

Approach and Avoidance Relationship Commitment

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Abstract The current paper proposes that relationship commitment is a goal; and as such, is regulated by the approach and avoidance dimensions. We suggest that two types of commitment exist: approach commitment, the desire to maintain and continue the relationship, and avoidance commitment, the desire to avoid relationship dissolution. Specifically, approach commitment is associated with a desire for future relationship incentives and rewards; and avoidance commitment is a desire to avoid the negative consequences or costs of relationship dissolution. In this paper, we evaluate previous research on relationship commitment from an approach and avoidance goal theory perspective, and then present an approach and avoidance commitment model and hypotheses testable in future research.

Keywords Motivation · Approach and avoidance · Relationship commitment

Commitment has been defined and studied in several different ways. For example, Rusbult and colleagues (1998) have defined commitment as the intent to persist in a relationship. In their model, commitment is primarily influenced by three factors; satisfaction with the relationship, investments in the relationship, and alternatives (or lack thereof) to the relationship, (Rusbult, Drigotas, & Verette, 1994; Rusbult, Wieselquist, Foster, & Witcher, 1999). Whereas Rusbult and colleagues posit one type of commitment influenced by several factors, other researchers have suggested that different

types of commitment exist. For example, *moral commitment* is based on feelings of obligation, *structural commitment* is based on feelings that leaving would be costly, and *personal commitment* is based on feelings of attraction and satisfaction (Johnson, 1999; Meyer, Allen, & Gellatly, 1990; Lydon, Pierce, & O'Regan, 1997). Overall, the research on commitment has been disparate and without a common thread uniting these numerous theories and models (Meyer et al., 1990; Adams & Jones, 1997).

We suggest another perspective which may help to develop a more parsimonious conceptualization of commitment. Specifically, we propose that commitment is a *goal*. A goal is an “internal representation of desired states where states are broadly construed as outcomes, events, or processes” (Austin & Vancouver, 1998, p. 338). The behaviors the person uses to achieve the desired states may be referred to as *intentions* (Gollwitzer, 1993). Previous views of commitment have hinted at the motivational and goal-oriented nature of commitment, but have not explicitly examined commitment from this perspective. For example, commitment has been described as a process that energizes a person to pursue a goal in the face of adversity (Novacek & Lazarus, 1990), and a strong personal intention to continue a relationship (Johnson, 1973; Levinger, 1965; Rusbult & Buunk, 1993). Even within the organizational domain (another area of psychology concerned with commitment), the concept of commitment has been moving from one of a psychological state (i.e. feelings or beliefs concerning the organization) to one that includes feelings of desire, need, and obligation. For example, Meyer et al. (1990) defined affective commitment as “the desire to maintain membership in an organization.”

Although commitment has not been explicitly examined from a motive or goal theory perspective, the study of goal constructs in other domains has been extensive (see Austin & Vancouver, 1998 for a review); and has included work in

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the interpersonal domain (e.g., Sanderson & Cantor, 2001). Regulatory focus has emerged as an important dimension of goals, and in particular, whether the goal is focused on approaching incentives or avoiding threats (e.g., Elliot, 1997; Elliot & Sheldon, 1997; Higgins, 1998). Moreover, recent work has applied the approach and avoidance distinction to interpersonal motives and goals (Gable, 2006). In general, the lengthy theoretical and empirical history of approach-avoidance work can inform our thinking about commitment and offer unique predictions based on this previous research.

Furthermore, there is evidence that these systems have biological roots. The motivational theory of Gray (1970, 1987, 1994) posited distinct appetitive and aversive motivational systems, referred to as the Behavioral Activation System (BAS) and the Behavioral Inhibition System (BIS), respectively. The appetitive system (BAS) activates behavior in response to signals of reward and non-punishment, whereas the aversive system (BIS) inhibits behavior in response to signals of punishment, nonreward, and novel stimuli. Gray suggested that BAS is a function of the limbic circuits and dopaminergic pathways; and the BIS system is rooted in circuits in the hippocampus, the septum and related structures. Recent empirical evidence from neurophysiological investigations provides support for the existence of separate physiological systems (Sutton & Davidson, 1997; Harmon-Jones & Allen, 1997; Sobotka, Davidson, & Senulis, 1992). Overall, the approach and avoidance distinction has been found in numerous domains in psychology and the neurobiological evidence provides a possible reason for its consistent emergence.

The current model posits that a desire to maintain or continue the relationship can be identified as *approach commitment*, and a desire to avoid relationship dissolution can be identified as *avoidance commitment*. Approach commitment is an approach goal and avoidance commitment is an avoidance goal: one is a goal toward relationship stability and one is a goal away from relationship instability. Specifically, approach commitment is associated with a desire for future relationship incentives and rewards; and avoidance commitment is a desire to avoid the negative consequences or costs of relationship dissolution. In this paper, we evaluate relationship commitment from an approach and avoidance goal theory perspective, and then present an approach and avoidance commitment model and hypotheses testable in future research.

Overview of current commitment model

First, it is important to consider what might lead to the adoption of approach and avoidance commitment goals. We suggest that both individual differences in tendencies to adopt approach or avoidance goals and the relationship environment may contribute to the strength of commitment goals.

Recently, Gable (2006) showed that dispositional approach social motives predispose people to adopt short-term approach social goals; and dispositional avoidance social motives predispose people to adopt avoidance social goals. For example, a person in a relationship who has strong approach social motives will be more likely to adopt approach goals, such as “I will try to grow and develop my relationship;” whereas someone who has strong aversive motives will be more likely to adopt avoidance goals, such as “I will try to prevent damaging my relationship.” Similarly, we suggest that approach and avoidance dispositional motivation predispose a person to approach and avoidance commitment. For example, a person with a strong fear of being alone (BIS, Fear of Rejection, etc.) will be more likely to have strong avoidance commitment; and a person with a strong affiliative tendency (BAS, Hope for Affiliation, etc.) will be more likely to have strong approach commitment.

In addition to individual differences, the relationship environment may contribute to goal adoption. Relationships consist of various incentives to stay (e.g. aspects that increase a person’s desire to stay in the relationship) and barriers to leave (e.g. aspects that prevent a person from leaving). For example, attraction to a person is a strong incentive to stay in the relationship, whereas lack of alternatives is a strong barrier to leave because finding another partner is perceived as difficult. Incentives and barriers do not indicate a current positive or negative relationship environment, but rather indicate a possible positive or negative environment in the future if the relationship were to continue (or end). Consider the following example:

Mary has been dating Joe for two years. They share an apartment together and just recently got a dog. Mary works from home and spends her evenings either with Joe or some of their mutual friends. Mary feels very committed and does not want her relationship with Joe to end.

Suzy has been dating Dan for a month now after meeting at a restaurant where Suzy waitresses. Dan is attractive, likes many of the same sports and interests as Suzy, and gets along very well with her family and friends. Suzy feels very committed and wants to continue her relationship with Dan.

Both Mary and Suzy are committed to their relationships, but Mary’s relationship environment seems quite different from Suzy’s. Mary has invested time, emotions, and friends in the relationship that she would lose if the relationship were to end; and she has few immediate alternatives to her current relationship. Her environment is filled with barriers which make leaving the relationship difficult because her future without the relationship looks bleak. In contrast, Suzy’s environment is filled with the possibility of continued incentives such as fun and attraction, which promote

continuing the relationship. We suggest that in combination with one's approach motivational tendency, a relationship environment filled with the possibility of future incentives (such as Suzy's) will promote a motivation toward the maintenance and continuation of the relationship (approach commitment). In contrast, in combination with one's avoidance motivational tendency, a relationship filled with numerous barriers to leaving (such as Mary's) will be associated with a motivation to avoid relationship dissolution due to the possible negative consequences (avoidance commitment).

Moreover, the negative consequences of barriers could include losing the positive aspects of the relationship such as a social network. Barriers consist of both the good aspects that are lost (e.g. friends) and the bad aspects that are gained (e.g. loneliness), and avoidance commitment will be associated with wanting to move away from both of these scenarios. In addition, the incentives to stay may not always be love and attraction, and could include wanting to continue a relationship for money or social status. Previous literature in relationship motivation has distinguished between intrinsic, extrinsic, (Seligman, Fazio, & Zanna, 1980), and instrumental motives (Rempel, Holmes, & Zanna, 1985). For example, a person may be motivated because of the shared enjoyment of an activity, praise, support, and sex received (intrinsic and instrumental), and also for the social status and stronger social network (extrinsic). In general, incentives can be intrinsic or extrinsic, and approach commitment will be associated with wanting to move toward both of these. In addition, self-determination theory (SDT: Deci & Ryan, 1985) suggests that autonomy is a fundamental need that may influence goal-directed processes; and it is likely that both approach and avoidance commitment can be either autonomous or controlled (Knee, Patrick, Vietor, Nanavakkara, & Neighbors, 2002). For example, Higgins and colleagues (1998) describe a motivational focus similar to avoidance that is concerned with responsibilities and obligations, or "oughts," and this indicates a lack of autonomy. While avoidance commitment may be more likely associated with feeling controlled, it is also possible that avoidance commitment feels freely chosen and autonomous. In short, the distinction between autonomy and control is another motivational principle that could be important for approach and avoidance commitment.

Of course, similar to approach and avoidance motivation, it is possible (and even likely) to have both approach and avoidance commitment. For example, Mary may also be very attracted to Joe and want to continue feeling this attraction (approach commitment). Moreover, Suzy may not have a lot of available dating alternatives and therefore does not want her relationship with Dan to end (avoidance commitment).¹ Therefore, we emphasize that an approach oriented focus toward gaining possible future rewards (incentives) of continuing a relationship and an avoidance oriented focus away

from future negative consequences (barriers) of relationship dissolution are influenced by both individual differences in motivation and the relationship environment.

Connections to existing models of commitment

Next, we review several widely identified theories in relationship commitment and their overlap with the proposed approach and avoidance commitment. Many of the established theories and models of commitment have implicitly distinguished between approach and avoidance orientations. Specifically, there are many theories which suggest a dichotomy of forces acting on commitment. Researchers identify attraction and constraining components in commitment such that the attraction aspect is associated with satisfying relationships and the constraining aspect is associated with an absence of happiness and the presence of feeling personal responsibility (Goode, 1959). These constrained individuals may avoid divorce in order to avoid many of the negative emotional and financial consequences. Similarly, Hinde (1979) distinguished between endogenous and exogenous commitment. Endogenous commitment is characterized by partners striving to maintain their relationship and provide rewards, whereas exogenous commitment is characterized by environmentally imposed constraints such as legal and social ties. One form of commitment is based on internal strivings to maintain satisfaction, and the other form is based on external factors that keep the relationship stable. Moreover, Stanley and Markman (1992) suggested that commitment is both personal dedication to the relationship and constraints against leaving it. Overall, there are many theories of relationship commitment that share components with the approach and avoidance distinction.

Interdependence theory and the investment model

One of the most influential theories of relationship research is Interdependence Theory (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978). Kelley and Thibaut suggested that the outcomes of social interactions can be broken down into the rewards a person receives and the costs that one incurs. Rewards are the positive experiences that create feelings of enjoyment and happiness including emotional well-being and self-esteem. On the other hand, costs are the negative experiences that yield emotional or physical discomfort or pain. When examined in conjunction, one can achieve an overall assessment of the outcome called "goodness of outcome."

Kelley and Thibaut suggested that relationships continue only if the experiences with that person meet the "standards of acceptability" for both partners. The first standard for evaluation is the Comparison Level (CL) and is used to evaluate the 'attractiveness' of the relationship. The rewards and costs

(jointly) in the relationship are compared to what one feels he “deserves,” which is based on previous relationships and experiences. In other words, the present situation is compared to the CL, and this is how one determines if a relationship is satisfactory or not. Outcomes above the CL are “satisfying” whereas outcomes below the CL are “unsatisfying.”

The second “standard of acceptability” is the Comparison Level for Alternatives (CLalt). The CLalt is the lowest level of outcomes that is acceptable to a person when taking all available alternatives into account. Therefore, the CLalt depends on the quality of the alternatives, and these can be anything from another relationship to being alone. If one believes that his/her current relationship is better than any other alternative, then he/she is dependent on the relationship. Dependence refers to the degree to which an individual relies on a relationship for the fulfillment of important needs (Drigotas & Rusbult, 1992). Interdependence Theory describes an evaluation of the environment in terms of rewards and costs, but it is the comparison with alternatives that influences the decision to stay in the relationship. The balance of rewards and costs affects the level of satisfaction, but if that is still higher than the best alternative, then the decision is to stay because of the dependence on the relationship. Therefore, a person can be both satisfied and dependent.

Building on Interdependence Theory, Rusbult and colleagues (1983) developed the Investment Model. This model distinguishes between two characteristics of relationships: “satisfaction,” or the positivity of affect and attraction to one’s relationship, and “commitment,” or the desire to maintain a relationship and to feel psychologically attached to it. Satisfaction in a relationship is achieved when the relationship provides high rewards and low costs, and exceeds expectations (i.e., CL). Commitment is influenced by the quality of alternatives, investment size, and satisfaction. Alternatives are similar to the CLalt from Interdependence Theory, however, investment is an added component built into the Investment Model. Rusbult described two categories of investment: intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic investments are resources such as time, emotions, self-disclosure, that would be lost if the relationship dissolved. In contrast, extrinsic investments are resources that are connected to the relationship such as mutual friends, shared memories, or possessions, and activities that are uniquely associated with the relationship. Overall, commitment is influenced by all three of these components: commitment is high when satisfaction and investments are high, and alternatives are low.

We argue that many of these components are influenced or moderated by the approach and avoidance goal orientation. For example, similar to the comparison level (CL), Carver and Scheier (1990) suggested that we compare an internal reference to the environment. This comparison can either be focused on reducing or enlarging a discrepancy (e.g. approach or avoidance). For example, a person can

want the relationship to continue because of the desire to obtain more incentives in the future (reducing discrepancy), and a person can want the relationship not to end because of the desire to avoid the costly consequences of relationship dissolution (enlarging discrepancy). This reducing/enlarging comparison can be applied to the evaluation of rewards and investments in the relationship.

Additionally, both Interdependence Theory and the Investment Model suggest that satisfaction is not a necessary component for commitment. It is possible to be unsatisfied but have poor alternatives and high investment, and consequently, be highly committed to the relationship (Rusbult, 1983). Therefore, one person may be satisfied and committed and another person unsatisfied and committed. Again, an approach-avoidance perspective may help to distinguish between these two types of relationships by elucidating differences in the definition of satisfaction as well as the focus of the commitment goals.

Levinger’s theory

In his writings, Lewin (1951) conceptualized “driving forces” and “restraining forces.” Driving forces are similar to approach and avoidance motives such that they drive a person either toward a positive object (approach) or away from a negative object (avoidance). Restraining forces act to restrain one from leaving any particular relationship/situation and are also similar to avoidance motivation. Furthermore, social exchange theory suggested a “bartering of rewards and costs” within a relationship (Huston & Burgess, 1979, p. 4). Levinger (1965, 1976) applied both Lewin’s ideas and social exchange processes to marriage in his model of marital cohesiveness and dissolution. This model views marriage as a “two-person group,” and therefore, marriage is subject to the forces which act to make a group cohesive. First, there are the inducements *to remain in a group* which include the attractiveness of the group such as satisfaction and the strength of the restraints to leaving the group. Second, there are the inducements *to leave a group* which include the attractiveness of other groups or alternatives and the restraints against breaking up the existing group or relationship. In short, Levinger posits that the strength of a relationship is a function of “attraction forces” and “barrier forces.” For example, attraction forces include rewards (e.g. companionship, sexual enjoyment) and these are inducements to remain in the group. In contrast, barrier forces include the costs that one would incur by leaving a relationship (e.g. financial, family, emotional, religious, or moral ties to the relationship), and this can be an inducement to not leave the group.

Levinger’s model suggests that unhappy couples may not dissolve their relationship because forces other than satisfaction are keeping them together. As investments in the relationship increase, these unhappy couples persist in their

relationship motivated by an attempt to make these investments “pay off.” Additionally, he suggests that a relationship based entirely on positive feelings and attraction is vulnerable to instability; however a relationship based entirely on feelings of obligation and barrier forces is filled with unhappiness. Thus, a relationship based on wanting investments to “pay off” creates relationship instability, as does a relationship based only on positive feelings. Our model suggests a similar dichotomy of independent forces toward relationship stability. However, we suggest that either approach or avoidance commitment will sustain a relationship, and it is when both are low that dissolution occurs. A person does not have to be happy with their relationship, but as long as they have a strong desire to attain more positive feelings in the future, they will try to keep the relationship stable. Moreover, we suggest that the type of incentive (intrinsic versus extrinsic) may be influential and an approach commitment for love (intrinsic) may benefit the relationship more than an approach commitment for money/status (extrinsic).

Types of commitment

In contrast to models that posit one type of commitment influenced by several factors, other commitment models identify different types of commitment. Johnson (1999) proposed three types of relationship commitment: personal, structural, and moral commitment. Within the organizational literature, Meyer et al. (1990) suggested a tripartite system of commitment which includes affective, continuance, and normative commitment. Adams and Jones (1997) suggested a similar system of commitment: *Commitment to Spouse* which is based on devotion, satisfaction, and love; *Feelings of Entrapment* which is based on the fear of the social, financial, and emotional costs of leaving the relationship; and *Commitment to Marriage* which is based on a sense of personal responsibility for maintaining the marriage and the belief that marriage is an important social and religious institution. Although labels for these types of commitment differ, they share the idea that commitment involves a motivation to continue the relationship. In particular, this motivation is rooted in feeling that one wants to stay, ought to stay, or needs to stay. Several types of commitment merit consideration.

Attraction commitment

One type of commitment is attraction (also known as personal, affective, or enthusiastic commitment). This commitment occurs when a person wants to continue the relationship based on attraction and satisfaction in the relationship. Similar to affective responses in the approach system (Carver & Scheier, 1990), this commitment is based on both the positive feelings about the relationship (e.g. satisfaction, love) and an absence of negative feelings if the relationship were

to end (e.g. no sad feelings if relationship were to end). For example, Lydon and colleagues' (1997) version of this commitment called “enthusiastic” was defined by asking participants if they felt enthusiastic about the relationship, enjoyment about the relationship, relief if not in the relationship (reverse coded), and to what degree they perceived the relationship as a burden (reverse coded). Lydon et al. found that enthusiastic commitment was correlated with finding the relationship attractive, rewarding, and satisfying, and finding alternatives unappealing. In other words, enthusiastic commitment is similar to Interdependence Theory's weighing of the rewards and costs of the relationship and comparing this to available alternatives. Overall, attraction commitment is similar to the proposed approach commitment goal such that it is focused on the incentives or positive aspects of a union, and both are based on a “want” or “desire” to continue the relationship. However, many of these measures are focused on the current state of the relationship, and confound their definition with satisfaction. For example, Lydon et al. (1997) found that satisfaction was the primary predictor of enthusiastic commitment. We suggest that commitment should be interpreted as a goal and not as a measure of current satisfaction. Specifically, a person with strong approach commitment looks toward the future as a way to obtain more of these incentives.

Continuance commitment

A second type is continuance commitment (also called structural commitment). It involves partners feeling they have to continue the relationship because leaving the relationship would be too costly. Johnson (1991) argued that this type of commitment has four components: 1) the availability of alternatives, 2) social pressure such as their network not approving of relationship dissolution, 3) the difficulty of termination procedures such as divorce proceedings, and 4) irretrievable investments such as time and resources. In short, continuance commitment shares many similar components with avoidance commitment goals: both include a focus on the barriers and possible costs to leaving and a desire not to have the relationship end. In addition, continuance commitment focuses on future negative consequences (e.g. divorce proceedings, loss of investments). Similarly, our model suggests that avoidance commitment is associated with looking to the possible costs of leaving and moving away from these negative consequences.

Moral commitment

A third type is moral commitment (also called normative commitment). This commitment involves feeling morally obligated to one's partner or the relationship. In the context of marriage, this may be the feeling that marriage ought to

last “until death do us part.” However, this could also be a personal moral obligation such that a person feels she promised her partner they would spend the rest of their lives together (Johnson, 1999). Similar to Johnson, Lydon and colleagues (1997) described moral commitment as an individual’s own values and feelings that one ought to continue a relationship and consisted of feelings of commitment, attachment, obligation, and duty. In their research, Lydon examined the distinctiveness of enthusiastic commitment and moral commitment; however, again we note that their definition of each was based on emotions. Specifically, Lydon suggested that the difference between the two types of commitment is that one is based on satisfaction and the other is based on feelings of meaning, defined as “the sense that a goal expresses one’s values, identity, and core beliefs about the self and others” (p. 105).

These examples suggest that moral commitment involves a fear of disappointing friends, family, co-workers, and feeling an obligation towards religion, morals, and the law. Indeed, moral commitment includes many similar components with the proposed avoidance commitment goal. For example, moral commitment involves a focus on the costs to leaving and the desire not to have the relationship end because it may involve breaking a vow, marriage contract, etc. In addition, both Levinger (1965, 1976) and Rusbult (1983) indicated that religious proscriptions and adherence of moral principles constitute barrier forces and investments. And, Lauer and colleagues (Lauer & Lauer, 1986; Lauer, Lauer, & Kerr, 1990) have suggested that commitment to the institution of marriage is a barrier to exiting and is the primary barrier to keeping unhappy couples from divorce. Moreover, researchers have grouped continuance and moral commitment together based on the various interpretations of moral commitment. For example, Levinger (1999) noted that Johnson’s moral commitment and continuance commitment represent internal and external constraints, however, he chose to group these different constraints into one category of “barriers.” He does not agree that there is a clear distinction between internal and external forms of constraint (e.g. moral and structural). Instead, he believes that external barriers must be personally perceived in order for them to affect behavior, and therefore all barriers are degrees of internal constraints. For example, some people do not adhere to social norms as strictly as others, and therefore a moral restraint does not affect everyone equally.

In addition to theoretical differences as to whether to group moral commitment as a part of continuance commitment or treat it as its own component in a tripartite model, empirical evidence has also shown mixed results. For example, moral commitment was a function of consistency values within men, however, among women, moral commitment was a function of consistency values, moral obligation, and two components of structural commitment (alternatives and

social pressure) (Johnson et al., 1999). From our motivational perspective, moral commitment can fit nicely into a parsimonious approach-avoidance model. We suggest that moral commitment can be framed through both an approach and avoidance lens. Specifically, the sense of meaning derived from adhering to a moral proscription could also be something that a person wants to achieve through the continuation of their relationship, thereby exemplifying an approach orientation. Or, social restraints can make commitment feel like an obligation and relationship dissolution a failure to uphold societal norms that a person wants to move away from, thereby exemplifying an avoidance orientation.

In sum, an approach and avoidance motivational focus can be applied to the different types of commitment currently discussed in the literature, and may even help to clarify mixed theoretical and empirical differences. Next, we offer suggestions as to how this new model and conceptualization of commitment may add clarity to and expand current research. Previous goal and motive research has elucidated how different goals and progress on the goals influence emotion, behavior, and cognition. Using previous goal research as a guide, we can organize the previous commitment literature, and also generate new predictions. Specifically, the distinction between approach and avoidance commitment may help to expand our understanding of how relationship commitment relates to important affective, cognitive, and behavioral outcomes.

Testable predictions of the model

Commitment measure

While there are many similarities among current conceptualized models of commitment, there is little overlap in measurement. For example, Johnson found that Rusbult’s assessment of commitment (derived from the investment model) overlaps extensively with his measure of personal commitment, but not moral or structural commitment (Johnson, Caughlin, & Huston, 1999). Similarly, Adams and Jones (1997) found that Rusbult’s “attractiveness to alternatives” items correlated only with their attraction component (Commitment to Spouse), and Johnson’s “termination procedures” (a component of structural commitment) correlated with all three types of commitment in their model (attraction, moral, and structural). Furthermore, many of the current commitment measures seem to overlap extensively with relationship satisfaction. For example, several studies obtained correlations between commitment and satisfaction in excess of .70 (e.g. Jones, Adams, Monroe, & Berry, 1995; Sacher & Fine, 1996). Overall, there is a lack of consistency in measurement, and therefore, the first research question we propose is how to measure approach and avoidance commitment.

Frank and Brandstatter (2002) attempted to construct a measure of approach and avoidance commitment; and their definition of approach commitment was derived from Meyer's et al. (1990) personal-affective (i.e. "want to") commitment and avoidance commitment was from the moral-normative (i.e. "ought to") and structural-continuance (i.e. "have to") commitment. Frank and Brandstatter's (2002) study supports many of the ideas in the current proposal such that affective commitment is similar to approach and continuance and moral are similar to avoidance. However, items from Meyer and Allen's commitment measure were not motivationally derived, and therefore, do not distinguish between a desire to continue versus a desire not to have the relationship end. For example, "I am attached to my partner" does not specify if the attachment is based on future incentives or costs and does not indicate a goal orientation. Moreover, they validated their approach and avoidance scales using Higgins' promotion-focused and prevention-focused scale. While Higgins' work is similar in structure to approach and avoidance motivation, a proper validation of the Meyer and Allen components would necessitate comparison with measures specifically of approach and avoidance motivation, such as Carver and White's behavioral activation and inhibition scale (BIS/BAS: 1994) or existing measures of approach and avoidance social motives and goals (e.g., Elliot Gable, and Mapes' (2006) social goals scale; Mehrabian's (1976) Hope for Affiliation Scale; Jackson's (1970) Fear of Rejection Scale). In short, we propose that current relationship commitment measures do not address the approach and avoidance distinction, and therefore, the first step in this examination should be scale construction. For example, an approach commitment item should be similar to "I want to continue this relationship because I want to share more activities with my partner," and an avoidance commitment item similar to "I don't want my relationship to end because I don't want to be alone."

Independence and relationship length

There has been extensive research to suggest that the approach and avoidance systems are independent (Sutton & Davidson, 1997; Gable, Reis, & Elliot, 2000). In addition, both Interdependence Theory and the Investment Model propose that a person can be committed to a relationship for multiple reasons (e.g. satisfaction and dependence). Levinger also posited the independence of attraction and barrier forces as a necessity for a relationship to be both happy and stable. Based on this previous research, the current model posits that approach and avoidance commitment are independent such that it is possible to be motivated to maintain a relationship to garner future incentives (e.g. approach commitment), or motivated to prevent relationship dissolution to avoid the

negative outcomes associated with barriers (e.g. avoidance commitment), or both.

It is also likely that relationship length will play a role in the relative strength of these two goals. Specifically, approach commitment may be stronger at the beginning of a relationship when incentives tend to be a primary reason for engaging in a relationship. However, as a relationship progresses, avoidance commitment may increase as barriers to exit increase (e.g. mutual friends, cohabitation, etc.). The marital literature suggests that satisfaction in marriage declines over time, particularly in women (Bradbury & Karney, 2004); and this fluctuation in satisfaction over time may be influenced by the increase and decrease in approach and avoidance commitment.

Definition of satisfaction

Research has found that how a person values their emotional experiences influences judgments of overall life satisfaction (Updegraff, Gable, & Taylor, 2004). Specifically, Updegraff et al. (2004) found that individuals with strong approach motivation based their judgment of overall satisfaction on their recent positive emotions. This is consistent with Gable's (2006) social motives model positing that approach social motives/goals are associated with defining successful interactions and relationships as those which provide incentives such as fun, companionship, and understanding; and painful relationships are those that fail to provide these rewards. In contrast, avoidance orientation is associated with defining pleasing interactions and relationships as those that lack uncertainty, disagreements, and anxiety; and painful relationships are those that possess these negative qualities.

Based on this previous motivational research, it is likely that approach and avoidance commitment will influence how the judgment of relationship satisfaction is made. The current model predicts that both approach and avoidance commitment will be positively correlated with feeling relationship satisfaction (as established in previous research noted above); however, individuals high in approach commitment will define relationship satisfaction based on their perceptions of the presence of continued positive aspects of the relationship, and individuals high in avoidance commitment will define relationship satisfaction based on their perceptions of the absence of threats to relationship security. Specifically, the presence of current rewards indicate the possibility of more in the future; whereas the absence of threats indicate a felt security that the relationship will not end.

Relationship stability

Many researchers have examined commitment and have shown that it is a powerful predictor of relationship persistence (Rusbult, 1983; Feilmlee, Sprecher, & Bassin, 1990).

Lydon and colleagues (1997) found that after approximately 3 months of separation, moral commitment significantly predicted relationship survival for long-distance daters, and enthusiastic commitment marginally predicted survival. In addition, Drigotas and Rusbult (1992) found that relationships with more “dependence” were less likely to end. White and Booth (1991) also found that fewer alternatives and many barriers against relationship dissolution were associated with marital stability. Overall, both the barriers that prevent leaving a relationship and the incentives to stay seem to be strong influences on stability. Therefore, the model proposes that approach and avoidance commitment will jointly contribute to relationship stability, and when both are low, a relationship will be more likely to end.

The dyadic component

Commitment in a romantic relationship differs from other commitments, such as commitment to a job or organization. Relationship commitment involves another person, creating a dyad. In short, what are the relationships like for two people with strong avoidance commitment, strong approach commitment, or one of each? We can again draw on previous research to guide some preliminary dyadic hypotheses. For example, Wieselquist and colleagues (1999) suggested a pro-relationship cycle in which commitment promotes pro-relationship behaviors. Specifically, when partners perceive pro-relationship behaviors such as constructive accommodation and sacrifice, pro-relationship behaviors are returned. However, this cycle of relationship growth may not occur if pro-relationship behaviors are not perceived. For example, if one person in the dyad has strong avoidance commitment and is focused on the presence/absence of negative events, they will likely miss the positive events resulting in less reciprocation of positive events. Motivation work by Impett, Gable, and Peplau (2005) found support for this idea. They showed that individuals that engaged in relationship sacrifices for approach motives had increased satisfaction, and partners that perceived sacrifices as approach motivated also felt increased satisfaction. Indeed, the dyadic component of approach and avoidance commitment will be an important piece to investigate in future research.

Gender differences

It is important to note that women tend to be more committed to their relationship than men (Duffy & Rusbult, 1986), and the correlates of commitment may differ by gender. For example, Sprecher (1988) found that satisfaction has a greater effect on commitment for males than for females. In addition, Davis and Strube (1993) found that different components of the Investment Model predict commitment for males than for females. Specifically, both satisfaction and attractiveness

of alternatives are predictors of commitment for females, however only attractiveness of alternatives was predictive of commitment for males. Thus, while the current model does not necessarily predict specific gender differences, previous research on commitment cautions that gender may be important when examining approach and avoidance commitment.

Conclusion

In a paper on the future directions of relationship commitment, Adams (1999) stated that “the literature would benefit most from attention to three general areas: 1) the conceptualization and measurement of commitment, 2) the development of models that elaborate on important processes relevant to commitment, and 3) the integration of the commitment literature with other theoretically meaningful bodies of research” (p. 503). Commitment has been investigated for decades utilizing many different lenses, however, in an effort to develop the literature, we propose a new perspective— one that draws on previous research in motivation and considers commitment to a relationship with another person a “goal.” Viewing commitment through a goal-theory lens will provide a more complete picture of emotional, cognitive, and behavioral commitment processes. A benefit of this perspective is that both incentives to staying and barriers to leaving can be addressed simultaneously. A second, and perhaps greater benefit of this perspective is that commitment research can draw on the voluminous literature of motives and goals that has come before to derive detailed predictions on both the development and consequences of approach and avoidance commitment.

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