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An Exploration of the Construction of Commitment Leading to Marriage

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The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how newly married couples construct and reconstruct commitment through events in courtship and early marriage. Fifteen newly married couples, 30 participants, were interviewed individually. Through the use of grounded theory six different themes (friendship, gradual process, positive examples, negative examples, planning for the future, and words of affirmation) emerged in the construction, origination, and communication of commitment. The results of this study have specific implications for theory, research, and practice with young adult couples. The concept of resilient commitment is introduced and briefly discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Although many young adults have experienced instability in their caregivers' relationships, there is substantial evidence that young adults continue to have a strong desire to marry and that marriage remains an important lifetime goal

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(Carroll et al., 2009; Mahay & Lewin, 2007; Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). Although marital attitudes develop and change throughout adolescence and emerging adulthood, marriage has been shown to be relatively more important over time compared with both careers and friends (Willoughby, 2010). In fact, many adolescents and young adults view getting married at about 25 years as the ideal age of marriage (Carroll et al., 2007; Willoughby, 2010). And yet, even with an abundant amount of empirical research indicating that marriage remains an important lifetime priority for young adults in the United States, the marriage rate has decreased by nearly 60% since 1970 (Cruz, 2013).

As examined by Lee and Payne (2010) there has been a very active discussion among researchers about why the marriage rate has decreased. Lee and Payne make the argument that the explanation for the decline can be divided into two categories: cultural and demographic/economic. Both categories are again highlighted in a recent research report by Hymowitz, Carroll, Wilcox, and Kaye (2013) that weighs the benefits and costs of delayed marriage. An underlying theme found in much of this research is the significance of commitment and the impact that committed relationships can have on couples and families.

Carroll and colleagues (2009) found that young adults recognize the importance of commitment as a critical step in personal readiness for marriage. This result was particularly important because their findings suggest that despite the fact that people develop their own marriage philosophy (i.e., the ideal age to marry, the type of person to marry), all participants viewed commitment as one of the most important marriage readiness indicators. Commitment has been found to play a vital role in the establishment and maintenance of a marital relationship (Robinson & Blanton, 1993). An area of research that deserves greater attention is how commitment is first constructed in relationships and how partners define commitment based on the environment in which they grew up.

The investigation of commitment originated from interdependence theory (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) and social exchange theory (Cook & Emerson, 1978). Later, investment theory (Rusbult, 1980) was developed in which commitment was seen as being based on satisfaction with the relationship, the quality of alternatives, and the amount of investment in the relationship. In addition, Stanley and Markman (1992) provided yet another theory of commitment based on constraints and dedication that added importantly to the field. More recently, there has been an interest in the concepts of sliding versus deciding (Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2006) and maximizing relationship possibilities (Mikkelsen & Pauley, 2013).

The concept of sliding versus deciding and its impact on the development of commitment has continued to be explored in the literature. For example, in a study by Owen, Rhodes, and Stanley (2013) individuals who reported having thoughtful decision-making processes also reported more

dedication to their partners and higher satisfaction in their relationship. However, on the contrary, Vennum and Fincham (2011) did not find a significant correlation between thoughtful decision-making processes and more dedication in young adult romantic relationships.

Some researchers have argued that commitment is an experiential process. Marston, Hecht, Manke, McDaniel, and Reeder (1998), for example, said that commitment is experienced by different people in different and multiple ways. This experiential view of commitment allows a broader understanding of the behavioral, emotional, and cognitive elements of commitment (Weigel, 2003). To gain a more thorough understanding of commitment, it may be powerful to investigate the experience of commitment development from an insider's perspective (Surra & Hughes, 1997). In this way, particular events, conditions, and interactions that may have been impactful in the forming of commitment can be more fully appreciated (Weigel, 2003).

Although some research has investigated the formation of commitment (Stanley, Rhodes, & Whitton, 2010), this topic is in need of further exploration so that clinicians, educators, and couples can gain a greater understanding about how commitment is first developed and how interventions can be focused in helping couples re-create this process. The primary goal of this article is to provide a greater depth of understanding into how couples construct and develop commitment leading to marriage. In certain aspects this study provides an extension to the work of Weigel (2003), who explored the origin of commitment, the construction of commitment, and communication of commitment in a case study with a recently married couple. Specifically, we were interested in the following: (1) How do couples construct and reconstruct the meaning of commitment through events in courtship? (2) Where do people's understanding of commitment in marriage originate? (3) How is commitment communicated during the courtship process and in marriage?

METHODS

A qualitative design using intensive individual interviews was chosen to understand the couple's perception of their own construction of commitment to marriage. Data were analyzed using Charmaz's (2006) constructivist grounded theory approach to emphasize "the participant's definitions of terms, situations, and events and try to tap his or her assumptions, implicit meanings, and tacit rules" (p. 32). Specifically, constructivists seek to understand the "world of meaning and action" of their participants "in ways classic grounded theorists do not" (Charmaz, 2009, p. 131). Constructivists also view data as constructed instead of discovered and see their analyses as "interpretive renderings not as objective reports or the only viewpoint on the topic" (Charmaz, 2009, p. 131). Exploring the data in this way can

facilitate an emphasis on the views, values, beliefs, feelings, assumptions, and ideologies of the individual (Creswell, 2007).

Participants

Participants for this study were recruited through fliers posted at several different locations at a western university campus. Because couples learn to develop joint meanings, rituals, and realities within the first couple years of marriage (Huston & Vangelisti, 1991), couples had to have been married less than 2 years to be included in the study. Fifteen White heterosexual couples (30 participants: 15 men and 15 women) participated in this study. On average, the couples had been married for approximately 13 months (range, 3–21). Men's ages ranged from 21 to 27 years, with an average of 23.6 years. Women's ages ranged from 20 to 27 years, with an average of 21.9 years. At least one person in each couple was either an undergraduate or graduate student of this western university. Data were collected until data saturation was reached, which according to the grounded theory approach was when no new or relevant information emerged (Saumure & Given, 2008).

Procedures

Partners in each couple were interviewed individually for approximately 1 hour to ensure minimal influence from the spouse while exploring each partner's personal experience of how commitment was constructed in their relationship. This also allowed the researchers to compare partners' definitions of commitment and how it was constructed during the courtship process. Particular attention was paid to their early dating relationship up until their decision to marry.

The interviews began with questions to get to know the participant and built an atmosphere of openness and comfort in sharing stories about their personal life. This style of questioning is in line with the literature on grounded theory in which Charmaz (2006) said, "The combination of how you construct the questions and conduct the interview shapes how well you achieve a balance between making the interview open-ended and focusing on significant statements" (p. 26). The design and chronology of the interview questions were also patterned after the interview method that Weigel (2003) used in his research study. Questions were developed to guide the interview so comparisons could be made between each individual couple. Although the sequence of questions was occasionally different from one participant to the next, as indicated by the flow of the conversation, generally the questions followed the same order. Examples of these questions are as follows: What is your definition of commitment? Where do you believe your understanding of commitment in marriage originated from? How and why did the commitment to marry your spouse develop?

Data Analysis

The interviews were digitally recorded and later transcribed for the purpose of analysis. The process of analysis consisted of several steps. First, the primary researcher listened to each interview at least twice before any data analysis. This immersed the researcher in the participants' responses and provided a way to initially reflect on potential themes. Next, the primary researcher began the initial coding phase that included a careful word-by-word, line-by-line evaluation of the data. Charmaz (2006) describes this process as necessary "toward fulfilling two criteria for completing a grounded theory analysis: fit and relevance" (p. 54).

Elements of focused coding were then applied to a fourth listening of the interviews and read-through to ensure the most significant and/or frequent codes were highlighted. In addition, focused coding required decisions about which initial codes made the most analytic sense to categorize the data "incisively and completely" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 57). This allowed the researcher to identify overlaps in the couples' language and perceptions of commitment.

Additional understanding that was learned about the participants and their understanding of commitment was written in memos on the side of the page and on separate pieces of paper in both the initial and focused coding process. Charmaz (2006) clarifies the importance of memo-writing when she said, "Memos catch your thoughts, capture the comparisons and connections you make, and crystallize questions and directions for you to pursue. Through conversing with yourself while memo-writing, new ideas and insights arise during the act of writing." (p. 72). Through this process the researcher was able to collapse and sort each theme into categories and subcategories.

The validity, or substantive significance, of the data was then established through analyst triangulation (Patton, 2002). Using a deductive method, two additional secondary coders with significant experience in qualitative data analysis randomly reviewed and validated over half of the interviews to assess the presence and salience of each theme identified by the primary coder. The secondary coders were not involved in any of the data collection process to ensure a fresh and nonbiased evaluation of the data. This resulted in the researcher validating the presence, salience, and cohesiveness of each theme according to the data.

RESULTS

Through the initial steps of qualitative analysis, six unique themes were identified that were organized into three categories: the construction of commitment during courtship, influences on partners' conceptualization of

commitment, and how partners' communicated their commitment to the relationship. For the vast majority of participants their relationship began as a (1) *friendship* and commitment was constructed through a (2) *gradual process* during which many of the participants considered their personal beliefs of commitment based on other examples they had in their lives. Participants developed schemas of commitment through (3) *positive examples of commitment* and (4) *negative examples of commitment*. To communicate their commitment for each other during courtship and in marriage, we found (5) *planning for the future* and (6) *words of affirmation* were the most prominent themes from the interviews in the research study.

Definitions of Commitment

To put the results of this study into context, it is important to first describe how the participants defined commitment in marital relationships. Interestingly, this led to a variety of answers, and frequently even spouses' definitions differed. This supports the finding by Marston et al. (1998) that commitment is experiential and is experienced by each individual differently. For example, one husband defined commitment in marriage as a choice:

Just being faithful. Just simply staying true to a decision you made. You make a choice and it's no one else's choice. You can't blame your parents for saying you should marry this person. You can't blame your partner for forcing you into being married. It's your choice and you made a commitment to it and if you didn't like it why in the world did you do it in the first place.

The wife, on the other hand, explained that she would define commitment in the following way:

In my marriage it means that he is the only one. I'm really close to my dad and he's really close to his mom. So it's been hard to let go of them. . . . That was a really hard thing to do, but with commitment you have to be whole heartedly toward your husband or spouse just tell them everything and never put anything before them.

Many of the participants' definitions of commitment fit with theories of commitment, such as interdependence theory (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978) and sliding versus deciding (Stanley et al., 2006). For almost every participant it was clear an active decision had been made to get married. In many respects this decision to marry seemed to be made based on dedication to their partner. As Stanley and Markman (1992) explained, couples assess the "want to" and "have to" parts of their relationship when deciding to commit to each other.

A participant in the research study highlighted the importance role commitment plays in their perception of the future stability of the relationship:

I'd always believed that commitment was going to be the hardest thing . . . and maybe it is, but it hasn't seemed so to me. It seems like a joyful ride so far that we've been able to just be together and be committed and understand each other and know things may get hard, but we can get through them all. I have also noticed how important commitment really is, of course to each other, but also commitment to yourself. . . . What has really changed is my personal commitment to our relationship.

It is interesting to note that this participant conceptualized commitment not as a static state but rather as an active state of being that requires effort to maintain, nurture, and grow. What is most interesting is that commitment, although made up of similar ingredients, looks different for each couple and takes on the unique qualities of the individuals within the relationship. As Weigel (2003) explained, "It may be that a couple brings basic core beliefs about commitment to their relationship, but that those core beliefs are pulled and stretched, shaped, and molded through interaction to fit the current shape of the relationship" (p. 16). So it is with the construction of commitment to marry.

Construction of Commitment in Courtship

The first research question sought to explore how couples construct and reconstruct the meaning of commitment through events in courtship. Questions designed to provide information regarding partners' construction of commitment included how the couple became interested in each other, qualities they found attractive in their spouse, and certain events that changed their commitment level during courtship. Follow-up questions were asked as necessary to extract any additional insight and two dominant themes emerged: friendship and gradual process.

FRIENDSHIP

The most prominent theme regarding the construction of commitment expressed during the interviews was the importance of friendship. For almost all couples, this was the basis of their relationship before any romantic involvement. Gottman and Gottman (2006) believed that happily married couples behave like good friends. "In other words, their relationships are characterized by respect, affection, and empathy. They pay close attention to what's happening in each other's life and they feel emotionally connected" (pp. 3–4).

For example one of the male participants explained as follows: "We were friends first and we always have been friends first and foremost.

That's where it all started I guess." This participant's wife provided further clarity on the importance of friendship:

I've always felt like relationships need to start as friendships. . . . I just see so many relationships where they get in and start dating and already have that romantic aspect involved in that relationship before they have any sort of admirations for the other person. I don't really know how to explain it, but I have always been scared going into a relationship without that friendship base. It really does just have to do with the fact that you just get to learn about someone in so many more ways if you're just friends first and there's no commitment attached to it before. You're just learning about the person and want to know about them and when that leads to a commitment relationship it changes. It is so night and day from relationships that start right off.

Another female participant explained, "I think [it made] a really big difference because the ice was broken and we were really able to get to know each other on a deeper level." This participants' husbands also agreed about the importance of friendship:

It was a good foundation that we were just friends and had that connection before any real romance was integrated in. I guess you know that person. You know the different aspects of who they are rather than, 'I have an attraction to you; I want to date you.' We can be fine when we don't have to kiss or hold hands. We can be fine just being together and talking and not having anything uncomfortable to worry about. So, I think that really helped in our marriage because we're just more completely comfortable with each other right from the get go and it's not ever awkward.

For the participants in this study, friendship seemed to create a strong foundation for their relationships. This friendship was important because it provided a level of comfort and understanding. Friendship also gave couples a connection to each other before romance and intimacy was integrated into the relationship. The strong foundation, comfort, and connection that friendship provided these couples interviewed was viewed as a crucial element to their ability to commit to each other and eventually make the decision to marry.

GRADUAL PROCESS

When assessing for perceptions about the process of developing commitment, one clear theme was the impact of time on the process. In other words, commitment was not a singular event but a process that required adequate amounts of time to get to know their potential dating partner before they

were willing to commit at a more serious level. With few exceptions, it was the small and often mundane events that couples noted during the courtship process that seemed to make all the difference. For example, one participant discussed this gradual process leading to commitment in the following way:

Over the course of the 3 years that we dated it was kind of the same, it just grew and grew. It was never like a pounding, glorifying moment that 'I'm going to marry him' . . . It was just gradual. . . . Eventually, I knew that he was the person that I wanted to marry.

Another participant explained, "I think it just progressed slowly, that it wasn't one big event. We were comfortable with each other, we spent time with each other, we held hands, we did homework together, we grew fond of each other and then we liked each other and eventually we fell in love."

This gradual process allowed partners to learn to appreciate each other's qualities and instilled a deeper desire to pursue the relationship. Another participant described how taking it slow helped her feel more comfortable and committed in the relationship:

Just looking back. . . . His strengths helped my weaknesses and vice versa. And really just knowing that I was comfortable with him, and knowing that I could trust him. Knowing that we could work through conflict and working through things that we disagreed with because it happened when we were dating.

The data further suggested that the gradual process of commitment is made up of layers of simple experiences that foster love and respect. One participant stated matter-of-factly, "It was really gradual. It wasn't big things that moved it up, just spending time together. We went on a lot of walks, ate a lot of ice cream, or just sat in his apartment or on my front porch."

Another participant provided further support that the little things over time fostered commitment:

We liked to go on hikes. . . . I think those were the times when we really felt like we connected and really that's when I felt like I was the closest to (her) and I really felt like I understood her when we were out and we were alone . . . and we felt like we could really open up to each other.

Consistent with previous qualitative research regarding the construction of commitment (Byrd, 2009), strong feelings of commitment were not instantaneous. Instead, they were developed slowly and over time, through daily interactions that created more feelings of love and appreciation. As couples were able to get to know each other through simple everyday occurrences, their commitment levels increased.

Impact of Family of Origin and Friends on Commitment

When discussing the development of commitment, individuals kept returning to the impact that family, friends, neighbors, and society had on their understanding of commitment before meeting their spouse. Positive examples served as a measuring stick for their relationship and what they expected in a committed relationship. However, what was surprising was the undirected discussion about the impact that negative examples of commitment had on their relationship. In fact, the data suggested that couples placed as much emphasis on the negative examples of commitment in their lives as the positive examples. For some participants these negative examples empowered them to not make the same mistakes, whereas for others it was a roadblock they had to overcome for them to commit more fully to their relationship.

POSITIVE EXAMPLES

Each of the participants in the study discussed the importance of positive examples. Most participants recognized their parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles as the origin of their understanding of commitment. These individuals made efforts to highlight these positive examples in their lives and attempted to emulate it in their committed relationship. One participant discussed the positive example of their parents the following way:

They stuck it out. Marriage is hard and it has ups and downs. So, as a kid or a teenager you could tell when those times were harder on your parents, but they always stuck it out. They were always kind and respectful to each other and that's the biggest thing that I saw, how they treated each other.

Several participants learned from their parents that a successful marriage takes work and requires effort and patience. Without this example, some participants reported they may not have had the commitment level necessary to work through the challenging parts in their relationship. One participant said the following:

If my parents never showed me or expressed it, honestly, I don't know if I would work for it or fight for it if things get rough. . . . I mean, if I never knew what it was or saw what it looked like, I wouldn't know how to emulate or imitate it.

It was clearly evident that participants saw how their parents, grandparents, and other family members exemplified commitment. These couples were able to model this type of commitment and learn never to quit. One participant said, "They [my parents] helped each other out. My dad

helps my mom if she needs to vent . . . It's just that they never quit on each other." Another participant provided further support of how their parent's examples showed them the importance of commitment:

It really showed me that commitment is very selfless. It takes a lot of time and a lot of hard work . . . Seeing my parents work hard on everything . . . putting each other first and making sure those things were taken care of before anything else . . . made a difference for me because I know that the little things do matter a lot.

These positive examples provided couples with an understanding of how to deal with difficult situations and taught them the importance of sacrifice and working through disagreements. They were also taught the value of service, putting someone else's needs before their own to make important sacrifices for their partner and relationship. This persistence to overcome obstacles provided valuable knowledge that it is possible to make their relationship work, even through difficult times.

NEGATIVE EXAMPLES

Although the role that positive examples had on participants was expected, the researchers were surprised by the reported influence that negative examples had on partners' conceptualization of commitment. In fact, most participants stated the negative examples of commitment in their lives were equally influential as the positive examples. When discussing the benefits of seeing positive examples versus negative examples, one participant noted, "I don't know which I would consider more valuable to my own marriage in my life, being able to say, 'I'd like to be like them' or being able to say, 'I'll never let myself be like them'."

Some participants had parents that had been divorced or had witnessed brothers or sisters and friends who had gotten divorced. Interestingly, these participants all believed it was beneficial to see the negative examples, so they could understand what to do and what not to do in their own relationship. For example, one participant described the important role of learning from the mistakes of others and how to prevent them:

Sometimes in my own mind to prevent a failure you have to understand what caused the failure in the first place . . . so it was really important to me to understand how different types of relationships fail because if I can understand why they can fail, I can recognize the signs and maybe I can take steps to prevent or correct it.

When asked if the negative examples of commitment made a difference in his relationship, one participant said, "I do because you see the effects they have and you see the causes of them too, so it kind of helps you learn

without doing.” Another participant also saw how bad habits can affect a marriage and how negative examples can help one know the good in a marriage:

If you don't know how bad it can be, you don't know if what you have is any good. I don't think I would feel as strongly about how I feel about commitment if I didn't see my friends' family environment and how commitment tore them up, so you definitely have to have the good and the bad.

Surprisingly, participants continually described how negative examples of commitment help them see the good in relationships, especially their own. In this way, participants were able to decide how to act in their relationship. One participant explained how initially his parents had a successful marriage, but then how that changed because of decisions his parents made:

With my parents I saw how good their marriage was and I saw how romantic and loving they were my whole life. Then I saw it go downhill because of one person's choices so I could diagnose it. . . . I know what they did and I can see why it went wrong.

Another participant described how his parent's divorce helped him become a better husband and father:

Their divorce totally made me a better person. Better son, eventually a better father, a better husband . . . it's not all rainbows and butterflies. If you want to be committed to marriage you have to constantly work at it and it won't always be easy once you say I do and come home from the honeymoon. . . . Because of my parents' divorce I realize you can't just coast. . . . So, I think that there's a lot of ways it affected me, but as far as commitment it affected me a lot. It opened my eyes to work that needs to be put into it.

For a few participants, experiencing the divorce of their parents made them apprehensive of commitment. Some struggled with forming a committed relationship as adults; not because they didn't believe in marriage, but because they were afraid to make the same mistakes. One participant said the following:

Coming from divorced parents, it freaked me out that I had deep feelings for him in the first place. Being a divorced child I didn't want to go through a divorce and I feel once you make that commitment, you made that promise . . . It's made a big impact on a lot of my decisions, being scared of commitment.

Many of the participants used the negative examples as opportunities to talk to their partner about their fears and what they don't want in their relationship. Ironically, these discussions created more commitment with these couples as they were able to tackle these concerns in an open way.

Communication of Commitment

The final research question that was examined in this study was how commitment is communicated during the courtship process and in marriage. Questions were designed to extract information about how the participants communicated commitment to their spouse. These questions included the following: Did you talk about commitment during the courtship period? Do you currently talk about commitment in your relationship? How do you communicate commitment in your relationship with your spouse? How does your spouse communicate their commitment? What could you do to show more commitment to your spouse? As with the other research questions, many themes were discovered; however, two prominent themes were found to be part of all participant interviews: words of affirmation and planning for the future.

WORDS OF AFFIRMATION

Most participants expressed how words of encouragement and understanding were important factors in their emotional intimacy with each other. One participant explained as follows:

I think telling him every day that I love him. . . . Showing him that I will do anything for him if he asks or I'll be there for him if he needs me to. . . . I know that he is committed to me when he does that.

Another participant described how listening and being attentive is another expression of commitment: "I think one of the biggest things is when I listen to him or when he listens to me, being attentive and trying to understand. That's one way that both of us really show each other that we're committed to the relationship because we want to improve it."

Many of the participants stated that the expression of emotional intimacy through words of affirmation was one of the most critical elements for them knowing that their partner was committed to them. A particular participant exemplified this as follows:

I don't think I could possibly hear "I love you" enough in a day, and she is much better about adjusting than I have been. She'll tell me she loves me all the time. She'll send text messages, and to me, that makes my day and makes life and things much brighter. Whenever she says that, it's easier to reflect on when we were first dating and recollect those memories, and the first time she said, "I love you," how it made me feel

and stuff like that. That's the best avenue to convey it and I think that's how she does do it.

Another participant discussed the importance of learning how to meet the emotional needs of their partner. Although at times it was challenging, it created an environment of emotional safety in their relationship. She expressed this as follows:

He's a more verbal being than I am, so he constantly says daily, "I'm glad I married you." He's always saying that. He always tells me he loves me. He's a verbal lover. . . . It's a lot harder for me because my parents don't say, "I love you," but spend all their time together. So, converting to a person that says, "I love you" every day is hard.

Even though expressing emotional intimacy was difficult for this participant, they were willing to change to make their relationship better and to show their partner how much they care. Clearly, the benefits of emotional intimacy created a safe haven for commitment to foster and grow. One participant said it best: "There's been times that we've cried together about certain things, we've shared personal things with each other, and that has brought us closer together."

PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

As participants' level of commitment increased, all the couples described the role that talking about their future together played in building their commitment toward marriage. Typically, this process involved couples sharing their future dreams and goals with one another. One participant said, "It helped me fall in love with him, really. It helped me be more committed to him because I knew his goals were in line with my goals and that definitely helped the commitment, for us."

Another participant stated how common goals have made her feel more at ease with her commitment: "I don't have to worry about that part of me anymore. And all my other goals, like having children, or having my career; it's so neat to have someone backing you up in all those goals and knowing that they'll never leave. . . . I think having the same goal or perspective was huge . . . If you have common plans and common goals then you are both committed to the same course of action and without that it leads to a lot of guess work."

Other participants described the process of planning for the future as critical in helping them communicate better and work through potential differences:

I think it [planning for the future] allowed us not to have the typical conflict that you see with some couples...it's helped us in our

communication knowing that we can talk about those things and also it helped that we can work through things that we disagree on making . . . us grow closer together.

Setting goals and making plans together had a synergistic and emotionally bonding effect on the couples. It also helped partners see whether their goals and aspirations are compatible. One participant noted the vital importance the discussing future plans in courtship and how it affected how they viewed each other:

I think it makes a big difference to plan. When the time comes along because we know what to expect and we've talked about his and we know what to do. I think it makes a big difference in the way we perceive each other. The way we feel about each other. It just makes us more prepared for the future and know that the other is on the same page. So, it makes it easier to go through the future things and challenges, if we know we are going to stick together and have loftier goals ahead.

Another participant described how talking about the future helped them to know exactly what they were getting into when they married :

I think it helped a lot because we both, we've watched friends that have had bad experiences and that kind of stuff. We walked into it with both eyes open. We both knew exactly what we were signing up for.

Couples frequently described how planning for the future created more meaning in their relationship and helped them see the commitment they had for their partner. Another participant explained as follows:

I know that he's fully committed and prepared to go through everything with me and he looks forward to all of our life experiences together. . . . We're just making future plans, looking for jobs, trying to have a baby. He's just like, "I can't see the future," but I know he'll be there with me, which is cheesy but true.

As participants began planning for the future as a couple, these participants recognized their partner would be there for them and that their relationship goals were compatible with one another.

DISCUSSION

This study strengthens our understanding of the construction of commitment for couples leading to marriage. Many of the themes that were extracted from the data coincide with what we know from previous theory and research on

how couples construct commitment leading toward marriage. The themes of friendship, gradual process, words of affirmation, and planning for the future are consistently found in the commitment literature (e.g., Byrd, 2009; Gottman & Gottman, 2006; Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 2010).

The unexpected finding of the significance of negative examples to the construction of commitment is in need of further research. It is possible that negative examples can actually provide some benefit for a person constructing their own understanding of commitment in couple relationships. Positive meaning making may play a vital role in future relational decisions regarding commitment and marriage. However, meaning making alone may not be enough to outweigh the consequences of parental divorce or negative examples of commitment. The literature clearly indicates that parental divorce can significantly increase the odds that offspring will see their own marriages end in divorce (Amato & DeBoer, 2001; Segrin, Taylor, & Altman, 2005). Some studies have found that in premarital or dating relationships, young adults whose parents had divorced were associated with lower relationship satisfaction, more conflict, and less commitment (Cui & Fincham, 2010; Rhoades, Stanley, Markman, & Ragan, 2012; Whitton et al., 2008). Research has also suggested that divorce or conflictual parental relationships have a negative impact on the attitudes of young adults about marriage and commitment (Cui, Fincham, & Durtschi, 2011).

It is unclear then what accounts for the discrepancy between the negative impact of parental divorce and the positive impact of negative examples. Perhaps it is possible that a subset of the population who have observed negative examples of commitment still have the ability to choose to be committed and have healthy relationships. We propose that how young adults respond to negative examples of commitment may in fact be much more complex than originally thought. We believe the value of observing both positive and negative examples of commitment can be empowering for some individuals as they are determining the meaning of commitment in their relationships. This idea is quite compatible with previous commitment research such as the sliding versus deciding model (Stanley et al., 2006). As Stanley and Rhodes (2009) explained: “at the root, commitment means making a decision to choose one alternative over others, and that in choosing, one is deciding to give up the other alternatives. Deciding is fundamental to commitment” (p. 35). For the participants in this study they seemed to “give up” negative alternatives they had observed and decided instead to demonstrate what we call resilient commitment. We include the word “resilient” to highlight that the even though individuals may have observed relational adversity and conflict from their family of origin, they may still have the ability to believe in the worth and viability of marital and couple relationships and choose to succeed in their own. Resilience can be defined as the capability to recover from adversity resourceful and strengthened to face life’s challenges (Walsh, 2006).

As Walsh (2006) explained about the resilience framework, it is “flexible for application with a broad diversity of families facing a wide range of stressful challenges. It attends to the interaction of individual, family, and social influences and recognizes that there are many, varied pathways in resilience” (p. xi). Incorporating resilience into our understanding of the construction of commitment provides us with the ability to reframe the way individuals and couples process their observations of negative examples of commitment. In this way we are also extending the call by Kelly and Emery (2003) for researchers to “look more closely at the varied evidence on children and divorce within and across disciplines and across methodological approaches” (p. 352).

We do not believe this phenomenon is only unique to our sample but is part of a larger story about commitment that needs to be told. It would seem a variety of factors may contribute to an individual’s ability to believe in the worth and viability of marital relationships when faced with earlier relational adversity in their family of origin. Future research should consider what factors may allow a person to develop resilient commitment. For instance, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and personal control have all been shown to be factors that facilitate resilience in individuals (Rutter, 1985). It is likely that additional factors as well contribute to the formation of resilient commitment. There has been push in marriage and divorce research to emphasize the importance of protective factors in couple relationships or, in other words, positive internal processes that help facilitate strong couple functioning (e.g., Fincham, Stanley, & Beach, 2007).

Clinical Implications

For professionals who work with individuals and couples, these findings can have significant implications. Providing education to individuals and couples about factors that promote commitment may be of great value. This education may include how commitment is an active and conscious decision made by each partner. Therapists and counselors who are providing couples therapy may want to consider processing with the couple how their family of origin and friends may have contributed to each partner’s personal understanding of what it means to be committed in a relationship. If partners have observed negative examples of commitment in other marriages and relationships, exploring why these couples struggled and how they can personally avoid making similar relational decisions may be of worth. In this way, clinicians may be able to help couples generate more resilience so couples can face adversities in their relationship differently from before. For couples who may be struggling with communicating commitment in their relationship, focusing on words of affirmation and planning for the future may prove to be beneficial.

Limitations

Although this study provided important and rich data regarding the construction of commitment leading to marriage, it is not without its limitations. The first limitation of this study is the sampling methodology. Because participants were recruited through a convenience sampling methodology, it is possible that participants who chose to take part in this study were somehow different from those who chose not to participate. Second, the homogeneity of the sample is a limitation. For example, the sample was exclusively made up of White, middle class, heterosexual couples who were attending a western university. Although this is a limitation, it is important to realize that the aim of grounded theory is not to generalize to a broader population. Rather, the goal is to develop a representative concept that builds a theoretical explanation of a specific phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Despite this, future studies should work to identify the construction of commitment to marry among couples of other races and ethnicities.

Third, although not necessarily a limitation of the study, all participants interviewed married at younger ages than the national norm (between ages 20 and 27 [Hymowitz et al., 2013]) and were in their first marriage. It is possible that the construction of commitment may look differently depending on the age and life experience an individual has as well as whether a person is in their first or second marriage. It is suggested that future research looks at interviewing couples who married later on in life as well as the differences in the construction of commitment among couples in their second marriage.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study have important implications for theory, research, and practice. Although the results of this study do support many findings of previous research, it is clear that commitment in young adult romantic relationships still deserves greater attention and focus. As we have previously stated, commitment researchers have laid a strong foundation for understanding how couple relationships form and factors that help sustain them. We believe the concept of resilient commitment makes a significant contribution to the literature and deserves further attention. Family researchers should strengthen their endeavor to research why couples commit to each other and how this bond can be preserved and fortified in the future.

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