., breaking up; Joel, MacDonald, & Spielmann, 2017, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*). These effects were not moderated by relationship commitment or relationship length despite relatively large sample sizes, suggesting that even people in relatively new or casual relationships selectively attend to information suggesting that their relationships will succeed.

Relationship researchers have long known that once a relationship becomes established, optimistic biases play an important role in long-term relationship maintenance (see Fletcher & Kerr, 2010 for review). However, I am uncovering evidence that this pro-relationship bias exists even in the early stages of dating, before a substantial commitment has been made. This early pro-relationship bias—what I am now referring to as a progression bias—suggests that self-control may be required to resist advancing relationships with poorly suited partners. Indeed, in a recent pilot study, I found that people reported fewer intentions to invest in new relationships with partners who were unresponsive to their needs if they had high rather than low self-control. I am currently conducting a preregistered, six-month weekly experience study among people in new dating relationships that will allow me to test this effect prospectively. This work is currently funded by a seed grant that was awarded to my lab this past spring ($31,844), and I am currently seeking continued funding for the project through NSF.
I am keenly interested in applying cutting-edge statistical methods to my research. During my postdoctoral research, I gained experience with a machine learning method called random forests and used it to predict romantic desire in Paul Eastwick and Eli Finkel’s speed dating data (Joel, Eastwick, & Finkel, in press, Psychological Science). Results were mixed: although we were able to predict up to 18% of actor variance (people’s overall degree of choosiness) and up to 27% of partner variance (people’s overall degree of attractiveness), we could predict 0% of relationship variance (unique desire for a specific person). The inability of this machine learning method to predict relationship-level desire at all suggests that science still has a long way to go before we really understand romantic desire (and also that online dating websites may be overstating their claims about their matching algorithms). However, it is my hope that machine learning techniques will be able to yield more accurate predictions about other types of future relationship events (e.g., long-term relationship satisfaction), thus helping relationship scientists to explore exciting new research questions about prediction.

In recent years, I have also become increasingly convinced of the need for psychology researchers to increase the transparency and reproducibility of our work. As of 2015, I preregister all new studies, and I share all materials and syntax on OSF (https://osf.io/kiqex/). However, a third tool in the open scientist’s toolbox—open data—poses unique challenges for researchers who collect sensitive and/or non-independent data. These challenges are in need of solutions, and as such, I have recently published a (friendly) adversarial collaboration about this intersection between confidentiality issues and open data practices (Joel, Eastwick, & Finkel, in press, Advances in Methods and Practices in Psychological Science). In this piece, we first debate the appropriate procedures for handling sensitive data, after which we advocate for the development of new tools that will help relationship scientists and others to make their data open while also protecting confidentiality. Tools that we advocate for include anonymization training for graduate students, new databases that can vet requests for access, and applications that allow researchers to analyze uploaded data while hiding the raw values (e.g., on ShinyApps.io).

I am committed to integrating the fields of JDM and romantic relationships as I believe that doing so holds enormous potential, both theoretical and practical. Using a multi-method approach (experimental, longitudinal, daily diary, dyadic samples) and advanced statistical techniques (multilevel modeling, machine learning, dynamical systems, simulated data), I maintain a diverse yet focused program of research on how people make decisions about their relationships, as well as ways in which these decision strategies could be improved for better happiness and health.