

Marriages at Risk

Relationship Formation and Opportunities for Relationship Education

Scott M. Stanley

Galena K. Rhoades

University of Denver

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The first section of this paper describes the current state of the field of marriage and relationship education, summarizing the state of that field in the context of growing needs based on societal trends toward family fragmentation. Major advances and existing questions about the use and effectiveness of relationship education are discussed. In the midst of the growing efforts to help couples using educational models, it has become increasingly obvious that there is much important work that may be done to help individuals make better decisions in their relationship choices, prior to couples forming in the first place. The second section of this paper describes advances in research and theory on the nature of how relationships form, and how aspects of relationship formation may be linked to increased risk for adverse outcomes. Drawing on the work of the team at the University of Denver (and elsewhere) on cohabitation dynamics, this paper describes a more generalized theory of relationship transitions and risk, emphasizing implications of the concept of inertia and the dynamics of sliding vs. deciding. Insights from that work are further contextualized by drawing upon theory and findings in the fields of social psychology and behavioral economics.

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Marriages at Risk: Relationship Formation and Opportunities for Relationship Education

The United States has undergone an unprecedented rise in family fragmentation in the past 40 years. Part of what drives this trend is the fact that the divorce rate has moved up dramatically, starting in the late 1960s and leveling off at a point where the average young couple marrying for the first time today has only about a 50% chance of remaining together through life (Raley & Bumpass, 2003). Of equal concern, a steadily increasing number of children are born in contexts where their parents are both unlikely to marry and unlikely to remain together whether married or not (Raley & Bumpass, 2003). This means that fewer children than ever before are likely to be raised in the context most strongly associated with child-wellbeing—a home headed by their biological parents (Amato, 2005). These trends, while greatest of all in the United States, appear to be repeated in most countries as they become more industrialized, such as the U.K., Australia, and countries on the European continent.

While most people have the dream of a lifelong, happy marriage, most do not achieve this goal. Glenn (1998), for example, shows that of the 50% or so of couples who remain together lifelong, that only about half of that half report being very happy in their marriage. As divorce rates have grown, successive generations have become wary of marriage, desiring it while fearing it. Many people have a crisis in confidence about marriage. This is particularly true for those who come from homes where parents divorced, who have lower confidence in both the institution of marriage (Amato & DeBoer, 2001) and also their own marriages as adults (Whitton et al., in press). In this context, many seek alternative pathways, such as premarital cohabitation, which is believed by younger people to reduce the risks of relationship dissolution (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001; Johnson et al., 2002). No study shows an advantage and most show associated risks for premarital cohabitation (Stanley, Rhoades & Markman, 2006). As we will discuss later in this paper, this risk is largely associated with cohabiting prior to engagement, that is, prior to clarity about commitment to marriage in the future (Kline et al., 2004; Rhoades, Stanley & Markman, in press, a). The evidence has accumulated showing that commonly taken paths, such as cohabiting prior to or instead of marriage, are associated with even higher levels of risk on a variety of dimensions, providing less stable contexts for raising children. For example, among trends recently presented in a paper by William Galston (who was an advisor to President Clinton), parents who are cohabiting at the time of birth of a child are one fifth as likely to be together at age two for that child as parents who are married at the time of birth of a child (Galston, 2008). This is really not surprising if one considers the fact that cohabiting couples tend to have lower levels of interpersonal commitment between the partners (Stanley, Whitton & Markman, 2004). In other words, cohabiting couples may have some different level of commitment to the institution of marriage than married couples, or they may simply be less traditional in their view of when to become married; regardless, on average, cohabiting partners also have less devotion to each other than married couples. They are more likely to break up because they tend not to be as committed to each other as are married partners.

Among policy makers, social scientists, and religious leaders, reactions to the changes in the institution of marriage range from dismay to a belief that such changes are inevitable and should largely be accepted (Coontz, 1992). In the U.S., various efforts have arisen to counter the trends toward family fragmentation. These include arguments for legal changes to make divorce harder to achieve, suggestions for government changes such as in policies that provide

disincentives for marrying, and educational efforts to help people be more successful in their own aspirations for lifelong love in marriage. The focus of the first part of this paper is on the latter. We will first briefly review the state of the field of marriage (or couples) education, and then move on to describe why we believe that some of the most promising avenues to help people to be successful in marriage may involve a focus on individuals rather than couples. The work of our team in that area—working with individuals—focuses on the nature of relationship transitions and how transitions are implicated in the development of risks for cohabiting and married couples.

Since this paper is covering a large range of existing knowledge and practice, we will not be attempting a systematic review of any single theme. Rather, we will present a basic overview of existing knowledge in these fundamental areas, ending with a focus on the area that we are most excited about in terms of the potential to understand the current growing risks threatening marital and family stability—risk and transitions in romantic relationships.¹

Does Marriage Education Work, and For Whom Does It Work?

Marriage or relationship education can involve many activities but most typically involves helping couples make behavioral or attitudinal changes. We will use the term “marriage education” (ME), but we mean to use the term broadly here to represent educational strategies with couples who are married, unmarried, or planning marriage. ME comes in many forms, using educational procedures in a variety of formats, from a single practitioner working with one couple at a time to workshops, retreats, or classes involving a group of couples. There are a number of more evidence-based models such as the program developed by Howard Markman, Scott Stanley, and their colleagues (PREP: The Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program) and those developed by others (e.g., RE: Relationship Enhancement) (see Silliman et al., 2001). The goal of ME is generally not therapeutic but educational and preventive, although based on our experience and less formal surveys, distressed couples can be, and often are, involved. The most common implementation of ME in the U.S. is premarital education, most often provided by clergy or lay-leaders in religious organizations. It is rarely available in secular contexts (Doss et al., in press; Stanley et al., 2006), though this is changing. As a consequence of a national policy initiative in the U.S. that grew out of our welfare reform policies, there are currently all manner of demonstration projects² providing marriage education in many non-religious contexts, including in low income communities that have historically had little access to such services. Much will be learned from these efforts.

While various applications or strategies remain untested, many studies over a number of decades have demonstrated promising and positive findings from a wide range of marriage and relationship education efforts with couples—findings summarized in numerous papers

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- 1 We realize that this paper can easily be seen as two papers in one. That is intentional for purposes of covering two areas of importance that are linked by the fact that some of the most exciting educational opportunities opening up with individuals are, in part, fueled by advances in basic research about how relationships are forming at this time.
 - 2 Demonstration projects are designed to gather knowledge, but not so much scientifically as pragmatically. The major questions are who can be reached, who can provide services effectively, to which communities, what barriers are encountered, what services are most desired, and so forth.

and reviews (Carroll & Doherty, 2003; Halford et al., 2003; Halford, Markman & Stanley, 2008; Sayers & Heavey, 1998; Stanley, 2001). Most of the outcome studies with the strongest methods examine the effects of pre-marriage education. In this body of studies, there is evidence of gains in communication, improvements in relationship satisfaction, and, in some studies, a lower likelihood of relationship dissolution (e.g., Markman et al., 1993). The most consistent and robust findings suggest that couples can learn to communicate less negatively and more positively, and that such effects can be long lasting. These and related benefits of premarital education have been shown in numerous studies as well as meta-analytic reviews (e.g., Carroll & Doherty, 2003; Giblin, Sprenkle & Sheehan, 1985; Hawkins et al., in press; Nock, Sanchez & Wright, 2008). Given that conflict and negativity are highly associated with deleterious effects on adults and children (e.g., Grych & Fincham, 1990), this is an important set of findings.

There is evidence that pre-marriage education (and likely all forms of ME) may have the greatest impact on those who are at relatively higher risk (e.g., Halford et al., 2006), though this finding needs to be replicated with various types of risks and couples. Further, while marriage education models were mostly developed with middle class, white couples, there is solid evidence that effects are comparable for those of varying economic and racial backgrounds (Stanley et al., 2005; Stanley et al., 2006). On such questions, much more will be known in the years to come as results come in from ongoing studies in the U.S. that are employing large scale, multi-site, randomized trials with community samples.³ In fact, we and our colleagues believe that the current context of expanding delivery of a variety of ME efforts provides an extraordinary context for rapidly expanding knowledge about both marital dynamics and strategies for preventive education (Halford et al., 2008; Markman et al., 2007). In part, advances will come because experimental procedures used in outcome studies can provide strong tests of underlying theories of function or change (see Coie et al., 1993).

The existing body of evidence lays an empirical foundation for believing in the value of broad-based efforts to make such experiences available to more couples (Halford, Markman & Stanley, 2008). As promising as the results to date are, there remain numerous challenges for our field of marriage education. For example, there is a massive weight of empirical research documenting the linkages between negative patterns of communication and poor marital outcomes (e.g., Clements, Stanley & Markman, 2004; Gottman & Notarius, 2000; Markman, 1981; Roberts, 2000). Such findings make a strong rationale for focusing on such dynamic risk factors (vs. static risk factors) as communication and conflict behavior in ME. (For more on the importance of the distinction between dynamic and static risk factors, as well as an overview of empirically demonstrated risk factors for marital distress, see Stanley, 2001.) However, there remain difficulties in documenting the exact mechanisms of change responsible for positive outcomes resulting from participating in marriage education (Stanley et al., 2007). We also need to know more on a range of important questions, including:

- What strategies are most effective with what types of risk profiles?
- What strategies most effectively overcome barriers to attending such services, especially among men?

3 For more information, see <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/project/projectIndex.jsp#strengthen>

- Is it cost-effective to try to screen out couples who are likely to do just as well without receiving such services?
- Is it wise to even attempt to screen out those who need much more intensive or differing types of services, such as those with issues of substance abuse, violence, or mental health problems?⁴
- What adaptations are most important for achieving optimal benefits with couples from diverse backgrounds?
- Who are the most effective teachers of ME, and what are the most effective methods of instruction?
- What is the best amount of ME for different couples? What is the association between dose and response or effect?

Moving Beyond the Focus on Couple Based Strategies

There are many educational strategies that can plausibly play a role in helping to reduce family fragmentation and aid more people in achieving their own goals for lifelong love. In fact, the concept of marriage education too easily conjures up only the image of working with couples, teaching a set of skills or principles. That is the very nature of the greater part of the work that our colleague Howard Markman, the first author, and a host of other colleagues have conducted over the past 25 years. We have developed and tested variations of The Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) over these years (e.g., Markman et al., 2004; Stanley, Blumberg & Markman, 1999).⁵

However, as we have argued in numerous papers and talks, there may be even greater opportunities to work with individuals in pursuit of the goals of strengthening marriages and families. Each activity or example listed below would plausibly increase societal good by increasing the percentage of “healthy marriages” and family relationships. In turn, that would increase the percentage of children who are raised in the context that has been increasingly shown to confer, on average, the greatest benefits (Amato, 2005; Waite & Gallagher, 2000). The relative effectiveness as well as cost-benefit analyses of this diverse list of activities should be a matter for serious research attention in the years to come.

- Helping individuals better understand the benefits of healthy and stable marriages
- Helping individuals develop realistic expectations about marriage, including an understanding that relationships take work, but also that lasting marriages are possible and beneficial
- Helping people understand the role and value of fathers and father involvement for children
- Helping individuals understand key risk factors for marital and relationship distress, in general, and their relationships in particular
- Working with a single persons about relationship choices; for example, someone who may not be interested in marriage for now but who could use help distinguishing between healthy and unhealthy relationships

4 The matter here is not so much about who is appropriate for the services, though this is obviously important, but what are the best strategies for making use of existing contact points to help people get other, additional, or substitute services, once they have sought help through ME. As we and colleagues have argued, ME can be used as a contact point for helping people acquire knowledge about other needed services.

5 For more information, see www.PREPinc.com.

If public policy and private sector efforts retained a focus only on couples, some of the most promising avenues of preventive interventions would be lost. An axiom of prevention is that the earlier one can successfully intervene in an unfolding process that contains risk, the greater the possible effect. It is understandable that the focus of the vast amount of work in this field has been on couples. However, working with individuals using educational approaches prior to their entrance on constrained and risky pathways appears to us to have the most potential of all for large reductions in risk. It is reasonable to surmise that there are more ways to reduce the risk for deleterious outcomes the earlier in the development of relationships that we intervene. Obviously, for some, the most effective intervention of all would be to intervene with knowledge about how to make wise partner choices before there is even a relationship formed.⁶

The above discussion of the varieties of marriage and relationship education imply dimensions we will now briefly, formally discuss. In our experience, there are three dimensions that matter most when considering what approach to education is going to serve best the needs and goals of the clients (based on Stanley, Pearson & Kline, 2005). Those are:

1. Attendance: Who attends the services? Is the attendee an individual or a couple?
2. Relationship status: What is the relationship status of the client? Is the attendee in a serious romantic relationship or not?
3. Safety: What is the safety and health of the relationship? Is the current relationship (or history) one of general safety or one of danger?

Understanding the implications of these three dimensions is crucial in designing a curriculum as well as in understanding the broader program of government services in which it is placed. These three dimensions can be depicted in a simplistic summary as shown in Figure 1.

Most people only think of the top level of the three dimensions of Figure 1 when they think of marriage education. This is not only limiting, as noted earlier, but it also does not reflect what may be one of the greatest potential targets of such efforts: individuals who may or may not be in serious relationships, where those relationships may or may not be safe.

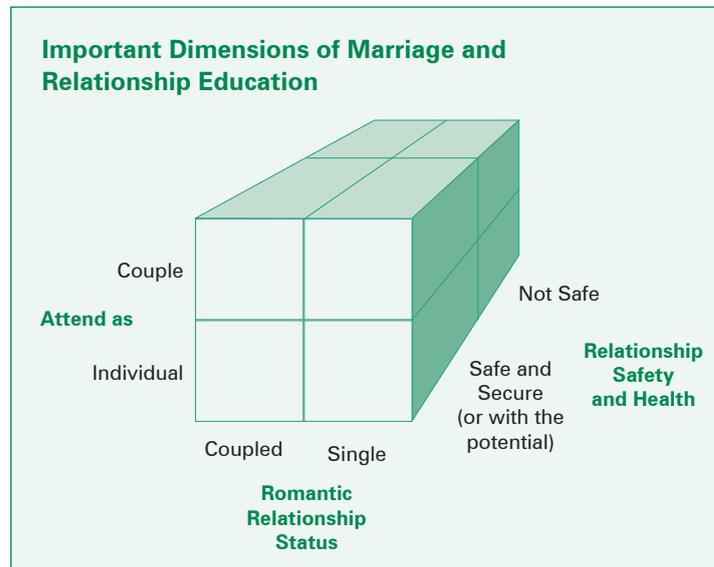


Figure 1: Defining Dimensions of Relationship Education Services

⁶ For example, I list things associated with making a wiser choice in marriage partner in my book *The Power of Commitment* (Stanley, 2005). Such information is not very mysterious, it is just mysteriously not emphasized in how youth and young adults are raised.

A specific example highlights one truly good outcome of the sort that can come from working with individuals—one not consistent with the caricature sometimes painted in debates on this issue in the U.S., where some have assumed that those favoring policies and programs to strengthen marriages aim to promote marriage to all people at all costs. Consider a woman with a three year old child who has struggled with poverty, and who happens also to be residing with a dangerous and abusive male. As part of her experience in welfare services, she may take part in a class where she learns more about healthy vs. dangerous relationships patterns (e.g., Pearson, Stanley & Rhoades, 2005). As a result, changes occur in her own beliefs and expectations about what is acceptable for her and her children. She may decide that her present relationship is unacceptably dangerous, even coming to understand much more clearly what the risks may be to not only her, but also to her children.⁷ In the class, she learns many things including how to get support and help to become safe by taking steps and seeking aid to move on from that relationship, but safely, and in ways that improve her future outcomes and that of the child. Sometimes, relationship and marriage education will result in the end of a relationship, not movement toward marriage.

ME can occur at multiple stages in life, from high school education about positive relationships and reasonable expectations, to young adults learning about high and low risk relationships and behaviors, to helping people make better choices when thinking about a potential partner, to helping already partnered couples gain a better chance in succeeding.

Best Practices are Empirically Informed, Revised, and Tested

Our tradition is the scientist practitioner model. Our team (including colleague Howard Markman), along with various other colleagues in this field, is committed to empirical processes for building best practices in ME (e.g., Halford et al., 2003; Halford et al., 2008). Before talking about our basic science research on relationship development and risk, we offer the following schema as an exemplar of the strongest kind of foundation upon which to build and refine interventions for couples.

Research-based approaches are strongest, in our view, when they are *empirically informed*. By this we mean that, to the extent possible, the information and strategies are based on the growing body of sound research on marital and family health. Not every point in any approach can be tested for individual effect, and many powerful, common sense principles are unlikely to ever be studied by social scientists, but we do think that approaches will generally be the strongest when the goals and strategies are consistent with existing, replicated, scientifically-based knowledge.

Approaches can also be *empirically tested*. As an example, one of our ME curricula, PREP, has been studied intensively, including long-term outcome studies by six or more different research teams in four different countries. The term that has come to be used most often for being empirically tested is *evidence-based*. Approaches vary in their basis of evidence for promoting positive results—some are no doubt effective yet have not such evidence, some

7 While we frame this example in terms of a female, we have heard many similar stories for males participating in such classes, as well.

are effective and also have a body of encouraging findings behind their history, and some approaches may lack both effectiveness and evidence. There are empirically informed and tested approaches where there may be little formal evaluation of effects with a new target audience. Nevertheless, even in those circumstances—and perhaps especially in such circumstances—care can be taken to build the content of an approach based on sound social science findings.

Finally, strong, scientifically-based models are, in our view, *regularly refined* based on the latest research. This is an essential part of what it means to be empirically based, because no ME curriculum is as effective as it can be and refinements are always desirable. We live in a time of unprecedented intensity and pace in the growth of a knowledge base about relationships. Approaches can be built in the present around sound findings (and some are), but new studies and understandings are steadily emerging in many relevant fields. It is ideal for approaches to be designed so that regular updates are possible and reoccurring. This model of reliance on empiricism gives us great optimism for the future of efforts to help couples and families. We do not know everything we would like to know, but a great deal is known today, and what is known is certainly enough to continue this work with confidence. As we take action to help others, we can build on the confidence of present approaches while refining strategies over time based on ongoing research and evaluations. This is the essence of empirically based best practices.

Our Work on Transition and Risk

We will now move to a topic related to our focus thus far: our basic science research into the development of couples, the nature of transitions, and risk. Our research team is well known in marriage and relationship education circles. We are also known, but less so, for our basic research in areas of relationship development and factors associated with marital success and failure. For example, our team has conducted research on: (1) factors most associated with risks for poor marital outcomes (e.g., Markman, 1981, Clements et al., 2004), (2) family of origin risk such as the effects of parental divorce on adult marriage prospects (Whitton et al., in press), (3) the development of depressive symptoms early in marriage (Whitton et al., 2007), (4) variables associated with thriving marriages (Stanley, Markman & Whitton, 2002), (5) the dynamics and implications of sacrificial behavior in marriage (Stanley et al., 2006; Whitton, Stanley & Markman, 2007), and (6) the characteristics (and risks) of nonmarital or premarital cohabitation (Kline et al., 2004; Rhoades, Stanley & Markman, 2006; Stanley et al., 2004; Stanley et al., 2006). These last two categories are most closely related to the first author's core theoretical interest over the years, commitment theory and measurement (e.g., Stanley & Markman, 1992). The themes of commitment and sacrifice also fit well into a growing trend among marital researchers to study processes that are more positive and likely related to higher order, dynamic changes in relationships (Fincham, Stanley & Beach, 2007).

Background Theory Regarding Relationship Commitment

Before focusing on our current work on transition and risk, we will lay some foundation for the process and conceptualization of commitment. There are different models of commitment that have been used in relationship research, and they have many similarities (see Adams & Jones, 1997; Johnson, Caughlin & Huston, 1999). In fact, the concepts in one model can easily

be mapped onto concepts in other models. Social exchange theory (e.g., Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) has been a dominant theoretical system that is reflected in most of the existing models (e.g., the work of Caryl Rusbult and colleagues (1980; 1983) as well as aspects of our model. The first author began studying commitment for his dissertation research, focusing on theory, conceptualization, and measurement. That model is quite psychological as reflected in the two terms chosen for the major constructs, *dedication* and *constraint* (Stanley & Markman, 1992), a distinction with parallels to other work on commitment (Johnson et al., 1999) but framed more psychologically. Simply put, dedication denotes the type of commitment associated with intrinsic motivation, including a desire to be with the partner long term, a willingness to have “we” trump “me,” a willingness to sacrifice for the partner and relationship, and a element of priority being placed on the relationship. Constraints, on the other hand, are factors that favor continuance without regard to quality of relationship or dedication level. Constraints are those forces that would make it harder to leave a relationship if one wanted to leave. Constraints likely provide a positive grounding for healthy relationships, but to define them, the question really should be asked in the negative, what would keep someone there if they wanted to leave?

What is striking about the study of commitment in close relationships, and especially marriage, is that direct measurement of commitment is so often not even attempted in social science. This is striking given that much marital and family literature is ostensibly about the nature of committed relationships. That lack of a focus on commitment is also in conflict with the laymen’s sense of how important commitment is in understanding relationships, and especially marriage and divorce (e.g. Johnson et al., 2002). For example, it is plainly obvious to the average couple who is married for many years that there are times when commitment, not happiness, has gotten them through tough spots and on to a better future.

There are a couple of other statements we would make about commitment that are foundational to the model of transition and risk that we have been working on in recent years. In addition to a measurement model framed on the basic push and pull of dedication and constraint, it can also be said, almost axiomatically, that “commitment means making a choice to give up other choices” (Stanley, 2005). This statement links to research in social psychology showing how difficult it is for people to make choices where they have a plethora of options (e.g., Schwartz, 2000, 2005).⁸ This is one of the most fundamental reasons why commitments could become increasingly difficult for people as options multiply. Second, it puts commitment theory squarely in the realm of research traditions in social and cognitive psychology that look at how people make decisions in conditions where there is risk and uncertainty, including: (1) prospect theory (e.g., Kahneman & Tversky, 1990), (2) affective forecasting (e.g., Gilbert, 2006⁹; Gilbert & Ebert, 2002), and (3) the theory of cognitive dissonance (e.g., Festinger, 1957; Brehm, 2007; Harmon-Jones & Harmon-Jones, 2002). Here, we will pay some attention to

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- 8 We hope the reader will excuse a matter of expediency. In this section, we will generally site what have been very accessible works without any great attempt to use what could be the preeminent references for original research in these areas of study.
- 9 This book is one of the finest examples of translating a body of knowledge into ideas for the average reader we have seen. It is a wonderful, and wonderfully clear, book.

dissonance theory in bringing a deeper analysis to the transition and risk model after laying more foundation.

How and Why Does Commitment Develop Between Partners?

If commitment means giving up options, why would somebody give up any choices in their relationship options in life? Clearly there must be a widespread belief that there is something to be gained. The most obvious answer lies in considering why commitment develops at all. Figure 2 presents a model for how commitment develops.¹⁰

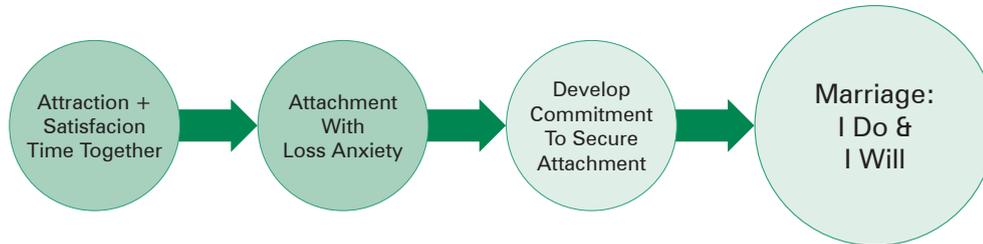


Figure 2

First, attraction develops based on partners' similarities and differences. There is a great deal of mystery, thankfully, in the roots of attraction, but let's assume for the moment that the attraction has developed between two people. Because of this, they spend more time together. As the relationship progresses, the ongoing satisfaction between partners results in a growing emotional attachment. However, along with the attachment comes a type of anxiety that we believe is nearly a universal phenomenon in societies where romantic attachment is part of how couples form. The anxiety comes because there is now the potential for loss (a point first made in Stanley, Lobitz & Dickson, 1999): "I like you and want to be with you now and in the future. What if you're not going to stay with me? What if you're not going to remain in my life?"

While we think this attachment process is entirely normal, we also believe that people will vary in how they experience it based on their own attachment history in their family of origin or prior romantic relationships.¹¹ We presume, but have no proof, that those who have genetic or childhood experiences that lead to higher levels of generalized attachment anxiety as a personal trait will experience this normal attachment anxiety in romantic relationships all the more acutely.¹²

¹⁰ Scott Stanley first presented this model fully in a keynote address to the Smart Marriages conference in July, 2002 (Stanley, 2002).

¹¹ It has become widely recognized that adults as well as children experience anxieties about the complexities of attachment. Sue Johnson, for example, has developed a strong and effective system of marital therapy based on this fact, working directly with couples in how they deal with the anxieties about attachment in the course of their marriages (Johnson, 1996). A general resource on this theme of attachment is Cassidy and Shaver (1998). A great example of the use of this theoretical system in empirical research with couples is Davila and Bradbury (2001).

¹² It is entirely probable that this prediction has been supported in studies that currently exist that we have not yet discovered.

The development of attachment is not the same as the development of commitment. Strong attachments between partners often lead to commitment but this is not automatic. It is the formation of commitment—a clear series of decisions about choices and the future, about boundaries, and the exclusion of alternatives—that brings security to a relationship, thereby settling or reducing anxieties about attachment and loss. Attachment often pushes one to desire security but commitment brings evidence that one can actually trust that security exists.

This simple model portrays what may be the most important role that commitment plays in relationship success and failure; commitment signals security. Accordingly, marriage represents the highest expression of the intention to have security between romantic partners. Therefore, a clearly understood, expressed, and regularly acted out “*I do*” is going to be the strongest foundation for relationship quality and stability. Of course marriages are not always permanent. But, generally speaking, two partners derive a sense of permanence and a future when they declare the intentions embodied in “*I do*” and follow through with “*We will.*” Couples who clearly express and act on such commitment will have an easier time handling what life brings their way because they have the security of a long term perspective that is crucial to help them weather the ups and downs that are inevitable in life together. This strong commitment brings a kind of safety in the security of the bond that, when combined with emotional safety, sets the foundation for a particularly strong marriage (Stanley, Markman & Whitton, 2002; Stanley, 2007). Conflicts, set backs, and challenges that could otherwise threaten a relationship will be managed better because of the secure bond.

In the U.S. and other western countries¹³, the ways romantic relationships develop has been changing. For example, in a report entitled *Hooking Up, Hanging Out and Hoping for Mr. Right*, Norval Glenn and Elizabeth Marquardt examined the dating experiences of women on college campuses, focusing on how they are thinking about their relationships and how relationships form (Glenn & Marquardt, 2001). One fact gleaned by observing the current dating scene among college students is that there are relatively few standards and structures for relationship development, compared with past eras.

It used to be that there were relatively clear steps in relationship formation for most people. While we are sure customs have always varied by region and cultural background, relationships progressed along pathways marked by stages of commitment. In many societies, developing relationships in past decades progressed on a path of commitment; dating moved toward “going steady,” which may have moved to a woman being “pinned” or wearing her beau’s class ring, and on to engagement.¹⁴ These actions represent emblems of commitment, with such patterns representing ways that young people practiced making commitments. It seems that such steps of practicing commitment are no longer existent for many younger people in the U.S. In talking to experts in this field, we’ve come to the conclusion that it is not at all clear that anything else has replaced these patterns that have largely disappeared; an

13 This also seems likely to be the case in most industrialized societies, however we have not made a study of that question. It is most clear in the U.S., and we believe this is reflected in many parts of the world at this time.

14 These are common symbols of increasing commitment in the history of the U.S. We would expect that such an analysis in other societies would reveal similar trends albeit with differing, specific customs.

interesting exception to this trend that is worth exploring is the expanding of use and interest in social networking sites on the internet (e.g., Facebook). Young people, at least in the U.S., appear to be using such systems to communicate information about relationship interests and status. More generally, we believe we have seen the steady erosion of societal and cultural practices that probably have functioned to *scaffold* the development from one stage of commitment to another (to borrow a developmental concept from Vygotsky's theory (1962)). In contrast, what we see developing in romantic relationships is a cultural trend toward practicing *not* being committed, or not committing in any particularly tangible and visible ways. We are not suggesting—not at all—that young people should become prematurely entangled and thereby close out alternative options too early in a relationship. Norval Glenn (2002) developed the idea of “premature entanglement” to capture the way relationships now develop so quickly that the entanglement forecloses an adequate search for a suitable partner.¹⁵ This concept has parallels to the concept of inertia we are coming to in the next section. At the root, what we are suggesting is that some important symbols of commitment have been lost in recent years and we think the loss is meaningful.

Such a shift in basic relationship development behaviors is clear in Glenn and Marquardt's report. It is also very clear in Whitehead and Popenoe's (2002) findings that such emblems of commitment are no longer routinely made in young adulthood. Rather, relationships and boundaries and futures are ambiguous as couples develop toward the possibility of marriage. Hence, with regard to the developmental model presented earlier, attachments without commitments have become widespread. This change, we believe, has enormous consequences. If commitment secures normal attachment anxiety in romantic relationships, it would be all the more needed to serve this function when an increasing number of young adults have been affected by factors such as parental divorce that leave them less confident and committed to the institution of marriage (Amato & DeBoer, 2001) and to their adult partners (Whitton et al., in press).

Maybe I Do

In the past decade, our team has become interested and involved in research on cohabitation. By “we,” we particularly mean the authors of this chapter, along with Howard Markman. Cohabitation has always gathered some degree of interest among researchers, and, if anything, this interest has accelerated as it has become increasingly common, both living together prior to marriage and living together without intention to marry (Smock, 2002). We believe that cohabitation research is particularly important, not only because it is a growing phenomenon affecting the lives of adults and children, but because it provides an excellent window into the way relationships develop and how patterns of development may be associated with risks for individuals or couples over time. We will now highlight some of the work and the implications we are pursuing.

¹⁵ Sociologist Norval Glenn (2002) has suggested that couples become prematurely entangled to their detriment. The focus of his reasoning is that the premature entanglement cuts off adequate search for a more suitable partner. The focus here in inertia is similar, though the emphasis is much more on the dynamics and development of commitment than the implications for search processes.

It has been understood for decades that those who live together prior to marriage, at least in the U.S., are at greater, not lesser, risk for poor marital outcomes (for a review of findings, see Stanley et al., 2006). This finding is counterintuitive for young adults because they generally believe just the opposite, that cohabiting prior to marriage will give them advantages in the context of generally risky odds for marital success (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). In fact, people believe that it improves their odds, and partly because they see it as a good way to test the relationship. It turns out that the reason for cohabiting most strongly associated with poor outcomes is, in fact, to test the relationship (Rhoades, Stanley & Markman, in press, b). Nevertheless, no study in decades has actually demonstrated an advantage for those cohabiting prior to marriage and most studies show the opposite. The traditionally understood explanation among researchers has been that this increased risk is associated with preexisting selection effects that put those who happen to cohabit at greater risk in marriage. For example, being more religious, or more traditional in views of marriage and divorce, are variables associated with not cohabiting and also associated with generally better odds for success in marriage. While there are studies that do show reduction in effects when accounting for some accepted selection variables (Lillard, Brien & Waite, 1995; Woods & Emery, 2002), many other studies have been unable to show that the effect is substantially reduced or eliminated by controlling for selection variables (e.g., Kamp Dush et al., 2004; Rhoades et al., in press, a; Stafford, Kline & Rankin, 2004; Stanley et al., 2004).

We have a theory of risk that includes an explanation of how the experience of premarital cohabitation may add to risk for couples in a way that goes beyond explanations relying mostly on the concept of selection (Stanley et al., 2006). Yet, selection is very involved. In 1996, the first author was examining data from a national sample that showed that those who cohabited prior to marriage did, indeed, have more problems in their marriages (Stanley, Whitton & Markman, 2004). In fact, the results showed that it was the men who had cohabited who reported lower levels of marital satisfaction, lower levels of dedication commitment to their spouses, and more negative interaction. The commitment finding was especially interesting. Males who had cohabited prior to marriage were substantially less interpersonally committed (dedication) to their partners than men in marriages where they had not cohabited prior to marriage, with the difference amounting to an effect size of .68. This reflects a substantial difference.

Why would husbands who had cohabited before getting married be less dedicated, on average, compared to other husbands who had cohabited only after they got married? The first author began to wonder if there might not be a subset of men in relationships where the couple cohabited prior to marriage who married someone they would not have married had they not been cohabiting. This is a direct extension of the concept of constraint, with the premise being that living with a partner (especially if sharing one address) would entail a higher average level of constraint on personal options than a relationship where partners were seeing each other actively, were similarly attached, but were not living together. Many things can make such a relationship more difficult to end, including the sheer difficulty of someone moving out, the difficulty of dividing up mutual possessions, the development of lifestyle patterns favoring the status quo, and so forth. We have labeled constraint in this formulation *inertia*, since inertia is the physical property of an object that relates to the amount of energy that would be needed to set an object at rest in motion or to shift an already moving object to a different trajectory.

Essentially, constraints inertialize relationships, and not merely marriage. While cohabitation has less inertia than marriage, the relevant comparison here is between cohabitation and dating without cohabiting. Cohabitation is most often compared to marriage, but it may be that, when it comes to understanding risk in developing relationships, the most important comparison probably is to dating without cohabiting.

In addition to the types of variables that constraints that have typically been discussed as costs of ending a relationship (Stanley & Markman, 1992), cohabitation prior to marriage or the development of clarity about commitment to the future may have another negative consequence unintended by some who go down that pathway. Economists talk about the “endowment effect” wherein people value things more than they would be willing to pay for them merely because they already possess them (first developed by Thaler, 1980). In other words, people tend to overvalue things they possess; this is true even if they did not even choose to acquire those things in the first place. This is closely related to the concept of loss aversion that has been repeatedly demonstrated in the research of Kahneman and Tversky (1990). The concept can be applied here in that some of those who are cohabiting prior to marriage may come to place greater value on this relationship they already have in comparison to what others would consider to be a solid match—and more importantly, compared to what they, themselves, would consider to be a better match if they were still searching (Glenn, 2002).

The core idea in this stream of reasoning is that some men who cohabit prior to marriage (not all men who do so) are less dedicated to their partners all along, and the constraints of cohabiting lead to incentives to remain in the status quo despite the underlying weaknesses in some of these relationships. While these ideas arose thinking about men but there is no reason not to believe that this dynamic can affect females also. In healthy relationship development, dedication develops and constraints follow. In fact, today’s dedication becomes tomorrow’s constraints. With some patterns of cohabitation, development of constraints too often precedes the full development of dedication.

Conceptually, the idea of inertia does not rely on, or even suggest, that cohabitation itself adds to the risk level in a relationship. Rather, cohabitation makes some risky relationships more likely to continue. Hence, with regard to the matter of selection effects, there is much evidence that those with greater risk factors are also more likely than others to cohabit prior to marriage. What cohabitation adds, in this model, is the increased difficulty of ending relationships that were already at higher risk (Stanley et al., 2006).

Testing What Inertia Predicts

This idea of inertia is fundamentally tied to the matter of how commitment develops (or how different types of commitment develop). There are numerous predictions that follow from this perspective, but one is most central of all. Inertia suggests that those partners who have already developed and clarified a strong, mutual commitment to their future before cohabiting should be at lower relative risks because they, by definition, are not remaining together partly because of increasing constraints. In contrast, it is those who are not mutually clear about commitment when constraints increase that are subject to the possibility of constraints inertializing their relationships.

There is a straightforward way to test this essential prediction. Are couples who begin to cohabit prior to either marriage or engagement (both representing full development of an intention to share a future together) at greater risk than those who only cohabit after engagement or marriage? Our team has pursued the investigation of this hypothesis in numerous data sets. We consistently have found that those who cohabit prior to engagement or marriage report, on average, less satisfaction, less dedication, higher levels of conflict, and lower confidence in the future of their relationships (Kline¹⁶ et al., 2004; Rhoades, Stanley & Markman, 2006; Rhoades, Stanley & Markman, in press). These findings are robust, holding up when controlling for a variety of selection-related variables. There is a parallel finding in the cohabitation literature, showing that among currently cohabiting couples, whether or not they are “planning” marriage in the future is strongly related to the quality of relationship (Brown & Booth, 1996). While related, our findings in this area are focused on the state of commitment to the future during the critical period or moment in time where constraints start to increase.

Sliding vs. Deciding: A Transition and Risk Model

Our research on cohabitation, and the study of the findings of others, has led to the development of a transition and risk model with far-reaching implications. This model has been very well received among scholars from a variety of professional, philosophical, political, and cultural backgrounds.¹⁷ Before laying out this model, we can describe the steps of development of the ideas that led to the catch phrase, *sliding vs. deciding*.¹⁸

The backdrop for the development of this model is the prior work in commitment theory and measurement, as detailed earlier. There are two themes from that line of reasoning of central importance here: (1) the notion of constraint, that directly led to the notion of inertia as it relates to cohabitation; (2) the recognition that, at the root, commitment means making a decision to choose one alternative over others, and that in choosing, one is deciding to give up the other alternatives. *Deciding* is fundamental to commitment. This is all the more true, and obvious, from the perspective of cognitive consistency theory (e.g., Kiesler, 1971) as well as cognitive dissonance theory (e.g., Harmon-Jones & Harmon-Jones, 2002).

With regard to the specific findings in Stanley et al. (2004), the notion of “maybe I do” marriages, wherein one or both partners were somewhat propelled to the altar by inertia, contained the seeds of what the concept of *sliding* has come to mean in our work. We are currently running a large, government-funded study of cohabitation, following 1,600 people over time who are in the period of making such transitions. Starting some years before this current project of ours, Wendy Manning and Pam Smock had received funding to conduct a qualitative study of cohabitation. Smock and Manning were already scholars in the area of cohabitation

16 Galena Kline changed her name to Galena Rhoades when she got married in 2006. Kline is now Rhoades.

17 Our evidence for this assertion is that we have presented this model of risk and transition to scores of audiences now, including those consisting of some of the most respected social scientists of our time who focus on marriage and family related matters. It has been very well received across a range of perspectives and beliefs.

18 To those whose language or primary language is not English, we realize that the rhythm of this phrase may not translate so well into other languages but we trust the concept will.

(e.g., Smock, 2000; Manning & Smock, 2002). They have been conducting this qualitative study to learn more about how people think about cohabitation. There are a variety of findings of note from their qualitative work but one looms largest of all in relation to our team's focus on commitment dynamics and relationship development. Manning and Smock have reported that less than half of people who are cohabiting in their sample report having deliberated about it (2005). Rather, the typical response, when asked how they came to be living together, reflects that it just sort of happened. They slid into it. In essence, to use our terminology, couples are very often sliding, not deciding, their way into cohabitation. If they are not deciding, they are often beginning cohabitation without clarity about each partner's commitment, expectations about the meaning of cohabiting, and the future of the relationship.

This specific set of findings and theory related to premarital cohabitation can be applied in a broader theory of risk and transition in relationships, to which we now turn. There are many types of relationship transitions for which people may vary a great deal on degree of thought, decision, and planning. To greater or lesser degrees, transitions such as becoming sexual, becoming pregnant, living together, and even marrying, all represent moments or periods of change in a relationship. Further, each of these transitions is either life-altering or potentially so. Becoming sexual may be the transition listed here the least often to cause life-altering consequences. However, even there, becoming sexual has clear, lifelong implications for many people. To make the case, we merely need to point out that the Center for Disease Control (CDC) in the U.S. released findings of a study in March, 2008, showing that 26% of females in the U.S. between the ages of 14 and 19 have a sexually transmitted disease.¹⁹ Figures 3 and 4 will frame the rest of this discussion.

We will explain the boxes and then the implications. Take careful note of the types of transitions in the Transition box. The first assumption for this model is that these are all potentially life-altering events (for good or bad). The second assumption is that overall life constraints usually increase after any of these transitions. That means that a person does not have as many degrees of freedom, to use a statistical analogy, after the transition as they had before the transition. This can be demonstrated for any of these transitions, including becoming sexual, perhaps unless one only ever becomes sexual with the partner they marry (before or after marriage) (Teachman, 2003).²⁰ The third major assumption in this model is that there are kinds of information that could be valuable to consider, that such information is obtainable, and that such information can help people make better decisions about transitions. As with every assumption here, this does not always have to be true, only generally true, for this model to have merit. A fourth observation, not an assumption, is that the common disagreements about cultural values regarding the best sequence of transitions in the Transition box do not have to

19 See <http://www.cdc.gov/STDCConference/2008/media/release-11march2008.pdf>

20 Teachman finds that those who only ever have sex with and cohabit with their future mate are not at higher risk from these activities. We do not question that result but do question what young people actually "hear" in what such a finding may mean for them. The percentage of people for whom this finding is true is small but people are prone, when in love, to think that the first person they have sex with is 'the one' rather than the first of a series of sexual partners wherein their life options deteriorate over time.

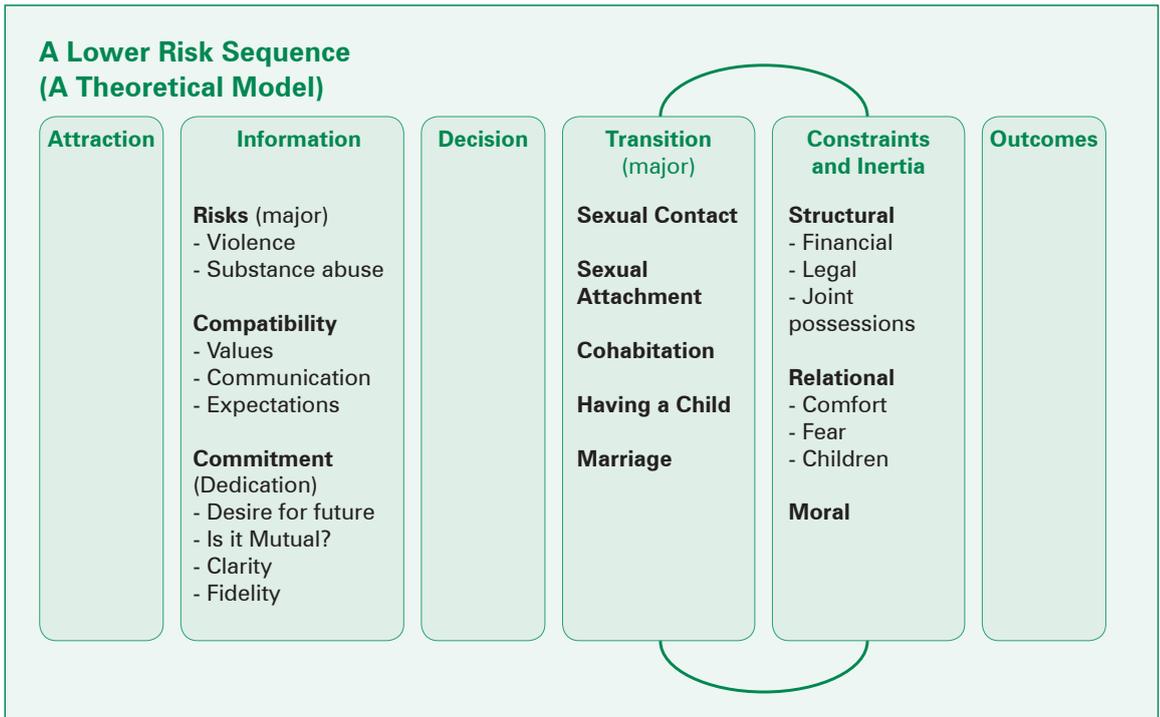


Figure 3. Lower Risk Sequence of Relationship Transitions

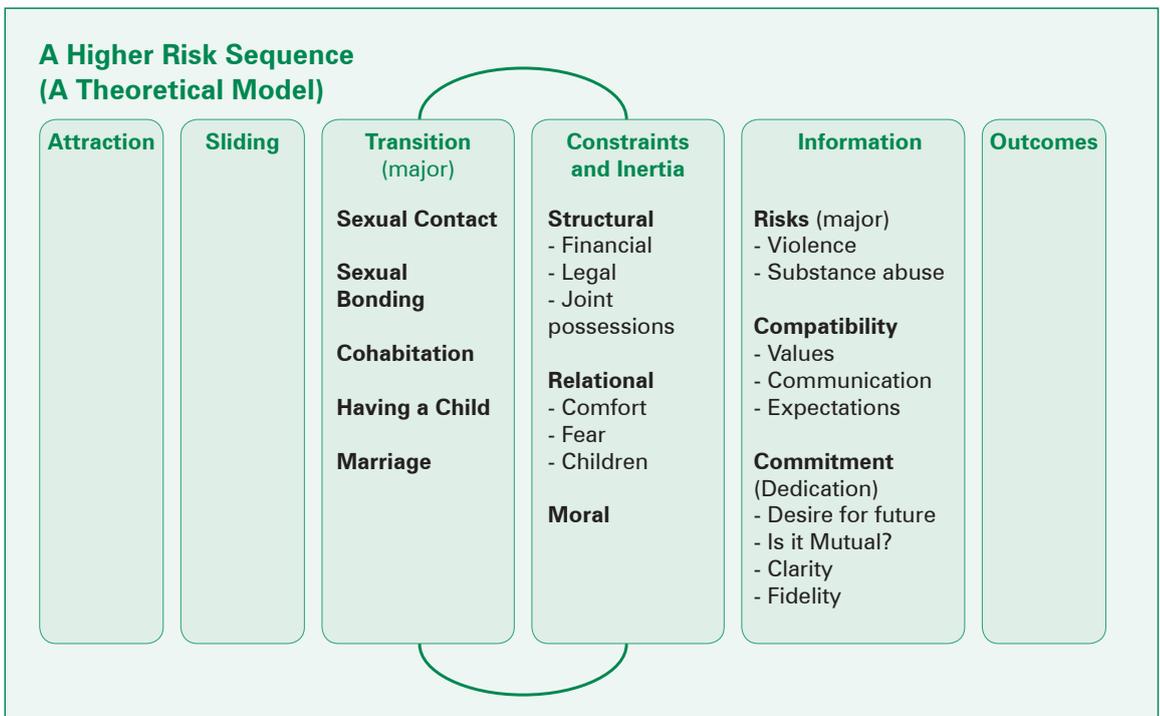


Figure 4. Higher Risk Sequence of Relationship Transitions

be agreed upon or settled to otherwise appreciate the main argument about risk and transitions being made here. In other words, people can believe or not that one sequence is the best, or proper, way to live life when considering the dimensions listed vertically in the transition box. However, people largely do not disagree with the risk implications of the ordering of the themes of this model on the horizontal dimension.

The lower risk model comports with a vast literature among philosophers, economists, sociologists, and psychologists about decisions under conditions of uncertainty (to use terms made popular by Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky). There are many life problems wherein humans must make potentially life-altering decisions about future prospects wherein they cannot possibly have complete information or the desired level of prognostic ability. Further, a vast set of literatures shows the myriad of ways in which people have trouble adequately considering all relevant information, in the best framing, and with proper appreciation for how their future self will appreciate what their current self has done (to name but a few resources: Kahneman & Tversky, 1990; Gilbert, 2006; Gilbert & Ebert, 2002).²¹

The point of the model as expressed in Figure 3 should be clear: it is better to get information bearing on the likely outcome of potentially life-altering transitions prior to going through those transitions. That surely does not guarantee a good outcome, but it certainly must improve the odds. There are two elements to this assertion. The first is that information gotten prior to a transition can help one make a better decision. The second is that making decisions, rather than sliding, supports the development and maintenance of commitment into the future. We will come back to this important point.

Figure 4 presents an entirely different picture. As in the lower risk model, going through transitions is assumed to have either the potential or sure result of decreasing options or increasing constraints. However, in the model of higher risk, the information that could support the best decision is obtained *after* one has reduced their degrees of freedom. Either pathway (Figure 3 or 4) implies that information will be obtained, but the higher risk pathway produces the information after it would have been ideally useful. The information in the higher risk model is more costly than the information in the lower risk model. To put it informally, one has reduced their options before making a choice. This does not lead to harmful consequences for everyone; some people “luck out” and land in situations by sliding that are comparable or identical to what they would have obtained by deciding.

For many individuals, the major risk implications are seen clearly in hindsight but not at the time where different choices could have been more easily made. Metaphorically, the experience is of finding oneself driving down a one way street with no desirable turn-offs and a failing reverse gear. We have made this idea a core concept in ME curriculum we have developed for individuals—originally designed especially for very low income, single parent, women who are recipients of government supports (called *Within My Reach*, WMR: Pearson, Stanley & Rhoades, 2005). Among the positive feedback we have received about WMR from people in the TANF (welfare) program in Oklahoma, we have received strong, positive reactions denoting

21 We credit the social psychologist Daniel Gilbert for the concept of current and future selves, as he details in his book, *Stumbling on Happiness* (2006).

relevance and usefulness for this way of thinking. In fact, class participants have been able to rapidly supply the class process with numerous examples of where sliding resulted in disastrous consequences for them and their children. One of the class activities involves thinking about and discussing “high cost slides” in order to sharpen the recognition of situations where it is easy to slide and end up with a poor outcome.

For example, a couple meets, become passionately involved, have sex, move in together within a couple of months, and end up having a baby. However, only months into living together, the woman fully comprehends that the man she is living with—and with whom she is having a baby—is violent and controlling, and of the worst type (Johnson & Leone, 2005). The inertia of the current situation complicates moving to a better and safer path.

While it is arguable and testable, it seems reasonable to assert that major transitions without clear decisions will be universally associated with greater average risk. In addition to matters of sequence, timing, information, and decisions, the co-conspirator in the higher risk outcomes predicted by the risk model in Figure 4 is speed. Sociologist Sharon Sassler has been making a considerable study of the implications of the speed of events in relationship with regard to risk. In present-day relationships, important transitions tend to happen very rapidly, and often for reasons of mere convenience, such as with cohabitation (Sassler, 2004; Rhoades et al., in press). In this framework, the speed of these relationship developments adds to the likelihood of entering pathways of risk that are limiting because of how the inertia of constraints alters subsequent options. One cannot be very reflective—and therefore, cannot be making a commitment which involves making a choice to give up other choices (Stanley, 2005)—when going at high speed.

Before moving to another implication of this model, it is worth noting that many relationship transitions have the general potential to increase constraints. That is not the difference between sliding and deciding. The main difference is that deciding means one has chosen a specific set of constraints as part of deciding to make a commitment, presumably in light of understanding, desire, and dedication. The problem with sliding transitions is that the constraints still increase, but without having been chosen as part of making a commitment. Commitment is choosing constraints, not sliding into them.

Decisions, Decisions

Much more could be said and developed with regard to this transition and risk model. For present purposes, we will move on to one other significant implication of this system of thought, the matter of decisions (as touched on in Stanley, Rhoades & Markman, 2006). One of the best frameworks for understanding these implications lies in cognitive dissonance theory. We are not social psychologists and do not intend to weigh in on the history of differing views of cognitive dissonance. However, our understanding is that the fact of dissonance reduction maneuvers is not in doubt, only the mechanisms of effect (Brehm, 2007). One of the viewpoints of dissonance that appears to enjoy considerable favor is that expressed in the work of Harmon-Jones and Harmon-Jones (2002).²²

22 Their viewpoint, supported by various evidences, is that the primary mechanism of reduction of cognitive dissonance is via the desire to reduce the feelings of negative affect that occur when one has awareness of dissonant cognitions and behaviors. This is in contrast to views more fundamentally in line with the desire to maintain cognitive and self-consistency.

In the Harmon-Jones' model (and doubtless, numerous others), dissonance reduction is an important mechanism in producing action tendencies in support of commitments one has made. A simple example comes to mind. Suppose one is considering buying a car and entertaining two options, a Ford Taurus and a Honda Accord. At some point, if one is to have a car, one must commit to a choice between the two options. One may choose the Taurus but the decision can still be hard and close. There is much to like about both models of car, and a great deal of contrast in features. According to dissonance theory, when one chooses an option, awareness of the other option remains and creates dissonance. We do not know who originated the concept of the "spreading of alternatives," but it is perfect for this discussion. What dissonance does in this scenario of decision and commitment is to help create more mental distance between the attractiveness of the two alternatives once one has settled on the choice. Dissonance mechanisms support the decision for the Taurus because these processes develop a helpful bias in favor of positive information about the Taurus and negative information about the Accord. One gets relief because one gets space between the alternatives—perhaps enough to drive the Taurus through.²³

The whole matter of alternatives has enjoyed a great deal of attention in commitment theory. For example, we know that monitoring attractive alternatives is associated with lower levels of dedication commitment (Stanley et al., 2002), and that as commitment strengthens to a particular partner, people actively devalue alternative partners that are still in awareness (Johnson & Rusbult, 1989). The monitoring and differential valuation of alternatives is a fundamental process associated with dedication commitment. In contrast, the existence and quality of alternatives is much more a matter of constraints, in that if one has fewer alternatives or alternatives of lower quality (in any area of life), they are more constrained.

The profound implication for the sliding vs. deciding contrast is that *sliding* transitions could not possibly provide as much support for sustaining commitment to a pathway as could *deciding* transitions. A process that involves no clear choice among alternatives will not create much dissonance. In fact, more difficult decisions (which implies more mental effort) set up stronger dissonance effects and stronger action tendencies to follow through on the commitment (Harmon-Jones & Harmon-Jones, 2002). Decisions are the basis of sustainable commitments.

Another implication of impaired commitment processes is that there will be less of a chance that two partners can form a strong sense of couple identity when there is less of a decision at the basis of commitment. The concept of two partners developing a third identity of *us* is believed to be part of the fundamental process of forming a loving, committed relationship from an exchange theory perspective. For example, George Levinger notes that "...as interpersonal involvement deepens, one's partner's satisfactions and dissatisfactions become more and more identified with one's own" (1979, p. 175). Cook and Emerson (1978) suggest that commitment reflects a change to non-competition between partners who begin to work toward achieving joint rather than individual outcomes. Lastly, Thibaut and Kelley (1978) posit a transformation of motivation occurring when two partners commit to joining their futures

23 We recently discovered that the word "decide" has at its root meaning the concept of "to cut." Deciding is fundamental to commitment because cutting off alternatives is fundamental to commitment.

together. A lack of clarity about if, when, and how a commitment has been made would presumably undermine the likelihood of building lasting love.

What does all of this mean for marriage? People who slide through major transitions up to and into marriage can be predicted to have poorer prospects for lifelong love and security, if for no other reason than there is not a clear basis of commitment to call upon when times are tough. If all other factors are equal (compatibility, skills, love between partners), the couple who has a sliding history should be at greater expected risk than the couple with a deciding history. Since this would all be “on average,” it will be the case that some in the expected higher risk group will do fine and some in the expected lower risk group will have problems. In the best of cases, marriage is a sometimes challenging and even difficult long-term pursuit. Most couples will have times of unhappiness and regret, and both types of commitment (dedication and constraint) can sustain couples through such times. The new sliding vs. deciding courtship paradigm will likely produce increasing numbers of couples (including those with children) wherein one or both partners, during difficult times, cannot look back to a time in life and remember, “I chose you.” If I am not sure that “I chose you,” my follow through will be reflected in a foundation of “Maybe I do” rather than “I do.”

Insights gained on transitions and risk from the type of research we have been describing is particularly relevant for informing the development and refinement of curricula for marriage and relationship education that targets individuals rather than couples. The implications of the dynamics summarized by the phrase *sliding vs. deciding* are obvious to most people, and in the experiences we have had with many participants in various relationship education settings, quite well-received as relevant to their romantic relationships. More research into the nature of how relationships develop, especially into the nature of transitions, holds much promise for guiding efforts to help more individuals make choices in their romantic relationships that can bring them closer to their own goals of achieving lifelong love and family stability.

Concluding Comments

This paper has covered a great deal of ground. It is clearly and intentionally two papers that are linked. In the first part, we laid out a summary of what we believe is the current state of knowledge about marriage and relationship education with couples. We transitioned to discuss what may be an even larger field—engaging in marriage and relationship education with individuals rather than couples, wherein a larger range of risk reduction strategies become possible, particularly wherein those efforts help people make better choices in partners in the first place. We reserved the balance of this paper for the ideas we are most passionate about. In support of the earlier points, we believe the latter discussion of a transition and risk model strongly supports the assertion that there is much valuable work to be done with individuals. By the time that people are coupled, and especially coupled with children, much of the die is cast in terms of risks over time. The historical courtship structures are receding. Young people have little that is available to replace those functions in structuring their romantic relationships in ways that will allow them to be more likely to achieve their own aims of lifelong love. The more we know, the more knowingly we can act on strategies to improve the lives of those at risk.

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