Attachment Processes and Commitment to Romantic Relationships

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INTRODUCTION

The premise of this chapter is that it is impossible to understand commitment to romantic relationships unless one considers how the attachment system affects the processes of falling in love and choosing a mate. Most theorists account for commitment to romantic relationships with economic models predicting commitment from the costs and benefits of the relationship (e.g., Rusbult, 1980, 1983). Although this approach has made a large contribution to our understanding of commitment, in the present chapter we consider the possibility that commitment to romantic relationships cannot be fully captured by cognitive models, because romantic commitments are due in part to what Bowlby (1969/1982) called the attachment system: a nonrational, inborn behavioral system designed by evolution to maintain important social ties. In Western culture, a romantic commitment is almost always made only after a couple has begun to feel attachment-related feelings toward each other. Yet because the attachment system is nonrational, commitment to romantic relationships cannot be equated with highly cognitive commitments, such as the decision to select a particular stock portfolio. In fact, the decision to love someone is hardly a "decision" at all. Most people experience falling in love as an automatic and largely uncontrollable process. Loving leads to the experience of "heartfelt" commitment: an uncontrollable devotion to a particular person that might persist even *against* one's will or better judgment. While people can choose, for rational reasons, not to enter a relationship with someone they love, they may still feel drawn to that person and struggle emotionally against their decision for years. Similarly, people may decide rationally that a particular person would be a good mate, yet this alone will not lead them to experience feelings of love (Baumeister & Wotman, 1992).

Once people fall in love, their feelings and experiences will reflect several nonrational attachment-related mechanisms. These mechanisms can lead romantic partners to experience

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puzzling feelings and to act in apparently self-defeating ways. While rational theories appear consistent with well-functioning relationships in which partners are in love and satisfied, and can voice the many ways they value their partners, these theories have more difficulty accounting for why people report love for their spouses when their relationships are costly, painful, or even life threatening.

This chapter is organized as follows: First, we provide a brief overview of attachment theory and explain how it can account for the experience of commitment in romantic relationships. Next, we discuss the important, systematic, individual differences in attachment style that have been identified in children and adults, and show how these differences are related in predictable ways to forms of commitment. Finally, we analyze the perplexing issue of why people in abusive relationships maintain feelings of love and commitment. We argue that attachment theory, compared with other models of commitment, is particularly useful in accounting for this puzzling phenomenon.

General Attachment Processes

Attachment theory was originally formulated by Bowlby (1969/1982, 1973, 1980) to explain why young children are distressed by separation from their primary caregivers. Attachment theory posits an evolutionarily adaptive system, the *attachment behavioral system,* that causes human infants to seek proximity to a familiar caregiver (the *attachment figure*), feel more psychologically secure in that person's presence, and protest vigorously when proximity to that person is impeded. In this way, evolution has equipped infants with various mechanisms to increase their potential for survival in a world requiring the care and protection of what Bowlby called a "stronger, wiser" other.

The attachment system is characterized by several features, including the following:

Separation Protest

Crying, whining, throwing angry tantrums, and so on, in response to separation from an attachment figure.

Secure Base

Normal attachment provides a sense of stability that enables the attached individual to explore the environment more freely and develop interests and skills more readily than if the relationship were troubled or threatened. According to Bowlby, "Human beings of all ages are happiest and able to deploy their talents to best advantage when they are confident that, standing behind them, there are one or more trusted persons who will come to their aid should difficulties arise" (1979, pp. 103–104).

Monotropy

Although most children and adults have more than one attachment figure, they usually have a preference for one specific person. This primary attachment bond is very difficult to break. Ainsworth (1991) echoes Bowlby in the following statement: "Let me define an 'affectional bond' as a relatively long-enduring tie in which the partner is important as a unique individual, interchangeable with none other" (p. 38). Weiss (1991) adds: "Attempts to substitute other figures fail, no matter how solicitous or caring the other figures may be" (p. 66).

Endurance of the Bond

Once in place, the attachment bond is not easily broken or reconsidered. According to Weiss (1991): "Attachment seems to persist in absence of reinforcement" (p. 67). Children do not habituate to their attachment figures and do not begin to prefer someone else on the basis of novelty or kindness. Unlike nonattachment bonds, which dwindle when a person is mistreated or becomes less interested in his or her partner, *once attachment bonds are in place,* they are relatively insensitive to the behavior of the attachment figure.

Lifelong Relevance

Attachment behavior "is a characteristic of human nature throughout our lives—from the cradle to the grave" (Bowlby, 1988, p. 82). The attachment system remains intact in adults and, when activated, results in behaviors functionally similar to those exhibited by infants and children (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). However, one difference emerges as people develop: Attachment to caregivers is gradually overshadowed by attachments to romantic partners. In adulthood, the attachment system functions to maintain romantic partnerships much as, earlier in life, it maintained ties to caretakers. Just like infants, adults are primed to select one special figure, and to develop enduring emotional ties to that person. Adults who have fallen in love and entered a romantic relationship will not easily leave their partners, even if their relationships are less than ideal.

The applications of attachment theory to the study of infant and child development have been reviewed in several anthologies (e.g., Bretherton & Waters, 1985; Cassidy & Shaver, 1999; Greenberg, Cicchetti, & Cummings, 1990; Parkes, Stevenson-Hinde, & Marris, 1991) and will not be discussed in detail here. In recent years, the theory has been expanded to apply to adolescent and adult romantic relationships (see review by Shaver & Clark, 1994; also Feeney, 1999). Viewed from an attachment perspective, romantic love is a complex process involving at least three of the behavioral systems discussed by Bowlby: attachment, caregiving, and sex (Shaver, Hazan, & Bradshaw, 1988; Shaver, Morgan, & Wu, 1996). Romantic partners often serve as each other's caregivers *and* primary attachment figures, exchanging these complementary roles when conditions require it. They also serve as each other's sexual partners, and in fact are likely to have become attached while acting on sexual attraction. Theoretically, this arrangement makes use of the attachment behavioral system in a second evolutionarily adaptive way: increasing the likelihood that parents will stay together long enough to enhance the viability of their offspring—the products of their sexual attraction (Hazan & Zeifman, 1994, 1999; Lykken, 1995).

Many researchers studying romantic relationships have found that predictions based on attachment theory, several of them previously tested only with respect to infant–caregiver relationships, are borne out in studies of adolescents and adults. Because most productive research ideas about adult romantic attachment have emerged from careful consideration of attachment dynamics in infancy, it is worthwhile to consider how we might think about commitment in the infant–caregiver relationship before we consider commitment in adult romantic relationships.

"COMMITMENT" IN INFANCY

Infants in attachment relationships are highly committed to their attachment figures in a nonrational, heartfelt sense. Almost every infant will become attached to at least one person, usually the most familiar caregiver or regular social interaction partner. Once "committed," children will prefer their attachment figures to other caregivers, even if alternative caregivers are objectively more sensitive and reliable.

Attached or "committed" children cannot easily detach from their primary attachment figures. The process of breaking an attachment in childhood can occur only if the child is separated from the caregiver, and may take months or even years to complete. The breaking of an attachment occurs in a three-stage process described by Bowlby (1980): (1) *Protest*—The child attempts to regain proximity by crying and calling for the attachment figure and angrily berating him or her for threatening abandonment; (2) *Despair*—when prolonged protest fails to effect a reunion with the attachment figure, the child will experience despondency and depression; (3) *Detachment*—if the separation is long enough, the child will eventually break the attachment. The detached child appears to have returned to normal, regaining interest in the environment and no longer appearing to be grieving. However, when detached children are reunited with their caregivers, they show active disregard. The attachment, in essence, has been defensively broken. Only if the attachment figure makes a prolonged effort to exhibit care and availability will a child open up to "reattachment." If children begin to reattach, they are likely to be vigilant, anxious, and clingy for an extended period of time.

ATTACHMENT PROCESSES IN ADULTHOOD

Attachment in adulthood exhibits many of the same features as attachment in infancy. One important parallel is that attachment-related feelings are not under rational control. In the case of loss, even if one knows—cognitively, rationally—that an attachment figure has died and is no longer available, one can still long intensely for that person, imagine hearing or seeing him or her, and imagine having a conversation with the person between earth and heaven (Hansson, Berry, & Berry, Chapter 16, this volume; Weiss, 1991). The need for the lost person is unlike the need for a lost umbrella, a wish that an investment had worked out better, or the incorrect assumption that one's latest research project would succeed. Attachments are in some sense deeper, more primal, and less open to argument and rational thought.

Just as infants will attach to their caregivers regardless of their caregivers' competence, adults generally cannot weigh the pros and cons of potential partners and fall in love accordingly. People may love someone whom they know is not good for them, and may be unable to fall in love with someone they think is a good match. Baumeister and Wotman (1992) present compelling examples of people who experience distress because they cannot fall in love with a willing partner whom they believe, "rationally," they should love. This is one area in which Zajonc (1980) was certainly correct when he said that "preferences need no inferences"; that is, preferences do not seem to be due to a totaling up of separate cognitive evaluations or a cool comparison of pros and cons.

Whom we love is oddly unpredictable, depending, it seems, on chance encounters, momentary excitement, small acts of interest or kindness, even haphazard propinquity. As in infancy, proximity plays a crucial role in the selection of friends and attachment figures. People who live or work near each other and share common spaces such as lounges, parks, and restaurants are more likely to become friends and lovers than people who live or work slightly farther apart (Kerckhoff, 1974; Nahemow & Lawton, 1975). Lykken (1995) describes how identical twins, despite their astounding physical and psychological similarities, tend not to fall in love with highly similar people. Moreover, people who fall in love with one twin tend not to fall in love with the other. Lykken further describes how his colleague Tellegen "pointed out that human romantic infatuation thus resembles the phenomenon of imprinting in geese and other precocial birds and . . . speculates that we evolved this susceptibility to infatuation because it tended to sustain the bond long enough for the more enduring bonds of companionate affection to mature" (p. 56).

INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES IN PATTERNS OF ATTACHMENT

Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, and Wall (1978) identified three major patterns of infant attachment: *secure, avoidant,* and *anxious.* (The names of these patterns have been shortened here for convenience.) The three patterns have been traced to systematic differences in parenting, and, to some extent, to differences in infant temperament. *Secure* infants explore novel environments in the presence of their attachment figures, become moderately distressed when their attachment figures leave them briefly, but return to a positive affective state when they return. Home observations indicate that this pattern occurs in relationships in which the attachment figure shows sensitive and responsive caregiving. *Avoidant* infants explore novel environments, though perhaps not as creatively as secure infants, and outwardly do not appear upset when their attachment figures leave. Upon reunion, these infants show little joyful response and may actively turn away from their attachment figures. Although avoidant infants appear unruffled in the Strange Situation, heart-rate monitors indicate that they are physiologically aroused—they are simply not showing any overt protest (Sroufe & Waters, 1977). Home observations indicate that the primary caregivers of avoidant infants are uncomfortable with close bodily contact and unlikely to respond warmly if the infant exhibits neediness or distress. *Anxious* infants are vigilant toward their attachment figures, exceedingly distressed upon separation, and are both clingy and angry during reunions. At home they receive inconsistent, intrusive, or poorly timed care from their primary attachment figures.

Attachment theorists generally focus on what they call the *quality* of attachment relationships rather than the *strength* of the bonds. They argue that attachment is an all-or-nothing process; infants are not "more" or "less" attached to someone. Rather, some infants are more secure, and some are more avoidant or anxious in their attachments than others. Therefore, individual differences in attachment have generally been measured in terms of types (styles) or dimensions (anxiety, avoidance), rather than strength of attachment. When the dimensions underlying the styles are assessed (see Ainsworth *et al.,* 1978, p. 102), the styles are viewed as regions in a two-dimensional space, and it becomes clear that a person can move from one "type" to another by changing positions, sometimes only slightly, on one of the dimensions.

Nevertheless, the three styles are relatively stable over time, even when measured categorically. Stability is maintained, up to a point, by self-perpetuating *internal working models,* mental structures reflecting people's expectations about attachment figures that are "tolerably accurate reflections of the experiences those individuals have actually had" (Bowlby, 1973, p. 235). Because working models are designed to reflect actual experience, if circumstances change dramatically, the discrepancy between an established working model and current relationship conditions might be great enough to lead to gradual changes in the model. As the model changes, the individual may exhibit or experience a change in his or her attachment style.

Attachment Styles and Commitment to Romantic Relationships

Adult parallels of the major infant attachment patterns have been identified and shown to affect the functioning and outcomes of romantic relationships (see reviews by Feeney, 1999; Feeney & Noller, 1996; Shaver & Clark, 1994). Here, we will forego a detailed exposition of this literature and focus instead on studies that reveal the relationship between attachment style and the experience of commitment. Simpson (1990) examined the relationship between attachment style, commitment, and other relationship variables in a longitudinal study of college-aged dating couples. He found that security was associated with greater commitment to the partner and greater interdependence, trust, and satisfaction. Avoidance showed the oppo-

site pattern, with high avoidance predicting less commitment, interdependence, trust, and satisfaction. Anxiety was not as strong a predictor of relationship variables, yet was associated with less commitment to the current partner and less trust. Shaver and Brennan (1992) found that attachment variables predicted commitment to romantic relationships better than the NEO-PI (Costa & McCrae, 1985), a multifactor personality inventory (hence "PI") that assesses several traits, including Neuroticism, Extraversion, and Openness to Experience. When attachment dimensions were considered, avoidance appeared to be the best predictor of commitment to romantic relationships, with greater avoidance predicting less commitment.

Keelan, Dion, and Dion (1994) examined changes in relationship characteristics over 4 months as a function of attachment style. Insecure subjects reported decreases in commitment, satisfaction, and trust, as well as increases in costs over time, and they were more likely than secure subjects to have ended their relationships during the 4-month study. Secure subjects maintained high levels of commitment, satisfaction, and trust, and low levels of cost over time. Pistole, Clark, and Tubbs (1995) examined associations between attachment styles and Rusbult's (1983) investment model of commitment. Secure attachment was associated with greater commitment and satisfaction and fewer costs. Highest costs were reported by anxious subjects, while avoidant adults reported the lowest investments. In general, these studies indicate that security is associated with greater feelings of commitment to current romantic relationships, while insecurity, particularly avoidance, is associated with less commitment.

Anxiety, Avoidance, and Thresholds for Commitment

Although anxiety and avoidance are both associated with less commitment to current relationships, avoidant and anxious people differ substantially in their orientations to commitment. Anxious people have a low threshold for creating romantic attachments and making commitments. In a study conducted at a marriage license bureau, anxious men acquired marriage licenses after a shorter courtship (19 months) than secure (49 months) or avoidant men (46 months; Senchak & Leonard, 1992). Anxious people appear to form emotional bonds very quickly, sometimes even before their relationships are fully established. Anxious adults are more likely than secure or avoidant adults to experience love at first sight and to agree with the statement, "It is relatively easy to fall in love; I find myself falling in love often" (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Furthermore, anxious people report higher levels of protest, anger, and despair following *unrequited love* than secure or avoidant adults (Fraley, Davis, & Shaver, 1996). Because anxious people tend to fall in love quickly, often before they know their partners well, they are more vulnerable to leaping into relationships with people who are destined to disappoint or hurt them. Thus, as Hazan and Shaver (1987) found, they tend to agree with the statement, "Few people are as willing and able as I am to commit themselves to a long-term relationship." They want committed relationships, but often select partners who do not share this wish. They cannot have a committed relationship without the consent of their partner, so if their partners are not willing to commit, their relationships will not be committed.

Unlike anxious people, avoidant adults have a high threshold for falling in love and making commitments. Avoidant adults are more likely than their nonavoidant counterparts to report never having been in love (23.7% of avoidant adults vs. 8.9% of anxious and 12.7% of secure adults) and currently not being in love (49.4% vs. 25.5% and 29.2%, respectively; Feeney & Noller 1990). They are more likely than secure or anxious people to believe that "it is rare to find someone you can really fall in love with" (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Even when they are involved in romantic relationships, they tend to maintain a distance. Kirkpatrick and Davis (1994) found that avoidant men in romantic relationships reported less commitment, satisfaction, viability, caring and intimacy than secure men, and less passion and commitment than anxious men.

Even though avoidant adults report less commitment to their relationships, they are not indifferent when their relationships end. Birnbaum, Orr, Mikulincer, and Florian (1994) compared subjects undergoing divorce proceedings with those from intact marriages and found that divorcing avoidant subjects exhibited *more* distress than divorcing secure subjects. However, much like avoidant infants, avoidant adults do not show their distress to their attachment figures. Fraley *et al.* (1996, Study 1) found that following the breakup of an exclusive romantic relationship, avoidant adults engaged in little proximity-seeking or protest behavior despite high levels of despair.

Attachment Style Pairings in Committed Romantic Relationships

Secure, anxious, and avoidant people have very different approaches to romantic relationships. Nevertheless, people with different attachment styles will meet, date, and sometimes form lasting relationships. Kirkpatrick and Davis (1994) and Senchak and Leonard (1992) found that most couples consist of two secure partners, yet there are a minority of couples in which one or both partners are insecure. Although most people in committed relationships have a secure partner, insecure adults are more likely than secure adults to have an insecure partner. These insecure–insecure pairings almost always take the same form: one partner anxious, the other avoidant. Kirkpatrick and Davis believe that anxious people pair with avoidant individuals because they meet each others' expectations about relationships (e.g., anxious people expect to be more invested in their relationships than their partners, avoidant people expect to be less committed than their partners). Although these anxious–avoidant couples reported little satisfaction, when the anxious partner was female and the avoidant partner was male, they were as stable over a 4-year period as secure–secure pairings. Gender stereotypes may play a role in preserving these "anxious woman, avoidant man" relationships. Anxious women display many traditionally feminine qualities (e.g., concern about relationships, "mothering" their partners, etc.), while avoidant men possess stereotypically masculine traits, such as limited emotional expressivity and a "tough" exterior. Even though these couples will not experience as many positive exchanges as secure–secure couples, they may understand and tolerate their partners' behavior as "gender-appropriate." This could also account for why avoidant women and anxious men have short-lived relationships: their behavior is counter to gender stereotypes and may appear especially anomalous.

Considering the differences between anxious and avoidant individuals, it is easy to see that an anxious–avoidant pair might exhibit some of the problems discussed in the research literature on marital distress. Christensen (1988), for example, has discussed a destructive "demand–withdrawal" cycle in which one partner repeatedly complains to the other about his or her coolness and distance, and the distant partner then becomes even more distant in order to avoid the painful tension caused by confrontation. In these couples, the demanding partner is more invested in the relationship than the withdrawing partner, and is engaging in protest behavior in an effort to bring the withdrawing partner closer. Just like infants, partners in romantic relationships will protest if they feel they are being neglected or abandoned. One partner's protest behavior serves to inform the other partner that he or she needs to attend to the relationship. If both partners are equally invested in the relationship, the other partner will attempt to reassure the protester of his or her continuing presence and commitment. But if the other partner is not invested in changing or repairing the relationship, such protest behavior will be unwelcome and annoying. The unwilling targets of protest behavior may become exasperated with the protesting person. They may feel guilty or frustrated because they cannot meet the other person's needs without compromising themselves, and they may begin to feel *contempt* for the protester (Baumeister & Wotman, 1992, p. 100). Gottman (1994) has empirically identified contempt as

one of the four most dangerous markers of troubled and deteriorating relationships. From an attachment perspective, contempt is an understandable outcome when an avoidant person is confronted with an anxious partner's protests, and it may help account for the low satisfaction of anxious–avoidant pairs.

Attachment Styles and Relationship Stability

Attachment styles are associated with different orientations to commitment, but do the styles predict relationship stability? Hazan and Shaver (1987) found that secure adults had relationships of longer duration (10.0 years) than anxious (4.9 years) or avoidant adults (6.0 years), and were less likely to report having been divorced (6% of secure vs. 10% of anxious and 12% of avoidant subjects). Other cross-sectional studies also suggest that secure individuals are less likely than insecure individuals to experience divorce (Birnbaum *et al.*, 1994; Feeney & Noller, 1990; Hill, Young, & Nord, 1994; but see Mikulincer & Erev, 1991, for an exception), while anxious adults are more likely than secure adults to experience breakups (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Kirkpatrick & Hazan, 1994). Yet when Kirkpatrick and Hazan (1994) examined the stability of adults' relationships over 4 years, they found that anxious subjects' breakups were often low points in otherwise long-standing, volatile relationships. Anxious adults were more likely than secure adults to break up with their original partners during the 4-year study, yet in one-third of the cases, they soon resumed the relationship. This trend was so strong that at follow-up, anxious subjects were as likely as secure subjects to report still being in a relationship with their original partner.

Commitment and Attachment Security: A Reciprocal Relationship?

Many studies indicate that subjects in ongoing committed relationships are more likely to be secure than those without such a relationship (Birnbaum *et al.*, 1994; Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994; Kobak & Hazan, 1991; Senchak & Leonard, 1992). Although this observation might suggest that secure people find it easier than insecure people to establish and maintain relationships, it may also indicate that being in a committed relationship promotes security. The proportion of secure subjects in committed relationships is quite large and surprisingly stable across studies (cited earlier) even though these studies were conducted in very different locations. On average, between 75% and 82% of subjects in committed relationships are secure, whereas fewer than 55% of subjects not currently in a relationship call themselves secure.

Kirkpatrick and Hazan (1994) compared the stability of subjects' self-reported attachment styles over a period of 4 years with changes in their relationship status. Among people who reported being secure at both Time 1 and Time 2 (4 years apart), 81% were married at Time 2, whereas only 27% of Time 1 secure subjects who became insecure were married at Time 2. Of the people classified as insecure at Time 1 and secure at Time 2, 63% were married at Time 2, whereas among those who were insecure at both times, 39% were married at Time 2. Thus, being married at Time 2 appears to contribute to security regardless of Time 1 attachment style. The divorce figures tell a similar story, with Time 2 security associated with intact marriages. Among Time 1 secure subjects who remained secure, only 10% had divorced by Time 2, whereas 27% of subjects who changed from secure to insecure had divorced. Of the insecure subjects who became secure, only 16% had divorced by Time 2, whereas 29% of the subjects who remained insecure had divorced. In summary, these findings suggest that the relationship between attachment style and relationship stability is reciprocal rather than unidirectional.

Other indications that relationship experiences can affect attachment security come from Baumeister and Wotman's (1992) study of unrequited love. Women who loved without reciprocation were especially likely to suffer, making many of them hesitant to love again, at least for a while (p. 184). These women questioned whether they were lovable and worried that they had degraded themselves in the process of trying to win love. One said that since her experience as an unrequited lover, "I've never allowed myself to like a guy that much, even the ones I've dated" (p. 185). Some men expressed similar sentiments: for example, "I have noticed more women interested in me but I do not want to get involved, because I am being cautious. . . . I don't want to get burned again" (p. 184); "This taught me a lesson that getting 'hung up' over someone is a preoccupation that generally increases stress and decreases well-being" (p. 185). These comments suggest that some people who might have been secure before being hurt were somewhat insecure afterwards, at least for a while.

Given that attachment styles seem to be partly determined by relationship conditions, how stable are they? In studies of infants, secure attachment is generally more stable than insecure attachment (Egeland & Farber, 1984). The same pattern seems true of adults. Keelan *et al.* (1994) looked at the attachment-style stability of subjects over a 4-month period, finding that 85% of secure subjects at Time 1 were also secure at Time 2. For the two insecure groups, the corresponding figures were 77% for the stability of avoidant subjects and 50% for anxious subjects. Kirkpatrick and Hazan (1994) reported similar figures over a period of 4 *years:* secure, 83% stability; avoidant, 61% stability; and anxious, 50% stability. It seems that the anxious category is especially unstable, perhaps because it is most affected by relationship status and quality.

Anxiety, Avoidance, and Relationship Perceptions

Anxious subjects often report that their partners are not as committed to them as they would like (e.g., Collins & Read, 1990; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994; Mikulincer & Erev, 1991; Simpson, 1990). It is important to consider whether the partners of anxious people are truly distant and undevoted, or whether anxious attachment leads people to believe that their relationships are more dismal than the facts warrant. The evidence on this matter is interesting and fairly clear: Anxious people's perceptions of their partners and their relationships are quite accurate. Mikulincer and Erev (1991) found that the partners of anxious subjects reported feeling less intimacy and commitment than the partners of secure and avoidant subjects. In the Kirkpatrick and Davis (1994) study, men in relationships with anxious women reported less commitment, satisfaction, viability, and intimacy, and more conflict–ambivalence than men paired with secure women. Collins and Read (1990) reported that both men and women were less interested in marrying partners scoring high on the anxiety dimension, and men were especially disenchanted with anxious partners. Men with anxious partners reported less satisfaction, more conflict, less closeness, poorer communication, less self-disclosure, less willingness to help their partner disclose, less faith in their partner, less liking for their partner, and more feelings that their partner was not dependable. Simpson (1990) found that female partners of anxious males reported less commitment, love, dependency, and investment. And the effect was even stronger for the male partners of anxious women. The higher a woman's anxiety, the less commitment, love, dependency, self-disclosure, investment, and satisfaction her partner reported, and the more her partner saw her as unpredictable. Therefore, anxious individuals, especially anxious women, seem justified in their concern that their partners do not love them enough and are not committed to them.

Some researchers have suspected that anxious individuals have idealistic and unrealistic expectations for romantic relationships, leading them to feel frustrated and disappointed by the

normal ups and downs of coupled life (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Yet this does not appear to be the case. Mikulincer and Erev (1991, Study 3) asked subjects to complete Sternberg's (1986) three-dimensional measure of passion, intimacy, and commitment four times, once for their own feelings toward their partner, again for their partner's feelings toward them, once to describe how they would feel in an *ideal* relationship, and finally to describe how they would want their partner, ideally, to feel about them. When asked to describe how *they* would feel in ideal love, avoidant people described feeling less commitment, intimacy, and passion than either secure or anxious people. There were no differences between secure and anxious subjects in their reports of the feelings they would like to have for their partner. When subjects were asked about the feelings they would like *their partner* to have for them, secure subjects wanted greater intimacy than insecure subjects, and, interestingly, anxious subjects reported wanting *less* commitment than either secure or avoidant subjects. In summary, anxious individuals did not have extreme ideals or needs. The level of intimacy they sought was no higher than the level that secure subjects felt they were *actually receiving,* and the level of commitment sought by anxious individuals was *even lower* than what secure subjects actually received.

What about the perceptions of avoidant subjects? Unlike anxious subjects who appeared "sad but wise," avoidant subjects tended to misperceive their partners, believing that their partners felt less intimacy and commitment than the partners actually reported (Mikulincer & Erev, 1991). Therefore, these low scores reflected the avoidant subjects' own feelings of intimacy and commitment rather than the partners' actual feelings. In general, then, it appears that if any group is misperceiving their relationships, it is the avoidant rather than the anxious group.

THE MAINTENANCE OF ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Rusbult (1980, 1983) formulated her investment model of commitment with the understanding that commitment cannot be defined by satisfaction alone. Although satisfaction significantly predicts commitment, the prediction is even more accurate when two other variables are added to the equation: investment in the relationship and the availability of alternatives. Thus Rusbult's model can account for "nonvoluntary dependence": cases in which people would prefer to leave a relationship but are not willing to do so because they would be losing investments, or because their flawed relationship is better than the available alternatives. Rusbult and Martz (1995) assert that women in abusive relationships are experiencing nonvoluntary dependence. Yet social and economic barriers cannot fully account for a woman's decision to stay with an abusive partner. There are certainly cases in which women feel trapped in loveless relationships, but Rusbult's model does little to illuminate the feelings of love and longing reported by many abused women. Follingstad, Rutledge, Polek, and McNeill-Hawkins (1988) found that women in ongoing violent relationships reported more commitment and love for their partners than women who had experienced only one violent incident. Similarly, Dutton and Painter (1993) found that the more abusive the husband, the more likely the wife was to report strong feelings of attachment. Both of these findings are difficult to explain with any theory focusing largely on the weighing of rewards and costs.

Love and Commitment in Abusive Relationships

Not only do many battered women love their partners, but love is often a reason why they choose to stay with them. Strube and Barbour (1983) interviewed battered women seeking counseling services while living with their abusive partners. At the onset of therapy, counselors asked the women an open-ended question about why they were involved with their partners

They found that women who mentioned love or economic dependence were least likely to end their relationships during the course of therapy; both factors significantly and independently predicted whether women would leave their relationships. Only 18% of the women who mentioned economic dependence had left their partners upon termination of therapy, compared to 71% of the women who did not mention economic dependence. Similarly, only 35% of women who mentioned love chose to leave their partners by the end of therapy, whereas 71% of the women who did not mention love left their partners.

In a sample of battered women at a shelter, Rusbult and Martz (1995) found that continued "positive feelings for the partner" predicted feelings of commitment but not whether the women actually returned to their partners within 1 year. Many of the women who returned to their partners were committed to leaving them when they entered the shelter, but either a change of heart or pressing circumstances led them to return. Snyder and Fruchtman (1981) also found that many battered women returned to their abusers despite their stated commitment to leave. In their sample of battered women at a shelter, only 13% of the women, at intake, reported planning to return to their abusers, yet when they were contacted 6–10 weeks after leaving the shelter, a full 60% of them were living with their abusive partners. Dutton and Golant (1995) write, "The bonds that bind abuse victims to their tormentors are legendary. They are like giant bungee cords. As the woman dives out of the relationship, the cord stretches to the breaking point. But the further she goes, the greater the tension to snap back" (p. 57).

Traumatic Bonding

Why is it so difficult to permanently leave an abusive partner? Dutton and Painter (1993; Painter and Dutton, 1985) outlined a theory of traumatic bonding that portrayed bond formation in abusive relationships as a function of reinforcement principles and power imbalance. They argued that people in abusive relationships experience a chaotic and sometimes rewarding bond. People are therefore hooked into the relationship through intermittent reinforcement, the reinforcement schedule most likely to prevent extinction. Much like gamblers who continue to lose as they throw coins into a slot machine, people in abusive relationships cannot break away because their next move might be rewarded. Although reinforcement principles may help to explain why people persist in frequently unrewarding relationships, they do not explain why love or passion would emerge, nor do they provide a framework for understanding why certain people might be more vulnerable than others to remaining in abusive relationships. Dutton and Golant (1995) argue that "there is no special deficit in a battered woman's personality that makes her susceptible to getting trapped in an abusive relationship. To the contrary, the features of the relationship itself are sufficient to account for the trapping" (p. 57).

Attachment Theory and Bond Formation

In contrast, attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969/1982) provides both a mechanism for understanding the emotional draw of abusive relationships and a basis for understanding individual differences in persistence. Ironically, the tendency to desire contact with a raging, frightening attachment figure is a natural outcome of the attachment system that *under normal circumstances* serves a protective function. The attachment system was "designed" by evolution to become activated under conditions of external threat, often signaled by caretakers who become distressed and thus indicate impending danger. Among primates,

> when a dominant male senses a predator or other danger he commonly threatens or even attacks a juvenile that unwarily approaches the danger spot. The dominant

> male's behavior, by frightening the juvenile, elicits the juvenile's attachment behavior. As a result the juvenile seeks the proximity of an adult animal, *as often as not that of the very male that frightened it;* and by so doing the juvenile also removes itself from danger. (p. 227, our emphasis)

The attachment system was not "designed" for situations in which the attachment figures themselves are the source of danger. According to Bowlby, "No system whatever can be so flexible that it suits all and every environment" (1969/1982, p. 50). "Thus, only when the environment conforms exactly to the environment of evolutionary adaptedness does each of the behavioural systems . . . produce its effect and the whole organization lead to behavior of survival value" (p. 76). In the case of abuse, we are observing the dysfunction of a system operating under unusual circumstances. When attachment figures are repeatedly abusive, their children or romantic partners will experience heightened feelings of attachment and will be confronted with the paradoxical dilemma of longing for the comfort of the attachment figure while also experiencing a desire to flee from him or her.

Victims of abusive relationships grapple with another paradox: They know rationally that their relationships are destructive, yet they continue to love and long for their abusive partners. This paradox is perfectly understandable when one considers that attachment bonds are nonrational, enduring, and largely uncontrollable. "Love is blind" once an attachment is in place; rational arguments do little to dissuade people from loving whomever they love. The Scottish psychoanalyst Fairbairn (1952) theorized that people experiencing the discrepancy between their loving feelings and their knowledge that the people they love are not deserving may experience "splitting," a dissociative defense whereby tension and confusion are bypassed through the formation of two separate models of the attachment figure, one positive and one negative. Once the models have formed, people will be able to draw on an "all good" model of their attachment figure to justify their current involvement.

People do not form attachments by objectively surveying the field of potential attachment figures and selecting someone accordingly. Both children and animals regularly form emotional ties to abusive caregivers and will protest separation from them. Celani (1994) recounts a case in which Fairbairn observed one of his colleagues asking a girl who had recently been removed from her home if she would like the colleague to find her a nice new mommy. Despite the abuse her mother had inflicted upon her, "the young girl recoiled in horror and insisted that she wanted her own . . . mother back" (p. 24). Celani adds, "The return to a batterer by the victim is psychologically identical to Fairbairn's observation that his abandoned children preferred to be beaten in their homes by their parents rather than live safely in a foundling home" (pp. 151–152).

INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES IN VULNERABILITY TO REMAINING IN ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Object Relations and the "Bad Object"

Celani (1994) draws on the work of Fairbairn and other object relations theorists when he asserts that battered women stay with their abusers because they are drawn to "bad objects"—partners "who hold out the promise of gratification, yet fail time after time to satisfy the needs of the dependent individual" (p. 137). He believes that only certain people will feel drawn into a relationship with a bad object: those who were deprived or neglected in childhood. Specifically, adults who did not receive adequate positive experiences with their caregivers in childhood may seek to re-create the dynamics of those early experiences by entering relation-

ships with people like their parents, who promise much but rarely deliver. His theory offers a wealth of potential research questions in a largely uncharted area, yet he focuses exclusively on individual differences when accounting for the maintenance of abusive relationships. Although it is extremely likely that some people *are* more vulnerable to entering abusive relationships than others, it is also likely that the dynamics of abusive relationships can lead almost anyone to feel drawn to his or her abusive partner.

Anxious Attachment and the Maintenance of Commitment in Abusive Relationships

Henderson, Bartholomew, and Dutton (1995) found that anxious attachment (which they labeled "preoccupied" attachment) was greatly overrepresented, and secure attachment underrepresented, in their sample of battered women seeking shelter or counseling. The majority of women in their sample were anxiously attached (53% compared with 20% in normal samples) while only 7% were secure (compared with the usual 45–55%). Attachment style alone did not predict continuing involvement with the abusive partner, yet when level of abuse was controlled, anxious women were more likely than nonanxious women to be emotionally and sexually involved with their partners at a 6-month follow-up. Also at follow-up, battered women with an anxious attachment style were more inclined to agree with the statement, "I still love my partner and I want to get back together."

Morgan and Pietromonaco (1997) found that people with a more anxious (or "preoccupied") attachment style reported greater commitment and experienced more rewards in highly conflictual romantic relationships than people with a less anxious attachment style. Although, in general, conflict tended to reduce commitment and rewards, people high in anxious attachment reported as much commitment and rewards in high-conflict relationships as in low. Rusbult's model significantly predicted commitment for the sample as a whole, yet her model was less effective in predicting the commitment of anxious people in highly conflictual relationships. Her model accounted for 75% of the variance in commitment for nonanxious people in low-conflict relationships, yet it accounted for only 49% of the variance in commitment for anxious people in high-conflict relationships. Thus, people with an anxious attachment style may be especially vulnerable to following their hearts (i.e., attachment-related needs) rather than their heads when they are involved with an abusive partner.

CONCLUSION

The leading theories of commitment (e.g., Rusbult, 1980, 1983) derive from economic models of close relationships. They portray commitment as resulting from the weighing and averaging of costs, gains, investments, and alternatives, leading to a decision concerning the value of staying with a particular relationship partner. We suggest, in addition, that romantic partners are held together in part by the attachment system—a fairly primitive, nonrational, and powerful binding force. Although commitment to a career, an organization, or a project has many features in common with commitment to a loved one, the latter seems different in its depth and dependence on innate mechanisms. This is indicated in part by the security accompanying committed romantic relationships. Few objects of commitment provide the fundamental sense of love-worthiness and connectedness experienced by people who are securely attached to a loving partner.

Once an attachment is in place, the bond is largely impervious to the behavior of the attachment figure, a quality rarely shared with career commitments, commitments to causes, and

so on. Although propagandists want citizens to recite "my country, right or wrong," or "my political party, right or wrong," most citizens do not really accept this. The feeling that one's attachment figures (like one's children) deserve allegiance, right or wrong, comes more naturally, even if it sometimes leads to tragedy. Of course, not all marital or romantic commitments contain an attachment element. Sternberg (1986) described eight fundamental forms of love based on different combinations of passion, intimacy, and commitment. One of these forms, empty love, was characterized by high commitment but little passion or intimacy. We would expect such relationships to show a different pattern from relationships in which partners are clearly attached to each other.

Attachment style is intimately linked to people's approach to commitment, with anxious people tending to making commitments quickly and easily, and avoidant people being hesitant to invest fully in relationships. Although commitment and relationship longevity are predictable from attachment style, the relationship between commitment and attachment appears to be reciprocal. Longitudinal studies indicate that changes in relationship status can alter attachment style, with people in committed relationships tending to move toward security, and people experiencing a divorce or breakup becoming less insecure. Anxious people fall in love quickly, making them susceptible to choosing partners who are inappropriate or even dangerous. Battered women seeking shelter are especially likely to be anxiously attached, and there is some indication that anxiously attached people report more commitment to highly conflictual relationships than people who are less anxiously attached.

In short, attachment theory helps to explain how commitment in romantic relationships differs from other, more rational commitments. It shows how a generally functional biological system can, under certain circumstances, contribute to dysfunctional, even destructive, relationships

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