Commitment: A Conceptual Structure and Empirical Application

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A conceptual structure for commitment is presented, specifying and clarifying the various meanings of the term as it has been used by sociologists and social psychologists. The possible importance of the concept for social psychology is illustrated by the interpretation of a number of social psychological experiments in terms of commitment processes. The utility of the concept of commitment for the analysis of courtship systems is discussed and the application of the concept of commitment on the level of social systems is illustrated by the use of the proposed conceptual structure in research on cohabitation on a university campus.

The concept of commitment, although in common use among sociologists and social psychologists, has not been subject to the conceptual specification or empirical grounding which is necessary to transform it from an intuitively appealing idea into a viable scientific variable. However, theoretical discussions of commitment may be found in the works of a number of authors writing in the interactionist tradition, and in 1960 Howard S. Becker took the first major steps toward meaningful specification of the concept. It is the purpose of this paper to expand upon these first attempts, formally specify a conceptional structure for commitment, and suggest a number of research areas in which the concept might prove to be important. In particular, the concept of commitment has arisen frequently in discussions of courtship and marriage, but has not as yet been pinned down to the extent that it could be used effectively in research in that area. Data will be presented which illustrate the potential utility of the proposed conceptual framework for commitment in the analysis of courtship systems.

Commitment

In everyday usage, and as it has come to be used by sociologists, commitment carries two distinct meanings which may be used as a basis for a specification of the concept. First, in expressions such as "He is committed to spreading the Gospel," commitment refers to a strong personal dedication to a decision to carry out a line of action. This type of commitment will be referred to here as personal commitment. The second common use of commitment is illustrated by statements such as "He can't back out now, he's committed himself." The connotation here is one of constraint. The individual has acted in such a way that he "must" continue the line of action, whether he is personally committed to it or not. This form of commitment will be referred to as behavioral commitment.

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1 The phrase "line of action" refers to any set of behaviors which are organized around the attainment of a goal, including the limiting case of one-act lines of action.
Personal Commitment. Personal commitment is encountered most often in the sociological literature in contexts which are not particularly concerned with commitment per se. For example, Becker and Carper's (1956) discussion of identification with an occupational role deals primarily with personal commitment to the various aspects of the role or organization in which it is embedded, and Hooker's (1960) discussion of the homosexual career contains references to commitment to homosexuality. In some cases the concept has been used more explicitly, e.g., in reference to commitment to marriage as a life-long relationship (Hillsdale, 1962); and Brehm and Cohen's (1962) inclusion of commitment as a crucial variable in their extension of dissonance theory has stimulated considerable use of the concept in dissonance research. However, in these discussions of personal commitment there has been a tendency to deal with it as a dichotomous variable. The individual is either committed or he is not. Personal commitment will be dealt with here as a continuous variable, formally defined as the extent to which an actor is dedicated to the completion of a line of action. It is hoped that such an approach will lend itself more readily to the development and testing of hypotheses in non-experimental settings.

Behavioral Commitment. The first systematic use of the concept of behavioral commitment was presented in Selznick's (1949:255) study of the TVA: "A commitment in social action is an enforced line of action; it refers to a decision dictated by the force of circumstance..." This definition suffers from the same weakness as that of Abramson, et al. (1958:16): "Committed lines... are sequences of action with penalties and costs arranged so as to guarantee their selection." The definitions proposed by Selznick and Abramson et al. are broad enough to include virtually any environmental determinant of behavior and thus include too many diverse elements to be of much heuristic value. Theorists who have worked with the concept in recent years have seen fit to add further restrictions in order to make the concept more manageable.

Becker, 1960: 35-36: "(1) The individual is in a position in which his decision with regard to some particular line of action has consequences for other interests and activities not necessarily related to it. ... (2) he has placed himself in that position by his own prior actions. ... (3) the committed person must be aware that he has made the side bet and must recognize that his decision in the case will have ramifications beyond it."

Gerard, 1965: 264: "... any constraints that operate against changing behavior serve to commit the person to that behavior."

Goffman, 1961: 88-89: "An individual becomes committed to something when because of the fixed and interdependent character of many institutional arrangements his doing or being this something irrevocably conditions other important possibilities in his life, forcing him to take courses of action, causing others to build up their activity on the basis of his continuing in his current undertakings and rendering him vulnerable to unanticipated consequences of these undertakings."

Kornhauser, 1962: 322: "... the 'force of circumstances' to which one becomes exposed by virtue of pursuing a course of action. A commitment consists in the various relations which are formed in the process of acting in a certain direction, so that to shift the line of action requires changing those relations."
Preiss and Ehrlich, 1966: 178-179: “By status commitment we refer to the degree to which factors other than those of psychological preference prevent the actor from withdrawing from his status.”

Stebbins, 1967: 8: “. . . the psychological state of awareness of the relative impossibility of choosing a specified new line of action because of the biological, psychological, and/or social penalties involved in making the switch.”

All of these theorists confine commitment to those factors which constrain one to continue a line of action. They are not interested in the determinants of behavior in general, but in the determinants of the consistency of behavior. The common sense connotation of commitment, as well as the definitions of Becker, Goffman, and Kornhauser, direct one’s attention to the fact that the initiation of a line of action often has consequences which make it difficult to change direction. Thus, behavioral commitment is defined here as those consequences of the initial pursuit of a line of action which constrain the actor to continue that line of action. It should be noted that Becker and Stebbins both further stipulate that the actor must be aware of his commitment. However, from the perspective of the observer, the actor may be said to be committed whether or not he is fully aware of the commitments which he has engaged, and such commitments may be referred to as potential behavioral commitments.

It is convenient to consider behavioral commitment to consist of two components: social commitment and cost commitment. When an actor initiates a line of action and other people are aware of his behavior, they may form normative expectations concerning its continuation. For example, while there may be no normative expectations concerning the performance of feats of daring, there may be norms concerning “chickening out” once one has begun such an act. These expectations may be the result of cultural or subcultural norms, or they may be due to the idiosyncratic expectations of particular persons within the actor’s social environment. The extent of the potential social commitment entailed by any behavior would then be considered to be a function of any of the variables which have been of interest to students of social influence processes, e.g., the number of people who form expectations concerning the continuation of the line of action, the extent of their consensus concerning such expectations, etc. The social commitment felt by the actor would be a function of such things as his awareness of the expectations, the characteristics of his relationship with those who hold the expectations, and the perceived legitimacy of the expectations.

Cost commitment refers to the costs (in terms of the actor’s own value system) of the discontinuation of a line of action which he has initiated. Cost may be defined in terms of the actor’s attitude (in the evaluative sense) toward the concomitants of discontinuation. Three particular types of cost commitments come to mind immediately. First, the initiation of a line of action may have immediate consequences for the form of action which is necessary to terminate it. For example, if the actor has involved himself in a legal contract, he may have to go through legal proceedings in order to cancel the contract, and to

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2 Social commitment could be considered to be one component of cost commitment. However, it was felt that it might prove to be heuristically valuable to maintain social commitment as a separate concept.
the extent that he dislikes contact with legal institutions, such a necessity constitutes a cost commitment. Second, the termination of a line of action may necessitate changes in the life of the actor. In the example above, if the legal contract happened to be a marriage contract, the cancellation would bring about a number of changes including perhaps sleeping alone, cooking for oneself, or moving out of a house in which one had lived for a number of years. Third, the initial pursuit of a line of action may entail the investment of assets which must be forfeited in order to terminate it. For example, the graduate student who drops out of school after two years of graduate work may receive very little in return for those two years of invested time.

The potential heuristic value of the concept of commitment will be developed in the remainder of the paper. First, the concept will be used to interpret a number of experimental studies in the area of social influence. Second, the development of a commitment approach to courtship will be outlined and the utility of the conceptual structure will be illustrated in a small-scale study of cohabitation on a university campus.

Commitment and Social Influence

In the area of social influence, behavioral commitment may be a two-edged sword. On the one hand, it may prove to be an important factor in the explanation of resistance to social influence. Deutsch and Gerard (1955) demonstrated that in an Asch conformity situation, public commitment to one's initial judgment significantly reduces the extent of conformity to a unanimously incorrect majority. Another study which bears upon the possible insulating effects of commitment is the early Hovland et al. (1957) work on assimilation and contrast effects. They demonstrated that individuals who held extreme positions concerning prohibition were less susceptible to influence than were those who held moderate positions. However, their extreme pro-prohibition sample consisted of members of organizations such as the WCTU. The extreme anti-prohibition sample consisted of persons known to the experimenters to hold such extreme positions, and Hovland et al. point out that it was very difficult for them to find a sample of such extremely anti-prohibition people. It is thus possible that the sample which they finally gathered consisted only of people who had made their position on the issue widely known, i.e., people who were probably socially committed to their stand. Thus, both extreme groups consisted of people who had probably engaged strong behavioral commitments to their positions on the issue of prohibition. Their resistance to persuasion may then be a result of this commitment rather than merely the extremity of their position.

On the other hand, behavioral commitment may in some situations tend to increase the effects of social influence attempts. Kiesler and Corbin (1965) have shown that when persons are not committed to continued membership in a group, conformity to group norms is a direct function of attraction to the group. However, when they are committed to continued membership, persons who are least attracted to the group actually conform more than those who are moderately attracted and, in fact, conform significantly more than unattracted persons who are not committed to continuing membership. In another
study (Kiesler, Zanna and DeSalvo, 1966) it was shown that lone deviates within a group shifted more toward the group position when they were committed to continued membership than when they were not. One might also interpret the Milgram (1965) obedience studies to be a demonstration of the power of commitment. Had Milgram advertised for volunteers to participate in a psychological experiment which would involve administering severe shocks to an innocent victim, he probably would have obtained few volunteers. Instead, subjects were not informed of the nature of the study until after they had volunteered. Once the subjects had committed themselves to participate in an experiment they felt compelled to go through with it.

Courtship and Commitment

The courtship system in the United States involves a series of culturally prescribed stages of commitment, varying somewhat across subcultures. Each of these stages in courtship involves a characteristic level of behavioral and personal commitment to the maintenance of the relationship. It is possible to approach courtship with the following model. As an individual's emotional attachment to his partner forms, he moves into the first stages of courtship, involving himself at the first minimal levels of behavioral commitment. As personal commitment to the maintenance of the relationship increases, the individual moves the relationship on to the next culturally prescribed courtship level, increasing his behavioral commitment. Awareness of this increased behavioral commitment may then serve to further increase the level of personal commitment since the awareness that one is involved in a relationship which would be costly to terminate is dissonant with the cognition that one is not personally committed to the relationship. The actor thus becomes involved in a process of increasing personal and behavioral commitment which culminates in the life-long commitment of marriage.8

The commitment approach to courtship opens a number of questions for research. What levels of commitment are involved in the various courtship stages in different subcultures? Are there crucial stages in the sense that some changes involve large increments in commitment while others do not? Has the absolute level of commitment changed in recent years? Has the level of commitment in some stages changed relative to that of other stages? What are the effects of the absolute and relative commitment of the partners on other aspects of the relationship, such as division of labor? This commitment framework has recently been applied in a study of cohabiting couples on a university campus.

Cohabitation seems to be developing as an accepted stage in courtship on university campuses across the country. That such a relationship is acceptable to the youth of today is indicated by the Look Youth Survey (a quota sample of 550 youngsters aged 13-20) which reported that “45 percent believe it is all right for a boy and girl who are in love to live together” (Shepherd, 1966:48). That it is part of the American courtship and marriage system rather than a rejection of it is indicated by the fact that over two-thirds of the cohabiting respondents in the study to be reported below indicated that they intend to

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8 Blau (1964:76-84) has suggested that the relationship will falter if the difference between the commitment levels of the two partners at any time exceeds some critical value.
marry their partner. Their relationship is not a rejection of marriage, but a prelude to it. Given the assumption that courtship is a process of increasing commitment culminating in marriage, the general hypothesis may be derived that married couples are more committed to the maintenance of their relationship than are cohabiting couples. Specifying the general hypothesis for personal, social, and cost commitment yields three hypotheses which were tested on matched samples of nineteen married and nineteen cohabiting couples on a midwestern university campus.

As is the case in many studies which deal with subcultures which are considered to be deviant by society at large, it was not possible to draw a random sample of cohabiting couples. The sample was thus collected by means of a reputational method. Thirty-six couples were contacted, of which eight refused to participate, leaving a total sample of twenty-eight cohabiting couples. Of the twenty-eight couples interviewed, four were known to the investigator at the inception of the study and five were known to friends of the investigator. The remaining nineteen were couples who were known to other cohabiting couples who had supplied their names in response to the last question of the interview.

Since the size of the sample precluded the use of multivariate techniques, the precision needed to provide a reasonably sensitive test of the hypotheses was attained by comparing the cohabiting couples with a precision-matched sample of married couples at the same university. For this purpose a short screening interview was administered to married student households, yielding nineteen married couples who were perfectly matched with cohabiting couples on two variables. None of the married or unmarried couples had any children in residence and each cohabiting couple was matched with a married couple who had the same working status, e.g., the male was working and the female was in school. In addition, the couples were roughly matched for length of time living together. The average absolute difference in amount of time together was two months and the largest difference was six months. The couples were also matched for age, with the average difference for males being 1.47 years and for females 1.37. The maximum difference for males was five years, while for females it was three years. Matching on further variables such as social class would have been desirable, but matching on even four variables was extremely difficult. The matching unit was the couple, not the individual. Thus, while the probability of finding a 30-year-old female student with no children is low enough, the probability of finding one who had been married to a 24-year-old student for one month was infinitesimal.

The Commitments of Married and Cohabiting Students
Are married couples more personally committed to the maintenance of their relationship than are cohabiting couples? Personal commitment was assessed
Commitment

by simply asking each respondent, "How long would you like⁶ to stay with [NAME OF PARTNER]?” If the respondent indicated a desire to stay together more than five years, he was asked, "How strongly do you feel about that?” and was presented with the following scale on which to respond.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>E</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not</td>
<td>Fairly</td>
<td>Very</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly</td>
<td>Strongly</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>At All</td>
<td></td>
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Table 1 indicates that both male and female married respondents were more personally committed to the maintenance of their relationship than were the cohabiting couples. The married respondents all felt at least fairly strongly about wanting to stay with their partners at least five years, while approximately one-third of the cohabiting respondents did not intend to stay with their partners that long.

Are married couples more socially committed to the maintenance of their relationship than are cohabiting couples? Respondents were first asked to list all those people “whose opinions of your personal life are important to you.” They were then asked which of these knew that they were living with their partner. Finally, they were asked, “How do you think [NAME OF REFERENCE OTHER] would feel if you and [NAME OF PARTNER] broke up: approve, indifferent, or disapprove?” Social commitment was operationally defined as the number⁶ of reference others who knew about the relationship and would disapprove of its termination. It should be noted that this index of social commitment does not tap the full range of potential social commitment, but only

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⁶ The question “How long do you expect to stay with your partner?” yielded the same results.
⁷ An analysis of an index using proportions instead of raw data numbers yielded essentially the same results.
the social commitment of which the respondent was aware and which presumably was important to him. Table 2 clearly indicates that the married couples were more socially committed to their relationship than were the cohabiting couples.

### Table 2. Marital Status and Social Commitment by Sex

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0-4</td>
<td>5-16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohabit</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[d = .63, p < .01\] \[d = .58, p < .01\]

About 95 percent of the cohabiting respondents named fewer than five persons who knew about their relationship and would disapprove of its termination, whereas only about one-third of the married respondents named less than five such persons.

Are married couples more cost committed to their relationship than are cohabiting couples? Each respondent was asked the following question: "If you were to decide you no longer wanted to live with [NAME OF PARTNER], what changes would you have to make in your present plans and living conditions?" He was then asked to indicate how he thought he would feel about each of those changes and presented with the following alternatives: "Extremely happy, somewhat happy, indifferent, somewhat unhappy, extremely unhappy." The index of cost commitment is the number of changes about which the respondent would feel somewhat or extremely unhappy.\(^7\) It is clear from Table 3 that there is virtually no relationship between marital status and this index of cost commitment. However, it was noted that the index of cost commitment taps only those commitments which were salient to the respondent, salient

### Table 3. Marital Status and Cost Commitment by Sex

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Zero</th>
<th>One or More</th>
<th>N*</th>
<th>Zero</th>
<th>One or More</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cohabit</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>(19)</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>(19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>(17)</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>(19)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[d = .12, \text{NS}\] \[d = .06, \text{NS}\]

\(^7\) Two respondents refused to answer the questions on the grounds that the situation was unimaginable.

\(^7\) Essentially the same results were found with indices using proportions and averages.
enough that they appeared in response to a very open question format which dealt with a hypothetical situation. It was thus decided to develop a measure of potential cost commitment.

An index of potential cost commitment was constructed as follows. Each respondent was given one point for each change about which he said he would be somewhat or extremely unhappy (this is the cost commitment index cited previously). In order to incorporate some potential cost commitment of which the respondent was not aware, or which was not salient enough to be reported in response to an open-ended question, two items were chosen from the interview which seemed to indicate conditions which might make termination of the relationship somewhat problematic. Thus, one point was added to each respondent’s cost commitment score if he had a joint savings or checking account with his partner, plus one point if he and his partner had made major purchases together which accumulated to more than $100. The index of potential cost commitment thus included not only those changes which the respondent mentioned spontaneously, but also two items which were considered to indicate conditions which would make termination of the relationship tedious. There is a fairly strong relationship between marital status and this index of potential

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4. Marital Status and Potential Cost Commitment by Sex</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Index of Potential Cost Commitment (Percent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohabiting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[ d=.69, p < .01 \]

\[ d=.58, p < .01 \]

It would seem that the married couples were aware of no more cost commitment than were the cohabiting couples, but that they had indeed engaged in some acts which would have made termination of the relationship somewhat more tedious for them than it would have been for cohabiting couples. This is not even to mention the vagaries of divorce proceedings in this country, which were not included in the indices of cost commitment in order to avoid confounding the independent and dependent variables. It is possible that at the extreme levels of personal commitment involved in marriage, individuals are not attuned to cost commitment. Other data indicated that over 70 percent of the married respondents had never even considered the possibility of their marriage not working out, and it might also be noted that two of the married respondents refused to answer the questions concerning cost commitment. They insisted that they had never thought about the possibility of terminating the relationship and did not feel that they could even discuss it adequately as a hypothetical possibility. Thus, in this situation the distinction between potential and actual cost commitment was crucial. The married couples were indeed more cost committed to the relationship than were the cohabiting
couples, but probably would not become aware of the extent of their commitment until their personal commitment decreased to the extent that they faced the possibility of terminating their relationship.

The Utility of the Concept of Commitment

The previous discussion of three social influence experiments in terms of commitment processes focuses primarily on the role of commitment as a conditioning variable, interacting statistically with the experimental manipulation of attempted influence. The basic notion is that the success of an influence attempt may depend upon the kinds of commitments in which the subject is involved. The effect of personal commitment has, of course, long been a part of theories concerned with social influence (Brehm and Cohen, 1962). It is hoped, however, that the discussion presented above makes clear the extent to which behavioral as well as social commitment may be a crucial factor in social influence research.

The use of the concept of commitment in the analysis of courtship addresses the issue with which Howard S. Becker was primarily concerned in 1960, i.e., the explanation of much of the consistency of human behavior. The concept draws attention to the ways in which behavior leads to consequences which make change difficult. The concept can serve as an important link between social psychological and sociological analysis of courtship systems. The processes that take place at the interpersonal level have important implications for the form of courtship and marital institutions in the society at large.

The concept of commitment has been useful in the explanation of other forms of consistency and inconsistency in human behavior. Kornhauser (1962) has discussed at some length the social commitments involved in liberal and radical political activities, making use of the concept to clarify processes of “defection” from political movements. I would think that the entire area of social movements and collective behavior would benefit from more explicit attention to processes of commitment at various stages of growth of the movement or collective action, and at various stages of individual participation. Kanter (1968) has provided an extensive analysis of mechanisms of commitment in Utopian societies, and has demonstrated that the use of such mechanisms contributes to the longevity of Utopian social systems.

It is clear that the idea of commitment processes is not new to sociology. In some sense, research on courtship has always been concerned with commitment, the labelling approach to deviant behavior is clearly concerned with commitment processes, and research on the maintenance of membership in formal organizations is certainly focused on commitment processes. I feel, however, that what Becker was trying to do in 1960 and what this paper tries to do once again, is to emphasize that processes of commitment are general phenomena that occur in all social settings and which are crucial for the maintenance of many types of social relationships, from cohabiting at the University of Iowa in 1968 to living in a Utopian community in Pennsylvania in 1834. A general conceptual structure which can be applied to such processes in many settings should encourage the development of a general theory of commitment.
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