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Through ‘thick and thin’ as long as it is healthy: shared meanings of commitment in long-term couple relationships, whether married or not

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ABSTRACT

Social theorists have suggested relationship practice changes such as rising rates of nonmarital cohabitation imply external anchors are lifting with relations become increasingly individualized and fragile. These suppositions are in part based on theories of commitment which have taken conventional characteristics of marriage as a blueprint from which to compare. Reporting findings from an in-depth qualitative study in England, in this paper, what it means to be committed and how commitment is displayed within 10 long-term (15 plus years) couple relationships across forms (same-sex, opposite-sex, married, civil partnership, cohabitant) is explored. The findings challenge conventional signifiers by which cohabitants are deemed less committed than married couples. In line with the individualization thesis, couples described an importance attached to autonomy and equality. Instead of public promises for a lifetime together, sexual intimacy and financial interdependence, couples displayed commitment through mutual reciprocity. However, these ‘individualized’ relationships were not sustained only to the extent of personal satisfaction. Moral consistency values to stick together through adversity, unless the relationship became unhealthy, signified what it meant to be committed; whether the relationship was formalized or not. Further research is needed to develop theories of commitment which better reflect the diversity of contemporary relationship practices.

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Introduction

Couple relationship practices in many countries over the past few decades have significantly changed (OECD, 2019). In England, co-residence, sex and childrearing are now largely socially validated to occur outside as well as inside marriage; with profound shifts in status for same-sex couples, increased rates of non-marital and pre-marital

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cohabitation, and an older average age at which individuals formalize their relationship (Office for National Statistics, 2019). As will be discussed in the next section, these changes have been theorized as reflecting growing individualization, which in turn has been associated with weaker relationship commitment. However, existing theoretical models of commitment were developed largely from studies with opposite-sex married couples at a time when there was less divergence in relationship practices and relationship research to date has largely sampled one relationship form rather than take a comparative approach. To address this gap, in this paper, we report and discuss findings from an in-depth qualitative study in South-West England which explored commitment in long-term relationships (15 plus years) across forms (same-sex, opposite-sex, married, civil partnerships, cohabitants). Throughout the paper, we have used the terms ‘opposite-sex’ and ‘same-sex’. This language use is not to denote perceptions of fixed identity but to be consistent with current use of these terms in English law and policy (Fairbairn, 2020). By comparing lived experience with existing theoretical ideas of commitment, the study offers insight for theory development and future research as to how commitment may be better understood across the diversity of contemporary relationship practices.

Theories of commitment: individualization and personal satisfaction

Changes in relationship practices have been theorized as ideational change as part of the second demographic transition in free-market demographic countries, wherein, as a result of greater relative affluence and decreased religiosity, values have shifted towards individualization and greater autonomy (Bianchi, 2011). These differing value orientations are perceived to lie behind decisions to marry, with individuals who forego marriage thought to be from secular, liberal, anti-authoritarian backgrounds which draw them to egalitarian relationships where independence and expressive values are emphasized (Lesthaeghe, 2010). The public adoption of a long-term outlook for a relationship is an assumed central component of commitment, providing ontological security to endure short-term difficulties and sacrifice for one’s partner (Amato, 2012). Giddens (1992) suggests such external relationship anchors are being replaced with a morality of authenticity, wherein individuals deploy reflexivity to achieve greater autonomy over their lives. He describes the emergence of individualized relationships, which premised on equality, lack stability as they are sustained only to the extent that both partners derive satisfaction. This emphasis on satisfaction reflects two highly cited theoretical models of commitment which both posit commitment as involving three dimensions.

In Rusbult et al.’s (1998) investment model, commitment reflects the level of satisfaction experienced, the quality of potential alternatives and the investment (intrinsic and extrinsic resources) which would be lost if the relationship ended. In Johnson et al.’s (1999) personal, moral, structural model, personal commitment describes how individuals want their relationship to continue, including how attracted they are to their partner, or the social identity conferred by the partnership and how satisfying they find the relationship. Moral commitment involves honouring vows, obligations to one’s partner or the partnership and general consistent moral behaviour. Structural commitment involves feeling constrained due to fear of social, financial and emotional costs

of leaving, investments made into the relationship and quality of alternatives. Whilst these models share similarities, Rusbult et al. model suggests the three components together influence commitment, while Johnson et al. suggest that structural commitment is not salient to relationship stability unless personal commitment diminishes.

Despite the heterogeneity of non-marital cohabitation, in line with these models of commitment, it has been described as involving less investment and structural constraints and thus is perceived as a less committed relationship (Langlais et al., 2017; Nock, 1995). Recent studies have reported conflicting findings as to whether non-marital cohabitation is a less committed relationship form. Some have reported continuing perceptions of marriage as a stronger level of commitment (Perelli-Harris et al., 2014) and couples feeling more secure after formalizing their relationship (Heaphy et al., 2013). While others have suggested that the similarities between cohabitation and marriage may be more striking than the differences (Musick & Bumpass, 2012), with cohabiting partners who take on a caregiving role offering as many hours of assistance as spouses (Noel-Miller, 2011) and childbearing and joint mortgages perceived as acts of commitment rather than weddings (Berrington et al., 2015).

Loss of public promise for a lifetime

In our earlier work based on this study, we reported a loss of importance to public promises across relationship forms (Blake & Janssens, 2021). Although cohabitants described not wanting to marry due to a fear that it would change how society viewed their relationship, all couples suggested that formalizing their relationship whether by marriage or civil partnership had not, or would not change their commitment to each other and that their commitment was private not public. This, at first glance, appears to support the individualization proposition that relationships are becoming internally referential. However, our analysis showed that relationship practices and decisions to formalize a relationship were shaped by individual habitus (Bourdieu, 2000). Neither the investment nor the personal, social, moral model of commitment emphasize situational contexts. In line with the vulnerability–stress–adaptation relationship model, which suggests relationships are affected by individual traits and types of life events encountered (Karney & Bradbury, 1995), we found the timing of co-residence and weddings for opposite-sex couples reflected life-stage norms and those with a positive social experience of marriage married, and those who did not, did not (Blake & Janssens, 2021).

The loss of importance attached to public commitment that we found appears to support Gross (2005), who suggested that there may be a decline in regulative but not meaning-constitutive traditions. However, we also found divergent value orientations as to whether, commitment was perceived as ‘perpetual’ from towards the start of a relationship, or ‘developmental’ and worked at, rather than taken-for-granted (Blake & Janssens, 2021). In line with Eekelaar and Maclean’s (2004) view that the moral bases which underpin personal relationships are complex and do not correspond in a simple way with ascribed categories of married, civil partner, cohabitant, we found these different value orientations went across relationship forms. Some who had a civil partnership or marriage believed commitment was developmental, while a cohabitant couple believed in perpetual commitment and had held a private commitment ceremony where they exchanged rings towards the start of their relationship (Blake & Janssens,

2021). So, does a lack of long-term outlook in the developmental view of commitment mean these couples are less committed? In this paper, we return to the individual and couple narratives collected, to further explore what being committed meant to the couples and how their commitment was displayed.

Displays of a committed relationship: sex, financial interdependence, equality?

Reflecting Judeo-Christian notions of a couple being of ‘one flesh’, the combination of assets and the presence of a sexual relationship have long signified commitment in English regulative processes (Herring, 2014). Such is the ongoing alignment of sex and relationships, that in common parlance today ‘if you ask a person whether they are in a relationship, it tends to mean whether or not they are having sex’ (Miller, 2007, p. 545). While recognizing sexual intimacy may decline in frequency over time and markedly with the onset of parenthood, studies continue to report an importance attached to sex for relationship quality (Chonody et al., 2020; Gabb, 2019).

Cohabitants and married couples have been perceived as having different money management strategies which then imply differences in levels of commitment (Hiekel et al., 2014). Conventional perspectives suggest marriage acts as a financial bond with couples pooling their finances, whereas cohabitants are less likely to do so, due to ideological values regarding independence, the unprotected risk of joint investments and ease of leaving a relationship if finances are kept separate (Hiekel & Wagner, 2020; Maclean & Eekelaar, 2005). These beliefs are reflected in different regulative treatment by relationship form in England. As Lord Marks put it during debates over cohabitant rights in the House of Lords; ‘when two people commit to marriage or civil partnership, they commit to full financial interdependence – a commitment which demands that there be a comprehensive range of remedies in the event of divorce’ (Lords Hansard, 2014, Col. 2070). However, as aforementioned, the differences between married and cohabitant relationships may now be smaller, with parenthood potentially encouraging financial solidarity (Hiekel et al., 2014) and buying and running a house increasingly dependent on two-person income (Jurczyk et al., 2019).

With the absence of gender differences found to facilitate greater equality, same-sex couples have been portrayed as pioneers of individualized relationships (Chonody et al., 2020). Two studies which looked beyond the lens of heterosexual co-residence couple relationships have suggested that the high level of intimacy required for egalitarian relationships, (the willingness to engage in communication, negotiation and joint decision-making) embodies evidence of commitment (Carter et al., 2016; Rostosky et al., 2006). However, others have cautioned that attractive egalitarian ideals can cause relationship fragility due to tension between autonomy and coupledness, and ongoing structural inequalities which restrict these practices (Jamieson, 1999; Lampard, 2016). Van Hooff (2013) has argued that there is little evidence of the detraditionalization of heterosexual couples, as individuals do not actively challenge gender inequalities. Parenthood is still found to lead to the adoption of gender-traditional behaviour, with women typically continuing to act as gatekeepers to caretaking duties (Jurczyk et al., 2019).

The aim of this study was to explore similarities and differences in commitment across relationship forms (married, civil partnerships, cohabitant, opposite and same-sex) and how displays and meanings of commitment compare to existing theories and signifiers

of commitment. The research questions we set out to answer were: *In contemporary long-term relationships of different forms, how is commitment displayed and what does 'being committed' mean?*

Method

This study involved a separate secondary analysis of data collected in 2018 for the Shackleton Relationships Project (Ewing et al., 2020). In-person semi-structured interviews were undertaken with both partners in 10 co-resident couple relationships of over 15 years in duration (20 individuals). To explore the experience of couples and the meaning they ascribe to their experiences, semi-structured interviews were chosen as a way to elicit meaning responsively, with leeway to focus on issues interviewees deemed important as well as specific research interests (Kelly, 2012; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). A combined joint and individual approach was adopted, whereby both partners of the couple were interviewed together and then separately and then together again. By generating three situated narratives (a couple narrative and two individual narratives), this multi-level approach incorporated a form of data source triangulation (Patton, 1999) to gain a richer understanding. The joint interviews lasted on average an hour and explored the story of how the couple met, key events in their lives and how they made decisions in relation to formalizing their relationship. The individual interviews lasted from half an hour to an hour and explored what if anything shaped their approach to commitment and what 'being committed' meant to them (Blake et al., 2021).

Ethics were approved by SSIS College Ethics Committee, University of Exeter [#201617-018]. To avoid any undue pressure to take part, checks were made with each partner that they felt informed about the study and independently consented, before the interviews were arranged, and again at the start of the interviews where a written consent form was completed. Contact details for relationship support organizations were provided should the interviews trigger any concerns. Anonymity was preserved by changing any identifiable features during transcription and adopting pseudonyms.

Sample

A convenience purposive sampling method was adopted to recruit participants with different relationship forms (married, civil partners, cohabitants) who were willing to share their experience and lived in South West England. Recruitment was carried out by advertising in internal staff e-newsletters of the biggest employers (Hospital, Council and University) and social groups for same-sex and Black Minority Ethnic populations. None of the participants were known to the interviewer before-hand. The sample included 4 married couples (3 opposite-sex, 1 female same-sex), 4 cohabitant couples (3 opposite-sex, 1 female same-sex) and 2 couples who were male civil partners. At the time of the interviews, the average age of the interviewees was 57 and the length of their relationships ranged from 17 to 54 years. Six of the couples were parents, with two of these couples still with children living at home. Three individuals had been married prior to their current relationship. Reflecting the sampling area, all but one described themselves as White-British. Most had completed higher education and seven out of twenty described themselves as spiritual or religious. At the end of the interviews,

interviewees were asked to individually complete the short version of the Spanier (1979) Marital Adjustment Scale and all rated the degree of happiness in their relationship as very happy or extremely happy.

Analysis

The interviews showed that the particularity of the individual biographies and the way in which sense was made would be lost by looking across transcripts for themes. Drawing on a life-stories as a biographic-narrative method, a content-led narrative analysis was undertaken to explore the broad patterns yet allow for individual variation in experiences and meanings of commitment in intimate relationships (Burck, 2005; Frost, 2013). Narratives are particularly useful to demonstrate how social and cultural issues influence meaning-making (Hammack, 2005). The analysis involved several close readings of the transcripts, paying attention to rhetorical devices, taken for granted assumptions, micro and macro social and cultural contexts, and differences between joint and individual responses. Narratives were then reconstructed by emplotting a chronology of the sequence of each couple's relationship story and an ecomap to capture influences upon their relationship which were then compared for recurrent genres (Ricoeur, 1991). Ongoing discussions between co-authors and comparison to other studies supported critical interpretation and understanding of the findings (Shenton, 2004). The findings are set out in two parts. In Part I, we look at how commitment was displayed within the couple relationships and in Part II, we report what being in a committed relationship meant to the interviewees.

Findings

Part I: displays of a committed relationship

'Two Become One' or Financial Independence and Sexual Fidelity?

Two of the opposite-sex married couples interviewed only had joint financial accounts with both describing this as a symbol of trust. As per Elenna '*we just put everything in one pot ... we don't have a "your money, my money" ... everything is just our money*'. For the other eight couples, economic independence and proportionate contributions to joint expenses were emphasized, with all partners managing their finances with separate accounts. Reflecting ethics of personal choice and responsibility, interviewees described the importance of being able to spend without having to check with their partner, or for their spending to impact their partner. For example, Lance and Aaron discussed combining their resources but decided, as per Lance that separate accounts '*gave us a certain amount of freedom*'. He expressed gratitude for this separation when he went through a period of overspending and accrued debt, he did not want to burden Aaron with.

While the couples did not undertake exact accounting (no '*monthly totting up*'), the emphasis on proportionate contributions to joint expenses reflected a need for things to be equitable by balancing out any asymmetry in earnings. As Jo explained:

When you have different incomes, how do you manage that?

I've got a really good computer programme and I work it out proportionately. It hasn't always been like that. We used to split it down the middle and I said to Bessie when I had more money ... let's do it proportionately because I know [without such a system]

it's not always easy to be the one not contributing as much, as you don't feel you have as many rights.

Five of these eight couples did have a joint account but described this as purely pragmatic to pay joint expenses. Three couples across relationship forms did not have a joint account, describing it as *'unnecessary'* and *'easier to keep things separate'*. For example, Violet worked on a freelance basis so from a tax perspective found it simpler to *'have separate set of figures, than extract them from a joint account'*.

Sex was a defining characteristic for one same-sex couple relationship. As Macy explains *'what can happen in lesbian relationships is sort of starting off as lovers and then just losing the sex and becoming friends and we both kind of, half-jokingly, but also with some sincerity said from the start, "I don't want to be just your friend, sex is important"'*. Two male partners in opposite-sex relationships also described sex as an important aspect of their relationship. The importance they attached to sexual intimacy was recognized by their female partners who lamented the decrease in their own libido as sex was *'another cement in a relationship'*. However, for the other couples, the importance of sex had diminished for both partners, with a number now living in platonic relationships and keeping separate bedrooms. As one interviewee explained *'being together is more important ... a company thing more than a physical thing'*. Sophia and Sawyer both rejected the notion that a couple relationship is, or should be, defined by the presence of a sexual relationship. Friends before they began cohabiting, Sophia explained:

We have no idea when that transition slipped over ... there was probably a sort of fuzzy grey area where we became more physically intimate ... We'd started sharing a bed, having sex occasionally but we still didn't consider ourselves to be in a couple [relationship] ... moving into a house together actually made us feel like a couple regardless ... We probably haven't had sex in about five years and it's not that important ... it has never been a major feature of my life.

Sex may not be a defining characteristic for all the couple relationships, but sexual exclusivity still largely appeared to be. For most interviewees, sexual fidelity was such a given in a committed relationship that it was not discussed between the partners. For example, despite one partner openly seeing someone else in the early days of his current relationship, this couple never felt the need to discuss monogamy as their relationship progressed: *'that's a bit of not looking over your shoulder isn't it ... telling others to get on their bike because you are with someone you want to be with'*. Ava explicitly described commitment as partly meaning that she was *'not going to sleep with anyone else'*. However, one couple and one individual reflected on how a hypothetical open sexual relationship would not affect their commitment to their partner. The couple in their joint interview drew a difference between emotional and physical intimacy:

If you wanted to go off and sleep with somebody else because you were scratching that biological itch, that would be fine ... I don't think that we have ever been threatened by the idea of sexual infidelity, but I think we probably would feel, both of us, very threatened by the idea that we were becoming emotionally attached to someone else

Emotionally yes ... sex outside of an emotional relationship really is just sex.

The presence of shared finances and a sexual relationship varied in their application as displays of commitment, with sexual fidelity important to many. However, the following characteristic went across all interviews.

Mutual Reciprocity – Give and Take

The idea of ‘give and take’ defined the interviewees’ notion of a relationship. As Bill explained, it is not a relationship if *‘there is only give one side and only take on the other’*. Or as Macy similarly put it *‘you can’t have a relationship that’s one-sided, it has to have both people in it’*. The importance of collaboration, compromise and not feeling taken for granted was described by all interviewees and was notably demonstrated by their effortless turn-taking in the joint interviews. In respect of managing conflict it was important to partners, not to feel that they were the *‘one stepping down all the time’* and in respect of supporting each other, neither partner wanted to *‘feel like a burden’*. As Macy explained *‘we’ve both had periods where we have needed [support] from the other, so it’s never just been in one direction. It has kind of balanced itself out ... that’s important to me because I wouldn’t want to feel like I was always the weak one and she was the strong one or vice versa’*.

Most of the couples interviewed described domestic chores being divided by individual abilities, likes, dislikes and availability of time. With each doing more, or less, and chores changing hands depending on circumstances. The narratives suggested same-sex couples found sharing tasks easier without traditional gender roles. As Bessie explains:

I don’t remember it being an issue who cleaned or ... you haven’t got this sort of huge gender thing hanging over you. I probably cleaned more then, because I worked from home ... but she cleans more now because since having been ill, I find it exhausting. Responsibilities have shifted ... we take everything in turns ... she cooks one day and the next day I do, and so it goes on.

Three opposite-sex couples described their domestic arrangements as fairly traditional. Lia explained that Max takes out the bin *‘because that’s a nice manly job’* and Elenna recognized that husband Tom tended to *‘do more of the outside and maintenance [tasks]’*. However, Tom really enjoys outdoor and maintenance tasks and does all the cooking and Lia negotiated with Max before they married, so that they would take turns cooking rather than it all fall to her:

... that’s how we went on for a long time and then when we got married, I said actually it’s not the cooking I mind, it’s the sort of planning ... then you have to go to the shop and it’s all those things that take time, so I split it. We had a discussion and we created cooking weeks ... my week and Max’s week and whoever is cooking, the other one washes up ... I know Max can cook and it’s not that he doesn’t want to, I think I just take over if I am allowed.

Structural factors compromised strives for equal partnership for couples who were parents. Both Elenna and Ava described their jobs as flexible unlike their male partner’s work which meant hidden childcare often primarily fell to them. As Ava explained *‘organizing them to go to the doctors, taking time off work when they need someone to look after them ... those kinds of things are unseen and unspoken about really’*. The interviews suggested a level of intimacy and willingness to engage in communication, negotiation

and joint decision-making are ways in which commitment is displayed across these contemporary relationship forms.

Part II: meanings of being committed

Moral Consistency Values – Through Thick and Thin

Across all interviews, individuals and couples described commitment as sticking together through thick and thin; a knowledge that they were both determined to work through difficulties and not give up easily. The stressors the couples had faced were varied, including disputes over parenting styles, challenging or distant relationship with extended family members, chronic ill-health conditions, infertility, periods of unemployment and/or living on the breadline, house moves across the UK and overseas, the bereavement of close loved ones and even an arson attack that destroyed one couple's home. Diverse responses to these stressors were reported. Whilst all interviewees rated their relationship as very happy at the time of interview, some recounted periods where they felt their relationship had struggled. Two of the couples had sought relationship counselling when they had thought relationship breakdown was on the cards. Where a common focus could be established in response to stress, couples pulled together:

Certainly, at the time of the fire, I am sure that brought us closer together because it was such a calamitous thing ... we wanted to bring the house back to life as it had been and so we knew what we were aiming at.

At other times, individual partners demonstrated different approaches to coping which required acceptance of these differences and ongoing adaptation. For example, after the death of a parent, one interviewee felt that their partner was not *'as sympathetic as he could have been ... it wasn't so much that he was insensitive, it was just that he thought life had to go on and the quicker I got back into a routine, the better'*. Couples described a process of redrawing relationship boundaries to adapt to stressors impacting their relationship. As Jo explained: *'it was quite difficult when Bessie was ill ... I am really good at stepping in and doing things and Bessie has always said how disempowering that is ... we've been negotiating those boundaries all the time'*. Similarly, for another interviewee:

There was a situation that I appreciated why [partner] was doing what she was doing ... but it was sufficiently painful for me to go through that I did have to say we have a choice here, we can either work to try and change that behaviour or I will have to walk away from this, just because I can't carry the hurt that comes with it.

The narratives suggest an individual mindset promoted commitment during periods of adversity. This mindset includes a sense of perseverance, loyalty, acceptance of differences, openness to growth and conflict resolution skills (including seeking help when needed). As Merlin explained *'it's almost in our make-up ... we both feel that you need to battle through things, rather than give up at the first hurdle'*. Robyn similarly described herself as not someone who walks *'away when things get difficult ... I tend to step up'* and Bill, when talking about his wife said, *'it's kind of been bred into her, this loyalty and faithfulness'*.

Decisions to leave – Investments Made and Being Healthy

Several interviewees reflected that within society, relationship commitment has changed. They suggested that the notion that you stay together due to a sense of

duty, despite being unsatisfied, was something previous generations believed in. In line with this suggestion, the partners of the youngest married opposite-sex couple interviewed (both aged in late 30s) said that neither obligation nor investments made should be a reason to stay in an unsatisfying relationship. For Max *'if you're not happy and you are not getting what you want out of the relationship, then either try and make it right or leave. [My friend] is staying in a relationship because he feels obliged and I feel really sorry for him.* Max's wife, Lia said that she didn't *'think you'd stay for the sake of it, even if you put stuff in ... [Although] you need a bit of stickability'*.

However, all other interviewees objected to personal satisfaction acting as a benchmark as to whether to continue with a relationship. Reflecting an importance placed on reciprocity and responsibility to mutually care for each other, some felt it was their partner's satisfaction, not their own, that was key. As Ron explained *'it's more that way around, not what I think but what Harry would feel'*. Emotional investments made into the relationship over time and practical difficulties acted as deterrents to leave. For example, Bill was aware of *'the mess it would create and that would be a big disincentive ... to try and untangle'* and Aaron explained that

we have invested so much in this relationship over the years that I would find it very difficult to walk away ... I can't imagine leaving Lance behind, especially at the age he is now. It would be a terrible thing to do. So, it would just be too difficult to stop.

For those with children, wanting to provide a stable relationship model and the idea of *'not being a close-knit family'* helped determination to get through difficulties. Ava could not

imagine what it would be that I would be going to, that could possibly be better than what I have. I love my husband [corrects herself as a cohabitant], my man ... I feel that I am supported by threads from the other people in my life and my strongest bonds are to my kids and my partner and it's like I am held in a web, so why would I remove myself from that?

Experience had taught the interviewees the value of, and up-and-down nature of intimate long-term relationships which moved expectations beyond personal satisfaction. Harry described relationships as *'too precious to just throw away willy nilly, especially one that is so long established'*. While Ava explained that *'with the benefit of an overview, [I know] just because I am unhappy at a certain point in time, it doesn't mean that I won't be happy at a future point'*. Whether the relationship continued to be healthy for both partners was expressed as a preferred benchmark. As per Sawyer and Macy respectively:

It, kind of, goes beyond [my happiness]. If you've gone beyond the point of actually being able to sit down and find the route through whatever difficulty it is you're having ... it's probably worth giving up at that point and parting before you actually start throwing things at each other.

Before we had our civil partnership ... we both wrote our own individual vows and we talked about this concept for as long as it was a healthy relationship we wanted to stay together, but if it came to a point where the relationship wasn't healthy for each of us, then we wouldn't stay together just because.

Discussion

How commitment is displayed

The findings challenge the use of a sexual relationship and shared finances as signifiers of committed relationships. Interviewees instead described the importance of respecting the emotional intimacy and individual autonomy within their partnership. For many the sexual aspect of a couple relationship was not of central importance. However, as per existing studies, sexual fidelity still largely appears to be (Carter et al., 2016; Heaphy, 2018; Lampard, 2016). For most interviewees, as Green et al. (2016) found, sexual fidelity was such a given in a committed relationship that it was not discussed between the partners. The decentral role of sex in long-term relationships endorses Herring's (2014) call for regulative processes to reconsider the exclusion of close platonic relationships, who may well exhibit the commitment described by couples in this study. The finding that most of the couples interviewed may keep a joint account for collective expenses but predominantly use separate financial accounts expands similar findings of studies with same-sex couples (Heaphy, 2018; Mezey, 2015) to opposite-sex couples; formalized and nonformalized relationships. It challenges the notion that the longer a couple are together, the more likely they are to pool their economic resources (Hiekel et al., 2014) and suggests a greater emphasis on the value of financial independence across contemporary relationship forms.

In keeping with the idea that 'give and take' is a social rule of understanding how relationships work (Finch, 1989) and reflecting Heaphy's (2018) description of contemporary relationship model ideals, the importance of collaboration and compromise was described by all interviewees. The narratives suggest, as per existing studies, that same-sex couples found sharing tasks easier without having to unlearn systemic gendered divisions of domestic labour (Heaphy et al., 2013; Matos, 2015). However, contrary to Van Hooff (2013), there was also evidence of opposite-sex couples reflexively considering domestic roles; making decisions based on fair division and who finds most pleasure in different household tasks. Goldscheider et al. (2015) have suggested that the possibility of a positive link between gender equality and union stability has largely been ignored due to longstanding convictions that the reverse is true. To avoid feeling taken for granted or taking one's partner for granted, the couples interviewed made efforts to maintain intimacy (Ferreira et al., 2013) and placed an importance on reciprocity and responsibility to mutually care for each other (Eekelaar & Maclean, 2004). As per Carter et al. (2016) and Rostosky et al. (2006), willingness to negotiate and make joint decisions signified commitment. However, as interviewees pointed out, continuing structural inequalities (such as 'female employment' tending to offer more flexibility to deal with hidden childcare) meant that how domestic arrangements play out may not always reflect couple's intentions.

Shared meanings of commitment

Across relationship forms, the couples in this study described commitment as an individual mindset to work through adversity. The motivations they expressed for sticking together through *thick and thin* included a lack of comparable alternatives, emotional investments made and practical difficulties to leave an established relationship as per

Rusbult et al.'s (1998) investment model of commitment. However, as pointed out by Lydon and Zanna (1990), this model conceptualizes adversity as negatively related to commitment, with costs of negative events expected to decrease rather than increase commitment. It therefore fails to explain what keeps couples committed in times of adversity when costs to individuals are high and personal satisfaction low.

Stress is typically viewed as a dyadic phenomenon that affects both partners in a relationship, but which can have different impacts according to the locus, intensity and duration (Randall & Bodenmann, 2009). In keeping with this notion, interviewees reported varied responses to adversity. If there was a common focus, couples pulled together. If this was not possible, individuals worked to accept their different coping responses and adapted to change by redrawing relationship boundaries. This ongoing process of adaption and emphasis on individual traits reflects the vulnerability–stress–adaption relationship model (Karney & Bradbury, 1995) and Lydon and Zanna's (1990) view that behaviour during periods of adversity acts as affirmations of core beliefs. In line with the general consistent moral behaviour espoused by the personal, moral, structural model of commitment (Johnson et al., 1999), individual internal ethical values, (e.g. loyalty, perseverance) supported a relationship through *thick and thin*.

However, contrary to the emphasis on personal satisfaction in existing models of commitment and the individualization thesis, how healthy the relationship was for both partners in a long-term relationship was described as the benchmark for decisions to stay or leave. Couples accepted fluctuations in satisfaction as normative (Langlais et al., 2017). They stayed committed during periods of low personal satisfaction as long as the relationship remained healthy for each partner, and their children if they were parents. The notion of 'healthy' as a benchmark better describes the idea that it would have to be a profound unhappiness affecting mental wellbeing or an abusive/neglectful relationship that would lead to a consideration of leaving. Relationship health was also described as important to Heaphy's (2018) participants and may reflect discourse around the medicalization of relationships through the introduction of specialist relationship counselling and emphasis on self-development in contemporary discourse (Chonody et al., 2020).

As the emphasis on health rather than personal satisfaction was reported by all but the youngest couple, it may also reflect change in meanings of commitment as individual's age and relationships endure. With much of the empirical research that has informed commitment theories having been undertaken with married couples within the first 10 years of their relationship, the lack of emphasis on personal satisfaction may reflect changes in the meaning of commitment over time. Johnson et al. (1999) suggest that structural commitment does not become salient until personal commitment diminishes. Yet, in these narratives, commitment embodies elements of each. Individuals wanted their relationship to continue, demonstrated consistent moral values and described investments made and costs of leaving; particularly where their partner was aging or where they had children. In our earlier work, we found that the couples interviewed for this study differed in their beliefs regarding a long-term outlook for their relationship (Blake & Janssens, 2021). Instead of a shared long-term outlook acting as a central component of commitment, these findings suggest shared length of time together supports commitment. A belief in a reasonable probability of improvement, which Amato

(2007) suggests helps sustains relationships, is based on experience to date not foresight of an unknowable future.

Conclusion

To our knowledge, this is the first in-depth qualitative study to explore meaning of commitment and how commitment is displayed in both formalized and nonformalized long-term same and opposite-sex relationships. Many relationship studies deploy the individual as the unit of analysis and start with a marriage blueprint from which to compare. By researching across forms, this study was able to explore hegemonic assumptions about commitment on an integrated basis. Our findings challenge simplified views that growing individualization and nonformalized relationship forms mean weakened commitment. While we did not set out to explore 'individualized' relationships, our recruited sample largely share the secular, highly educated, White-ethnicity characteristics typically associated with individualized norms. It is therefore perhaps to be expected that the identified displays of commitment reflected an importance attached to autonomy and equality. However, meanings of commitment were not centred around personal satisfaction and relationships easily ended as second demographic transition theorists have suggested. Instead, being committed reflected moral consistency values to stick together through adversity, so long as a relationship remained healthy – whether the couple were married or not.

The influence of individual traits discussed herein, and social habitus discussed in our earlier paper (Blake & Janssens, 2021), carries an implication that some individuals will have a greater disposition to commitment than others. Where social policies and regulatory processes (such as taxation breaks and division of assets upon relationship breakdown) are based on assumptions that certain relationship forms are more committed than others, this raises critical questions as to how societal inequalities are being reproduced and reinforced. This study was carried out prior to the COVID pandemic but emerging discussion suggests that the financial strains, uncertainty, and social isolation it has brought has taken its toll on intimate relationships across the world (BBC, 2020). As policymakers face competing demands on priorities as we rebuild, further research is needed to further explore these findings and develop theories of commitment which better reflect the diversity of contemporary relationship practices. This study is offered to inform that discussion. While our recruited sample did lean towards assumed characteristics of an individualized population group, we did not find any differences in meanings of commitment or how commitment was displayed by demographics such as religiosity or education. Future research could look to widen demographic characteristics and include other relationship forms such as stepfamilies and those who live apart, to further explore if the displays and meanings of commitment described herein reflect a specific 'individualized' population or wider contemporary norms.

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Data availability statement

The data are not publicly available as they contain information that could compromise the privacy of research participants. Please contact the corresponding author with enquiries.

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