



## Notes on the Concept of Commitment

Howard S. Becker

*The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 66, No. 1 (Jul., 1960), 32-40.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0002-9602%28196007%2966%3A1%3C32%3AANOTCOC%3E2.0.CO%3B2-U>

*The American Journal of Sociology* is currently published by The University of Chicago Press.

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/ucpress.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

---

JSTOR is an independent not-for-profit organization dedicated to creating and preserving a digital archive of scholarly journals. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

## NOTES ON THE CONCEPT OF COMMITMENT<sup>1</sup>

HOWARD S. BECKER

### ABSTRACT

The concept of commitment is widely used but has received little formal analysis. It contains an implicit explanation of one mechanism producing consistent human behavior. Commitments come into being when a person, by making a side bet, links extraneous interests with a consistent line of activity. Side bets are often a consequence of the person's participation in social organizations. To understand commitments fully, an analysis of the system of value within which side bets are made is necessary.

The term "commitment" enjoys an increasing vogue in sociological discussion. Sociologists use it in analyses of both individual and organizational behavior. They use it as a descriptive concept to mark out forms of action characteristic of particular kinds of people or groups. They use it as an independent variable to account for certain kinds of behavior of individuals and groups. They use it in analyses of a wide variety of phenomena: power, religion, occupational recruitment, bureaucratic behavior, political behavior, and so on.<sup>2</sup>

In spite of its widespread use, the appearance of the concept of commitment in sociological literature has a curious feature the reader with an eye for trivia will have noticed. In articles studded with citations to previous literature on such familiar concepts as power or social class, commitment emerges unscathed by so much as a single reference. This suggests what is in fact the case: there

has been little formal analysis of the concept of commitment and little attempt to integrate it explicitly with current sociological theory. Instead, it has been treated as a primitive concept, introduced where the need is felt without explanation or examination of its character or credentials. As is often the case with unanalyzed concepts used in an *ad hoc* fashion, the term has been made to cover a wide range of common-sense meanings, with predictable ambiguities.

In what follows, I consider the uses to which the concept of commitment has been put and the possible reasons for its increasing popularity, indicate the nature of one of the social mechanisms to which the term implicitly refers, and develop a rudimentary theory of the social processes and conditions involved in the operation of this mechanism. Because the term has been used to express a varied assortment of ideas, it is fruitless to speculate on its "real" meaning. I have instead chosen one of the several images evoked by "commitment" and tried to make its meaning clearer. In doing so, I will unavoidably short-change those for whom the term evokes other of the associated images more strongly. The ultimate remedy for this injustice will be a classification and clarification of the whole family of images involved in the idea of commitment.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was presented at the meetings of the Midwest Sociological Society, April, 1959. I wish to thank Eliot Freidson, Blanche Geer, Sheldon Messinger, and the *Journal's* anonymous editorial consultants for their helpful comments.

<sup>2</sup> See the following examples: E. Abramson *et al.*, "Social Power and Commitment: A Theoretical Statement," *American Sociological Review*, XXIII (February, 1958), 15-22; Howard S. Becker and James Carper, "The Elements of Identification with an Occupation," *American Sociological Review*, XXI (June, 1956), 341-48; Bryan R. Wilson, "An Analysis of Sect Development," *American Sociological Review*, XXIV (January, 1959), 3-15; Philip Selznick, *TVA and the Grass Roots* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953); and Irving Howe and Lewis Coser, *The American Communist Party: A Critical History, 1919-57* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957).

<sup>3</sup> Such a classification and clarification are not attempted here. For a pioneer effort see Gregory P. Stone, "Clothing and Social Relations: A Study of Appearance in the Context of Community Life" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Sociology, University of Chicago, 1959). I have also confined myself to consideration of the concept as it applies to individual behavior, though it often appears in analyses of the behavior of organizations.

## I

Sociologists typically make use of the concept of commitment when they are trying to account for the fact that people engage in *consistent lines of activity*.<sup>4</sup> Howe and Coser, for instance, seek to explain the behavior of the follower of the Communist party line in this fashion: "The Stalinist did not commit himself to the use of Marxism; he committed himself to the claims of the Party that it 'possessed' Marxism."<sup>5</sup> By this they mean that the Stalinist did not undertake always to use Marxist styles of thought but that he did undertake always to honor the party's claim that it knew what the Marxist truth was. In short, they explain a man's persistent support of the shifting party line by referring to a commitment on his part to the belief that the party represented the source of correct Marxist knowledge.

The concept of commitment enjoys use in studies of occupational careers. We can explain the fact that men ordinarily settle down to a career in a limited field, and do not change jobs and careers with the alacrity of the proverbial economic man under changing market conditions, by referring to a process whereby they become committed to a particular occupation. James Carper and I found that graduate students in physiology originally wanted to become physicians but eventually developed commitments to the field of physiology such that they were no longer interested in the medical degree they had earlier desired so much.<sup>6</sup>

In these examples, and others that might be cited, commitment is used to explain what I have already called "consistent behavior." What are the characteristics of this kind of

behavior, for which commitment seems so useful an explanatory variable?

To begin with, it persists over some period of time. The person continues to follow the party line; he remains in the same occupation. But the notion of a consistent line of activity implies more than this, for we often think of complexes of quite diverse kinds of activities as consistent. In fact, the examples just cited conceal a great diversity of activity. The Stalinist may engage in diametrically opposed lines of activity as the party line shifts. A person remaining in the same occupation may engage in many kinds of activity in the course of his career. The diverse activities have in common the fact that they are seen by the actor as activities which, whatever their external diversity, serve him in pursuit of the same goal. Finally, the notion of consistent lines of activity seems to imply a rejection by the actor of feasible alternatives. He sees several alternative courses open to him, each having something to commend it, but chooses one which best serves his purposes.

It is one of the central problems of social science, of course, to account for consistency, so defined, in human behavior. Many explanations have been forthcoming, but none has remained unscarred by critical attack. The volume of criticism suggests that sociologists are still looking for an unexceptionable explanation of consistent behavior. At the risk of doing violence, by reason of brevity, to some complex arguments, let me summarize these explanations and the criticisms that have been made of them.

Some of the most clearly sociological explanations (in the sense of being based most firmly in the process of social interaction) have been theories built around the related concepts of social sanction and social control. These theories propose that people act consistently because activity of some particular kind is regarded as right and proper in their society or social group and because deviations from this standard are punished. People act consistently, therefore, because it is morally wrong, practically inexpedient, or both, to do otherwise.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Nelson N. Foote, "Concept and Method in the Study of Human Development," in *Emerging Problems in Social Psychology*, ed. Muzafer Sherif and M. O. Wilson (Norman, Okla.: Institute of Group Relations, 1957), pp. 29-53.

<sup>5</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 521.

<sup>6</sup> Howard S. Becker and James Carper, "The Development of Identification with an Occupation," *American Journal of Sociology*, LXI (January, 1956), 289-98.

Such a theory, however, has still to explain consistently deviant behavior. Deviance is often explained by a circular process: a person who initially commits a minor infraction is increasingly alienated from normal society, therefore commits increasingly serious infractions, and so on.<sup>7</sup> Alternatively, it is explained as the result of a process of differential association:<sup>8</sup> the deviant has associated more with people who think his deviant act is proper than he has with those of the majority which thinks it is wrong. Again, deviance is explained by reference to a conflict between cultural goals which all members of the society value and a sharp restriction of institutionally legitimate means for achieving them;<sup>9</sup> this explanation, though, accounts only for the genesis of deviance and deals with the question of consistency only by assuming continuous presentation to the individual of the conflict. Serious objections have been raised as to the validity or area of applicability of all these theories; none constitutes a complete explanation of consistently deviant behavior.<sup>10</sup>

The second problem associated with theories based on the concept of social control, the fact that people obey social rules even when no sanctions would follow an infraction, has been dealt with by positing the internalization or a generalized other which constitutes the hidden audience that en-

forces the rules. This theory is quite generally accepted by sociologists but is just as generally criticized because it offers no reasonable explanation of how people choose one from among the many audiences they can mentally summon to observe any given act.

Other efforts to explain consistent lines of activity also meet criticism. Such activity is sometimes explained by the presumed existence of universally accepted cultural values which inform and constrain behavior. Thus a society is characterized by, let us say, a stress on the value of affective neutrality or the value of achievement; therefore, it is argued, people will consistently choose in any situation that alternative which allows expression of this value. Put another way, individuals will choose alternatives which are consistent with and logically deducible from such a basic value position. Such a theory has difficulty, first of all, in specifying what the basic values of a society are; those theorists who hold that modern society is characteristically ridden with value conflicts might claim such difficulty will be chronic. Second, such a theory does not explain the process by which values, so conceived, affect behavior. It is not likely, for instance, that people make logical deductions from value premises and act on them.

Explanations of consistent behavior are sometimes imported from psychology or psychoanalysis. They refer consistency of behavior to a stable structure of personal needs. They predicate that individuals have stable needs and consistently act so as to maximize the possibility of satisfying them. This kind of scheme is widely used in sociology, either alone or in eclectic combination. But the explanation of behavior by reference to needs not directly observable and, indeed, often inferred from the presence of the behavior they are supposed to explain often causes sociologists to feel queasy about employing it.

In short, many sociologists are dissatisfied with current explanations of consistent human behavior. In my view, use of the con-

<sup>7</sup> Talcott Parsons, *The Social System* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1951), pp. 249-325.

<sup>8</sup> Albert K. Cohen, Alfred R. Lindesmith, and Karl F. Schuessler (eds.), *The Sutherland Papers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1956), pp. 7-29.

<sup>9</sup> Robert K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1957), pp. 131-60.

<sup>10</sup> For some questions about the Parsons and Merton approaches see Albert K. Cohen, "The Study of Social Disorganization and Deviant Behavior," in *Sociology Today: Problems and Prospects*, ed. Robert K. Merton, Leonard Broom, and Leonard S. Cottrell, Jr. (New York: Basic Books, 1959), pp. 461-74. For Sutherland's own critique of the theory of differential association see Cohen, Lindesmith, and Schuessler (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 30-41. See also Foote, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

cept of commitment in current sociology constitutes an attempt to solve the problem of explaining consistent human behavior in a sociological way without the flaws often attributed to the theories just reviewed. The concept hints at a theory which would do this, but it only hints; it does not deliver the theory full blown. Such a theory would contain a definition of the nature of acts or states of commitment. It would specify the conditions under which commitments come into being. It would indicate the consequences for behavior of acts or states of commitment. In the remainder of this paper I consider some of these points, not attempting to construct such a theory entire, but giving a first approximation of answers to these questions.

In writing of these questions, I have deliberately narrowed the referent of "commitment" to one specific social-psychological mechanism, one of the mechanisms hinted at in the term. It should be clear that this mechanism is not offered as the only possible explanation of consistent human behavior. The present analysis simply undertakes to clarify the nature of one of a family of related mechanisms operating to produce this result.

## II

What kind of explanation of consistent human behavior lies implicit in the concept of commitment? Clearly, the person is envisioned as having acted in such a way ("made a commitment") or being in such a state ("being committed") that he will now follow a consistent course. But, as the term is ordinarily used, the nature of this act or state of commitment is not specified; it appears to be regarded as either self-explanatory or intuitively understandable. If we use the concept in this way, the proposition that commitment produces consistent lines of activity is tautological, for commitment, whatever our intuitions about its independent existence, is in fact synonymous with the committed behavior it is supposed to explain. It is a hypothesized event or condition whose occurrence is inferred from the fact

that people act as though they were committed. Used in this way, the concept has the same flaws as those psychological theories which explain behavior by referring to some unobserved state of the actor's psyche, this state deduced from the occurrence of the event it is supposed to explain.

To avoid this tautological sin, we must specify the characteristics of "being committed" independent of the behavior commitment will serve to explain. Schelling, in his analysis of the process of bargaining,<sup>11</sup> furnishes a hypothetical example whose analysis may help us arrive at a characterization of the elements of one of the mechanisms that might be called "commitment." Suppose that you are bargaining to buy a house; you offer sixteen thousand dollars, but the seller insists on twenty thousand. Now suppose that you offer your antagonist in the bargaining certified proof that you have bet a third party five thousand dollars that you will not pay more than sixteen thousand dollars for the house. Your opponent must admit defeat because you would lose money by raising your bid; you have committed yourself to pay no more than you originally offered.

This commitment has been achieved by making a *side bet*. The committed person has acted in such a way as to involve other interests of his, originally extraneous to the action he is engaged in, directly in that action. By his own actions prior to the final bargaining session he has staked something of value to him, something originally unrelated to his present line of action, on being consistent in his present behavior. The consequences of inconsistency will be so expensive that inconsistency in his bargaining stance is no longer a feasible alternative.

The major elements of commitment present themselves in this example. First, the individual is in a position in which his decision with regard to some particular line of action has consequences for other interests

<sup>11</sup> Thomas C. Schelling, "An Essay on Bargaining," *American Economic Review*, XLVI (June, 1956), 281-306.

and activities not necessarily related to it.<sup>12</sup> Second, he has placed himself in that position by his own prior actions. A third element is present, though so obvious as not to be apparent: the committed person must be aware that he has made the side bet and must recognize that his decision in this case will have ramifications beyond it. The element of recognition of the interest created by one's prior action is a necessary component of commitment because, even though one has such an interest, he will not act to implement it (will not act so as to win his side bet) unless he realizes it is necessary.

Note that in this example commitment can be specified independent of the consistent activity which is its consequence. The side bet not to pay more and the additional interest this creates in sticking to the original offered price occur independent of the fact of refusing to pay more. Were we to interview this clever bargainer before the final bargaining session, he presumably would tell us that he understood his interests could now be served only by paying no more.

Thus, whenever we propose commitment as an explanation of consistency in behavior, we must have independent observations of the major components in such a proposition: (1) prior actions of the person staking some originally extraneous interest on his following a consistent line of activity; (2) a recognition by him of the involvement of this originally extraneous interest in his present activity; and (3) the resulting consistent line of activity.

We cannot, of course, often expect social life to be of the classic simplicity of this economic example. Rather, interests, side bets and acts of commitment, and consequent behavior will seem confounded and irremediably mixed, and it will require considerable ingenuity to devise appropriate

indexes with which to sort them out. But the economic example shows us the skeleton we can look for beneath the flesh of more complicated social processes.

### III

If we confined our use of commitment to those cases where individuals have deliberately made side bets, we would seldom bring it into our analyses of social phenomena. What interests us is the possibility of using it to explain situations where a person finds that his involvement in social organization has, in effect, made side bets for him and thus constrained his future activity. This occurs in several ways.

A person sometimes finds that he has made side bets constraining his present activity because the existence of *generalized cultural expectations* provides penalties for those who violate them. One such expectation operates in the area of work. People feel that a man ought not to change his job too often and that one who does is erratic and untrustworthy. Two months after taking a job a man is offered a job he regards as much superior but finds that he has, on the side, bet his reputation for trustworthiness on not moving again for a period of a year and regretfully turns the job down. His decision about the new job is constrained by his having moved two months prior and his knowledge that, however attractive the new job, the penalty in the form of a reputation for being erratic and unstable will be severe if he takes it. The existence of generalized cultural expectations about the behavior of responsible adult males has combined with his recent move to stake his personal reputation, nominally extraneous to the decision about the new job, on that decision.

A person often finds that side bets have been made for him by the operation of *impersonal bureaucratic arrangements*. To take a simple instance, a man who wishes to leave his current job may find that, because of the rules governing the firm's pension fund, he is unable to leave without losing a considerable sum of money he has in that fund. Any decision about the new job in-

<sup>12</sup> So far, the definition of commitment proposed here parallels that of Abramson *et al.* (*op. cit.*, p. 16): "Committed lines are those lines of action the actor feels obligated to pursue by force of penalty . . . Committed lines . . . are sequences of action with penalties and costs so arranged as to guarantee their selection."

volves a financial side bet the pension fund has placed for him by its rules.

The situation of the Chicago schoolteacher presents a somewhat more complicated system of side bets made by the operation of bureaucratic arrangements. Teachers prefer to teach middle-class children. To do so, they must be assigned to a school containing such children. Teachers can request assignment to as many as ten different schools; assignments are made, as openings occur, to the teacher whose request for a given school is of longest standing. New teachers are assigned to schools for which there are no requests, the lower-class schools teachers like least. The desirable schools have the longest list of requests outstanding, while less desirable schools have correspondingly shorter lists. The teacher in the lower-class school who desires to transfer must, in picking out the ten schools she will request, take into account the side bets the operation of the bureaucratic transfer system has made for her. The most important such bet has to do with time. If she selects one of the most desirable schools, she finds that she has lost a bet about the time it will take her to get out of her present position, for it takes a long time to reach the top of the list for one of these schools. She can instead choose a less desirable school (but better than her present situation) into which she can move more quickly, thus winning the side bet on time. This system of bets constraining her transfer requests has been made in advance by the bureaucratic rules governing requests for transfer.<sup>13</sup>

One might ask in what sense the person's prior actions have made a side bet in these two instances. How has he, by his own act, placed himself in a position where his decision on a new job or request for transfer involves these other considerations? Is it not rather the case that he has had no part in it, being constrained by forces entirely outside himself? We can without sophistry, I

think, locate the crucial action which has created the commitment in the person's acquiescence to the system, in his agreeing to work under the bureaucratic rules in force. By doing this, he has placed all the bets which are given in the structure of that system, even though he does not become aware of it until faced with an important decision.

Side bets constraining behavior also come into existence through the process of *individual adjustment to social positions*. A person may so alter his patterns of activity in the process of conforming to the requirements for one social position that he unfits himself for other positions he might have access to. In so doing, he has staked the ease of performance in the position on remaining where he is. To return to our earlier example, some Chicago schoolteachers chose to remain in a lower-class school for the lengthy period necessary to reach the top of the list for a very desirable middle-class school. When the opportunity to make the move came, they found that they no longer desired to move because they had so adjusted their style of teaching to the problems of dealing with lower-class children that they could not contemplate the radical changes necessary to teach middle-class children. They had, for instance, learned to discipline children in ways objectionable to middle-class parents and become accustomed to teaching standards too low for a middle-class school.<sup>14</sup> They had, in short, bet the ease of performance of their job on remaining where they were and in this sense were committed to stay.

Goffman's analysis of *face-to-face interaction*<sup>15</sup> suggests another way side bets are made through the operation of social processes. He notes that persons present to their fellows in any sequence of interaction an image of themselves they may or may not be able to live up to. Having once claimed to be a certain kind of person, they find it necessary to act, so far as possible, in an

<sup>13</sup> For a fuller account of the operation of this system see Howard S. Becker, "The Career of the Chicago Public Schoolteacher," *American Journal of Sociology*, LVII (March, 1952), 470-77.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 473-75.

<sup>15</sup> Erving Goffman, "On Face-Work," *Psychiatry*, XVIII (August, 1955), 213-31.

appropriate way. If one claims implicitly, in presenting himself to others, to be truthful, he cannot allow himself to be caught in a lie and is in this way committed to truth-telling. Goffman points out that the rules governing face-to-face interaction are such that others will ordinarily help one preserve the front he has put forward ("save face"). Nevertheless, a person will often find his activity constrained by the kind of front he has earlier presented in interaction; he finds he has bet his appearance as a responsible participant in interaction on continuing a line of activity congruent with that front.

This review of the social mechanisms through which persons make side bets extraneous to a particular line of activity that nevertheless later constrain that activity is not exhaustive. It serves only to point the direction for empirical study of side-bet mechanisms, in the course of which a more definitive classification might be made.

#### IV

As some of our examples indicate, commitments are not necessarily made consciously and deliberately. Some commitments do result from conscious decisions, but others arise crecively; the person becomes aware that he is committed only at some point of change and seems to have made the commitment without realizing it. By examining cases of both kinds, we may get some hints toward a theory of the genesis of commitments.

Such a theory might start with the observation that the commitment made without realization that it is being made—what might be termed the "commitment by default"—arises through a series of acts no one of which is crucial but which, taken together, constitute for the actor a series of side bets of such magnitude that he finds himself unwilling to lose them. Each of the trivial acts in such a series is, so to speak, a small brick in a wall which eventually grows to such a height the person can no longer climb it. The ordinary routines of living—the daily recurring events of every-

day life—stake increasingly more valuable things on continuing a consistent line of behavior, although the person hardly realizes this is happening. It is only when some event changes the situation so as to endanger those side bets that the person understands what he will lose if he changes his line of activity. The person who contributes a small amount of each paycheck to a non-transferable pension fund which eventually becomes sizable provides an apposite illustration of this process; he might willingly lose any single contribution but not the total accumulated over a period of years.

If this is the case with commitment by default, we might conjecture that it is also true of commitments resulting from conscious decisions. Decisions do not of themselves result in consistent lines of action, for they are frequently changed. But some decisions do produce consistent behavior. We can perhaps account for this variety of outcomes of decisions by the proposition that only those decisions bolstered by the making of sizable side bets will produce consistent behavior. Decisions not supported by such side bets will lack staying power, crumpling in the face of opposition or fading away to be replaced by other essentially meaningless decisions until a commitment based on side bets stabilizes behavior.<sup>14</sup>

We might also note that a consistent line of activity will often be based on more than one kind of side bet; several kinds of things valuable to the person may be staked on a particular line of activity. For instance, the man who hesitates to take a new job may be deterred by a complex of side bets: the financial loss connected with a pension fund he would lose if he moved; the loss of seniority and "connections" in his present firm which promise quick advance if he stays; the loss of ease in doing his work because of his success in adjusting to the

<sup>14</sup> The preceding paragraphs are adapted from Howard S. Becker, "The Implications of Research on Occupational Careers for a Model of Household Decision Making," in *Consumer Behavior*, Vol. IV: *Models of Household Decision Making*, ed. Nelson Foote (forthcoming).

particular conditions of his present job; the loss of ease in domestic living consequent on having to move his household; and so on.

## V

For a complete understanding of a person's commitments we need one more element: an analysis of the system of values or, perhaps better, valuables with which bets can be made in the world he lives in. What kinds of things are conventionally wanted, what losses feared? What are the good things of life whose continued enjoyment can be staked on continuing to follow a consistent line of action?

Some systems of value permeate an entire society. To recur to Schelling's example of the canny house-buyer, economic commitments are possible only within the confines of a system of property, money, and exchange. A side bet of five thousand dollars has meaning only where money is conventionally valued.

However, it is important to recognize that many sets of valuable things have value only within subcultural groups in a society and that many side bets producing commitment are made within systems of value of limited provenience. Regional, ethnic, and social class subcultures all provide raw material for side bets peculiar to those sharing in the culture, as do the variants of these related to differing age and sex statuses. A middle-class girl can find herself committed to a consistently chaste line of behavior by the sizable side bet of her reputation that middle-class culture attaches to virginity for females. A girl who is a member of a social class where virginity is less valued could not be committed in this way; and, except for a few puritanical enclaves in our society, boys cannot acquire commitments of this kind at all, for male virginity has little value, and no side bet of any magnitude could be made with it.<sup>17</sup>

More limited subcultures, such as those

associated with occupational groups or political parties, also provide sets of valuables with which side bets can be made. These esoteric systems of value must be discovered if the commitments of group members are to be understood. For instance, the professional dance musician achieves job security by becoming known as a dependable man to a large group of employing band-leaders and to an even larger group of musicians who are not leaders but will recommend him for jobs they hear about. The dependable man is, among other things, a man who will take any job offered him unless he is already engaged; by doing this, he shows that he will not let a leader who needs a vital man down. His reputation for not letting leaders down has economic value to him, for leaders who believe in that reputation will keep him working. When he is offered a job that he does not, for whatever reason, want, he finds himself committed to taking it anyway; by failing to do so, he would lose the reputation for dependability and the consequent steady supply of jobs the value system of the music business has bet for him on his consistency in always taking whatever job is offered.<sup>18</sup>

In short, to understand commitments fully, we must discover the systems of value within which the mechanisms and processes described earlier operate. By so doing, we understand not only how side bets are made but the kind of counters with which they can be made; in fact, it is likely that we cannot fully penetrate the former without understanding the latter.

## VI

The conception of commitment I have been proposing has certain disadvantages for empirical and theoretical work. In the first place, many of the difficulties faced in using other theories remain unresolved. People often have conflicting commitments,

<sup>18</sup> An earlier and somewhat different account of dance musicians' job security can be found in Howard S. Becker, "Some Contingencies of the Professional Dance Musician's Career," *Human Organization*, XII (Spring, 1953), 22-26.

<sup>17</sup> I hasten to say that this illustration is hypothetical; I do not know the facts of the differential distribution of evaluations of chastity.

and the theory proposed here offers no answer to the question of how people choose between the commitments they have acquired when such conflicts are activated. Problems like this do not magically disappear on the introduction of a new concept.

Furthermore, the limited conception of commitment I have suggested covers a limited area. Many kinds of consistent behavior will probably prove unexplainable in its terms. This is as it should be, for analytic precision comes through the breaking-down of global categories into more limited and homogenous classificatory types. However, the concept of commitment has been made to cover such a wide range of phenomena in ordinary discourse that confusion may arise from trying to limit its use. This difficulty should be met by clarifying analytically the several mechanisms that have been subsumed under commitment, the conditions under which they operate, and the ways they may be distinguished from one another.<sup>19</sup> It seems convenient to retain "commitment" to refer to the specific mechanism of constraint of behavior through previously placed side bets and use such terms as "involvement," "attachment," "vocation," "obligation," and so on, to refer to related but distinguishable phenomena. Un-

fortunately, we cannot make our concepts precise and at the same time keep the full range of evocative meaning they have acquired in ordinary discourse.

These disadvantages, serious as they are, must be weighed against the advantages that use of the concept confers. First, the idea of the side bet allows us to specify the elements of commitment independently of the consistent line of behavior they are used to account for and thus avoid tautology. Though it may not always be easy to find empirical indicators of the side bets constraining people's activity, side bets and consistent activity are in principle distinguishable, and we are thus able to avoid a common difficulty in the use of the concepts.

Beyond this, the conception of commitment I have sketched gives us the theoretical tools for assimilating the common-sense notion that people often follow lines of activity for reasons quite extraneous to the activity itself. While we are all aware of this fact, we have no conceptual language which allows us to put this insight to work in our research and theory. The concept of commitment furnishes the requisite terms. In addition, it outlines the mechanisms by which past actions link extraneous interests to a line of activity.

<sup>19</sup> See Stone, *op. cit.*, and Erving Goffman, "Role Distance" (unpublished paper).