

## **Intimate Partners Who Struggle With Formal Commitments: Attachment Styles, Major Challenges, and Clinical Implications**

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*In this article, we explore attachment perspectives of romantic relationships and intimate partner commitments. We then present four challenges faced by individuals who are in a relationship where an expressed problem is the lack of a formal commitment. The four challenges that we address are (a) lack of recognition for the relationship, (b) cultural/religious pressures, (c) not being financially ready for a formal commitment, and (d) differences in what a formal commitment means. We then provide real-life examples of four people struggling with formal commitment, and we conclude with clinical implications of this phenomenon.*

In the United States, many people view dating as the first step before making a relational commitment. As individuals observe how parents and families model relationships while taking in relational messages from the media, they learn about cultural norms of romantic relationship progression. Such views often reflect the values that we hold closest in life, such as religion, culture, and personal life ambitions. In this way, beliefs about what is right and wrong for relationships can create problems when two dating partners do not share similar values. Even when both relational partners hold the same ideals, problems can arise for a couple when their values do not fit societal standards.

In this paper, we explore attachment perspectives of romantic relationships and intimate partner formal commitments. We define formal commitments generally as culturally accepted norms of long-term dedication to

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monogamous intimate partnerships. These cultural standards may vary according to contextual variables such as religion, socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, and nationality. Examples of such norms are a wedding or commitment ceremony (religious and or secular), moving in together, buying a house, or having children. We also delineate four challenges individuals may face when no formal commitments exist in their relationships: (a) lack of social recognition for the relationship, (b) cultural/religious pressures, (c) financial reasons, and (d) divergent perceptions of what a formal commitment means. Within each challenge, we provide case examples of four people struggling with formal commitment.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Intimate Relationships and Attachment

Myriad academic writers have focused on romantic and intimate relationships. They have written on many aspects, including how these partnerships develop (Knapp & Vangelisti, 2005; Owen & Fincham, 2012), continue (Ysseldyk & Wohl, 2012), and terminate (Madey & Jilek, 2012). In earlier studies, researchers have explored commitment and attachment within these relationships (Hazan & Shaver, 1994; Levy & Davis, 1988; Shaver & Hazan, 1988; Shaver, Hazan, & Bradshaw, 1998). Couple and family therapists and researchers have also applied attachment models about caregiver-child relationships to romantic partnerships (Johnson, 2004; Woolley, Wampler, & Davis, 2012).

Although attachment theory emerged from extensive work with infants and caregivers (Ainsworth et al., 1978), Bowlby (1988) introduced the notion of applying the theory to adults and their relationships. From this perspective, an individual's past relational experiences influence future his or her intimate partnerships (Hazan & Shaver, 1994). People, therefore, develop attachment styles in past adult romantic relationships that affect their behaviors in current relationships.

### ATTACHMENT STYLES

Individuals who have endured negative relationships can formulate attachment styles that set them up to be unsuccessful with romantic commitments because they anticipate failure (Birnie et al., 2009). Researchers have suggested that people who expect rejection in their relationships often engage in rejection behaviors (Downey et al., 1998). Such individuals typically display avoidant attachment styles and are frequently less committed in their relationships (Pistole, Clark, & Tubbs, 1995) than people who indicate less avoidant styles.

In fact, individuals who demonstrate highly avoidant attachment are less likely to feel satisfied in and commit to their relationships than people who have less avoidant attachment styles (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Furthermore, those who are avoidant may struggle to trust dating partners, often expecting future hurt and abandonment (Baldwin et al., 1993). They are likely to make destructive choices in intimate partnerships (Vicary & Fraley, 2007) and struggle with relational commitments in general (Morgan & Shaver, 1999).

It is not surprising that individuals with high avoidant attachment styles may also experience difficulties in committing to relational partners. This pattern reflects the research because one defining characteristic is that they may become distressed with relational dependence (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998; DeWall et al., 2011). These individuals differ from those who display highly anxious attachment styles. People with highly anxious attachment may commit easily to relationships (Morgan & Shaver, 1999).

## Relational Commitment

Arriaga and colleagues (2007) described intimate partnership commitment as “the ‘glue’ that keeps relational partners together when relationship challenges arise” (p. 389). Without commitment, couples may not survive difficult obstacles. If, however, individuals commit seriously to each other, they will more likely endure such challenges. Despite numerous extant definitions of relational commitment in the literature, we define it broadly as “the motivation to stay in a relationship and work toward its success” (Lydon & Linardatos, 2007, p. 223). Commitment issues can affect the progress and direction of relationships. Rusbult, Drigotas, and Verette (1994) argued that strong commitment is a good predictor of high relational investment and can reveal how long the intimate partnership will continue.

### BENEFITS OF RELATIONAL COMMITMENT

Intimate partners with strong commitment have a greater likelihood of engaging in spontaneous relational maintenance behaviors that engender relationship satisfaction and keep the relationship intact (Le & Agnew, 2003). In addition, relationships with strong commitment can handle long separations (Lydon, Pierce, & O'Regan, 1997). Forgiveness after betrayal also occurs more often in such partnerships (Finkel et al., 2002). Therefore, having commitment assists relationship maintenance and facilitates the management of difficult situations.

Relational commitment is so powerful that simply perceiving one's romantic partner as committed may positively influence the relationship (Drigotas, Rusbult, & Verette, 1999; Miller & Rempel, 2004; Murray et al., 2003). Having intimacy in a relationship reduces the amount of uncertainty

(Solomon & Knobloch, 2001), which is important because of the negative role that uncertainty can play in romantic relationships. In particular, uncertainty has been linked to lower satisfaction in relationships, less closeness, and greater relational distress (Campbell et al., 2005). Also, having strong commitment may reduce uncertainty in couples (Solomon & Knobloch, 2001).

#### PREDICTING RELATIONAL COMMITMENT

Given the extant literature on commitment in relationships, many researchers have suggested that there are several factors that influence predicting commitment in romantic relationships. One factor is whether or not an individual contends there is an alternative to the current partner (Rusbult, Drigotas, & Verette, 1994). If a partner perceives that there are superior partners available outside the relationship, he or she may not express as strong of a commitment as someone who does not think that better options exist.

Another variable that has predicted commitment in men is perceived family support. Perceived family support as a predictor is specific to Latino and Caucasian men and may influence the likelihood of these men actually committing to marry their relational partners (Umaña-Taylor & Fine, 2003). Perceived family support cannot generalize to all men but it does have important implications regarding the similarities between these two racial groups. Also, although perceived family support is a specific predictor for a specific population, most researchers have suggested that there are many other variables that can affect relational commitment in various relationships. These variables include personality traits (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998), the quality of the relationship (Adams & Jones, 1997; Karney & Bradbury, 1995), and contextual factors outside of the relationship (Huston, 2000).

A third predictor in making formal commitments is having relational goals. Individuals more often commit to their relational partners when they have goals of wanting to start families (Salmela-Aro, Aunola, & Nurmi, 2007). When they have this desire, they are more likely to commit to the overall relationship. Expressing a strong commitment makes sense because having children might make couples become more dependent on one another, and commitment grows through partners fostering this dependence (Rusbult et al., 1998).

### Major Challenges

#### LACK OF RECOGNITION FOR THE RELATIONSHIP

One of the most difficult challenges for partners can be the lack of recognition that they receive regarding their relationships because they do not have formal commitments. One example is the experience of Lily, who

is a 26-year-old heterosexual Caucasian woman who has been dating her Caucasian boyfriend for seven years. Lily is ready for a formal commitment, but her boyfriend is not. She tires of the numerous questions from people regarding when the couple will get married.

Lily's experience of not receiving social recognition parallels that of same-sex couples living in geographical locations where they cannot legally marry their partners. Relationship labels, such as *engaged* or *married*, are important. Common usage and acceptance of these labels reveal shared cultural values within communities (McConnell-Ginet, 2006).

A lack of recognition and acknowledgement of relationships is a phenomenon that can especially face gay couples. Heterosexual relationships, historically certified via marital arrangements, are the social norm. Marriage then emerges as the preferred relational status in U.S. society (Clarke, 2003; Goodwin & Butler, 2009). Gay couples, who frequently cannot access this institution, often suffer severe social repercussions. Tim is a 38-year-old gay Caucasian man who has been dating his Latino boyfriend for two years. Tim would like to marry his boyfriend someday; however, numerous roadblocks prevent it from happening. Because he is a gay man in a state where same-sex marriage is illegal, Tim recognizes the importance of relational labels and the challenges inherent in the inability to access such labels.

At times, the lack of recognition can result in partners feeling pressure to make a formal commitment. This pressure can come from diverse sources and result in partners frequently facing questions regarding their relationship status. For Lily, these questions intensify the fact that she was ready to make a formal commitment. Individuals may believe that there is a lack of recognition for their relationship simply because they do not have a formal commitment. Lacking a formal commitment may result in partners feeling as though their relationship is not as important as committed intimate partnerships.

#### CULTURAL/RELIGIOUS PRESSURES

Pressure to have a formal commitment in one's relationship can also stem from a broader system of culture and religion. Amar is a 30-year-old heterosexual Middle Eastern man who is heavily involved in his Christian community of faith. At present, he is dating his Caucasian girlfriend of three years and feels the pressure of his religious community to take the next step and propose marriage.

Some researchers found that there are many stress-relieving benefits of religious behaviors (Plante, Saucido, & Rice, 2001; Smith, McCullough, & Poll, 2003). In contrast, other researchers demonstrated the importance religion plays in promoting stress by advocating a strict adherence to traditions (Bourguignon, 1992). Amar believes that most of the pressure he

experienced originated from his family's strong adherence to their religious community. Because Amar and his girlfriend do not follow the traditional progression for their relationship, he said that the couple has experienced intense pressure from their families.

Vanessa is a 24-year-old heterosexual Latina who also strongly identifies with her Christian community. She has been with her Latino boyfriend for four years. Vanessa's Latino culture and her Christian background are two factors that hinder her from making a formal commitment. She thinks that her culture expects couples to have children quickly after getting married, and she is not yet ready for this responsibility. *Simpatía* is a word used to describe the Latino cultural expectation that relationships will be pleasant and conflicts will be avoided in the family; an expectation that Latina women and girls experience (Gloria & Peregoy, 1996). Hispanic cultures also promote values such as collectivism, strong family ties, and interdependent relationships (Santiago-Rivera, Arredondo, & Gallardo-Cooper, 2002).

Given the strict expectations from her culture and church, Vanessa believes that she has to hide her relationship with her boyfriend from church members. These religious and cultural expectations were something that she was not ready for at the time, and so she and her boyfriend choose not to reveal their relationship to the public and to her family. Not divulging this secret has allowed the couple freedom from expectations. Keeping such a secret had its difficulties, but it is easier for Vanessa than following the strict rules of her culture and church.

#### NOT BEING FINANCIALLY READY FOR A FORMAL COMMITMENT

For some individuals, having a formal commitment is something that they are not ready for because of their financial situations. Edgar is a 34-year-old heterosexual Latino male who has been dating his Caucasian girlfriend of three-and-a-half years. He believes that there are two aspects to their financial situation that hinder him from a formal commitment: finances and job security. There are certain steps that Edgar thinks they must take before they make a formal commitment. In particular, he contends that the couple must get their financial situation in order and increase job security for both of them.

Amelia also expresses that finances are a hindrance to moving forward with a formal commitment as she wants to feel financially secure before being married. Amelia is a 26-year-old, heterosexual, Caucasian female who has been dating her Latino boyfriend of five-and-a-half years. Amelia thinks that she needs to be able to support herself financially before marrying, in case the relationship does not work out at a later time. Being financially secure is important to her because she does not want to rely on her boyfriend to take care of her. This caution emerged out of what she saw her mother endure when Amelia was a child.

#### DIFFERENCES IN WHAT A FORMAL COMMITMENT MEANS

The challenge for some couples is that they might hold divergent ideas of what formal commitment means. Lily thinks that the differences in her intimate partnership stem from relationships they observed in their families-of-origin. Amar also contends that his caution about progressing into a marriage has to do with the bad relationships he saw growing up, whereas his girlfriend had the opposite experience. Tim wants to marry eventually and enjoy all of the benefits that heterosexual couples have through marriage. However, his boyfriend does not believe that same-sex marriage is right for him. Embarrassment by the expression of one's same-sex desires and behaviors can often result in what is referred to as internalized homophobia (Szymanski & Carr, 2008). Internalized homophobia can be especially prominent for Latino gay men who are more likely to be surrounded by traditional masculine cultural ideology with negative messages about same-sex relationships (Estrada et al., 2011).

#### CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS

Implications for clinicians working with people in similar situations include increasing awareness of societal pressure on clients to formalize commitment in order to enjoy equal recognition with marriages. It is important for therapists to be aware of personal beliefs, stereotypes, and biases about marriage, which often come across to clients. Clinicians can unknowingly pressure clients to marry or not to marry based on therapists' values and experiences regarding marriage. They also need to acknowledge that clients may want their relationships as equal to couples with formal commitments. Handling this sensitive topic with care and determining how to reaffirm the importance of the relationship could help partners to feel validated and understood. Therapists also can help clients find creative ways to reaffirm the importance of their relationships to outside systems. In addition, it is vital to assess for the degree of influence of clients' families on the relationship and on decisions regarding commitment. Such awareness can help guide sessions for clinicians as they focus on how these influences affect stress levels and relational dynamics. Clinicians could invite family members to join some sessions to increase support and build advocacy for the relationship. It is also important not to overlook cultural and religious elements when working with these clients. Therapists must remain open-minded regarding clients' varied cultural and religious expectations. Rather than working against these systems, clinicians can respectfully make these expectations overt and work with clients to find healthy ways to manage stress while staying true to their cultures and religions.

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