Relational commitment: The expression of commitment in marriage

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Relational Commitment: 
The Expression of Commitment in Marriage

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B.A., California State University, Fresno, 1982
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This study explored qualitatively the communication and expression of commitment. The subject population consisted of twenty married individuals, ten females and ten males. The subjects ranged in age from twenty to fifty-eight, and had been married from one to twenty-five years.

Research questions sought to discover, (1) how married individuals express commitment, (2) how time effects the expression of commitment, and (3) female/male variations in the expression of commitment.

Qualitative methodology was used to investigate the process of commitment expression. Interviews were conducted to investigate self-reported expressions of committed behavior. Sorting the data from transcriptions of the tapes revealed the following seven categories: (1) Promise, (2) Fidelity, (3) Willingness to Remain Committed, (4) Sacrifice, (5) Support and Acceptance, (6) Appreciation, and (7) Planning Joint Activities. These findings indicated that commitment behavior is reflexive. The initial promise to be married influences behavior (e.g., categories 2 - 7), and these behaviors reinforce the promise.

Regarding the effects of expressed commitment over time, this study revealed that commitment expression changes as the relationship continues. Participants reported characteristics of early and later marriage. In addition, they listed those factors contributing to the changes in their relationships.

Finally, very few differences were observed between the expressed commitment by females and males.
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CHAPTER I

LITERATURE REVIEW

Within the last two decades, a considerable amount of research has focused on relational communication. A majority of literature in the social sciences views relationships in terms of developmental stages, social and communicative categories, and types of relationships (Altman and Taylor, 1973; Duck, 1973; Knapp, 1978). However, very few studies have focused on factors within relationships that impel individuals to stay together (Rosenblatt, 1977). Rosenblatt (1977) states that one approach is to study the internal and external forces that effect relationships. One of these forces is commitment.

Assuming that commitment is an existing force within a relationship, it would seem plausible that rules for the enactment of commitment also exist. Using Shimanoff's (1980) definition of rules, the enactment of commitment has potential properties to be followable and prescriptive, and inclusive of behavior that is obligated, preferred and prohibited in certain contexts. Thus it is the purpose of this paper to review of the literature on relational commitment, and examine the factors involved in the enactment.
Functions of Commitment

The use of the term commitment has several different functions. Quinn (1982) identifies three categories or "senses" (p. 778) of commitment usage: (1) a speech act that initiates it, and the entailment of that act, (2) a state of intentionality, and (3) a relationship to another person (p. 778). First, as a speech act, the term is used as an initiation of a proposition or action (Quinn, 1982). Searle (1965) referred to illocutionary acts, as those acts in saying something. He stated that a speaker's utterance does two things, (1) expresses a proposition and (2) does so in a particular way. The proposition is what the speaker is performing and how (with what force) it is being performed. Similarly, Rubin (1973) defined commitment as pledging of oneself to a particular line of action" (p. 160). The term is also viewed as a promise or pledge, private or public, that the participants make to each other (Hinde, 1979).

Second, the term is used to identify a state of intention, referring to the dedication or devotion an individual has to the act. Johnson (1973) defined commitment as "the extent to which an actor is dedicated to the completion of a line of action" (p. 395). Here the author extends the speech act to include not only initiation of the act but the dedication to its completion. Similarly,
Rosenblatt (1977) states that "communication of one's dedication promotes expectation of others . . . that bind one to the dedication that one has communicated" (p. 74).

Dedication to the relationship can also be defined in terms of maintenance and duration. Kanter (1972) in her studies of nineteenth century communes, found that commitment referred to the willingness of an individual to behave in manners that would promote the maintenance of the group. The maintenance is viewed in terms of duration. Commitment seems to be used interchangeable with some determined length of the relationship. Hinde (1979) identified commitment as "those situations in which one or both parties either accept their relationship as continuing indefinitely or direct their behaviors towards insuring its continuance" (p. 132). Thus, commitment refers to the dedication of an act and its completion in a specific time period.

Third, as a relationship to another person, the term is associated with the link or ties that bond persons together (Kanter, 1972; Quinn, 1982). Thus, it is an attachment to the relationship. Commitment has also been defined as the cause for "this" linkage and vice-versa, thus maintaining its existence (Kanter, 1972).
Therefore commitment can be described as a compelling force that dedicates an individual to an action and the completion of that action, to another person. As simple as this appears to be, there are still many questions unanswered. What are the properties that constitute commitment? How is it accomplished? And how is commitment expressed?

Properties of Commitment

Various research defines relationships in stages from initiation to intimacy to disengagement (Knapp, 1978). Similarly, other studies define relational "types" (Duck, 1973). While still other studies measure the degree of intimacy by the kind of topics expressed in talk (Altman and Taylor, 1973). Included in this research is the degree or levels of intimacy within relationships. Commitment is most likely to be found in these levels.

Similarly, Johnson (1973) noted that courtship behavior has specific stages that lead to commitment. Once an individual becomes emotionally attached he/she "moves into the first stage of commitment" (p. 399). As individuals' personal commitment increases, the relationship becomes more intimate. Movement through these stages is defined socially by the rules appropriate for courtship. The author refers to these rules as being "culturally prescribed" (p. 339).
Once the level of commitment is achieved, it is divided into two aspects: behavioral and personal. As behavioral commitment increases, personal commitment increases and vice-versa, which continues and reinforces the process.

When a relationship has progressed to the appropriate level of intimacy, where commitment is most likely to occur, the question arises as to what properties constitute the act. Literature suggest that in order to achieve commitment one must give up or sacrifice those alter influences that would interfere with the enactment (Kanter, 1972: Hinde, 1979).

While studying communal living, Kanter (1972) found that in order for the relationship to other individuals and the communal setting to be committed, individuals had to sacrifice and give up alternative lifestyles for the commitment to be the object of focus. "The group builds commitment to the extent that it clearly cuts off other possible objects of commitment" (p. 77), therefore enhancing the highest probable outcome of the committed act.

Thus, the investments in commitment can be measured in terms of cost and rewards. First, the individual must determine if the relationship satisfies personal needs. Second, the satisfaction of those needs cannot be met elsewhere. Third, the individual views commitment as a true
expression of self (Kanter, 1972, p. 66).

Once the decision to commit has been established by both parties, the cost of discontinuance is evaluated. First, discontinuance may have an immediate consequence, such as divorce. Second, disengagement from the commitment may require significant changes, such as moving or living alone. Third, the investments, whatever they may be, are forfeited at risk, for the completion of the termination.

Thibaut and Kelley (1959) refer to the interdependence inherent in relationships that influence partners to behave in particular ways, by determining rewards and punishments (p. 12). The authors describe a comparison level that measures the degree to which the rewards outweigh the costs. If the net cost outweigh the rewards, the behaviors or attitudes towards the action will not be favorable. However, if the rewards are higher than the cost the interaction will be viewed as satisfactory. Thus, the commitment would be favorable if the rewards in the relationship are higher than the cost. In addition, the authors describe a "comparison level alternative" (p. 100-125). This refers to the possible existence of another interaction, in this case a plausible commitment elsewhere, by which the present relationship is compared in terms of rewards and cost.
Thus, the enactment of commitment involves choices (Kanter, 1972). The necessity to make choices will often result in dissonance. Since human behavior attempts to avoid inconsistencies, rationale for the decision made will emerge (Rubin, 1973). Thus, the decision to commit oneself may cause dissonance. However, assuming that the act of commitment is somewhat irreversible, Rubin (1973) suggests that the plausible method for reducing dissonance is to intensify the bond associated with the act (p. 173).

Intensity levels of commitment can vary. To examine these levels, it is necessary to identify the internal and external forces that effect the maintenance of the relationship. Internal forces are those factors created by the participants, that influence their choices, such as relational rules. External forces are those factors that are externally created and reinforced, and which also effect the relationship, such as socialized rules (e.g., relational etiquette). These forces act as constraints, which bind and obligate the individuals to a particular action (Johnson, 1973; Rosenblatt, 1977).

Relationships are influenced by several internal factors. First, the individuals must mutually define their relationship as a committed one (Rosenblatt, 1977, p. 76). Second, partners establish relational priorities. Both
parties formulate rules as to what kind of behavior is appropriate together, apart and with other parties. In addition, they decide which social (outside) rules do and do not apply to their relationship (Johnson, 1973, p. 175). Third, once the relationship has been established as a committed one, termination of the relationship becomes a source of power, from each partner over the other (Emerson, 1962; cf Stuart, 1980, p. 103). Fourth, the commitment must be reciprocal in nature (Kanter, 1972, p. 65) Aside from mutual definitions of the committed relationship, the enactment must be reciprocal to enhance the intensity level. Rosenblatt, (1977) states that high commitment is not necessarily associated with exclusiveness. However, if the individuals are establishing rules for conduct, it would seem acceptable to have a rule or rules that allow for differences in behaviors. Fifth, faith in the other partner, that the commitment will continue, will also result in high commitment (Hinde, 1979). Similarly, high commitment has been associated with habitual patterns involved in the relationship. The more habitual the particular act, the higher the commitment is likely to be (Rosenblatt, 1977, p. 76). However, if patterns are broken, commitment will be reduced. Thus, Hinde (1979) suggest that faith in the act must be "flexible to accommodate growth" (p. 133).
Externally, several factors influence and maintain a relationship. First, commitment is viewed as "conformity to external pressures, including the expectations of others" (Rosenblatt, 1977, p. 74). So the extent that partners recognize and behave as a committed relationship, they will be treated, externally, as such (Hinde, 1979, p. 138). Second, public commitment (e.g., public marriage ceremony) has been found greater when it is achieved "publicly, effortly and voluntarily" (Rosenblatt, 1977, p. 75). Consequently, because the commitment is public, it is difficult for the individuals to withdraw. "Rituals work, in part, simply by making it embarrassing for the couple to abandon their relationship" (Rubin, 1973, p. 179), thus, contributing to the strength of the commitment. In addition, Levinger (1976) found that relatives and community were a significant influence on the couple's continuance of the relationship. Finally the existence of children have been found to contribute to the stabilization of the relationship and maintain a certain level of commitment (Rosenblatt, 1977, p. 76).

The Expression of Commitment

The first portion of this review attempts to evaluate commitment in terms of its definition, the stages where it is most likely to exist, the properties that constitute the enactment and the internal and external forces that
influence the act. The second portion of this review will attempt to discover how commitment is expressed, symbolically, and through talk.

Symbols for commitment may be expressed publicly and privately. Hinde (1979) identified these symbols as anything from a public activity (i.e., merely going out in public) to a social ritual (e.g., engagement) to the giving of a ring (p. 137). In his discussion on communicative stages, Knapp (1978) describes the exchange of "intimacy trophies" (p. 21) so that one can "wear" the other's identity. Fraternal organizations have public rituals which include a special ceremony for the couple involved in a committed act (Scott, 1965).

Sexual intimacy has also been associated with the degree of commitment. Measuring the sexual activity among students, Avery and Ridley (1975) found that particular levels of sexual intimacy (i.e., foreplay to actual intercourse) was associated with level of commitment. The more intimate the sexual behavior the higher the expected commitment level. Similarly, Robinson, Balkwell and Ward (1980), using word association, found that individuals (mainly women) related the primacy of "love vis-a-vis marriage commitment" (p. 253) to sexual intimacy.
Thus far, very little information in the literature has been provided to suggest actual expressions of commitment through talk. Knapp (1978) discussed briefly that talk in committed relationships reflected a sharedness, for example, using "we" or "our". In addition, Quinn (1982) examined commitment in terms of its usage (function). She identified three functional categories: promise, dedication, and attachment. From these categories she developed three syntactic patterns representing these categories. Using X and Y to represent the persons, and "a" as the proposition, the patterns are represented as follows: (p. 780) (1) X makes a commitment/ it is a commitment to Y to do a/ that X will do a. (2) X is committed/ it is a commitment to a/ to doing a. (3) X has a commitment/ is committed/ commits self to doing a.

Clearly defined, it is apparent that numbers one and three represent reciprocity between X and Y, and number two represents the dedication of X to the completion of a.

Similarly, Searle (1965) describes rules for enacting speech acts. In an example to demonstrate these rules, he listed five rules for the use of "function indicating devices" (p. 238): (1) utterances must predicate some future act, (2) the act is uttered only if the speaker and
the listener prefer only the speaker to carry out the act, (3) the act is uttered if it is not obvious that the speaker will do the act in a normal course of events, (4) the act is uttered only if the speaker intends it, and (5) the utterance of the act counts as the undertaking of an obligation to do the promise (p. 238). Here the author clearly defines the initiation of the act, its completion and the reciprocity of the receiver to be involved in the enactment process. Similarly, both of these studies identify potential rules for the enactment of commitment.

Statement of the Research Question

Based on the current literature on relational commitment there seems to exist properties that are followable and prescriptive and inclusive of behavior that is obligated and preferred and prohibited in a given context. However, the thrust of current literature focuses mainly on the functions of commitment, rather how commitment is communicated or expressed. It is the belief of this author that more research is needed to examine the expression of commitment. It would seem appropriate to seek information that will be descriptive of such expression.

Because commitment evolves around "values that favor continuity" (Zuk, 1975, 1978; cf Stuart, 1980, p. 100), marriage would seem to be a relational context where such
values would emerge (Scanzoni, 1979).

Thus, the following research question and sub-questions were asked:

1. How is commitment expressed between married couples?
   a. Do variations of commitment expression exist by the duration (years) in the relationship?
   b. Do variations of commitment expression exist between females and males within a relationship?
CHAPTER II

METHODS

It is the goal of the researcher to choose the most appropriate methodology to address questions in research. Methods are the way in which questions concerning characteristics, causes and consequences of social phenomena are answered (Lofland, 1971). Bailey (1982) describes this phenomenon in terms of process versus product. The descriptive approach (process) attempts to explain how phenomena "arose or came to be of interest" (p. 286), rather than analyzing the causes or consequences (product).

Sociology, in an attempt to discover how we make sense out of our everyday activities has chosen to investigate trivial and mundane behavior of everyday life (Garfinkel, 1967; Goffman, 1959; Simmel, 1949; Shutz, 1967; c.f. Schwartz and Jacobs, 1979). Qualitative methodology asks the question "What's happening." The goal of such research is to gain access to members interpretive process, and represent the participants in their own terms (Lofland, 1971; Schwartz and Jacobs, 1979; Spradely, 1979). Lofland (1971) states that the "qualitative analyst seeks to provide an explicit rendering of structure, order
and patterns found among sets of participants" (p. 7).

The purpose of this study was to explore qualitatively expression of commitment between married couples. The researcher investigated the "process" (Bailey, 1982, p. 286) of commitment expression, rather than the causes or consequences. The subjects, materials, and procedures to be used are discussed in this chapter.

**Subjects**

The subjects for this study were volunteers from a local church in Missoula, Montana. Twenty married individuals, ten females and ten males, were active members at the Episcopal Church of the Holy Spirit.

Subjects ranged in age from twenty to fifty-eight, with a majority falling between the ages of twenty-four to thirty-seven. The length of marriage for subjects ranged from one to twenty-five years of marriage, with a majority falling between four and eleven years. None of these subjects had been previously married.

**Materials**

The materials consisted of a formal interview guide (Lofland, 1971; Spradely, 1979). Fifteen questions addressed the following research questions: (1) How is commitment expressed between married couples? (2) Do
variations of commitment expression exist by the amount of years in a relationship? and (3) Do variations of commitment expression exist between females and males?

The interview guide has been divided into two sections, prototypes and actual relationships (Wilmot and Baxter, 1983).

The section on prototypes asked participants what they thought were the ideal or model expressions of commitment with married couples in general (See Appendix A). The second portion of the interview asked participants how they expressed commitment, and how they perceive commitment is expressed to them (See Appendix A). The combination of these two areas will assist the researcher in discovering how commitment is expressed durationally and across sexes. In addition, the ordering of the two types of questions, attempts to reduce the initial anxiety of answering personal questions about oneself at the beginning of the interview (Lofland, 1971).

**Procedures**

Responses from the interviews were tape recorded, to allow the interviewer to concentrate on the subjects' responses without distraction (Swartz and Jacobs, 1979, p. 43). Results of the interview were transcribed onto 3 x 5 cards. Verbatim transcriptions were taken from those
responses that seemed significant "at the point in writing" (Lofland, p. 91).

Once the interviews were completed, the researcher examined the data for the emergence of "analytic ordering" in terms of "structure, order and patterns" elicited by the participants (Lofland, 1971, p. 7).

Sorting of the data involved a three-step process. First, each interview was read and analyzed for the emergence of substantiative properties, and potential topical areas written down. Second, the responses were divided by the questions in the interview. Again, the data was read for substantiative patterns. Within each question the data were divided by similarities. Third, all the responses were grouped together, and sorted according to similarities. At the completion of this three-step process, the following seven categories emerged: (1) Promise, (2) Fidelity, (3) Willingness to Remain Committed, (4) Sacrifice, (5) Support and Acceptance, (6) Appreciation, and (7) Planning Joint Activities.

In addition, the data were sorted by female/male responses, and by the number of years married, to investigate variations that may exist in both categories.
As a final procedure, the assessment was conducted by a coder for verification of reliability. A sample of the data was given to the coder to be sorted into the above categories. The coder was instructed to sort the responses into the most representative category.

Responses sorted by the coder were quite similar to those of the researcher. Of 78 responses, all but six were placed in the same category previously sorted by the researcher. Using Cohen's Kappa, measuring the degree of agreement between coders, revealed a reliability index of .92.
The results of the assessment of data exploring the expression of commitment by married individuals, the effect that time has upon the expression of commitment in marriage, and the comparison between expressions of females and males will be discussed in this chapter.

The Expression of Commitment

The first research question focused on the nature of commitment. Participants responded to questions regarding the definition of commitment, and the ways in which commitment is expressed. An intensive interview (Lofland, 1971) asked respondents to provide examples of their definitions of commitment, as well as, their actual expressions of commitment.

The examples derived from the interviews were sorted into clusters in terms of "structure, order and patterns" (Lofland, 1971, p. 7). The following seven categories emerged: (1) Promise, (2) Fidelity, (3) Willingness to Remain Committed, (4) Sacrifice, (5) Support and Acceptance, (6) Appreciation, and (7) Planning Joint Activities. These seven categories have been arranged into two clusters: (a)
the initiation of commitment, and (b) the behaviors that fulfill the initial promise.

The next portion of this chapter will review these categories, providing representative examples of the data.

Promise

The basis of marital commitment, as described by subjects, arises from the decision to make a promise to another individual. This promise is inherent within the marriage ritual, identifying the permanence to stay together with another person for the rest of their lives. A typical way that participants expressed this promise is shown in the following example:

It is a decision to stay together.

The decision to commit oneself, realized in a promise, is a conscious decision. Commitment was described as a choice, or a willingness to "be committed." This is represented clearly in statements by two different interviews.

Commitment means the conscious decision -- you make a decision to make a life together.

Commitment is cerebral. Because of your morals or the certain way you view the world, you make choices.
The act of commitment is a conscious choice made by individuals in light of other alternative lifestyles (i.e., being single or dating more than one person). Individuals can choose to be in a marriage relationship or not. For example:

It is a choice. You can choose to make a commitment, you can also choose to break a commitment. My wife and I made a choice to be married.

We still have the option to leave, so it becomes a personal thing. So it is really a choice and personal commitment -- a personal decision to stay with that person.

Thus, a promise is the foundation from which all other commitments are based. The act of getting married, and participating in a public ceremony, provides a framework through which the marriage relationship functions and its commitment is given meaning. This framework is illustrated in the following examples:

The decision to get married, in itself, is the summation of all commitment. Anything after that is supporting and fulfilling that commitment or not. In a marriage that grows, more commitments are made, but generally to fulfill the first one.

Commitment is less an emotion than it is a promise, so it needs to outlast emotional ups and downs.

The act of getting married is the commitment.
The actual marriage vows are used to provide a framework to key elements in commitment. These vows are one of the ways for these participants to make the commitment tangible. Consequently, these vows serve as guidelines for behavior in the relationship. For example:

Commitment is something that holds you through the good times and the bad, for richer or poorer, in sickness and health. It is the commitment that keeps the relationship running.

We made a commitment, yes I will.

The sickness and health thing, taking care of each other.

When you say for better or for worse you mean that.

**Fulfillments of the Initial Promise.**

In fulfillment of the promise to be committed, which involves a conscious choice, and is represented through the marital vows, participants describe the following factors that carry out this promise. These behaviors must be reciprocal to be considered indicators of commitment.

Fidelity

All participants stated that being sexually faithful is an "obvious" form of showing commitment. They described fidelity as part of the requirement or being in a marriage
commitment. While participants thought that being sexually faithful was a generally acceptable "given" for those persons in a marriage relationship, several indicated that they knew individuals, who were married, that did not hold those same beliefs. Thus, they agreed that fidelity was a choice.

You're faithful.

When you say forsaking all others you mean that. You don't fool around with other people.

Fidelity, that is another choice. It is out there if you want it. The fruitstand is open at all times choose not to take that fruit.

Willingness to Remain Committed

A second factor demonstrating commitment is the willingness of each spouse to endure the relationship, through both easy and difficult times. The willingness or conscious intention by each partner to endure provides security to the commitment. Intentionality, for most participants, indicates dedication to the commitment, reinforcing the promise to marry. Consequently, individuals found satisfaction knowing that their spouse would always "be there" to "work things out." Willingness to remain in the relationship is illustrated in the following examples.
A willingness to stick around.

Somebody to be there. You have a commitment to there when they need you.

When a couple is having a problem, not to give up and walk out, attempt to work things out. If you're committed you're at least going to make the effort. Its the effort part.

That you're willing in spite of certain things, to say I can deal with it, we'll go on.

Being there with the other person through the good times and bad. Being committed to the relationship. Working at keeping the relationship going and growing.

You will do everything that is required to make things work. When things get difficult, you're not going to just throw it aside. That its a more permanent kind of thing, that you expect it to last.

Its just knowing that you can be yourself, and be all yourself, and even if you show the ugly, ugly parts of yourself, that it will okay.

I like the idea that if I was a rotten person for a while or if I should get my face half gone in a car wreck, that he would still be there, and I would be there for him.

Sacrifice
Successful fulfillment of the enduring nature of commitment, usually requires sacrifices. A committed individual must give up or sacrifice some of their needs or wants for their spouse. Sacrifice of personal needs places a value on the individual's contribution to their spouse's satisfaction.

These sacrifices may be positive or negative. For example a sacrifice may be something that the individual does not mind giving up (positive), or it may require giving up something that the individual likes (negative), as shown in the following examples:

The willingness to give up something in your life, to mold your personality with somebody else's.

Doing things that are difficult to do. Like making the bed, because I don't like to do it.

I don't go out as often, I stay home more, to spend time with her. I don't chase around with my friends, which is something that I used to do quite a bit.

(During Eucharist in church) There are only two people standing in the church, my wife and me. Peer pressure doesn't bother me, but being the center of stage does. Yet as long as she wants to stand, I'll stand with her. It isn't so bad on a nice day, but if we've been arguing, you know you're standing because you're committed.

By going to a church function (that I didn't want to go to) with my wife. It took a lot for me to go. But I knew that she wanted me to.
Taking your need and putting it aside.

"I worked nights for four years. We needed the income. If I was by myself I wouldn't have worked nights."

Try to look out for each other's long term satisfaction.

Share and care for one another, like the Bible says, deny unto self and love the other over themselves.

Commitment not only involves sacrifice for the partner but it also requires that an individual give up some of their personal needs for the relationship. Individuals state that achieving mutual satisfaction in their marriage relationship requires them to develop a jointness with their spouse. Thus, a relational sacrifice, as well as an other sacrifice, is significant for the existence of commitment in a relationship. For example:

Giving yourself as part of a whole, so that your judgement, actions, reactions, are based on the betterment of the whole.

He has done a lot of personal sacrificing of his own ambitions for the good of the relationship. He loves theatre. We're in Missoula, Montana! There is nothing for him to do here. But I finished grad school first, and this seemed like a good job. So he made personal sacrifices because he is committed to the relationship.
Support and Acceptance

Individuals describe the jointness of commitment to include support and acceptance of one another. They stressed the importance of acceptance and support of each partner in regardless of their personal likes or dislikes. This unconditional regard of the other is also a form of affirmation, providing self worth, as shown in the following examples:

I support and accept him for whatever he does, whether I want it for myself or not.

Support is a big part of commitment, showing concern.

Being interested in what the other's needs, interests are. Not necessarily having the same interest. It is interest because of that involvement with that person.

I am going to school, studying business and accounting. My husband doesn't agree with studying accounting or business. But because he cares about me, he scurries around and make the path easier for me. He supports and accepts me.

Reaffirming the other, what the other person is, telling the other person that they're a good person, that you appreciate the talents they have, the kind of people they are.

I show her commitment by affirming her. If she has had a bad day, she may need someone to listen to her, someone to say, that person needs a cool glass of wine or a hug. That's commitment, reaching out to the other person and say I think you're
I try to express appreciation to my wife for her talents. I let her know that she made a pretty dress, and that I would like her to where it to church on Sunday, to show her I am not embarrassed to be seen with her. If she makes twelve loaves of bread, I want to let her know that I appreciate that.

I tell him I am proud of him, whatever he does, 'go for it.'

Appreciation

Participants added that affirmation and appreciation of the spouse is further demonstrated by performing special tasks or favors. Appreciation can be demonstrated in various ways: verbal, material, or physical.

Every morning or everyday, saying 'I love you,' 'I care,' 'you are important to me today.'

Terms of endearment, 'honey', 'babe'. Saying 'I love you.'

He gives me a card, with a message that he has written.

I'll write her a love letter sometimes. It helps nurture our relationship.

She used to write notes and put them in my lunch box.

Doing special things that someone likes, making a special meal, make sure it's something they really like. Having things there, their favorite toothpaste.
Remembering small things, birthdays, anniversaries.

Buying flowers.

Because we have a new baby, saying to her, maybe if we're lucky he'll have your color of hair.

Doing things that make her happy and take the load off.

I touch her a lot, hug her and kiss her, and tell her that I love her.

I hug him, hold his hand.

Planning Joint Activities

The planning and carrying out of joint activities plays a significant role in the demonstration of commitment. Making plans to spend time together or plan joint activities enhances and strengthens the commitment.

Planning joint activities suggests a future orientation between couples. Individuals found that future planning is representative of their commitment. In other words, planning activities is an indicator that they (the couple) are going to be together to fulfill or carry out the activity. Planning future events could mean anything from a day in advance, to several years in advance, to a lifetime. The following are representative examples:

We make future plans. If I didn't think the
marriage was going to last, I wouldn't make those plans. We're excited about what's coming up.

He is always talking about what is going to happen, the things we're going to do.

We show each other commitment by planning activities together, and by doing them.

Anything you would do or say that would have a long term duration message.

I tell him my greatest desire is to grow old with him. End up sitting on the front porch and reminiscing and having something to reminisce about.

**Durational Aspects of Commitment**

To address the second set of research questions regarding the effect that time has upon the expression of commitment, participants reported changes in commitment occur over time. All participants agreed that, as the relationship grows and changes over time, the expression of commitment also changes. However individuals indicated that while the ways in which commitment is expressed varies, the basis of commitment, i.e., the initial promise remains the same.
The next portion of this chapter will review the durational aspects of commitment by the following subcategories: (a) early marriage, (b) later marriage, and (c) events contributing to the phases of expressed commitment.

Early Marriage

Individuals outlined characteristics of their relationship, early in marriage which influenced their expressed commitment. These characteristics are (1) strong physical expression, (2) a need for alikeness, and (3) reinforcement of the relationship.

While interviewees noted that a physical relationship is an integral part of the marriage at any stage, newly married couples as well as those married a few years (approximately one to four years) placed a greater significance on a physical relationship. For example, a male married two years described commitment as a, "physical type of bond." A woman that had been married eight years described her early marriage as an "intense physical passion."
Early marriage is also characterized by a need for alikeness. First, as a genuine representation of the their perceived similarities, couples often participate in the same activities. Second, individuals share activities for no other reason than to "be" together. Doing joint activities or just being alike provides an additional security to the relationship, acknowledging the commitment.

When you are first married there is a need to be alike. Its threatening to the relationship if you discover differences.

When we were first married there was a great need to do everything together and to think and be alike.

When you are first married you show a lot of attention to each other, not wanting to be apart for a long periods of time.

As a way to reinforce one another, in their relationship, couples in early marriage express their commitment through appreciation. Usually this appreciation is displayed verbally or by doing special tasks or favors. Appreciation reaffirms the promise to be committed.

I think commitment is more verbal at first, I really like being with you or I am committed to make it work or just saying your committed.

In the first few years you say I love you, a lot.

Early on you do a lot of little nice things, like
what you do when you're dating. Like writing notes to one another.

Thus, early marriage is characterized by a physical bond, demonstrating similarity between couples, and emphasis on verbally reinforcing one another by showing appreciation.

Later Marriage

Marital relationships develop over time. Consequently, as the relationships grow and change, expressions of commitment also change. Participants reported that commitment requires maturation. A male married 8 years stated, "In the beginning, you think what you have is commitment, but as you go along you realize it wasn't".

The description of maturation is based on the couples experience, as well as, their knowledge of other, older couples that they know i.e., parents, grandparents, people at church. Even Younger married who had been married 5 years and less, as well as those persons married for ten to twenty years or more, foresaw or experienced change in their relationship. Thus, they also foresaw and experienced change in their expression and fulfillment of commitment. Having
such foresight seemed to be related to individuals' expectations of commitment. For example, a woman married 20 years stated that her expectations were, "that it won't be easy, and it won't be instant, and it won't be perfect." A male married 22 years focused on the growth of the relationship through the changes.

I suspect my expectation is that the 'us' part will continue to grow overtime, with oscillations -- there will be a steady increase.

In addition, the longer a couple stayed together the more secure in the relationship the partners felt. Interviewees stressed the importance of demonstrating commitment to provide security in the relationship. The more secure the relationship the less pertinent those characteristics of early marriage became. In fact, individuals found satisfaction in being different because they enjoyed their own activities and their spouses accepted and supported these activities. Thus, as the relationship endures, the need to be alike contributed less to the security of the relationship. Participants reported that this was mainly due to the longevity of the relationship; the longer the relationship, the more secure it becomes, and the more secure the relationship the longer it lasts.
In addition, while the physical desire does not diminish, it develops into a stronger emotional bond.

Later on, as you learn more about them, your bond will change from a physical into a more emotional bond.

Participants added that the physical desire is "still there," however, "other things" just take precedent.

Finally, while verbal expressions of appreciation are still considered important in marriage, the display of special tasks or favors, and verbalizations lessen as the relationship endures. One woman married 6 years summarized this very well when she stated,

The longer you're together, unfortunately the business of life tends to outweigh your desire to do those little things. Even though you may want to do them, or feel the same way, often the time just isn't there.

In fact, individuals described ways to display appreciation that require less effort but still communicate their commitment.

You may do things that take a little less time, and are a little more subtle.

Events Contributing to Phases of Expressed Commitment
Participants listed four major characteristics contributing to marital growth and change, affecting commitment: (1) children, (2) job change, and (3) moving.

Children

The response given most by participants regarding events that affect the marriage was children. The birth of the first child played a significant role in the change in the relationship. The addition of a child into a couple's life alters the expression of commitment in several ways.

First, the birth of a child symbolizes the continued commitment between the couple. A male married 6 years and had his first child stated, "Children are the fruit of Commitment". Having children bonds the couple even more than before they had the child, "because we are family, blood." Participants added that having children is an indicator that the relationship will continue.

Secondly there are no longer just the two in the marriage. Thus, each individual's time and energy spent on the relationship must now be divided between their spouse and their child. This also means that the time they had for each other is reduced. Consequently, individuals must now find other ways, requiring less time, to communicate their commitment. Often individuals metacommunicate. For
example, a female married 13 years stated, "I know I can't spend as much time with you but I still love you."

Participants added, that the additional attention to spouses gives to the child created less time for them. Thus they devised ways to share responsibilities for the care of the child, allowing them more time together.

For example, several husbands stated that they often shared responsibilities when their newborn was still breast feeding.

When it is time for the baby to be fed, I get up and bring him back to bed, so he can nurse. I put him back when he's done.

Sharing responsibilities is commitment because it shows that the other person is giving up their time to be with their spouse, "saying that my time is important and I am choosing to be with you."

Moving and Job Changes
In addition to having children, other factors, such as moving to a new town or changing jobs effects the expressed commitment. Experiencing a new town or a new job usually means meeting new people. Individuals reported that they found themselves relying on their spouse a great deal more until they were more comfortable with their new environment.

You depend on each other more, for a while -- you don't have your friends.

During these times where difficult decisions had to be made, it was reported that the expression of commitment became more apparent.

We had to talk about it, and our choice, what we decided was because of our commitment.

Thus, changes in expressed commitment occur throughout the life of the relationship. Major events affecting the relationship over time were the result of children, moving, and job changes.

Female/Male Variations
In response to the third research question regarding variations of expressed commitment between females and males, very few differences exist among the participants interviewed in this study.

Generally, the examples of expressed commitment reported by both sexes communicated commitment in a similar manner, in all of the categories presented. However, there were some differences in the manner in which participants responded to the questions during the interview.

Considering that most people do not and have not formalize their thoughts on commitment, it was common for interviewees to pause a few moments before formulating their responses. However, female/male differences did exist in the manner in which they responded. It was the observation of this researcher that males responded to questions fairly rapidly. Generally, females took longer time to respond to questions. They seemed to be searching for a more "deep-seated" answer. After a long pause, and perhaps a few probing questions, they would say, "Oh well, there is the obvious things like . . . ."

Traditional roles were also apparent by reports of expressed commitment. Females and males reported that males showed appreciation by giving traditional gifts or favors, e.g., flowers or poetry. Females showed more nurturing
appreciation by anticipating their spouse's needs or by fixing his favored meal. Ways that males showed their sacrifice to the relationship was often represented by sharing the household duties.

The research question investigating sex differences did not generally yield data that would indicate that the question was productive.

**Themes or Ideas Related Doing Commitment**

Assessment of the data revealed the following ten themes.

1. Individuals have difficulty discussing how or what other married persons do to express commitment.

2. Commitment is represented by the exclusivity of acts, because activities are unique to their relationship.

3. Commitment is relational, requiring both individuals to commit themselves, therefore the act of commitment is reciprocal.
(4) Individuals without children (usually young marrieds) identify that changes will occur in expressed commitment as a result of having children.

(5) Commitments manifest itself during conflict or rough periods.

(6) Decision making reflects the relationship and commitment. Thus, change in the norm manifest the norm.

(7) Both young and older married individuals described future orientation as a integral part of commitment.

(8) During difficult times in the relationship individuals often question the continuation of the relationship.

(9) Individuals know when they are not doing commitment well, even before their spouses communicate it to them.

(10) Participants noted that they are continually working to improve their expressed commitment.
A discussion of the results, implications, and suggestions for future research will be discussed in this chapter.

The major focus of this study was to investigate how commitment is expressed between married couples. Twenty married individuals representing both sexes and a range of marital duration were interviewed as informants about commitment in marriage. The interview guide was divided into two major sections: prototypes and actual relationship (Wilmot and Baxter, 1983). Questions under prototypes were designed to ask participants how they view commitment among married couples in general. All participants had difficulty discussing what they thought other couples did in their relationship to demonstrate commitment. They either responded that they did not know what others did, or they (perhaps unknowingly) reverted to their own relationship, often using personal examples. Difficulty in assessing others' commitment has also been found in similar research. Levinger (1976) stated that it is very difficult for a third party to evaluate another couple's commitment.
Similarly, in response to the second portion of the interview regarding questions about their actual relationships, participants in this study expressed difficulty in formulating their thoughts on commitment. For example, a male married twenty-two years and female married twenty-five years stated that it was not something that they had ever done in the past.

Nature of Commitment

The first portion of the interview asked respondents to discuss their views on commitment, including definitions, and actual expressions. Answers to these questions were clustered into seven general categories: (1) Promise, (2) Fidelity, (3) Willingness to Endure, (4) Sacrifice, (5) Support and Acceptance, (6) Appreciation, and (7) Planning Joint Activities.

The categories which emerged in this study supported and extended findings in the literature on relational commitment.

While current literature identifies characteristics of commitment that involved pleasing one's partner, there is no label identifying Support and Acceptance, or Appreciation, exclusively. One possible explanation is that very few studies have focused on the communication or the expression of commitment. Consequently, the development of such
categories may not have emerged in the previous research.

The basis of commitment was described in the present study as a promise to commit oneself to one's partner and to the relationship. The notion of promising in this study parallels descriptions of commitment defined by Hinde (1979), Johnson (1973), Kanter (1972), Quinn (1982), Rosenblatt (1977), and Rubin (1973) who suggest that commitment is a promise or pledge to an act, that bonds an individual to another person.

The act of promising was reported in Chapter Three to be a conscious decision or choice. Participants noted that they had a choice to be married or not, because there existed alternatives. This information was consistent with Kanter (1972) and Rosenblatt (1977) who acknowledged that marriage commitment was both voluntary and optional.

Marital vows were used to provide framework for the couple to the key elements in commitment. Nine out of twenty participants referred to their wedding vows as a foundation for their commitment. These results were higher than those found by McMillan (1969; cf Stuart, 1980) who revealed that only 15% of the males and 8% of the females as a reason for preserving their marriage. It is not certain why discrepancies would exist. Subjects in both studies were active church members, so the differences may reflect
methodological differences between the current and previous research.

In addition, the remainder of the participants, in this study, who did not discuss marital vows offered reasons to continue the marriage based on similar values found in the marriage ritual, for example, using phrases like, "I said I would always be there." Thus, concluding that marital vows were an important element of commitment for this sample.

It was the observation of this researcher that reference to the vows allowed a very abstract term like commitment to become tangible. The vows are a framework from which the couples can refer to make sense of commitment in their relationship. Ideally, it allows partners to have an understanding of how the other is defining the act.

The act of promising, therefore, creates a basis from which all other commitments are made. Couples seem to negotiate the behaviors that follow in order to fulfill successfully the initial promise. Thus, the promise becomes reflexive in nature. The promise influences the behavior, and the behavior reinforces the promise. This supported research by Johnson (1973) suggesting that commitment is divided into two aspects: behavioral and personal. As behavioral commitment increases, personal commitment increases, and vice-versa.
Behaviors which fulfilled the initial promise emerged in the following categories: fidelity, willingness to remain committed, sacrifice, and planning joint activities.

These behaviors were found to be supportive of the initial promise to be committed. Participants reported that all of these behaviors were reciprocal. Consequently, for commitment to be successful, it is necessary that both partners participate. Identifying the relational nature of commitment, a male married four years stated, "I can't do commitment without her. It won't work if I do it by myself." Reciprocity was consistent with Kanter's (1972) research on communal living which found that the enactment of commitment must be reciprocal to enhance the intensity level.

Fidelity was identified by all participants as an integral part of the marriage commitment. Similarly a study by Robinson, Balkwell, and Ward (1980) revealed that love and marriage were related to sexual intimacy and exclusivity. While most participants agreed that being sexually faithful was an assumed characteristics of marriage, they knew of couples who did not adhere to such values. Consequently, fidelity was a negotiable factor in supporting the promise.
The willingness by each partner to remain committed to the relationship was the second factor demonstrating commitment. The willingness and conscious intention of the individual to endure, reinforces their dedication to the act. These findings were supportive of research by Hinde (1979) and Kanter (1972) revealing that the willingness of an individual to behave in ways that would promote the maintenance and continuance of the relationship displays dedication to the act and its completion.

Continuity of the relationship is represented durationally. Individuals are working towards a goal, short or long term. Quinn (1982) reported that the nature of promising "engenders a particular state of intentionality. . . attaching oneself to that person for the duration of time (p. 793)." She extends her discussion by acknowledging that promising involves a dedication to working towards goals, i.e., working out problems, staying married, satisfying each other.

Sacrifice of personal needs and wants was viewed as a requirement for successful commitment. Sacrificing placed a value on the individuals' contribution to their partner's satisfaction. Respondents indicated that appropriate sacrifices were those that contributed to the overall satisfaction of their partner and/or the relationship,
without causing them long term mental or physical anguish.

Similarly, the Marital Precounseling Inventory, a self-report measure developed by Stuart and Stuart (1973; cf Stuart, 1980) to assess an individual's investment in the relationship, revealed that individuals who were perceived as pleasing their partners the most and providing the other with greater satisfaction, were the most committed of the two.

Planning joint activities was found to be an very significant indicator of commitment. Sharing activities was reported to enhance the relationship in several ways. First, couples found satisfaction by merely spending time together and enjoying the other's company. Secondly, sharing activities allows each partner to learn more about one another by participating in those activities that are satisfying to them. Third, sharing activities usually involves planning. Expression of both short and long term goals reassures the future of the relationship. Participants newly married as well as those married 25 years, reported that making future plans was an integral part of their relationship. Research by Stuart and Stuart (1973; cf Stuart, 1980) suggested that the more partners share activities, the higher the commitment level.
Durational Aspects of Commitment

The second research question investigated marital phases that contribute to various changes in relational commitment. All participants reported that events in their marriage effected their expressed commitment.

Commitment was described as a very complex element in a relationship. Participants noted that as the relationship grows and changes, so does the commitment. The longer the relationship endures the more intricate and, for these participants, the stronger it becomes.

As the longevity of the relationship increases, security in one another and the continuance of that relationship also increases. In addition, feeling secure in the relationship contributes to the duration of the relationship, thus maintaining its existence. Both Kanter (1972) and Quinn (1982) associated commitment and the attachment to the relationship as reinforcing one another to continue the relationship.

Participants reported they were more aware of their commitments during difficult times in the relationship. Rough periods were reported to bring the couple together to evaluate their commitment, rather than suppressing it. Walster and Walster (1978) suggest that partners often find
an attraction to those difficult periods, thus enhancing rather than reducing the level of commitment.

In addition, several participants reported that when "things got bad," that they expected outsiders, mainly, friends, relatives, and their church community, to support their marriage and its continuance. External forces such as community, supported the research by Levinger (1976) which placed a high value on outsiders for the maintenance of the relationship.
Female/Male Variations

The third research question investigated variations in expressed commitment between females and males. Very few variations existed in this study.

The differences in response time during the interview could be a characteristic resulting from many factors. At this time the researcher is uncertain of these differences.

In addition, the present literature on female/male variations do not address differences in the communication or the expression of commitment. Aside from the fact that very little research has been done on commitment exclusively, a possible explanation is that the variations that do exist are slight and not worthy of mention.

Conclusion

At present the literature in the social sciences has dealt with relational commitment indirectly. Specifically, studies revealing insights into committed behaviors emerged while focusing on other aspects of relationships such as, developmental stages, social and communicative categories and types of relationships, all of which commitment plays an integral part.
The purpose of this study was to explore qualitatively the expressions of commitment in marital couples. The primary focus of the study was to investigate the process of communicating commitment. This study was unique in that it has focused on the concept of commitment, exclusively. To date no other studies have done this.

The study revealed many properties of expressed commitment. Some of these findings were consistent with previous research on commitment in communes, cohabitants, and marital couples. In addition, other findings provided insight into properties not previously discussed in relational literature.

Application of these findings seem significant. While some may argue the generalizability of this research, it is the belief of the author that expansion of literature in relational commitment is needed. Thus, this study provides the reader with an example of some ways that married individuals have successfully done commitment. In addition, the examples are representative of how people use talk to define their commitment.

Limitations
Methodological limitations of this study evolve from questions regarding self report. Any time a self report method is used to derive information about subject's behavior, the question arises as to what extent is the behavior that the participants are reporting parallel to their actual behavior? This type of question is significant and worthy of mention. However, in this particular study, it was the observation of the interviewer that participants were genuine with their answers. In fact, individuals that had difficulty with questions during the interview occasionally responded, "I don't know."

A possible method to validate these findings would be to look at actual conversations between married couples. Focusing on couples and their actual conversations would provide the researcher with a prime sample of data through which validations of commitment dimensions could be performed. For example, the notion of reciprocity could be investigated to see if appreciation is followed by appreciation, and so forth.

Questions For Future Research

The results of this have provided several questions for future research. First, to expand the current literature in light of this study, it would be beneficial to discover how other cultures define and express commitment to one another.
For example, how to married individuals, who are not active church members, express commitment in their marriage? Or how does the expressions of commitment from those members of the Episcopal Church compare to those members of other religions?

Second, commitment in this study was found to be reflexive in nature. The promise influenced the behaviors, and the behaviors reinforced the promise. Thus, a question arises as to, "What framework do other relationships, i.e., friends, cohabitants, and family members, use to make sense out of their commitment?" If the promise and wedding ritual bond married couples together, it would be interesting to discover what framework maintains other relationships.

Finally, commitment in this study was found to have properties both relational and other-oriented. This discovery provides a dimension of commitment not previously researched. Do individuals who are other oriented have a sense of relational orientation, and vice versa? For example, Stuart and Stuart (1975; cf Stuart, 1980) developed a Marital Precounseling Inventory, which measured a couples' investment in their relationship. A series of questions asks participants to report the behaviors of their spouse. The questions asks individuals to report on behavior like pleasing the other or making sacrifices. The
results of these questions would measure the individuals investment. However, all of these questions are other oriented. Thus, the results of this type of testing is questionable, perhaps incorrectly assessing a couple commitment. Insight into these dimensions may provide valuable properties of expressed commitment.
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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW GUIDE

The purpose of this study is to discover how couples express commitment. I would like you answer the following questions regarding commitment. Some of these questions may seem far-fetched or difficult to answer. The reason for this is that some questions are appropriate for some people and not for others. You need not worry about this. Merely answer the questions to the best of your ability. The interview will be tape recorded so that I can focus on the interview and not be distracted taking notes. However, the material in the interview will remain strictly confidential. Any information used in the interview will not identify you in any way. (Lofland, 1971)

PROTOTYPES

1. What does commitment in marriage mean to you? How would you define it?

2. Describe how married couples do commitment (dedication, devotion) to one another.
a) What does one do to show commitment?
b) How is that communicated?
c) What specific things does one do to indicate...?

3. Do you think that the expression of commitment remains the same throughout marriage?
   a) If not, in what ways does the expression of commitment change?
   (1a) What might the wife say? What might the husband say?
   b) Where do you see the changes in expressing commitment occurring throughout marriage?
   (1b) Are there specific times?

ACTUAL RELATIONSHIPS

4. How many years have you been married?

5. How do you do commitment with your spouse?
   a) What do you do to show commitment?
   b) How is that communicated?
   c) What specific things do you do that indicate...?

6. How does your spouse express commitment to you?
a) What do they do to show commitment?
b) How is that communicated to you?
c) What specific things do they do to indicate commitment?
d) What makes that commitment for you?

7. Are there particular times in your relationship when you express commitment more or less? When?

8. Are there particular times during the day or week that you show commitment more or less? When?

9. How often do you express commitment to your spouse?

10. When was the last time you expressed commitment? What did you say?

11. How do you know when your not doing commitment well?

12. What expectations do you have about doing commitment?

13. Are there ways that you would like to express commitment but do not? Why?

14. How do other people know you are committed?
15. Are there any other ways to express commitment that I have not mentioned that you would like to discuss?