

The Role of Relational Maintenance Behavior and Attachment Styles in Predicting Marital Commitment

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Abstract

Commitment to both spouse and the institution of marriage appears to be important to the success of a marriage. The aim of the present study is to examine the role of relational maintenance behavior and attachment styles in predicting marital commitment. The statistical population has been consisted of all the couples who had middle school children in Tehran city; so, 372 married people (233 women and 139 men) have been selected by multiple cluster sampling. The Relational maintenance behavior measure (RMSM), Adult attachment questionnaire (AAQ) and personal commitment subscale have been considered as the data collection tools. The results have shown that there is a significant positive relationship between assurance subscale, openness, conflict management, share task, positivity, advice and secure attachment style and marital commitment, and there is a significant negative relationship between avoidant and ambivalent attachment styles and marital commitment. Also multiple regression analysis has shown that the four subscales of relational maintenance behavior (assurance, openness, conflict management and positivity) and attachment styles (secure, avoidant and ambivalent) can predict the marital commitment ($p < 0.05$). According to these findings, it can be concluded that relational maintenance behaviors and attachment styles affect the marital commitment and commitment to marital relationship among couples can be increased by training relationship maintenance behaviors and providing necessary trainings related to attachment styles for parents.

Keywords: Relational maintenance behaviors, Attachment styles, marital commitment

1. Introduction

Commitment is considered as one of the crucial factors in the development and stability of personal relationships, and it helps to explain that why some relationships end and some others do not end (Adams & Jones, 1999). Commitment is defined as a serious intention to stay in a relationship that includes a long-term orientation toward participation along with the feelings of psychological attachment (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998). The high levels of marital commitment have predicted the marital stability for more than 5 years by (Sprecher, 2001), more than 7 years by (Kurdek, 2000), and more than 15 years by (Bui, Peplau, & Hill, 1996). Also, marital commitment has a relationship with more expression of love, compatibility and higher marital stability, better problem solving skills and marital satisfaction. Marital commitment has three single factors: personal commitment, moral commitment and structural commitment. Personal commitment means life partner's tendency degree to maintaining relationship. This commitment reflects person's attitudes toward life partner and their relationship, and also relationship is an importance degree for the person (Ramirez, 2008). Moral commitment means person's commitment feeling degree about continuing the relationship. Person's fundamental values and believes about correct behavior direction in relationship is moral commitment center (Johnson, Caughlin, & Huston, 1999). Structural commitment means life partner feeling degree about commitment to continuing loving relationship. Structural commitment means that the person feels that he/she has to be in the relationship due to external factors (Tang & Curran, 2013).

Since the beginning of the 1980s, the researchers have identified the relationship maintenance as one of the factors of relationship development (Ogolsky & Bowers, 2012). The relational maintenance behaviors are defined as the actions and activities that are used to maintain a relationship (Canary & Stafford, 1994). Many studies have shown that couples use the relational maintenance behaviors to maintain their relationships (Badr & Taylor, 2008). Connery and Stanford (1992) have conducted a research to explain the strategies that couples use

to maintain their relationship, and they have identified these strategies: assurance (the behaviors that emphasize on commitment, love, and faithfulness of spouses), openness (self-discloser, direct expression of feelings about their relationships and each other), positivity (maintaining and using a cheerful and pleasant interaction), social network (using family, friends and relatives to maintain the relationship), share task (emphasizing on the tasks and the couples' satisfaction of their responsibilities). Stafford, L., Dainton, M., & Haas (2000) have presented two more strategies that have included advice (expression of opinions to the partner), conflict management (using the strategies such as cooperation and apologizing). The results have shown that the couples who use these strategies properly experience a higher marital commitment, satisfaction and happiness (Ramirez, 2008; Johnson, 2009). The people whose spouses use more relational maintenance behaviors are more satisfied with their relationships (Dainton, 2000), they have more reliance on their relationships (Dainton, 2003), and they have reported less uncertainty about the future of their relationships (Guerrero, Eloy, & Wabnik, 1993).

Edenfield, Adams and Briehl (2012) have shown that there is a significant difference between attachment style and using proper emotional relationships and relational maintenance behaviors. Attachment is a relatively stable emotional bond that is created between mother and child or people who regularly interact with infants (Papalia, 2002). The adults with secure attachment style are those who have a positive sense of self and positive perceptions of others (Cann, Norman, Welbourne, & Calhoun, 2008). These adults tend to have more positive views of themselves and their spouse; they also feel comfortable with both attachment and independence (Bogaerts, Daalder, Van Der Knaap, Kunst, & Buschman, 2008). The adults who have avoidant attachment style claim that they do not need to have a close relationship and they tend to avoid intimacy (Wearden, Peters, Berry, Barrowclough, & Liversidge, 2008); It has been reported that these people are hesitant to invest on their romantic relationships and therefore they have the lowest level of commitment (Morgan, & Shaver, 1990). The adult who have the anxious / ambivalent attachment style have less positive view of themselves; they are often uncertain about their value and they blame themselves for the lack of accountability of their spouse (Bogaerts, Daalder, Van Der Knaap, Kunst, & Buschman, 2008). Judy (2006) in her study has shown that there is a significant relationship between secure attachment style and marital commitment, and also there is a significant negative relationship between avoidant attachment style and personal commitment. Thomas (2009) in his study has shown that people how have avoidant and ambivalent attachment styles have low commitment and assurance in their marital relationships.

According to the importance of marriage and the role of marital commitment in the improvement of marital relationships, it is necessary to study the factors that can strengthen the marital commitment. For this purpose, the aim of this study is to investigate the role of relational maintenance behavior and attachment styles in predicting marital commitment.

2. Method

This study is descriptive- correlational. The statistical population has concluded all the couples who had middle school children in Tehran city. In this sample, 372 married participants (233 women and 139 men) have been selected by cluster random sampling. At first, the districts of 5 and 10 have been randomly selected from the total districts of Tehran ministry of education; then, by going to the department of education in these two districts and listing all the middle schools, 4 schools have been selected randomly and from every school three classes have been selected by simple random sampling. Afterwards, the questionnaires along with a paper about the purpose of the study and written consent form have been sent to the parents and 372 questionnaires have been completed and returned. The correlation between relational maintenance behavior, attachment styles and marital commitment was evaluated with the employment of correlation matrix coefficient (Table 1), and multiple regression models were applied in order predicted marital commitment based on predictor variables (Tables 2).

Relational Maintenance Strategy Measure: in this scale, the relational maintenance strategy measure (RMSM) of Stafford, Dainton, & Haas (2000) has been used in order to measure the strategies of relational maintenance. This questionnaire has 31 questions that is ranged by Likert method (1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree) (Stafford, Dainton, & Haas, 2000). This questionnaire has 7 subscales that are: assurance (8 items), openness (7 items), conflict management (5 items), share task (5 items), positivity (2 items), advice (2 questions) and social networks (2 items). Stafford, Dainton, & Haas (2000) have reported the mean of Cronbach's alpha for each strategy as follows: assurance 0.92, openness and disclosure 0.87, conflict management 0.84, share task 0.86, positivity 0.72, advice, 0.75, social network 0.71.

Personal commitment: personal commitment has been evaluated by using the subscale of personal commitment and investment model scale (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998). The subscale of personal commitment has been consisted of 7 questions and the scoring is determined by Likert method (0 = strongly disagree to strongly

agree=8). Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew (1998) by using Cronbach's alpha method have reported the reliability of 0.91 for this subscale. In this study the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for subscale of personal commitment has been obtained 0.89.

Adult attachment questionnaire: this scale has been made by Hazan, C., & Shaver (1987). This questionnaire has 15 items, and each one of the secure, avoidant, and ambivalent attachment styles has 5 items. The scores in Likert scale range from never (score of 0) to almost always (score of 4). Hazan, C., & Shaver (1987) have reported 0.81 for the test – retest reliability of the questionnaire and 0.78 for Cronbach's alpha reliability.

3. Results

The study sample has included 372 married people (233 women and 139 men). The average age of participants was (37± 7.42) years. In this study sample, 49 participants had high school diploma, 67 participants had associate degree, 151 participants had B.A, 90 participants had M.A, and 15 participants had Ph.D. The average length of marriage of the participants in this study was (12± 3.24) years.

Table 1. Means, standard deviation, and correlation between study variables

Variable	Marital commitment	sig	mean	SD
Assurance	.65**	.001	45.13	10.68
openness	.34**	.001	38.20	9.15
Conflict management	.48**	.001	26.81	6.08
Share task	.27**	.001	26.78	5.26
positivity	.37**	.001	11.19	2.28
advice	.31**	.001	11.39	2.16
Social network	.001	.99	11.05	2.58
secure attachment style	.25**	.001	12.19	2.81
ambivalent attachment style	-.46**	.001	6.48	3.24
avoidance attach met style	-.39**	.001	7.76	2.93

* (P < 0/05) ** (P < 0/01)

As can be seen in Table 1, there is a significant positive relationship between assurance ($r = 0.65$), openness ($r = 0.34$), conflict management ($r = 0.48$), share task ($r = 0.28$), positivity ($r = 0.37$), advice ($r = 0.31$), secure attachment style ($r = 0.25$) and marital commitment; also there is a significant negative relationship between avoidant attachment style ($r = -0.39$), ambivalent attachment style ($r = -0.46$) and marital commitment.

Table 2. Step-wise regression of attachment style and relational maintenance behavior on marital commitment

Dependent variable	Independent variable	Beta	R	Adj Rsq	Rsq CH	F CH	Sig
Marital commitment	Assurance	.65	.65	.42	.42	275.58	.001
	Ambivalent attachment	-.23	.73	.53	.10	84.42	.001
	Openness	.36	.76	.57	.04	43.26	.001
	Secure attachment	.12	.77	.59	.01	13.97	.001
	Conflict management	.08	.77	.59	.005	4.75	.031
	Avoidance attachment	-.08	.78	.60	.005	4.75	.020
	Positivity	.08	.78	.60	.006	5.35	.021

As can be seen in Table 2, the stepwise regression analysis results indicate that the predictive variables of assurance, ambivalent attachment style, openness, secure attachment style, conflict management, avoidant attachment style and positivity are the significant predictors for marital commitment. Also, the share task, advice and social network variables could not predict the marital commitment. The values of R and Adjusted R Square

have been respectively obtained 0.78 and 0.60; it means that 0.60% of the marital commitment variance can be explained by the above 7 variables; the assurance variable ($\beta = 0.65$) has the most important role in predicting the marital commitment.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of present study is to examine the role of relational maintenance behavior and attachment styles in predicting the marital commitment. The research results have shown that there is a significant positive relationship between the subscales of relational maintenance strategies, assurance, openness, conflict management, share task, positivity and advice and marital commitment, and there was no significant relationship between the subscale of social network and marital commitment, and also assurance, openness, conflict management and positivity have been able to predict the marital commitment. The results of this section of the study are consistent with the findings of Agolovsky and Brewer (2013), Ramirez (2008), Connor and Stafford (1992), Dainton and Aylor (2002), Stanford, Dainton and Haas (2000).

In explaining the findings we can say that the relationship between relational maintenance strategies and marital commitment is mutual because using the relational maintenance strategies will lead to the marital commitment, and on the other hand couples treat each other and use the relational maintenance strategies based on their level of commitment (Ramirez, 2008). In most of the cases, commitment plays an important role in maintaining the relationships. The couples who have a high level of marital commitment will use the higher levels of relational maintenance strategies (Stets & Hammons, 2002). Feeney, Noller, & Callan (1994) have shown that the relational maintenance behavior can be considered as the main mechanism for marital satisfaction. Ramirez (2008) has reported that marital satisfaction, love and commitment are the results of relational maintenance behaviors; also these factors will lead to the steady use of relational maintenance behaviors.

Also it can be concluded that assurance and encouragement include a direct dialogue between the spouses about their commitment and their willingness to stay in the relationship. Sometimes one of the spouses has the fear, anxiety and doubt about the fact that whether his/her spouse will invest on their relationship and stay in it or not; in this situations the couples can end such feelings by assuring each other and showing their faithfulness. Assurance reduces negative emotions toward the relationship and increases the length of the relationship (Nimtz, 2011). Also the ability to manage and resolve the conflicts can effectively form a strong connection in the couples' relationships and help them to create a close and intimate relationship (Somohano, 2013). Naturally, couples who live in such an atmosphere will have more lasting relationships.

The results also have shown that openness has an important role in predicting marital commitment. According to Montgomery, B. M (1981) openness is a communicative behavior that helps people to be understood by others. In fact, openness is sharing what we know, what we think, what we feel and what we are with others (Eggerich, 2004). Also the results have shown that, conflict management can predict marital commitment. Conflict is an inevitable part of any relationship.

The successful couples are those who can find a way to solve their conflicts and manage them before facing a dead end (Gottman, & Gottman, 2006). Preventive measures of the development of the conflicts include: increased coordination in terms of the goals, decisions, attitudes forgiveness, flexibility, compatibility, understanding and empathy; all of these measures have been mentioned by the couples in this study (Kaslow, & Robison, 1996). Wallerstein, J. S., & Blakeslee, S (1995) have mentioned humor and laughter as the essential elements in long-term marriages. Also, Appleton, C., & Bohm, E. (2001) have said that people who have sense of humor also have a high ability for companionship and empathy. According to the results of these studies and the present study, it can be concluded that sense of humor is one of the fundamental components for a long-term marriage and marital commitment; it also has been considered in the present study.

The results also have shown that there is a significant positive relationship between secure attachment styles and marital commitment, and there is a significant negative relationship between avoidant and ambivalent attachment styles and marital commitment, and the three attachment styles are able to predict marital commitment. The results of this study are consistent with the findings of Judy (2006), Pistole & Vocaturo (1999), and Kardatzke (2009).

In explaining the findings it can be said that, the person who has a secure attachment style feels that he is valuable and he is worthy of other's care and attention. The adults who have a secure attachment style tend to describe their romantic relationships as a cheerful and trusted relationship. They can easily get close with others and they tend to be comfortable in interaction with their partner. Secure life partners tend to describe their experiences more positively, and it seems natural that people with secure attachment style have a high commitment. People with avoidant attachment style have reached a cognitive decision in their internal activation

pattern and they feel that they are precious and lovely themselves, and others (the spouse) do not care enough about them, so they start to create a negative view of them. In adulthood, these people are afraid of intimacy and closeness to others and avoid intimate relationships (Kardatzke, 2009). Also people with ambivalent attachment style have low commitment in their marital relationship. People who have ambivalent attachment style are those who have doubt about their value in their internal activation pattern and they have a positive evaluation of others (their spouse), they are constantly looking to reassure their assurance and blame themselves for their relationship problems, and the most important is that these people usually consider any behavior of their spouse as a sign of abandonment and this characteristic make them not to be able to have a high commitment to their spouse. One of the limitations of this study is the limitation of the study sample; therefore, it is recommended to examine the future researches in a larger sample in order to be able to increase the generalizability of the results.

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