
Being Committed: Affective, Cognitive, and Conative Components of Relationship Commitment

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This article presents the first systematic empirical examination of the state of relationship commitment as advanced by Rusbult and her colleagues, defining the state in terms of affective, cognitive, and conative components. From this perspective, the state of commitment is seen as having three distinct components: (a) psychological attachment, (b) long-term orientation, and (c) intention to persist. Two longitudinal studies of individuals in dating relationships revealed that the three components each predict both couple functioning and eventual breakup status. Both studies also provided suggestive evidence that long-term orientation is a particularly important component of commitment in dating relationships.

Theory and research on the determinants of relationship maintenance have increased markedly over the past three decades (Adams & Jones, 1999). There is substantial agreement among researchers that level of commitment to a relationship is strongly related to whether the relationship lasts (cf. Kelley, 1983). In keeping with a social psychological tradition of examining feelings, thoughts, and motivations related to key constructs (e.g., Ostrom, 1969), the current research examines the state of relationship commitment, defining commitment in terms of its affective, cognitive, and conative components. Consistent with Rusbult's theoretical position concerning the state of commitment (cf. Rusbult & Buunk, 1993), the present research posits that commitment to a relationship is a multidimensional construct with three distinct components: (a) psychological attachment to the relationship (affective component), (b) long-term orientation regarding the relationship (cognitive component), and (c) intention to persist in the relationship (conative component). We report the

results from two longitudinal studies that examined various questions concerning this conceptualization.

Commitment and Relationship Persistence

A review of the sizable literature on relationship stability suggests that there are several factors that can increase the odds of relationship breakup (cf. Karney & Bradbury, 1995). For instance, couple members in relationships that end report relatively low levels of satisfaction and closeness, exhibit high rates of negative interactions and negative or defensive communication styles, have attractive and accessible alternatives to the current relationship, lack a social network that might serve to bolster their relationships, and are likely to exhibit an avoidant attachment style (Feeney & Noller, 1992; Feinlee, Sprecher, & Bassin, 1990; Gottman & Levenson, 1992; Simpson, 1987). This research has contributed to our descriptive knowledge of the factors contributing to relationship dissolution, yielding a useful list of risk factors for breakup.

An alternative approach has been to test theoretical explanations of the process by which relationships persist (or perish) over time, including detailed examinations of relationship commitment (Agnew, Van Lange, Rusbult, & Langston, 1998; Johnson, 1973; Kelley, 1983;

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Levinger, 1965; Rusbult, 1983; Simpson, Gangestad, & Lerma, 1990; Stanley & Markman, 1992; Surra, Arrzzi, & Asmussen, 1988). Commitment has been described as the causal mechanism by which various other relationship-promoting factors lead to relationship persistence (Johnson, 1973; Rusbult, 1983). In addition to its association with relationship persistence, strong commitment has been shown to be associated with a host of relationship maintenance behaviors (see Rusbult & Buunk, 1993, for a review), including inclinations toward accommodative behavior, derogation of tempting alternatives, willingness to sacrifice immediate well-being for the good of a partner, and greater tendencies toward positive illusions concerning the relationship. Despite extensive research on the central role of commitment in ongoing relationship processes, there is mixed agreement on precisely what constitutes commitment.

Conceptualizations of Relationship Commitment

Most theorists agree that commitment involves the factors that lead one to continue in a relationship (cf. Kelley, 1983). However, different accounts of the exact factors that comprise relationship commitment abound (Adams & Jones, 1997; Surra, Hughes, & Jacquet, 1999). A committed couple member has been described as a person who (a) has a strong personal intention to continue the relationship (Johnson, 1973; Levinger, 1965; Rusbult & Buunk, 1993), (b) feels attached or linked to the partner (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993; Stanley & Markman, 1992), (c) feels morally obligated to continue the relationship (Johnson, 1991; Lydon, Pierce, & O'Regan, 1997), (d) imagines being with the partner in the long-term future (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993), (e) places primacy in a relationship over other aspects of life (Stanley & Markman, 1992), (f) has overcome challenges to the relationship (Brickman, Dunkel-Schetter, & Abbey, 1987; Lydon & Zanna, 1990), (g) has relatively poor alternatives to the current relationship (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), (h) has many tangible and intangible resources that would be lost if the relationship were to end (Hinde, 1979; Johnson, 1973; Lund, 1985; Rosenblatt, 1977), and (i) confronts difficulties in ending (or strong social pressure to continue) a relationship (Johnson, 1991; Levinger, 1965; Rosenblatt, 1977). Others have discussed commitment in more general terms beyond its application to interpersonal relationships (e.g., Becker, 1960). This nonexhaustive list suggests that relationship commitment is a multifaceted concept (Adams & Jones, 1997).

Several authors have attempted to organize the multitude of factors related to commitment by drawing broad distinctions among these factors. One such distinction

concerns whether commitment factors originate in the relationship itself or are imposed from outside the relationship (Kelley, 1983; Stanley & Markman, 1992). Examples of factors derived from the couple members themselves—referred to as endogenous commitment (Hinde, 1979), personal commitment (Johnson, 1991), or personal dedication (Rosenblatt, 1977)—include being satisfied with one's relationship or making it a life priority. Examples of factors derived from outside the relationship—referred to as exogenous commitment (Hinde, 1979), structural commitment (Johnson, 1991), or commitment as conformity to external pressures (Rosenblatt, 1977)—include having close others pressure continuance or not having the financial resources to leave.

A second broad distinction concerns whether commitment factors are best captured by objective indicators or by subjective perceptions. Some of these factors involve aspects of the relationship that can be observed by noncouple members (e.g., observing the exchange of wedding vows, noticing interventions by family members during a couple's difficulties). Other factors focus on couple members' perceptions of their own relationship (e.g., reports of wanting the relationship to continue, reports of not having alternatives to the relationship). Recent research has advanced our knowledge of subjective understandings of commitment and examined ways in which individuals describe the term "commitment" (Fehr, 1999; Marston, Hecht, Manke, McDaniel, & Reeder, 1998) as well as couple members' explanations of why their level of commitment has changed (Surra et al., 1999).

A third distinction that might be used to organize the diverse set of factors associated with commitment concerns whether commitment is defined in terms of causes of relationship persistence or in terms of a psychological state that involves something beyond relationship persistence. Kelley (1983) defined the state of commitment in terms of that which stably causes a relationship to remain intact over time (e.g., conditions that cause "membership stability"); that is, the causal conditions leading to relationship persistence over time comprise the state of commitment. Johnson (1991) also describes a committed state in terms of causes of relationship persistence: A person remains in a relationship because they want to do so (personal commitment), ought to do so (moral commitment), and/or have no choice but to do so (structural commitment). Johnson further differentiates between the causes of commitment and the state of commitment, suggesting, for example, that valuing the continuation of a current relationship (or the continuation of relationships in general) causes strong moral commitment. Thus, some have suggested that although a host of

conditions create strong commitment, the actual state of commitment is defined in terms of *reasons for persisting* in a relationship.

Rusbult and Buunk (1993) maintain that the actual state of commitment involves more than having strong reasons for persisting in a relationship, describing the components of commitment as follows:

Commitment level is a psychological state that globally represents the experience of dependence on a relationship. . . . [Commitment] represents long-term orientation, including feelings of attachment to a partner and desire to maintain a relationship, for better or worse. Thus, commitment is defined as a subjective state, including both cognitive and emotional components, that directly influences a wide range of behaviors in an ongoing relationship. (p. 180)

Rusbult (1983) further suggests that three factors cause the state of commitment: satisfaction level, or the positive versus negative outcomes experienced in a relationship; quality of alternatives, or the perceived desirability of available alternatives to the current relationship; and investment size, or resources tied to a relationship that would be lost if the relationship were to end (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998). These causal factors remain distinct from commitment, which, in turn, has its own psychological “reality” (i.e., being psychologically attached, adopting a long-term orientation, and intending to maintain a relationship). We do not wish to suggest that a strong psychological attachment, long-term orientation, and intention to persist are the only indicators of a committed state. Rather, we suggest that these components are some of the psychological characteristics of being committed.

The importance of examining the psychological state of commitment that exists beyond the mere state of persisting in a relationship can be illustrated in the following example: David and Susan are spouses who have persisted in their relationship for many years because they vowed to remain together “until death do us part.” Yet, they differ in important ways: Compared to Susan, David is more satisfied, has more invested, and perceives fewer alternatives; that is, David is more dependent on Susan than Susan is on David (Rusbult et al., 1998). David’s high dependence on Susan corresponds to her power over him—his dependence and her power reflect different sides of the same objective set of circumstances (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Of importance, although their relationship has persisted, they have different subjective experiences of commitment. Indeed, often spouses may remain together despite their differing states of commitment; that is, despite having markedly different affective experiences, thoughts, and intentions concerning their relationship. Thus, the subjective psychological experi-

ence, as defined by these components, can be seen as providing important and unique information about a relationship.

Affective, Cognitive, and Conative Components of Commitment

The state of commitment involves affective, cognitive, and conative components. This conceptualization is similar to ones offered to clarify the nature of other multidimensional social psychological (e.g., attitudes) (cf. Ostrom, 1969) and relationship (e.g., love) (cf. Aron & Westbay, 1996) constructs. The first component, psychological attachment to the relationship, refers to the affective connection that develops between committed relationship partners. As partners become increasingly dependent and reliant on each other for their well-being, they knowingly or unknowingly become increasingly susceptible to strong emotional experiences triggered by partner behaviors (Berscheid, 1983). Furthermore, individuals who are increasingly committed also may vicariously be affected by a partner’s positive and negative experiences. Indeed, as partners’ emotional experiences become synchronized, they often are not aware of the extent to which they are linked to one another. Couple members may believe they no longer have strong feelings for the other only to be surprised by unanticipated strong emotional experiences once they are separated (Berscheid, 1983). Thus, part of the “glue” that keeps couples together over time is the affective bond that develops between committed partners (Sprecher, 1999).

The second component, long-term orientation regarding the relationship, is more cognitive in nature. It involves a strong assumption that in the distant future the relationship will remain intact. Rather than feeling emotionally attached to the relationship, the long-term orientation component involves envisioning oneself as involved with one’s partner into the distant future, “for better or worse.” Increased dependence leads couple members to adopt a broader perspective of the relationship (Clark, Mills, & Powell, 1986), in which it is assumed that the partner is motivated to maintain the relationship into the future (Holmes & Rempel, 1989). Stable relationships are also characterized by communication implicitly suggesting that the relationship will remain intact well into the future (Marston et al., 1998; Miller & Boster, 1988). Indeed, interdependent couple members exhibit a general cognitive tendency to adopt a joint identity (Agnew et al., 1998; Stanley & Markman, 1992) as well as to maintain cognitive representations that are linked to long-term relationship persistence (Murray & Holmes, 1999).

The third component, intention to persist in the relationship, refers to being intrinsically motivated to continue a relationship beyond the present time. It embodies the motivational state held to underlie much of human social behavior and, as such, is consistent with the predominant social psychological models of behavioral prediction (e.g., Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). Thus, intending to persist in a relationship comprises the conative (or motivational) component of commitment. Many theoretical conceptualizations of commitment contain an intention component (e.g., Hinde's private pledge or Johnson's personal commitment). Merely expecting or intending for an event to occur may trigger a reorganization of the environment so as to create the conditions that bring about the event (Lewin, 1951); merely intending to continue the relationship may bring about conditions supporting continuance. This motivational component and long-term orientation are related but distinct constructs. As Johnson (1991) suggests of individuals low in personal commitment but high in structural commitment, it is possible to have thoughts that place oneself with the partner in the distant future yet lack sustained motivation to continue the relationship.

The Current Research

Given that these three components have yet to be subject to detailed empirical examination, the primary purpose of the current research was to examine the multidimensional conceptualization of commitment advanced above. We anticipated that each component of commitment would be positively associated with general couple functioning. Moreover, given the central role of couple functioning in directing the course of relationships, each component also was expected to be associated with relationship persistence.

Hypotheses 1a, 1b, and 1c: Higher levels of couple functioning will be associated with (a) greater levels of psychological attachment to the relationship, (b) stronger long-term orientation regarding the relationship, and (c) greater intention to persist in the relationship.

Hypotheses 2a, 2b, and 2c: Relationship persistence will be associated with (a) greater levels of psychological attachment to the relationship, (b) stronger long-term orientation regarding the relationship, and (c) greater intention to persist in the relationship.

A secondary aim of this research was to explore the possibility that one of the components figures prominently in characterizing ongoing relationships. For example, just as behavioral intention has been found to be the most proximal and robust predictor of behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980), so too might the intention component of commitment be most associated with per-

sistence. An additional aim of Study 1 was to explore how the different components of commitment emerge over time, and particularly how they change during the transition from new involvements to increasingly committed relationships. To examine the emergence of commitment, Study 1 involved individuals in recently initiated dating relationships rather than highly committed or marital relationships.

STUDY 1

For our preliminary investigation, we conducted a study using extant data. Study 1 was a multiwave longitudinal study principally designed to investigate stability of satisfaction level in recently initiated dating relationships (Arriaga, 2001, Study 1). Basic measures of each component of commitment were collected, allowing for a test of the current hypotheses.

Method

Design and participants. The study involved 10 measurement occasions (or "times") conducted 1 week apart and a follow-up session conducted approximately 4 months after Time 10. Participants were undergraduates who volunteered to participate in fulfillment of requirements for introductory psychology courses at a major Southern research university. To study the initial development of commitment, participation was limited to individuals who had been involved in a dating relationship of no less than 2 weeks and no more than 3 months. Sixty-five individuals began the study at Time 1, with 47 participants (31 women and 16 men) completing all 11 sessions including the follow-up.¹

Participants were 19 years old on average ($SD = 1.33$) at Time 1. The majority were White (65%, with 25% African American, 5% Asian American, and 5% Latino). At Time 1, the relationships were, on average, 8 weeks in duration and primarily exclusive in nature. At follow-up (4 months after Time 10), a third of the participants ($n = 16$) continued to be in their relationships, whereas two thirds ($n = 31$) were no longer dating their Time 1 partners.

Procedure. Data collection sessions were conducted on a weekly basis in a small classroom, with approximately 10 participants taking part in each session. At Time 1, the experimenter described the number of measurement occasions as well as benefits to taking part in the study and obtained written consent from participants. At each session thereafter, the experimenter reviewed instructions and the confidentiality of responses and distributed questionnaires. At follow-up, participants were also debriefed and thanked for their assistance.

Measures. At each time, participants completed a number of measures, including items that tapped the

theorized components of commitment outlined above. As is often the case with extant data, the general set of commitment items administered in this study was not designed specifically for the purpose of tapping the theorized components. However, one item was identified as clearly capturing the essence of each component: "I feel very attached to our relationship—very strongly linked to my partner" (tapping psychological attachment to the relationship; $M = 5.51$, $SD = 2.06$), "I am oriented toward the long-term future of my relationship (e.g., I imagine being with my partner several years from now)" (tapping long-term orientation; $M = 4.19$, $SD = 2.93$), and "I intend to stay in this relationship" (tapping intent to persist in the relationship; $M = 5.26$, $SD = 2.51$). Each item employed a 9-point response scale (0 = *do not agree at all*, 8 = *agree completely*). Given that these items comprised various facets of one underlying construct—commitment level—they were expected to be, and indeed were, highly correlated (psychological attachment with long-term orientation, $r = .55$; with intent to persist, $r = .68$; long-term orientation with intent to persist, $r = .65$; all $ps < .01$).

To measure couple functioning, individuals completed a modified 18-item version of Spanier's (1976) Dyadic Adjustment Scale ($\alpha = .91$) (e.g., "How often do you and your partner quarrel? Do you quarrel . . ."; 1 = *all the time*, 2 = *sometimes*, 3 = *rarely*). At follow-up, only individuals whose relationships persisted were asked to complete the couple-functioning measure.

To measure breakup status, participants were asked at follow-up whether they were still dating the person they were dating at the start of the study. Participants whose relationships ended also were asked who was responsible for the breakup—the participant, the partner, or both participant and partner in mutual agreement. On the basis of responses to these questions, participants were categorized into one of three breakup groups: (a) those individuals whose relationships endured, or "stayers" ($n = 16$); (b) those individuals who ended their relationships, or "leavers" ($n = 20$); and (c) those individuals whose partner ended the relationship, or "abandoned" individuals ($n = 7$).²

Results and Discussion

Because the sample was composed of individuals in relatively new relationships, our analyses focused on Time 10, when greater levels of commitment might be observed.

Associations between components and couple functioning. To test Hypotheses 1a, 1b, and 1c, we calculated Time 10 concurrent correlations between each component and couple functioning. Consistent with the hypotheses, each of the three components was positively associated with couple functioning (psychological attachment to the relationship, $r = .49$; long-term orientation regarding

the relationship, $r = .44$; intention to persist in the relationship, $r = .45$; all $p < .01$). Because the overall sample was composed of many relationships that eventually ended, it is not surprising to find these effects for couple functioning: Those relationships about to end are almost certain to be poorly functioning.

To examine couple functioning among relationships that were not on the verge of ending, we calculated lagged correlations between Time 10 components and couple functioning measured at follow-up (i.e., 4 months later) on the 16 individuals whose relationships endured. Given the small sample size, these results should be interpreted with caution. Even among stable relationships, Time 10 component levels were significantly associated with higher levels of couple functioning at follow-up (psychological attachment, $r = .72$; long-term orientation, $r = .64$; and intention to persist, $r = .68$; all $ps < .01$).³ Although these results are tentative, they are intriguing: They suggest even stronger links between the components of commitment and long-term couple functioning among stayers than among the overall sample. Conceivably, among leavers and abandoned, individuals may have well-functioning relationships but not be committed (particularly among leavers) or may be committed but not have well-functioning relationships (particularly among abandoned).

Associations between components and breakup. To test Hypotheses 2a, 2b, and 2c, we assessed the simple longitudinal association of each component at Time 10 with breakup status at follow-up. Because of the small sample size of abandoned individuals ($n = 7$), this group was excluded from all analyses involving breakup. Consistent with these hypotheses, results revealed that breakup status was significantly correlated with each component (psychological attachment, $r = .34$; long-term orientation, $r = .54$; intent to persist, $r = .38$; all $ps < .05$), such that greater levels of each component occurred among individuals who persisted in their relationships rather than among those who ended their relationships.

To determine whether any component exerted effects above and beyond the other two components in predicting breakup (i.e., whether any component accounted for unique variance in predicting breakup), we performed a multiple regression analysis in which we regressed breakup status onto the three Time 10 components simultaneously.⁴ Greater levels of long-term orientation occurred among individuals whose relationships endured rather than ended, after controlling for the effects of other components (standardized beta = .67, $t = 2.65$, $p < .05$). The associations of psychological attachment and intent to persist were not significant after controlling for the effects of the other components. Thus, individually, greater levels of each component were significantly associated with enduring relationships versus

TABLE 1: Means and Standard Deviations of Commitment Components for Each Breakup Group, Study 1 and Study 2

	<i>Stayers</i>	<i>Abandoned</i>	<i>Leavers</i>
Study 1: Time 1 levels of commitment components			
Psychological attachment	5.81 _a (2.01)	—	5.80 _a (2.02)
Long-term orientation	4.31 _a (2.55)	—	4.00 _a (2.79)
Intent to persist	5.88 _a (2.50)	—	5.95 _a (2.34)
Study 1: Time 10 levels of commitment components			
Psychological attachment	6.13 _a (1.67)	—	4.70 _b (2.25)
Long-term orientation	5.88 _a (2.45)	—	2.80 _b (2.80)
Intent to persist	6.19 _a (2.10)	—	4.25 _b (2.67)
Study 2: Time 1 levels of commitment components			
Psychological attachment	6.73 _a (1.12)	6.49 _a (0.95)	5.26 _b (1.96)
Long-term orientation	6.59 _a (1.67)	6.13 _a (1.61)	4.33 _b (2.71)
Intent to persist	6.87 _a (1.31)	6.58 _a (1.31)	5.40 _b (2.10)

NOTE: Table values are means (with standard deviations in parentheses) for each breakup group. Within rows, mean values with different subscripts are significantly different ($p < .05$). Study 1 and Study 2 used different items to measure each component (see details in text).

breakups, but only long-term orientation accounted for unique variance in predicting future breakup status. We also compared the components to couple functioning in predicting breakup by performing a multiple regression analysis in which breakup status was regressed onto the three Time 10 components and Time 10 couple functioning simultaneously. Only long-term orientation remained positively associated with lasting relationships (standardized beta = .68, $t = 2.49$, $p < .05$), suggesting that couple functioning is relatively less important than is this particular component of commitment in predicting breakup.

Because this sample was composed of individuals who had been dating for a relatively short period of time at Time 1 (and, arguably, had not yet developed strong commitment), we also examined whether component levels changed over the course of the study (Times 1 through 10) in similar or different ways for eventual stayers versus leavers. To determine whether stayers and leavers differed at Time 1, three ANOVA analyses were performed (one for each component) with breakup group as a between-subjects factor. Table 1 shows that, for Study 1, the two groups did not differ significantly in their Time 1 mean component levels: for psychological attachment, $F(1, 34) = 0.00$, *ns*; for long-term orientation, $F(1, 34) = 0.12$, *ns*; for intent to persist, $F(1, 34) = 0.01$, *ns*. Given that these were relatively new relationships at Time 1, it is not particularly surprising that all individuals were essentially the same in their component levels. However, it is notable that these groups were characterized by markedly different component levels by Time 10. Table 1 indicates that stayers and leavers differed significantly in Time 10 component levels: for psychological attachment, $F(1, 34) = 4.45$, $p < .05$; for long-term orientation, $F(1, 34) = 13.68$, $p < .01$; for intent to persist, $F(1, 34) = 5.61$, $p < .05$.

What transpired between Time 1 and Time 10? Figure 1 displays mean levels for stayers and mean levels for leavers of psychological attachment, long-term orientation, and intent to persist for Time 1 through Time 10. For instance, in the top panel, the dotted line indicates the average level of psychological attachment for stayers at each time, whereas the solid line indicates average levels for leavers. *t* tests examining group differences at each time revealed that significant differences between stayers and leavers on each component first emerged at Time 5. To explore time-related changes for stayers and leavers, we performed three mixed-design ANOVA analyses (one analysis for each component), in which time was a within-subjects factor (Time 1 vs. Time 10 component levels) and breakup group (stayers vs. leavers) was a between-subjects factor. In effect, this analysis examines changes over time in the mean level of each component for each breakup group separately.

The results for psychological attachment revealed no main effect for time, $F(1, 34) = 1.43$, *ns*, or for breakup group, $F(1, 34) = 1.49$, *ns*. Thus, averaging across time, stayers were no more psychologically attached than were leavers, and averaging across breakup groups, individuals did not exhibit changes in psychological attachment. However, there was a significant interaction between Breakup Group and Time, $F(1, 34) = 4.59$, $p < .05$. Follow-up tests revealed that psychological attachment significantly decreased over time among leavers, $F(1, 19) = 6.78$, $p < .05$, but did not change among stayers, $F(1, 15) = 0.37$, *ns*.

For long-term orientation, there was also no main effect for time, $F(1, 34) = 0.17$, *ns*, but there was a main effect for breakup group such that, averaging across time, stayers possessed stronger long-term orientation than did leavers, $F(1, 34) = 5.06$, $p < .05$. This main effect was qualified by a significant interaction between

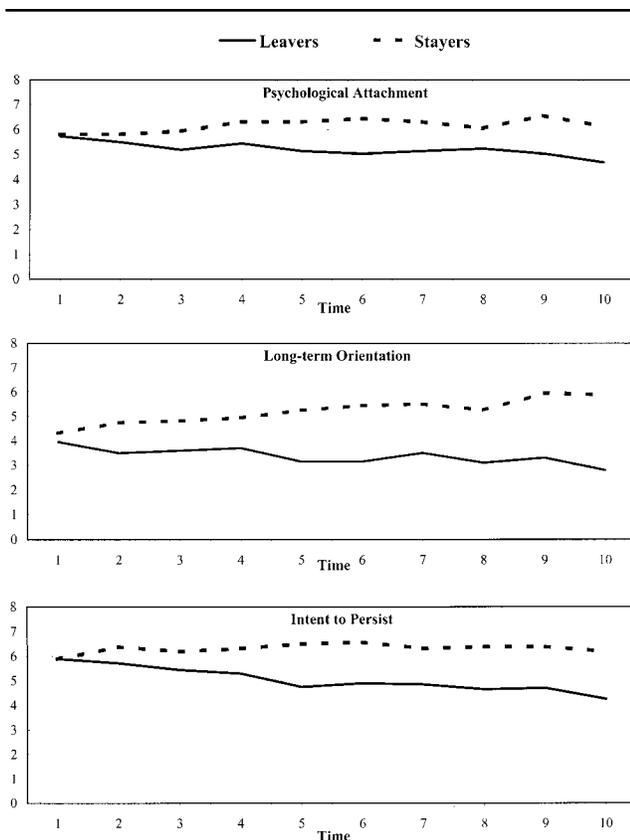


Figure 1 Study 1 mean levels of psychological attachment, long-term orientation, and intent to persist from Time 1 through Time 10 for stayers versus leavers.

Breakup Group and Time, $F(1, 34) = 10.34, p < .01$. Follow-up tests revealed that long-term orientation had a marginal decrease over time for leavers, $F(1, 19) = 3.62, p < .10$, and it significantly increased over time among stayers, $F(1, 15) = 8.15, p < .05$.

For intent to persist, the results revealed no main effect for time, $F(1, 34) = 2.60, ns$, or for breakup group, $F(1, 34) = 1.88, ns$. However, there was a significant interaction between Breakup Group and Time, $F(1, 34) = 5.47, p < .05$. Follow-up tests revealed that intent to persist significantly decreased over time among leavers, $F(1, 19) = 7.22, p < .05$, but did not change among stayers, $F(1, 15) = 0.33, ns$.

Together, these results provide support for Hypotheses 2a, 2b, and 2c, revealing strong links between each component and later breakup status. Of interest, long-term orientation may be particularly important in maintaining dating relationships over the long run: Long-term orientation continued to provide independent prediction of breakup status after controlling for the effects of other components and couple functioning. These results also capture some of the more dynamic aspects of

relationships by exploring the nature of change over time in each component. Leavers exhibited declines in all three components over time. However, stayers exhibited a significant increase in long-term orientation only, rather than increases in all three components. Thus, long-term orientation appears to have strong links to maintaining dating relationships.

Patterns of component means among stayers and leavers. We also explored whether the Time 10 pattern among the three component levels differed for stayers versus leavers. In effect, we were interested in whether there were significant differences in component levels within a given breakup group (i.e., in middle section of Table 1, whether there were differences among the mean values within Stayers and within Leavers). To perform this analysis, the three components were treated as a repeated-measures factor with three levels (psychological attachment, long-term orientation, and intent to persist), and breakup group was treated as a between-subjects factor (stayers vs. leavers).

The results revealed a main effect for breakup group, $F(1, 34) = 9.29, p < .01$: Averaging across components at Time 10, there were significant differences between stayers and leavers (as shown above). There was also a main effect for component, $F(2, 33) = 6.39, p < .01$: Averaging across breakup groups, there were significant differences among the three component levels. Follow-up contrasts revealed that, on average, participants exhibited lower levels of long-term orientation than psychological attachment, $F(1, 34) = 6.29, p < .05$, or intent to persist, $F(1, 34) = 4.53, p < .05$, whereas levels of the latter two components did not differ. More important, these main effects were qualified by a significant interaction between the components and breakup group, $F(2, 33) = 3.28, p < .05$, indicating that the pattern of means among the three components differed for stayers versus leavers. Follow-up analyses revealed that for leavers, there were differences among the three components, $F(2, 18) = 7.53, p < .01$: Long-term orientation was significantly lower than psychological attachment, $F(1, 19) = 13.48, p < .01$, or intent to persist, $F(1, 19) = 12.69, p < .01$, with the latter two components not differing significantly from each other. For stayers, there were no significant differences among the components, $F(2, 14) = 0.48, ns$.

This finding—that the strongest discrepancy among components occurred for leavers, in which long-term orientation was significantly lower than the other two components—suggests that the absence of long-term orientation in particular, relative to the other components, is characteristic of individuals who eventually end their relationships. Because the relative importance of long-term orientation in dating relationships was not hypothesized in advance, we investigated whether it would replicate in Study 2.

STUDY 2

In addition to attempting to replicate Study 1 findings with a larger sample, a major aim of Study 2 was to improve on the Study 1 measure of each component by developing multi-item measures. We hoped to find that these measures were both (a) internally reliable and (b) empirically distinguishable from one another, albeit related given that they are presumed to be components of a single latent commitment construct. Furthermore, on the basis of Study 1 findings concerning the relative importance of each component in predicting breakup status, we advanced the following prediction:

Hypothesis 3: Compared to the other components, long-term orientation will exhibit a stronger association with breakup status.

An additional aim of Study 2 was to provide indirect support for the idea that psychological attachment, long-term orientation, and intent to persist are indicators of a committed state, as Rusbult (1983) has suggested. If these components represent the state of commitment, then they should be more proximal predictors of breakup status than are variables believed to be causes of commitment, such as level of satisfaction, quality of alternatives, and investment size. That is, the components of commitment should mediate the observed associations between theorized causes of commitment and later breakup status.

Hypothesis 4: The impact of satisfaction level, quality of alternatives, and investment size on relationship persistence will be mediated by the components of commitment. Once the effect of the three components is accounted for, additional variance accounted for by the theorized causes will decline or drop to nonsignificance.

No a priori hypotheses were advanced regarding possible differential correlations between specific causes of commitment and specific components, although we speculated that each cause might exhibit a unique pattern of association with each component. For instance, as shared resources, investments bind partners together and presume the continuation of an involvement beyond the immediate moment. Thus, it is possible that investments would be more strongly related to psychological attachment and long-term orientation than to one's immediate intention to persist. In Study 2, we explored these associations.

Method

Design and participants. Study 2 was a two-wave longitudinal investigation involving individuals in ongoing romantic relationships. Participants were undergraduates who volunteered to participate in partial fulfillment

of requirements for introductory psychology courses at a major Midwestern research university. At Time 1, data were collected from 330 individuals involved in self-identified heterosexual relationships (168 women and 162 men). At Time 2, approximately 5 months later, data were collected from 275 of these participants (145 women and 130 men; 83.3% retention).⁵

Participants were 19 years old on average at Time 1 ($SD = 1.49$). The majority were White (89%, with 4% African American, 4% Asian American, and 2% Latino) and reported dating their partners on a regular basis (with 73% "dating steadily"). At Time 1, the relationships were, on average, 14.6 months in duration. At Time 2, 63% of participants ($n = 174$) continued to be in their relationships, whereas 37% ($n = 101$) were no longer dating their Time 1 partners.

Procedure. The procedure was identical to that of Study 1, except at follow-up: Study 2 participants were interviewed by telephone 5 months after Time 1.

Measures. At Time 1, participants completed measures designed to tap satisfaction level, quality of alternatives, and investment size, as measured by the Investment Model Scale (Rusbult et al., 1998). Using 9-point Likert-type response scales, five items tapped satisfaction level ($\alpha = .93$; e.g., "I feel satisfied with our relationship"), five items tapped perceived quality of alternatives ($\alpha = .87$; e.g., "My needs for intimacy, companionship, etc. could easily be fulfilled in an alternative relationship"), and five items tapped investment size ($\alpha = .83$; e.g., "Compared to other people I know, I have invested a great deal in my relationship with my partner"). Averaged scores were computed for each theorized cause of commitment and were used in the analyses. Participants also completed an abbreviated five-item version of Spanier's (1976) Dyadic Adjustment Scale to measure couple functioning (e.g., "How often do you and your partner quarrel? Do you quarrel . . ."; 1 = *all the time*, 2 = *sometimes*, 3 = *rarely*; $\alpha = .76$).

To more reliably measure the components of commitment, in addition to using the Study 1 items, we generated a pool of items each using a 9-point scale (0 = *do not agree at all*, 8 = *agree completely*). Based on preliminary reliability and factor analyses, we selected four items to measure each component. We then performed confirmatory factor analyses of the 12 items using LISREL 8 to determine whether three distinct factors plausibly underlie the observed pattern of covariances among items or whether, instead, the items reflected only one underlying factor. We calculated and compared two alternative models: (a) a three-factor model, in which each of the items hypothesized to measure a specific component was allowed to load only on that hypothesized component, and (b) a one-factor model, in which all 12 items were

allowed to load on a single factor. The overall fit of the three-factor model was found to be excellent, whereas a one-factor model did not provide an acceptable fit to the data. Of importance, the three-factor model provided a significantly better fit to the observed data than did the one-factor model.⁶

Based on the three-factor model results, composite measures were derived, with four items measuring psychological attachment ($\alpha = .80$): “I feel very attached to our relationship—very strongly linked to my partner” (LISREL loading = .96, $M = 6.59$, $SD = 2.03$), “It pains me to see my partner suffer” (loading = .75, $M = 7.46$, $SD = 1.14$), “I am very affected when things are not going well in my relationship” (loading = .74, $M = 6.95$, $SD = 1.52$), and “In all honesty, my family and friends are more important to me than this relationship” (reverse-scored, loading = .69, $M = 4.23$, $SD = 2.55$). Four items measured long-term orientation ($\alpha = .88$): “I am oriented toward the long-term future of my relationship (e.g., I imagine being with my partner several years from now)” (loading = .97, $M = 6.12$, $SD = 2.51$), “My partner and I joke about what things will be like when we are old” (loading = .75, $M = 5.64$, $SD = 2.64$), “I find it difficult to imagine myself with my partner in the distant future” (reverse-scored, loading = .88, $M = 6.05$, $SD = 2.51$), and “When I make plans about future events in my life, I think about the impact of my decisions on our relationship” (loading = .84, $M = 5.80$, $SD = 2.30$). Finally, four items measured intent to persist ($\alpha = .84$): “I intend to stay in this relationship” (loading = .97, $M = 6.60$, $SD = 2.09$), “I want to maintain our relationship” (loading = .96, $M = 6.93$, $SD = 1.75$), “I feel inclined to keep our relationship going” (loading = .43, $M = 5.58$, $SD = 2.51$), and “My gut feeling is to continue in this relationship” (loading = .79, $M = 6.33$, $SD = 2.18$). As was the case in Study 1, the three composite component measures were highly correlated (psychological attachment with long-term orientation, $r = .81$; with intent to persist, $r = .74$; and long-term orientation with intent to persist, $r = .76$; all $p < .01$).

Time 2 included a measure of breakup status that was identical to that of Study 1, yielding three breakup groups: stayers ($n = 174$), leavers ($n = 36$), and abandoned ($n = 27$) (see Note 2). Individuals whose relationships endured also completed the couple-functioning measure at Time 2.

Results and Discussion

Associations between components and couple functioning. To test Hypotheses 1a, 1b, and 1c, we calculated concurrent correlations between each component and couple functioning at Time 1. Consistent with the hypotheses, each of the three components was positively associated with couple functioning (psychological attachment to the relationship, $r = .67$; long-term orientation regarding

the relationship, $r = .71$; and intention to persist in the relationship, $r = .72$; all $ps < .01$). We also calculated lagged correlations on stayers only, predicting Time 2 couple functioning from each Time 1 component. Each of the three components was significantly positively correlated with later couple functioning (psychological attachment, $r = .25$; long-term orientation, $r = .34$; and intent to persist, $r = .29$; all $p < .01$). Thus, in ongoing relationships, greater feelings of psychological attachment, long-term orientation, and intent to persist were linked to better relationship quality at a later point in time (see Note 3).

Associations between components and breakup. To test Hypotheses 2a, 2b, and 2c, we assessed the simple longitudinal association of each component with breakup status at follow-up (stayers vs. leavers).⁷ Consistent with hypotheses, results revealed that breakup status was significantly correlated with each component (psychological attachment, $r = .39$; long-term orientation, $r = .41$; and intent to persist, $r = .35$; all $p < .01$), such that greater levels of each component occurred among individuals whose relationships endured rather than ended. To interpret the association between each component and breakup group further, we performed three separate ANOVAs (one for each component), with breakup group as a between-subjects factor. The results revealed a main effect for breakup group in each of the three analyses: psychological attachment, $F(1, 208) = 38.54$, $p < .01$; long-term orientation, $F(1, 208) = 42.46$, $p < .01$; and intent to persist, $F(1, 208) = 29.69$, $p < .01$, consistent with the mean values presented in the bottom section of Table 1 (see “Study 2: Time 1 Levels of Commitment Components”). Additional analyses using a three-level breakup group variable (i.e., including abandoned individuals) indicated that leavers were significantly less committed than abandoned individuals or stayers, and the latter two groups did not significantly differ.

To determine whether any component exerted effects above and beyond the other two components in predicting breakup (i.e., whether any component accounted for unique variance in predicting breakup), we performed multiple regression analyses in which we regressed breakup status onto the three components simultaneously (see Note 4). Controlling for the effects of the other components, greater long-term orientation was associated with enduring relationships (standardized beta = .25, $t = 2.22$, $p < .05$). However, the associations of each of the other two components with breakup status were not significant when the three components were tested simultaneously. We also compared the components to couple functioning in predicting breakup by performing a multiple regression analysis in which breakup status was regressed onto the three Time 1 components and Time 1 couple functioning simultaneously.

Only long-term orientation remained positively associated, albeit marginally, with lasting relationships (standardized beta = .19, $t = 1.67$, $p < .10$), suggesting that couple functioning is relatively less important than is this particular component of commitment in predicting breakup.

Together, these results provide additional support for Hypotheses 2a, 2b, and 2c, revealing strong links between each component and later breakup status. Moreover, consistent with Hypothesis 3, long-term orientation was most strongly related to breakup status. This component continued to provide independent prediction of breakup status after controlling for the effects of the other components and couple functioning, whereas there were no independent effects of either psychological attachment or intent to persist.

Pattern of component means among stayers, abandoned, and leavers. We also explored whether the Time 1 pattern among the three component levels differed among breakup groups. As was the case in Study 1, we were interested in whether there were significant differences in component levels within a given breakup group (i.e., in the bottom section of Table 1, differences among the mean values within each column). To perform this analysis, the three components were treated as a repeated-measures factor with three levels (psychological attachment, long-term orientation, and intent to persist), and breakup group was treated as a between-subjects factor (stayers, abandoned, and leavers).

The results revealed a main effect for breakup group, $F(2, 234) = 23.76$, $p < .01$, indicating that, averaging across components, there were significant differences among the three breakup groups (as shown earlier). There was also a main effect for component, $F(2, 468) = 16.78$, $p < .01$, indicating that, averaging across breakup groups, there were significant differences among the three component levels. Follow-up contrasts indicated that, on average, participants exhibited lower levels of long-term orientation than psychological attachment, $F(2, 234) = 6.22$, $p < .01$, or intent to persist, $F(2, 234) = 4.57$, $p < .05$, whereas there were no significant differences in levels of the latter two components. More important, these main effects were qualified by a significant interaction between the components and breakup group, $F(4, 468) = 4.01$, $p < .01$, indicating that the pattern of means across the three components differed for stayers, abandoned, and leavers. Follow-up analyses revealed that for leavers, long-term orientation was significantly lower than psychological attachment, $F(1, 234) = 19.64$, $p < .01$, or intent to persist, $F(1, 234) = 22.96$, $p < .01$, with the latter two components not differing significantly from each other. For stayers, the differences among components were not as pronounced: Long-term orientation was marginally lower than psy-

chological attachment, $F(1, 173) = 2.89$, $p < .10$, which was marginally lower than intent to persist, $F(1, 234) = 3.01$, $p < .10$. For abandoned, there were no significant differences among component levels. This finding—that the strongest discrepancy among components occurred for leavers, in which long-term orientation was significantly lower than the other two components—replicates that of Study 1, suggesting again that the absence of long-term orientation in particular, relative to the other components, is characteristic of individuals who eventually end their relationships.

Mediation analyses. Given that the components are assumed to indicate a committed state—and given that commitment is assumed to emerge as a consequence of increasing satisfaction, declining alternatives, and increasing investments—Hypothesis 4 predicted that the components would partially or wholly mediate any associations of satisfaction, alternatives, and investments with breakup (stayers vs. leavers); that is, we anticipated that although the presumed causes of commitment might significantly predict breakup, when the association with the components is taken into consideration, links with the causes should be reduced or eliminated. To test Hypothesis 4, we performed mediational analyses (cf. Baron & Kenny, 1986).

We proceeded in four steps. First, the presumed causes (i.e., satisfaction, alternatives, and investments) significantly predicted the presumed mediators, the components (for psychological attachment, $R^2 = .671$; for long-term orientation, $R^2 = .680$; for intent to persist, $R^2 = .557$; all $ps < .01$). Second, the presumed mediators, the components, were collectively found to be significantly associated with the criterion, breakup ($R^2 = .183$, $p < .01$). Third, we tested an unmediated multiple regression model in which breakup was regressed simultaneously onto the three causes. The total variance accounted for by this three-variable unmediated model was significant ($R^2 = .151$, $p < .01$). Finally, we tested a mediated multiple regression model in which breakup was regressed simultaneously onto the three components and the three causes ($R^2 = .189$, $p < .01$). Results from model comparison analyses indicated that the three causes did not account for additional variance in breakup above and beyond that accounted for by the three components in the second step (partial R^2 for the causes = .006), $F_{\text{diff}}(3, 203) = 0.50$, *ns*, but the components did account for additional variance in breakup above and beyond that accounted for by the causes in the third step (partial R^2 for components = .038), $F_{\text{diff}}(3, 203) = 3.17$, $p < .05$. Thus, consistent with Hypothesis 4, the results suggest that three components of commitment mediated the effect of three theorized causes of commitment (satisfaction, alternatives, and investments) in their prediction of breakup.

Ancillary analyses. In an exploratory vein, we examined the concurrent correlations between each presumed cause of commitment and each component at Time 1. All correlations were significant at the $p < .01$ level. Descriptively, satisfaction level exhibited relatively similar associations with each of the components: long-term orientation ($r = .77$), psychological attachment ($r = .73$), and intent to persist ($r = .74$). In contrast, quality of alternatives exhibited a significantly lower association with intent to persist ($r = .48$) than with psychological attachment ($r = .58$), $t(329) = 5.00$, $p < .01$, or with long-term orientation ($r = .59$), $t(329) = 5.57$, $p < .01$. Investment size followed a similar pattern, such that it was significantly less associated with intent to persist ($r = .50$) than with psychological attachment ($r = .64$), $t(329) = 4.50$, $p < .01$, or with long-term orientation ($r = .61$), $t(329) = 3.57$, $p < .01$.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Summary and Implications

The current work is the first systematic attempt to measure and examine the distinct components of commitment proposed by Rusbult and her colleagues (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993). The results from two longitudinal studies revealed that individuals in well-functioning relationships exhibited greater psychological attachment, stronger long-term orientation, and greater intention to persist in the relationship than did individuals in poorly functioning relationships (Hypothesis 1). Also, compared to individuals in dating relationships that ended, those in relationships that persisted over time exhibited higher levels of each component (Hypothesis 2).

One component appeared to be particularly important in characterizing ongoing relationships. In contrast to the behavioral prediction literature, which would have pointed to the importance of intention to persist in the relationship (cf. Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980), the current research revealed that long-term orientation plays a prominent role in the experiences of individuals in dating relationships, as indicated by the results of several analyses. First, in both studies, long-term orientation accounted for unique variance in predicting persistence, above and beyond the prediction provided by the other components (Hypothesis 3). In contrast, neither psychological attachment nor intent to persist exhibited unique effects in either study. Second, in both studies, long-term orientation remained associated with persistence even after controlling for couple functioning. Third, in both studies, leavers were characterized by particularly low levels of long-term orientation relative to the other components. Finally, in Study 1, although all

three components declined among leavers, only long-term orientation increased for stayers.

It is possible that this latter finding—the increase of long-term orientation for stayers—may merely reflect ceiling effects in the levels of the other components. For instance, one can imagine how, once in a relationship, couple members might take for granted that they intend to continue it, thus minimizing the amount of variation observed in intent to persist. However, Study 1 was composed of individuals who had not been dating long at the outset of the study and were thus unlikely to “take for granted” their relationships. Moreover, the mean values for intention and for psychological attachment, although higher than those for long-term orientation, were not at their highest possible levels; that is, they did not reach the true ceiling (see Table 1). Although the findings regarding long-term orientation remain to be replicated in future research, both studies converged on the relative importance of this component in dating relationships.

The salient role of long-term orientation could be taken to suggest that the psychological state of commitment is best characterized in terms of just one component, namely, adopting a long-term orientation. That is, it could be said that it is more parsimonious to reconceptualize commitment in terms of long-term orientation only. However, at an empirical level, this was not supported in the current studies. Although both studies provided evidence relating to the importance of this component, Study 2 also revealed that a three-factor model was superior to a one-factor (or two-factor) model of commitment. Furthermore, it is possible that long-term orientation is particularly important in dating relationships but that other components become increasingly important in other interdependent relationships (e.g., marriages, child-parent relationships).

The components of commitment examined in the current research not only differentiated among relationships that endured (i.e., in levels of couple functioning) but also among relationships that ended. In Study 2, stayers and abandoned individuals did not differ significantly on any of the components, as might be expected given that abandoned individuals wanted the relationship to continue but were left by their partners. However, component levels were significantly different for leavers and the abandoned group, despite the fact that individuals in both groups were in relationships that ended (see Table 1). This finding underscores the importance of examining the abandoned group and leavers separately rather than combining these two groups under the assumption that individuals in relationships that end share similar characteristics. Future research could examine abandoned individuals further to identify

effective mechanisms for coping with relationship loss (Agnew, 2000).

Is it possible that these three components of commitment are not merely indicators of a committed state but are also causes of commitment? We believe that it is unlikely that psychological attachment, long-term orientation, and intent to persist cause a relationship to become a long-term, stable relationship. If this were the case, individuals in relationships that persisted and those in relationships that eventually ended should exhibit different levels of these components early in their relationships. Yet in Study 1, these two groups did not differ in their component levels at Time 1 (in fact, group differences in component levels did not emerge until Time 5). However, these groups did differ in their Time 1 levels of satisfaction and alternatives, two theorized causes of commitment.

Rather than cause the emergence of commitment, we suggest that these components are characteristics of persons who are committed. Study 2 provides support for this claim. In a model predicting breakup from the components, adding the causes of commitment did not significantly increase the prediction of breakup (Hypothesis 4). On the other hand, in a model predicting breakup from the causes, adding the components of commitment significantly increased the prediction of breakup. These results provide suggestive evidence differentiating the components from presumed causes of commitment, and they support the idea that the components are more proximal variables to breakup than are the presumed causes. The results also provide initial, exploratory analyses of differential correlations between each presumed cause and each component. Future research might further examine the links between specific causes and specific components of commitment.

Strengths and Limitations

Several limitations of the present research should be noted. One limitation concerns the fact that the current findings are based on samples of only one population: college-age individuals in heterosexual dating relationships. Although the large sample size of Study 2 increases the level of confidence in the results, in future research it will be important to replicate the current findings in other populations (e.g., married couples, nonheterosexual relationships) in an attempt to further validate the component measures examined in this research.

A second limitation concerns the inability to address causal relations among components of commitment and subsequent breakup status. Arguably, factors other than the proposed components may create insurmountable difficulties in some relationships and promote increasingly stronger ties to the partner in other relationships.

Short of providing evidence of a causal relation, Study 1 demonstrated no differences in commitment level at the start of the study, suggesting that the breakup groups were roughly equivalent at Time 1. Yet, clear differences in the commitment component levels of these groups emerged and resulted in different outcomes. Although the current work is limited in its ability to demonstrate causal relations, it contributes to our understanding of the psychological state that sustains a relationship over time. Future research might attempt to manipulate experimentally the commitment components to further specify the causal relations among these variables.

A notable strength of the current conceptualization is its focus on the psychological components of a committed state. Commitment to a relationship does not merely involve breakup prevention or “sticking it out”; it involves a subjective state that links one’s own emotional well-being to the well-being of the relationship, squarely places the partner in images and thoughts about the future, and fuels a sustained desire to continue the relationship. Thus, there is more to a committed state than mere relationship persistence. We suggest that causes of persistence, such as having barriers to leaving a relationship, may indeed characterize committed individuals, but, of importance, they lead to psychological changes—specific affective, cognitive, and conative changes such as those examined—that are essential aspects of a committed state.

Much would be gained from future research that further teases apart the subtle distinctions among (a) factors that contribute to the emergence of a stable, committed relationship; (b) factors that lead to relationship persistence; and (c) factors that characterize the everyday feelings, thoughts, and behavioral intentions of committed couple members. The current research focused on this last set of factors. Future research might continue to examine all of these factors, including additional affective, cognitive, and conative indicators of committed couple members. Indeed, an examination of commitment is useful for understanding how and why some relationships endure and others end, thus providing insight into important processes that direct the ongoing course of a relationship.

NOTES

1. Of the 18 individuals who did not complete the study, 7 were in relationships that ended before Time 10, 4 were dropped due to missing a session, 3 could not be contacted for follow-up, 2 indicated that their data should not be used, and 2 had partners in the study (one member of each couple was randomly eliminated to ensure independence of observations).

2. Because participants who indicated that their breakup was “mutually agreed on” ($n = 4$ in Study 1, $n = 38$ in Study 2) could not be categorized as either “leavers” or “abandoned,” they were excluded from analyses involving breakup group as a variable.

3. When controlling for earlier dyadic adjustment (Time 10 in Study 1 and Time 1 in Study 2), the correlations between components and later adjustment fell to nonsignificance, possibly because earlier and later levels of dyadic adjustment were highly correlated ($r = .74$ in Study 1, $r = .50$ in Study 2). Thus, there was little change in dyadic adjustment to be predicted.

4. These analyses were repeated using logistic regression. Because the pattern of results was the same, we report the results from the standard regression analyses only.

5. Time 2 participants did not differ significantly on investment model variables from those who participated only at Time 1.

6. It might be suggested that long-term orientation and intent to persist are indistinguishable components. Thus, we also compared the three-factor model to a two-factor model in which one factor was composed of psychological attachment items and the second factor was composed of items measuring the other two components. The two-factor model was not found to provide an acceptable fit to the data. More important, the three-factor model fit the data significantly better than did the two-factor model. Detailed information about these analyses can be obtained from the authors.

7. Unless otherwise noted, analyses involving breakup status compared stayers to leavers. Note that analyses including abandoned individuals as a third group (coded between stayers and leavers) did not change the overall pattern of results. However, including abandoned individuals made the interpretation more difficult because they did not choose to end their relationships (their partners made this decision). As becomes clear later in this paragraph, the abandoned group was very similar to stayers.

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