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Duty toward Whom?

Reconsidering Attractions and Barriers as Determinants of Commitment in a Relationship

George Levinger

A human action is morally good, not because it is done from immediate inclination—still less because it is done from self-interest—but because it is done for the sake of duty. (Paton, 1964, pp. 18–19, summarizing a key proposition of Immanuel Kant, 1785)

[Pair commitment] pertains to the net sum of the attractions and barriers inside a relationship minus the net attractions to and barriers around the most salient outside alternative. (Levinger, 1976, p. 28)

The eminent German philosopher, Immanuel Kant, postulated the existence of two contrasting forms of commitment to an action or to a relationship. One form is the commitment of desire, or of affection or devotion, which he considered changeable or evanescent, and therefore untrustworthy. The second is the commitment of duty, or obligation, which Kant saw as more stable and far better morally (Kant, 1785/1964).

Two hundred years later, writers on commitment or relationship continuance still make parallel two-sided distinctions—such as between “wanting to” and “having to,” stay with someone (e.g., Brickman, 1987), between commitment of “responsiveness” and of “obligation” (Masters & V. Johnson, 1974), between “personal dedication” and “constraint commitment” (Stanley & Markman, 1992), or between feeling attracted to and feeling barred from leaving a relationship (Levinger, 1965, 1976). A three-part distinction among “want to,” “ought to,” and “have to” types of commitment has also been proposed (M. Johnson, 1991) and empirically supported (e.g., Adams & Jones, 1997; M. P. Johnson, Chapter 4, this volume)—but the “ought to” and “have to” components also can be considered distinct subparts of constraint commitment.

A major change since Kant’s lifetime is that today, people usually view desire, affection, or responsiveness as better reasons for committing themselves to a relationship than duty or obligation or constraint. Some contemporary couples, especially in the Western countercul-

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ture that glorifies self-fulfillment, even go out of their way to spurn any permanent constraints on their relationships. Many long-term pairs eschew marriage altogether. Other couples, who do marry, may deliberately alter the traditional marriage vow of staying together “as long as we both shall live” to the alternative vow of remaining together “as long as we both shall love.”

My aim here is to expand on a two-sided conception of relational commitment as a mix of personal desires and both internal and external constraints. I first review how historical changes in constraints and attraction forces in Western societies have affected the dynamics of people’s commitments to their close relationships, specifically to their marriages; only during the last two decades has there been much research on other than marital or premarital close relationships. I will then review my own “attraction–barrier” model of commitment to a relationship and consider the development of pair commitment in established couples; here, I focus on the previously ignored fourth variable in my earlier formulation (i.e., barriers around alternative relationships or identities). Finally, I try to tie together these varied foci in order to look at contemporary issues in long-term pair commitment.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

Across all cultures and historical periods, marriage can be defined as a sexual and economic union sanctioned formally by the partners’ society (Murdock, 1949; Westermarck, 1921). Traditionally, it was assumed that marriages are concluded less for the benefit of the spouses themselves than for that of their children and wider kinship. The notion of committed couple relationships originated before the dawn of human civilization, arising from the need of dependent children to have two parents caring for them—the mother for nursing and immediate child care, and the father for helping to provide food, support, and protection to both her and their offspring (Murstein, 1974; Westermarck, 1921). Indeed some observers (e.g., Russell, 1929) have claimed that the institution of marriage is beneficial only for the welfare of a couple’s offspring.

Over the past several centuries, spouses’ “commitment” to marriage has, in industrialized societies, undergone a transformation of meaning. What we now consider to be typically an extremely active, deliberative choice process was in previous eras often expected to be a rather passive process of compliant acceptance. Today, in Western societies, most persons commit themselves to a permanent relationship only after an extended period of mutual exploration; several hundred years ago, they were often committed by others—by their parents or other kin who arranged a marriage with little or no consultation with bride or groom. (In some non-Westernized cultures, of course, such practices are still common today.)

A major form of courtship in earlier centuries, specifically among the British propriety classes in the seventeenth century, consisted of

the selection of a possible spouse by the parents or ‘friends,’ after careful examination of his or her economic prospects. If the results were satisfactory, a preliminary agreement was reached . . . about the terms of the financial settlement. The couple were then brought together, in order to discover whether or not they found each other personally obnoxious. If no strong negative feelings were aroused, the couple normally consented, the marriage settlement was signed, and the arrangements for a formal church wedding went forward. (Stone, 1992, p. 7)

A more extreme example of parents disregarding their children’s desires is contained in an account of French courtship several centuries ago. Ostensibly, the son of the president of Dijon’s parliament asked him: “Father, is it true that you intend to marry me to Mademoiselle
X?” To which question the father supposedly replied: “Son, mind your own business!” (cited by Murstein, 1974, p. 18).

In past centuries the durability of the marriage bond was only feebly associated with the spouses’ initial or subsequent attraction to one another. In a society where marital partners were obliged to stay together no matter how malignant their relationship, both internalized and societal constraints overrode personal desires in guaranteeing the continuity of a marriage. Once two spouses were bound together, their personal wishes were subordinated to family loyalty and societal compulsion.

Thus, Stone (1990) tells us that several centuries ago, England did not tolerate marital separation, let alone divorce; death was virtually the only way to dissolve a marriage. The powerful forces that kept together even the most miserable of couples included internalized values as well as external controls. Examples of internal inhibitions were that “both sexes were told that marriage was a sanctified and indissoluble contract, and women were taught that it was God’s will that they should obey their husbands” (p. 2). External controls included “the watchful and persistent supervision of the marriage by parents, kin, ‘friends,’ and neighbours . . . [who] rarely hesitated to intervene [as well the near impossibility for all but a few of the most powerful] to obtain a full divorce with permission to remarry” (Stone, 1990, pp. 2–4).

The case was not much different in other European lands, where patriarchy ruled inside the home and the State and Church outside it. In such societies, commitment to one’s marriage was hardly an individual or independent act. Rather, it was the result of familial, communal, and religious forces that socialized spouses-to-be before marriage and continued to pressure them thereafter. Death, which occurred far earlier than today in the typical couple, was the primary escape from the marital bond. Even in the United States, it was not until the late 1950s that marriages of couples with dependent children became more likely to be ended by divorce than by death (Bane, 1979).

Under those confining conditions—and with large educational, economic, and legal inequalities between men and women—most couples were far less intimate than is the norm today. Although many homes were probably warm and loving, it appears that many partners accepted a conjugal life of little emotional sharing. Marriage roles tended to adhere to the traditional roles of husband as chief—as economic provider, domestic rule setter, and final authority in matters of child care—and the wife as the subordinate, whose responsibilities were mainly the children and the home. In seventeenth-century America, for instance, the “colonial household was a business, school, vocational institute, church, house of correction, and welfare institution [in which] surveillance was the norm. [Even] the closest of relationships was formal to a degree we would today find not only awkward but contradictory to intimacy” (Gadlin, 1977, pp. 35–36).

Nevertheless, as early as the seventeenth century, the bases of marital commitment began gradually to change. Whereas, previously, it had been accepted that romantic love and marriage were unconnected, Puritan religious doctrine emphasized the importance of affection, intimacy, and loyalty in marriage (Degler, 1980). In the seventeenth century, intimate love had started to become a goal for a small fraction of married pairs—including England’s King Charles I and his Queen; by the nineteenth century, intimacy in marriage had become the normative ideal (p. 14).

Over the last two centuries, the Western family’s functions were reduced in number, and the family’s structure changed from a rigidly hierarchical institution to a partnership of individuals; wives and children gained greater independence and the right to live their own lives (Mitterauer & Sieder, 1982). What was once largely an “owner–property” husband–wife arrangement became increasingly an “equal-partner” relationship (Scanzoni, 1979). These changes, which became noticeable during the 1800s, accelerated after the wider availability of public schooling and a broader labor market—especially during the two world wars—pushed
women out of the home and into the labor force. Women no longer had to marry, or to stay married, in order to survive economically, and the liberalization of divorce laws also contributed to their freedom.

As the family lost much of its educational and economic importance, it increased in its emotional and psychological importance. It gradually became axiomatic "that personal happiness and the affection of the two partners for each other are the only proper foundation for a marriage and the family that follows" (Degler, 1980, p. 9). As people moved to cities and their home was separated from their workplace, the home became an increasingly private place, where its members made increasingly individualized choices. An accompanying change occurred in the growth of impersonal economic market forces, which permitted family members to reduce their dependence on their kin and increase their reliance on impersonal networks of commercial exchange (Dizard & Gadlin, 1990). That social change, in turn, encouraged a growing emphasis on personal identity and self-expression.

A number of trends went hand in hand. A rise in people's individuation meant that potential spouses were increasingly different from each other; thus, it mattered more and more whom one would choose to live with: When all potential mates had nearly the same upbringing, a choice that suited family convenience had been more defensible than after men's and women's life experiences became more individualized. Furthermore, an increasing freedom from their parents allowed sons and daughters to make important decisions for themselves, and the increasing equality between men and women made both courtship and marriage a more mutual process.

The impact of these changes was, of course, dramatic. As young adults gained in autonomy, and as the marriage partnership gained in emotional significance, the locus of marital choice shifted from the parents to their children—and a partner's romantic attractiveness became increasingly vital. As the surrounding structures weakened, the modern commitment process put a much greater burden on youthful decision makers themselves.

Yet, while marriage choices became increasingly self-made, they did not necessarily become wiser or more discerning. Although many "love matches" (Blood, 1967) undoubtedly have led to deeply gratifying lifelong marriages, it is doubtful that there has been an increase in the overall proportion of happy marriages—with some recent data even suggesting a reverse trend during the past two decades (Glenn, 1991). Although social changes have allowed the dissolution of unhappy marriages, heightened expectations of what is "happiness" may have made partners less tolerant of irritations or periods of mutual boredom. A rise in the belief that people are entitled to high emotional gratification in relationships has led to rising opportunities for disappointment (Attridge & Berscheid, 1994).

The indirect consequences of these changes are also worth noting. Berscheid and Campbell (1981) have hypothesized that the weaker the barriers against exit and the more that partners see it possible to leave their relationships, the more actively they will compare the attractiveness of what they now have with what they might receive elsewhere; when the burden of justifying the goodness of a relationship falls on the sweetness of its contents, these contents themselves are more likely to turn sour. If so, partners may become more careful to monitor their current satisfaction, thus expending more time and energy in reevaluating the wisdom of their original choice. This would further lead partners to be unsure about the permanence of their pairing and to desire continued evidence of its goodness.

To put it another way, relationships that would have been considered attractive many years ago may appear less attractive today, while the barriers that would then have blocked exit are now far weaker. On the other hand, alternative possibilities have increased in number, if not in attractiveness. Thus, it becomes obvious why romantic partners today find it harder to commit themselves to permanence or, once so committed, find it harder to forever maintain their initial union.
ATTRACTIONS AND BARRIERS AS DETERMINANTS OF COMMITMENT

The connection between young Americans' happiness and their marital status appears far weaker now than even 25 years ago. For example, in their analysis of data from the annual General Social Surveys from 1972 to 1986, Glenn and Weaver (1988) found a decreasing linkage between being married and reporting oneself as "very happy." In 1972, 32.4% of married U.S. men and 43.7% of married women 18–31 years old reported themselves as very happy, while only 11.1% of like-aged never-married men and 21.1% of such women reported the same. By 1986, only 25.6% of married men and 34.7% of married women aged 18–31 said they were very happy, while this was said by 31.3% of never-married men and 22.4% of never-married women of that age. If we assume this trend has continued, then today's typical U.S. never-married young man—and perhaps also never-married young woman—is likely to feel somewhat happier than a like-aged married person, quite contrary to the status of previous generations, when remaining single implied being less than fully satisfied. These survey data confirm that younger Americans have come to weigh the benefits of a marriage commitment as less positive than they did in earlier decades. Glenn and Weaver interpret these changes cautiously, but they note that the never-married are now far more likely to have access to "regular sexual relations without stigma," while marriage itself "no longer provides the security, financial or otherwise, that it once did." (p. 323).

A parallel view is expressed by Espenshade (1985), who concludes that U.S. "marriage is weakening as a social institution" (p. 83), noting an increasing tendency to postpone and perhaps avoid marriage altogether, an increasing propensity to divorce, and a decline in rates of remarriage. He suggests that the rise in women's earning power has made marriage less attractive to them and the alternatives to marriage less unattractive. In an earlier era, the typical woman subordinated herself to the man's career opportunities and cared for the relationship; not only are many contemporary women reluctant to take second place in pursuing their careers; but they also may be less inclined to take prime responsibility for the emotional health of their marriage.

AN ATTRACTION–BARRIER MODEL FOR UNDERSTANDING COUPLE COMMITMENT

Over the past century, couples in each new generation have faced markedly different opportunities and demands than those faced by their parents. Before discussing further the implications, let us examine a theoretical model of relational cohesiveness.

One influential definition of commitment to a relationship equates it with one's enduring adherence to a partner, based on both "stable positive factors that comprise part of love and on stable extraneous conditions... that keep a relationship together whether or not [one feels positively about it]" (Kelley, 1983, p. 313). A relationship grounded entirely on positive feelings is vulnerable to future instability; in contrast, one that depends mainly on feelings of obligation or on externally imposed pressures may be devoid of satisfaction (Levinger, 1965). A strong mutual pair commitment, therefore, is sustained by both partners' continuing positive feelings toward the other together with some constraining feelings, ties, and structures.

The attraction–barrier model of relational cohesiveness (Levinger, 1965, 1976) derives from Lewin's (1951) conception of the psychological "driving" and "restraining" forces that either impel or impede a person's movement through his or her lifespan: Driving forces are those psychological forces that actively propel locomotion through one's lifespan: Positive forces (i.e., attractions) encourage movement toward an activity, a person, or a relationship; negative forces (i.e., repulsions or negative attractions) encourage flight or avoidance. Restraining forces consist of obstacles or barriers that deter a person's movement out of a psychological region: Such barriers can range from a personally felt obligation to stay in a relationship to an impersonal societal sanction against leaving one's partner.
In Figure 2.1, the positive and negative arrows refer to each partner's positive and negative attractions toward the person—other (P–O) relationship; the $b$ arrows signify barrier forces that impede exit. Note that barriers to exit usually seem unimportant until one thinks of leaving a relationship; only after one's attraction wanes do barriers become psychologically salient (see data cited in Levinger, 1983, p. 349).

Figure 2.1, however, is incomplete. It ignores the influence of alternative relationships that may also be sources of significant attractions and barriers. Figure 2.2, therefore, depicts Person P in both the primary bond with O and also in an alternative relationship with O', which has its own distinct set of driving and restraining forces. Such “alternative ties” need not necessarily be to another person; they can refer to any other alternative relationship, including one's work situation.

We are ready now to define the four components of the attraction—barrier model:

\[ P's \text{ Commitment to the } P–O \text{ Relationship} = A + B - (A' + B'). \]

1. **Attractions (A)** refer to a person's net attraction to the primary relationship. Net attraction is "directly associated with its perceived rewards and inversely with its perceived costs" (Levinger, 1976, p. 25). Rewards include receiving valued resources such as love, respect, nurturance, or material resources, as well as security and consensual validation. Perceived costs include one's expenditures, such as time, energy, and other expenses of the relationship, as well as feelings of irritation or distaste toward the partner. Note, however, that in a deeply positive relationship, intimate partners do not usually calculate their benefits or costs narrowly, as might acquaintances in a superficial connection (Clark & Mills, 1979; Levinger & Snoek, 1972). One attractive aspect of intimacy is that the other's positive outcomes may be experienced as one's own and that one actually feels gratified from incurring personal costs so as to benefit the partner.

2. **Barriers (B)** signify the total strength of restraining forces—or termination costs—that keep P from leaving the principal relationship. The strength of barriers is conceptually distinct from that of attractions, but empirically they may be correlated. On the one hand, it is usually the highly attracted who choose to set up high constraints to help secure the stability of their relationship; on the other hand, it is mainly the discontented—seeking to reduce their pair involvement—who perceive barriers as burdensome. Except at such transition points,
however, barrier forces usually stay in the psychological background of a relationship (Levinger, 1983).

Barriers may derive mainly from public enforcement (e.g., a legal partnership or marriage contract, a society's divorce prohibition) or from private pressure (e.g., pressure from friends and relatives for a couple to stay together). Barriers may be experienced as mainly internal (e.g., one's personal pledge or one's felt obligation to stay) or as mainly external (e.g., the threat of social stigma against divorcees, of financial penalty, or of expulsion from one's religious group). "Irretrievable investments" (M. Johnson, 1991; Rusbult, 1980)—including time, effort, and money put into building a relationship—may also be felt as a barrier against leaving it.

3. Alternative Attractions ($A'$) consist of $P$'s net attraction to his or her most salient alternative (i.e., the sum of all $P$'s positive minus $P$'s negative feelings toward any given alternative). Theoretically, if there were a complete absence of barriers ($B$) around the primary $P$–$O$ relationship, $P$ would leave it if and when $A'$ exceeded $A$.

4. Alternative Barriers ($B'$) refer to the strength of the restraints that keep $P$ from leaving an alternative relationship, including ties to one's family or to a work relationship. If alternative barriers are extremely high, then even if $A$ far exceeds $A'$, $P$'s commitment to the $P$–$O$ relationship will be impaired.

In Judeo-Christian tradition, committing oneself to a marriage has meant putting the husband–wife relationship at the center of one's personal life and elevating it above all one's other interpersonal commitments. Nonetheless, other commitments (e.g., those to one's parents and children and, mainly for men, to one's work situation) have always competed with those to one's marital partnership. Today's alternative constraints are even more complex. Contemporary women no longer assume that they must put aside all other life options so as to become
a wife and mother; if they do marry, they may decide their career commitment precludes having many (or even any) children, and they expect their spouse to take a more equal part in their home life. Modern men, who increasingly voice principles of equality in child care or housekeeping (Teen Survey, USA Weekend, September 6–8, 1996, p. 10), generally are inhibited by work demands and persisting male-centered norms from putting those principles into practice. Thus, both men and women in today’s intimate partnerships face alternative constraints that increasingly rival the reduced constraints around their primary relationship. When, either because of economic need or because of career building, both partners must hold full-time paid jobs, the ensuing B force often intrude on their primary relationship.

Previous discussions of attractions and barriers in relationships (e.g., Berscheid & Campbell, 1981; Kurdek & Schmitt, 1986; Levinger, 1965, 1976, 1983) have recognized the important role of alternative attractions but have neglected that of alternative barriers. These two concepts are, of course, interrelated but should not be confused with each other. Duties to third parties and external pressures to stay in another relationship can interfere with the primary bond even when one is unattracted to the competing ties.

Barriers and Attractions: A Definitional Note

As mentioned earlier, the term barrier—or, more precisely, barrier force—was coined to be synonymous with Lewin's (1951) concept of a psychological restraining force. I employed this term, as well as the term (positive and negative) attraction forces to represent Lewin's driving forces, because I preferred the simple contrast between B and A forces to Lewin's more abstruse distinction between barrier-based restraining forces and bivalent propulsive driving forces.

Nevertheless, my use of these terms creates two problematic issues that require discussion: (1) the problem of distinguishing between internal and external barriers (i.e., between constraints imposed mainly by oneself and those that stem from outside influences); and (2) the potential fuzziness of the distinction between barriers and attractions.

Internality versus Externality of Barriers

In his three-category analysis of the commitment concept, my colleague Michael P. Johnson (1991; Chapter 4, this volume) feels compelled to use two separate categories for capturing the notions of internal and external constraints to stay in a relationship. In Johnson's lexicon, internal constraints are called moral commitment, which he suggests is based on one's valuing consistency in general and/or a stable close relationship in particular, as well as feeling a contractual obligation specifically to one's partner. External constraints are called structural commitment, which Johnson says stems from irrevocable investments, negative social reactions against pair breakup, the costliness of termination, and/or the unavailability of acceptable alternatives (Johnson, 1991, pp. 121–124). He thus distinguishes categorically between the "ought to" and "have to" components of commitment.¹

Without denying the logic of Johnson's distinction, I continue here to group all those kinds of constraint under the single rubric of barriers. I do so for two principal reasons, aside from my own obstinacy. First, I like this term's sharp conceptual contrast with attractions

¹Note that in my first paper on the attraction-barrier model, I myself introduced a parallel distinction: "Barriers against a breakup emanate from ... the emotional, religious, and moral commitments that a partner feels toward his marriage or toward his children [and from] the external pressures of kin and community, of the law, the church, and other associational memberships" (Levinger, 1965, p. 20).
(Johnson's "personal commitment") and its conformity to Lewin's original notion. Second, and more important, I do not agree that there is a clear categorical distinction between internal and external forms of constraint—or between the moral and the structural. Instead, I see degrees of internality on a continuum, where all sorts of barriers, even the most external ones, must be translated into personally perceived, psychologically meaningful forces in order for them to affect a person's actual behavior. There are also large individual differences: Many people take social norms extremely seriously and comply with them assiduously, whereas others ignore them or even defy them deliberately. The same "structural" restraint does not affect everyone equally.

Within field theory, moreover, a fence only becomes an active restraining force if and when we start to evaluate our present pasture and begin to think that the grass outside it may be more delicious. Only then do we start wondering how sturdy is the fence or how difficult to jump.

Furthermore, while I agree with Johnson that "moral" and "structural" constraints are very different in principle, I disagree with his decision, in practice, to subsume "irretrievable investments" and "the unavailability of alternatives" under the rubric of structural commitment. For me, structural means something steady and objective—a tangible thing out there that we all can notice and will bump into if we do not watch out.

The irretrievability of an investment, however, seems largely subjective: It is a perception based on one's personal definition of what is "irretrievable," and of what constitutes an "investment" rather than an amortized expenditure. For example, a man who has spent much time and money on a previously enjoyable but now failing relationship need not necessarily define his past expenditures as investments in this pairing; he can equally well justify them as while payments for fun times in the past and for a learning experience that helps prepare him for developing a future, more successful relationship.

Nor do I agree with Johnson (1991) that the existence or nonexistence of attractive "alternatives" is necessarily structural. Perceiving acceptable alternatives to one's primary relationship depends in large part on one's exploration of such alternatives. In turn, the effort put into such an exploration is generally more contingent on perceiving weaknesses in one's own primary attractions (Levinger, 1983) than on external, structural influences. Structural factors do, of course, affect the number of one's potentially available alternatives (e.g., someone in a big city does have a larger number of possible alternatives than someone in a small village). But neither one's ability to access these alternatives nor their attractiveness derives from the external structure itself.

Given both the gradualness of the internality–externality continuum and the muddiness of how to label items as showing structural commitment, therefore, I cannot justify subdividing the barrier construct into clearly separate moral and structural categories. Nonetheless, I do agree with Johnson that (1) there is a valid distinction between the extremes of "ought to" (a moral imperative) and "have to" (a structural coercion), and (2) that the barrier concept should indeed address this distinction more explicitly.

The Distinctness of Barriers and Attractions

One helpful critic has asked me, "Cannot today's attraction become tomorrow's barrier against breaking up one's relationship? And are not duties, which here are equated to one form of barrier, often self-chosen and thus indicative of one's attraction to the relationship?" My answer is "yes" to both suggestions, but this does not imply that the meanings of attraction and barrier are therefore interchangeable. The same relational feature may indeed be experienced as either an attraction or a constraint, but how and whether it is so experienced will depend on the stage of the relationship and on our desire to evaluate it. At an early stage, where we are
estimating our liking or love for the partner, her grace, her knowledge, and her warm nurturing may well lead us to be strongly attracted to her; each such quality would be a source of her intense desirability. During the acquaintance, buildup, and continuation phases of a close relationship (Levinger, 1983), we are prone to consider our partner’s positive features as intrinsic attractions: Our partner’s beneficial attributes are accessible to us; they make her more desirable and our relationship—whether actual or contemplated—more rewarding.

If, however, we start to focus on our pair’s deterioration or ending, we will begin to weigh its minuses against its remaining pluses. Now, various barriers against exit become more salient. In the unlikely case that we should consider the partner or the relationship totally unattractive, our loss would be minimal. More common is ambivalence, where our tie retains a substantial portion of pluses, which must be added to the external termination costs; in that case, the remaining attractions take on the function of psychological barriers against breakup.

Consider now the meaning of “duty,” or the felt obligation to act in some specifiable way. In one sense, the constraints of duty may be regarded as self-imposed, since we often do choose to take on duties and to behave as someone who is both responsive and responsible. But it also can be argued that many of our internalized duties are externally derived from socializing agents—which may range from our mother and father, to a charismatic school teacher, to the Bible and its commandments. Furthermore, violating our duties often has consequences beyond merely stimulating our guilt feelings, consequences that are linked to tangible punishments from outside agents. Altogether, then, I would argue that our feelings of duty to a relationship function primarily as constraints or barriers, even though fulfilling our duties depends partly on our attraction to it.

Processes of Developing a Relational Commitment

According to the attraction–barrier model, a strong commitment to a given relationship signifies that one’s net attractions and barriers (or termination costs) durably exceed those available in the best alternative relationship (Levinger, 1965, 1976). Or, according to Kelley’s (1983) definition, for a pair relationship to be stable, “the average degree to which the pros outweigh the cons must be large relative to the variability in this difference” (p. 290). In other words, pair commitment implies pair stability.

Kelley (1983, p. 296) goes on to say that developing a strong pair commitment requires raising the relationship’s “average pro–con difference without producing an offsetting increase in its variance,” and (or) decreasing “the variance in the pro–con difference without producing an offsetting decrease in its average level” (emphasis mine). He suggests a number of ways of doing this: (1) “improving the reward–cost balance of membership”; (2) making “irretrievable investments” that would be lost if one leaves the relationship; (3) raising “the social costs of termination”; (4) increasing the partners’ common “understanding” of their mutual dependence and developing their sense of being a “couple”; (5) “linking membership to the self-concept” of each partner; (6) broadening one’s time perspective on the pair’s interactive events, where negative events can be seen as part of a much longer, far more positive, couple past and future; and (7) “reducing the availability and attractiveness of relationships” (pp. 298–307).

Kelley’s suggestions fit well into an attraction–barrier perspective. His first suggestion is the same as increasing the pair’s net attractiveness; the second and third denote increasing the barriers against leaving it; and the seventh suggestion means decreasing not only the alternative attractions, but also the barriers around those alternatives. Kelley’s fourth and fifth suggestions both imply that in a growing commitment, the other’s rewards become increasingly one’s own rewards, so that the relationship itself will grow in value and compellingness. Finally, the sixth suggestion implies that particular aversive or unattractive pair experiences
can be discounted by viewing them within a wider, more positive couple context—where the appraisal of one's current net attraction to the partnership is enhanced by remembering the pair's long history of mainly positive feelings.

Commitment processes tend, of course, to be subtle and gradual. A contemporary heterosexual scenario may proceed as follows: A commitment germinates after two people meet and find their interaction mutually rewarding. At first, their commitment is limited merely to the decision to continue seeing each other, with little thought about a common future. Later, if they continue to enjoy each other, the two persons may start wondering about their joint prospects. To the extent that the two spend time with each other, they make an “investment” in their relationship (e.g., Levinger & Snoek, 1972; Rusbull, 1980), which gradually grows in value. The more they come to value this investment, the more they would lose from ending their connection.

After their relationship has become sufficiently valuable, therefore, one or both members may wish to assure its future stability. If either one desires an exclusive relationship, he or she will want to confirm that neither partner's alternative ties will interfere with its further progress and maintenance (Levinger, 1983). This becomes the occasion, then, of building mutual understandings and of withdrawing from competing alternatives.

Various observers (e.g., Bolton, 1961; Brickman, 1987; Huston, Surra, Fitzgerald, & Cate, 1981; M. Johnson, 1991; Rubin, 1973) have noted that the commitment process is usually gradual but is accompanied by occasional upward or downward turning points. The development of heightened interdependence is often difficult to perceive until after its buildup (Huston et al., 1981; Levinger, 1983). Consider, for example, the following report by one newly married interviewee: “It is hard for both of us to say when we privately got engaged. The subject would come up time after time, and each time we would be more seriously attached afterwards, until it was just ‘there.' I’m not sure when it occurred exactly. There was no time it exactly occurred—it was a gradual transition” (Bolton, 1961, p. 237).

When two partners are ready to disclose their commitment publicly, they are likely to have resolved most of their earlier hesitations—although, often there remain residues of doubt and ambivalence. If and when the two convert their private commitment to a public one, they transform internally experienced barriers against leaving their pairing into externally reinforced constraints. When their relationship was purely private, its termination costs consisted mainly of the loss of psychological or emotional investments. After it becomes publicly recorded, however—specifically in the case of marriage—the termination costs increase markedly in their social, economic, legal, and perhaps religious dimensions. Later on, in marriage, the partners not only will have greatly increased familial and economic interdependence, but also the advent of dependent children creates a totally new set of termination costs—costs to be suffered by their children as well as by themselves.

To put it another way, what was originally an informal craving to continue an attractive association is converted into a formal obligation. Given the partners’ heavy mutual involvement, they are impelled to protect the ongoing stability of their relationship. To the extent that third parties become increasingly involved—not only the couple’s children but also the spouses’ parents, kin, friendship network, and society at large—the partners’ duty to maintain the relationship is reinforced. Moral constraints are augmented by legal and other structural restraints, such as the enforcement of child support and punitive sanctions against its violation.

**Alternative Barriers from Ties to Third Parties**

Previous applications of the attraction–barrier model have concentrated on only its first three components (A, B, and A') and have neglected the fourth component of alternative barriers. Theory on relationship breakup has failed to analyze the effects of alternative barriers,
and empirical research has not studied them. This neglect has blinded us to some important phenomena that, I believe, contribute to people's current difficulties in making permanent pair commitments and to the high breakup rate among seemingly committed pairs.

All instances of B' forces refer to restraints against leaving some alternative state or relationship, which only become salient when one contemplates departure from it. But what may constitute such alternative states? To help answer that question, let us first consider heterosexual pairs at two contrasting levels of involvement: (1) a pair at an early stage of courtship, where both internal and external barriers around the pair are weak even though the partners' mutual attraction may be strong; and (2) a pair at an advanced stage (e.g., a 10-year marriage with children) where these barriers are extremely strong. For each pair, we can examine the nature of alternative barriers.

An Early-Stage Romance

People in early-stage relationships often must explore their own and the other's existing alternatives, including their obligations to previous partners. B' forces may derive from either partner's necessity to extricate him- or herself from a competing romantic relationship. To what extent are both partners free from obligations to other attachments? It is rare in our culture to maintain two equally strong romantic commitments for very long; if a new relationship is to become increasingly involving, a previous tie usually must be cut (Levinger, 1980); but even when such an alternative is no longer appealing, one may hesitate to take this step.

Job-based alternative barriers also can affect a premarital relationship. Partners who are strongly attracted to each other may refrain from deepening their pair commitment in order to follow their individual careers. If both partners feel locked into careers that take them in divergent directions, then even their mutual strong love may not suffice for building a lasting union.

Alternative barriers may also stem from differing religious or ideological commitments. Potential partners may come to realize that their differing memberships or convictions are too far apart, and too rigidly adhered to, so as to block them from building a durable new tie.

An Established Marriage

In a marriage, outside romantic relationships are less likely to be sources of alternative barriers even though they might offer competing attractions. More common are competing demands from relationships of differing types, for example, obligations to one's marriage versus one's work relationships, duties to the spouse versus those to one's children (as well as to children from a previous marriage), or one's responsibilities to the family versus the demands of persons outside the immediate family. In each instance, pressures to center on the primary relationship are pitted against those from competing concerns.

Traditional husbands have divided their time and energy between home and work, with their work obligations often reducing their attention to spouse and children. Traditional wives, meanwhile, have balanced their devotion to their husband against the time and effort dedicated to caring for the children and the home. For both, responsibilities to parents or other kin have generally been another source of personal constraints.

Today, in an era of two-earner marriages, both spouses are often caught in the work-versus-home conflict. When a couple also has children, both spouses' lives are subject to still greater cross-pressures. Note the major historical change in mothers working away from home: In 1940, only 15% of women with children aged under age 6 were in the workforce; today, over 60% fall in this category. In a dual-job marriage, both spouses face alternative barriers that stem from their job and employer. While a job tie does not necessarily compete with one's obligations to the spouse, extreme job demands can indeed disrupt the marital enterprise. Such
disruption is especially intense if spouses accept jobs in distant locations and decide to live much of their married life apart, as has become more frequent in recent decades (Gerstel & Gross, 1984). An example of such a disrupted relationship is contained in the announcement by film stars Emma Thompson and Kenneth Branagh of the breakup of their 6-year-long marriage: “Our work has inevitably led to our spending long periods of time away from each other, and as a result, we have drifted apart” (The New York Times, October 3, 1995, p. B4).

Another Form of Alternative Barrier: A Commitment to Oneself

Not discussed previously, nor alluded to in Figure 2.2, is a more unconventional form of alternative barrier. It does not involve obligations to any third party, but it arises from one’s commitments to one’s sense of self.

To introduce this concept, I refer Marks’s (1986) study of marriages, entitled Three Corners. On the basis of his research, Marks suggests that a relationship partner’s involvements can be described in terms of a triangle. Its three corners are (1) the “inner self,” (2) the “primary partnership,” and (3) “any other important focal point of his or her personal world.” It is likely that one’s involvement in Corner 2 will compete with those in Corners 1 and/or 3, unless the individual or, better yet, both partners can integrate these various influences into a harmonious whole. Involvements in Corner 3 refer, of course, to one’s attractions to and barriers from the alternative ties discussed earlier. Those regarding the inner self (Corner 1) refer to influences from one’s personal background and current self-oriented concerns.

Yankelovich (1981) coined the term “duty to self ethic” when, reporting on a series of his social surveys, he suggested that self-fulfillment has become an increasingly important American ideal since the 1960s. He believes that this ethic has interfered with people’s willingness to make lasting commitments. Yankelovich argues that when persons feel constrained to “do only what they feel like doing,” it interferes with their lasting commitments to personal relationships. Someone who puts self-actualization above communal concerns seems not only highly attracted to the self, but also seems constrained by a barrier around his or her personal identity—around Corner 1 in the relational triangle.

A large part of contemporary commitment difficulties may indeed stem from interference from people’s powerful individualistic identities. If so—and we must recognize that this includes attractions as well as barriers—this source of alternative barriers also deserves further exploration.

In summary, alternative barriers consist of psychological pressures from alternative states that interfere with carrying out one’s commitment to the primary relationship. At the beginning of a relationship they prevent its adequate deepening, leading to stunted roots and, often, to early breakup. After a pair’s establishment, they can intrude in additional ways—especially if the partners encounter recurring conflict or a decline in their mutual attraction. Given the current climate of market-driven insecurity, the increased prevalence of alternative barriers in our society adds new impediments against the stability of close relationships.

CONCLUSIONS

In an era when people have learned to connect and disconnect themselves to and from others with increasing speed, the issue of relational commitment has become more and more salient. As the communal supports around the couple relationship have weakened, its members have had to assume a greater and greater personal responsibility for its continuity. And this has become increasingly difficult for the typical individual or partnership. This chapter has used
my attraction—barrier model, with a special emphasis on the neglected concept of alternative barriers, to analyze couple maintenance and durability.

In Immanuel Kant’s time—in the 1700s and before—citizens tended to accept the constraints of their society and their family relationships. Aside from the scourges of death, disease, and economic hardship, their social lives were relatively stable and predictable; marriage and family were a lifetime commitment. Thus, it made sense to insist on people’s acceptance of their fate and their loyal performance of the consequent obligations and duties.

In our current society, however, both the internal and external barriers against breakup are much weaker, and people usually have more options. Partners’ attractions to alternative states, as well as the barriers around those states, often compete with the forces that support or constrain the principal relationship. Furthermore, today’s norms have broadened the range of what kinds of close relationships are considered acceptable.

Thus, when today’s relationships seem to be unworkable or insufferable, people no longer are forced to tolerate them indefinitely. Yet while today’s partners have more choices and often can achieve greater satisfaction in the formation of their close relationships, the lowered barriers give them less security. Berscheid and Lopes (in press) have put this problem starkly: “The freedom of perpetual choice . . . means that individuals must continually expend time and energy to reevaluate the wisdom of their previous choice” (pp. 9–10). The very definition of what is an “unworkable” relationship has become a problem today, because the availability of alternatives helps us ignore our own responsibility for making it either work or not work.

Recent scholarship on marriage and the family reflects an ambivalence about these historical changes. On the pessimistic side, it associates the growth of individualism with historical losses in relational stability, with deplorable consequences for children and our wider social networks. On the more positive side, it argues that this increased individualism has led to gains in gender equality and a weakening of the owner–property forms of traditional marriage. Regardless of our values, though, it is impossible to return to the more placid husband-as-provider and wife-as-homemaker couple of an earlier era without new transformations in the Western postindustrial economy and major changes in the social meaning of “success.”

In their review of American family trends since Colonial times, Mintz and Kellogg (1988) conclude that “the difference between our present predicament and past concerns is that . . . many Americans today tend to regard familial responsibilities as an impediment to self-fulfillment [and that our society has failed] to resolve the tensions between our domestic arrangements and changing social and economic circumstances. [The results of this failure] are apparent in the growing number of poor families and the declining well-being of children” (p. 244). People’s new rights and opportunities carry important rewards, but they also entail substantial costs—costs that accrue to the parties who would benefit from relationship stability: to dependent children, to grandparents and other kin, to society at large, and even to the partners themselves. Mintz and Kellogg’s words echo those of other historians or sociologists (e.g., Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1984; Popenoe, 1988) who see the roots of family instability in the conflict between a modern ethic of individualism and a traditional ethic of community.

I too believe that the conflict between our need for self-fulfillment and our commitment to community is extremely significant. Nonetheless, we should recognize two vital points. First, our society’s individualism derives from this century’s changes in our economy, and its emphasis on consumerism and on marketplace ethics (Dizard & Gadlin, 1990). Without major reversals in our work patterns and success values and norms, the wider community will continue to be subordinated to our individual ambition. Second, we should acknowledge that men have always been encouraged to fulfill themselves—as warriors, as traders, and even as traveling preachers; in earlier times, it was primarily women who cared for the “communal” needs. Most young women today resist the idea that they alone should make the sacrifices that have helped build stable relationships and stable communities.
Going beyond that debate, I would suggest that duty to our self and duty to our primary relationship are not necessarily contradictory. Twenty years ago, in reviewing contributions to an early conference on close relationships, I proposed that the perceived conflict between self and relationship can be resolved through a redefinition of the self: “One road toward attaining self-fulfillment may be the expansion of our personal boundaries [from the individual to the dyadic, the group, and the societal components of self]” (Levinger, 1977, p. 160). We need not see the self as exclusive of others, nor define self-fulfillment egotistically. Instead, we can define it as including the rest of the world and recognize, as philosophers have informed us through the ages that (in John Donne’s words) “no man is an island.”

Figure 2.1 implies that a growing person–other relationship is accompanied by a growing intersection of two partner’s lives and identities, where each partner is increasingly affected by thoughts, feelings, and actions of the other. Recent social-psychological research suggests that close pair relationships signify an “expansion of self” (Aron & Aron, 1986) and the “inclusion of other in self” (Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991), and this finding has now been extended to “person/in-group” relationships in general (Smith & Henry, 1996).

In the ideal close relationship, each partner’s self-commitments can be reconciled with commitments to the partnership as well as to third parties, and each member’s triangle (Marks, 1986) can harmonize with that of the other. If such a broadened definition of selfhood can be realized more widely, individualism and commitment need no longer be considered antithetical in the quest for both satisfying and stable social relationships.

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REFERENCES


