

Commitment: The Key to Women Staying in Abusive Relationships

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Much of the previous research examining why some women choose to remain in abusive relationships suggests that women remain with an abusive spouse for a number of reasons, many of which place blame on themselves or their partner instead of the situation (Eckstein, 2011). While personal and contextual reasons for remaining in a relationship are important, we argue that factors such as the commitment process may be the most difficult to overcome once a woman makes the decision to leave the relationship. Cialdini's (2009) influence principle of commitment and consistency suggests that once a decision is made, people will typically do whatever they can to remain consistent with that decision. In the case of women in abusive relationships, abuse may not begin until the relationship has lasted for years. Implications for commitment and consistency in abusive relationships will be discussed, as well as proposed mechanisms such as the Foot-in-the-Door effect and cognitive dissonance.

Keywords: domestic violence, commitment, consistency, cognitive dissonance, foot-in-the-door

Les recherches examinant les raisons qui motivent une femme à demeurer dans une relation abusive suggèrent souvent que le choix de rester avec un conjoint violent est influencé par, notamment, le blâme que porte la femme sur elle-même ou sur le conjoint plutôt que sur la situation (Eckstein, 2011). Bien que les facteurs de motivation personnels et contextuels soient importants, nous soutenons que ceux liés au processus d'engagement sont les plus difficiles à surmonter suite à la décision de quitter une relation marquée par la violence. Les principes d'engagement et de consistance de Cialdini (2009) suggèrent que, suite à une décision, les gens tenteront de maintenir la consistance en lien avec celle-ci. Dans le cas de la violence conjugale, les abus peuvent se manifester plusieurs années après le début de la relation. Les implications ainsi que des mécanismes tels que le « pied-dans-la-porte » et la dissonance cognitive seront discutés.

Mots-clés : violence conjugale, engagement, consistance, dissonance cognitive, pied-dans-la-porte

Domestic Violence Statistics (2012) indicates that at least one in three women report becoming the victim of some type of abuse during their lifetime. Furthermore, domestic violence is the number one cause of women's injuries throughout the United States (Domestic Violence Statistics, 2012). Research conducted by Enander (2010) suggests that domestic violence survivors have trouble understanding why they and other victims of abuse stay in abusive relationships for so long. Owing to the prevalence of abuse in today's society it begs the question, why do so many women find it difficult to leave their abusive

relationships? Commitment to the abuser and consistency within the relationship are potential answers that could be studied by psychologists and other social scientists as a means to understand this societal problem.

The initial commitment to a relationship may lead a woman to ignore and/or discount the first signs of abuse, and subsequently she may be more likely to stay in the relationship with continuing abuse because of her initial commitment to the relationship (Rusbult & Martz, 1995). In the present paper, we propose that the initial commitment and the motivation to maintain consistency between individuals' attitudes and behaviors (cf. Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010) may perpetuate this process and explain why some women choose to remain in abusive relationships, even though they know it is unhealthy. Cialdini (2009) has proposed the role of commitment and consistency in dysfunctional relationships in his book, *Influence: Science and Practice*.

This work was part of a class project completed by the first author under the direction of the second and third authors at the University of Alabama. The authors would like to thank the members of the Online Social Influence Lab for their insight and assistance throughout this project. Please address correspondence to Brandon Dare (email: badare@crimson.ua.edu) or Dr. Rosanna E. Guadagno (email: rguadagn@nsf.gov). Dr. Rosanna E. Guadagno is now at the National Science Foundation. The views expressed in this paper do not reflect those of the National Science Foundation.

However, he proposed it in an anecdotal manner as a means to illustrate the commitment and consistency-process. In this paper, we expand on this anecdote, focus specifically on domestic violence, and make theoretical and conceptual linkages using existing relevant research to transform this anecdote into a potential moderator explaining why women find it so difficult to leave abusive relationships. In accomplishing this goal, specific commitment and consistency based phenomena including the Foot-in-the-Door effect and cognitive dissonance will be discussed in depth.

Domestic Violence in Romantic Relationships

Why do women stay in abusive relationships? Research has focused on some interpersonal aspects of their relationship and how these factors may impact their decision to stay. For example, according to Herbert, Silver, and Ellard (1991), women in violent romantic relationships focus on the positive interpersonal aspects (i.e., love for their partner) of the relationship instead of the negative (i.e., abuse from their partner) in order to cope with their relationship. In support of this thinking, a study conducted by Eckstein (2011) also found that domestic violence victims tend to focus on positive aspects of the relationship or even made excuses for why abuse was prevalent within the relationship. Also, these women may make interpersonal comparisons such as comparing their situation to women who experience more abuse than they do (Herbert, Silver, & Ellard, 1991). This could lead them to be somewhat thankful that their relationship is not as bad as they think it could be and also may increase their positive view of their own relationship (Herbert, Silver, & Ellard, 1991). Furthermore, research suggests that women attributing domestic violence as their partner's fault rather than their own are more likely to leave the relationship (Truman-Schram, Cann, Calhoun, & Vanwallendael, 2000) while those blaming themselves for the abuse are more likely to stay in abusive relationships (Patzel, 2006). Patzel (2006) also reported that reasons why women stay in abusive relationships include loving their abuser and having difficulty labeling the acts as abuse. Thus, attributions of blame and other personal factors may force the typical abused woman to cope with her abusive spouse rather than leave the relationship.

In addition to examining personal factors, previous research suggests that the characteristics of the relationship (i.e., interpersonal factors) play a key role in explaining why women stay in abusive relationships. Gelles (1976) reported that the frequency and intensity

of abuse throughout the relationship influence a woman's decision to stay or leave. Women were more likely to leave if the violence was more intense (i.e., being shot at, choked, or struck with object other than hand) or if violent acts occurred frequently (i.e., weekly or daily; Gelles, 1976). Also, Schutte, Malouff, and Doyle (1988) found that the number of relationship separations (i.e., temporary break-ups) predicted women's likelihood of leaving their abusive spouse as more separations were linked to an increased rate of leaving. On the other hand, Rusbult and Martz (1995) found that women with a stronger commitment to an abusive relationship tended to be less educated, had less financial resources and had children with the abusive spouse, or had been involved with the relationship for an extended period of time, suggesting that characteristics of the victim and the situation also play a role. Research suggests that women who fulfill a traditional gender role are more likely to be committed to abusive relationships (Stuve, 1998; Truman-Schram et al., 2000). This could be explained by the fact that those women consider a relationship with a man as a vital part of their existence as a woman (Truman-Schram et al., 2000). Furthermore, there may be children involved and, owing to the traditional roles they fulfill, these abused women may not have an income stream should they leave the relationship (Stuve, 1998). In sum, if a woman believes she should be part of a traditional, intimate relationship with her partner, she may develop a deeper sense of commitment to him because it is important to her traditional gender role.

As reviewed above, previous research has done an extensive job at uncovering personal, interpersonal and contextual reasons for women staying in abusive relationships, but few, if any, have explained the mechanism behind the development of their commitment. Specifically, the above research focuses on the personal (e.g., traditional gender role and level of education of the victim), interpersonal (e.g., love for a partner or social comparison) and situational (e.g., frequency and intensity of abuse, the victim's financial situation, and having children with the abuser) aspects of abusive relationships. While each of the reasons reported above as explanations to why women stay in abusive relationships is important, we argue that other aspects of the context or situation an abused woman finds herself in (e.g., using behavior from a previous situation as a guide to how to behave in a current situation) might contribute to her commitment to the abusive relationship, though she may not explicitly be aware of them. According to Anderson and Saunders (2003), many scholars believe that women

who have previously been exposed to abuse were more likely to stay with an abusive spouse. A study conducted by Rusbult and Martz (1995) reported that women with a stronger commitment to the relationship had been involved with the relationship for an extended period of time and were more likely to return to their abusive partner instead of ultimately ending the relationship. These results suggest that commitment and consistency to abusive relationships are important underpinnings of the reason why women stay in these relationships. However, we argue that the socio-psychological process through which commitment within an abusive relationship occurs has yet to be thoroughly studied. By interpreting abusive relationships through the lens of the social influence principle of commitment and consistency, we seek to increase our understanding of the socio-psychological factors that may cause a woman to stay with a violent partner. Specifically, we seek to examine the common situations abused women find themselves in and how these situations make it difficult to leave the relationship. We take the perspective that the general tendency for individuals to want to be (and be seen) as committed and consistent in their behaviors across situations may lead to commitment to a relationship, even if it is a bad one.

Commitment and Consistency as the Key

Cialdini (2009) defines commitment and consistency as the act of making a choice and encountering internal and external pressure to act in a manner consistent with an individual's commitment. In other words, once we make a decision we will typically act in a manner that makes our actions remain consistent with that decision. Importantly, this tendency to want to maintain consistency with previous commitments is a general one that applies to many individuals and across many situations (we do not like to be perceived as "flip-floppers" or as people who say one thing but do another). An example illustrating how commitment and consistency might apply to women in abusive relationships can be seen in research conducted by Gryl, Stith, and Bird (1991). It indicates that women often first encounter relationship abuse during their high school years. Women that are exposed to abuse as early as high school may become accustomed to abuse and feel that it is acceptable during marriage, according to Truman-Schram et al. (2000). Furthermore, 30% of women in a sample aged 18-25 stated that they had experienced abuse during a previous relationship (Truman-Schram et al., 2000). The implication is that additional experiences of abuse may be tolerated or

become more normal to women because of previous experiences and commitment to relationships in which abuse occurred. Developing this feeling of consistency and normalization of abuse may transfer to many different situations, which may include, but are not limited to, consistently ending up in violent relationships or simply developing an ambivalent attitude towards abuse in general (Wood, 2001).

This paper will mainly focus on abused women's consistency of accepting abuse within a relationship as a means to further explain why she stays in the relationship. The foot-in-the-door (FITD) effect (Freedman & Fraser, 1966) and cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959) provide two mechanisms for how commitment and consistency may cause an abused woman to remain in an unhealthy relationship. Therefore, we will review the literature on the FITD and cognitive dissonance theory and tie these two commitment and consistency phenomena to abusive relationships. Specifically, we argue that the principle of commitment and consistency is useful in understanding why women stay in abusive relationships through (1) escalating commitments – in particular tolerating escalating severity of abuse (via a FITD process); and (2) the tendency to avoid or to try to reduce feelings of dissonance (arousal) when our attitudes do not match our behaviors (via a cognitive dissonance mechanism).

Foot-in-the-Door Effect

The principle of commitment and consistency is demonstrated by the foot-in-the-door effect. According to Freedman and Fraser (1966), the FITD effect occurs when someone who complies with a small, initial request becomes more likely to comply with a second, larger request in the future. Although complying with the larger, "target" request may not be something they intended to do in the beginning—indeed people in the control condition that only received the larger target request mostly refused to comply—the need to remain consistent from one request to the next can influence individuals who complied with the initial request into complying with the final request (see Cialdini & Guadagno, 2004, for a review). The study conducted by Freedman and Fraser (1966) demonstrated the FITD effect at work with Californian housewives. Experimenters contacted these women over the phone and asked initial questions pertaining to their household cleaning items. Three days later, participants were contacted with a request to allow multiple men in their house for a two-hour inventory

of their cabinets and storage spaces. Freedman and Fraser found that those who agreed to the initial request were significantly more likely to comply with the second, much larger request three days later relative to those who did not answer those initial questions. An increased rate of compliance in the FITD condition can be explained by the principle of commitment and consistency. Participants who agreed to the initial request may experience some internal pressures to make their actions remain consistent when confronted with the second, somewhat preposterous request. Freedman and Fraser explained this with self-perception theory (Bem, 1967), which states that people look to their prior behavior to infer their current attitude. This is the widely accepted explanation of the FITD and it has been replicated across many contexts (Burger, 1999). Thus, applied to the FITD effect, self-perception theory predicts that people who agree with the larger, target request that follows the initial request do so because through agreeing with the initial request they come to infer they are the kind of person who agrees to requests on the particular topic in question (e.g., helping the homeless, promoting cancer prevention). Thus, the initial request may seem small, but saying yes to it leads people to infer their attitude toward the topic of the initial request from their agreement with the initial request.

The FITD effect and self-perception theory can be applied to abusive relationships by considering why a woman chooses to stay with an abusive male partner. Perhaps abuse slowly begins years into the relationship after she has already developed a strong sense of love and commitment to the man and relationship. There may be children involved, increasing the commitment. The woman may endure initial, slight acts of abuse, which will eventually lead to slowly escalating violence in the future (Griffing et al., 2002). For example, the abuse may begin with an intense verbal dispute, something that would not give a woman reason to leave her spouse. Over time, the verbal disputes could escalate to the extent that her partner or spouse proceeds with physical abuse. Eventually, she may find herself in a position where she should abandon the relationship, but instead chooses to stay because of the factors reviewed above and a positive attitude toward the relationship inferred by her past actions. Specifically, her previous choice to stay in the abusive relationship while the abusive acts were “minor” have lead her to develop an attitude towards the relationship that does not include the option of leaving. According to the commitment and consistency principle and self-perception theory, deciding to stay in the young rela-

tionship will lead her to stay in the future because she believes she is the type of person that is consistent with her prior actions. As a result, leaving the relationship now is not an option because she has been committed for an extended period of time and ending the relationship would be inconsistent with her prior behavior. Her initial, minor exposure to abuse in the relationship that gradually worsened makes her a prime target for the FITD effect and inferring a more positive attitude than objectively called for toward the relationship owing to self-perception theory. Thus, she is more likely to rationalize extreme acts of abuse because they gradually increased in frequency and severity.

Cognitive Dissonance Theory

The principle of commitment and consistency is also apparent in the theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959). According to Festinger and Carlsmith, cognitive dissonance occurs when an individual experiences discrepancies between his actions and attitudes. An individual experiencing dissonance will make any attempt necessary to reduce or prevent the psychological discomfort caused by the cognitive dissonance, whether it be through modifying his or her attitudes or avoiding situations that may lead to increased dissonance. A study conducted by Festinger and Carlsmith (1959) illustrates cognitive dissonance in a sample of college students. Each participant was required to perform a series of monotonous tasks for an extended period of time. Once they completed the task, an experimenter asked them to tell the next participant that the study was not boring, but was, in fact, enjoyable. Some participants were given one dollar (insufficient external justification) for this deed, while others were given twenty dollars (sufficient external justification). Although each student experienced dissonance upon the request of the experimenter, those who were given twenty dollars experienced less dissonance because that amount of money was high enough for them to justify the deception over the entertainment level of the experiment. Students who were given one dollar were not able to make justifications based on earnings, but instead changed their attitude about the study in order to reduce dissonance. Therefore, those participants who were paid one dollar reported the task as genuinely being more entertaining than those who gained twenty dollars.

In examining the reasons for women remaining with abusive partners, cognitive dissonance theory can

be quite useful. Women in abusive relationships may experience high levels of dissonance resulting from their negative attitude towards the abuse in the relationship and their inability to leave the relationship. If they feel “trapped” in the relationship, they may be inclined to change their negative attitude pertaining to the relationship or the abuse, whether they know it or not. While changing their attitude to be more positive towards the relationship and the abuse will reduce any experienced dissonance, a newly positive outlook on abuse could be more dangerous - leaving the relationship may become more difficult if the abused woman has a positive outlook on the relationship and/or abuse. Once the woman commits to an attitude change that results in her adopting positive feelings towards the abusive relationship, she will continue to have those positive emotions due to the human nature of wanting to remain consistent with our thoughts and actions, therefore reducing dissonance. For example, a woman who gradually becomes exposed to violence may justify the abuse as much as necessary to make it seem less dangerous. These justifications may lead her to unknowingly change her attitude of abuse over time. Eventually, her experienced dissonance will be at a minimum because her actions and attitudes have become consistent – she remains in the abusive relationship while developing a progressively more positive outlook on the relationship. This does not mean she thinks abuse is acceptable and wishes to be in a violent relationship, rather she feels most comfortable within the relationship whenever her cognitive dissonance is at a minimum.

Leaving the Relationship

Much research has focused on reasons for a woman remaining in a relationship with an abusive partner, but few, if any, plans for leaving the relationship have been proposed. We argue that the processes described above can also be applied to leaving an abusive relationship. Wuest and Merritt-Gray (1999) concluded that leaving the relationship does not usually occur in one step, but rather a progression of steps beginning with a decision to resist abuse to finally leaving the relationship for good. By starting with a series of small steps that lead to the ultimate decision of breaking away from an abuser, a woman is in fact applying the same method that could have gotten her into the violent relationship in the first place – consistency as reflected by the FITD effect. Each additional step she is able to complete would make turning back more difficult because having inconsistent actions is something most people tend to avoid (Cialdini, 2009).

Women who find themselves in a relationship that shows any basic signs of a future filled with domestic violence should try their hardest to leave the relationship early. As previous research shows, the longer the abusive relationship develops the stronger the commitment the woman seems to have to the relationship (Truman-Schram et al., 2000).

Any woman wanting to leave an abusive relationship may want to abandon their partner immediately, but the best route may be for her to take it one step at a time. In doing so she will be utilizing the principle of commitment and consistency through the foot-in-the-door mechanism. Initially, a woman may want to see a therapist or counselor in order to map out her escape plan. The therapist can provide further aid by setting the woman up with the appropriate person to activate a restraining order and connecting her with networks for abused women. A legal restraining order will help the woman counteract any feelings of commitment that may remain for the man or relationship. Once she removes any possessions from the abuser’s house, she may want to move in with a close friend, relative, or shelter in a location undisclosed to her abuser. This new situation will likely provide her with a sense of security that is necessary for her to continue on a path of consistency that moves away from her previous relationship and out of the grasp of her abuser. After a sufficient amount of time, she will find moving out on her own easier and will be more comfortable living on her own or with any children she may have. Taking this route may also make leaving her spouse easier on her children because they will gradually see him less and less (justice system willing).

Discussion

In this paper, we argued that, in addition to already well known factors affecting women in abusive relationships (Anderson & Saunders, 2003), commitment and consistency is a component of both the continuation of an abusive relationship as well as a woman’s final escape. Given the high prevalence of abuse in relationships, we urge researchers and practitioners to consider consistency as one aspect of domestic violence. While one limitation of this theory is that it still needs to be tested, we assert that the principle of commitment and consistency is an important variable that, once supported by future research, will provide intervention and relief efforts with a new perspective for aiding abused women.

Abusive relationships are extremely dangerous for women (and any children involved) who are unable to discern an escape route (Anderson & Saunders, 2003). Once an individual falls prey to the commitment and consistency principle in an abusive relationship or any other context, deflecting its influence is not easy. Perhaps the best way to decrease the number of abusive relationships is by educating women before they find themselves trapped in one. If more women knew about the factors—including social influence, the scientific study of the influence of external factors on individuals' attitudes and behavior—that may lead one to become trapped in a violent relationship by their own consistency, they would be able to avoid such factors and place themselves in positions that are not favorable to abuse. According to Cialdini (2009), the best way to evade the power of commitment and consistency is to trust one's gut, and if something does not feel right, be cautious or avoid the person or situation that is producing the discomfort. Other research suggests that making people aware of their susceptibility to influence can reduce its impact (Sagarin, Cialdini, Rice, & Serna, 2002).

Limitations and Future Directions

In order to better protect women in our society, future studies should examine any factors that may make women more susceptible to abuse, as well as factors that may contribute to a woman's decision to leave or stay. Perhaps the only way to understand why some women choose to remain with an abusive spouse is by comparing women in different relationships (abusive vs. non-abusive). Such studies should measure personality variables such as preference for consistency (Guadagno & Cialdini, 2010).

According to Guadagno, Asher, Demaine, and Cialdini (2001), the Preference for Consistency (PFC) Scale measures an individual's desire to remain consistent. Thus, individuals with a high preference for consistency make every attempt to create consistency between their attitudes and actions where an individual scoring low on the PFC Scale may be more unpredictable from one situation to the next. Perhaps women with a higher preference for consistency tend to stay in abusive relationships more than women with a lower preference for consistency, as these women may be more susceptible to the FITD effect and also more likely to be bothered by dissonance should there be a discrepancy between their attitudes and behaviors. Future research should examine this question.

Furthermore, social efforts should be made to teach people, particularly those vulnerable to abusive relationships, about the disadvantages of consistency in certain contexts. While generally, consistency with one's prior attitudes and behaviors is seen as an admirable quality (Guadagno & Cialdini, 2010), this is not likely the case for women in or at risk for abusive relationships. Thus, domestic violence preventions, interventions, and education should all include the pertinent components on self-perception theory (Bem, 1967), the FITD (Freedman & Fraser, 1966) and cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959) so that at-risk women are well armed with social influence to avoid or escape abusive relationships.

Finally, this review focused on the most common type of domestic violence in which the woman is the target of the abuse and the man is the abuser. Thus, our analysis may not generalize to homosexual relationships or relationships in which the woman is the abuser (see Renzetti & Miley, 1996). Before these alternate scenarios can be considered, the hypotheses generated in this review need to be applied to heterosexual relationships in which the man is the abuser. Once support is found for the role of commitment and consistency in extending the duration of a dysfunctional relationship such as an abusive relationship, then less common relationships can be considered.

In conclusion, we have reviewed an important societal problem through the lens of the social influence processes of commitment and consistency (Cialdini, 2009). With this new perspective on a common source of dysfunction in relationships, we encourage other researchers to empirically examine the role of commitment and consistency in women's choice to stay in an abusive relationship and the role it also may play in her ultimate departure. Perhaps in doing so, we can develop interventions aimed at shattering the abused woman's feelings of commitment to the relationship and allow her and any children involved to live a better life.

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Received July 15, 2012

Revision received February 13, 2013

Accepted February 24, 2013 ■