

Committed to what?

Using the Bases of Relational Commitment Model to understand  
continuity and change in social relationships

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Past research on commitment processes in close relationships has tended to adopt a dichotomous view of relationship persistence, yoked to the type of relationship under consideration. A relationship is either on or off, together or broken up. We argue against such a view, reasoning that close relationships are more suitably characterized by frequent changes in type of relations between dyad members. Little is known about how relationships may morph from one type to another, such as from a steady romantic relationship to a friendship (or vice versa). In this chapter, we consider how people contemplate relationships with alternative others as well as alternative forms of a relationship with a current relationship partner. We focus our discussion on the concept of need fulfillment, noting how needs might be filled by different partners or by different forms of a relationship with a given person. Using the Bases of Relational Commitment Model, a new model that extends the well-known and validated Investment Model, we articulate a theoretical framework that identifies how thoughts about other forms of a relationship with a partner might help account for relative commitment to the current type of relationship experienced by dyad members. We close by describing some methodological challenges to conceptualizing relationships as dynamic and subject to change.

### **Need Fulfillment and Relationship Types**

Close interpersonal relationships fulfill particular ongoing needs held by individuals. However, not all needs may be fulfilled by the same partner at any given time, and the needs a particular partner fills may change over time, thus changing the type of relationship one has with that partner.

A number of interpersonal needs have been identified by theorists over the years (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Prager & Buhrmester, 1998), including needs such as for security, sex, identity, self-actualization, companionship, friendship, inclusion, and self-expansion. With respect to needs that are fulfilled within a romantic relationship, Drigotas and Rusbult (1992) identified five types of relationship needs: (1) intimacy needs, (2) companionship needs, (3) sexual needs, (4) security needs, and (5) emotional involvement needs. Intimacy needs are related to confiding in one another, sharing thoughts with one's partner, and disclosing feelings to one's partner. Companionship needs include spending time together and engaging in activities with one another. The full range of physical relations, from hand-holding to intercourse, is included within sexual needs. Security needs rely on having a stable relationship and being able to depend on the relationship to make life more secure. Finally, emotional involvement needs are related to the degree to which partners' emotions and moods correspond, and the extent to which partners are emotionally connected.

Although not exhaustive, the five relationship needs outlined by Drigotas and Rusbult (1992) provide some sense of the kinds of needs that people seek to fulfill via interpersonal interactions with others. There has not been a great deal of empirical work to hammer out an exhaustive list of need types or, more generally, on the concept of need fulfillment, but extant research has demonstrated associations between need fulfillment and emotional reactions within ongoing premarital romantic involvement (Le & Agnew, 2001) as well as between need fulfillment and relationship "stability," as traditionally assessed (Drigotas & Rusbult, 1992).

Lay people (as well as relationship scientists) have developed and commonly use shorthand terms to refer to others who routinely fulfill interpersonal needs. Relationship type terms such as “friend,” “boyfriend,” “girlfriend,” “best friend,” “lover,” “spouse,” “partner” have at their base the notion that the person for whom the label applies are fulfilling particular relational needs. Some needs may be filled by more than one person (e.g., one may have multiple friends who collectively fulfill one’s companionship needs). Other needs tend to be filled by only one person, often due to historical, societal and/or normative constraints (e.g., generally one has only one person at a given time who fulfills sexual needs). Of course, a given person may fulfill multiple needs for another person at any given time. For example, Girlfriend Y may be seen as fulfilling one’s security needs, one’s sexual needs, and one’s companionship needs. We see the concept of “relationship type” as best characterized as bundles of different kinds of need fulfillment between people.

Over time, the extent, type, and source of need fulfillment may morph, often in concert. The *extent* to which a person is perceived as satisfactorily fulfilling various specific needs can change. So, for example, Girlfriend Y may have at one point been seen by Boyfriend Q as, among other things, a satisfactory sexual partner as well as a great companion but, upon Q becoming acquainted with alternative sexual partner K, the view of Y may shift such that Y is now seen more as a source of fulfilling companionship needs and less as a source of fulfilling sexual needs. In this example, the relationship between Y and Q can be seen as shifting from one *type* (featuring the satisfaction of multiple needs) to another (featuring the satisfaction of fewer needs). The relationship does not end; it changes (Rollie & Duck, 2006). One might change by now

referring to K as “partner” or “Girlfriend” and old Girlfriend Y as “close friend.” In this way, the *source* of one’s need fulfillment has changed. One might characterize the former relationship with Y as a “breakup”, yet the term breakup, as discussed below, does not adequately or accurately describe the dynamic change from one type of close relationship to another between these people.

The satisfaction one derives from one kind of need fulfillment with a specific partner can also pull one away from pursuing a relationship type characterized by different need fulfillment possibilities with that person. For example, it may be the case that one values the companionship of a partner to such an extent that the possibility of pursuing a romantic relationship with that person is not actively considered or is quickly dismissed. The person may be “turned off” by the prospect of being physically intimate with the partner. That is, the satisfaction perceived to be obtainable from another type of relationship with the same partner may be quite low. Alternatively, the perceived satisfaction derived from pursuing a relationship characterized by only companionship need fulfillment, devoid of physical intimacy, may be very low. Thus, as we describe below, the evaluations and comparison of satisfaction to be gained across relationship type possibilities are an important consideration in determining relational continuity. As will be described, needs can be fulfilled best often by pursuing different relational options.

### **Relationship Dissolution or Relationship Evolution?**

Although acknowledging exceptions, we have come to believe that relationships are more likely to evolve than to completely dissolve. Such evolutions reflect changes in the needs fulfilled by a given relationship; it may be the case that old needs are no

longer filled by a given person and better filled by another person, or it may be that the types of needs filled by a given person have shifted.

Is there evidence suggesting that such needs change? Although not directly examining need fulfillment, we have obtained evidence showing that romantic relationships are indeed dynamic, that their “type” can change. In a recent longitudinal study of romantic relationship commitment processes, we uncovered two particularly curious findings in our data of romantically involved individuals (Agnew, Arriaga, & Goodfriend, 2006). First, at Time 2 of the study (about 6 months after Time 1), among those study participants who reported that they were “no longer still in a romantic involvement with their [Time 1] partner,” 39% indicated that they had engaged in sexual intercourse with that partner since the reported “breakup.” Second, following the “breakup,” very few reported having no relationship whatsoever with the former partner (only 8%) whereas the majority reported some relationship, though of a different type (e.g., 8% best friends, 12% close friends, 28% friends, 44% acquaintances). These findings led us to question to what extent a “break up” had actually occurred and, more generally, what is meant by “break up.”

“Break up” is often considered a key dependent variable in close relationship research and is used to validate a number of relationship process variables. It is particularly prized among social psychological researchers given that it is behavioral in nature, in contrast to the multiplicity of psychological variables investigated by relationship scientists. Faced with such findings, however, we view the concept of relationship “breakup” as (a) unclear, (b) a misnomer often reflecting a static fiction

rather than dynamic reality, and (c) not recognizing that dyadic relationships often have a life course, or trajectory, that survives shifts in need fulfillment over time.

The trajectory of a relationship -- whether it is well-functioning or in distress -- is closely aligned with how committed each partner feels to continuing the current state of the relationship. As such, examining shifts in relationships led us to question what is meant by “relationship commitment” at any given moment in a relationship.

In our own research on commitment processes within romantic relationships (e.g., Agnew, Van Lange, Rusbult, & Langston, 1998; Arriaga, Reed, Goodfriend, & Agnew, 2006; Lehmillier & Agnew, in press), when we ask a person whether or not they are committed to their relationship with their current romantic partner, we are asking (at least implicitly) whether they intend to continue to have a romantic relationship with that person. By romantic, we assume the relationship entails at least some degree of physical intimacy, though the definition of “romantic relationship” is left open to the respondent (and, despite working with thousands of respondents over the years, we have never once had one ask us what it means). If that person later reports that they have “broken up” with their romantic partner, we assume that means that the physical intimacy is now over. [As to whether the person wanted this change in relational outcomes, that is another question entirely. Although romantic involvement is an interdependent venture, one partner can effectively “call the shots” with respect to shifting the nature of the relationship (see Agnew, 1999; Agnew, 2000)]. However, findings such as those cited above (with 39% of individuals who reported “breaking up” with their partner also reporting sexual relations with that person since the “break up”) clearly call our assumptions into question.

After physical intimacy has ceased within a relationship, however, a number of paths are available to the former intimate partners. They can continue to have a relationship with one another, even a close one, but one that no longer features physical intimacy. They can continue to have a relationship, but not a particularly close one, again lacking in physical intimacy. Or they can have no relationship whatsoever, completely “moving on,” with no future contact between once physically intimate partners. What determines the future relational path taken? What determines shifts in relationship type preferences? These questions lie at the heart of our current research interest. We know of no models that provide a conceptual understanding of shifts that people make between relationship types. Below we offer such a model.

### **What Accounts for Shifts People Make Between Relationship Types?**

Although there is a great deal of existing research on relationship cognitions and their influence on relationship processes (e.g., see Acitelli, this volume; see Clark, this volume; see Fletcher, this volume), extant models of relationship commitment are mute with respect to movement between relationship types with the same partner. In fact, measures of relationship commitment rarely specify what it is that a respondent is committed to! Take, for example, an item measuring commitment level in the Investment Model Scale (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998): “I am committed to my partner.” Committed to what? (To the well-being of the partner? To the well-being of the relationship with the partner? And to what type of relationship with the partner? The current type of relationship or any type of relationship?). The target of commitment is unclear. Certainly the relatively vague item phrasing follows the popular and equally vague vernacular used to describe relationship connections. However, we believe the

lack of precision also masks key relational processes. As a result, we know very little about the life course of a relationship as it unfolds between two people over time. We agree with Masuda's (2006) recent observation regarding what she refers to as postdissolution relationships: "Relationship researchers still cannot sufficiently explain why some people voluntarily maintain relational interactions with their former romantic partners" (p. 113).

We contend that the factors that determine whether a particular type of relationship is continued are also instructive in determining whether any type of relationship is continued with a person. Thus, we start by describing the Investment Model of Commitment and use it, and extensions to it, as a building block to articulate a model of both relationship continuity and change.

### **The Investment Model of Relationship Commitment**

Based in part on notions from interdependence theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959; Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Kelley et al., 2003; Rusbult, Arriaga, & Agnew, 2001), the Investment Model was developed by Rusbult to explicate factors underlying individual-level commitment toward any specific type of relationship (e.g., a romance or a friendship; Rusbult, 1980a). The Investment Model posits that three independent factors influence level of commitment to a relationship. The first two factors, satisfaction level and quality of alternatives, are derived from the interdependence theory concepts of satisfaction and dependence for describing the state of a relationship. Rusbult proposed that satisfaction level and quality of alternatives each are important predictors of commitment. The third factor, investment size, was offered by Rusbult to take into account the influence of sunken costs on relational decision-making (Rusbult, 1980b).

The Investment Model has proven to be a robust predictor of relationship stability (e.g., Bui, Peplau, & Hill, 1996). Moreover, recent meta-analytic work concludes that (a) each of the three specified predictors accounts for unique variation in commitment level, and (b) the three factors collectively account for over 60% of the variance in commitment (Le & Agnew, 2003). We provide a brief summary of the Investment Model's three predictors of commitment and review some recently suggested additions to the Model as a backdrop for our discussion of a new model, which accounts for relationship continuity as well as relationship changes.

In the Investment Model, *satisfaction level* refers to the evaluations of outcomes obtained in the course of interaction with a particular relational partner, relative to the outcomes one might expect to attain in comparable relationships of a similar type (referred to as one's comparison level, or "CL"; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). To the extent that interactions yield favorable, positive outcomes relative to expectations, an individual will be satisfied with the relationship. To the extent that interactions yield unfavorable, negative outcomes relative to expectations, an individual will be unsatisfied with the relationship. Although interdependence theory does not prescribe particular weights to be assigned to outcomes that comprise the CL, it is reasonable to assume that particular interactions with particular people have disproportionate weight within the CL (e.g., interactions with one's primary attachment figure may weigh heavily in judging future interpersonal interactions; see Schmitt, this volume; see Shaver & Mikulincer, this volume; see Simpson, Collins, Tran & Haydon, this volume).

The second component of the Investment Model is *quality of alternatives*. Quality of alternatives refers to an assessment of the outcomes that one believes would

be attained in the next best available relationship of a similar type. Thus, it is a rating of expected satisfaction in an alternative relationship. The main interdependence notion here is that an individual's dependence on a given partner for outcomes is a function of the distance between the outcomes one attains with a given partner versus what one perceives would attain in the next best possible relationship of the same type; the greater the distance between these two derived outcomes, the greater the dependence (and hence, commitment) to the current relationship partner. Rusbult and colleagues' view of the concept of alternatives is rather broad, allowing for a consideration of a number of different alternatives to the current relationship, not limited to alternative relationship partners within the same relationship type. For example, Rusbult and colleagues have included having no relationship (being alone) and/or spending time with friends as alternatives that would have the effect of lowering commitment to a current romantic relationship (see Rusbult et al, 1998). Below we will expand further the concept of relationship alternatives in accounting for shifts in preferred relationship type between two people. We emphasize that the concept of alternatives in the Investment Model is essentially an evaluation of perceived satisfaction, albeit with respect to a different relational target.

Finally, the Investment Model includes the concept of *investments*. Investment size is defined as “the magnitude and importance of the resources that are attached to a relationship—resources that would decline in value or be lost if the relationship were to end” (Rusbult et al., 1998, p. 359). Thus, from this perspective, investments can be viewed as one type of barrier to ending a relationship; if the relationship were dissolved, partners would lose all the investments they had “sunk” into their partner and their

relationship. The more a person puts into a relationship over time, the more one risks losing should the relationship end, thus inhibiting relationship dissolution.

### **Beyond Satisfaction, Alternatives and Investment: Plans and Subjective Norms**

The Investment Model provides a compelling and empirically-validated theoretical framework through which to understand general commitment processes. Moreover, evidence has been obtained attesting to the Model's applicability in understanding both interpersonal and non-interpersonal targets of commitment (Le & Agnew, 2003; Agnew, Hoffman, Lehmilller, & Duncan, in press). However, recent research suggests that additional variation in relationship commitment can be accounted for by adding other elements to the Model's specified predictors.

### **Future Plans for a Relationship**

Recently, Goodfriend and Agnew (2006) have argued for a reconceptualization of the investment concept. Previous theorizing and research on the Investment Model has viewed investments as resources that have already become linked to the relationship. This is not surprising, considering the economic roots of the concept of investments (Becker, 1960) and the manner in which investments are generally defined. However, the general definition of investments offered by Rusbult and her colleagues, as quoted above, notes that investments include anything that might be lost if the relationship were to end. It seems reasonable to suggest that this includes not only things that have already been invested, but also any *plans* that partners have made, either individually or with the partner, regarding the relationship. For example, if an individual has made plans with his/her partner to have children, move to Santiago, or buy a beach house in the coming years, these future plans would all be lost if the relationship were to end

now. The potential loss of future planned investments might influence an individual's decision to remain in a relationship, beyond the loss of resources already invested. Thus, Goodfriend and Agnew (2006) suggest that possible *future* investments should be considered when considering what might be lost upon relationship termination.

As such, investments may be conceptualized as varying along a temporal dimension that includes past as well as planned investments. In the extant literature, all investments have been past investments (i.e., currently existing resources that have been sunk into the relationship and cannot be retrieved upon relationship termination). However, planned investments also undeniably exist—investments that a person consciously intends to put into his/her relationship in the future. Although planned investments have not yet come to fruition, if the relationship were to end, these plans would be lost, in addition to any past investments. Faced with such a loss, it is easy to envision a person with many plans for his or her relationship thinking twice before ending an involvement.

Recent developments in the psychology of goals as well as past findings in the attitudes literature highlight the importance of considering future possibilities in current decision-making and behavior. For example, Gollwitzer's (1999; Gollwitzer & Sheeran, 2006) concept of implementation intentions emphasizes the theoretical and empirical advantages of elaborated plans that one develops to see one's goals to fruition. Generally speaking, the more elaborated the plan, the more likely is goal completion. Furthermore, publicly stated plans may serve to fuel interpersonal commitments in a manner similar to publicly stated attitudes (Kiesler, 1971). Just as making a public commitment toward a position is likely to strengthen one's advocacy of that position, so

too might a couple's firm and elaborated future plans function to increase level of relationship commitment.

Future plans can be conceptualized in different ways. For example, Oettingen and Mayer (2002) have explored two forms of thinking about the future: expectations versus fantasies. Their research suggests that simply thinking about future events or goals is not the key to successful enactment. Expectations about the future involve judging an event's likelihood of occurring, and therefore motivate one toward action. In contrast, fantasies are simply positive, embellished future desired events, and therefore are "not a solid basis for acting" (p. 1199). Planned investments align with expectations about the future – "I will do this in the future with my relationship partner" – and, thus, higher levels of planned investments should motivate partners toward actions that will lead to the success and continuity of the relationship (as opposed to simply fantasies about what the partners might like to see happen). Empirical findings to date indicate that having more plans not only significantly predicts levels of concurrent relationship commitment but also continuation of that relationship over time (Goodfriend & Agnew, 2006). We view the notion of future plans as an important extension of the investment concept and a useful addition to the Investment Model.

### **Subjective Norms Regarding a Relationship**

In addition to considering how plans might influence relationship commitment, research has also begun to examine how others outside of the dyad may impact intradyadic decision-making and relations. Research has examined the associations between perceptions of a social network's approval or disapproval for a romantic relationship and characteristics of that relationship (Agnew, Loving, & Drigotas, 2001;

Arriaga, Goodfriend, & Lohmann, 2004; Bryant & Conger, 1999; Cox, Wexler, Rusbult, & Gaines, 1997; Lehmiller & Agnew, 2006; Lehmiller & Agnew, in press; Loving, 2006; Parks, Stan, & Eggert, 1983; Sprecher 1988; Sprecher & Feinlee, 1992). In general, past studies have shown that qualities, structure, and opinions of a social network are associated with the quality and functioning of dyadic relationships embedded in that network.

The concept of *subjective norms* has recently been shown to account for variation in commitment level above and beyond satisfaction, alternatives, and investments within the relational domain (Etcheverry and Agnew, 2004). Taken from the Theory of Reasoned Action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980), subjective norms in the relational realm refer to what one believes that important social referents (e.g., one's family, friends, church) think one should do with respect to a relationship, weighted by one's motivation to comply with those specific referents. With respect to relationships, motivation to comply refers to a general tendency to yield to the perceived wishes or opinions of the source of normative beliefs with respect to one's relationship. If motivation to comply with a social referent is high, that person should have a greater influence upon behavior in a relationship than when motivation to comply with that person is low. For example, if a specific social referent is perceived to have strong positive beliefs about one's romantic relationship and the motivation to comply with that referent is high, that person should have a powerful and positive effect on behavior oriented toward continuing in the romance.

Subjective norms are theorized to influence behavior via their effect on intentions to perform a behavior. Fishbein and Ajzen (and numerous others) have found

behavioral intentions to be one of the best predictors of actual performance of a behavior (cf. Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). Relationship commitment is a particularly apt focus for the application of subjective norms as commitment has been found consistently to be associated with relationship cognition and behavior (see Agnew, Van Lange, Rusbult, & Langston, 1998). Moreover, commitment itself is held to include “intention to persist” in the relationship, which is akin to a behavioral intention (Arriaga & Agnew, 2001). Thus, the application of the subjective norms construct to the prediction of intent to persist in a relationship is particularly appropriate.

Research by Etcheverry and Agnew (2004) applied the subjective norms concept within the realm of premarital romantic relationships. They found that this variable provided additional prediction of relationship commitment, above and beyond the powerful effects of satisfaction, alternatives, and past investments. Just as behavioral intention mediates the effect of subjective norms on behavior in the Theory of Reasoned Action (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980), longitudinal analyses indicated that commitment mediated the effect of subjective norms on remaining in a romance approximately 8 months later. Both theoretically and empirically, the subjective norms construct appears to account for an element of commitment that is not captured by the three predictors within the Investment Model. Thus, we see it as a useful addition to the Model.

### **The Bases of Relational Commitment Model**

To account for continuity in relations of a particular type between two people as well as possible changes in type of relationship, we offer the Bases of Relational Commitment Model (BORC Model; see Figure 1). As in the Investment Model, we suggest that satisfaction level is considered with respect to outcomes obtained in a

relationship as it is currently defined (e.g., a romantic partnership and/or a friendship). That is, as one evaluates outcomes in a current relationship, one evaluates them against a standard for a specific type of relationship (a specific CL), as described in interdependence theory. However, we focus particularly on need fulfillment as critical outcomes. Extending the Investment Model notion of alternatives, perceptions of satisfaction to be derived in alternative relationships is considered with respect not only to other partners for a given type of relationship, but also to pursuing a range of alternative relational options, including the pursuit of other relationship types with the current partner. Investments (past and planned) are theorized to encompass more than the current state of the relationship and are held to guide the decision to continue in a relationship *of any type* with a given partner. Moreover, investments may be considered across the domain of experienced and envisioned relationship types. Finally, subjective norms are considered with respect to the type of relationship that one perceives as most supported by significant others outside the relationship. We elaborate on the BORC Model below.

### **Obtained and Alternative Satisfaction Levels**

In determining commitment to a particular type of relationship, satisfaction is considered with respect to (a) outcomes obtained in the relationship as it is currently defined, (b) outcomes perceived as obtainable from an alternative partner for the same relationship type, and (c) outcomes perceived as obtainable in an alternative relationship type with the same (current) partner. Both obtained and alternative satisfaction evaluations have the concept of need fulfillment at their core.

Evaluation of Current Outcomes Relevant to Need Fulfillment. Satisfaction level is considered with respect to outcomes obtained in the relationship as it is currently defined. Obtained outcomes are judged with respect to the extent that they are perceived as fulfilling particular interpersonal needs, measured against one's CL for the fulfillment of those needs. If the level of satisfaction derived from a particular type of relationship with a partner is perceived as high, then that relationship type is likely to persist. If it is low, continued pursuit of that relationship type is unlikely.

Of course, the fulfillment of particular needs may be deemed more important by an individual than the fulfillment of other needs. For example, a given person might have particularly high affiliation needs and see great values in the cultivation and maintenance of friendships. Another person may be less social and more sexual in their interpersonal tendencies, seeking to gratify sexual needs in the absence of considerable companionship. In this way, individual differences may be seen as influencing obtained and perceived satisfaction with a given relational partner (see Kelley, 1983).

Evaluations of Alternative Partners and Types. Although currently obtained satisfaction is an evaluation with respect to what one is receiving in a given type of relationship, there are also two additional and distinct alternative satisfaction judgments that can be made that may impact commitment to a relationship type. Alternatives may be considered with respect to other partners for that type of relationship but also with respect to alternative relationship types with the current partner. The perceived quality of alternative partners has traditionally been viewed as the primary draw away from a current partner (see Miller, this volume). However, if an alternative type of relationship is

perceived as compelling, it may also serve to draw a person away from their original relationship type assuming the two types are not simultaneously desired.

First, as in the Investment Model, we consider alternatives external to the existing dyad. One assesses the anticipated satisfaction obtainable from an alternative person who might fulfill the same needs fulfilled by the current relational partner. If the satisfaction foreseen as obtainable from an alternative partner is greater than that currently obtained by one's partner, commitment to continuing a relationship (of the type offered by the alternative) with the current partner will be reduced.

Second, we consider alternatives internal to the existing dyad. That is, in the BORC Model, anticipated satisfaction is considered with respect to alternative relationship types with a given person. Note that, consistent with interdependence theory, a CL is held to exist for various relational domains (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978). People have separate expectations for outcomes obtained in relations with friends, lovers, fishing partners, financial advisors, etc. Just as one evaluates the outcomes attained in a given relationship versus the generalized expectations one holds for outcomes in that type of relationship (i.e., against the CL for that domain), we suggest that one also judges the satisfaction expected to be gained in pursuing (or not pursuing) alternative relationship types with the same partner. Thus, one may consider the expected satisfaction derived with respect to the fulfillment of different needs by a relational partner, and by extension, with respect to different relationship types filled by that person.

For example, interactions with Boyfriend Z might yield reasonably satisfying outcomes with respect to the fulfillment of sexual needs, but tremendously satisfying

outcomes with respect to the fulfillment of companionship needs. We argue that individuals regularly gauge the relative fulfillment of a variety of relational needs by a given person. If one type of relationship provides greater satisfaction than another, the individual will be more likely to pursue the particularly satisfactory type. In this way, commitment toward one type of relationship with a person may vary as a function of commitment toward another type of relationship with that person.

It is also the case, of course, that interactions with a particular partner can simultaneously yield highly positive levels of satisfaction with respect to the fulfillment of multiple needs. For example, Husband C may fulfill several needs at a highly satisfactory level. In this instance, commitment to a romantic relationship with C as well as to a close friendship with him would not be in conflict and both would continue simultaneously.

Central to the commitment-promoting power of obtained and alternative satisfaction evaluations is the notion that a person has only so much time in daily life to pursue social interactions (or to do anything at all, for that matter). Thus, as a person cannot do everything with everyone, time must be allocated between various social targets. We believe that a reasonable basis on which time allocation decisions are made (and, thus, by which relationship commitments emerge) is according to perceived need satisfaction.

### **Valued Linkages**

Investments (past and planned) are also theorized to influence one's commitment to a relationship *of any type* with a given partner (e.g., romantic or friendship). However, given that the term "investments" is traditionally limited to

describing past actions as well as the term's prominent use in the name of Rusbult's model, we offer a new term to refer to those treasured elements that serve to keep people committed: *valued linkages*. Valued linkages are subjectively treasured connections to a given relational partner, in the form of past investments or future plans, which one does not wish to lose but that one would lose if the relationship were to end.

In the BORC Model, valued linkages are not just considered with respect to those that have formed within the current relationship type. Rather, they may be considered across the domain of experienced and envisioned relationship types. We see the presence of valued linkages as particularly important in determining whether any type of relationship is pursued with a person over time.

Past Investments. As in the Investment Model, the investments that one has made over the course of time with a person strengthen one's commitment to a relationship with that person. The investment may be intrinsic or extrinsic, tangible or intangible (Rusbult, 1980b; Goodfriend & Agnew, 2006). We contend that the investments need not be accrued during the course of interactions relevant to the current relationship type. Rather, all investments accrued, in whatever relational context, serve as relational "glue." For example, if a person has invested a great deal with Person D over the years as a close friend and companion prior to a sexual relationship, all of these investments would influence the decision of whether or not to continue a relationship of some type with D. Without such accrued investments, it is less likely that strong commitment to a relationship will form and continue. Moreover, we believe that, without such linkages, there is a greater possibility of shifting from some type of relationship to no relationship at all.

Future Plans. In ending a relationship, one loses not only those investments that have been sunken to date but also the possibility of achieving any future plans with a relationship partner. Thus, the plans that one forms with a relational partner act to keep one's commitment to the partnership alive. In BORC, future plans combine with past investments to strengthen commitment to continuing a relationship of some type with a given person.

One notable aspect of considering future plans as contributing to commitment is that such plans do not require that relationship partners have much of a shared history together. That is, even partners who have known one another for a relatively short period of time may become quite committed to continuing their relationship, not because of considerable past sunken costs but because of a motivation to see cherished future plans come to fruition. We argue that the motivation to continue a relationship in order to fulfill cherished goals can be powerful, consistent with findings from the vast literature on the robust effects of approach-avoidance motives (see Gable, this volume). In addition, we see relationship commitment as particularly fueled by future plans given that individuals often predict that the future will bring particularly positive affective outcomes (Wilson & Gilbert, 2003). Desiring good things to happen in the future can have a potent influence on what one does at the current time.

### **Subjective Norms**

Subjective norms are considered not with respect to what one perceives that significant others want one to do concerning a current relationship but with respect to the type of relationship that one perceives as most supported by significant others. One can easily imagine a situation in which a person wants to pursue a romantic relationship

with a particular person but that desire is opposed by other important people in the person's life, who favor a different relational type (for recent research on social marginalization processes that may hinder commitment and stability of a romantic involvement, see Lehmilller & Agnew, in press; Lehmilller & Agnew, 2006). For example, one's parents may not be opposed to a friendship between their daughter and a neighborhood boy but be vehemently opposed to a romantic relationship between the two. To the extent that important social referents successfully communicate their views to a relationship participant, commitment to the preferred relationship type would be expected to increase and commitment to the non-preferred type(s) to decrease.

Of course, one may know what others want one to do but not be motivated to comply with those wishes. Thus, the concept of motivation to comply serves as a useful theoretical (and empirical) weight in determining whether or not perceived normative beliefs will, in fact, influence commitment level. As in the Theory of Reasoned Action, we see perceived normative beliefs as having little influence on behavior unless one is motivated to comply with their source. Thus, for example, although one may be aware of one's parents' unfavorable view of a particular romantic partner, this perception should only have impact in so far as one cares about what one's parents think. If one does not care, the perception of parental disapproval should have little or no impact on one's feelings of commitment. If one does care, then the perception of disapproval should negatively affect one's level of commitment.

### **Summary of BORC Model Predictions**

To summarize, with respect to understanding commitment to a particular type of ongoing relationship with a particular person, the BORC model predicts that

commitment will be highest when (a) obtained satisfaction in the current type of relationship is high, (b) perceived satisfaction levels for relations with others (i.e., with a different partner for the same relationship type, being with one's friends), with oneself (i.e., being alone), and with the current relationship partner in a different type of relationship are low, (c) past investments with the person of any type are high, (d) future plans with the person of any type are high, and (e) subjective norms are supportive of continuing in the current type of relationship. By considering these elements, the BORC model can also be used to understand shifts between commitment to one type of relationship and commitment to another type with the same person, as well as decisions to pursue no type of relationship at all.

### **Methodological Challenges of Considering Relationship Changes**

In considering close relationships as subject to change in type, a number of methodological challenges become salient. Chief among these challenges are the necessity of obtaining relationship data over time and the need to be specific with respect to administered measures. We consider each of these challenges briefly below.

#### **Necessity of Longitudinal Data**

Relationships between two people have a life course. They begin in one way or another (Sprecher, Wenzel, & Harvey, in press), are maintained over time (Canary & Dainton, 2003), and at various points may change into something quite different than originally began or envisioned (Fine & Harvey, 2006). Tracking the life course of a relationship between two people requires multiple measurements over significant periods of time. Given that relationships unfold and morph over time, longitudinal data are absolutely essential. Not only are multiple assessments required to track relational

continuities and changes, but the timing of any consequential relational changes may not be captured on a given measurement occasion. Sudden events can occur that fundamentally shift one's view of a partner and the subsequent course of a relationship (Surra & Hughes, 1997). Moreover, events can lead one not to want to pursue any further involvement with a person (e.g., a discovered affair). The variables included in the BORC Model can track such temporal changes but only to the extent that they are captured as they unfold over time.

### **Importance of Measurement Specificity**

Given the various needs that may be fulfilled in a relationship and, thus, the types of relationships that may exist between two people, it stands to reason that attempts to measure commitment processes should be as specific and precise as possible with respect to the target of commitment. Consistent with Ajzen and Fishbein's principle of correspondence (1977; later referred to as the principle of compatibility by Ajzen, 1988), the likelihood of superior behavioral prediction with respect to the stability or continuation of a particular type of relationship would be appreciably enhanced by using measures that are specific with respect to type of relationship. For example, if one wishes to assess satisfaction with the romantic relationship between person A and B, one must ensure that the measures used are specific to *romantic relationship* need fulfillment and not general measures of relationship satisfaction. One might also consider including measures that assess the relative importance of different interpersonal needs for a given individual and allow for those importance ratings to change over time. As specified in the BORC Model, it is also important to assess perceptions regarding alternative relationship types with a given person, as such

perceptions may influence one's commitment to the current type of relationship.

Unfortunately, with added measurement specificity may come added measurement length and increased burden on study participants. However, we see the value added to our understanding of relationship changes as worth the possibility of increased burden and urge researchers to rise to the challenge that comes with a thorough consideration of dynamic commitment processes.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Relationships between people can change. We know surprisingly little about how relationships morph from one type to another. In this chapter, we consider how people contemplate relationships with alternative others as well as alternative forms of a relationship with a current partner in accounting for relational commitment of a particular type with a particular person. We have focused our discussion on the concept of need fulfillment, noting how interpersonal needs might be filled by different people or by different forms of a relationship with a given person. Standing on the shoulders of giants, we extend concepts from interdependence theory, the Investment Model, and the Theory of Reasoned Action to help account for both continuity and change in relationship commitments. The Bases of Relational Commitment Model provides the variables necessary to account for commitment to a given type of involvement by assessing obtained and alternative satisfaction level, valued linkages, and subjective norms regarding a relationship. Initial tests of the BORC Model have yielded supportive findings, with each of the model's specified variables accounting for unique variance in relationship type commitment and the overall model accounting for over three-quarters of the variance in commitment (Agnew, Arriaga, & Wilson, 2007). We look forward to

further tests of the model and encourage its use in understanding continuity and changes in social relationships.

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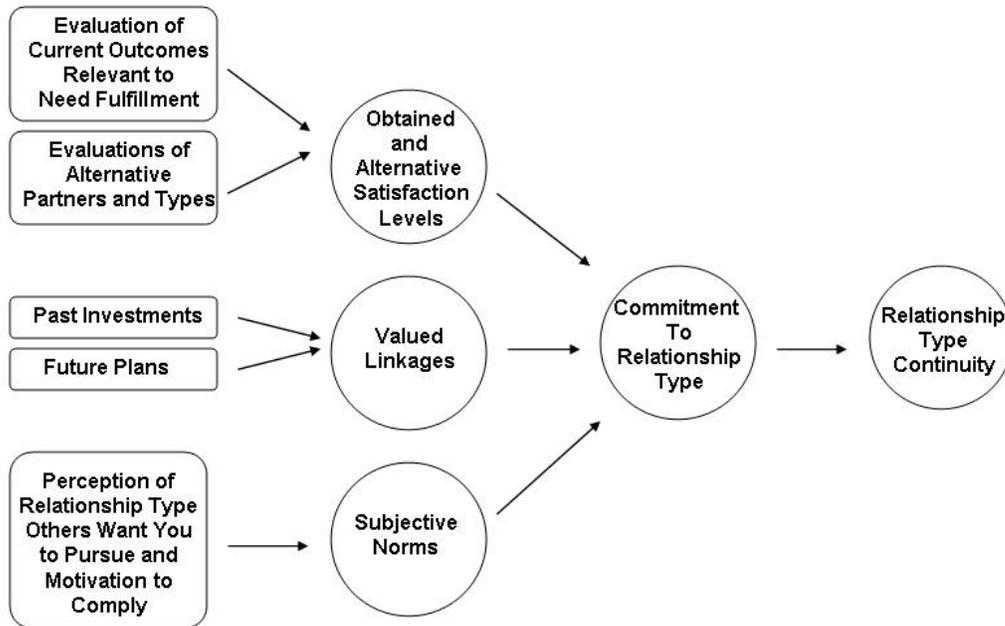
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**Figure 1:**  
**The Bases of Relational Commitment Model**  
**Predicting Relationship Type Continuity**