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Association between commitment, positive and negative affects, and depression in romantic relationships

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Abstract

This study examined whether the association between approach-avoidance commitment and depression was mediated by affects toward romantic partner. Path analysis revealed that approach commitment was positively associated with positive affect, in turn positive affect was negatively associated with depression. Although approach commitment was also negatively associated with negative affect, this association was weaker than association between approach commitment and positive affect. Avoidance commitment was positively associated with negative affect, in turn negative affect was positively associated with depression. Although avoidance commitment was negatively associated with positive affect, this association was weak. Furthermore, direct effect of approach-avoidance commitment on depression was not significant. These results suggested that positive and negative affects toward romantic partner mediate association between approach-avoidance commitment and depression.

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Keywords: approach-avoidance commitment; affects toward romantic partner; depression

1. Introduction

Commitment is an important predictor for maintaining romantic relationships (e.g., Le, Dove, Agnew, Korn, & Mutso, 2010). Several researchers have defined commitment in many ways, but the fundamental property of commitment is an intention or motivation to maintain a relationship (Johnson, 1991; Lydon, Burton, & Menzies-Toman, 2005; Rusbult, 1983). Recently, researchers have suggested that commitment has two dimensions: approach commitment and avoidance commitment (Frank & Brandstätter, 2002; Strachman & Gable, 2006). Approach commitment is defined as an “approach goal for rewards, which comes from relational maintenance.”

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Avoidance commitment is defined as an “avoidance goal from punishment, which is associated with relationship dissolution.”

Approach and avoidance commitment differentially impacts on relationship quality. For example, while approach commitment is positively associated with relationship satisfaction, avoidance commitment is negatively associated with it (Frank & Brandstätter, 2002). In addition, research in various domains has indicated that approach goals predict personal adaptation and avoidance goals predict personal maladaptation. For example, social approach goals (e.g., try to deepen my relationship with my friends) are positively associated with subjective well-being, and social avoidance goals (e.g., trying to avoid disagreements and conflicts with my friends) are positively associated with physical symptoms (Elliot, Gable, & Mapes, 2006). Given that approach-avoidance commitment is domain-specific, approach commitment should be associated with personal adaptation and avoidance commitment should be associated with personal maladaptation.

The present study examined whether approach-avoidance commitment was associated with personal adaptation and maladaptation. In present study, depression is assessed as an index of personal adaptation. The following hypothesis is predicted:

Hypothesis 1: Approach commitment is negatively associated with depression, and avoidance commitment is positively associated with depression.

Approach and avoidance goals have independent processes that influence relationship and personal adaptation (Elliot et al., 2006; Gable, 2006; Impett, Gordon, Kogan, Obeis, Gable, & Ketner, 2010). In research on affect and emotion, Gable, Elliot, & Reis (2000) found that a strong approach orientation toward rewards (Behavioural Activation System; BAS) was associated with more daily positive affect, and a strong avoidance orientation from punishment (Behavioural Inhibition System; BIS) was associated with more daily negative affect. Gable & Poore (2008) found that individuals who had strong approach goal tendencies evaluated relationship satisfaction by the presence or absence of positive affect toward a romantic partner. Individuals who had strong avoidance goal tendencies evaluated relationship satisfaction by the presence or absence of negative affect toward a romantic partner.

These results suggest that approach goals are associated with relationship and personal adaptation as mediated through positive affect, and avoidance goals are associated with relationship and personal adaptation as mediated through negative affect. For this reason, the association between approach-avoidance commitment and depression (H1) should be mediated by positive and negative affect toward a romantic partner. The present study also examined this mediated process. Thus, the second hypothesis is as follows:

Hypothesis 2: Approach and avoidance commitment and depression is mediated by positive and negative affect toward a romantic partner. Specifically, approach commitment is strongly mediated by positive affect, and avoidance commitment is strongly mediated by negative affect.

2. Method

2.1. Participants.

One hundred and forty-five undergraduate students who were involved in a romantic relationship completed a series of questionnaires (57 men and 98 women; average age = 19.98, SD = 2.20). The relationship length among

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