

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

Romantic relationships are multi-dimensional and complex phenomena that develop over time as two people through their shared interactions become interdependent (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993). Commitment is an integral component of romantic relationships and dating is the primary means of getting to know another person and deciding whether to risk a long-term connection (Surra & Hughes, 1997).

Over the past three decades, much has been written about relational commitment. Commitment has been defined as the willingness to maintain a relationship with a partner (Sternberg, 1987); a psychological attachment to a partner and the desire to sustain a long-term relationship (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993); and the continuation of a relationship due to personal dedication (Forste & Tanfer, 1996). A number of researchers have formulated scales or developed typologies that delineate characteristics or dimensions of commitment. For example, Fehr (1988) found in a prototype analysis that commitment includes loyalty, trust, and honesty; while Aron and Westbay (1996) concluded after a similar investigation that mutual dependency, devotion, and the desire for a long-term relationship are dimensions of commitment.

Three models have emerged to explain commitment. Levinger's Cohesiveness Model focuses on the positive and negative attitudes an individual has toward his or her partner and their relationship (Levinger, 1979a). Levinger proposes that relationship cohesiveness, the decision to continue a relationship, is determined by attractions, barriers which prevent an individual from discontinuing a relationship, and

availability of alternative partners (Levinger, 1979b). Johnson's Framework of Commitment explains the decision to maintain or terminate a relationship from the perspective of three types of commitment: personal commitment -- whether an individual wants to continue the relationship; moral commitment -- whether an individual ought to continue the relationship; and structural commitment -- whether an individual has to continue the relationship (Johnson, 1991). Johnson's model also considers the social context in which a relationship develops. Rusbult's Investment Model posits that an individual's dependency on and commitment to a relationship is a function of relational satisfaction -- an examination of the costs versus the rewards of a relationship, alternatives -- an evaluation of alternatives to the present relationship, and investments -- an assessment of what could be lost if the relationship was dissolved (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993). All three models rely on interdependence theory and collectively suggest that an individual's commitment to a romantic relationship is influenced by rewards, costs, investments, alternatives, and barriers (Kurdek, 1995).

Although these and other studies have advanced knowledge of commitment as a relational property, most research results rest on the experiences of Caucasian samples (Duffy & Rusbult, 1986; Feinlee, 1995; Goldsmith & Baxter, 1996; Leslie, Huston, & Johnson, 1986; Mills, Daly, Longmore, & Kilbride, 1995; Rubin, Peplau, & Hill, 1981; Rusbult, Johnson, & Morrow, 1986; Sprecher & Feinlee, 1995). Research on individuals from diverse racial or ethnic backgrounds is needed to further inform the literature.

The purpose of this study was to provide needed baseline information on commitment in the romantic relationships of African-American women and men in

young adulthood. Young adults were selected as informants for this project because they are in the process of forming their identity as independent persons; while at the same time learning to develop and maintain close personal relationships that require some measure of dependence (Moss & Schwebel, 1993).

This research explored commitment from the perspective of interdependence theory. From this theoretical perspective, relational commitment is a function of investments extended, rewards received, barriers erected, costs experienced, and relational alternatives available. Young adults are assumed to derive their beliefs about commitment within the context of past, present, and anticipated interactions with family, peers, and romantic partners (Rusbult & Arriaga, 1997). The following research questions guided this study:

1. What meanings do African-American men and women ascribe to commitment -- how do they define commitment and what are their expectations regarding commitment?
2. What meanings do African-American men and women attach to relational dimensions important to the process of commitment as derived from interdependence theory?
3. What sources have assisted African-American women and men in developing expectations for how partners should behave in a committed relationship?

## CHAPTER TWO

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

#### Theoretical Perspective

The theory that guided this research was interdependence theory. Interdependence theory derives from exchange theory and focuses on the interaction between partners and how those interactions influence each partner's outcomes (Kelley, 1979; Kelley & Thibault, 1978). Exchange theories are based on the premise that the interaction of relational partners occurs within the context of partner assessments of costs and rewards, with rewarding interactions leading to partner decisions to commit to a long-term relationship (Sabatelli & Shehan, 1993).

According to interdependence theory, rewards, costs, and relational alternatives are factors that individuals use to evaluate the outcomes of a relationship and decide whether or not to stay with their current partner (Rusbult & Arriaga, 1997). Rewards -- for example, intimacy, happiness, and similar interests -- represent the positive outcomes of a committed relationship. Costs reflect the negative outcomes partners experience in a committed relationship. The loss of personal freedom, unfaithfulness of a partner, and spending less time with friends are examples of possible costs incurred in a committed relationship. Relational alternatives are options, such as pursuing a sexual relationship with someone other than one's partner, which may or may not be attractive to an individual who is in a committed relationship.

Three models have been developed to explain why individuals decide to commit -- Levinger's Cohesiveness Model, Johnson's Framework of Commitment, and

Rusbult's Investment Model. Each relies on interdependence theory (Johnson, 1991; Kurdek, 1995). The models collectively suggest that an individual's commitment to a romantic relationship is influenced by the rewards received, costs experienced, investments extended, relational alternatives available, and barriers erected that prevent an individual from discontinuing a relationship.

This study investigated commitment from the perspective of investments, relational alternatives, costs, and rewards. Barriers, a dimension of commitment taken from Levinger's Cohesiveness Model, was also included in this research. Instead of examining the barriers erected that prevent an individual from discontinuing a relationship, this study asked about barriers which prevent an individual from making a long-term commitment. This change was made because for young adults identifying factors that prevent a long-term commitment was more relevant to their lives than describing factors that prevent them from leaving an already established relationship.

This research also included questions relative to social context. Although, most literature on romantic relationships has not directly examined the influence of social context, two studies that focused on contextual influences were Garbardi and Rosen (1992) and Sprecher and Feilmlee (1992). Garbardi and Rosen (1992) investigated how the relationship between parents influenced the perception of intimate relationships of college students aged 18 to 25 years old. Of the 300 participants, 4% were African-American. College students were found to gather meanings of relationship beliefs and attitudes toward marriage from the observations of their parents' intimate relationships. Sprecher and Feilmlee (1992) examined how social network support affects the quality of young adults' intimate relationships. All of the

101 dating couples were Caucasian college students. Results indicated that young adults' perceived support from family and friends influenced their relational commitment behaviors. These findings show that the inclusion of social context is important in understanding the sources of young adults' meanings of commitment.

#### Overview of African-American Studies on Commitment

Three studies examining romantic relationships among African-American singles were located (Davis & Strube, 1993; Davis, Emerson, & Williams, 1997; Porter & Bronzaft, 1995). Two studies used college student samples. Using Rusbult's Investment Model (Rusbult, Johnson, & Morrow, 1986), Davis and Strube (1993) examined the romantic commitment of 20 Caucasian and 20 African-American dating couples via questionnaires. Commitment was found to increase for Caucasian males when relationship satisfaction increased but not for African-American males. Relationship satisfaction and the availability of other romantic partners were significant predictors of commitment for African-American women, while physical attractiveness of a partner and the availability of other romantic partners were significant predictors of commitment for African-American men.

Porter and Bronzaft (1995) investigated dating relationships using a questionnaire to collect information from 70 single African-American females between the ages of 17 and 25. Without implying or directly stating the use of a theoretical framework, the researchers asked about marital, educational, and occupational goals; dating preferences; perceptions of relationships with African-American men and men of other racial/ethnic backgrounds; and choices regarding marriage partners. Results indicated that 50% of the respondents agreed that African-American men have more

difficulty committing to a long-term relationship than men from other racial/ethnic backgrounds. Forty percent of the respondents perceived the African-American men they dated as untrustworthy. Eighty-seven percent of respondents reported being most willing to marry African-American men, while 15% of the participants expected to remain unmarried. These findings may reflect some stereotypes African-American women have about African-American men. Cazenave and Smith (1990) note that African-American women typically describe their past relationships negatively and are more likely to accept negative stereotypes about African-American men.

In the third article reviewed, Davis, Emerson, and Williams (1997) focused on perceptions of equity, power, satisfaction, and romantic ideals and alternatives among Black professionals in dating relationships. The authors did not directly report relying on a particular theory; however, an exchange framework was implied because of the focus on equity and romantic satisfaction. The sample included 135 participants (44 men and 91 women), who were attending a Black professional conference. Questionnaires were utilized to collect background information and dating histories. T-tests were conducted to compare mean scores of males and females and multiple regression was employed to determine predictors of romantic satisfaction. Results indicated that for males and females sexual relations and physical attractiveness of a partner were significant contributors to romantic satisfaction. Males reported that their current partners more closely meet their romantic expectations than reported by females.

Results of these studies demonstrate the need to further examine commitment in African-American relationships. Specifically, there is a need to address how

commitment is personally defined; what broader contextual considerations influence definitions of commitment; and how African-Americans weigh the challenges as well as the benefits embedded in the process by which partners decide to commit to a long-term relationship. The overall goal of this study is to discover the nature of commitment in African-American relationships and find out if factors rooted in interdependence theory generate knowing responses.

#### Significance of the Research

Despite the large increase in the number of articles and books on romantic relationships in the past decade (McKinney & Sprecher, 1991), few include African-American perspectives. For example, a content analysis of the articles appearing in the *Journal of Marriage and the Family* between 1939 and 1990 found that data from African-American participants were used in only 2% of the articles (Littlejohn-Blake & Darling, 1993). This content analysis illustrates that the majority of articles rely on predominately Caucasian samples, indicating a need for additional research from individuals of diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds.

Today, African-Americans are more likely to be single than any other segment of the American population. And more often than other ethnic groups, African-American partners terminate relationships when their expectations are not met (Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995). Before 1950, African-Americans married at earlier ages than Caucasians but now African-Americans in large numbers are choosing to delay marriage. Between the years of 1970 and 1990, the percentage of married African-Americans declined from 83% to 63% (Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995). Eighty-eight percent of African-American men and 75% of African-American women between the

ages of 20 and 24 are single. As African-Americans age, a significant number remain unmarried. Forty-two percent of African-American men and 37% of African-American women are unmarried at age 30 (Staples & Johnson, 1993). This decline in marriage among African-Americans has led some researchers to conclude that there is a lack of commitment to marriage among African-American men and women (Kiecolt & Fossett, 1995; Schoen, 1995). Some even characterized this unwillingness to commit as a crisis situation.

When African-Americans are asked directly about their prolonged period of singleness, several reasons are advanced. First, some African-American women and men report that many potential partners fail to meet their expectations. For example, some women voice concern about finding a partner capable of earning enough money to support a family (Higginbotham & Weber, 1995). Other African-American women say they choose not to get married or become involved in romantic relationships because they would rather be single than compromise their expectations (Bethea, 1995).

African-American men and women also indicate that racial myths and stereotypes from the larger culture sometimes influence their beliefs about each other and inhibit formation of committed relationships. For example, African-American women are portrayed as domineering and African-American men as fearful of commitment (Cazenave & Smith, 1990). Finally, the imbalanced sex ratio of 100 single African-American women to every 88 men impacts the choice of partners (Taylor, Chatters, Tucker, & Lewis, 1991). Chronic unemployment, premature death due to violence, and the incarceration of African-American men are identified as

reasons fewer eligible African-American men are available for committed relationships with African-American women (Bethea, 1995; Kiecolt & Fossett, 1995; McAdoo, 1995; Staples, 1993; Staples & Johnson, 1993). Despite these structural constraints, the majority of African-American women and men continue to report that they value marriage (Davis, Emerson, & Williams, 1997; Porter & Bronzaft, 1995).

In conclusion, quantitative studies have generated a body of useful knowledge on relational commitment. This study extended those findings by taking a qualitative approach specifically designed to explore the definitions, expectations, and actions young adult African-Americans describe as relevant to their perceptions of commitment.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODOLOGY

This exploratory examination of commitment among African-American men and women relied on a qualitative approach to allow the perspectives of participants to be visible in the research results. Such an approach is appropriate for the study of groups in which little information is known (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

#### Site and Sample Selection

This study is based on in-depth semi-structured interviews with 16 African-Americans, 8 men and 8 women, who ranged in age from 20 to 23 years. Ten out of 16 participants, 5 males and 5 females, were currently in a committed relationship that had been in existence for 5 months to 6 years. Participants who were not currently in a relationship answered questions based on a committed relationship which ended 1 to 9 months at the time of the study. Participants were recruited through personal contacts, visits to classes that had a large percentage of African-American students, and the distribution of an announcement regarding the need for participants on a listserv subscribed to by African-American students (Appendix A).

Interested individuals phoned the researcher and were informed of the purpose of the study and screened for eligibility. This initial contact allowed the completion of a demographic worksheet (Appendix B). Data from the demographic worksheet were compiled to report sample characteristics (See Table 1). Eligible individuals were informed of their right to withdraw at any time and told of the monetary compensation of \$10 for their participation. Phone numbers were gathered and pseudonyms were

selected by participants at this time. Additionally, interview date, time, and location were scheduled. Participants were contacted by phone within two days of the scheduled interview to confirm the date, time, and place.

### Data Collection

A pilot study was conducted with one male and one female prior to the actual interviews to evaluate the interview guide and format. Interviews lasting from 1 1/2 to 2 hours were conducted on campus or at the researcher's home. Each participant read and signed an Informed Consent Form before being interviewed (Appendix C). Participants were told that two tape recorders would be used during the interviews in case of an equipment malfunction. Preliminary questions about how the participant met his or her partner, what attracted him or her to the partner, how the participant would describe his or her partner, the ways in which the participant and his or her partner were similar and different, and the activities they do or did together were asked to build rapport and put each participant at ease. A semi-structured interview guide was used to ask participants about their romantic relationship experiences (Appendix D). Each participant was offered \$10 upon the completion of the interview to compensate them for their time. All of the participants accepted compensation.

Field notes were made at the conclusion of each interview to preserve memories of the interactions and descriptions shared at the interview and to allow immediate observations and thoughts to be recorded for later use in the data analysis process (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Kaufman, 1994). In order to assure confidentiality and anonymity of participants, audiotapes were labeled with the pseudonyms chosen

Pseudonym	Age	Currently in a committed relationship?	Length of current or most recent committed relationship
Lisa	20	No	3 months
Anastasia	22	No	24 months
Melanie	20	Yes	14.5 months
Nicole	21	Yes	72 months
Lovely	21	Yes	6 months
Monique	23	Yes	15 months
April	21	Yes	36 months
Mike	23	Yes	7 months
Kevin	20	Yes	13 months
Shawn	21	No	48 months
Whodini	23	No	12 months
Gene	20	Yes	14 months
Shango	23	No	36 months
Kareem	22	Yes	5 months
Robert	21	Yes	7 months
Suzie	21	No	18 months

Table 1 Sample Demographics

by participants. One copy of the audiotape was given to the transcriptionists and one was kept as a back up.

### Data Analysis

The audiotaped interviews were transcribed by two hired transcriptionists. Transcriptionists typed interviews verbatim and transferred participant responses from audiotapes to a computer disk. Transcripts were read twice while listening to the audiotapes in order to check the accuracy of the transcripts. Corrections were made to the transcripts before beginning data analysis with NUD\*IST 4.0 (Qualitative Solutions and Research Pty Ltd, 1997).

Each of the 16 participants were initially coded as male or female and whether they were currently in a committed relationship (yes or no). Next, data were coded by interview question and then, paragraph by paragraph. Participant responses were compared to discern the prominent themes found under each question. Categories were identified by displaying the themes in a tree format and examining the themes to determine if there was a connection between them. Categories and themes were then reviewed to determine if they could be reduced further. After finalizing the categories and themes, the researcher discussed the findings with her advisor. Conclusions were drawn from reflexive conversations between the researcher and her advisor. This type of analysis is within the standard procedures established by qualitative methodologists (Gilgun, Daly, & Handel, 1992; Kaufman, 1994; Marshall & Rossman, 1989; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

## CHAPTER FOUR

### RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to examine how African-American men and women defined commitment and described what they expected from a committed partner, what meanings they attached to relational alternatives, investments, barriers, costs, and rewards, and what sources were instrumental in their development of expectations of how a committed partner should behave. The findings reported here reflect the responses of 16 male and female study participants. Results are reported by research question.

#### Research Question One: Meaning of Commitment

One goal of this research was to determine the meaning each participant ascribed to commitment as applied to committed relationships. Two interview questions were used to gather meanings of commitment, “What does commitment mean to you?” and “What are your expectations of a partner in a committed relationship?” Two categories emerged from participants’ responses, expected actions and expected feelings. The accompanying themes are presented under each category (See Figure 1).

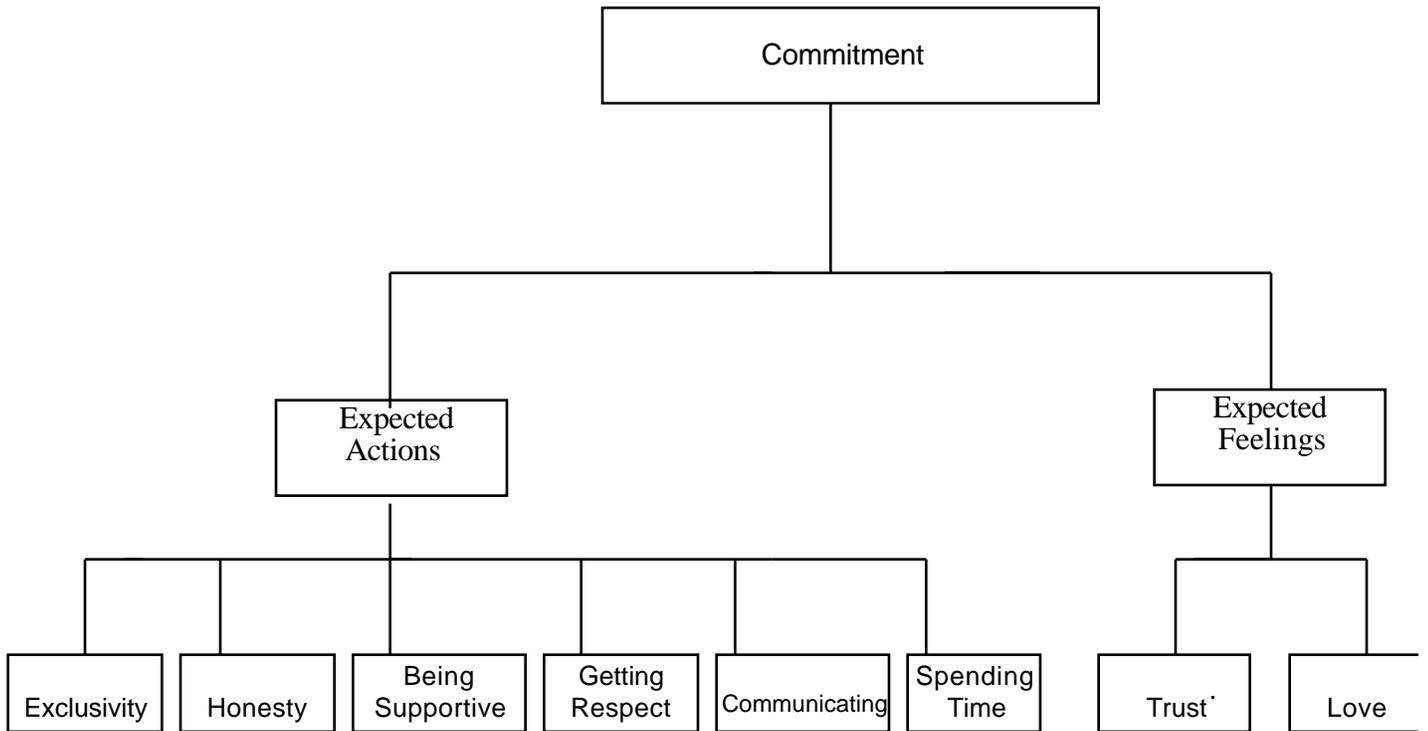


Figure 1 Commitment: Expected Actions, Expected Feelings

## Expected Actions

Expected actions was the first category found under the meaning of commitment. Six categories emerged under expected actions: Exclusivity, Honesty, Being Supportive, Getting Respect, Communicating, and Spending Time.

### Exclusivity

Exclusivity and monogamy were repeatedly identified by participants as giving meaning to commitment and informing expectations for partner behavior. Because exclusivity and monogamy had similar connotations, these responses were combined into one theme, Exclusivity. All of the participants expressed that exclusivity was a facet of a committed relationship.

I think, to me, commitment is basically the biggest part of a relationship other than selflessness because it is commitment that is going to keep you together in all things, in all responsibilities because sometimes in relationships things may not be working at that particular time the way you might want them to. But if you're committed to one another and you have a commitment to each other and your goals or whatever you discussed that you want to do then, that can really get you through some tough times. (Shango)

A verbal agreement with somebody else saying that it's just that other person in your life. (Gene)

I wouldn't go out on dates with anybody else. I wouldn't be intimate with anybody else. (Mike)

Having one person that you care about. (Whodini)

### Honesty

Honesty was identified by 9 of the 16 participants as an indication of commitment. Several respondents expressed it this way:

I expect them to be honest. If I ask you a question, I want to know the straight answer. I'd rather you tell me the straight answer and hurt my feelings than me find out from someone else and my feelings be even more hurt. (Shawn)

Honesty is a big thing with me. You can tell me anything in the world as long, you know, but you have to be honest. And I can usually forgive almost anything. (Lisa)

And [I] definitely expect them to be honest with me... And if they're not honest and I find out they've been dishonest, then that's like the end -- I don't want to talk to you no more. Honesty is like a big thing with me. (Anastasia)

I expect honesty. I don't want a man who lies, because lying in the beginning means lying throughout the whole relationship. (Monique).

### Being Supportive

Nine of the participants included being supportive in their meaning of commitment. Being supportive in a committed relationship signified understanding, working together during difficult times, and being there for a partner.

Being, even through like when times are really, really rough-sticking it through. And supporting the other person. I think too it sometimes, you kinda have to put

some of your own feelings and some of your own -- I'm not going to necessarily say like beliefs, but if you feel strong about something, maybe putting that on hold so that you can understand your partner a little better. (Nicole)

Promising that or knowing that the other person's going to be there, be there for one another. (Kevin)

Commitment is . . . that's a hard question. It's not just about being exclusive with someone. There's more to it than that. It's being there for that person and understanding that person. . . (Melanie)

### Getting Respect

Five participants stated that getting respect from their partners was an essential feature of a committed relationship.

Respect -- big time. (Anastasia)

. . . . And I forgot the most important word -- respect. That's a BIG issue with me. If I don't get respect, you don't get respect. That's just how . . . This is just how it goes. (Suzie)

### Communicating

Five participants mentioned communicating as a component of commitment. They expressed that communicating was something they expected from a committed relational partner.

I kinda expect communication. You know if you're going to go out somewhere, you know, "Shawn I'm going such-and-such place. I'll be back this time or that time." Or Shawn I'm going to go do this, whatever." Just inform me -- not necessarily you know, I'm your warden, but just if I have the need to talk to you about something, I know where to find you. (Shawn)

I want them to communicate with me. Let me know if anything's wrong. If they see there's something wrong, then I want to sit and talk about it, see if we can work things out. (Anastasia)

### Spending Time

Four of the participants identified spending time as an element of commitment. The amount and quality of time spent together emerged as important dimensions of a committed relationship.

I guess more or less, most of my time will be spent -- not most of my time, but more often than not I'd be spending more time with her than anybody else. (Mike)

Spending time together, you know, like even if it's like ten minutes a day, something, some kind of good time and being able to read each other's emotions and kind of get a feeling of what they're thinking and what they're feeling.. (Lisa)

Spending time with that person. Taking them out, bringing flowers, you know, things like that, taking them to a movie sometimes. (Whodini)

Spending adequate time with me. (Shawn)

## Expected Feelings

Expected feelings was the second category found under the meaning of commitment. Two themes emerged to represent expected feelings -- Trust and Love.

### Trust

Trust was the most common feeling expected by participants. Thirteen of the 16 participants mentioned trust.

Gotta be able to trust each other. Gotta be able to trust each other. (Anastasia)

I expect trust. (Nicole)

I expect to be able to trust her. (Mike)

I expect him to trust me. Trust in me not to give the next good looking guy coming for my phone number. (Lovely)

### Love

Love was the second expected feeling revealed by participants. Four of the 16 participants expressed that they expected love from a committed partner.

Well, of course, I foremost expect them to love me. (Shawn)

I expect him to love me unconditionally. (Lovely)

I expect love from her. Love is to me kind of complicated. I mean, it's like a physical aspect. You know we all need a hug sometimes. And there's the emotional. You know, I think, part of it. I guess, how may I explain that. I guess, I could explain that sometimes you need to hear your partner to say, you know, I love you. You know, sometimes, I think that makes a big difference. And I want to say that there's like a mental aspect. That's separate from the emotional aspect. And I guess, I would have to say, that...I guess you just know that person's there, you know. Because you really don't question it. (Kevin)

I expect him to love me. (April)

### Question Two: Relational Dimensions

Research question two was explored by several interview questions asked to uncover the meanings that participants attached to the following relational dimensions: relational alternatives available, investments extended, barriers that may inhibit a long-term commitment, costs experienced, and rewards received. Each relational dimension is considered important in the process of commitment as derived from interdependence theory. Each dimension is represented by a category (See Figure 2).

#### Relational Alternatives

Three themes emerged from the responses of participants to the interview question "How do you handle attractions to others?" -- Acknowledging But Not Pursuing, Acknowledging and Pursuing, and Not Acknowledging or Pursuing.

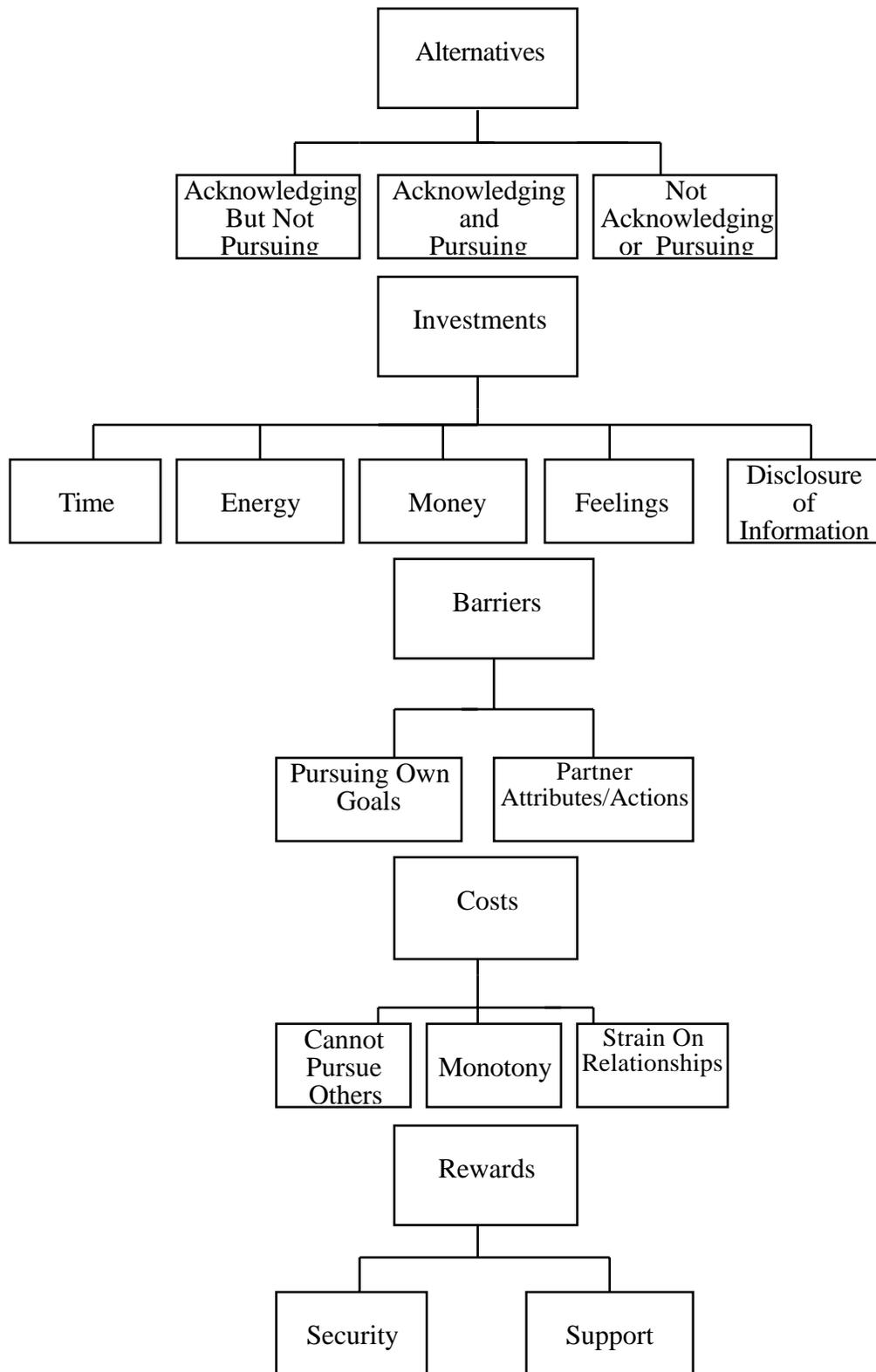


Figure 2 Relational Dimensions: Alternatives, Investments, Barriers, Costs, Rewards

## Acknowledging But Not Pursuing

Nine participants acknowledged the attractiveness of other individuals but did not pursue them. Participants mentioned the attractiveness of other individuals to themselves, a friend, the individual, and/or their partners.

I just don't, like, go on my impulse, my male animal instincts. 'Cause there're people around here that I'm attracted to. It's just, that's it. I think about my woman and I'm happy. (Kareem)

...With me, I think it just, you just remember, with me I would just try to remember that "Hey, I'm with someone." And this person is attractive. She could be attractive physically, sexually, anything. But, I'm in a committed relationship and I can't let this go but so far. (Robert)

If I was in an exclusive relationship, I'd just compliment her by saying "You look nice today" and keep on going. (Shango)

The funny thing is that I could tell William, anyway, that I was attracted to that person. It's easy to say -- if I see someone attractive, then I will say "That is a very attractive man," and there's not much said about it. Because I do it to him too. If I see an attractive female, I'm like, "Oh let me hook you up with her," just in kidding. So, we do get along when it comes to that. Yeah, there's no problem with that. (Nicole)

Some participants stated that they would tell other individuals that they are attractive and also inform them that they are in a committed relationship.

I'd just be like, "I got .....I have somebody," you know. I mean you're nice looking and all, but nothing could ever, you know, stem from...nothing could ever go further than a friendship basically. (Anastasia)

If I was by myself, I could talk to the person and if there was a mutual attraction, then apparently he would approach me as well. So eventually, it would come down to "Are you in a relationship?" And I would tell him yes. (Nicole)

### Acknowledging and Pursuing

Four participants revealed that they acknowledge other individuals' attractiveness and pursue them for companionship and friendship although they are currently in a committed relationship.

Unfortunately, sometimes I tend to pursue my attractions to other people. Basically, if it's interesting enough, I'll pursue it. And then there are some times that I don't pursue it because of things that I've heard about the person or I know that I don't need to deal with that person. If they're interesting enough, I'll pursue it, if not, then I'll leave it alone. If Roscoe was here, I wouldn't pursue it. His distance plays a big part in this. If he was here all the time, it would make life a lot different. I wouldn't be pursuing any of the people that I find attractive, but out of basically loneliness and just for companionship, that's why I pursue it. I don't pursue it looking for a relationship or anything. I just pursue it just for companionship. Someone to talk to, someone to be around when he's not here. (Monique)

You need a back-up because... And I call them like once a month or something, just so we keep on cool terms, you know, so when I do come back home we still can talk, and still be cool. Because I suppose in between now and the time we go home for spring break, she just comes back from wherever she's going and

she's just really mad at me for something and we break up. And it's like, yeah I'm going to be hurt. I still talk to blah, blah, blah, in Richmond, because when I go home in a couple of weeks to Richmond, I got somebody to talk to. And then I can like... then I would pursue that other person in Richmond a little stronger, because now I really don't have any attachments. That's what it is. Back-up.  
(Gene)

A lot of times, I just look. Every once in a while if I just happen to meet 'em, I might talk to them. You know, conversate, maybe call them on the phone or something. But just remain friends I guess, and if -- just remain friends and I guess, it's like they're always there in case I break up with my girlfriend. (Mike)

#### Not Acknowledging or Pursuing

Two of the participants stated that when they are in a committed relationship they do not acknowledge or pursue other individuals. One of the participants downplayed the attractiveness of individuals through self-talk; while the other participant, expressed that the attraction to other individuals was absent.

I mean, I guess I would just think about it and then I'd just tell myself the grass is not always greener on the other side or what always looks good is not good.  
(Kevin)

I'm not attracted to them. Like I said it's different now that I'm with Troy. I have no...usually I just have the urge to like, if my man was away I have to get some ding-a-ling from somewhere. So, you know, I call up a past, you know, come over here, you know, visit me for a minute. He go and nothing [is] said. There's nothing done. And nobody knew it, what people don't know can't hurt them. But, I don't, I'm not attracted to nobody anymore. I mean, they're just another

face in the crowd. That's what so different about it. I have never felt like this.  
Never. (Lovely)

## Investments

Five themes were identified from the responses of participants to the question "If you think of what you put into a relationship as investments, what kind of investments do(did) you put into your relationship?" -- Time, Energy, Money, Feelings, and Disclosure of Information.

## Time

Fifteen participants stated time was the primary investment that they put into their relationships.

Time is the biggest investment I've ever put into a relationship. Time is very important. It's very precious. I got to, you know, divest time to get to know the person. (Shango)

I put in a lot of time. (Lisa)

Time. That's the big one. (Nicole)

A lot of time. It's like I talk to her...I try not to talk to her too much, you know because I know that she's really here for her schoolwork, so I don't want to interrupt or interfere with that or nothing. So I talk to her, mostly every night during the week. But on the weekends, it's just all the time, it's me and her. It's like we either play cards with two other people, you know, play some spades. And we're together the whole night playing spades, or we'll rent a movie and

watch the movie, just me and her, you know, just sit and watch a movie together. Or even if she wants to go to party, not to many parties going on with Black people, so chances are, I'm going to the same party, so even if we go to a party, we still see each other and still spend time together, and when it's time to leave the party, she still comes home to me and just sit and chill. Usually, a lot of time. (Gene)

I put a lot of time into this relationship. Oh, it's my time, man. If it don't work, that's a lot of time wasted. I could have been doing something else constructive with my life. (Monique)

### Feelings

Feelings was the second most common investment mentioned by participants. Nine participants explained the feelings they invested in their committed relationships.

I put a lot of trust into the relationship. I, yeah, I put probably a great deal of trust in the relationship. (Nicole)

I definitely try to commit love to it. Sometimes my roommates said that I loved her more than I loved myself. At times, I could see that. I would do things like... Once she wanted to go home for the weekend, so I drove from Carolina to here, picked her up, took her home, stayed at home Friday and Saturday evening, came back Sunday, drove from Maryland to here, dropped her off, and drove back to Carolina. (Shawn)

I'm investing my trust in you. (Robert)

## Energy

Eight participants mentioned physical energy, emotional energy, and/or energy in general as investment(s) in their committed relationships.

I put a lot of energy I think too. Physical energy, as in traveling to - and not that Roanoke is that far away, but still going down there. And then going down there through the week sometimes. (Nicole)

My emotional energy is one of the biggest things I invested. (Shango)

I have invested a lot of energy. (Anastasia)

## Money

Eight participants stated that money was an investment they put into their relationships.

I put a lot of money into this relationship. (Monique)

Money yeah. I mean money for little things here and there. (April)

Expenses, yes. It's very expensive. A relationship is really expensive after a while. (Melanie)

## Disclosure of Information

Two participants expressed that they invested in their relationships through self-disclosure.

Self-disclosure. I opened up, told him things that I normally wouldn't tell anybody else. You know? I went to him with like, you know, some deep intimate stuff that, you know, some of my girlfriends don't even know.

(Anastasia)

I let him get to know me, I let our feelings build up about each other. I didn't try to rush things. We're trying to build, like, the good foundation for anything in the future that we would have so we'd have something to fall back on. (Lisa)

### Barriers

Participants were asked "What might stand in the way of you making a long-term commitment?" to determine what barriers, if any, inhibited them from establishing a committed relationship which may lead to marriage or cohabitation, for example. Two themes emerged -- Pursuing Own Goals and Partner Attributes/Actions.

#### Pursuing Own Goals

Six participants stated that the pursuit of their own goals would influence their decision not to seek a long-term commitment.

No, well, I wouldn't make a long-term commitment -- oh since it's been a year, so I guess the next logical step would be like an engagement-type thing. I wouldn't make something like commitment, you know if I was still in school.

(Gene)

I know right now I really don't want a long-term relationship just because of the fact that I'm about to leave. I'm not trying to start anything that I necessarily can't

finish. And I'm not trying to put myself into a situation where I'm in a long-distance relationship where somebody was in Connecticut and I'm in Carolina. I'm definitely not trying to do that. (Shawn)

Not knowing where I'm going to be in the next year or so. Not being sure if I want to be in a relationship. (Mike)

My career. (Anastasia)

### Partner Attributes/Actions

Seven participants discussed how a characteristic and/or an action of their partner may interfere with a long-term commitment.

If he doesn't want to commit and I want to commit, it's not going to work. (Monique)

For me, the person needs to know where he's going and have goals set. If he doesn't have those things, those goals, then it's harder for me to be committed because I'm the type of person that likes things to go -- to be set. Also, if he is a liar or a cheat. Not being truthful. Definitely that would stand in the way. (Nicole)

...Her breaking my rules. (Kareem)

...If I find myself in a situation where I'm constantly trying to overlook a lot of things about their personality....How they carry themselves. How they act. How they treat you. How they treat others. (Robert)

## Costs

Three themes emerged from asking participants “What are the negative aspects of being committed to one person and one relationship?” -- Cannot Pursue Others, Monotony of Relationship, and Strain on Relationships. One participant stated that there were not any costs to being committed to one person and one relationship.

### Cannot Pursue Others

Nine participants explained that a cost to being in a committed relationship was that they could not pursue other individuals.

Well, you see somebody that you might be attracted to, you can't like...there's only so far you can go with somebody else, even if you are attracted to them, because you're committed to the person you said you were, so you can't go off and just be out there doing whatever with whoever. (Gene)

You're tied down to one person. If you see somebody else that you like, you can't..you know -- be going talking to him and stuff like that. You can't collect numbers at the movie theater or the mall. (Anastasia)

If you get tired of them, you can't pretty much throw them away and get something else, if you're in a commitment. If you see something that you like, you can't hardly mess with it. (Mike)

...You're tied down. You're not as free and open to get to know really get to know people, particularly the opposite sex, without the innuendo of you taking it too far. If you're single, it's easier for you to go out and met some other girl, and meet someone else. But, if you're committed and you're always out meeting

somebody else, and you're trying really deeply to get to know them, then and our particular folks, they going to ask questions. Talk about you. (Robert)

### Monotony of Relationship

Four participants stated that monotony was a cost of being in a committed relationship.

Negative things? Is there anything negative about being in a relationship. It gets monotonous sometimes, if you're in a committed relationship. (Monique)

Like that saying, well me, I'm always scared that I might think that, you know, the grass is greener on the other side. That kind of thing. But, I'm always afraid that things might get boring. (Whodini)

I guess it would be a drawback if you're tired of being with the same person. You know, seeing the same face with the same attitude. (Robert)

Get tired of them. You CAN get tired of them. They start getting on your nerves. Um, you just -- I don't know. It can tend to get boring. You have to think of exciting things and exciting ways to make it exciting. (Suzie)

### Strain on Relationships

Two participants discussed the strain on other relationships as a cost of being committed to one person and one relationship.

I know with me and my friends, sometimes it puts a strain on the relationship with my friends and the relationship I have with her. It has caused me to choose should I go out to the party with my boys or should I go out to the party with my

girl? And if you tried to merge the two together, that may work in some situations, but in some situations you will not be able to do that. And you will sometimes be able to choose, or be forced to choose, sometimes you gotta choose your boys and sometimes you gotta choose your girl. And one of the two parties is going to be upset, you're going to have to deal with the party that's upset. (Shawn)

Especially time away from friends. If they're not in a relationship, then they're kind of upset with you because you spend a lot of time with him and you used to spend time with them, so it can get kind of stressful on friendships. It takes time away from your family. Because I live so close to my family. And sometimes my mom will be like "Come over." And I already have plans. (April)

### Rewards

Security and Support emerged as themes when participants were asked "What might a committed relationship provide that other relationships would not? Do you consider these as positive aspects of being committed to one person and one relationship?"

### Security

The responses of eight participants revealed that security was a reward for being committed to one person and one relationship.

Consistency. Knowing that there is someone to go home to. Lowering the chances of AIDS. Disease-free, hopefully. (Monique)

Comfort and security. You don't have to really worry about. I know with me, I guess I've never really been alone for more than 3 months at a time. And just knowing that you've got somebody you can call, that you can talk to, somebody you can go out, hang out with. Someone that you know if you really feel just bad and things can get no worse, this person should be able to cheer you up, you know. (Shawn)

I think a committed relationship actually does provide the trust that people need. Because when you're not committed, you worry about, well he could be with this person or that person because there's no commitment there. And being committed -- I don't know, to me it's much more comforting to know that, you know, I'm in a relationship that neither one of us - Well, I mean, I never say "never," but have intentions of cheating on each other or, you know. (Nicole)

You don't have to worry about STDs. That or coming up pregnant and worried about the friend saying, "It ain't mine." But you wouldn't have to worry about it in the committed relationship. (Lovely)

You know that you don't have to go out...and it's like, when you go out...there are a lot of people like when you go out it's like taking a chance. When I go out, I'm going to have fun and I'm going to meet someone. You take that chance if you're going to meet somebody that might and do something. Like a committed person, it's sort of like a guarantee. You have somebody there at home that you can talk to and chill with and things like that. (Gene)

### Support

Six participants expressed that support was a reward for committing to one person and one relationship.

The biggest thing I think it can provide is support. And looking at my parents' relationship, their relationship has allowed them to support one another in trying to attain the goals that they have set up -- both individually and as a group.  
(Shango)

Support. I mean, explaining I'm going to try and explain, you can be in a, just like a , just like a friendship or a sexual relationship but have a friendship with this person and not be able to talk to this person about everything because you're scared about how they might see you. But, once you're in a committed relationship, you know this person loves you anyway. So whatever you could say, I mean, it can probably like blow them away or whatever. But they going to still love you. They going to still be with you. (Lovely)

### Research Question Three: Sources of Expectations

Sources of expectations served as the context within which the meanings of commitment and the relational dimensions were constructed. Participants were asked: "Who or what has influenced your expectations of how people should act in a committed relationship?" Four themes emerged -- Past Relationships, Observing Others' Relationships, Advice from Family and Friends, and Television (See Figure 3).

#### Past Relationships

Fourteen participants stated that they learned from their past relationships the ways partners should act in a committed relationship. Most responses focused on clarifying their expectations of a partner and/or their relationship.

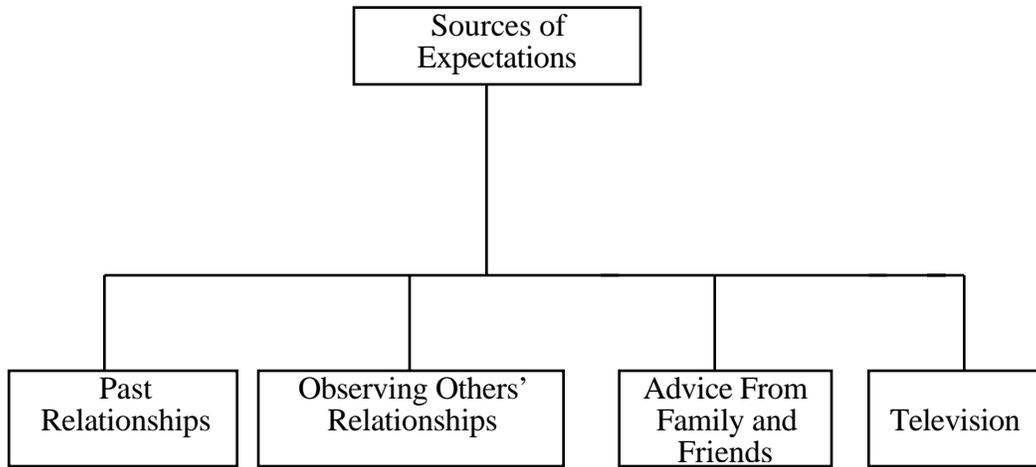


Figure 3 Sources of Expectations

Yeah, they just, I mean, they just don't know what they're doing. And so you pick up what this one has done. What this one has done. What this one has done. And then boom, you just say, "Look, I know about this. I know how you do this. I know when you said you're going here and I see you right there." You know, you know all that. You just take your past experiences and learn from them. And I had my expectations way from the beginning before all that. But, be, being with the rest of them has just compounded my expectations. You know, made me firmer in my expectations. (Melanie)

I try to take things with me as I go along. Basically, they've helped me to see what I do and do not want in certain people. Things I can and cannot tolerate, basically. (Anastasia)

That you're not going to get along all the time, and that's not a reason NOT to stay together. To be on guard as far as -- when somebody's attitude or things that they do start changing, then something else is going on. Once they start to shy away from you, something else is usually going on. Um, don't let friends -- my friends or their friends -- get involved in the relationship because that usually messes it up. (Mike)

....I guess my past relationships...they've taught me to be more selective with a person. Not to, not to be so quick to just accept what you see on the outside. (Robert)

....No matter how much you do for somebody, it still ain't enough sometimes. (Kareem)

You said how my past relationships? I know not to give him any money. I try not to complain as much. I mean I've learned a lot....I mean, I know when to get out of the relationship and not want to come back. Don't keep on going back to something that's not healthy now. (Suzie)

I guess as far as saying, seeing how, looking at certain, I guess, women's personalities that I've been with in the past and saying "Hey, you know, I don't like this about this person." Just kind of warn you not to try to see someone that kind of seems, like, the same kind of personality then kind of stay away from them and not really try to commit to them. (Kevin)

Oh yeah. Like I learned how the ...About the, I don't like the being tied down. Well, just the part about the ...But the answering ... just answering to 'em 24/7. Like I got a second mom up here. "What you doing?" You go home, you gotta answer to mom about where you're going; what time you're coming back -- all that. And like when I get up here, then like just because I didn't go out with her tonight, I don't want to have to go through the same, "Where did you go? What did you do? Who was you with? Why were you at her house? (Gene)

Hmmm. (Pause). One, to be a little bit more caring toward someone else's feelings. Because I tend to be harsh at times. So, also to not to be so jealous, and also not to expect too much out of people you get disappointed. So, kind of...Whatever, you see is what you get and don't expect too much more out of people. (Monique)

### Observing Others' Relationships

Thirteen participants expressed that they learned about the expectations of how a partner should act in a committed relationship from observing others' relationships. Relationships among parents, of extended family members, of friends and on television were observed by participants to obtain information regarding expectations of partners.

Parents were mentioned as models by 8 participants.

Um, my mom has probably influenced a lot, even though her relationship with my father is not any more. She has always provided that basis of what should be...or how a person should act in a committed relationship. My parents have influenced my expectations on relationships. My parents did not have a good marriage, and I don't want to have to go through the same nonsense that my mom did. (Monique)

Oh well, [my father] didn't have to say anything. He didn't have to say anything. I mean my father and mother have been together for 28 years. That's all you need to say about commitment, and putting, what 6 kids through college. At least into college. (Shango)

Um, I think my parents. My mom and dad. It's...she...my father works a job where he doesn't...He goes in like 5 :00 in the morning and doesn't come home until 11:00 and so they've had to adjust themselves to where she has her space; he has his space, but when they are together, they are together....I think -- I don't know -- you need a chance to miss each other and yet -- because when you are together 24/7 it can be crazy. So the way that my parents are, it's just that when he comes in then they have their time together. When he takes off, they take their vacations together and those type of things....(Nicole)

Several participants mentioned observing relationships among other family members as a source of how a partner should act.

...Um... my brother [Todd], he's married. If I need any help with anything, he's the person that I would more than likely go to, because he's basically like the only real Christian in the family that I've seen. And so, I'll model after his

relationship because he's got a loving wife, son, another child on the way, and everything. (Anastasia)

...I don't want to be just like my family. I mean, by any means at all. Just a combination of seeing my family, other families...(Kevin)

Um, she...Well two of them [female cousins] have divorced, so I look at that as well. There's kids involved too with those. So, I don't know. There was like, her spouse had an affair, so, and then she, the other one -- my cousin had an affair, so again, it's just that trust. (Nicole)

Nicole also commented on her observation of the abusive relationship of an aunt.

...One aunt -- she was abused by her husband, so that was very...I don't know, I guess I look and say, "I don't want that," you know.

...Also, other relatives. Just looking at the way that their marriages turned out. (Suzie)

Two participants stated that observing friends' relationships was a source of what to expect from a partner in a committed relationship.

Um, just I guess first of all from watching friends, you know, a lot of times I used to play matchmaker. I made some bad matches, so um, the things that they had to go through, the things they went through, um, especially being here at Tech -- you probably know just the things that happen here. People come here and they do any and everything they couldn't do at home or wanted to do at home, and didn't do at home. So, just watching that. (Shawn)

....Just watching, just learning from their mistakes. Or just seeing how things go in their relationships. (Robert)

### Advice From Family and Friends

Fourteen participants expressed that the advice from family and friends was a source of how they should act and/or what characteristics their partners should possess in a committed relationship.

My mom, I tell you what my mom said. She said, "Boy, boy you don't want a jealous woman." And that's the only thing I remember her telling me. (Kareem)

[My mom told me] one -- don't trust your man around your best friend. That's a big thing because that happened to her. Um, honesty. She always told me to be honest in a relationship and to appreciate the person. Just that...(pause), to love the person that I'm with and just appreciate them and honesty. First of all honesty, always making sure that everything is out in the open and not being in the dark about anything. And not to trust anybody. And if you have a hunch about something, to follow your hunches about men, because men lie. Men lie, lie, lie, lie, lie. Every man I know has lied at some point in time, whether it be something small or whether it be something big. They've lied about something, so if your heart tells you to do something, you need to follow it. (Monique)

To find someone who's compatible. My father used to say, "Always find someone that likes you for you. Don't ever find someone that wants you for what you can give them....My mother is very -- as far as race -- she is really open, you know....She doesn't care who it is, what it is, as long as I'm happy. You know, she says, "Your happiness is the most important thing and you, only

you, can define when and what makes you happy. I, myself, or your father -- no one else can tell you what makes you happy....(Shawn)

...She's [my mother] told me , you know, when you're committed, stay committed, you know. If it's something that you feel good about, that the relationship is good, then, you know stay with it. Um, but she's always been more of ...I don't know, like do for yourself first. Being a female, do for yourself....You have to better yourself before you can be in a relationship.  
(Nicole)

My sisters have really influenced me the most. I have two older sisters. From a very early age they really molded me as far as relationships were concerned. Telling me certain things that women enjoy, telling me how to behave, how I should...Things that I could do to improve the way that I am and how I can be perceived by women. You know as far as how I should groom myself, different things that I should read. Different movies, music, just all types of things like that. And also my mother. You know, my mother plays right in there with my sisters. And the way I was raised was to be very respectful.... Never to be to overly dominant. To be understanding. To be concerned, genuinely concerned about her needs and not to try to make what I want to do what she wants. Be sure to talk to her and make sure that she has goals of her own because a lot of times women's goals get mixed into what their partner wants to do....(Shango)

[My mother passed onto me] what you were saying, that I'm a prize. That I should be the one -- No, he should be privileged to be with me. You know, put myself on that pedestal, that I'm number one....(Suzie)

Several participants mentioned what they learned from friends regarding the important components in a committed relationship.

...I have many associates but as far as like my friends what have they told me. I don't know, my roommate is big on "just don't do as I do." And some of the things, I guess that she's trying to tell me, I don't know -- stay committed, trust, um, because she's having those problems right now....(Nicole)

...The only advice I would really take is like from my Christian friends. They'll let me know, like you don't need this, you know type of relationships. You don't really need to be in , you know. Or they'd be like "this person, they're a good person or whatever, but make sure that you know you don't do this or do that, or you don't overstep your boundaries, whatever..." You know stuff like that. Make sure that this is a Godly relationship and make sure you don't do things overboard or whatever, make sure you don't do this or do that. (Anastasia)

Well, the people that I'm with, that I usually hang around, I know if I was in a committed relationship, they would support that. But, and actually if I was to ever venture outside of that committed relationship, they would probably either joke me on that or, you know, be like, "What you doing man? You know you got a girl at home and stuff." But they wouldn't necessarily stop me....They help me out more than, you know, keep me from it, a committed, a commitment. (Whodini)

## Television

Three participants identified television as a source in which they learned about what to expect from a partner in a committed relationship.

...You don't want people to think your boyfriend or husband are treating you mean....Expectations of whatever like on sitcoms or whatever. You see nice, compassionate husbands -- I guess that's what society makes you think you

should have or something....And he's really good with the kids. Thoughtful.  
(April)

Television. You know, that television isn't real, but I definitely see what I don't want. You know...I don't want no overbearing, overcontrolling, you know power-control freak. I don't want a dude that's going to sit there and bad-mouth me or cuss at me, because I've had that before too. Um, I don't want nobody that 's going to hit me or nothing. Um, I don't want a dude that's going to go out and cheat every 5 minutes with some person, some random person that he just meets on the street or at a bar. Um, I don't want nobody that's, you know emotionally or mentally abusing. I've had that too. That wasn't good. Just basically all those people you see on "Jerry Springer" -- I don't want none of that. (Anastasia)

...I guess the stuff you...hear just on TV sometimes influences, like the media. Even TV shows, the way they portray things. (Suzie)

## CHAPTER FIVE DISCUSSION

### Overview

The purpose of this study was to explore the meanings, expectations, and behaviors that African-American college students ascribe to commitment in their romantic relationships. The findings reported here reflect the perspectives of 16 study participants, 8 men and 8 women, obtained during in-depth interviews. The theoretical framework that guided this investigation was interdependence theory. Past research using interdependence theory collectively suggested that rewards, costs, investments, barriers, and alternatives influenced the desire to sustain a long-term relationship with a romantic partner. Because previous studies on commitment had focused on Caucasian college-aged samples, this study extended the areas of inquiry to include contextual considerations. The research questions that guided this investigation were:

1. What meanings do African-American men and women ascribe to commitment -- how do they define commitment and what are their expectations regarding commitment?
2. What meanings do African-American men and women attach to relational dimensions important to the process of commitment as derived from interdependence theory?
3. What sources have assisted African-American women and men in developing expectations for how partners should behave in a committed relationship?

Interview questions were designed to gather information relative to these research questions. The results, as described in detail in Chapter Four, were then re-evaluated for evidence of congruence. The discussion that follows describes how the results extend our knowledge of commitment relative to interdependence theory and inform the literature on African-American relationships.

### Discussion Relative to Theory

For the 16 African-Americans interviewed in this study, the findings confirm that commitment is described in terms identified in previous research. The responses of these 16 young adults identified exclusivity, honesty, being supportive, getting respect, spending time, trust, and love as meanings of commitment. These results parallel those of Fehr (1988). Fehr sampled a Caucasian college population and found that exclusivity, honesty, supportiveness, respect, spending time, trust, and love were all features of commitment. Participants in this study, then, ascribe similar meanings to commitment as other college students.

This research also extends knowledge of commitment by suggesting that these young, single African-Americans had developed a two-tier system for commitment. Committed relationships were indeed described by informants as close, loving, exclusive partnerships, but boundaries clearly defined their stability across time. Past theoretical models have described commitment from a long-term perspective (Levinger, 1979a; Levinger, 1979b; Johnson, 1991; Rusbult, Drigotas, & Verette, 1994). This sample identified two types of commitment, short-term and long-term. Participants described short-term commitment as being exclusively attached to their

partners and wanting to continue the relationship, but not wanting to marry the partner. These participants understood that they would eventually terminate the relationship. A long-term commitment was signified by the participant's plans to eventually marry their partner.

Another addition this study makes to theory involves the description of relational alternatives. Relational alternatives have been studied by numerous scholars using interdependence theory (Buunk, 1991; Johnson & Rusbult, 1989; Kelley, 1983; Rusbult & Buunk, 1993). Johnson and Rusbult (1989) found in a study of evaluating the attractiveness of relational alternatives that those who were more committed to their relationships were less likely to view alternative partners as attractive than those who were less committed to their relationships. Three responses to an alternative partner were identified by participants in the present study: acknowledging but not pursuing other individuals, acknowledging and pursuing other individuals, and not acknowledging or pursuing other individuals. As in Johnson and Rusbult's study (1989), two of the 16 participants in this study did not acknowledge or pursue an alternative partner.

However, not acknowledging the attractiveness of an alternative partner or pursuing that partner, did not necessarily indicate that these two participants were more committed than the remaining 14 participants. Most of the participants in this study acknowledged the attractiveness of other individuals to a friend, the individual, and/or their partners -- but did not pursue a relationship with the alternative. Some participants who openly acknowledged their attraction to the alternative individual also informed the alternative that they were in a committed relationship. Three participants

acknowledged the attractiveness of the individual and pursued a relationship for the purposes of companionship or friendship, but with the understanding that anything else was not possible.

Finally, the manner in which these African-American participants spoke about barriers was unique from the literature reviewed. In Levinger's Cohesiveness Model, barriers are viewed as inhibiting individuals from leaving their committed relationships (Levinger, 1979a). This study examined barriers which prevent an individual from making a long-term commitment to a relational partner. Responses of the 16 study informants uncovered practical reasons individuals did not establish long-term commitments. For example, career goals, not being financially stable, and being unsure of whether or not they want to be in a relationship with their current partner -- whether the partner's personal characteristics and behaviors warranted a long-term commitment -- were barriers.

In sum, this study has added knowledge to theoretical understandings of the commitment process by identifying common definitions, a new categorization of commitment encompassing long and short-term perspectives, and a unique meaning of relational barriers. Factors rooted in interdependence theory did generate knowing responses from African-American college students.

#### Discussion Relative to African-American Literature

Most past research in commitment did not include African-American participants. A goal of this study was to discover the nature of commitment using responses from the 16 African-American students who volunteered to take part in this

investigation. One of the primary contributions of this research is that all participants indicated being committed to their partners and their relationships. Participants identified pursuing career goals and not being financially secure as reasons for not establishing a long-term commitment. African-Americans are more likely to be single than any other segment of the population, but the findings do not indicate that they place less value than do other sampled populations on commitment or marriage. For these 16 informants, “unwillingness” to marry did not seem to involve a lack of commitment. Some researchers have concluded that African-American men and women are not as committed as others in the general population (Kiecolt & Fossett, 1995; Schoen, 1995). Based on the results of this investigation, it seems important to explore other reasons for the high rate of singlehood in the African-American population.

Another interesting finding of this study is that there African-American participants mentioned time, feelings, energy, disclosure of information, and money as investments they made as partners in committed relationships. These findings are reflective of investments identified by other sampled groups (Duffy & Rusbult, 1986; Johnson, 1991; Knapp & Taylor, 1994). For example, Duffy and Rusbult (1986) identified money, self-disclosure, and emotional investment as investments in a study on commitment. Johnson (1991) labeled “time, energy, and money as irretrievable investments” (p. 122). Knapp and Taylor (1994) explained that time is often considered an investment by those in romantic relationships. Again, similarity between this group of informants and other studied groups is compelling and further justifies the need for additional research in this area of study.

Confirming other research findings, participants identified the inability to pursue an alternative, monotony, and strain on other relationships as costs to being committed to one person and one relationship. Of these findings, the identification of strain on other relationships as a cost is unique to this sample. Some participants said that it was difficult to balance their committed relationship and their relationships with family and/or friends. This finding offers further evidence of the importance of extended kin and friend networks in African-American families. African-American family members have been found to simultaneously maintain a variety of close, supportive relationships outside of their immediate family (Littlejohn-Blake & Darling, 1993; McAdoo, 1995; Taylor, Chatters, Tucker, & Lewis, 1991). These results suggest that such relationships do not necessarily diminish in importance as individuals enter committed romantic partnerships.

Most participants revealed that their parents' relationship served as a model for understanding how a committed partner should behave; however, relationships with extended family members and friends were also identified sources of relational expectations. Participants received advice from extended family members and friends and also their own relationships as sources of information for models of how committed partners should behave in a committed relationship. Surra (1991) indicated that the social context of relationships has been excluded from the literature on close relationships. These findings seem to justify the inclusion of social context in examinations of close relationships among African-American populations.

Given what the results of this study revealed concerning relational commitment, it seems important to expand the investigation of relationships among African-

American adults to include personal and relational factors other than commitment. Baseline information on romantic relationships is needed to increase understanding and limit negative social commentary concerning the meanings, definitions, and behavior of African-American relational partners.

### Limitations

Participants in this study were 20 to 23 years of age. For young adults aged 18 to 19 and adults over the age of 25, investments, relational alternatives, costs, rewards, barriers, meanings of commitment, and sources of partner expectations may differ. Young adults aged 18 to 19 typically are beginning to construct their identities as adults as they begin college and/or live in a separate household from their parents or family. Adults who are 25 and over are establishing careers, marrying, or deciding to remain single. These participants were still in young adulthood and therefore, as they become older, may identify different components of commitment, definitions of commitment, and sources of expectations of how partners should behave in a committed relationship. Also, all participants in this study were college students. Although research on close relationships among college students is informative, other groups of the population should also be studied. Investigation of close relationships among non-college adults may also inform the literature on commitment. Further, whether participants were currently in a committed relationship or not currently in a committed relationship may have influenced how they talked about commitment.

### Suggestions for Future Research

Romantic relationships among African-Americans need further study. Because most of the African-American population is single, examining other relational dimensions of their relationships besides commitment may provide additional insight into the reasons so many choose to remain single. For example, similar studies on intimacy, love, trust, and other components of long-term relationships could provide equally enlightening results. Barriers which prevent individuals from establishing a long-term commitment deserves further investigation, given the high percentage of singles among African-Americans, and that the majority of study participants stated that they valued committed relationships and eventually wanted to marry.

Expanding the study of commitment to other types of relationships, such as friendships, sibling relationships, and parental relationships, could provide a more complete picture of close relationships among African-Americans. Although findings from this study cannot be generalized to all African-Americans, it provided a snapshot of romantic relationships among these 16 African-Americans.

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## APPENDIX A

Flyer distributed to classes

# **ATTENTION!!!!**

African-American men and women are needed to participate in a research project on relationships. Participants must be at least 20 years old, single (never married), and currently enrolled at Virginia Tech.

Please contact Lenette Hillian, Master's Candidate, at 951-9787 (leave message) if interested.

## APPENDIX B

## Demographic Worksheet

1. Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Pseudonym: \_\_\_\_\_  
Phone number: \_\_\_\_\_

2. Age: \_\_\_\_\_

3. Sex \_\_\_\_\_ Male \_\_\_\_\_ Female

4. Currently in a relationship? \_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No

Ask if response is yes:

How long have you been with your current partner? \_\_\_\_\_ years/months

What is your partner's first name? (Pseudonym) \_\_\_\_\_

What is your current partner's race or ethnicity? \_\_\_\_\_

Ask if response is no:

When was your last relationship? \_\_\_\_\_ years/months ago

How long did your relationship last? \_\_\_\_\_ years/months

5. Availability for interview

Date

Time

Place

## APPENDIX C

VIRGINIA POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE AND STATE UNIVERSITY

Informed Consent for Participants of Investigative Projects

Title of Project: COMMITMENT IN AFRICAN-AMERICAN RELATIONSHIPS

Principal Investigator: Lenette Hillian

I. THE PURPOSE OF THIS RESEARCH

The purpose of this project is to better understand commitment in African American relationships. I am interested in how African American men and women define commitment, what they expect from a romantic partner, and what influences their decision to establish and maintain a committed romantic relationship. Approximately thirty people will participate in this study.

II. PROCEDURE

You will participate in one in-depth, tape recorded interview with me. The interview will last for 1 1/2 to 2 hours and be conducted on the Virginia Tech campus. Audiocassettes of your interview will be labeled with a pseudonym chosen by you. You will be asked to provide background information such as your major, involvement in extracurricular activities, and graduation plans. You will also be asked questions about the meanings of, expectations held about, and behaviors which demonstrate commitment in relationships.

III. RISKS

I anticipate no risks to you from your participation in this research project.

IV. BENEFITS OF THIS PROJECT

No promise or guarantee of benefits have been made to encourage you to participate in this research, but your participation in this project will be helpful by extending the information about commitment in African-American relationships. The majority of young adult African Americans are single, and there is little information available about their relationships. You will have the opportunity to talk about relationships from your own point of view.

V. EXTENT OF ANONYMITY AND CONFIDENTIALITY

Your interview responses will be kept strictly confidential. A pseudonym chosen by you will be used to label audiocassettes. Your demographic worksheet and audiotapes will be kept in a locked file cabinet owned by me. I will conduct and audiotape interviews. A transcriptionist will type your responses and transfer your responses from audiotape to a computer disk. The transcriptionist will be required to keep audiotapes and the computer disk protected and not to share information contained on the audiotapes and disk with other individuals. Audiotapes will be destroyed after the successful defense of my thesis.

VI. COMPENSATION

You will receive \$10 for your participation upon completion of your interview.

VII. FREEDOM TO WITHDRAW

You may choose not to answer any question. You have the right to withdraw from this project at any time without penalty.

VIII. APPROVAL OF RESEARCH

This research project has been approved, as required, by the Institutional Review Board for Research Involving Human Subjects at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, and by the Department of Family and Child Development.

IX. PARTICIPANT'S RESPONSIBILITIES

I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

X. PARTICIPANT'S PERMISSION

I have read and understand the informed consent and instructions regarding this project. All of my questions have been answered. I hereby acknowledge the above and give my voluntary consent for participation in this research project.

If I choose to participate, I understand that I may withdraw at any time without penalty. I agree to abide by the rules of this project.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Should I have any questions about this research or its conduct, I will contact:

Lenette Hillian Investigator	951-9787
Dr. Gloria W. Bird, Ph.D. Faculty Advisor	231-4791
H.T. Hurd	231-5281

**MEMORANDUM**

TO: Lenette Hillian and Gloria Bird  
Family and Child Development

FROM: H. T. Hurd  
Director

DATE: January 15, 1998

SUBJECT: IRB EXEMPTION APPROVAL- "Commitment in African-Americans:  
Meanings, Expectations, and Behaviors" - IRB #98-009

I have reviewed your request to the IRB for exemption for the above referenced project. I concur that the research falls within the exempt status.

Best wishes.

HTH/erg

## APPENDIX D

## Interview Guide

### Commitment Questions

The next questions will focus on relationships.

(Building rapport--Question 1)

1. When I talked to you on the phone you told me that you were in a committed relationship (or had a committed relationship within the past 9 months). Tell me about that relationship.

Probes:

- a. How did you meet?
  - b. What attracted you to him/her?
  - c. Describe him/her for me.
  - d. In what ways are (were) you similar? How are (were) you different?
  - e. What activities do(did) you usually do together? Where do(did) you go? What do(did) you do?
2. What does commitment mean to you?
  3. What are your expectations of a partner in a commitment relationship?
  4. There are always people that look interesting or attractive to us as we go about our daily lives. Now that you are in a committed relationship (or were in a committed relationship), how do (did) you handle those attractions?
  5. If you think of what you put into a relationship as investments, what kind of investments do(did) you put into your relationship?

6. What might a committed relationship provide that other relationships would not?  
Do you see these as positive aspects of being committed to one person and one relationship?
7. What are the negative aspects of being committed to one person and one relationship?
8. What barriers might stand in the way of making a long-term commitment to someone?
9. Who or what has influenced your expectations of how people should act in a committed relationship?

Probes:

- a. Have any family members influenced your expectations for commitment?
  - b. What about friends?
  - c. How have your past relational experiences influenced your expectations regarding relationships and commitment?
  - d. What other experiences (or people) have influenced your expectations?
10. Is there anything else about commitment and relationships that we haven't covered in this interview that you would like to tell me about?

Thank you for participating in this study.

## APPENDIX E

**Lenette D. Hillian**  
507-I Sunridge Drive  
Blacksburg, VA 24060  
(540) 951-9787

## **EDUCATION**

**M. S., Family and Child Development**, May 1998  
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University Blacksburg, VA

**B. S., Family and Child Development**, May 1995  
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University Blacksburg, VA  
Minor: Psychology

## **PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE**

**Research Assistant.** Virginia Tech Department of Family and Child Development. Blacksburg, VA. May 1997- present.

- \* Analyze quantitative and qualitative data
- \* Performed data entry
- \* Co-wrote final report

**Project Success Facilitator.** Virginia Tech Office of Academic Enrichment. Blacksburg, VA. October 1997-present.

- \* Co-facilitate weekly meetings with undergraduate students
- \* Participated in new facilitator orientation sessions on time management and reading assessment

**Graduate Assistant.** Service-Learning Center at Virginia Tech. Blacksburg, VA. May 1996-May 1998.

- \* Co-facilitated orientation and follow-up sessions for service-learning students
- \* Coordinated community service activities
- \* Monitored service-learning students' progress
- \* Reviewed grants for funding
- \* Co-planned cultural events with the Center's Director
- \* Compiled Mentoring Handbook
- \* Served as a liaison between community organizations, agencies, and the Center
- \* Co-wrote Program Development Grant

**Coordinator for Summer Programs.** Service-Learning Center at Virginia Tech. Blacksburg, VA. May 1996-August 1996; May 1997-August 1997.

- \* Organized training sessions for college student volunteers
- \* Assessed program to identify strengths and make recommendations
- \* Facilitated follow-up discussion sessions for college student volunteers

**Graduate Assistant.** Virginia Tech Department of Family and Child Development. Blacksburg, VA. August 1995-May 1996.

- \* Served as teaching assistant for undergraduate courses
- \* Edited Family and Child Developments, the graduate student newsletter
- \* Recruited employers for career fair

**Residential Counselor.** Virginia Tech Office of Academic Enrichment. Blacksburg, VA. July 1995-August 1995 (2 weeks).

- \* Supervised residence hall and activities of middle and high school participants
- \* Provided counseling to middle and high school participants
- \* Maintained weekly and special circumstance contact logs

## **PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS, ORGANIZATIONS, AND ACTIVITIES**

Current National Council on Family Relations; Golden Key National Honor Society; Phi Upsilon Omicron National Honor Society for Family and Consumer Studies  
Previous Family and Child Development Graduate Student Association Coordinator; Graduate Student Assembly-Department of Family and Child Development Representative; College of Human Resources Academic Affairs Committee

## **AWARDS AND HONORS**

Women's Center of Virginia Tech Student Activist of the Year Award; Graduate Research Development Project Grant; Department of Family and Child Development Community Service Award; National Collegiate Minority Leadership Award; Phi Upsilon Omicron National Honor Society Candle Fellowship recipient

## **PRESENTATIONS**

1998 Commitment in African-American Relationships. The Women's Center at Virginia Tech. Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, VA.  
1997 An Experience of Place: Learning in, with, and from Communities. Virginia Campus Outreach Opportunity League's (VA COOL) Statewide Conference on Community Service and Higher Education. Hampton University, Hampton, VA.  
1997 Making the Transition from an Undergraduate Program to a Graduate Program: The Who, What, Where, How, and Why. A seminar for undergraduate students interested in pursuing a graduate degree, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, VA.  
1997 Conference for Potential Graduate Students, Panelist. Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, VA.  
1997 Commitment, Love, and Trust: What Do They Mean? A forum presented for Black Female Coalition; Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, VA  
1995 Funding for Graduate School. A seminar presented for Black Graduate Student Organization; Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, VA.

## **PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

1994-1997 Attended numerous conferences on family relationships, aging, diversity, financial management, leadership, and personal relationships.

## **COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT**

1998 Service Scholar. Christiansburg Institute Alumnae Association. Blacksburg, VA.  
1997-1998 Committee member. Montgomery Youth-Adult Partnership. Christiansburg, VA.  
1997-1998 Mentor. Generations Project. West End Center for Youth. Roanoke, VA.  
1996-1998 Committee member. Women's Month Planning Committee. Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, VA.  
1996 Project Assistant. Explore Tech Science and Engineering Exposition. Richmond, VA.