To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Nancy A. Davis entitled "Marital Commitment." I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in Psychology.

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MARITAL COMMITMENT

A Thesis

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ABSTRACT

The problem was to explore the experience of making a marital commitment and the nature of that commitment from the point of view of individual persons and couples. Five couples were interviewed in depth: two couples who were engaged, and married during the course of the study (interviewed before and after the wedding); one couple who had chosen to live together and not marry at the time; one couple married five years; and one divorced couple. Results of the individual experiences were discussed, and major conclusions were: (1) A commitment arises through one's experiences, and is discovered and lived out, rather than consciously chosen. (2) The experience of the transition to legal marriage is idiosyncratic to the particular person.

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I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years there has been much attention given by behavior scientists to the family. The beginning unit of the family is the married couple. How is that kernal unit formed, that is, how do two persons make the decision to marry and thereby establish a beginning family of their own?

Commitment

At some point during the public legal and/or religious marriage ceremony, the members of a couple take a definitive stand regarding the nature of their relationship and its future; they make a commitment. For some, of course, a form of that commitment may have been made earlier, perhaps when first agreeing to marry, perhaps when first publically announcing their intention to marry. For others, perhaps there is no sense of commitment at the time of the wedding; rather, they may adopt a reserved stand. In any case, "for better, for worse," the couple's relationship would seem to make a clear-cut transition to a new status with new roles and expectations inherent. How that transition is viewed by an engaged, then newly-married, couple and what the nature of that felt commitment is, is the topic of the proposed project.

Choice. The partners presumably choose one another from among all members of a pool of available persons meeting whatever social, cultural, physical and emotional requirements the partners hold at the particular time the choice is made. This is one choice, and has been the focus of a large body of theorizing and research on marriage.

A second and different kind of choice is that for or against making the legal transition of the marriage ceremony. Note that no temporal factor is intended here; persons may address themselves to these two choices in either order or simultaneously. Whether or not to marry has become a salient question only in recent years and there is therefore a dearth of research literature in that area.

The present project proposes to investigate both of these decisions in an attempt to deal with the following issues: how the members of a couple arrive at the decision point, what they experience during the decision making, how the two choices do or do not relate to one another, how the two partners attempt to and/or succeed at influencing one another in dealing with this decision, to what extent they feel free vs. determined in the choice-making, and how completely these decisions are made, i.e., the felt strength of the commitment to the resulting choice of mate. Presumably, other, unanticipated, issues may also emerge.

A fuller discussion of one of the above more crucial issues is in order here. Man's "free will" vs. "determinism" has for centuries been the object of voluminous writing, study, thought, and philosophizing. Some authors writing from an existential viewpoint have challenged the value of separating the two (e.g., Keen, 1970; Wheelis, 1970; Wickes, 1963). Rather, an interaction between them is discussed, that is, man makes choices within the bounds described by whatever limits of matter and consciousness are extant.

In making the decision to marry the conflict between choice and limits is particularly clear,and in fact forms what can be termed the

paradox of marriage. Now that the couple is married (i.e., the relationship has been legalized and/or solemnized in marriage), are the members staying together because they wish to or because they must? (Haley, 1963, p. 215.) How this continuing paradox is experienced by the particular couple will be addressed in the current project.

Anxiety. Since marrying entails a new status of the relationship, and therefore entering into an unfamiliar experience, a certain amount of natural anxiety might be expected upon making the decision of whether to marry. Schachtel (1959) poses a distinction between activity emotion (a directed, activity-sustaining tension characterized by active coping) and embeddedness emotion (the diffuse discharge of tension, characterized by helpless distress), and claims that anxiety is the primary embeddedness emotion. At the separation from the familiar (embeddedness) or the threat of such a separation, anxiety is experienced. Whether that anxiety is in fact experienced, how it is viewed (e.g., as normal, hindering, unhealthy), how it is handled, and whether and to what extent it remains after the decision has been made are also proposed points of inquiry in the present research.

Intimacy. Intimacy and commitment would seem to be intricately bound to one another. Intimacy would seem to entail a growing closeness and connectedness, a deepening of the relationship. One author writing in the existential tradition in fact defines commitment in terms of intimacy: "Commitment means I am connected with the world." (Koestenbaum, 1974, p. 172.) Is it possible to have deepening intimacy in a relationship without concurrent deepening commitment? This depends

in part on what intimacy means to the members of the couple. What to them heralds growing closeness?

Self-image. How do the members of a couple fantasy themselves in their approaching marital roles? How do they picture their rights and responsibilities and their capabilities to achieve fulfillment of both. Among the questions to be explored are (a) is responsibility viewed as a challenging and broadening experience or as a confining and frightening one; (b) what is their image of their own and partner's roles; and (c) what are the expectations each partner has of the other? Several abstractions could perhaps be pursued, such as her image of his expectations of her; his image of her view of his expectations of her.

This area perhaps even more than the others should be left open for definition by the subjects themselves, as their view of themselves can vary greatly and potentially be influenced by a large array of variables--e.g., parents' marriage and attitudes, own self-esteem, age and previous relationship experience, current level of intimacy. Further, some interesting cultural men-women differences here may emerge.

Enjoyment. In what ways does the couple anticipate that their lives will be enhanced and more enjoyable due to the act of marrying and of marrying the particular partner? Do they expect that there are benefits and joys they will gain from marriage?

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Although research on marriage and the family is one of the most popular areas in sociology and psychology (Hill, 1968), no empirical studies have been located by this writer in which marital commitment is a major focus. Commitment is occasionally mentioned in the formal report of a study and frequently included as an item in questionnaires given to marriage partners. However, commitment is not clearly defined and the meaning of the word to the subjects is not assessed.

Heiss (1962) studied intimacy in dating relationships, using the terms intimacy and commitment interchangeably. In this study subjects were divided into three groups of increasing intimacy or commitment; although commitment is vaguely defined, it seems characterized in three ways: (1) to what degree the relationship is an exclusive one, (2) how much the members of couples think or know they are"in love," and (3) whether or not they say marriage is very likely or certain. Using this rating of intimacy/commitment as a base, Heiss went on to observe and interpret male-female interaction in a disagreement setting.

In a simple and practical article on couples therapy, Addario and Rodgers (1974) present a "commitment scale" as one of the quick techniques useful in an initial interview. Commitment is defined as how much each member wants to stay in the marriage, and each is asked to rate his or her commitment on a scale from 0 (completely wanting out) to 100 (total commitment). By this means, the authors assert, a clearer idea can be gained of where each partner stands in the marriage.

Focusing on work commitment, Saflios-Rothschild (1971) discovered a similar lack of agreement on the definition of commitment in the sociology literature. She catalogued the various ways that work commitment has been "conceptualized"--actually, defined--and concluded that more research is needed on refining the concept. Saflios-Rothschild claims that this could be achieved by measuring the concept at its different levels and with different techniques, and an intercorrelation done of different indicators of work commitment.

It would seem that a more practical approach would be to conceptualize before measuring. To attempt to quantify a concept in order to define that concept can perhaps lead to a clean operational construct, but not to a clearer understanding of the phenomenon under study. One notable attempt has been made to develop a conceptualization of marital commitment. The main purpose of Ryder, Kafka, and Olson (1971) was not that of developing the concept of marital commitment, but they nevertheless dealt effectively with it as an integral part of their discussion on separating and joining influences through courtship and early marriage. Further, their analysis is grounded--albeit loosely--in data from a large sample (2000) of superficially studied couples, and a smaller but still sizable number (50) of more intensively studied couples.

Ryder, et al. describe a stage in the developing relationship of a dating couple which they term precommitment. This is characterized as "a kind of moment of truth" (p. 453) in which the serious implications of the transitional process come into view. This stage, therefore, should be a careful focus for the current proposed project, as it would

seem to be during this time that the most conscious decision--whether to continue and increase involvement or reverse the transitional process by terminating the relationship or establishing more distance--would be made.

The stage labeled as commitment by Ryder, et al. begins when there is a general acceptance of the transition process by the couple and by their friends and relatives. This is apparently beyond a felt point of return, and the authors claim that the feeling of free choice is virtually lost here. During late courtship couples often feel swept along by a social process. This stage is characterized by confirming activities, e.g., other people more consistently treat the couple as a unit.

The culmination of the transition process is termed the transition point and is, of course, the wedding (or whatever ceremony legalizes and solemnizes the union). According to Ryder, et al. the impact and seriousness of the wedding itself is rarely experienced.

What Makes Marriage Work?

The general body of marriage research seems yet to achieve a union between empirical precision and conceptual meaning. Published accounts are either tight and illuminating conceptual discourses based on general impressions from a large amount of data and/or clinical experience (e.g., Haley, 1962 and 1963; Ryder, Kafka, and Olson, 1971), or dazzling arrays of data and statistics with no logical thread (e.g., Goodrich, Ryder, and Raush, 1968; Hooper and Sheldon, 1969). Nevertheless, the vast wealth of research on marriage, especially on courtship

and early marriage, seems loosely organized around one particular theme: What makes marriage work?

What is meant by "work" is variously described as marital happiness, marital adjustment or marital success, the three terms generally seeming interchangeable. Burgess and Cottrell (1939) defined marital adjustment as mutually satisfying patterns of behavior; Locke and Wallace (1959) described it in terms of the accommodation of husband and wife to each other; Locke earlier (1951) defined it in somewhat more detail to be the adaptation of husband and wife to each other so as to resolve conflict efficiently and promote mutual satisfaction in marriage. These are examples of the very general manner in which the variable of success or adjustment has been defined. Numerous marital adjustment scales have been used (e.g., Burgess and Cottrell, 1939; Locke, 1951; and Terman, 1939), the most popular appearing to be that developed by Locke and Wallace (1959) and which is considered to be of quite doubtful validity (Buros, 1965, p. 680).

Commitment would seem to be a crucial topic in any discussion of what makes marriage work. How it fits in is not currently known. In the proposed project what is meant by happiness, success, or adjustment will be described by the individual subjects; the investigator is attempting not to predefine the meaning.

Choice: Mate Selection

How members of a couple came to select one another and the resulting "fit" of the partners is the focus of a great deal of attention. There are two basic approaches here. One is a description of

how the partners fit together, the second a description of how they fit coupled with an assessment of how happy or adjusted they are, i.e., how does this fit work.

During the 1950's and early 1960's a spirited controversy took place in this area over homogamy (simplistically stated: likes attract likes) vs. complementarity (opposites attract). This literature has been a focus of at least one excellent review (Tharp, 1963) and will not be detailed here. Neither view has received overwhelming empirical support (Goodman, 1964; Marsh, 1971). Essentially, marital choice would seem far too complex a phenomenon to be dealt with adequately by any unidimensional scale or theory. The development of a type of personality profile of individual members of a couple on particular dimensions (e.g., dominance-submission) is the base for both homogamy and complementarity theories. Such individual profiles are too rigid to allow for the fluidity and subtlety inherent in the interactions of a couple. For example, can a woman who decides her husband will make the decisions in the family clearly be called submissive when it is she who has thus defined the relationship?

The present paper is vitally concerned with mate selection, that is, choice. The focus will be on the experience itself of making the choice, and no attempts will be made to evaluate the rightness of the choice.

Self-Image and Perceptions of the Other

What kind of person one feels one is would seem to influence the kind of commitment he or she would make. Much theorizing and

research has been done on self-concept, interpersonal perception, and marriage, although again the relationship to commitment has not been a focus.

To study marriage from the point of view of interpersonal perception is an attempt to consider the couple as an interacting unit and is thus a less rigid approach than those previously discussed. Assessments are variously made in these studies of self-concept (e.g., Corsini, 1956b; Dymond, 1953), perception of the partner's self-concept (e.g., Dymond, 1953; Luckey, 1960), ideal self- and perception of partner's ideal self-concepts (e.g., Weigel and Richardson, 1971), and role perceptions (e.g., Kotlar, 1965 and Ort, 1950). The various permutations of these are correlated with one another and the correlations (i.e., congruence or lack of congruence) correlated with marital success, happiness, or adjustment.

The instruments which have been used to tap self-concept and interpersonal perception include the MMPI, the Edwards Personal Preference Scale, Kelly's Personality Rating Scale (Kelly, 1941), and the Leary Interpersonal Check List (Leary, 1957). The usual procedure is to ask subjects to take the same questionnaire several times, each time adopting a different stance (point of view of self, of partner, of partner's view of self, etc.).

Major studies in this area are those of Kelly (1941); Ort (1950); Preston, Peltz, Mudd and Froscher (1952); Dymond (1953); Corsini (1956a, 1956b); Luckey (1960); and Kotlar (1965). The findings overall do not generally hang together neatly as each researcher appears to be interested in a slightly different focus. However, the general

thrust can be summarized by the conclusions reached by Dymond in her 1953 study: "In this kind of group (marital units) the general proposition was confirmed that accurate prediction of the partner's self-concept (which assumes high understanding of him) and satisfaction with the relationship occur together. Lasting love is not blind and ignorance is not bliss." (P. 344.)

The usual word of caution on drawing conclusions based on data obtained with questionably valid instruments is in order here. In her careful and lengthy critical review of self-concept measures, Wylie (1974) concludes (p. 315) that the state of the art is still very primitive and not getting better. Theoretical and methodological improvements are necessary in order to put the work on a more respectable scientific base.

Self-image and perceptions of the other are nevertheless of central importance in a discussion on marital commitment. The ways in which these may be related will be explored in the present project, with attention placed on perception of self as a partner in the relationship, expectations of self and the other, roles, and the various interpersonal perceptions.

Hypotheses

The study is exploratory in nature. It is designed to gather experiential data, and no definitive hypotheses are listed. Rather, the present purpose is to identify variables and develop a conceptual understanding of marital commitment.

III. METHOD

Subjects

Five couples are studied in depth, with the goal of obtaining an understanding of how the members view their commitment to one another. Two couples were engaged and got married during the study, one had chosen to live together and not marry at this time, one had been married five years, and one was divorced. Couples in these varied relationship states or stages were chosen in order to gain as full an understanding of the nature of marital commitment as possible.

All subjects were Caucasian and of middle socioeconomic status. Their ages ranged from 19 to 29. Subjects were offered a nominal payment for participating in the study, but half refused to accept it. There was no attempt to randomly select subjects for this, an initial exploratory study, as depth rather than breadth was desired.

Interview Technique

Subjects were interviewed both separately and together (with the exception of the members of the divorced couple, who, by mutual agreement, were interviewed only separately). The interviews, which were tape-recorded, were unstructured in form and covered those issues discussed in the introduction and any others which arose in the course of the conversations. Engaged, then married, couples were interviewed before and after the wedding in order to obtain the most complete information possible regarding their view of the commitment.

IV. RESULTS

Each couple's experience of the transition to legal marriage is somewhat different and contributes to the understanding of commitment, and an in-depth description is given of each.

John (Age 22) and Susan (Age 22)

John and Susan say they knew they would get married (i.e., would go through a legal ceremony) some 18 months before they actually did so, yet neither can pinpoint when the decision to marry was made, or even considered. Susan claims she knew they would eventually marry--"I never pushed it, I just knew"--when John flew to visit her during a summer vacation. Before John entered her life she had never thought marriage a possibility for her. John says he never did consider marriage in general or marrying Susan in particular, not at any point in their long friendship and dating relationship. "The idea (of marriage), once it was planted, was always there." But he does not know when or where or how the idea was planted. By the time they made the decision it had already been made, it was "just there."

Choice. The couple, then, apparently does not experience their marrying one another as a conscious choice. Neither had marriage in mind at the beginning of the friendship, nor as what they describe as a more casual relationship moved into dating and greater closeness. When pressed, however, both indicate that certain conditions did exist which allowed their continuing association and provided opportunities for possible growth of the relationship. "Just a lot of things that

we found we had in common that caused us to have more exposure to each other, and so from there, here we are."

Each transition--and John and Susan note movement from superficial contact to casual friendship, to dating, to more serious dating, to engagement, to marriage--was slow, gradual and imperceptible. There is a felt sense of "naturalness"; given that the two of them got together, it was the natural course of events that marriage would happen. Note that there seems to be little experienced control over those events, instead they both are moving slowly along on a comfortable course.

John and Susan claim, before and after the wedding, that indeed marriage constitutes no great difference for them. In paradoxical statements they say that marriage is "no big change" or "just a complete change in life-style," so that when they do view marrying as a change in their lives, they downplay the significance of it. After marriage, still paradoxically, they say, "There's a real lack of any great change," and "The only difference is we're together." Therefore, it would seem that not only do they not see themselves as making a clearcut decision regarding whether to marry, but that they also view that transition through the marriage ceremony as a simple and easy one.

Anxiety. Not experiencing their movement toward marriage as a clear decision, John and Susan also do not report anxiety or unease at any point during the evolving of their relationship toward and through the wedding. Susan notes that she is "excited but not nervous." John wonders why someone would be nervous.

Intimacy. John does not know how to understand the topic of getting closer to Susan. She was fun to be with and he liked to be

with her, and he supposes he realized he was getting closer to her when he began to miss her during their separations over school vacations. Susan cites opening up to John, especially revealing some uncomfortable feelings about her father, as her signal that she was getting closer to her partner. Neither member of the couple mentions sex when discussing closeness or any other topic.

Dependency. John and Susan view themselves as generally self-sufficient people. At the same time, they consider their dependency on one another an important aspect of their involvement. For John dependency is the core of commitment. Susan becomes angry when she considers John to be involving himself too much in her everyday business (she prefers self-sufficiency in that area), but likes her psychological and spiritual dependency on him.

Conflict. Susan and John like to see themselves as rational and as practical people. Therefore, open displays of anger or "temper" are not valued. Susan claims she has a "terrible time" with losing her temper--which seems to mean snapping at John--and it is the aspect of herself she dislikes the most. When she is angry with John, she withdraws and becomes conspicuously silent as a fairly purposive signal to him that "he has done something wrong." According to Susan, it is only after he senses she has calmed down that he begins asking her why she is upset. Her claim is that the period of silence is in order to protect her from sounding or being irrational and over-emotional, states which she very much dislikes in herself.

She thinks he finds her temper quite disturbing, while he says her upsets help to bring them closer together. Both agree that John is more rational and "easy-going"; he only criticizes her when she makes bad decisions (decisions which she feels are not his concern in any case). Each cites a different theme around which conflict frequently evolves, and the themes do not change after the wedding.

Commitment. A marital commitment seems to signal an immense involvement to both John and Susan. "It's total, every way," says John, with dependency as the core. Susan calls it a growth commitment, a promise to help each other become and attain the most that is possible.

These commitments do not become salient at the time of the marriage ceremony, they were made long before. Again, they feel natural to John and Susan; there is no sense of effort in deciding upon or living out their promises to one another. There is a sense of finding or discovering the commitment, rather than of determining it.

Ken (Age 22) and Jeannette (Age 19)

Ken and Jeannette formed a close, "symbiotic" (Jeannette's term) relationship fairly early. Both considered themselves loners who had little time for or interest in many people, and they developed a somewhat isolated relationship involving activities--mostly studying together--with each other alone. Their decision to marry was made within five months after they met, initially planned for two or three years in the future. They married when they had known each other a little over one year.

Choice. Both cite a careful, conscious decision to marry: "We don't like to jump into anything." However, Ken's description of his actions contradicts this claim. He surprised both of them by suddenly and without forethought proclaiming his love for Jeannette three months after they had met. In fact, he says that he himself did not know he loved her before he stated so. Jeannette was "scared to death" by this announcement, and she did not initially respond, beginning instead a one-month careful consideration of her feelings for Ken.

Jeannette weighed, "analyzed," how she felt toward Ken, asking herself whether it might be an infatuation and taking a wait-and-see attitude. During this period of time she fantasized about marriage, and by the end of the month decided that she, too, loved Ken. For her, this was the strongest commitment she expects to make. Love and marriage go together to Jeannette, so there was no separate choice for marriage. She expected the relationship to continue to be very involving, with the couple spending most of their time together.

Ken began to seriously consider marriage about four or five months after they met. Again, he calls this a careful and studied decision, but his description shows some impulsiveness. The two of them were arguing a great deal and Ken decided to terminate the relationship because of the constant "hassling." During the following two days he felt lost and lonesome and found himself "back on her doorstep apologizing." Somehow by then he had decided in favor of marriage and began to bring up the topic for discussion.

He states that he did weigh several considerations. For example, she is young. Ken states, however, that he has been looking for a wife since he was 18 and that Jeannette fits all his requirements. They complement each other, and have similar tastes and similar likes.

This couple made two separate decisions regarding marriage: The first to get married eventually, the second to marry quite soon. They are both near the beginning of their college years (he is a freshman, she a sophomore), are strongly determined to finish without a break, and devote large amounts of time to studying. Therefore, they are in a poor position financially. Nevertheless, they went ahead and married, are living in the basement of Ken's parents' house and are supported in every way by his parents.

Before marriage Jeannette was living with her parents and claims that she had a nervous condition aggravated by conflict with her stepfather. Her doctor finally strongly advised her to move from the family home, and Ken and Jeannette consider that marriage was the ideal solution, the "only solution." This second decision, then, was made with less studied consideration, though Jeannette still says that she and Ken and Ken's parents analyzed the situation carefully. Before the wedding she states that she can cope with anything in that house because Ken's parents "aren't dictators." Ken claims that if Jeannette had not had problems with her step-father and needed to move from his house, they nevertheless would have married very soon.

Anxiety. Ken was in a turmoil over the original decision to marry, which he places as occurring during the two days after he terminated the relationship. His feelings, of course, were mixed with the felt anxiety of choosing whether to return to the relationship and eventually marriage, and the loneliness and pain of facing the possibility of not being with Jeannette. Jeannette, on the other hand, claims to not have felt any discomfort while deciding whether she loved--and therefore would marry--Ken. She states that she did not hurry herself and was not hurried by Ken, and therefore did not feel pressured.

Both were "nervous" the day of the wedding, but this was over the "big production," as both claim they had long since made their commitments to one another.

Conflict. There is a fair amount of conflict throughout Ken and Jeannette's relationship. After the marriage ceremony, Ken claimed that he had been purposefully picking arguments with Jeannette in order to "test" her, and that he no longer does so after marriage. Jeannette says that she feels quarreling is healthy. "If you don't have little arguments and discussions to dissipate the tensions you will have a bad fight." She feels there is a calm after the argument is over.

The central issue in conflict between the two of them seems to be that of who is in control. Jeannette is resentful over what she sees as her stepfather's domination of her and her mother, and will resist ("I dig in my heels") any move from Ken which she sees as commanding. At the same time, Ken does often take an authoritative

stand on issues and tends to see Jeannette's response as irrational ("but eventually I'll get her rational"). Nevertheless, both cite as a major attraction to one another the fact that each will stand up to the other.

However, the issue is immensely complicated by relationships with the couple's parents. Before marriage, Jeannette was eager to move from her family home into that of Ken. After marriage, she cites numerous complaints regarding the situation in Ken's home, again the central issue seeming to be control. The parents are completely supporting the newly-married couple--and will be for two or three years--and seem to be similarly involved in other aspects of Ken and Jeannette's lives. Jeannette does not deal directly with the parents, instead withdrawing and complaining to Ken. "Don't you dare tell your mother," she instructs him, at the same time setting him up to do so. Ken is very much caught in the middle, continually hearing complaints from both sides and relaying messages. By now, Jeannette is claiming that the situation in her own family home was bad, but not this bad.

Therefore, there is after marriage very little conflict between the couple per se. According to Ken and Jeannette, everything would be perfect if only they had their "own little place." Any tension is seen as due to "the situation," and little responsibility is taken for seeing and resolving issues between the two of them.

Commitment. Despite the conflict in their living arrangement, both Ken and Jeannette state they are strongly committed to one

another. The wedding itself, the public acknowledgement of their relationship, "locked in" and solidified the commitment. In addition, for Ken the spiritual aspect was important: "It was saying it out loud in front of God that meant something." Nevertheless, both insist that had they not married at all they would be just as strongly committed.

Matthew (Age 24) and Beth (Age 20)

Matthew and Beth have chosen to live together and not marry at this time. She is a student and receives financial aid which would be discontinued if she were to marry Matthew, who is a professional and well able to support her and her daughter by a previous marriage (she is widowed). Both cite the financial practicality--Beth wishes to maintain this income--as the only reason they are living together and not married. Both claim that the relationship progressed rapidly--they made the decision to move into a house together about 3½ months after they began dating. At the time of the interviews, Matthew and Beth had been sharing one residence for four months, and seemed to be in a fairly difficult period of adjustment to one another. Beth revealed in several different ways her fear of suddenly being left by Matthew--which seems likely related to her experience of the sudden death of her husband. What was to be Matthew's role with the two-year-old child was a central issue, with Beth seemingly reluctant to let go enough to share care of the youngster with him.

Choice. Matthew and Beth cite as the turning point in their relationship the actual decision to move to a house. Although Matthew had been staying most of the time with Beth in her apartment,

he had maintained a separate residence and could have returned to it. Renting a house meant giving up both separate residences and beginning a new, shared life: it symbolized the commitment for both of them.

Beth considered the decision for about two months. She was aware she would be giving up the first freedom she had had, as she was married at age 18 and a mother fairly soon after. She was exceedingly solicitous about Matthew's relationship with her daughter. The child grew to love him quickly, and this influenced Beth's decision; she felt that the move would be good for her daughter. Beth talks of her choice and commitment primarily in terms of giving up her freedom. Although she wants and expects Matthew to remain with her in a marital relationship or a "marriage-like relationship," she is afraid he will not. She is afraid of being dependent on him, worried that he will not continue to support her. Thus, her expectations seem couched in negative and conflictual terms.

Matthew does not discuss the choice in terms of giving up anything, in fact states that he feels he gained rather than sacrificed. He says he simply enjoyed being with Beth more than with other women. He did not have as good a time with others as he does with her. Her maturity, seriousness and ambition attracted him quite early, and he speaks of Beth with admiration. Matthew was in an important transition in his life when he met Beth, having recently finished school and moved from another state to accept a professional job. "And Beth just became part of that new life." Most of the friends he was making were married, and she fit in well with them. Matthew's pride in Beth is again evident as he talks of her relationship with his friends.

Further, Matthew claims to have been "ready" to marry in any case. So given his pleasure in being with Beth, his choice to make what he sees as a solid, long-term commitment to her seems to have been made fairly simply and comfortably.

Anxiety. Beth states that she was very "uptight" while deciding whether to live with Matthew. The confusion lasted two months, during and after the decision had been made: "I wasn't sure whether I should go back on it or I should stick with it." She was concerned about her deceased husband's parents possibly trying to get custody of her daughter, and concerned about how Matthew felt about the child. But most of all she was concerned about the possibility of Matthew's leaving her after they had moved together. She cannot afford the house herself, and Beth therefore knew that choosing to live with Matthew put her in a vulnerable position.

Matthew did not report anxiety while deciding to live with Beth. "I just got to the point where I thought that she meant enough to me, and I felt that I meant enough to her that it was foolish for us to go on like we were." And, "When you're old enough to get interested in the opposite sex, everybody says, all the guys say, 'Well, I'm not going to get married,' but when you find a girl that you want to hold onto, things work out and it's all for the best."

Conflict. Beth considers herself short-tempered, and says she "throws her temper off" at Matthew, but not at her child. Matthew calls this her bitchiness, and says it is especially evident when Beth is under pressure. He claims that he himself has a terrible temper which he has learned to control.

A major conflict area is around the child, especially regarding discipline. It appears that Beth is reluctant to give up some of the specialness of an exclusive relationship with her daughter, and is somewhat unwilling to admit Matthew into their relationship. Further, she claims that she is afraid of losing her temper and actually abusing the child. She therefore tends to be permissive, while Matthew pushes for stronger limits.

Both Matthew and Beth tend to express their anger fairly directly, not withdrawing or saving up hurts for later battles.

Commitment. Both claim to have solid, long-term commitments to the relationship. Beth is concerned regarding what Matthew's commitment is to her daughter, and seems to have a hard time accepting his reassurance regarding this. Matthew says that financially taking care of Beth and the child is not an expression of his commitment, but just one of the responsibilities that goes with the commitment.

Larry (Age 29) and Gwen (Age 29)

Larry and Gwen were divorced after almost nine years of marriage. The description each gives of the commitment to one another, and how he or she withdrew that commitment differ markedly. Larry in fact claims to have never been invested or committed to Gwen or to the relationship, a position of which Gwen is not aware. Early in the marriage, according to both, they adopted a pattern in which Larry was passive and generally withdrawn and Gwen more active and invested. Larry's passivity came to be greatly exaggerated, with his "not being able to" make even a small decision such as what to have for dinner.

Gwen's acceptance of him and tolerance of nearly any situation were also quite exaggerated. He expresses surprise at her lack of expectations, and she claims that a couple who is committed can make it through anything.

Choice. Gwen and Larry met early in their freshman year at a small, church-connected college, and began "going steady" within a week. Gwen already had what she considered high standards for any prospective husband, and Larry met them easily, he was "perfect." Therefore, the decision to marry him was already made, as far as she was concerned.

Larry talks immediately about his passivity, claiming that he was young and insecure and away from home for the first time. He liked being with Gwen and figured that "when you grow up and somebody loves you, then you get married." So when she brought up the idea of marriage, he "went along with it." He felt he dare not hurt her, a theme which was to recur continually throughout their relationship, but of which she seems to have never been aware. Since they had religious scruples against premarital sex, they did not long delay their wedding, and were married at age 19.

Gwen's decision, then, was regarding whether or not Larry met her standards, while Larry carefully did not make a definitive decision. Both seemed to accept marriage as an inevitability in life, with little personal thought about what it entailed. She would choose to move into a marital relationship with whomever met her criteria; he, through his passivity, would accept the manner in which she structured the decisions.

Gwen in fact was apparently attracted to a man who would allow her to thus construct the relationship. While Gwen was then accepting of her mate, Larry very much resented the situation he felt he had drifted into. Thus, each dealt very differently with the consequences of the decision or nondecision.

Communication. Gwen claims that their communication was very good in most areas, yet her story and his, told in separate interviews, rarely jibe. She assumed many things,--e.g., the nature of his commitment--and Larry acknowledges that he did not let her in on his thinking, again so as not to hurt her.

Separation. Larry says he became increasingly withdrawn from Gwen and noninvested over many years. He did not at any time initiate discussion regarding his discontent, instead waiting for her to "draw him out." She did so once every few years, usually surprised that he was not happy. Finally, after 7½ years he admitted to her that he did not care for her. Still thinking they would eventually work out the problems, Gwen moved into the second bedroom "to shock him." It was 15 months more before the divorce was actually final. They retained separate bedrooms for five months, at which point she moved out. For the next four months they met weekly to discuss how the separation was going; after that they ceased seeing each other. Larry contacted a lawyer about three months later, and they were officially divorced after the requisite three months.

Transition toward divorce was also marked with Larry's passivity. He claims that he considered the marriage finished at the time

he expressed his lack of caring for Gwen, but he neglected to tell her that. She refused to make the moves toward actual divorce--she did not want a divorce--and Larry delayed for over a year, again in order not to hurt her. Gwen accepted Larry's termination of the relationship with anger and depression, but accept it she did. "Nobody owns anybody else." In fact, she claims to be somewhat proud of him for breaking out of his passivity and going ahead with divorce.

Children. Larry was wary of anything which might bind him to Gwen, but she wanted children. He went along with this, telling himself he would push his feelings of discontent out of his mind, "because people tell me it's a good marriage, so it must be." However, the couple was unable to conceive. Gwen says that this upset Larry; he says he was relieved. It was at the point that medical treatment of the problem in conception was proving to be effective that Larry finally decided "I had to get out."

Conflict. Larry says that he was too noninvested to work up to an argument, and Gwen also states that their lack of conflict was a sign of noninvolvement. Their very first "disagreement" after marriage was in fact over Larry's passivity, when he neglected to make a decision regarding where to go the coming weekend.

Commitment. Gwen had a clear idea what her commitment was, expected Larry's to be the same, and assumed that it was. The commitment was to a "continuance of the relationship," "to love him, to be a wife and friend and companion to him, to build a home with him and

a life, to grow together." Larry is emphatic in his statement that he never made a commitment to the relationship, rather his commitment was--finally--to divorce. He remembers saying to himself right after the wedding ceremony, "What have you done? What have you gotten yourself in for?" and quickly adopting a habit of keeping his hand in a pocket in order to hide his wedding ring.

Pete (Age 28) and Eileen (Age 28)

Pete and Eileen have been married for five years and have two children. They claim that their commitment has changed little over the period of time they have been married, that it was strong in the beginning and has remained so.

Choice. The couple began dating steadily two weeks after they met, and neither ever went out with someone else again. Pete was quickly supportive of Eileen, who describes herself as insecure and fairly dependent at the time.

At age 22, Eileen still lived in her family home, where her father was quite controlling and demanding. About four months after they started dating, Eileen and Pete began to discuss the possibility of her moving, too, when Pete left to go to a separate city. The tentative plan was for her to obtain a job and an apartment of her own. This decision was the major one for both of them, since it entailed a complete severance of relations with Eileen's father. For her, it would be an exceedingly strong expression of commitment as she had never before gone against her father's wishes. For Pete, too, it would be a significant expression of commitment since he felt

a great sense of responsibility for Eileen thus cut off from her family. Eileen did leave and moved to the new city. (Her father has not spoken to them since and in fact refuses to see his grandchildren.)

Pete does not see the decision as having been a clear-cut choice. He knew he wanted Eileen, and beyond that simply did what he had to. "There were no other choices. This is what I want, and this is what I can do to get it."

The decision to go ahead and marry was quite secondary. They married a few months after the move to the new city, the actual wedding hastened by Pete's induction into the military. Pete says that for him the commitment was set long before marriage. Eileen states that she had always wanted marriage and children, and it was a matter of finding the right person.

Anxiety. Eileen felt a great deal of turmoil at the time of making the decision to leave her family home. Afterward, the turmoil continued, but it was different; she became quite dependent on Pete, binding him to her in any way possible. She stated that even though they had not discussed it at the time, she knew when she left her parents' home that she and Pete would marry.

Pete's anxiety came more after the move was completed and before the marriage ceremony. Once she was established in her own apartment he began to fear that she would become interested in other men and no longer want to be with him. However, she instead became rather insistently dependent on him and he was quickly locked in to

fulfilling the responsibilities which he saw as going with his decision for her to move with him.

Conflict. Initial conflict after the couple moved and during the first years of marriage centered around Eileen's dependency. She would "blow up" easily, wanting Pete to always be with her (and to want to be with her). Paradoxically, she found it difficult to accept his commitment to her. He felt quite pressured and smothered but generally kept his feelings inside. Gradually over years she has gained confidence in her own abilities and is now less demanding of Pete. He has expressed his need to be by himself or with other people at times (a big step, he says), and there is less frightened demanding and fewer outbursts.

Commitment. Pete and Eileen both state that their commitment to one another has changed little over the course of their relationship thus far, and indicate that this is probably unusual for married couples. They say that "because of the circumstances" they were strongly committed to one another from early in the relationship, and that that commitment has remained. Even with the addition of children to the family there is no major change they say.

V. THE CONCEPT OF MARITAL COMMITMENT-- DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The concept of marital commitment with its variables is thus quite complex and, for the most part, idiosyncratic to a particular individual. One major goal of the investigation is to describe the commitment from the individuals' point of view; a second is to discuss the more general findings and is the focus of the present discussion.

It seems that in general one does not consciously make a commitment. Rather, over a period of time--how long varies from person to person--the commitment is discovered. One finds himself living out his commitment to another person, acting in ways which express that commitment, and typically can not pinpoint a time when the bond was made.

The wedding ceremony itself was not cited by any of the subjects in the present study as constituting a definitive transition point. At most, it was a public affirmation of promises the couple had already--at times long since--exchanged with one another. This open expression perhaps served to solidify the commitment, but it was a commitment already discovered and acknowledged.

Elements and means of expressing the commitment also vary markedly. Where a person found it possible to describe the nature of his or her commitment, terms such as "growth," "continuance," "forever," "be together" are used. Remaining together over time is

generally either stated or assumed. Particular responsibilities are sometimes mentioned as expressions of the commitment, and sometimes as activities that go along with the commitment.

There is tremendous variation in the experience of deciding to remain with one person over a long period of time. For many the choice feels simple and natural, for others there is turmoil and a clear recognition of what one is giving up in order to remain with a particular partner.

The issues of what one gives up and what one gains are interesting ones. Matthew and Pete, for example, both talk in terms of wanting to be with their partners and do not feel that there are also sacrifices involved. What they give up is not what they want in any case. Jeannette, on the other hand, considered the other relationships she would be foregoing, yet came to much the same resolution: compared to Ken she did not want the others. John and Susan both feel their relationship moved slowly and naturally toward legal marriage. Therefore, neither choosing to enter into a marital relationship, nor choosing to marry a particular partner is always experienced as a clear transition point in which one decides on a particular alternative and thereby gives up others.

Thus, the anxiety which might be expected to be part of a choice for a new and different life-style--which also closes the possibility of others--is frequently not experienced. Interestingly, although Jeannette did consider hers a careful and conscious decision, she did not report anxiety during the one month period of reflection.

For her, anxiety is connected with pressure, and so long as she felt she could take her time in deciding, she did not experience anxiety.

What about making the "wrong" decision, thereby closing off avenues which may have proved more satisfying or productive? This seemed not to be a worry for these couples. Perhaps the couples in the present study are accepting and comfortable with the risks inherent in any decision, or perhaps, as Ryder, Kafka, and Olson (1971) say, they are not cognizant of the seriousness of the step. Larry seemed to have had a dim awareness that entering into a marital union was not what he wanted to do, but he refused to take an active part in making a decision and living with the resulting consequences.

For Larry, and for many of the other subjects (Jeannette, Ken, Matthew, Gwen, Eileen), there is a sense of inevitability regarding the state of being married. These people expected--with pleased anticipation, neutral acceptance, or resignation--to eventually marry. Matthew, for example, felt "ready" to marry and was delighted to have met Beth whom he admired and who fit well in his life-style. For these persons (with the exception, perhaps of Jeannette) the decision to marry sounds almost arbitrary, and they seem to find it difficult to discuss the experience in terms of choosing.

Therefore, it could perhaps be said that these individuals felt determined, as opposed to free, in choosing. However, this is not the reported experience. Perhaps the issue of freewill versus determinism is one which fascinates philosophers but with which people in general are not concerned. The experience is of constraint (Larry) or lack of constraint, within the certainty of getting married.

Intimacy or closeness seemed to be a topic with which the subjects were puzzled. "Since we are planning to be married (or are married), isn't it obvious that we're close?" appeared to be their attitude. Again, this is evidence of a felt naturalness. Neither could they describe how they grew closer, or by what means they were aware they were becoming close. Susan was able to cite self-disclosure as a sign of closeness, but most subjects could not pinpoint any particular indicators.

Whether or not to eventually have children played no role in any couple's decision except that of Pete and Eileen (who simply assumed they would at some time in the future). Both engaged couples, in fact, stated that there was a strong likelihood that they would elect never to have children; in any case, it was not a decision to be dealt with now. This is evidence that the close tie throughout history and across cultures between marriage and children can no longer be assumed. Couples are now frequently marrying for reasons other than raising a family.

There is no clear relationship between commitment and conflict--neither styles of conflict resolution nor themes of conflict. For example, Larry, with no commitment, and Jeannette and Susan, with strong commitments, all withdraw at the possibility of conflict. It is reasonable that those with strong commitments would feel safer in dealing with discord, since it would threaten the relationship less; this is sometimes the case and sometimes not.

In brief, then, there are two central findings which lend cohesiveness to a conceptual description of marital commitment:

(1) A commitment arises through one's experiences, and is discovered and lived out, rather than consciously chosen.

(2) The experience of the transition to legal marriage is idiosyncratic to the particular person.

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