

Commitment bias: mistaken partner selection or ancient wisdom?

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Abstract

Evidence across the social and behavioral sciences points to psychological mechanisms that facilitate the formation and maintenance of interpersonal commitment. In addition, evolutionary simulation studies suggest that a tendency for increased, seemingly irrational commitment is an important trait of successful exchange strategies. However, empirical research that tests corresponding psychological mechanisms is still largely lacking. Here an experimental test is proposed for one such mechanism, termed the *commitment bias*, which is hypothesized to increase people's commitment to existing partners beyond instrumental reasons. To exclude one alternative explanation, the commitment bias is distinguished from uncertainty reduction. Results from a cross-culturally replicated laboratory experiment (USA, China, and the Netherlands) provide support for the argument but also point to the importance of culture as an alternative or mediating factor. © 2010 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Building and maintaining long-term social relationships is a natural part of human life and a behavior observed universally in all societies (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). People create relationships with great ease and are often reluctant to dissolve them, even if other alternatives are available. What makes people hold on to relationships in situations when this is apparently not in their best interest?

According to standard rational choice explanations of long-term relationships, people repeatedly interact with each other when the benefits of a relationship outweigh its maintenance and alternative costs (Axelrod, 1984; Cook & Emerson, 1978; Hayashi & Yamagishi, 1998; Lawler & Yoon, 1996; Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998). First, having a long-term relationship with the same partner provides direct knowledge about the past behavior and thus the trustworthiness of a partner (“shadow of the past”). This makes a previous partner relatively more attractive than an unknown individual. Second, the prospect of recurring benefits from future mutual cooperation creates an incentive for existing partners to cooperate in the present, knowing that noncooperation could trigger retaliation by the partner and

thus jeopardize future payoffs (“shadow of the future,” see Axelrod, 1984).

On the other hand, a great wealth of empirical evidence (cf. Baumeister & Leary, 1995) suggests that people have a tendency to become emotionally attached to each other, with less regard for the direct benefits derived from the relationship, its maintenance, or alternative costs. People create social relationships with great ease and strongly resist the dissolution of these relationships, well beyond rational considerations of practical advantage.

A series of recent simulation studies explore the possibility of the evolution of a “commitment bias,” which could be an important psychological step in the process of commitment formation (Back & Flache, 2006, 2007, 2008; de Vos, Smaniotto, & Elsas, 2001; Smaniotto, 2004). These computational models are built on minimalistic assumptions about conditions of the ancestral environment, such as relatively small group size, food shortage, and increased need for mutual help. What these models show consistently is that when compared with strongly selfish or conditionally cooperative strategies, commitment emerges as the most viable strategy under a wide range of environmental conditions.

For the rest of this article, “commitment” will refer to the behavior of repeatedly selecting the same partner even in the presence of potentially better alternative partners, and “commitment bias” will refer to a seemingly irrational

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psychological tendency that is hypothesized to partially induce people to do so.

The purpose of this article is to experimentally test the existence of a commitment bias. To do so, a short, anonymous, instrumental market setting is used where instrumental aspects of relationships are more salient, and at the same time the influence of non-instrumental factors can be more closely controlled. In such a setting, we have no reason to expect people to diverge from standard rational behavior toward commitment formation, unless there exists a systematic decision-making bias that pushes them to do so.

2. Hypotheses

To test the existence of the commitment bias, I propose to test whether commitment behavior can be observed and systematically influenced under such an instrumental setting by manipulating only noninstrumental factors.

A key factor that relevant for a commitment bias but not for instrumental rationality is the length of exposure between persons. In a world of instrumentally rational actors, simply because Person A has seen or interacted with Person B for some time should not, by itself, makes A more committed to B. In other words, an instrumentally rational A who assumes that everyone else obeys only their own self-interest would show equal preference for two different interaction partners B and C with whom interaction balances are equal. This is because A has no more incentive to trust B with whom he had a mutually cooperative interaction of \$20, than another with whom he had two interactions of \$10 each.

In an ancestral world, however, the fact that someone has been around for a long time could have been a strong indicator for the trustworthiness, viability, and also the predictability of this person. Therefore, an actor with such an ancestral past *should* have a preference for a partner of two past interactions over a partner of only one interaction. Therefore:

Hypothesis 1. (commitment bias)

The longer the initial exposure between two persons, the more committed they become to each other, holding instrumental aspects of their relationship constant.

A potential criticism against this argument is that during repeated interactions, uncertainty is reduced about the trustworthiness of the interaction partner. Reduction in uncertainty makes the long-term interaction partner always more attractive than an unknown stranger, holding other characteristics equal (see Kollock, 1994). Yamagishi, Cook, and Watabe (1998) proposed that uncertainty promotes commitment formation, and explained the tendency to form committed relationship with the individual's low level of general trust in others. The researchers showed in a cross-cultural setting (comparing the USA and Japan) that those

who trust others less, in general, are more likely to form committed relationships.

If the commitment bias is a purely psychological mechanism facilitating interpersonal commitment, it should exist independently from uncertainty reduction. Since it is impossible to fully eliminate uncertainty from an economic setting, I propose:

Hypothesis 2. (uncertainty)

The length of initial exposure has a positive effect on commitment even when controlling for the effect of uncertainty.

If we indeed acquired a commitment bias during our evolutionary past, then this bias should be present in different cultures:

Hypothesis 3. (cross-cultural)

The commitment bias exists cross-culturally.

3. Design

To test the hypotheses, I created a commitment-dilemma game that participants played during a laboratory experiment. To examine the existence of the commitment bias (Hypothesis 1) the experimental design manipulated the *length of initial exposure* between the participant and a steady partner at three levels (short, medium and long), and measured how committed the participants became to their partner. In order to test the relationship between uncertainty and commitment (Hypothesis 2), perceived uncertainty was measured using a post-experimental questionnaire. To test Hypothesis 3 about cross-cultural stability, I repeated the experiment in six locations of three countries—the Netherlands (Groningen and Utrecht), China (Shanghai and Nanjing), and the USA (Ithaca and Binghamton, NY, USA).

The commitment game was played in a purely instrumental setting (buyer-seller relationships), involving only anonymous interactions. In addition to being more targeted, this setting also gives additional experimental control to exclude alternative explanations for commitment behavior, such as physical attraction, social control, or social desirability.

During the commitment game, participants had to find trading partners. There were two kinds of actors in the game: artists who sold paintings and collectors who bought them. Participants were told that they would be randomly assigned to the role of seller (artist) or buyer (collector), but in reality, all participants were assigned to the role of seller, and played against computer-simulated buyers (see the original instructions in the Appendix). This ensured complete experimental control over the pricing mechanism and instrumental factors.

Special care was taken to ensure that participants would not feel deceived during the experiment. Before starting the actual game, for example, participants had to wait for other

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