2. Rusbult’s Investment Model

Building on Kelley and Thibaut’s model, Rusbult (1980, 1983) developed an investment model of interpersonal relationships (see Figure 11.14). In agreement with Kelley and Thibaut, Rusbult’s model holds that relationship satisfaction is determined by three factors: benefits, costs, and comparison level. Relationship commitment is also thought to be influenced by three factors: relationship satisfaction, the perceived quality of alternative relationships, and investments. This last term refers to all of the things that would be lost if the relationship were dissolved. These investments can include tangible goods, (e.g., a house, a pet, or mutual friends) and intangible things (e.g., the energy one has spent working on the relationship, the years one has devoted to the relationship, or the emotional well-being of one’s children). According to the model, relationship commitment is strong when investments are high and relatively weak when investments are low. Finally, relationship commitment determines relationship stability. This term refers to whether couples actually decide to remain together or split up.

Rusbult (1983) tested the model over a one-year period, comparing people who remained in a relationship, left a relationship, or were left by their relationship partner. Figure 11.15 shows an intriguing pattern of results. Looking only at benefits and costs, we can see that people who stayed with their partner experienced more benefits and fewer costs than did those whose relationships ended. Notice also that this pattern is the same for those who were left by their partner as those who left their partner. The other three variables show a different pattern. Here, we see that people who left a relationship differ from those who stayed or were left behind, with leavers reporting greater alternatives, fewer investments, and a lower commitment to the relationship. Taken together, these findings support the claim that a decision to leave a relationship depends more on alternatives, investments, and commitment than on benefits and costs.