



# Bonded or stuck? Effects of personal and constraint commitment on loneliness and stress



Tricia J. Burke<sup>a,\*</sup>, Chris Segrin<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Texas State University, Department of Communication Studies, Centennial Hall, Room 205, 601 University Drive, San Marcos, TX 78666, USA

<sup>b</sup>University of Arizona, Department of Communication, 211 Communication Building, Tucson, AZ 85721, USA

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## ABSTRACT

In this study, we investigated whether individuals' personal and constraint commitment are differentially associated with their loneliness, as well as whether their commitment had an indirect effect on their stress through their loneliness. Participants included 255 couples in married or cohabiting relationships. Results of dyadic analyses indicated that individuals' constraint commitment and loneliness were positively associated and their personal commitment and loneliness were negatively associated. Further, there was an indirect effect of people's commitment on their stress through increased loneliness. Together, these results suggest that distinct types of commitment are differentially linked to psychosocial well-being.

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## 1. Introduction

Commitment is a crucial element of romantic relationships (Surra & Hughes, 1997). Whereas relationship satisfaction is a barometer for relational well-being (Berscheid & Regan, 2005), relationship commitment reflects the degree to which individuals desire to sustain their relationships. Commitment can take several forms, however in the current study, commitment is operationalized as personal or constraint commitment. Whereas personal commitment is characterized as one's desire to stay in a relationship (i.e., a traditional definition of commitment), constraint commitment is a reflection of one's perceived barriers to dissolving a relationship (i.e., feeling trapped in the relationship; Stanley & Markman, 1992). Thus, these distinct types of commitment correspond to vastly different relational environments.

Taking a nuanced approach to understanding people's relational commitment could potentially identify different paths through which relational environments influence well-being. Current research indicates that people in poor quality relationships are lonelier (Segrin, Powell, Givertz, & Brackin, 2003) and that loneliness is common among married couples who are on the path to relational dissolution (Gottman, 1994). Moreover, individuals with a dearth of quality relationships often experience worse health and well-being (House, Landis, & Umberson, 1988). Although relationship quality is

linked to loneliness, less is known about the association between relational commitment and loneliness. Thus, identifying whether people's personal and constraint commitment are distinctly associated with their loneliness is an important extension of the extant research. Given that loneliness is also linked to stress (Cacioppo, Hawkley, & Thisted, 2010), we extend the research further by examining the indirect effect of people's commitment on their stress through their loneliness.

## 2. Commitment and loneliness in romantic relationships

Commitment is a relational process that develops as a function of individuals' perceived relational environment. Accordingly, commitment is a largely cognitive activity that is evaluated in conjunction with people's relational investment and satisfaction (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998). That is, individuals are motivated to sustain relationships in which they are invested and satisfied (i.e., rewarding relationships) and to end relationships when their investment and satisfaction are limited (i.e., costly relationships). This process is consistent with the exchange perspective of relational calculus (Kelley, 1979; Kelley & Thibaut, 1978). Within this context, commitment is often operationalized as a unidimensional construct; however, other research suggests that commitment is indeed a multi-dimensional construct (Stanley & Markman, 1992).

As an example, some people might stay in a relationship because of their dependency on receiving financial support from their partner instead of their desire to preserve their relationship with their partner. This scenario exemplifies a situation in which

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 512 245 2222.

E-mail addresses: [tburke@txstate.edu](mailto:tburke@txstate.edu) (T.J. Burke), [segrin@email.arizona.edu](mailto:segrin@email.arizona.edu) (C. Segrin).

someone has low personal commitment but high constraint commitment. As mentioned previously, personal commitment reflects an individual's desire to sustain, improve, and invest in his/her relationship (Stanley & Markman, 1992). Constraint commitment occurs when people perceive themselves to be unable to dissolve their relationship for economic, social, or personal reasons. Research suggests that personal and constraint commitment are related, but independent constructs (Givertz & Segrin, 2005; Stanley & Markman, 1992). Thus, in an effort to understand people's relational environment more comprehensively, we investigate personal and constraint commitment separately.

Research illustrates a pattern in which women report greater personal, but not constraint, commitment in relationships where they also perceive a greater relational bond (Givertz & Segrin, 2005). Further, the association between people's personal commitment and relationship satisfaction is much stronger than the association between people's constraint commitment and relationship satisfaction (Givertz & Segrin, 2005). Together, this research shows that individuals' personal and constraint commitment vary in association with their perceived relational bonds and relational quality. These findings are especially salient in the context of the current study, which examines these distinct commitment dimensions in conjunction with loneliness.

It may seem counterintuitive for people in relationships to feel lonely; however, loneliness is not a function of mere involvement in relationships. Rather, individuals experience loneliness when their achieved level and quality of social involvement do not meet their desired level and quality of involvement (Peplau & Perlman, 1982). That is, people can be in relationships and feel lonely if their relationship quality is less than what they desire. Although loneliness can be aroused by situational factors, for many people loneliness is a stable individual difference (e.g., Shaver, Furman, & Buhrmester, 1985). Nevertheless, evidence of assortative mating for loneliness (Distel et al., 2010) indicates that lonely people might be paired together. Indeed, loneliness appears to cluster within close relationships (Cacioppo, Fowler, & Christakis, 2009; Segrin, Burke, & Dunivan, 2012). It stands to reason that if people's relational bonds and quality are associated with personal and constraint commitment in different ways, then loneliness could be differentially associated with these dimensions as well.

People who are personally committed to their partners engage in relational maintenance behaviors (Canary & Stafford, 1992) that build and enhance their close connection with their partners, resulting in greater cognitive interdependence (i.e., collective unity) in their relationships (Agnew, Van Lange, Rusbult, & Langston, 1998). In contrast, people who are committed to their partners because of perceived constraints to dissolving their relationships might resent their partners and inhibit their relational maintenance behaviors. Consequently, when people are personally committed to their partners, their relationships likely meet or exceed their desired level of relational involvement, which should be associated with less loneliness (Givertz, Woszidlo, Segrin, & Knutson, 2013). When people are committed to their partners because of relational constraints, the relationship likely falls short of their desired level of quality, which should be associated with greater loneliness. Thus, the following is hypothesized:

H1a: Personal commitment will be negatively associated with loneliness.

H1b: Constraint commitment will be positively associated with loneliness.

### 3. Loneliness and stress

Humans have an innate need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Consequently, lonely people experience stress as a function

of their unfulfilled attachment needs. In an attempt to eradicate this stress, lonely people are motivated to search for relationships that can fulfill their desired level of social connection. When they fail to establish relationships that meet their attachment needs, they might feel socially excluded or rejected (Cacioppo, Hawkley, & Berntson, 2003), thereby heightening their stress. Indeed, research indicates that a positive association exists between individuals' loneliness and stress appraisals (Cacioppo et al., 2010; Segrin & Passalacqua, 2010). The experience of stress is exacerbated for lonely people, as they typically do not have a supportive network available to help them manage their stress (Cacioppo et al., 2003).

Abundant research suggests that support from one's social network can buffer the ill effects of stress (House et al., 1988) and is linked to positive relationship quality (Cramer, 2006; Cutrona, 1996; Sarason & Sarason, 2009) and positive well-being (Fincham & Beach, 2010). However, research addressing the link between relationship quality, specifically commitment, and stress is limited. Some evidence shows that people in low quality relationships experience greater stress after imagining relationship events (Berry & Worthington, 2001). Similarly, Tesser and Beach (1998) found negative life events to be a factor in people's degradation of their relationship quality. Finally, a study on homosexual couples revealed that stress was inversely related to relationship quality (Otis, Rostosky, Riggle, & Hamrin, 2006). This study links commitment to stress more specifically.

Whereas people likely feel less lonely in quality relationships in which they are personally committed to their partners, people likely feel lonelier in troubled relationships in which they feel greater constraint commitment. Further, given the established link between loneliness and stress (Cacioppo et al., 2010), people with greater personal commitment should experience less stress because of their fulfilled relational desires. In contrast, people with greater constraint commitment might experience greater stress as a function of their unfulfilled relational desires (i.e., loneliness). Moreover, given that commitment is a relational phenomenon and that loneliness has been attributed to assortative mating (Distel et al., 2010) it is possible that one partner's commitment and loneliness could be associated with the other partner's stress. Thus, the following is hypothesized:

H2: Individuals' (a) personal commitment and (b) constraint commitment will have an indirect effect on their own stress (intra-personal effect) and on their partner's stress (interpersonal effect) through their loneliness.

## 4. Method

### 4.1. Participants

Participants in this study were recruited as part of a larger study on loneliness. This study included 255 heterosexual married or cohabiting dyads. Participants had to be at least 18 years old, in a married or cohabiting relationship, and able to read and respond to questionnaire items in English. The participants' age ranged from 18 to 76 ( $M = 45.53$  years old,  $SD = 13.85$ ). Participants were 81% Caucasian, 12% Latino/a, 3% Asian/Pacific Islander, 2% African American, 1% American Indian/Alaskan Native, and 1% other. These individuals were fairly educated (48% completed college and 22% earned a graduate degree) and primarily employed full time (61%). The average relationship length was 21.56 years ( $SD = 12.35$ ), and 75% of the sample reported being married.

### 4.2. Procedure

Researchers solicited participants through students in classes at a small Northwestern university and large Southwestern

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