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# Commitment, Theories and Typologies

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## **Commitment, Theories and Typologies**

Commitment is a construct at the core of understanding human relationship maintenance. A number of commitment theories and typologies have been offered by social and behavioral scientists over the past several decades. This entry reviews some of these theories and typologies, emphasizing their points of similarity and their differences, and discusses why commitment plays a prominent role in research aimed at understanding the continuity of human relationships. The entry begins by reviewing how theorists have viewed the concept of commitment.

### **The Concept of Commitment**

Commitment has been defined in various ways. At its root, commitment can be defined as intending to continue in a line of action. Thus, relationship commitment may be viewed as intending to continue in a relationship with a given person. The relative simplicity of this definition, however, masks significant differences in how commitment has been conceived by theorists over the years. Some view commitment in behavioral terms (i.e., continuing to do something). Others view it more psychologically, as the subjective experience of relationship continuation (e.g., how one feels about continuing a relationship with a partner). Some conceive of relationship commitment as a unidimensional concept, whereas others emphasize that it is either multidimensional in nature or that there are multiple types of commitment. For example, while some researchers describe commitment as having cognitive (e.g., thoughts), affective (e.g., feelings), and motivational (e.g., intentions) components, others describe several distinct types of commitment itself (such as moral commitment, structural commitment and personal commitment). Still others have emphasized the distinction between voluntary

commitment (i.e., being committed because one wishes to be) and non-voluntary commitment (i.e., being committed because one has to be). Although often possessing points of similarity, theories and typologies of commitment primarily tend to differ based on how commitment itself is conceptualized.

### **Theories and Typologies of Commitment**

Early theories of commitment emphasized the positive factors that led people to continue in a relationship. Factors such as degree of love for a partner and satisfaction with the relationship were held to be important elements in keeping people together. Later theories, while not discounting the critical role of positive factors, included factors that prevent people from leaving a relationship, such as societal disapproval of divorce or not wanting to go through the process of starting over with a new partner. Currently, the most prominent extant theories of relationship commitment are George Levinger's cohesiveness theory, Caryl Rusbult's investment model, and Michael Johnson's tripartite typology. Although these approaches differ, they share some common elements, including the notion that relationships continue because of things that draw us to want to stay with a partner *and* because of things that prevent us ending the relationship.

### **Levinger's Cohesiveness Theory of Commitment**

George Levinger was particularly interested in understanding processes involved in both keeping relationships (particularly marriages) together and breaking them apart. His cohesiveness model, rooted in Kurt Lewin's field theory, emphasized the role of two social forces in determining relationship commitment: attraction forces and barrier forces.

With respect to forces that attract, Levinger described two types of forces: present attractions and alternative attractions. Both present and alternative attractions are

perceived as yielding positive outcomes for the actor but are quite distinctive in nature. Present attractions refer to forces that draw a person toward continuing a given relationship. For example, the love one feels for a partner serves as a present attraction to the relationship and helps to sustain it. Similarly, need fulfillment, wealth, and status are all considered to be commitment-promoting attractions when they are present in a current relationship. Alternative attractions, in contrast, refer to forces that pull a person away from a current relationship. For instance, a particularly compelling unattached colleague for whom one feels attraction may serve as an alternative attraction.

Barrier forces are those things that keep partners from leaving their relationship. Levinger describes both internal and external barriers, each of which act to constrain a person from leaving a relationship. An example of an internal barrier is feelings of obligation toward a partner, which might be rooted in a person's religious beliefs. Leaving a partner would breach the perceived obligation and generate negative feelings. In the case of a marital relationship involving offspring, feeling that children should be raised in a home with two parents may serve as an internal barrier to relationship dissolution. External barrier are forces that operate outside of the person. For example, stringent divorce laws that make it difficult to end a marriage would be considered an external barrier force that serves to maintain relationship commitment. Pressure from friends or family to "stick it out" and "make things work" also can serve as a potent external barrier to dissolution.

Together, attraction forces and barrier forces determine a person's commitment to a relational partner. As both types of forces are dynamic and subject to change over time, commitment may fluctuate to reflect such changes.

## **Rusbult's Investment Model of Commitment**

Caryl Rusbult's theory of commitment is rooted in interdependence theory, proposed by John Thibaut and Harold Kelley in the late 1950s. More specifically, Rusbult uses the interdependence concepts of dependence, comparison level, and comparison level for alternatives as a basis for her investment model of commitment. The investment model holds that commitment is the subjective experience of dependence and is a function of three independent variables: satisfaction level, quality of alternatives, and investment size.

The first variables held to influence commitment is satisfaction. Satisfaction level refers to the relative positivity of outcomes obtained in interactions with a partner. Outcomes are assessed with respect to a person's comparison level for similar outcomes within a given domain. For example, in determining whether one is satisfied with one's current romantic partner, one compares the outcomes received in interaction with the current partner to the outcomes that one has received in past similar kinds of relationships (e.g., outcomes from interactions with past romantic partners). If one's outcomes exceed those experienced in past relationships, one will be satisfied with the current relationship; if outcomes are below those experienced in the past, one will be dissatisfied with the current relationship. If a person has never had a past romantic relationship, he or she might compare the outcomes received in interactions with a new partner to outcomes that he or she has seen obtained by characters in a film or read about in a book. The main point is that past experiences serve to create expectations for a given domain of behavior (e.g., romantic relationships) that are used to evaluate how satisfied we are with newly obtained outcomes in that domain.

The second variable posited to influence commitment is alternatives. Broadly speaking, quality of alternatives refers to the satisfaction envisioned as attainable beyond the current relationship. For example, a person may consider a relationship with the next best available alternative romantic partner (perhaps an ex-partner or someone else to whom one is attracted). A person may also consider non-romantic alternatives to the current relationship, such as the satisfaction afforded by hanging out with friends or by simply being alone. The more compelling one's alternatives are viewed, the less committed one will be to the current partner. If alternatives are not perceived as particularly attractive, one will be more committed to the current partner.

The third factor referred to by Rusbult in her Investment Model is the model's namesake, investments. Sometimes people stay in a relationship because they do not wish to incur the costs associated with a breakup. Investment size refers to those resources (both tangible and intangible) that one has put into a relationship that one would lose or have diminished in value if one were to leave the relationship. For example, a person may consider the time, effort, self-disclosures, joint friends, and personal reputation that might be lost or damaged upon ending a relationship. An interesting aspect of the investment concept is that it points to how a person may become committed to a relationship not because of positive feelings (i.e., satisfaction level) or a lack of other options (i.e., quality of alternative); rather, a person may remain committed because he or she perceives that to do otherwise would yield unacceptably high costs. Thus, sometimes a person remains in a relationship even though they really would rather not. An oft-cited illustration of this can be found in the conventional wisdom that marital partners sometimes remain together "for the sake of the children." Indeed, children can

be considered an investment that helps bind partners to their relationship.

Collectively, satisfaction level, quality of alternatives, and investment size are theorized to influence commitment level. A given relationship may be driven by one or more of these factors and these factors have been found to work together in an additive fashion to influence commitment. Commitment level itself has been found to be associated with a number of relationship maintenance behaviors, such as willingness to sacrifice for one's relationship and forgiveness of betrayal by one's partner. Commitment level has also been found to mediate the effects of satisfaction level, quality of alternatives, and investment size on the enactment of such behaviors.

### **Johnson's Tripartite Typology of Commitment**

Michael Johnson's tripartite framework departs from the previous two models in conceptualizing commitment as a multidimensional rather than unidimensional construct. Johnson specifies three distinct types of commitment: structural commitment, or feeling that one must remain in a relationship; moral commitment, or feeling that one ought to remain in a relationship; and personal commitment, or feeling that one wants to remain in a relationship.

Structural commitment has four components: potential alternatives to the current relationship; perceived social pressure to remain with a current partner; irretrievable investments accrued over the course of a relationship; and the perceived difficulty of terminating the relationship. In Levinger's terms, each of these components is held to make it difficult to end a relationship due largely to external constraints. Moral commitment is comprised of three components: the sense of moral obligation not to divorce one's spouse; the sense of personal obligation to one's partner; and the need to

maintain consistency in one's general values and specific beliefs. Personal commitment also has three components: overall attraction to a partner; attraction to the relationship itself; and one's relational identity (i.e., the extent to which a person views the relationship as part of his or her self concept).

There is clear overlap of many of these components with aspects of Levinger's and Rusbult's models. In contrast with Levinger and Rusbult, however, Johnson proposes that the three different types of commitment yield different subjective experiences. Each type is experienced as either originating from within the person or imposed from outside the person. Moreover, each type is experienced as a function of either choice or constraint. Structural commitment is based on factors that are external to the individual (e.g., social reactions) and is experienced as constraining the individual. Moral commitment is based on an individual's own beliefs, but as morality is a function of societal beliefs, it is experienced as constraining. Personal commitment is based on an individual's own wishes and desires and is, thus, experienced as freely chosen rather than as imposed.

Research by Johnson and colleagues has generally supported the tripartite typology. How do the three types of commitment work together to influence relationship continuation? Johnson proposes that when a person experiences strong moral and personal commitment, structural commitment is not needed to maintain a relationship. In contrast, if a person experiences low moral or personal commitment, structural commitment becomes paramount in determining relationship continuation.

### **Why Commitment Matters**

Regardless of the theory or typology, commitment is considered an important variable by relationship researchers for several reasons. First, it is considered to be a key

motivational variable, with powerful influence on relationship affect, cognition, and motivation. For example, research has found that people who self-report higher levels of commitment tend to think about their relationship in more partner-inclusive ways (e.g., they write about their relationship using more plural pronouns – we, us, our – and fewer singular pronouns – me, I, he, she) and they tend to see their relationship as better than others' relationships. Second, commitment has been shown to relate to the enactment of a variety of critical relationship maintenance behaviors. Behaviors such as accommodation, forgiveness, and willingness to sacrifice for one's partner help to sustain a relationship, keeping partners together "through thick and thin." Put another way, people who are more committed to their partners act differently toward their partners than people are less committed and these actions contribute to relationship continuation. Third, commitment is a proximal predictor of relationship breakup. Over time, commitment ebbs for those people who eventually choose to terminate their relationship and, thus, commitment level serves as a potent bellwether for predicting the ultimate stability of a given relationship. Fourth, and finally, although romantic relationship commitment has been emphasized in this entry, the theories of commitment reviewed here can and have been used to understand commitment beyond the romantic realm. For example, commitments to a friendship, to an organization, to a sports team, or even to a policy position have all been examined using aspects of these theories. Thus, it appears that factors that lead us to continue in romantic relationships also play a prominent role in keeping us committed to a variety of pursuits.

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**See Also:**

Cohesiveness in Groups; Commitment, Predictors and Outcomes; Courtship, Models and Processes of; Dependence; Interdependence Theory; Motivation and Relationships; Social Exchange Theory; Stage Theories of Relationship Development.

**Further Readings:**

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