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Received: 28 February 2024 | Revised: 25 June 2024 | Accepted: 2 July 2024

DOI: 10.1111/spc3.12986

REVIEW ARTICLE

WILEY

Relationship commitment regulation: Influencing a partner's commitment to achieve one's commitment goals

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Abstract

We introduce a model of relationship commitment regulation, which describes how romantic partners might use empirically-validated antecedents of commitment level strategically to influence a partner's commitment toward their relationship based on certain commitment goals they have for the relationship. People are generally aware of and relatively accurate with respect to knowing their partner's level of commitment and also have preferences regarding their desired level. We summarize key antecedents of commitment level (i.e., satisfaction level, alternative quality, investment size, future plans, and subjective norms) and then describe how each can be manipulated via relationship maintenance activities to move a partner's commitment level up or down, or maintained at a desired current level. Collectively, the model provides a strategic roadmap for actions one can take to foster desired commitment in one's partner and provides insight into the dyadic processes and outcomes of relationship maintenance.

KEYWORDS
relationship commitment, relationship maintenance, relationship processes, relationship satisfaction, social influence

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Understanding factors that influence the continuation of close interpersonal ties has been the focus of a significant body of scientific research for decades. Such research has tended to focus on one critical variable: *commitment* (e.g., Joel et al., 2020). One's feelings of commitment toward a partner and/or a relationship has been found to robustly predict not only the enactment of critical relationship maintenance processes, but is also the leading answer to arguably the most important question facing a relationship: Will it survive? Several theoretical models have been offered over the years to further scholarly understanding of how relationship commitment operates, not just what flows from it but also what gives rise to it (Le & Agnew, 2003; Tran et al., 2019). Here we harness decades of theoretical and empirical work on commitment to offer a framework for understanding how one might use empirically-validated antecedents of commitment strategically to influence a partner's commitment toward a relationship.

Given the mutual interdependence between romantic partners, it is inevitable that relationship partners experience fluctuations and conflict in their relationships, with downstream consequences regarding doubt and uncertainty about each other's commitment (e.g., Arriaga et al., 2006). To date, much of the literature on what occurs when this happens focuses on self-oriented strategies people use. These include reworking one's own expectations (e.g., Fletcher et al., 2000), idealizing one's partner (e.g., Murray et al., 1997), finding redeeming features in a partner's faults (e.g., Murray & Holmes, 1999), or accepting a partner for who they are (e.g., South et al., 2010). Beyond these self-oriented strategies that have been shown to be effective in maintaining relationships, one might also make attempts to change one's partner, either simultaneously with self-oriented strategies or instead of them. Knowing that people do work to regulate or change their partners' characteristics to match their own ideals (Overall et al., 2006), and do engage in mate retention strategies such as mate guarding to retain their partner's fidelity (Buss et al., 2008), we expect they also act in ways to regulate their partners' commitment levels. Like emotions that can be upregulated and amplified (e.g., Côté & Morgan, 2002), or downregulated and suppressed (e.g., Gross & John, 2003), we expect people may desire to increase their partners' commitment level (upward regulation) or decrease it (downward regulation). A risk regulation perspective (Murray et al., 2006) supports regulation efforts in either direction, with individuals either risking continued dependence on a vacillating partner by working to reignite the partner's commitment or pursuing self-protection and disengaging from the partner to reduce the risk of becoming vulnerable to pain when/if rejection hits. Of course, given that relationships are dyadic and interdependent, an attempt to regulate one's partner's commitment has a higher probability of being successful if it is acknowledged and reciprocated (or at least not rejected). We aim to highlight how these different perspectives can be better integrated into a more comprehensive model of commitment regulation and specifically theorize about how partners may attempt to regulate each other's commitment levels.

2 | INVESTMENT MODEL OF COMMITMENT PROCESSES

The level of commitment someone experiences is dynamic, based on their cognitive, motivational, and affective appraisals of the relationship and its situational context at a given time (Arriaga & Agnew, 2001; Rusbult, 1980). According to the most prominent theoretical account of commitment, the Investment Model of Commitment Processes (Rusbult et al., 1998, 2012), commitment arises from one's perception that the relationship provides outcomes that exceed expectations (referred to as satisfaction level), that alternative relationships could not provide outcomes that exceed what is produced by the relationship (referred to as quality of alternatives), and that a lot of resources are sunk into the relationship that would be damaged or lost if the relationship were to end (referred to as investment size). This holds true across relationship types, demographics, time, and location (for reviews, see Le & Agnew, 2003; Tran et al., 2019). Put simply, the more satisfied and invested one is, and the worse perceived quality of alternatives one has, the more committed they will be to their current relationship.

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Two substantive extensions have been made to the Investment Model of Commitment Processes in the 40+ years since it was first offered (Rusbult, 1980). First, the construct of investment size has been expanded to include a consideration of its temporality. Originally, investments were considered in the same vein as sunken costs (Arkes & Blumer, 1985), having occurred in the past but influencing current decision-making. Subsequent theorizing and research has since considered the future investments or plans that individuals and couples make with respect to their relationship and how such planning influences commitment (Goodfriend & Agnew, 2008). Whereas both past investments and future plans (collectively referred to as "valued linkages"; Agnew et al., 2008) are strong predictors of commitment, future plans seem to be an especially powerful predictor. This finding is in line with research demonstrating that expectations regarding commitment antecedents are influential predictors of current commitment level (Baker et al., 2017, 2020). Second, the perceived perceptions of important others in one's life (beyond one's partner) about one's relationship have been found to account for variance above and beyond the traditional Investment Model variables in predicting one's commitment (referred to as subjective norms; Etcheverry & Agnew, 2004). Moreover, the perceptions one has as to whether society at large is perceived as supportive of one's relationship have also been found to be influential predictors of commitment (e.g., Lehmiller & Agnew, 2006). Commitment is higher insofar as friends, family members and society at large are perceived as supporting the relationship.

Together, then, five variables have been found to account for the lion's share of variance in one's current commitment level: satisfaction level, quality of alternatives, past investments, future plans, and subjective norms (see the top half of Figure 1 for a visual depiction of these variables). Commitment, then, is theorized to initiate a pattern of cyclical growth, in which a host of pro-relationship mechanisms that are crucial for the continuation of the relationship come online, which then further fuel commitment (Agnew & Adams, in press; VanderDrift & Agnew, 2020). It is because of commitment that people are willing to sacrifice for their partners (Wieselquist et al., 1999), accommodate them when they are acting poorly (Rusbult et al., 1991), forgive their transgressions (Finkel et al., 2002), forego desirable alternative partners (Johnson & Rusbult, 1989), and engage in other pro-relationship cognitions and behaviors (Agnew & VanderDrift, 2018). These pro-relationship mechanisms, once enacted, then cycle back to bolster commitment, which leads to more pro-relationship action and so on (Wieselquist et al., 1999). Not surprisingly then, commitment is a powerful predictor of whether a relationship remains intact over time or dissolves (Le et al., 2010; VanderDrift et al., 2009).

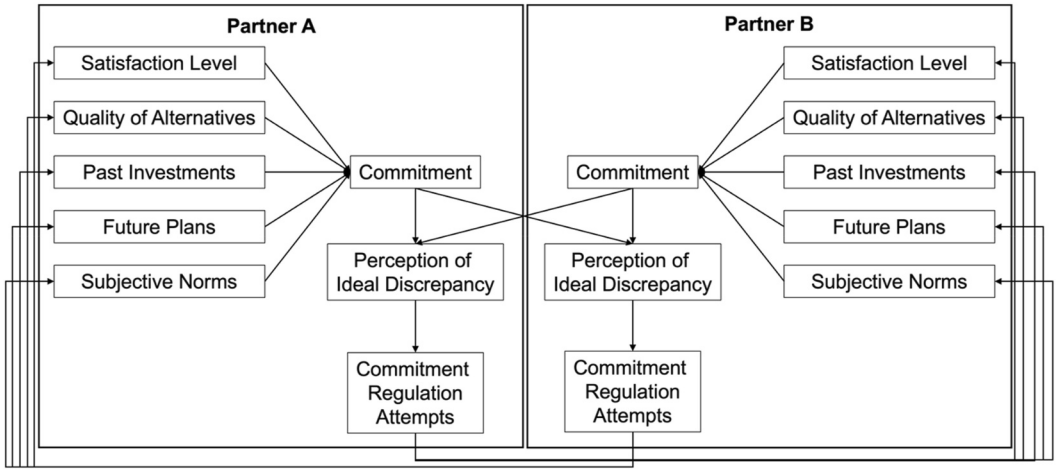

FIGURE 1 Commitment regulation model.

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3 | PERCEIVING AND INFLUENCING A PARTNER's COMMITMENT LEVEL

Given how powerful a predictor commitment is, it stands to reason that people in relationships will be cognizant not only of their own feelings of commitment to a relationship but also of their perceptions of their partner's feelings of commitment. Such perceptions are adaptive and functional, given that a relationship ending can be a devastating experience (e.g., Arriaga et al., 2006; Tan et al., 2020), and this is especially true when the end was initiated by the other partner and was unexpected (Agnew, 2000; Sbarra & Emery, 2005). As such, there is great incentive to pay attention to, and accurately perceive, one's partner's level of commitment (Murray & Pascuzzi, 2024). Doing so allows people to avoid being surprised by hurt feelings (Murray & Holmes, 2008), or surprising one's partner with hurt feelings. In addition, perceived partner commitment provides a bases on which to understand partners' behaviors (Bradbury & Fincham, 1992). People are not able to always act in ways that support the relationship; however, when their partner perceives that they are committed to the relationship, their partner sees their imperfect actions as minor, non-diagnostic setbacks (Murray & Holmes, 1997; Rempel et al., 1985). When their partner perceives that they are less committed, however, those imperfect actions may take on a different meaning, and may be seen as harbingers of future pain (Murray & Holmes, 2008). Put simply, there is significant evidence that supports the notion that people put in significant effort to correctly assess their partners' level of commitment (Arriaga et al., 2006; Tan et al., 2020)

Beyond perceiving a partner's commitment, a person may also have preferences for what level of commitment they desire their partner to have. The same factors that influence one's own commitment level also influence one's partner's commitment level. Preferences for commitment can be conceptualized as playing out in a quadrant of preferred level of partner commitment relative to one's own commitment level. For example, one person may not feel particularly committed (i.e., relatively low own commitment) and prefer for their partner to feel the same way (i.e., their preference is for matching levels of commitment), whereas another person may also not feel great commitment toward their partner but wants their partner to feel more committed (i.e., their preference is for mismatched levels of commitment). See Figure 2 for a visual depiction of this conceptualization. Of course, this conceptualization is a simplification of the dyadic process involved, as each actor within the relationship may differ in their felt versus desired commitment level.

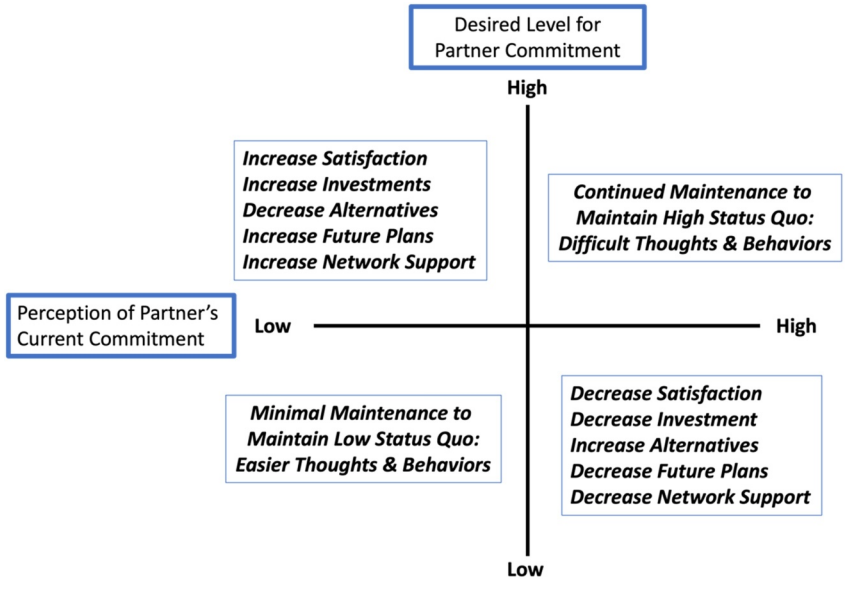

FIGURE 2 Directional strategies to regulate commitment.

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In terms of preferences for matching commitment, relationships follow normative developmental trajectories, in which commitment tends to begin low and builds over time as resources become tied to the relationship, memories are made, and the partners' learn to trust each other (Wieselquist et al., 1999). However, there is evidence that people's perception of their own commitment – perhaps their hope for commitment – might rise much faster than that (Joel & Machia, in press). In such cases, when someone sees strong potential for the new relationship to become committed, they may prefer their partner to be more committed than they currently are. Conversely, when someone does not see as much potential for the future, perceiving that their partner wants to leave (Tan et al., 2023) – or they realize their own commitment is beginning to wane – a reciprocal developmental trajectory may commence, in which they realize that they would like to leave the relationship and they may prefer their partner also become less committed (VanderDrift et al., 2009). In both examples, people's preference is for their partner's commitment to match their own commitment level (or desired commitment level; see Pusch et al., 2023, for research on the benefits of minimizing discrepancies in self-reported closeness between partners within a relationship).

People also may have motives for mis-matched levels of commitment with their partner. In terms of motives that lead people to desire their partner to be more committed than they themselves are, traits such as anxious attachment or Machiavellianism, for example, may lead people to desire partners with greater commitment than their own (Brewer & Abell, 2017; Joel et al., 2011). It is also possible, although we expect much less common, that there are motives that drive some people to want their partner to be less committed than they themselves are. Such cases may exist in affairs or other risky short-term relationships, or for people with strongly avoidant attachment, for example, In these instances, people's preference is for their partner's commitment to deviate from their own commitment level (or desired commitment level), for reasons to do with the power distribution in the relationship (cf. Agnew & Harman, 2019) or the security felt by the perceiver (Arriaga et al., 2018).In sum, people perceive a partner's level of commitment and may have a preferred level for their partner's commitment. Given this observation, we pose the logical next question: Might people try to change their partner's commitment to align with their preference? We believe the answer is "yes." Before reviewing evidence for that and what approaches people may use to influence their partner's commitment, we acknowledge two points. First, we are combining at least two underlying processes when discussing regulating a partner's commitment level. The first process is that people may actually attempt to change their partner's commitment antecedents, such as by working hard to show gratitude to increase their partner's satisfaction level, or by planning an extravagant date night to increase their partner's sense of future plans. The second process is that people may simply reframe the current reality to be more consistent with their desired level of partner commitment. For example, they may remind their partner of all their lovely past memories to make investment size more salient or they may point out the positive attributes they themselves bring to the relationship to make satisfaction level more salient. Whereas there are psychological and theoretical differences between these two processes, for the sake of more fully describing how people attempt to influence their partner's commitment level, we describe both. Second, we acknowledge that we present these regulation ideas neutrally, but almost certainly, the outcomes of such actions are not neutral. By that, we mean that we can imagine situations in which it is beneficial for the relationship and both partners for one's commitment to increase (e.g., when one has high levels of avoidant attachment, but an otherwise healthy, emotionally safe relationship), as well as situations in which it is harmful (e.g., when one has a controlling or abusive partner who is attempting to increase dependence to exert more power). Understanding these outcomes will be an important goal for future work once more is understood about how, when and why partner's influence each other's commitment.

4 | HOW TO CHANGE A PARTNER's COMMITMENT LEVEL

At times, one partner's high commitment may be precisely what is preferred by the other partner. In such cases, no attempts to modify a partner's commitment level are needed. Nevertheless, ongoing relationships benefit from myriad relationship maintenance strategies used to ensure that current levels of commitment are maintained (see

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top right of Figure 2). Some such strategies are cognitive, involving the thought processes that characterize committed relationship partners. For example, seeing one's partner as part of one's self and perceiving one's relationship as superior to that of others help to maintain commitment (Rusbult et al., 2000). Other maintenance mechanisms are behavioral, and encompass the actions people do to maintain their relationship, such as accommodating a partner's negative behaviors and forgiving a partner's inevitable transgressions (Rusbult et al., 1991). In instances in which both partners currently possess and desire low commitment, such maintenance activities become less crucial (see bottom left of Figure 2) and may entail enacting only relatively routine, habitual maintenance processes.

When a partner's commitment level is not as desired, a person could raise or lower their partner's commitment by working to change their partner's perceptions of any number of the empirically-validated theoretical antecedent of commitment. For example, given that satisfaction is known to fuel one's commitment to a relationship, working to increase a partner's satisfaction should result in an increase in their commitment. Satisfaction level is sensitive to how someone feels in the relationship and their perception of outcomes they receive (Le & Agnew, 2001; Patrick et al., 2007). As such, the levers to alter it include actions that change affect, opportunities, and subjective experiences. People could engage in behaviors to make partners feel good to raise satisfaction. For example, they could express gratitude (Algoe, 2012), make kind gestures (Stavrova & Ehlebracht, 2015), use affectionate touch (Jakubiak & Feeney, 2017), and share positive news (Gable et al., 2004). To increase satisfaction, they could additionally act in ways that enhance the opportunities their partner has by sacrificing their own preferences in the best interest of the partner (Wieselquist et al., 1999), accommodating their partner's poor behavior (Rusbult et al., 1991), and forgiving their partner when needed (Molden & Finkel, 2010).

In contrast, if the goal is to reduce a partner's commitment, then one could work toward reducing their partner's sense of relationship satisfaction. One could engage in behavior that would make their partners feel bad, such as initiating conflict (Surra & Longstreth, 1990) or engaging in betrayal (Finkel et al., 2002). In all likelihood, however, simply failing to engage in satisfaction-enhancing ways is likely sufficient to reduce satisfaction. These behaviors are so normative and expected in relationships that their absence is likely acutely felt by one's partner and sufficient to reduce satisfaction level (Joel & MacDonald, 2021).

Similarly, valued linkages (i.e., past investments and future plans) can be altered by directly modifying the linkages, or by modifying the significance of the linkages. Investments serve as a barrier to exiting the relationship, as they are the tangible and intangible resources that would be diminished in value or lost if the relationship should end (Goodfriend & Agnew, 2008). In some cases, it is possible for one partner to alter the other partner's actual investments, by adding or removing linkages (e.g., combining or separating bank accounts – Olson et al., 2023; engaging in a shared recreation activity as a couple or separately with other friends). Future plans are readily modifiable as well and contribute significantly to an overall sense of investment. It is relatively straightforward to add or cancel future plans as the linkage in question has not yet occurred (e.g., buying or selling concert tickets, planning or canceling a vacation, getting engaged or breaking off an engagement). Doing so would significantly influence a partner's sense of commitment. Other times, only the significance of those linkages can be altered, if, for example, they occurred in the past (e.g., emphasizing how unique or common the partners' shared intellectual life or identity is, or how easy or difficult it was to think about future plans with/for the partner; Tan & Agnew, 2016). Again, as with satisfaction level, whereas it is possible to both add linkages and remove them, the evidence suggests that it may be easier to reduce a partner's commitment through this avenue than to increase it. Specifically, people feel invested in relationships very quickly; partners report feeling invested well above the scalar midpoint only two months into dating relationships (Rusbult, 1980), independent of how many milestones they have actually accrued in the relationship (Joel & Machia, in press). This suggests that the norm in relationships is to feel invested and that whereas adding additional linkages could bolster this, it may be more diagnostic to remove or diminish the significance of such linkages.

Perceived quality of alternatives to the current relationship can be another barrier to exiting a relationship, in which a partner believes the outcomes they would receive outside of the relationship pale in comparison to what

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they receive within the relationship. Perceptions of alternatives arise not only from the prospect of pursuing other potential romantic partners, but also in other ways to meet needs more generally (e.g., spending time with friends or alone). A lever someone could use to alter their partner's perception of their quality of alternatives is to encourage or discourage their partner to be in situations to encounter alternatives. By suggesting (or recommending against) that one's partner go out with friends, a person changes both the odds that they will run into a romantic alternative, but also the partner's perception of spending time with friends as a viable alternative to being in the relationship. A person could also alter their partner's perception of how well they would do without a partner to change their perception of alternatives (e.g., by emphasizing or undermining how independent and self-sufficient their partner is). There are two biases that operate on alternatives to protect relationships (VanderDrift et al., 2011). The perceptual bias against alternatives holds that people fail to notice their alternatives (Miller, 1997) whereas the motivated bias suggests people actively derogate their alternatives when they do notice them in order to bolster their current relationship (Johnson & Rusbult, 1989). Collectively, as we have noted with both satisfaction and valued linkages, this means that the normative state of the relationship is to perceive poor quality alternatives. As such, because it is rarer and thus diagnostic, it may be easier to lower commitment by presenting a highly attractive alternative than to lower commitment by derogating or removing them.

Finally, to alter the perception of subjective norms, a person could alter either the perception others have of their relationship, how much they care what others think, or both. To use this to raise commitment, one partner could remind the other partner how much their friends and family like them as a couple or could invest more in building actual relationships with the other's friends or family. Alternatively, to reduce commitment through this mechanism, a person could mention friends and family who have concerns about their relationships, thwart relationships with their partners' valued others, or emphasize the odds stacked against them due to societal prejudices against their union.

5 | CONCLUSION

Theoretical models of relationship commitment provide a roadmap from which to approach attempts to change a partner's commitment. Future work should empirically validate these bases of commitment regulation to examine for whom and when each commitment regulation base is particularly effective. Longitudinal research could then examine if commitment regulation attempts result in actual change in partner commitment, but also examine changes in the components (e.g., affective, cognitive or conative, Arriaga & Agnew, 2001) and forms of commitment itself (e.g., nonvoluntary, Rusbult et al., 1991; Tan et al., 2018). Future research could also look at whether one is the source or recipient of these regulation attempts, and whether being the recipient of partner attempts lead to corresponding attempts at *self-change* as well. Finally, future work should be conducted to identify *when* partners are especially susceptible to noticing their partner's commitment and attempting to influence it (e.g., during which developmental periods within relationships this occurs, which situations trigger such appraisals), and *whether* partners are amenable to having their commitment influenced versus feeling reactive or resistant to such attempts. We hope that future research works to explore the dynamic nature of regulating commitment between partners, as this type of research promises to provide rich insight into both processes and outcomes of relationship maintenance.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We have no acknowledgments.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

We have no conflicts of interest.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

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How to cite this article: Machia, L. V., Tan, K., & Agnew, C. R. (2024). Relationship commitment regulation: Influencing a partner's commitment to achieve one's commitment goals. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, e12986. https://doi.org/10.1111/spc3.12986

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