

# Sliding vs. Deciding: How Relationship Formation Paradigms Undermine Commitment

Prof. Scott M. Stanley  
*University of Denver*

- Support for much of the work by the University of Denver team in these areas has been provided by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) and the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in the United States.

## Safety Theory of Healthy Marriages and Relationships

- Physical Safety
- Emotional Safety
- **Commitment Safety and Security**
- Community Safety

Why Does Commitment Develop?

Implications for what energy will go into:  
Resilience or monitoring of the attachment?

Develop Commitment To Secure Attachment

Attachment With Loss Anxiety

Attraction + Satisfaction Time Together



Stanley, S. M., Rhoades, G. K., & Whitton, S. W. (2010). Commitment: Functions, formation, and the securing of romantic attachment. *Journal of Family Theory and Review*, 2, 243-257.

How do earlier  
relationship  
experiences affect  
the development of  
commitment?

Exhibit A:  
premarital  
cohabitation



## Premarital Cohabitation Effect

- Decades of research show it is associated with more difficulties in marriage.
  - **Important Caveats**
    - Emerging research shows weakened association, but what does that really mean?
    - Income, education, and race moderate association (e.g., Osborne, Manning, & Smock, 2007).
- Why? It's supposed to help!
- Selection plays an important role

## A big part of the story is selection.

- Compared to daters with plans to marry, cohabiters with plans to marry . . . (RDS Data)
  - Are older
  - Have less education
  - Are more likely to already have children
  - Have had more sexual partners
  - Are more likely to have divorced (or never married) parents
  - Experienced more conflict in their families growing up
  - Have more favorable attitudes toward divorce
  - Are less religious

## What People Do Not See

- Cohabiting makes it harder to break-up by increasing constraints.
- Cohabitors break-up all the time, of course, but cohabiting sharing a single address makes it harder to break up than dating—all other things held equal.

# Inertia

Inertia (physics):  
resistance to change in  
motion or direction



Stanley, S. M., Rhoades, G. K., & Markman, H. J. (2006). Sliding vs. Deciding: Inertia and the premarital cohabitation effect. *Family Relations*, 55, 499 - 509.

## Timing Matters

- Major aspects of commitment:
  - Personal Dedication
  - Constraint
- For many, constraints increase substantially before *mutual* dedication is fully formed.

## Testing Aspects of Inertia Theory

- Inertia should be a non-factor for those who have already clarified **mutual**, long-term commitment prior to cohabiting.
- Those engaged or married before cohabiting should be at lower risk.
- This prediction holds true everywhere we know it's been tested.

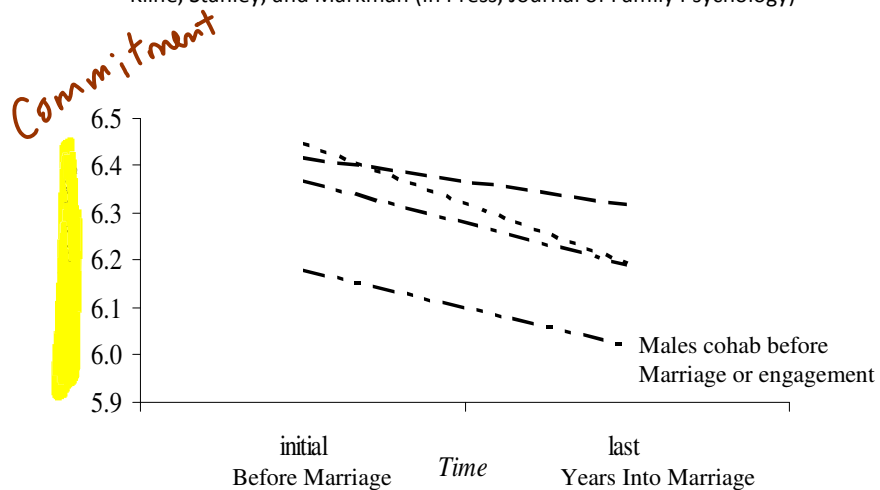
- Kline, G. H., Stanley, S. M., Markman, H. J., Olmos-Gallo, P. A., St. Peters, M., Whitton, S. W., & Prado, L. (2004). Timing is everything: Pre-engagement cohabitation and increased risk for poor marital outcomes. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 18, 311-318.
- Rhoades, G. K., Stanley, S. M., & Markman, H. J. (2009). The pre-engagement cohabitation effect: A replication and extension of previous findings. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 23, 107-111.
- Goodwin, P. Y., Mosher, W. D., & Chandra, A. (2010). Marriage and cohabitation in the United States: A statistical portrait based on Cycle 6 (2002) of the National Survey of Family Growth. *Vital Health Stat 23 (28)*. Washington D.C.: National Center for Health Statistics.
- Stanley, S. M., Rhoades, G. K., Amato, P. R., Markman, H. J., & Johnson, C. A. (2010). The timing of cohabitation and engagement: Impact on first and second marriages. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 72, 906-918.

## Inertia Theory

- The key point is NOT that cohabiting before marriage or engagement, per se, makes a less resilient commitment.
- The point is that less resilient couples become more likely to remain together because of inertia.

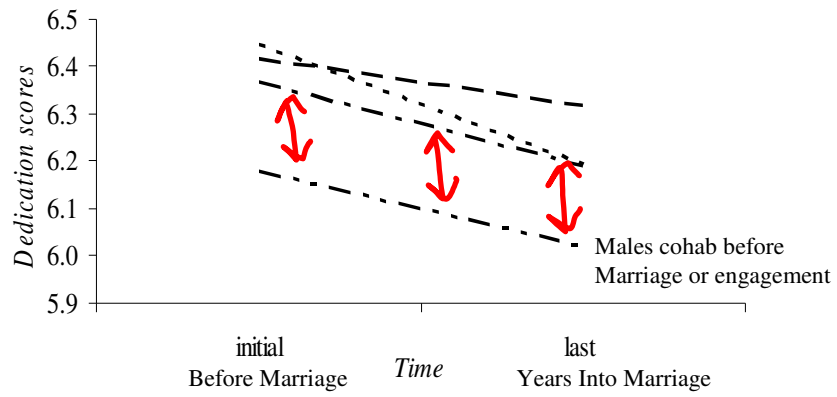
### Dedication Levels Before Marriage and Up to 7 Years Into Marriage (Ave. 4 Years Into Marriage)

Kline, Stanley, and Markman (In Press, Journal of Family Psychology)



### Dedication Levels Before Marriage and Up to 7 Years Into Marriage (Ave. 4 Years Into Marriage)

Kline, Stanley, and Markman (In Press, Journal of Family Psychology)



Transition is NOT transformation.

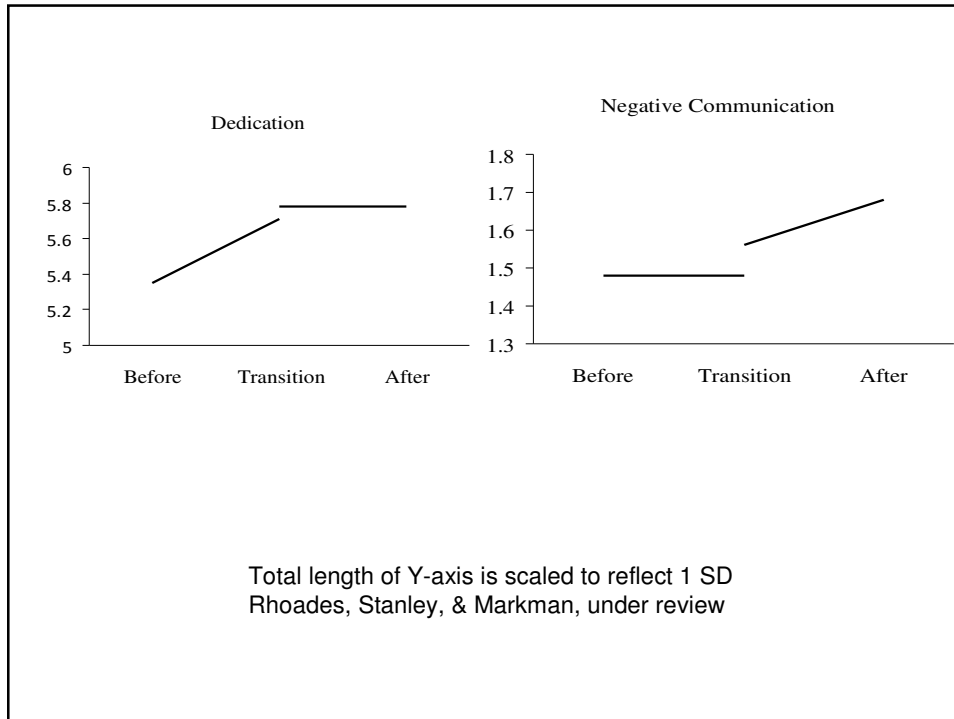


## Relationship Development Study

- Funded by National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD)
  - NICHD Grant RO1 HD047564-01A2
- Random, national, longitudinal sample of
  - 1,294 individuals
  - 18-34 years old
  - 60% women, 40% men
  - All recruited when unmarried (68% dating, 32% cohabiting)
- Longitudinal: mail surveys every 4 to 6 mo.

## Testing Aspects of Inertia Theory: Longitudinal Transitions (RDS)

- Examining within-individual changes before and after transitions is a potent way to control for selection.
  - Individuals act as controls for themselves  
(e.g., Johnson, 2005)
- Interrupted time series analyses  
(Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, under review)

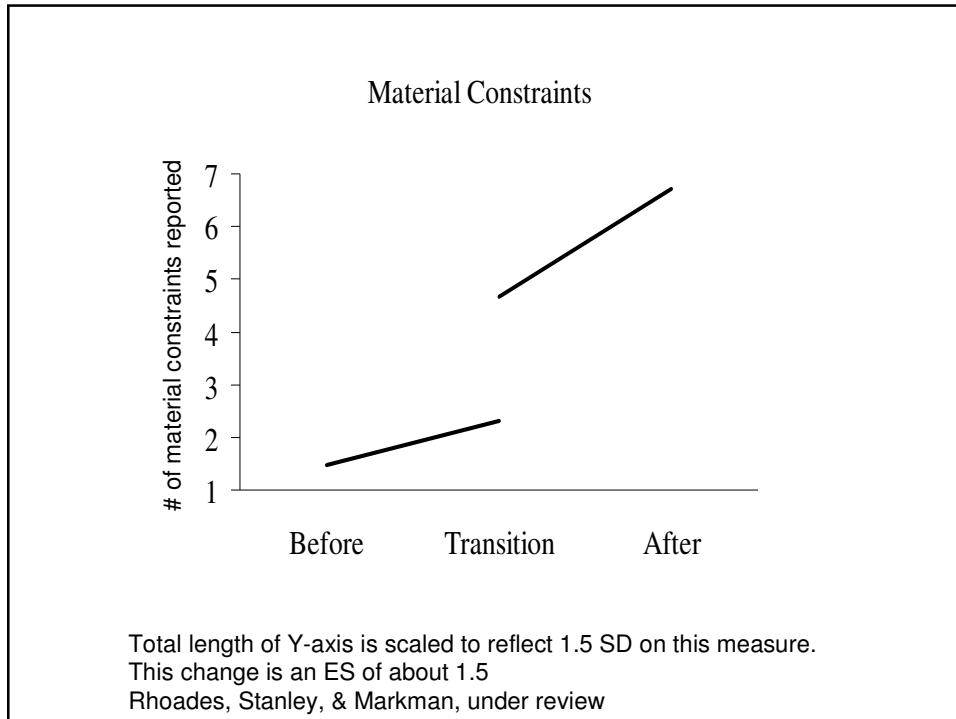


## Material Constraints: Focused on this Stage of Relationships

- “Joint Activities Checklist”: 25 external factors
  - paying on each other’s credit cards
  - having a pet together
  - paid for future vacation plans
  - making home improvements together
  - signing a lease
  - having a joint-bank account
  - cell phone contract together
  - joint gym membership
  - buying a home



Rhoades, G. K., Stanley, S. M., & Markman, H. J. (in press).  
Commitment dynamics in cohabiting relationships. *Family Issues*.



## Predicting Remaining Together

- Each increase of one point on that material constraint scale increases likelihood of being together one year later by 10%.
- Guess what does not add to the prediction of these unmarried couples remaining together?

**Having a child together**

Rhoades, G. K., Stanley, S. M., & Markman, H. J. (2010). Should I stay or should I go? Predicting dating relationship stability from four aspects of commitment. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 24(5), 543-550.

## Sliding vs. Deciding



## How do Couples Enter Cohabitation?

- Qualitative Research: More than  $\frac{1}{2}$  of cohabiting couples report sliding into it (not talking about it, not making a decision together).

Manning, W. D., & Smock, P. J. (2005). Measuring and Modeling Cohabitation: New Perspectives from Qualitative Data. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 67, 989 – 1002.

- Quantitative Research (RDS): We find that 2/3rds of cohabiters report that they mostly slid into cohabiting. (However, . . .)

Stanley, S. M., Rhoades, G. K., & Fincham, F. D. (2011). Understanding romantic relationships among emerging adults: The significant roles of cohabitation and ambiguity. In F. D. Fincham & M. Cui (Eds.), *Romantic relationships in emerging adulthood* (pp. 234-251). New York: Cambridge University Press.

## Why might this matter? Commitment and Resilience

- Consider:
  - Commitment is making a choice to give up other choices.
  - Healthy commitment will include choosing to be constrained.
  - Sliding into inertia can mean giving up options before one has clearly chosen.
- Implications for mate selection and formation of dedication

## Mate Selection and Resilience

- Sliding can mean constraints are increasing too early—prior to the development of dedication.
- When this occurs, inertia increases the risk for lower quality matches.
  - Adequate partner search is interrupted  
(as suggested by Glenn, 2002)
- Poorer matches *lead to weaker bonds leading to weakened resilience.*

## Formation of Commitment and Resilience

- Clearly formed commitment establishes a sense that “I chose to be on this path with my partner.”
- According to Cognitive Dissonance theory, clear, effortful decisions set up stronger action tendencies to follow-through on a choice (commitment).

(e.g., Brehm, 2007; Harmon-Jones & Harmon-Jones, 2002)

## Implications for Clinical Practice and Prevention



We have four or more papers and chapters relevant to this. If you want to read more, [just ask us to send them.](#)



**One:** There is much work to do far earlier in relationship development if we are to help individuals increase their chances of ending up in strong, happy, and resilient relationships.

- **Two:** When working with couples who have been together a longer period of time, it is worth exploring how commitment developed.
  - A deep sense that “I didn’t sign up for this” is a huge block to making progress.
  - Did constraints develop before dedication matured? (Did they have mutual, clear, and public plans for marriage prior to cohabiting?)
  - Does each partner feel like he or she chose the path they are now on?

email: [scott@stanleyemail.com](mailto:scott@stanleyemail.com)

You can get word.doc versions of some of our  
papers at:

<http://www.box.net/shared/xnxx4fb1ao01p0750h9s>

[Scott's blog] [www.slidingvsdeciding.com](http://www.slidingvsdeciding.com)