

BRIEF REPORT

Testing the Popular Belief That Men Have Commitment Issues

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HIGHLIGHTS

Big data affirms that ‘fear of commitment’ is generally higher in men than women, but younger and older groups of both men and women also show lower relationship readiness.

ABSTRACT

A sample of 36,592 online daters provided data on Commitment Readiness defined as “an individual’s desire and readiness to commit exclusively to one romantic partner” in relation to Age, Gender, and Parental Status (singles with and without children). Consistent with previous research, the women scored higher on Commitment Readiness than did the men. Furthermore, Age and Commitment Readiness showed a strong inverted U-shaped relation, with younger and older respondents scoring lower on Commitment Readiness as compared to individuals aged 31–60 years old. Interestingly, Commitment Readiness evidenced neither a significant effect of Parental Status nor an interaction of Gender by Parental Status. Besides the theoretical import of these results, our study illustrates the potential power of Internet research and provides a curious counterexample to criticisms of over-reliance on significance levels for correlational data.

KEYWORDS

Commitment readiness, gender differences, invented syndromes, pop psychology

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‘Fact,’ physically speaking, is the ultimate residue after human purposes, desires, emotions, and ideas and ideals have been systematically excluded. A social ‘fact,’ on the other hand, is a concretion in external form of precisely these human factors.

— John Dewey (1931/1985, p. 64)

Google the phrase ‘fear of commitment in men’ and more than 124 million entries emerge that frequently offer clinical tips and relationship advice on this topic, which clearly exists in popular (pop) culture as a ‘social fact.’ Of course, an important question for social scientists,

clinicians, and the general public should be whether this popular belief has objective support or rather represents an invented syndrome (e.g., Lack & Rousseau, 2020) or a gender myth or stereotype (e.g., Slobodin & Davidovitch, 2019). Moreover, the plethora of online content about reputed commitment issues in men seems to underscore the trend for many people to use internet sources to self-diagnose or self-treat a variety of psychological or medical maladies (Alhusseini et al., 2020; Finney Rutten et al., 2019; Forkner-Dunn, 2003). We thus aimed to test this popular belief as part of our general research on the veracity of certain ‘pop psychology—medicine’ beliefs and concepts (see also Lange et al., 2022).



OPERATIONALIZING FEAR OF COMMITMENT

We define fear of commitment (FOC) as an ambivalence or lack of desire to commit exclusively to one romantic partner. While several factors are hypothesized to contribute to a willingness to commit, relatively few empirical studies have focused on romantic relationships. Our definition was inspired by the work of Arriaga and Agnew (2001), which tested Rusbult's notion that the commitment construct involves three factors: (a) long-term orientation, (b) intention to persist, and (c) psychological attachment (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993). They reported that with dating couples there is evidence of the predictive capabilities of all three factors in relation to level of couple functioning and eventual breakup status. Long-term orientation, in particular, appeared to figure heavily in the maintenance of relationships over time. We should note that this theoretical approach is likewise appropriate for the study of interpersonal domains (Tran et al., 2019). Moreover, the commitment construct plays a significant role in 'couple identity clarity' or the extent to which individuals in a romantic relationship believe they are a couple. Couple identity clarity is important because it influences partner perceptions of their affiliation and relationship persistence (Emery et al., 2021).

Adams and Jones (1997) sought to measure the relationship between three commitment constructs—i.e., commitment to spouse, commitment to marriage, and feelings of entrapment—and a variety of demographic characteristics such as educational level, income level, length of relationship, and number of children. They found the majority of demographic variables achieved significant correlation with commitment to marriage scores, and that education and income levels predicted scores on the feelings of entrapment measure. While length of relationship and number of children were unrelated to fear of entrapment scores, number of children was significantly and inversely related to commitment to spouse scores. Recent research suggests complex between factors such as these influence decisions to stay/leave relationships and can motivate individuals to remain in unrewarding relationships for the sake of their romantic partner (Joel et al., 2018).

In comparing male and female perceptions of romantic relationships, Sweet (1995) found that—contrary to previous research and theory on male experience—few men mentioned fear of intimacy or fear of being controlled. Moreover, about the same number of women reported these feelings as did the men in the study. However, significantly more men than women expressed fear of commitment ($p < .01$), among other factors. Sweet also analyzed the reasons

men gave for why they experience fear in relationships within the context of sex role expectations. Men expressed anxiety over their perceived need to be the dominant partner and to be in control of and responsible for making decisions in the relationship, according to social mores.

Similarly, Schmitt et al. (2003) studied the 'dismissing' form of adult romantic attachment orientation across 62 cultural regions. This refers to an avoidance of close personal relationships and the tendency to prevent romantic disappointment by maintaining a sense of relational independence and emotional distance (Bartholomew, 1990; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). A major finding from this robust study was that "men are more dismissing than women in almost all cultures, but these differences are usually quite small in magnitude" (p. 322). Divergences like these between males and females are important in several ways. For example, men tend to regard their romantic partner as their principal source of social support. In contrast, women draw on a broader range of support mechanisms (Dykstra & Fokkema, 2007). Accordingly, romantic partnership is generally more beneficial to men's well-being than women's (Stronge et al., 2019; Taylor, 2011).

PRESENT STUDY AND METHOD

We aimed to replicate and extend the limited literature that suggests an increased propensity for men to report certain commitment issues (including FOC) compared to women. Jerabek, Jacobson, and Tidman constructed a 12-item, self-report 'Commitment Readiness Test' for use as an online psychological measure (2000, unpublished online psychological test, PsychTests.com, Canada). The test items used were selected to represent real-life, situational scenarios. For example, respondents are asked to imagine being in a particular situation and pick the answer that best matches their most probable behavior in such circumstances.

The item pool was created following an extensive analysis of available literature on the topic and with the intent to represent a cross-section of factors contributing to an individual's desire and readiness to commit exclusively to one romantic partner. Higher scores ostensibly represent an increased desire and readiness to commit, whereas lower scores are said to reflect an ambivalence or lack of desire to commit exclusively to one romantic partner, i.e., a greater FOC. The test was originally validated on an online sample of 29,679 respondents ($M_{age} = 22.6$ yrs, $SD = 7.7$). Jerabek et al. (2000, above) reported a Cronbach's alpha of 0.80 for the test.

A seven-item short form of this Commitment Readiness Test was later incorporated into a proprietary

romantic compatibility matching system (Lange et al., 2005–2006). Representative items from this shortened form include: “I’m comfortable with the idea of being with one person for the rest of my life (five-point Likert scale anchored by Strongly Agree and Strongly Disagree) and “I believe that a couple should spend X of their free time together” (six options anchored by 0–10% and 91–100%). Subsequently, we were given research access to data from a large sample of individuals ($n = 36,592$) who had used an online relationship-building service. This provided the opportunity to examine the FOC concept relative to Age ($M = 32$ yrs; *Median* = 29.0 yrs; $SD = 11.5$; range = 17–101 yrs), Gender (18,235 women; 18,357 men), and Parental Status (9,984 Singles with Children; 26,608 Singles Without Children). No other demographics were available for our sample.

RESULTS AND CONCLUSION

The Commitment Readiness variable ($M = 83.2$, $SD = 14.8$) as expressed on a normalized scale with scores ranging from 0 to 100 was subjected to a Gender x Parent (No vs. Yes) Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA), using respondents’ age in years as a covariate. Acceptable model fit was obtained ($F_{22268,14319} = 0.88$) and statistically significant effects of age and gender were found.¹ In particular, Commitment Readiness tended to increase with age ($B = 0.35$, $SE_B = 0.007$, $t_{\infty} = 46.67$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.056$)—i.e., with each year of age, respondents’ Commitment Readiness increased by about 0.35 scale units.

It is important to note that this finding does not hold for older respondents, i.e., those over 60 years of age. While there are relatively few such cases ($n = 611$, or 1.7%), the plot of the average Commitment Readiness by Age in Figure 1 shows a marked *decrease* in the older respondents’ scores on Commitment Readiness. That is, age and Commitment Readiness show an inverted U-shaped relation as witnessed by the finding of a powerful (negative) quadratic component ($t_{\infty} = -18.66$, $p < .001$). Since we are not aware of any previous studies that have reported such an effect, we would be interested in receiving any information that bears on this finding.

Consistent with previous studies (e.g., Schmitt et al., 2003; Sweet, 1995), the women generally expressed a greater Commitment Readiness than did the men ($M = 84.7$ vs. 81.9, $F_{1,36587} = 278.10$, $MS_e = 200.04$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.008$).² Despite the large sample size, the ANCOVA showed neither a main effect for being a Parent ($F_{1,36587} = 2.11$, $p > 0.10$) nor a Gender x Parent interaction ($F_{1,36587} = 0.62$). This suggests, somewhat in contrast to the findings of Adams and Jones (1997),

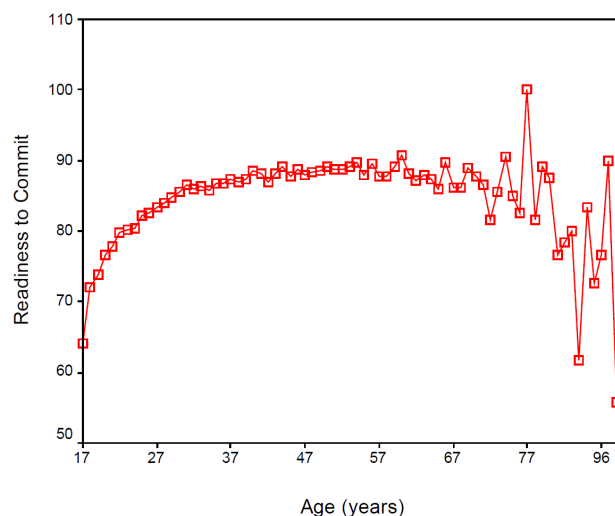


Figure 1. Average readiness to commit by age in years.

that the presence of children does *not* play a significant role in determining Commitment Readiness in a romantic relationship for either our male or female respondents.

DISCUSSION

Our results affirm that a lower Commitment Readiness (and an associated higher FOC) in men versus women is more than a social fact—this gender difference seems to be a legitimate effect. That said, large samples do not automatically overcome the problem of self-selection of participants. While this is a concern in any study, we have confidence in the present findings as they conceptually replicate prior gender differences in this domain (cf. Schmitt et al., 2003). However, our data also unexpectedly implicated respondent Age as a significant moderator of Commitment Readiness/FOC. This suggests that commitment issues focus on (a) men and (b) those over 60 years old (both men and women). However, additional research is needed to see if the patterns observed here pertain primarily to the attitudes of singles who use online dating or whether similar trends also extend to the general public and cross-cultural contexts.

Also needed are rigorous investigations of the extent to which similar-appearing concepts overlap with FOC, namely Fear of Intimacy, Fear of Entrapment, and Dismissing Attachment Orientations. In this context, studies should also examine the idea of Commitment Readiness or an individual’s degree of willingness to develop a close romantic relationship. Recent work has indeed demonstrated that commitment readiness in single (unpartnered) people influences their pursuit of

a relationship and the likelihood of future relationship initiation. The construct also likely interacts with anxieties about longer-term involvement, intimacy, entrapment, etc. (Hadden & Agnew, 2020; Hadden et al., 2018).

Finally, future research should explore the root causes of gender (and age) differences in FOC and related constructs. Evolutionary perspectives on courtship and rejection in humans offers a viable framework here. This view stresses the different resources that men and women traditionally contribute to producing offspring (Buss, 1988). As a result, FOC and commitment readiness might show differential patterns with perceptions of good health, youthfulness, and fertility in women versus physical dominance, ambition, and socioeconomic status in men (see, e.g., Whitty, 2004).

IMPLICATIONS AND APPLICATIONS

Putative evidence favoring assumptions and ideas that are engrained in cultural beliefs systems or endorsed by pop psychology does not correspondingly validate publicly available information or advice about those concepts. Thus, any proposed clinical counseling or other psychological guidance should also be carefully scrutinized by researchers to assess the accuracy of information and efficacy of treatment recommendations. This will become increasingly important as the public continues to turn to online sources of expert insights and diagnosis criteria to support their psychological and medical self-management.

On a more conceptual level, the large sample of respondents used here casts an interesting light on Meehl's (1990) contention that large databases always inflate small effects or artifacts to statistical significance (see also Standing et al., 1991). Specifically, our study provides an interesting counterexample to the argument against the process of null hypothesis testing. The enormous statistical power afforded by our substantial sample did not yield significant associations among all of the variables—a finding contrary to Meehl's assertion (1990) that “everything correlates to some extent with everything else” (p. 204). At the same time, the relatively small portions of the variance that are explained by age and gender support the notion that large samples may be needed to obtain replicable findings in social science research.

NOTES

¹ Not surprising given the sample size, the observed power for $p < .05$ was essentially perfect (i.e., 1.00) for all effects, except for the Gender x Parent interaction (power = 0.16).

² Readiness to commit was evaluated at age 31.

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