

What is commitment?

How married and cohabiting parents talk about their relationships

JAN PRYOR and **JOSIE ROBERTS** discuss the findings of a small qualitative New Zealand study that examined the accounts of married and cohabiting parents about their views of relationship commitment. How did couples describe the concept and what were their experiences of commitment as partners and parents? Why had they chosen to marry or not marry, and were there barriers to leaving their relationships?

T

he term “commitment” is common currency in both lay and academic writing, especially in regard to relationships. Yet dictionary definitions are remarkably uninformative about its meaning in this context. For example, it is not until the ninth definition of commitment in the Random House dictionary that we find “the act of committing, pledging or engaging oneself”. The seventh definition of commit is “to bind or obligate as by pledge or assurance.” In turn, a pledge is defined as “a solemn promise or agreement to do or refrain from doing something”. Indeed, it has been suggested that the use of the word “commitment” in regard to relationships is specific to the last half of the 20th century (Jamieson, Anderson et al. 2002).

By definition, marriage embodies a publicly-made pledge. Until recently, it was usually the case that a marriage ceremony provided an external, public framework for a couple’s commitment to each other, which preceded the practical working-out of what that pledge meant. Today the vast majority of couples live together before marrying. The decision to cohabit is made for a range of reasons, including convenience (economies of scale), the trial of a relationship as a prelude to possible marriage, or as a deliberate alternative to marriage in order to avoid its associations with formal commitments. Although many go on to make the public commitment of marriage, some never make a public pledge but remain a couple without a formal declaration of commitment.



The behaviours that traditionally occurred after making a public declaration of commitment, such as living together, now often occur before a couple has made any decisions to remain in a relationship indefinitely. The context – and possibly the concept – of commitment has thus changed, although at its core it still indicates the intention to maintain a relationship. So, too, have its temporal relationships with behaviors, attitudes, and external pledges. Commitment, nowadays, is more often internal, personal, and specific to the person or the relationship rather than being about the more abstract ideal of promise itself.

A minority of couples gets married before living together, and they usually bring with them the external structures of religious beliefs or family and social expectations. For those who do not go directly into marriage, the intention to stay in the relationship is usually at best conditional at the time of union formation, and may not be present at all at that time. Furthermore, it may never occur in the lives of some



couples (Lewis 1999), who drift into cohabitation and find themselves forming families with no declared intent to maintain a relationship for the foreseeable future.

Thus the relationship between commitment and the behaviors associated with commitment has, in many instances, reversed. Instead of commitment preceding the behaviours that sustain it, as in direct marriage, increasingly it is the case that behaviors such as positive communication, problem-solving strategies, and happiness with the relationship, precede and lead to commitment. Indeed, commitment has been described as the causal mechanism by which relationship-promoting behaviors lead to stability (Arriaga and Agnew 2001).

Conceptualisations of commitment to relationships are wide-ranging. It is generally agreed to be associated with relationship continuation in both happy and unhappy couples (Adams and Jones 1997). Indeed, measures that reflect a general dimension of commitment are associated with relationship stability (Cate, Levin and

Richmond 2002). However, this may reflect a circular situation where the construct measured (intention to stay in a relationship) conflates with the outcome (staying in a relationship). It is apparent, too, that the nature of commitment that holds functional relationships together is different from that which binds dysfunctional relationships.

Johnson (1991) describes a conceptual framework for commitment that identifies three distinct dimensions rather than one general one. The first is *personal commitment*, which describes the positive aspects of commitment felt by a person to their partner or to the relationship they have with that person. The second, *moral commitment*, arises from values and beliefs held by the individual about the sanctity or seriousness of the relationship. The third is *structural commitment*, which describes constraints against leaving a relationship (such as emotional or financial costs, and the disapproval of friends or society). Structural and moral commitment are seen as restraining factors stopping people from leaving relationships whereas personal commitment describes the positive aspects of the desire or intent to sustain the relationship.

Table 1 shows the components of Johnson's (1991) three dimensions of commitment as described by Johnson, Caughlin and Huston (1999).

Adams and Jones (1997) have provided empirical evidence for these separate dimensions by generating items from the literature on commitment and using factor analysis to derive three factors reflecting the dimensions described by Johnson. More recently, Johnson and colleagues (1999) have demonstrated that the three dimensions correlate reliably and independently with conceptually derived variables, and that global commitment as measured using items from a measure developed by Braiker and Kelley (1979) correlates only with personal commitment, the positive dimension described by Johnson.

Table 1 Three dimensions of relationship commitment

<i>Personal commitment</i>
Attraction to partner Attraction to relationship Identification with relationship
<i>Moral commitment</i>
Attitudes to separation (values, beliefs) Obligation to partner Consistency values
<i>Structural commitment</i>
Perception of alternatives Social pressure Separation processes and procedures Investments (physical, emotional, economic)
<i>Source:</i> Johnson et al. 1999.

Although there is empirical support for more sophisticated conceptualisations of commitment, there has been little work examining the subjective accounts of commitment from people living in relationships. Fehr (1988) argues that it may not be possible to reach a precise definition, and that lay people may use the word in ways that are very different from those examining it professionally. She used attributes obtained from students (mean age 22 years) to identify features of commitment, and went on to examine which of those features were central to the concept. She found that the most frequently mentioned attributes reflected perseverance and staying with decisions made. They also included qualities characterising commitment, such as loyalty and faithfulness. It is unlikely, however, that many of her subjects would have been in long-term committed relationships since they were undergraduates. Their accounts, then, might lack the underpinning of the experience of committed relationships.

Another way of examining the concept of commitment is to ask why people stay in their relationships, and what the barriers to leaving might be. Previti and Amato (2003) examined the reasons that married people give for staying married. They found that the reasons given formed 18 categories, which fell into two major groupings – the rewards of being married, and barriers to leaving.

Children may act as a positive influence in keeping couples together by increasing the positive aspects of commitment to each other.



Another important aspect of commitment that has not been examined in any systematic way is the possible differences between married and stable cohabiting couples. While married couples have by definition made external commitments to each other, cohabiting couples may or may not have made personal commitments.

There have been two recent qualitative studies describing commitment in cohabiting couples. In the United Kingdom, Lewis (1999) interviewed 17 married and 12 cohabiting couples with children under the age of 11 years, and they also interviewed 32 parent couples of these parents. She found that the cohabiting couples had made private commitments to each other and had made public commitments to their children often through open discussion of what surnames they should carry. Married parents had made public commitments to each other, to their children and to their families by the formal act of marriage. There were, though, more similarities between the young cohabiting and married parents than between older and younger married couples. The young group saw their commitments, public or not, as personal and internally driven, whereas the older generation talked about obligations, seen as externally imposed, rather than commitment as described by their adult children.

Jamieson and colleagues (2002) interviewed a group of 20–29-year-old Scottish couples, 17 married and eight cohabiting. They also surveyed 137 people living in couples, and 109 single individuals. They found that cohabiting couples described commitment as important for their relationship, and gave the desire to commit as the most frequent reason for deciding to live together. When asked whether living together without marriage had advantages over marriage, more than half the cohabiting respondents did not have a preference, and almost none chose the reason “it does not have to be a permanent commitment” as an advantage of living together rather than marrying. For many, marriage was irrelevant to commitment, and made no difference to how they saw their relationship, although some saw marriage as important for children. In this regard, we know that increasing numbers of children are born into cohabiting households and many of their parents subsequently marry. It is probable too, that many couples marry before becoming parents, after they have made the decision to have children.

The presence of children may be important for sustaining cohabiting relationships. We know that cohabiting couples with children are more likely to stay together than those without (Wu and Balakrishnan 1995), but we do not know why. Children may act as a positive influence in keeping couples together by increasing the positive aspects of commitment to each other. On the other hand, they may represent barriers or restraints to leaving, given the widely held recognition of the negative impact of separation on children.

There is also little information on why people choose to marry or not. Duvander (1999) suggests four factors leading Swedish cohabiters to decide to marry. First she describes marriage as part of a normative process that becomes more likely as people get older, and when they have children. Second, in some contexts, there may be economic gains in joining resources legally. Third, socialisation, or childhood factors, may lead people to see marriage as the right thing to do. These childhood experiences include: growing up in an intact family in high socio-economic circumstances; living in a rural area where more traditional constraints hold; and holding religious beliefs. She suggests, too, that personal attitudes to families, parenthood, and preferences for independent or joint activities, are important. Of course, these last might be influenced by childhood experiences. Love is also acknowledged by Duvander as important, but as difficult to measure.

In a study in the United States, people’s choice of marriage or cohabitation has been linked with their attitudes and values (Clarkberg, Stolzenberg and Waite 1995). These authors point out that “the well-defined and often sex-typed roles and responsibilities of ideal marriage contrast sharply with the emphasis on equality, independence, self-reliance and self-determination that seems to characterise cohabitation” (1995: 611). In their examination of attitudes in the National Longitudinal

Study of 1972, they found that attitudes to work, extended family relationships, gender roles, and the value of leisure time all predicted the choice of marriage or cohabitation at first union. They note, too, that cohabitation offers a form of co-residence that allows comparative freedom from the constraints of “traditional” marriage, although many cohabiters go on to marry.

An Australian study explored the intentions to marry in a large group of cohabiting people (Qu 2003). Qu found that more than half (57 per cent of men and 52 per cent of women) thought that marriage to their partner was likely or very likely and that more than 70 per cent of couples interviewed had the same expectations as each other. Age was important; those who were youngest, and who had been in their relationships the shortest length of time, were most likely to expect to marry. Those who had been married before, were older, and had been in their relationships longer, were less likely to expect to marry. These findings suggest that many young cohabiters do intend to marry and, presumably, see cohabitation as a step in that direction.

The NZ study

The New Zealand *Relationship Commitment Study* examined the accounts of married and cohabiting parents about their views of relationship commitment. Respondents were asked to describe the concept, their experiences of commitment as partners and parents, why they had chosen either to marry or not marry, and what barriers they saw to leaving their relationships.

In 2003, 50 couples with children in New Zealand’s Wellington city were recruited to the study by advertisements on local radio and in newspapers, as well as by word of mouth. Thirty couples were married, and 20 were cohabiting. It is not known whether any cohabiters were planning to marry; however, they had been in their relationships for an average of 12.5 years. Their mean age was 37.4 years (range 24–61 years), and there was no difference between married and cohabiting participants in age – married people averaged 37.5 (women) and 38.4 (men), and cohabiting women averaged 37.3 years, with cohabiting men averaging 38.5 years. There were no differences in the time they had been in their current relationships (12.5 years) or in the number of previous relationships reported (0.6). The majority (88.5 per cent) were Pakeha New Zealanders (of European descent), 5.2 per cent were Maori, and 6.2 per cent comprised other ethnicities. Māori are under-represented in this sample, as they comprise approximately 14 per cent of the New Zealand population.

For the majority of those who were cohabiting this was their first cohabiting relationship (63.6 per cent); for 22.2 per cent it was their second; and for 14 per cent it was their third or more cohabiting relationship. No religious affiliation was reported by 64.6 per cent of couples, and 35.4 per cent said they did have a religious affiliation. The mean number of children was 2.14 (range one to six). Most children were the biological offspring of both partners.

Overall, this sample was not ethnically representative of New Zealand, and neither were the numbers of married and cohabiting parents representative of the New Zealand population. Statistics New Zealand indicates

that approximately 13 per cent of children at any one time live with cohabiting parents. The fact that 46 per cent of children are born ex-nuptially suggests that many cohabiting couples may marry after having children.

This article describes the findings of a semi-structured interview. Participants were interviewed individually in their homes, and extensive notes were taken by the interviewer. Responses were coded into emergent categories by the first author, and inter-rater reliability assessed by having 50 per cent of responses coded by an independent rater. Inter-rater agreement was 80 per cent; codes where disagreement was found were discussed and resolved.

What is commitment?

Five categories emerged from responses to the questions: “What is commitment generally?” and “What does commitment mean to you personally?” Table 2 gives examples for each category.

Keeping promises and honoring obligations

This category reference to promises made and decisions taken in regard to the relationship. It included phrases like “seeing through decisions”, honoring one’s word, honoring intentions, and not taking relationships lightly. Both cohabiting and married respondents used words such as promises, decisions, and keeping one’s word, indicating that promises and obligations are not associated with commitment just by those who have made a public or legal pledge through marriage.

Relational future

This category involved reference to the continuance of the relationship over time. Phrases such as being there

Table 2 Examples of words and phrases used for each category

<i>Keeping promises and honouring obligations</i>	
See through decisions	Honor word
Honor intention	Stick to word
Obligation	Keep word
<i>Relational future</i>	
There for the long haul	Forever
Last the distance	Long-term
Intention to stay distance	Longevity
<i>Unconditional involvement</i>	
Through thick and thin	You make your bed, you lie in it
Through ups and downs	Through good and bad times
<i>Putting work into the relationship</i>	
Having to work at it	Do your share
Work through problems	Do your best
Think before acting	Give it my all
Work to stay together	Doing things for one another
<i>Characteristics and descriptors</i>	
Tolerance	Respect
Loyalty	Sacrifice
Trust	Faithful
Tenacity	Support
Courtesy	Love
Communication	Sensitivity
Compromise	Availability

for the long haul, intending to stay the distance, and being involved over the long term, are encompassed in this category. Again, very similar intentions were expressed by both cohabiting and married participants.

Unconditional involvement

This reflects awareness of the good and bad times of relationships, and the intention to stay with them despite these. Phrases included “through thick and thin”, “doing whatever it takes, sticking through hard times, and (from a married participant) “you make your bed, you lie in it”.

Putting work into the relationship

Energy or actions needed to foster a relationship comprise this category. They include phrases that have the word “work” in them, such as working through problems, having to work on it, and working to stay together. It also encompasses actions that are directly related to the other person, such as doing things for one another, having time for the other person, planning together, and putting the other first.

Personal characteristics or descriptors

This category comprised one-word descriptors, in the main, that indicated individual characteristics associated with commitment. These were distinguished from phrases in the previous category by not including verbs, but rather describing states or qualities. Examples are trust, loyalty, honesty, respect, faithfulness, availability, courtesy, openness, and tolerance. The category also included some potentially negative descriptors such as sacrifice, compromise, and obligation.

What are the most important factors keeping you in your relationship?

Responses to this question yielded five categories of response: personal factors, relationship factors, external factors, values, and children and family factors.

Personal factors

The main factors mentioned in this category were emotions or feelings based in the individual, such as love, respect, support, and trust. Two people (one married woman and one cohabiting man) said that the relationship enabled them to be themselves, or to be an individual.

Relationship factors

Responses in this category made specific reference to the relationship, or indicated factors that included both partners. Many of them encompassed sharing aspects of their lives such as goals, values, past and present together. Others included sex, communication, and spending time with their partner.

External factors

This category reflected external constraints such as extended family, expectations, and the fact that it would be hard to find another partner.

Values

Another category referred to values or beliefs. Examples were religion, honouring a commitment, and making vows. It was notable that no cohabiting participants mentioned values as factors in keeping them in their relationships.

Family factors and children

Some respondents mentioned aspects of family life that kept them in their relationship. These included references to the fact that their partner was a “great dad”, the importance of the family unit, and the presence of children.

Barriers to leaving a relationship

Twelve respondents said they saw no barriers to leaving their relationships. Of these, four were married and eight were cohabiting. Five of the cohabiters were women. The same five categories emerged as for reasons for staying with the partnership: personal, relationship, external, values, and family factors.

Personal factors

The loss of positive aspects of being in the relationship such as losing stability, love, friendship, and happiness was frequently cited as a barrier to leaving. The term “emotional reasons” was sometimes used, and appeared to denote the pain that would be involved in losing the relationship. The fear of negative factors such as loneliness, trauma, disruption, and being a lone parent was also mentioned.

Relationship factors

These also included loss of aspects of the relationship such as friendship, support, and a future together. One cohabiting woman talked of being entwined, and of it being difficult to disentangle from each other. Concern for the effect on a partner was also mentioned by several respondents, in phrases such as not wanting to hurt the partner, and the negative effect on a partner of their leaving the relationship.

External factors

These encompassed financial costs, fear of starting again, disapproval of family and friends, and not being able to find anyone else as a partner. External factors were mentioned equally by married and cohabiting participants.

Values

Values and beliefs were cited as barriers to leaving, including vows or promises made, and religious beliefs. As with reasons for staying in a relationship, only married participants mentioned values as barriers to leaving a relationship.

Family and children

The most frequently mentioned barrier to leaving a relationship was the presence of children. The majority of both cohabiting and married parents mentioned this factor – 61 of 100 participants.

Reasons for marrying

Married participants were asked what their reasons were for marrying. These fell into four categories: personal, values, external reasons and process factors.

Personal reasons for marrying

This category reflected factors within, or having an impact on, the individual. They included loving their partner, wanting security, and feeling committed to the relationship as reasons for getting married.

Values

Several respondents said that they married because of a belief that it was the “right thing to do”. Some held

religious beliefs, and others said it was the “traditional thing to do”.

External and practical reasons

Family expectations that couples would marry were the most often mentioned in this category. Others included the need to marry to obtain a visa to enter other countries, and the need for being legally married in some circumstances. Some also saw marriage as a public statement of their commitment.

Process factors

Many participants saw marriage as part of a normal life process. It was described as “the next step”, “the next step in commitment”, or what they had always expected to and did. Some decided that they wanted to be married before they had children.

the comments that it was difficult to keep everyone happy, and that they wanted to be different and to defy expectations.

- The third related to *values* held by the participants, including comments such as political objections, being against the idea of marriage, issues of ownership inherent in marriage, and the belief that commitment

Cohabiting couples described commitment as important for their relationship, and gave the desire to commit as the most frequent reason for deciding to live together.



Reasons for not marrying

Cohabiting parents were asked why they had not married. Their reasons fell into three main categories, with one forming sub-categories.

Marriage did not matter

The largest number (23) of responses fell into this category; marriage was simply not important to these participants. They used phrases like “no reason to”, and “didn’t get around to it”; and that they “did not need a piece of paper”. The decision not to marry was not an active choice; rather, it was not an issue for them.

Active rejection of marriage

Almost as many participants as those who considered that marriage did not matter gave specific reasons for not marrying, and these fell into three sub-categories.

- The first reflected *personal* reasons such as marriage feeling like a trap, wanting to protect their individuality, and choosing not to because they were happy as they were and did not want to change their situation.
- The second was indicative of *rejecting expectations* of other people or of not wanting the expectations that go along with marriage. In this category were

is more important than marriage. Also falling into this sub-group were comments their feelings associated with divorce. One person talked of other people’s marriages falling apart, and of being cynical about marriage because of their parents’ divorce.

Practical and process issues

The main aspect of this category was financial constraints on getting married. Some mentioned that they wanted to have their children first, or that age was a factor, with a partner feeling either too young or too old to marry.

Discussion

When asked what commitment meant to them, participants in the New Zealand *Relationship Commitment Study* described what might be seen as the dictionary definition of commitment. Both married and cohabiting people talked in terms of promises, the future, working to ensure the continuation of their relationship, and the personal characteristics and qualities associated with these aspects. For them, commitment is the intention to maintain the relationships “through thick and thin”, and also the willingness to put work into relationships and having the qualities needed to foster commitment.

The findings here are similar in some ways to those reported by Fehr (1988), for whom the central features

Table 3 Central features of commitment

<i>Descriptor terms</i>	<i>Promise/obligation terms</i>	<i>Unconditional</i>	<i>“Work” words</i>
Loyalty Responsibility Faithfulness Trust Devotion Reliable Supportiveness Honesty Love Respect Caring Perseverance	Living up to your word A promise Obligation A high priority	Being there for the other in good and bad times	Give best effort Giving Being concerned about other’s wellbeing Giving

Source: Fehr (1998).

of commitment included loyalty, responsibility, and living up to your word. In Table 3 phrases used by undergraduate students in Fehr's study are shown. For purposes of comparison, we have categorised them in the same way as in the present study.

It is apparent that Fehr's participants did not include references to a relational future, and only one was made to the unconditional aspects of commitment. This is perhaps not surprising, given their relative youth in comparison with the sample of parents in the *Relationship Commitment Study*. The descriptors given are, however, almost identical in both studies.

When questions were asked that examined the factors keeping participants in, or preventing them from leaving, their relationships, categories emerged that parallel the dimensions of commitment articulated by Johnson et al. (1999). Personal and relationship factors reflect Johnson's personal commitment dimension (see Table 1). Attraction to one's partner, partnership satisfaction, and identity as a couple are all represented

Cohabiting parents did not mention values keeping them in their relationship. Their reasons for staying were overwhelmingly positive, and related to their partner and their relationship.



in the responses here. It was the presence of these that kept people in their relationships, and the threat of losing them that was seen as the barrier to leaving.

External factors in the *Relationship Commitment Study* included items representing both moral and structural commitment. Values, beliefs, and promises were cited both as factors keeping people in, and as barriers to them leaving their relationships. Concern for the plight of the partner was also mentioned – a category similar to the obligations to partners identified by Johnson et al. (1999) as a component of moral commitment. Similarly, expectations of others, financial and emotional costs, and lack of alternatives, reflecting Johnson's dimension of structural commitment, were also mentioned.

It was particularly striking that cohabiting parents did not mention values keeping them in their relationship. Their reasons for staying were overwhelmingly positive, and related to their partner and their relationship. In contrast, religion, security, and vows (often seen as restraining factors) were mentioned by married participants as barriers to leaving, as well being as positive factors keeping them in their relationship.

Family and children were other factors seen as both keeping people in and restraining them from leaving. It was notable, though, that this was the most frequently cited factor as a barrier for leaving but was much less often mentioned as a reason for staying in the relationship. Although 61 respondents mentioned children as a barrier to leaving, only 20 named children as a reason

for staying. This was the case, too, in the findings of Previti and Amato (2003). Children were not seen as rewards, but as barriers to leaving. This suggests the possibility that aspects of the relationship itself exert positive influences on relationship continuance, whereas the presence of children is more likely to act as a barrier to ending it. Earlier research has demonstrated that both married and cohabiting couples are less likely to separate if they have children; the findings here indicate that they act as a restraint rather than as a positive, internal force.

Asked why they married, the most frequent response from married respondents was that it was a stage in the life course. It was the "next step" or the "next step in commitment", or something they had always expected to do. For some, it was a prelude to having children; for others, it was likely to be a decision made after cohabiting as a trial before making a public commitment. This response aligns with the findings of Qu (2003), that most cohabiters intend to marry, although we do not have data on who had cohabited before marrying in

this group. Life stage is also a reason for marrying suggested by Duvander (1999), and indicates support for the role of cohabitation as a prelude for marriage rather than an alternative for many cohabiters.

Reasons for not marrying cited by cohabiting participants fell into three major categories. One strongly reflected the irrelevance of marriage; it was simply not an

important issue for them. This finding, from a group of parents in committed, long-term relationships, may be specific to the status of marriage in New Zealand – there are relatively few legal privileges bestowed by marriage, particularly in regard to property and children. New Zealand, too, is a comparatively secular society. Recent census data (Statistics 2004) indicate that nearly 28 per cent of New Zealand adults say they have no religion, and more than 12 per cent either do not state a religion or object to answering the census question. In this sample, 50 per cent of married participants said they had a religious affiliation, whereas only five (25 per cent) of cohabiters did so.

There are also high rates of relationship formation between Maori (the indigenous culture) and those of European descent (Callister 2004). Traditionally, Maori culture has encompassed informal marriages that do not seek legal ratification. There are high rates of intermarriage between Māori and Pakeha in New Zealand, so that it may be that attitudes to formal marriage in general are influenced by Māori attitudes.

The emergent categories of decisions respondents made about marrying or not marrying are strikingly similar, with both groups citing personal reasons, values, expectations, and processes. The reasons given in each case are in some ways similar to the differences in values and attitudes reported by Clarkberg et al. (1995). Those who chose not to marry indicated egalitarian attitudes and the need to retain a sense of individuality, while those who married referred to values of security and tradition. In turn, expectations of

others were either rejected (by cohabiters) or accepted (by those who married).

The practical reasons given by each group were different, and suggest in each case that marrying or not marrying was, for some, essentially a pragmatic decision. Financial reasons cited by a few cohabiters may reflect the demographic tendency for this group to be less financially secure (Smock 2000) although we do not have data on household income for this sample, and very few respondents offered this as reason for not marrying.

Process reasons also highlight attitudinal differences. For some married parents, marriage was a prelude to having children; in contrast, some cohabiting parents said they wanted to have their children first. Where age was mentioned as a factor in relation to marrying or not, it is likely that this reflected situations where either people felt they were not old enough to marry, or had been in their relationship so long that marriage had become irrelevant.

Conclusion

Overall in the New Zealand *Relationship Commitment Study*, the articulation of commitment and what it meant to these married and cohabiting parents was remarkably similar. Both described commitment in terms of promises, a relational future of unconditional involvement, and of it requiring work.

However, differences were apparent in how the two groups saw barriers to leaving and reasons for staying. More cohabiting than married parents saw no barriers to leaving, and they cited predominantly positive (personal and relational) reasons for staying. This may provide at least partial explanation for the fact that cohabiting relationships are generally less stable than married ones, since the onus is on the quality of the relationship to maintain stability rather than the restraining factor of legal commitment. However, even for married parents external barriers to leaving include more than the fact of public vows; the disapproval of family and friends is also important, as are financial factors. Although these were mentioned by cohabiting parents, they do not seem to be as important to them as to married participants.

Of those who reported reasons for not leaving the relationship, children were mentioned by all as being the factor that stopped them. This may partially explain the similarities between the groups in descriptions of commitment. Another important finding that also explains why there were fewer differences than similarities is the lack of salience of legal marriage for many of the cohabiting, and some of the married, parents as reflected in their statements that they saw no barriers to leaving. Attitudinal differences between the groups were apparent in their responses to the same factors explaining why they had or had not married, but these differences do not appear to be associated with greater, lesser, or different kinds of commitment.

Clearly this is neither a large nor representative sample of married and cohabiting parents in New Zealand. Nonetheless, the findings indicate that attitudes and

behaviours associated with relationship formation and parenting are complex. It is also apparent that, at least in New Zealand, commitment rather than the legal status of their relationship may be much more important in determining whether or not parents stay together.

Children are a potent barrier to leaving a relationship for both married and cohabiting parents, yet the quality of that relationship is also important to children's wellbeing. In the context of this New Zealand study, perhaps our energies are best focused on fostering and supporting positive facets of commitment, rather than seeing the legal status of a relationship as a major factor in determining the wellbeing and stability of families.

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