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Commitment and investments in homosexual and heterosexual romantic relationships

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Abstract

Framed by the Investment Model (Rusbult, 1980, 1983), the maintenance of romantic relationships are influenced by the experience of general commitment and the perceived investments applied in the relationship. Albeit showing the robustness of these predictions among heterosexual romantic relationships, literature suggests homosexual romantic relationships to be socially and legally marginalized, characterized by lower investments and general commitment. To better understand the dynamics underlying heterosexual and homosexual romantic relationships, we suggest the importance of additionally considering the moral obligations to remain in the relationship (i.e., moral commitment; Johnson, 1991). As such, we conducted a correlational study to explore the impact of cohabitation in individuals' experiences of (general and moral) commitment and investments. Results show that, for homosexual relationships, cohabitation increases the experience of general commitment and investments, while no differences emerged in heterosexuals. Furthermore, homosexuals (vs. heterosexuals) reported a higher level of moral commitment. We discuss these results under our framework and the need to take into account norms and changes in society.

Keywords: Investment Model; Romantic relationships; Sexual orientation; Commitment

Topic: Homosexual relationships

Romantic relationships are extremely important in providing a sense of comfort and security, while promoting our well-being and happiness (Dwyer, 2000). Hence, the study of the factors underlying their maintenance is extremely relevant, with great impact on society.

One of the most prominent models in romantic relationships literature is the Investment Model (IM; Rusbult, 1980, 1983). This model is focused on commitment (hereafter referred as general commitment), defined as the individual's intent to maintain a relationship, influenced by satisfaction, quality of alternatives and magnitude of investments. A large amount of empirical evidence supports this model in predicting stay/leave behaviors in heterosexual romantic relationships (e.g., Le & Agnew, 2003; Le, Dove, Agnew, Korn, & Mutso, 2010; Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998). We suggest the importance of additionally considering moral commitment, or the sense of moral obligation to continue in the relationship (Commitment Framework; Johnson, 1991), argued as a form of intrinsic investments within the larger general commitment construct (Rodrigues & Lopes, 2013a).

In the present article we aim at better understanding the experience of commitment in heterosexuals and homosexuals, as framed by the IM and the commitment framework. The theoretical importance of this study relies in the fact that same-sex civil unions (i.e., *uniões de facto*) and marriage are now legally recognized in Portugal (March 2001 and May 2010, respectively). As such, we are embedded in a socially relevant environment to study similarities and differences within these relationships.

Commitment in Romantic Relationships

According to Rusbult's IM (1980, 1983), general commitment refers to the individual's intent to persist in the romantic relationship, a long-term orientation and involvement towards the partner, and feelings of psychological attachment.

In turn, this experience is positively influenced by the satisfaction and magnitude of investments allocated to the relationship, and negatively influenced by the perception of quality among alternatives (the antecedents). Briefly, satisfaction stems from the experience of positivity and rewards. Investments refer to intrinsic (e.g., time spent together) and extrinsic (e.g., a house bought together) resources applied in the relationship that would be lost or diminished if it was to end. Alternatives refer to any scenario that can provide rewards, other than the current relationship (e.g., being with another partner, family members, friends, or alone).

Importantly, the IM is conceptualized as an additive model (Rusbult & Martz, 1995), which is to say that individuals do not necessarily need to experience all three antecedents to maintain the relationship. Examples of this are fledgling relationships (Eastwick & Finkel, 2008), emotional divorce situations (Coleman, Lawrence, & Leon, 2006) and abusive relationships (Rusbult & Martz, 1995). In this line of reasoning, such situations result from compensation of one or more antecedents, in order to experience general commitment.

Directly related to our research, imagine the following scenario. Robert is married to Mary and is having second doubts about remaining in the marriage. He is not satisfied and feels that his needs could be met by spending time with his friends. Based on IM premises, Robert will endure in his marriage as long as there is a large amount of investments to compensate his low satisfaction and perception of high quality of alternatives. In this specific scenario, Robert's decision may have been based on the amount of extrinsic investments (e.g., cohabitation), but also in intrinsic investments, namely a sense of obligation. This personal disposition to feel morally obligated to stay married converge directly with the notion of moral commitment (Johnson, 1991; see also Johnson, Caughlin, & Huston, 1999), and is the result of negative attitudes towards separation, a sense of responsibility for supporting, taking care and not abandoning the partner, and a sense of personal consistency in one's choices.

Few researchers have focused on moral commitment (see Johnson, 1999; Ramirez, 2008 as exceptions) and its distinctiveness and relevance has been questioned (e.g., Rusbult, 1991). However, recent empirical evidences show moral commitment to be associated with investments, but not with general commitment (Lopes & Rodrigues, 2013). Specifically, moral commitment is a subtype of general commitment construct, directly associated with intrinsic investments and the perception of internal barriers preventing the abandon of the relationship (for a discussion, see Rodrigues & Lopes, 2013a). Moral commitment is especially important to our present study since, and contrarily to heterosexual relationships, homosexual relationships are mostly associated with intrinsic, rather than extrinsic, investments (Kurdek, 2007, 2008; Lehmiller, 2010). This presumably derives from homosexuals' difficulty to engage in a long-term legal investment, such as marriage (Hall & Kitson, 2000; Nock, 1995). Thus, the study of commitment in homosexual relationships might gain with the introduction of this specific construct.

Adding to this fact, literature points that IM predictions are somewhat inconsistent among homosexuals (vs. heterosexuals; see Le & Agnew, 2003), and thus it is extremely important to extend our understanding. Specifically, literature suggests a higher rate of relationship dissolution among homosexuals, due to the perception of higher social marginalization (Lehmiller & Agnew, 2006) and fewer perceived barriers to its abandon (e.g., absence of legal divorce procedures; Kurdek, 1998). Although relationship quality and satisfaction are strong predictors of commitment in homosexuals (Kurdek, 2008; as for heterosexuals, Le & Agnew, 2003), some inconsistencies arise in regards to investments.

However, we must take into account changes governing romantic relationships and how they can impact the experience of commitment. Although marriage has been taken as the norm in heterosexual relationship development, there has been a significant decrease in the number of marriages (also in Portugal, OECD, 2012). This does not necessarily mean a decrease in long-lasting heterosexual romantic relationships, but is possibly associated with a change from a marriage norm to a cohabitation norm (Cherlin, 2004; Fletcher et al., 2013) in relationship development. Also, recent changes in Portuguese legislation, namely the legalization of same-sex civil unions in March 2001, and same-sex marriage in May 2010 (Vale de Almeida, 2010), may have contributed to changes in the perception of such relationships. A legal recognition of their romantic relationships may have led homosexuals to perceive the opportunity to invest (not only intrinsically) in their relationships.

In sum, being general commitment an individual's intent to maintain the relationship and to remain psychologically attached to it (Rusbult, 1980), we did not expect it to be impacted by sexual orientation (e.g., Rusbult et al., 1998) or cohabitation (e.g., Lehmiller, 2010; Rusbult et al., 1998). On the other hand, although empirical evidences suggest that homosexuals (vs. heterosexuals) invest less in their romantic relationships (Lehmiller, 2010; Lehmiller & Agnew, 2006), we hypothesize that changes in the Portuguese context regarding civil unions may lead to the absence of differences in investments according to sexual orientation. Also, and given that investments are linked with intrinsic and extrinsic goods applied in the relationship (Rusbult, 1980, 1983) we expected a direct impact of cohabitation. Finally, as moral commitment stems from internal dispositions to remain in the relationship (Johnson, 1991; Johnson et al., 1999) and is associated to intrinsic investments (Rodrigues & Lopes, 2013a), we expect no differences according to sexual orientation or cohabitation.

Method

Participants

A total of 533 Portuguese individuals (73.9% female), with ages varying from 17 to 62 years ($M = 27.45$, $SD = 6.91$), voluntarily took part in this study. Participants were mainly from Portugal metropolitan areas (67.8%), with a Bachelor/Major (49.2%) or a Master/PhD (34.5%) degree. Most of our participants (82.6%) identified themselves as heterosexuals (67% heterosexual women; 15.6% heterosexual men) and 17.4% as homosexuals (5.6% lesbian women; 11.8% gay men). All participants were in a romantic relationship (heterosexuals, $M_{\text{Length}} = 45.68$ months, $SD = 38.80$; homosexuals, $M_{\text{Length}} = 46.93$ months, $SD = 51.76$, no differences in relationship length, $t < 1$), with 35.6% cohabiting (7.8% homosexuals; 27.8% heterosexuals) and 64.4% not cohabiting (9.2% homosexuals; 55.2% heterosexuals) with their partner.

Measures

General commitment and investments.

We used the subscales from the Portuguese version of the Investment Model Scale (Rodrigues & Lopes, 2013b; Rusbult et al., 1998). The general commitment subscale comprises seven items ($\alpha = .89$, e.g., *I want our relationship to last for a very long time*), and the investments subscale comprise five items ($\alpha = .81$, e.g., *I have invested a great deal of time in our relationship*). Responses to each item were given on a scale ranging from 1 (*Do not agree at all*) to 7 (*Agree completely*), and the average of scores of each subscale results on a mean general commitment and a mean investments score.

Moral commitment.

We used the Portuguese version the moral commitment scale (Johnson et al., 1999; Lopes & Rodrigues, 2013), comprising nine items ($\alpha = .76$) divided in three components: perception of moral contract with one's partner (5 items, $\alpha = .81$; e.g., *You could never leave [partner's name] because you would feel guilty about letting [him/her] down*), consistency values (2 items, $r_p = .43$; e.g., *Whenever you promise to do something, you should see it through*) and attitudes towards separation (2 items, $r_p = .34$; e.g., *It's all right to get a divorce if things are not working out*). Responses to each item were given on a scale ranging from 1 (*Do not agree at all*) to 7 (*Agree completely*). and the average of means across these three components results in a mean moral commitment score.

Sociodemographic measures.

Additionally, we asked participants to indicate: (a) their sex (male/female/transgender), (b) their age (in years), (c) their relationship status (single/in a relationship/married), (d) their cohabiting status (cohabiting/not cohabiting), and (e) the length of their relationship (in months).

Procedure

All measures were inserted into Qualtrics® web platform, and the resulting hyperlink for the on-line questionnaire was published in social network sites (e.g., Facebook®) and sent by e-mail to mailing lists. By clicking on the hyperlink, participants were informed they would be taking part in a study about personal relationships and it was explicitly stated they were allowed abandon the investigation at any point simply by closing the web browser. The questionnaire started with sociodemographic questions, followed by the general commitment, investments, and moral commitment scales, presented in random order. At the end, participants were thanked for their collaboration and were provided with an email address to contact the research team. There was no time limit to complete the questionnaire and mean time of response was 16 minutes. Only complete questionnaires were considered for further analyzes.

Results

General Commitment

As expected, participants' scores of general commitment were analyzed according to a 2 (Sexual orientation) x 2 (Co-habitation) ANOVA, showing, as expected, that neither sexual orientation, $F(1, 507) = 2.35$, $MSE = 2.41$, $p = .126$, nor cohabitation, $F(1, 507) = 2.71$, $MSE = 2.78$, $p = .100$, had a direct impact on general commitment. However, an interaction between these factors emerged, $F(1, 507) = 3.73$, $MSE = 3.83$, $p = .054$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$.

In a more detailed analysis, planned contrasts show that heterosexuals' general commitment was not different between cohabiting ($M = 6.30$, $SD = 1.04$) and non-cohabiting individuals ($M = 6.34$, $SD = 0.98$), $t < 1$. For homosexuals, cohabiting individuals reported higher general commitment ($M = 6.35$, $SD = 0.80$) than those not cohabiting ($M = 5.92$, $SD = 1.23$), $t(507) = 1.98$, $p = .048$, $d = .18$. Importantly, planned contrasts showed no differences in general commitment between cohabiting homosexuals and cohabiting heterosexuals, $t < 1$.

Investments

A 2 (Sexual orientation) x 2 (Cohabitation) ANOVA revealed a direct impact of sexual orientation, $F(1, 507) = 5.79$, $MSE = 10.26$, $p = .016$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$, and cohabitation in perceived investments, $F(1, 507) = 3.38$, $MSE = 5.98$, $p = .067$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$. Specifically, homosexuals ($M = 4.25$, $SD = 1.34$ vs. heterosexuals, $M = 3.88$, $SD = 1.33$) and co-habiting participants ($M = 4.06$, $SD = 1.22$ vs. non-cohabiting, $M = 3.88$, $SD = 1.40$) reported higher investments. Although results regarding sexual orientation do not seem to converge with our initial hypothesis, we believe they actually strengthen our argumentation. Indeed, and even though the interaction did not reach significance, $F(1, 507) = 1.79$, $MSE = 3.17$, $p = .182$, planned contrasts show that cohabiting homosexuals reported more investments ($M = 4.53$, $SD = 1.28$) when compared to cohabiting heterosexuals ($M = 3.93$, $SD = 1.78$), $t(507) = 2.49$, $p = .013$, $d = .22$. In turn, this latter group of participants was not different when compared to non-cohabiting heterosexuals ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 1.41$), $t < 1$, or to non-cohabiting homosexuals ($M = 4.02$, $SD = 1.35$), $t < 1$.

Moral Commitment

A 2 (Sexual orientation) x 2 (Cohabitation) ANOVA analysis resulted in a direct impact of sexual orientation, $F(1, 507) = 9.70$, $MSE = 6.99$, $p = .002$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$, with homosexuals reporting more moral commitment ($M = 3.69$, $SD = .83$) than heterosexuals ($M = 3.43$, $SD = .86$). As expected, the impact of cohabitation was not significant, $F < 1$. However, the interaction between factors reached significance, $F(1, 507) = 6.46$, $MSE = 4.66$, $p = .011$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$. In a more detailed analysis, planned contrasts show that cohabiting homosexuals reported higher moral commitment ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 0.79$) than cohabiting heterosexuals ($M = 3.28$, $SD = 0.82$), $t(507) = 3.77$, $p < .001$, $d = .33$, but no different than non-cohabiting homosexuals ($M = 3.56$, $SD = 0.85$), $t(507) = 1.62$, $p = .105$, $d = .14$.

Discussion

This research was a first step in analyzing heterosexual and homosexual romantic relations and the impact of cohabitation/non-cohabitation norms in commitment and investments, providing a first insight into the dynamics, overlaps and differences between these relationships. Based on our results, cohabitation does not seem to determine heterosexuals' general commitment towards their romantic relationships, unlike homosexuals to whom cohabitation seems to increase the experience of general commitment. Also, homosexual romantic relationships do not seem to be characterized by a lesser magnitude of investments than heterosexual romantic relationships. Indeed, cohabitation emerges as an important factor determining the perceived investments within homosexuals, even more so than in heterosexual romantic relationships.

Results for heterosexuals seem to be consistent with the suggestion of cohabitation as normative (Stanley, Rhoades, & Whitton, 2010), given the inexistence of differences in general commitment between cohabiting and non-cohabiting heterosexuals. Also, results for homosexuals are not convergent with the marginalization of sexual minorities and their romantic relationships (e.g., Costa & Davies, 2012; Lehmilller, 2010). Lehmilller

and Agnew (2006) suggest that individuals in marginalized relationships (including homosexual romantic relationships) have lower investments (due to social negative pressure). Our results suggest otherwise, with homosexuals (vs. heterosexuals) reporting a higher level of moral commitment, and cohabiting homosexuals (vs. heterosexuals) reporting higher magnitude of investments. Also, cohabiting (vs. non-cohabiting) homosexuals reported higher general commitment, no different to the levels reported by both groups of heterosexuals.

In sum, for homosexuals the decision to cohabit together may have an internal barrier function, that is, as the decision to cohabit may imply the coming out to family and friends (Kurdek, 1998; Kurdek & Schmitt, 1987) and to the immediate social circle (e.g., neighbors), leading to higher psychological binding and greater involvement in the romantic relationship (hence higher general commitment and investments). This could have been bolstered by the changes in the Portuguese Legal system and the recognition of same-sex “de facto” unions and same-sex marriage (Vale de Almeida, 2010). In other words, the decision to live with one’s romantic partner may be an important step in the natural course of homosexual romantic relationships (e.g., self-disclosure, coming out), with the possibility of legally recognize such union and benefit from the similar rights that heterosexual have. This diverges from evidences relying in the notion that homosexual romantic relationships are characterized by fewer investments, given the impossibility of a similar outcome as heterosexual romantic relationships have (i.e., civil union or marriage). Nonetheless, we must take this interpretation with caution, as it may not be generalized across homosexuals (e.g., differences according to social class; Oliveira, 2013)

This research is not without limitations, and future studies should further explore homosexual romantic relationships. First, it would be important to understand more thoroughly the subjective meaning that homosexuals and heterosexuals attribute to the decision to cohabit. Second, it would be important to extend the sample to include married individuals, in order to explore the importance of cohabitation (vs. marriage) in both homosexual and heterosexual romantic relationships.

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