

Commitment Uncertainty: A Theoretical Overview

Jesse Owen
University of Louisville

Galena Rhoades
University of Denver

Brad Shuck
University of Louisville

Frank D. Fincham
Florida State University

Scott Stanley
University of Denver

Howard Markman
University of Denver

Kayla Knopp
University of Denver

This article provides a conceptual overview of commitment uncertainty and fluctuations in commitment. In doing so, we distinguish commitment uncertainty from related concepts, such as ambivalence about commitment and doubt. In addition, we describe the onset and course of commitment uncertainty. Finally, we highlight several issues regarding the treatment of individuals and couples who express commitment uncertainty.

Keywords: commitment, dedication, constraint commitment, attachment, commitment uncertainty

The cost of unstable romantic relationships, including cohabitation, marriage, and long-term partnerships, is not limited to the health of romantic partners, but it also affects the physical and mental health of children and workplace productivity (Amato & Cheadle, 2005). The foundation of romantic relationships ultimately

rests in partners' commitment to one another. However, divorce/separation rates provide a frequent reminder that for many couples commitment to the relationship can be uncertain, wavering, and even unknown—a phenomenon that we label commitment uncertainty. Uncertainty plays a prominent role in human behavior across a range of contexts (e.g., coworker interactions, dating relationships, marriage; Berger & Calabrese, 1975; Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004; Kramer, 2004). In this special section, we review the nature of commitment uncertainty across several domains. The section begins with this theoretical overview; subsequently, three articles examine how commitment uncertainty can influence (a) adults' romantic relationships over time, (b) couple therapy outcomes, and (c) interventions for couple therapists.

Jesse Owen, Department of Educational and Counseling Psychology, University of Louisville; Galena Rhoades, Department of Psychology, University of Denver; Brad Shuck, Department of Educational and Counseling Psychology, University of Louisville; Frank D. Fincham, Family Institute, Florida State University; Scott Stanley, Department of Psychology, University of Denver; Howard Markman, Department of Psychology, University of Denver; Kayla Knopp, Department of Psychology, University of Denver.

Jesse Owen is now at the School and Counseling Psychology Department at the University of Denver.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Jesse Owen, University of Louisville, Department of Educational & Counseling Psychology, Counseling, and College Student Personnel, Louisville, KY 40292. E-mail: jesse.owen@louisville.edu

Theoretical Foundations

Several theoretical frameworks describe commitment in romantic relationships, and most contain two main aspects: (a) a sense of

wanting to be in the relationship and (b) forces that propel a person to stay (Adams & Jones, 1997; Agnew, Van Lange, Rusbult, & Langston, 1998; Johnson, Caughlin, & Huston, 1999; Owen, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2011; Rusbult, Drigotas, & Verette, 1994; Stanley & Markman, 1992). The foundation of most commitment models lies in Thibaut and Kelley's (1959) interdependence theory (see Rusbult & VanLange, 2003). In short, relationships develop over time via investments in the relationship, positive interpersonal exchanges, and increased concern about the loss of the relationship. Many of these facets of interdependence are captured and expanded upon within the different commitment theories (e.g., Johnson et al., 1999; Rusbult & VanLange, 2003; Stanley & Markman, 1992).

The articles in this special issue rely on Stanley and colleagues' theory of commitment. This theory posits two overarching types of commitment: dedication and constraint. Dedication commitment comprises several dimensions, including a strong couple identity (we-ness), having a desire for the relationship to go long term (long-term view), having a sense of primacy regarding the relationship, and maintaining a willingness to sacrifice (see Stanley & Markman, 1992). These dimensions demonstrate a clear pattern of engagement in and priority of the relationship. Moreover, as partners are able to get their needs met and derive a sense of meaning and purpose from their relationship, they monitor alternative relationships less (Johnson, Caughlin, & Huston, 1999; Stanley, Markman, & Whitton, 2002) (e.g., potential extradyadic intimacy [EDI]). Dedication can also lead couples to become more invested (structurally and psychologically) in their relationship.

These investments, although generally positive, can also keep partners together by constraining them. More specifically, constraint commitment describes aspects of the relationship that bind partners together and make breaking up more difficult, such as structural investments, being concerned about partner/child welfare, financial alternatives, the perception that other potential partners would be available if one left the relationship, and social pressure (Owen et al., 2011; Stanley, Rhoades, & Whitton, 2010). Constraints can also encourage partners to work on the relationship; however, con-

straint commitment is likely not sufficient to engender a functional and healthy relationship without a strong sense of dedication to the relationship (Adams & Jones, 1997; Johnson et al., 1999; Stanley & Markman, 1992). Research has demonstrated that dedication and constraint commitment are related to several aspects of positive relationship functioning, such as communication quality and relationship adjustment (e.g., Adams & Jones, 1997; Owen et al., 2011; Stanley & Markman, 1992; Whitton, Stanley, & Markman, 2007). These different types of commitment also uniquely predict relationship stability (Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2010).

Uncertainty About Commitment

In romantic relationships, there are several areas in which uncertainty can arise (e.g., uncertainty about being a parent; see Knobloch, 2008). For our purposes, we focus on the degree to which partners are uncertain about whether they want to be committed to their current relationship. That is, we are interested in commitment uncertainty after a mutually agreed upon union is formed (e.g., an exclusive relationship). It is often normal to wonder about the level of commitment, especially in the early phases of dating when there is not a defined relationship status. These experiences are likely best captured in relationship development models (see Stanley et al., 2010). However, after an initial commitment, uncertainty has wide ranging implications for relationship functioning and personal well-being (Arriaga, Reed, Goodfriend, & Agnew, 2006; Knobloch & Theiss, 2011). We now turn to considering why commitment uncertainty is important and explore how it manifests in relationships.

Why Commitment?

Of all of the aspects of romantic relationship functioning that have been examined over the years, why embark on uncovering another facet of commitment? Although there are many reasons, two are prominent. First, commitment is the essence of what it means to be in an exclusive romantic relationship, driving how much partners invest, identify, and engage with one another and the relationship. Commitment is part of the fabric of how partners understand themselves and their world, which puts commit-

ment on par with other fundamental aspects of the human experience (e.g., models of ethnic identity, personality). At present, we know about what defines commitment, but we have little understanding about the fluctuations in and perceived uncertainty about commitment (Ariaga et al., 2006; Knobloch, 2008; Lavner, Karney, & Bradbury, 2012).

Second, one of the strongest predictors of separation/divorce is a lack of commitment (Impett, Beals, & Peplau, 2002; Le, Dove, Agnew, Korn, & Mutso, 2010). This is not a surprise because relationship dissolution and lack of commitment may seem like two sides of the same coin; however, there is a process that leads to separation. In particular, as commitment starts to waver, and uncertainty sets in, there is a likely a sequence of cognitions (e.g., thinking about separating, interpreting events as more definitive about the status of the relationship), affective responses (e.g., more intense emotional reactions), and behaviors (e.g., avoiding engaging with partner, spending time with others) that are a likely prelude to relationship dissolution. Accordingly, capturing those feelings of uncertainty about commitment may provide a fruitful way forward. Currently, methods used to understand commitment generally reflect a description of partners' level of commitment or assess whether individuals are thinking about separation/divorce (Owen et al., 2011; Previti & Amato, 2004; Stanley & Markman, 1992; VanderDrift, Agnew, & Wilson, 2009). These methods typically do not reflect how individuals understand the process or level of uncertainty in their commitment, especially over time.

What Aspects of Commitment Are Uncertain?

Commitment uncertainty is best understood as a metacognitive process about several facets of dedication and constraint commitment. Theoretically, commitment uncertainty influences certain aspects of dedication and constraint commitment more than others (e.g., couple identity or willingness to sacrifice vs. previous structural investments). In addition, commitment uncertainty likely includes vacillation in thoughts, emotions, and behaviors over time. That is, at times, the uncertainty may manifest itself as a dialectical process; uncertain partners

may act as if they are certain or more dedicated to the relationship to alleviate guilt or test their partner's intentions, but then vacillate to show clearer signs of uncertainty (e.g., avoidance, consideration of attractive alternative partners). Thus, across domains, one of the hallmarks of commitment uncertainty should be signs of wavering, fleeting, and unpredictable patterns of behavior.

Among other things, commitment uncertainty likely reflects a rupture or strain in the sense of couple identity. Thus, partners are likely to experience a shift in the ways they view we-ness or a shared sense of identity with their partner. Signs of uncertainty in couple identity likely reflect questioning of the values, beliefs, and priorities in the relationship. In this regard, individuals may turn inward (i.e., look to intrapersonal aspects of the self) to find meaning, which may promote autonomy and personal aspirations as compared with reflections that are interpersonal in nature and that include joint pursuits for their relationship (e.g., Knobloch & Theisis, 2010). In a similar vein, there should likely be a shift in describing the self in terms of "we" and "us" to the more individualistic terms, "I" and "me" as well as a shift in from couple activities to more individualistic planning and activities (e.g., not going out with partner). Emotionally, the rupture in couple identity might produce confusion, angst toward the self, anger toward the partner, and sadness regarding the loss of couple identity that was or was projected to be. Essentially, uncertainty about couple identity is analogous to sending a boat out to sea with cracks in the hull and with a crew that has no captain.

Stemming from the uncertainty in couple identity comes uncertainty about the long-term vision of the relationship. Having a long-term vision of the relationship can help provide stability and weather challenging day-to-day stressors (Stanley et al., 2010). However, in the face of an uncertain couple identity, questions may arise about the future and whether it is wise to make long-term plans. Signs of uncertainty about the long-term vision may include (a) hesitancy about making long-term plans or complete avoidance of such discussions, (b) viewing the future in idealistic or fantasy-driven ways (often void of the current partner), (c) emotionally disengaging from developing stronger social bonds with the partner and other couple

friends/family, and (d) being more reactive than normal to daily hassles. The lack of long-term vision could also lead to a shift in activities or constraints in the relationship because it may be difficult for couples with high uncertainty to make plans.

Uncertainty in couple identity and long-term vision of the relationship brings the primacy of the relationship into question and likely reflects a shift in investments, time, and energy into the relationship. That is, willingness to sacrifice, future tangible investments, and psychological investment into the partnership likely shift and wane. For example, partners may be less likely to purchase a new house together or be less likely to take time off work to celebrate a birthday with their partner in the face of increasing uncertainty about the primacy of the relationship.

As uncertainty mounts, partners are likely to consider or monitor alternatives more and more. Exploring the possibilities of new partners might arise in service of structuring a new personal identity (e.g., “Am I attractive to others?”), an escape from the dissonance that uncertainty can bring, and/or in pursuit of a new beginning of a relationship. Serious alternatives monitoring and engagement in EDI (i.e., engaging in physical or emotional intimacy with individuals outside of the relationship) may serve multiple purposes. For example, engaging in EDI can be a type of negative relational maintenance behavior in which partners might do detrimental behaviors to reduce the dissonance in the relationship (Dainton & Gross, 2008; Canary & Stafford, 1992). Thus, commitment uncertainty might spawn negative behaviors to promote certainty (e.g., by eliciting affirmation of the relationship by the partner).

Commitment Uncertainty versus . . .

Ambivalence and Ambiguity

Ambivalence may seem part and parcel of commitment uncertainty, and the two are clearly linked. In our view, commitment uncertainty is relationship specific whereas ambivalence may take two forms. First, it can take the form of ambivalence about the notion of commitment, which is more trait-like than commitment uncertainty is. That is, ambivalence may reflect an individual who is ambiv-

alent about committing in general, (e.g., “commitment phobic”). Individuals who are ambivalent about commitment will likely experience lower investments across all of their romantic relationships. In attachment terms, ambivalence about commitment is consistent with the avoidant attachment dimension (Hazzen & Shaver, 1987). Stanley and colleagues argue that a fundamental function of commitment is to secure romantic attachment, which is something strongly desired for those who are more anxiously attached and something to be resisted for the avoidantly attached (Stanley et al., 2010). Stanley, Rhoades, and Fincham (2011) further argue that the ambiguity about commitment often seen in romantic relationships is motivated by such attachment dynamics, with the anxiously attached fearing pushing for clarity and driving a partner away and the avoidantly attached resisting clarity to not have to increase commitment. However, in both cases, there is ambivalence about making the actual levels of commitment clear out of fear of some type of loss.

Second, ambivalence, similar to commitment uncertainty, may arise in a specific relationship. In this regard, ambivalence has been conceptualized in terms of an attitude that can occur within components of an attitude (intracomponent ambivalence) or between components, such as feelings and beliefs (intercomponent ambivalence; see Kachadourian, Fincham, & Davila, 2005; Maio, Fincham, & Lycett, 2000; Maio, Fincham, Regalia, & Paleari, 2003). In relationship research, the focus has been primarily on the evaluative valence of attitude objects—namely, the partner and the relationship (e.g., Fincham & Linfield, 1997; Mattson, Rogge, Johnson, Davidson, & Fincham, 2013). In other words, ambivalence refers to simultaneously feeling positive and negative feelings about the partner/relationship and thus describes one’s evaluation of the partner/relationship (e.g., “I feel so-so about this relationship”). However, as noted earlier, commitment uncertainty is notably different because it is conceptualized as a metacognitive process regarding individuals’ commitment processes (Flavell, 1979). Commitment uncertainty reflects how one thinks about their commitment to their relationship (e.g., my commitment goes up and down a lot,

which makes my ability to make a decision about what to do).

Doubt/Confidence

Commitment uncertainty is likely to foster a host of negative emotional reactions and thoughts about the future of the relationship. The degree to which partners are doubtful that the relationship will continue speaks to their prognostic abilities, general pessimistic outlook, and relational efficacy (Fincham, Harold, & Gano-Phillips, 2000; Knobloch, 2008). Thus, commitment uncertainty describes the degree to which the dedication and investments to the relationship is in question whereas doubt describes the potential outcome of the relationship. Conceptually, commitment uncertainty may be positively associated with more doubt about the future of the relationship, a cycle that is likely to be self-fulfilling.

Low Levels of Dedication

Dedication and uncertainty seem to be opposite ends of a continuum. Up until now, we have described the very nature of commitment uncertainty as ruptures, strains, and vacillation to the foundations of dedication (e.g., couple identity, long-term vision of the relationship). Thus, it might seem obvious that these experiences would result in lower dedication scores, and likely there is an association between the two (Arriaga et al., 2006; Shuck et al., 2014), but they are not opposites. The literature on infidelity has addressed this kind of association; infidelity and relationship satisfaction can be orthogonal concepts because some individuals who are satisfied with their relationship still engage in EDI (Amato 2010). Furthermore, after learning about a partner engaging in EDI, one might both want the relationship to continue and yet be doubtful about the viability of the relationship. In these cases, it would be important to differentiate between those individuals who are doubtful and those who are not very committed. The distinction between dedication and commitment uncertainty also parallels what interpersonal theorists describe as loyalty to others (cf. Sullivan, 1953). That is, individuals can be loyal to others regardless of the quality of the relationship; the loyalty may rest with previous experiences or hope for how the relationship may develop in the future. In

this way, dedication may not fully capture the current state of the stability of the relationship.

The Process of Commitment Uncertainty

The unfolding nature of commitment uncertainty is likely a complex process in which multiple factors (e.g., length of relationship, constraints, attachment strategies) can influence its trajectory. We now turn to three aspects of this process: (a) the onset and course of the uncertainty, (b) cognitive and emotional dissonance, and (c) the intrinsic pressure to reduce uncertainty.

Onset and Course

There are likely four prototypical ways in which commitment uncertainty originates within committed relationships. First, uncertainty may originate from an event in the relationship that creates a turning point (i.e., turning-point theory; Baxter & Bullis, 2006). Some events can trigger a reevaluation of the relationship. Although the event may vary from couple to couple, this proposition suggests that partners need to be mindful of the meaningful events in their lives and how each may set their relationship on a different trajectory. The course of the relationship is likely to be affected by how the couple copes with the event as well as the subsequent uncertainty caused by the event. Second, commitment uncertainty may be a slowly evolving process that grows over time based on a general deterioration in the connection and engagement between partners. In addition, general avoidance of the uncertainty coupled with other constraints (e.g., living together, children) is likely to sustain many relationships, helping individuals resist the growth of uncertainty. Cognitive dissonance mechanisms would strengthen resistance to increasing uncertainty. For example, the dissonance arising from being uncertain while still engaging in the relationship may motivate partners to initiate conversations regarding the viability of the relationship.

Third, commitment uncertainty can become salient without any specific causal event. In these cases, the etiology may be rooted in the recognition of fundamental issues concerning their compatibility; partners may realize that there are significant issues in their relationship that were not adequately vetted in the dating

process. This phenomenon is likely occurring more often as many couples today seem to increase their constraints (e.g., through cohabitation) before dedication fully maturing (Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2006). Fourth, commitment uncertainty may be part and parcel of the relationship, in which the early signs of uncertainty were present from the start of the relationship. In fact, there is evidence that some relationships start off at low levels of adjustment and continue to be stably low (Lavner, Bradbury, & Karney, 2012). For some, the basis for such uncertainty, present from the start of the relationship, could lie in the dynamics of the two being together (e.g., getting together based on an affair).

Cognitive and Emotional Dissonance

Although there may be some variation in the initiation and course of the commitment uncertainty, it is likely that uncertainty will result in cognitive and emotional dissonance. By definition, commitment uncertainty will likely result in partners questioning their desire to continue to invest in the relationship, the degree to which they feel like the relationship will continue, and their desire to seek affection from other people. Because of commitment uncertainty, the cognitive and emotional dissonance is likely to produce a sense

of confusion and vacillation in these positions. In Table 1, we highlight key cognitive and emotional reactions within specific domains of commitment that are affected by commitment uncertainty. These statements are consistent with those that we have heard from couples who reported high levels of commitment uncertainty in our clinical work (see Owen, Keller, Shuck, Luebcke, Knopp & Rhoades (2014)).

Dissonance Reduction

Although uncomfortable, dissonance serves a purpose. These feelings and thoughts will likely motivate individuals to take action (e.g., to initiate therapy, end the relationship, or try to enhance the relationship). Thus, when the uncertainty remains for a period of time, the uncertainty is likely maintained by two sources: one external and one internal. The power of constraints in a relationship cannot be underestimated (Owen et al., 2011; Rhoades et al., 2010). As an example, concern about the welfare of children if the relationship were to end might encourage partners to endure and work through the uncertainty. A seemingly similar pattern could emerge when individuals feel confined by financial constraints. Such external pressures could help couples face prevailing uncertainty, but they

Table 1
Cognitive and Emotional Examples of Commitment Uncertainty

Commitment uncertainty	Process	Example
Couple identity	Rupture/strain	I do not feel like my partner and I are a team. I am sad to lose what we had as a couple
Long-term vision	Wavers	My commitment goes up and down daily. I feel sick that I do not know where my relationship is heading
Primacy of the relationship	Avoided	I would rather stay at work than go home. I am so angry with my partner that I would rather avoid it than deal with it.
Future investments	Halted	I worry about buying new things because I am not sure the relationship will last. I do not think there is a reason to invest more in this relationship at this point.
Willingness to sacrifice	Avoided	Given the uncertainty about the future, I am holding back on doing things for my partner. I feel annoyed by partner, so why should do more for him/her/they.
Serious alternative monitoring	Increased	The ups and downs in my relationship have prompted me to flirt with other people. I do not feel loved by my partner, and I want to be noticed, touched, and appreciated.

could also increase the likelihood of partners staying together and yet not addressing the uncertainty, which could ultimately lead to increasing negativity or conflict.

Internal factors could block the individual from fully attending to the uncertainty. Dissociative coping styles (e.g., denial, dissociation, avoidance) or an avoidant attachment style could lead to avoidance of the emotional turmoil that might often accompany commitment uncertainty. These kinds of internal processes may lead to uncertainty being demonstrated behaviorally, such as through an affair.

Treatment Considerations for Commitment Uncertainty

Given the newness of the concept, there are many unanswered questions regarding how best to assist couples and individuals who experience commitment uncertainty, but below we provide several possibilities and areas to consider in future research. Most treatment protocols assume that couples would like to continue their relationship (Owen, 2013), with some exceptions for the treatment of infidelity and higher conflict relationships (e.g., Snyder, Baucom, & Gordon, 2008). Over one third of couples seeking treatment overtly express a desire to clarify their commitment to the relationship (Doss, Simpson, & Christensen, 2004; Owen et al., 2012). These expressed desires to continue the relationship are associated with therapy outcomes. For example, Owen et al. (2012) found that for couples in which both partners expressed a desire to improve their relationship, over 90% were still together 6 months post-therapy. However, when one or both partners wanted to clarify the commitment to the relationship, because they were likely uncertain about their commitment to the relationship, approximately 50% were still together 6 months post-therapy. It is interesting to note that in this study, those who ended their relationship still gained in their personal well-being over the course of the 6 months post-therapy. Thus, addressing the commitment question could have important implications for treatment. We will describe six considerations in the treatment process. These recommendations are based mainly on our preliminary studies examining how commitment uncertainty can affect the process of

couple therapy (see Luebcke et al. (2014); Owen et al. (2014)).

Key #1: Assessment of Commitment Uncertainty

Given the foundational nature of commitment to relationships, it seems to be imperative to assess the nature of commitment early in the treatment process. There are several ways to assess the level of commitment and commitment uncertainty. As noted above, the distinction between commitment uncertainty and other related constructs is quite nuanced. Thus, it may be useful to utilize brief clinical measures to gain a better understanding of partners' perspective about their relationship. To assist therapists, we provide brief assessment tools in Table 2 to measure commitment uncertainty via the Commitment Uncertainty Short Scale (CUSS; Stanley & Rhoades, 2011). This measure has two subscales: self-uncertainty or the personal uncertainty in the commitment and perceptions of partner uncertainty or the perceived levels of uncertainty about the partner's commitment. We also encourage therapists to consider assessing dedication and constraint commitment (see Owen et al., 2011 for the revised Commitment Inventory). These measures can be contrasted with other measures, such as attachment measures, to distinguish between commitment uncertainty and ambivalence about commitment in general.

In addition, during the intake session, it can be useful to directly assess commitment uncertainty. These questions may be asked during the couple sessions and could be followed up during one-on-one meetings with the partners. In our experience, there are many reasons why partners may not be forthcoming during couple sessions (e.g., guilt, concern about partner welfare, EDI). Individual sessions should be done with caution because they have the potential to lead to imbalances in the therapeutic relationship or triangulation. To conduct individual meetings, therapists should elicit informed consent as well as provide clear boundaries and guidelines regarding confidentiality (e.g., information shared individually is fair game for couple sessions) to avoid ethical concerns and therapeutic missteps. Regardless of whether individual sessions are completed, we believe that understanding the nature and stability of

Table 2
Commitment Uncertainty Short Scale

Commitment Uncertainty Short Scale						
How committed are you to this relationship?						
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not at all committed			Somewhat committed			Very committed
How committed is your partner to this relationship?						
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not at all committed			Somewhat committed			Very committed
I am unsure how committed I really am to the future of this relationship.						
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Strongly disagree			Neither agree nor disagree			Strongly agree
My commitment to my partner is a day-to-day thing at this point.						
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Strongly disagree			Neither agree nor disagree			Strongly agree
My level of commitment in this relationship has been wavering.						
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Strongly disagree			Neither agree nor disagree			Strongly agree
My commit to this relationship goes up and down a lot.						
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Strongly disagree			Neither agree nor disagree			Strongly agree
I am unsure how committed my partner really is to the future of this relationship.						
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Strongly disagree			Neither agree nor disagree			Strongly agree
I believe that my partner's level of commitment in this relationship has been wavering.						
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Strongly disagree			Neither agree nor disagree			Strongly agree
I think my partner's commitment to me goes up and down a lot.						
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Strongly disagree			Neither agree nor disagree			Strongly agree
At this point, I do not feel like I can count on a steady level of commitment from my partner.						
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Strongly disagree			Neither agree nor disagree			Strongly agree

commitment in the relationship will likely be imperative to the course of treatment. Beyond the initial assessment of commitment, Tremblay Wright, Mamodhousen, McDuff, and Sabourin (2008) suggest that commitment be assessed throughout the course of treatment.

It can also be illuminating to explore the development of commitment to the relationship. As noted earlier, there are substantial reasons to believe that some couples increase their constraints for remaining together before fully developing dedication to be together (Stanley, Amato, Johnson, & Markman, 2006). For ex-

ample, did the couple begin to cohabit before having clear, mutual plans for marriage (e.g., engagement)? Such patterns are theoretically (Stanley et al., 2006) and empirically (e.g., Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2009a) associated with lower marital quality. Essentially, the clinician should listen for ways in which one or both partners retains a sense of having been trapped by circumstances to remain in the relationship, which could be a sign of poor initial formation of commitment that could sustain lower levels of dedication to the relationship and uncertainty about whatever level has been

achieved. For such couples, working to establish if there could develop a stronger commitment would then become an important consideration in therapy (see also Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2009b).

Key #2: Establishing the Frame of Couple Therapy (Individual and/or Couple Sessions)

The frame of therapy is an important consideration because it relates to the type of sessions (i.e., individual vs. couple) as well as ethical considerations (e.g., who the client is). As discussed above, we see value in therapists affording an opportunity for partners to initially express their commitment uncertainty/certainty during individual and couple sessions for the therapist to assess what frame would be best. In some cases, it may be that only couple sessions are needed and in others a balance of couple and individual sessions may be indicated. To determine the best frame, it is important to gauge the degree to which processing the uncertainty in couple sessions will (a) surpass the distress tolerance of partners, (b) enact avoidance coping strategies, or (c) lead to lack of safety. If any of these conditions are met, then it may be important to consider a balance of individual and couple sessions, perhaps particularly at first to bolster the partners' individual distress tolerance and coping skills. As discussed earlier, it is imperative that clinicians discuss the purpose, boundaries, and rules of confidentiality regarding individual sessions at the outset of using them. Further, it will likely be important to have equal numbers individual sessions with both partners to keep a balance in the alliances.

Key #3: To Commit or to Change Relationship Distress: Chicken or Egg

In our experience, couples who present with commitment uncertainty and want to work on the relationship frame their distress in this manner: "I would be more committed if things improved" with the "things" being communication, intimacy, or whatever factors are missing. Indeed, it may be wise for couples to not make major decisions regarding the future of their relationship while they are very distressed. This chicken or egg situation (e.g., "I will commit if things improve, but I will not commit until they

do") is a challenging situation or bind because the lack of commitment will likely lead to lower likelihood of affecting change. That is, there is little motivation for partners to change their relationship behavior when their relationship is not likely to continue. There seem to be two options for responding to this bind: (a) directly address the commitment in their relationship and whether their relationship should continue or (b) put the commitment question to the side and deal with the other considerations in their relationship (cf. Stanley, Lobitz, & Dickson, 1999).

Many couples are able to agree to put aside questions of the continuance of the relationship so that they can work on repairing the relationship in a context of some stability. Many can agree to avoid discussing commitment on their own for a certain period of time. Doing so helps to remove the destructive element of commitment being used as a "bargaining chip" in daily disputes. For example, if a couple is disagreeing about how best to discipline their child, then leaving the relationship should not enter the discussion. The couple should be taught to focus on the topic at hand and work on commitment at a different point in time.

At the same time, if the goal for therapy is to clarify the future of the relationship, that topic needs to be the center of the discussion in therapy. In this process, it is important help the couple make a thoughtful decision about the viability of their relationship, such as by examining the factors that are influencing the decision, exploring the impact of staying or leaving, and ruling out other potentially co-occurring issues (e.g., personal distress, relational distress, maladaptive coping strategies). A goal of this work is for the couple to be able to differentiate relational distress marked by poor communication, emotional disengagement, and a desire to avoid one another from a desire to end the relationship.

Key #4: Defining the Outcome of Treatment

It is important in any therapeutic encounter to identify goals for treatment, and in couple therapy it is also important that partners develop and commit to common goals together. Most often in couple therapy practice and research, we define success as increased relationship

functioning or lack of separation or divorce (Owen, 2013); however, these outcomes are only appropriate for those partners who would like to continue their relationship. That is, increasing the degree to which partners trust each other and are able to be vulnerable with each other is likely a positive outcome for couples who want to strengthen their relationship. When partners present with commitment uncertainty, the outcome of therapy might be uniquely different (e.g., separating well, or increases in personal well-being). In addition, the treatment goals and outcomes may need to be reconsidered over the course of therapy, especially for couples with more commitment uncertainty, because their desire to stay in the relationship may vary over time. Consequently, it might be useful for therapists to reconsider what outcomes they see as important in couple treatments and to carefully consider their treatment goals for each couple who presents for therapy.

Key #5: Avoidance Approach of Uncertainty

There are many ways to intervene with couples who show commitment uncertainty, such as attempting to promote certainty or to dissolve the relationship. Ultimately, it might be wise to focus on reducing avoidance and increasing positive engagement about the status of their commitment to the relationship. Utilizing explorative interventions (e.g., questions, reflections) may be a positive way forward for couples and individuals to understand what they may face in their relationship (see Authors, blinded for review). Other interventions, such as working toward heightening or increasing direct communication regarding salient issues or emotional valence between partners (see Owen & Quirk, 2014 for clinical examples), might serve to motivate couples to take action on their new understandings. Although there is likely a pull from partners to clarify the definition of the relationship, it is likely important to not rush such a decision because this type of decision is likely foundational to the future of their relationship and, if made too soon, it may not be one they can commit to. It is important to keep in mind that a rush to a quick decision might be a defense (e.g., avoidance) that led the couple to their current level of distress

and uncertainty. This pull to make a decision might also come from well-meaning therapists to provide some hope for the future; therefore, therapists should be aware of their own motivations. Utilizing thoughtful decision-making processes has consistently been associated with better relationship functioning (Owen, Rhoades, & Stanley, 2013; Vennum & Fincham, 2011).

Key #6: The Shifting Alliance

The formation of the alliance in couple and individual therapy has been a key and robust predictor of therapy outcomes (Friedlander, Escudero, Heatherington, & Diamond, 2011; Horvath et al., 2011). Couple alliance has several components. For instance, Pinsof (1994) defined the systemic alliance as having client-therapist alliances (self-therapist), perceptions of partner-therapist alliance (other-therapist), and partner-partner alliance (within-alliance). The latter, the within-alliance, describes the degree to which partners feel aligned with each other in therapy (Pinsof, Zinbarg, & Knobloch-Fedders, 2008). Presumably, this level of the alliance might be most susceptible to vacillate, especially as partners attempt to form a better sense of their commitment to each other. Thus, it is unlikely that partners will be able to move forward to successfully process their commitment levels unless there is a safe environment where there is a collaborative purpose to their work (e.g., improve the relationship, clarify the viability of the relationship). To do so, therapists may want to actively work on alliance formation, especially the within-alliance, as an initial goal for treatment. Furthermore, therapists may want to check in about the alliance over the course of therapy (see Owen, Reese, Quirk, & Rodolfa, 2013). This can be done in several ways, including administering brief alliance measures or verbally asking clients about their view of the therapeutic relationship and processes.

There is likely much more to discover about the treatment implications for working with couples who are experiencing commitment uncertainty. We hope that these initial treatment considerations might assist therapists in their work. In addition, we hope that this special issue will serve as a platform for therapists and

researchers to consider the role of commitment uncertainty in couples' lives.

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