

# Sliding Versus Deciding: Inertia and the Premarital Cohabitation Effect\*

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**Abstract:** Premarital cohabitation has consistently been found to be associated with increased risk for divorce and marital distress in the United States. Two explanations for this “cohabitation effect” are discussed: selection and experience. We present an empirically based view of how the experience of cohabitation may increase risk for relationship distress or divorce for some people beyond what is accounted for by selection. Specifically, using a commitment framework, we suggest that some couples who otherwise would not have married end up married because of the inertia of cohabitation. We discuss practice implications for relationship transitions that are characterized more by sliding than deciding, especially where a transition such as cohabitation increases inertia to remain in a relationship regardless of quality or fit.

**Key Words:** cohabitation, commitment, divorce, marriage, relationships.

The increase in cohabitation is one of the most significant shifts in family demographics of the past century (Smock, 2000). Cohabitation has become common, with an estimated 50% (Bumpass & Lu, 2000) to over 60% (Stanley, Whitton, & Markman, 2004) of couples living together before marriage in the United States. Yet, cohabitation prior to marriage has been consistently associated with poorer marital communication quality, lower marital satisfaction, higher levels of domestic violence, and greater probability of divorce in U.S. samples (e.g., Cohan & Kleinbaum, 2002; Kamp Dush, Cohan, & Amato, 2003; Kline et al., 2004; Stafford, Kline, & Rankin, 2004). Importantly, even though premarital cohabitation is now considered normative, recent studies have suggested that the associated risks are not abating (e.g., Kamp Dush et al., 2003). The association between premarital cohabitation and poorer marital outcomes is known as the “cohabitation effect.” We begin with a brief review of research on this effect and explanations for it. Then, we detail

an innovative and empirically derived perspective of why the effect occurs for some couples. The perspective we put forth not only can add to the explanation of the cohabitation effect but also suggests more generally that the way couples go through major relationship transitions may be associated with subsequent risk and outcomes. Finally, we discuss implications for research and practice. Throughout, we draw on commitment theory for help in understanding both cohabitation and risks associated with other relationship transitions.

## The Existing Knowledge Base

Although there have been notable advances in knowledge, we know far less than we would like about *why*, and under what circumstances, the cohabitation effect occurs. This is in part because of limitations in the existing literature, the three greatest being (a) a lack of theory, (b) a general dearth of

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longitudinal methods with sufficient sensitivity and quality of measurement, and (c) the fact that a vast number of studies published on the cohabitation effect are from a single, now aging data set (the National Survey of Families and Households). Despite these limitations, much knowledge has been gained from the existing studies of cohabitation.

The scope of the current body of findings are summarized in Table 1, where we present a simple conceptual scheme to categorize major findings (the categories are not orthogonal but are conceptually useful). Overall, such findings are robust in the study of first marriages, yet much less is known about risks in second marriages or marriages preceded by cohabitation among the very poor. Implications of the knowledge and theory presented here may be different in relationships that have been less studied. Further, for reasons beyond the scope of this paper, premarital cohabitation is not associated with greater risks in many other countries such as those in Europe (Kiernan, 2002). Also note that our discussion will generally allude to the increased risks associated with premarital cohabitation without differentiating between relationship dissolution and distress. Although these outcomes are different, our model for risk applies to both. We note these different outcomes in our discussion of findings and in Table 1 but otherwise do not make the distinction unless it is theoretically crucial.

Discussions of the cohabitation effect have centered on two fundamental explanations (Axinn & Thornton, 1992; Brown & Booth, 1996; Smock, 2000): *selection* (i.e., the cohabitation effect is because of the pre-existing characteristics of people who cohabit) and *experience* (i.e., there is something about cohabitation itself that increases risk for distress or divorce, or both). Selection variables have typically been operationalized as relatively static, sociodemographic variables (e.g., religiosity, number of previous marriages, education level, income, presence of children, and age). Research suggests that such selection characteristics can predict who will or will not cohabit prior to marriage (e.g., more religious individuals are less likely to cohabit; Stanley et al., 2004; Thornton, Axinn, & Hill, 1992). Further, some studies demonstrated that selection accounts for a portion of the cohabitation effect (e.g., DeMaris & Leslie, 1984; Lillard, Brien, & Waite, 1995; Woods & Emery, 2002). In contrast, a number of studies indicated that selection does not fully account for the cohabitation effect (e.g., Kamp

Dush et al., 2004; Stafford et al., 2004; Stanley et al.). For example, Cohan and Kleinbaum (2003) found that married couples who had cohabited premaritally had poorer observed communication skills, and these effects could not be explained by socio-demographic characteristics. Likewise, Kline et al. (2004) found that those who began cohabiting prior to engagement had more negative interactions, lower levels of interpersonal commitment to their partners, lower relationship quality, and lower levels of confidence in their relationships than those who cohabited only after engagement or not at all before marriage; these effects were significant even after controlling for age, ethnicity, education, income, length of relationship, religiosity, and duration of premarital cohabitation. These studies suggest that there may be something about the experience of cohabitation that is associated with risk in marriage. However, note that there must be many variables related to who “selects” which pathway that have not been measured or examined to date. For example, variables such as attachment history and anxiety, mental health problems, or personality may also play roles in selection and risk but remain poorly understood.

Some of the clearest evidence for the experience perspective comes from the work of Axinn and colleagues. Axinn and Barber (1997) demonstrated that individuals who cohabit prior to marriage for longer periods of time, especially with multiple partners, experienced an erosion of esteem or valuing of marriage and childrearing over time. Hence, the experience of cohabitation may erode the motivation for, and commitment to, marriage. Additionally, Axinn and Thornton (1992) found that the experience of cohabitation was associated with increased acceptance of divorce, which may help explain links with actual divorce.

From what has been discovered thus far about the cohabitation effect, we believe it probable that both selection and experience are important to understand the association between cohabitation and subsequent risk for marital distress and divorce. Understanding why and under what circumstances cohabitation may be linked with subsequent divorce or marital distress is important because of the implications for helping people lower their risks. Research on selection can be helpful in identifying the individuals who are most likely to cohabit and most likely to be at increased risk. For example, women who have cohabited with multiple partners are at

Table 1. *Brief Review of Major Findings Related to the Cohabitation Effect*

Category	Major Finding	Citations
Background	More traditionally religious persons are less likely to cohabit prior to marriage	Lillard et al. (1995); Stanley et al. (2004); Thornton et al. (1992)
	Those with more traditional and less egalitarian role orientations are less likely to consider cohabitation outside of marriage	Lye and Waldron (1997)
	Individuals with divorced parents are more likely to cohabit	Cherlin and Chase-Lansdale (1995); Kamp Dush et al. (2003); Teachman (2003)
	Blacks, Whites, and Latinos are equally likely to enter cohabitation, but Blacks are far less likely to eventually marry	Manning (1995)
	Higher numbers of premarital cohabitation partners are associated with risk for divorce	Lichter and Qian (2005); Teachman (2003)
General beliefs	Many young people believe cohabitation is a good way to test their relationships	Johnson et al. (2002); Thornton and Young-DeMarco (2001)
	Increasingly, young women in high school are less likely than young men to believe that marriage has advantages over cohabitation or staying single	From the University of Michigan Monitoring the Future survey, as reported by Whitehead and Popenoe (2002)
	The very poor tend to believe it is better to have financial security before getting married, so they tend to cohabit longer before possibly entering marriage	Edin et al. (2004)
	The desire to establish financial security prior to marriage is related to wanting a full, religious wedding, home ownership prior to marriage, and established financial responsibility in both partners. This desire, therefore, favors transitioning into marriage at later ages	Edin et al. (2004); Smock, Manning, and Porter (2005)
	Cohabitation with more partners or for longer periods, or both, prior to marriage is associated with a reduction, over time, in esteem for marriage and childrearing	Axinn and Barber (1997); McGinnis (2003)
Relationship quality	Premarital cohabitation is associated with more negative communication in marriage, both on objective coding of couple interaction and self-report	Cohan and Kleinbaum (2002); Kline et al. (2004); Stanley et al. (2004); Thomson and Colella (1992)
	Premarital cohabitation is associated with lower levels of marital satisfaction	Brown (2004); Brown and Booth (1996); Nock (1995); Stafford et al. (2004); Stanley et al. (2004)
	Premarital cohabitation is associated with higher perceived marital instability	Kamp Dush et al. (2003); Stafford et al. (2004); Thomson and Colella (1992)
	Premarital cohabitation is associated with greater likelihood of marital domestic aggression	Brownridge and Halli (2000); Kline et al. (2004); Stanley et al. (2004)

Table 1. *Continued*

Category	Major Finding	Citations
Divorce	Divorce is more likely among those who cohabited premaritally than those who did not cohabit, especially those who cohabit with more than one partner prior to marriage (Teachman) and non-Hispanic, White women (Phillips & Sweeney)	DeMaris and Rao (1992); Kamp Dush et al. (2003); Phillips and Sweeney (2005); Teachman (2003)
Personal vulnerabilities	Premarital cohabitation is associated with higher levels of depression and lower levels of self-esteem, as well as lower life satisfaction	Stafford et al. (2004)
	Premarital cohabitation is associated with having a greater likelihood of a history of delinquent behavior	Woods and Emery (2002)
Commitment	Premarital cohabitation is associated with lower levels of dedication to one's spouse for men but not for women	Rhoades et al. (in press); Stanley et al. (2004)
	Cohabitors with plans to marry have higher relationship quality than cohabiters without plans to marry	Brown (2004); Brown and Booth (1996)
	Those cohabiting prior to engagement score, on average, lower on a wide range of indices of marital quality compared to those who live together only after engagement or after marriage	Kline et al. (2004)

increased risk for divorce (Teachman, 2003). Further, if we are able to discern which aspects of the cohabitation experience are associated with risk, preventive and therapeutic interventions could target more mutable, dynamic risk factors (Stanley, 2001).

After laying an empirical foundation, we will present the concept of inertia. Briefly, the inertia perspective suggests that some relationship transitions increase constraints and favor relationship continuance regardless of fit, knowledge of possible relationship problems, or mutual clarity about commitment to the future of a relationship, or all.

### **Commitment Theory as a Conceptual Framework**

To understand how the experience of cohabitation may be associated with risk for divorce or distress, we

focus on commitment theory. We first briefly detail core elements of this theoretical system and then illustrate ways it can illuminate the cohabitation effect. (A full treatment of commitment theory can be found in Jones and Adams [1999].)

Commitment theory broadly overlaps other major theoretical perspectives, having close connections with exchange/interdependency theory (Thibaut & Kelly, 1959), attachment theory (e.g., Hazan & Shaver, 1987), and extensions or modifications of rational choice theory where commitment is believed to trump competitive market conditions between partners in favor of joint outcomes (Cook & Emerson, 1978). We describe Stanley and Markman's (1992) commitment model because it has the most straightforward application to research on the cohabitation effect. It is a model with close ties to other works on commitment in personal relationships, most notably the work of psychologist Caryl Rusbult and

colleagues (e.g., Rusbult & Buunk, 1993) and sociologist Michael Johnson and colleagues (e.g., Johnson, Caughlin, & Huston, 1999). In general, commitment theory makes an important distinction between forces that motivate connection versus forces that increase the costs of leaving. The higher order constructs can be called dedication and constraint commitment (Stanley & Markman).

### *Dedication*

Partners who share a high level of dedication (also known as interpersonal commitment) tend to have a strong sense of couple identity, or a “we-ness” that pervades how they approach life. They also report that they have a strong desire for a future together or a long-term view. Dedication is also characterized by placing the needs of the partner and relationship at a higher priority as well as a willingness to sacrifice for one another (Stanley & Markman, 1992; Van Lange et al., 1997; Whitton, Stanley, & Markman, in press).

### *Constraint Commitment*

Constraints are forces that increase the costs of leaving and they help explain why some people remain in unhappy relationships. Constraints can take many forms including a perception of few alternatives to one’s relationship or partner, concern for children’s welfare, values about divorce, social pressure, structural investments (e.g., financial investments, commingled resources), and termination procedures (i.e., the difficulty of taking the steps to end the relationship) (Johnson et al., 1999; Stanley & Markman, 1992).

When defined broadly, commitment is an important aspect of relationship quality for adults (Amato & Rogers, 1999) and is, likewise, important for child well-being (Amato & Booth, 1997; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1996). In fact, security about the continuance of the relationship is believed to be one of the most essential types of safety that characterize healthy relationships and marriages (Stanley, Markman, & Whitton, 2002). Because the existing cohabitation literature is fundamentally focused on aspects of how couple relationships form and develop, it is noteworthy that the construct of commitment has received little attention. Stanley et al. (2004) noted that the predominant focus with regard to commitment in this literature has been on

commitment to the institution of marriage rather than on dedication between partners (e.g., Ciabattari, 2004). Although this is surely an important focus, the inclusion of measures of constructs such as dedication and constraint commitment in cohabitation research may yield clear practice implications.

## **The Trend toward Ambiguity in Relationships**

One of the recent changes in union formation in American culture is that the lines between various types and stages of relationships have become quite blurred (Casper & Bianchi, 2001). Cohabiting partners often do not even share the same understanding of the path they are on together (Manning & Smock, 2005). Lindsay’s (2000) view was that cohabitation represents an ambiguous state of commitment for many, partly because of the fact that cohabitation is an “incomplete” institution in terms of a common understanding of what the cohabitation experience is and what it means, at least in the United States (Heuveline & Timberlake, 2004; Nock, 1995). In comparison, prior courtship customs provided great clarity, both between partners and to those around them, about the path a couple was on (Whitehead, 2002). The very ambiguity of cohabitation may undermine the ability of some couples to develop a clear and mutual understanding about the nature of their relationships. In contrast to ambiguity, a high level of commitment generally speaks to a sense of security and mutual clarity between partners and within their social networks about exclusivity and a future. For many couples, the ambiguity of cohabitation becomes part of the pathway toward a marriage more prone to distress or divorce because of relationship inertia, described next.

## **Relationship Inertia**

The central idea of inertia is that some couples who otherwise would not have married end up married partly because they cohabit. Although this process may not occur for all or even most couples who cohabit, it happens often enough to account for part of the overall cohabitation effect. There is greater inertia favoring relationship continuance with cohabitation than with dating because, all other things being equal, constraints will be greater with cohabitation

(e.g., financial obligations, a shared lease, sharing a pet, pregnancy, loss of perspective on possible alternatives). At the same time, there is nothing about cohabitation that necessarily increases levels of dedication. Increased constraints may make it more difficult to terminate the relationship, but the partners may or may not feel more dedicated. Thus, some cohabitants could find themselves being less than ideally compatible but likewise find that ending the relationship has become difficult, tipping the scale toward staying together and, for some, marriage.

### Case Example

Although this story was constructed as an exemplar, the details are based on empirical findings supporting the validity of the dynamics expressed, as well as being further supported by numerous informal interviews we have conducted. Rob and Emily are in love and have developed a strong bond, but they also have relatively low confidence in their ability to succeed in marriage. Their reasons for doubt are based on family history (both are children of divorce and are wary of making a bad choice; e.g., Amato, 2001), problematic relationship dynamics (they do not manage conflict well; e.g., Clements, Stanley, & Markman, 2004), and personal vulnerabilities (he has a problem with alcohol, she tends to experience anxiety about abandonment and has several symptoms of depression; e.g., Davila, 2003). Emily thinks about marriage, but Rob is less inclined to take that step at this time because he frankly sees little advantage and mostly greater financial obligation if things did not work out in a marriage (see Whitehead & Popenoe, 2002). Even though the two of them have not talked directly about this, she thinks that cohabitation is a good step toward their commitment to a future, but he is not thinking nearly as much about this as she is (e.g., Rhoades, 2005). However, to the degree that each thinks marriage is a possibility, they are comforted by their belief that cohabitation is a good way to lower their odds of divorce (e.g., Johnson et al., 2002; Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). One thing leads to another, and after a couple months of Rob spending the night a few times a week, and leaving more and more of his belongings at Emily's place, they drift into living together full time (e.g., Lindsay, 2000; Manning & Smock, 2005). The meaning of their cohabitation is ambiguous in that they do not have

a mutually agreed-upon commitment to the future. In contrast, if they were engaged (or married) before cohabiting, there would be very little ambiguity about their intentions for the future.

Rob and Emily have some pre-existing characteristics (e.g., parental divorce; Amato & DeBoer, 2001) that make them both wary of marriage and which are consistent with the selection perspective (e.g., low religiousness; Stanley et al., 2004); however, they see only benefits to living together. What Rob and Emily do not think much about is that constraints for staying together may increase when they begin cohabiting; for example, they sign a new lease together, in affect, making a 1-year commitment. While they are living together, Emily becomes pregnant. This unplanned event further increases the forces that favor continuance of the relationship (Edin, Kefalas, & Reed, 2004); even though, in their case, Rob and Emily's dedication to one another has not increased by the experience. Eventually, without fanfare, they move into marriage. Importantly, Rob wonders if he would have married Emily if they hadn't lived together, and he remains less dedicated than her (e.g., Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, in press).

Obviously, many cohabiting couples break up, but it may be harder to break up when cohabiting than when not. Thus, cohabitation itself may not cause risks as much as it makes it harder to terminate a riskier union, thus constraining the search for a better partner fit. It seems that many people contemplating cohabitation do not consider the difficulties of increasing constraints prior to a more dedication-based commitment being formed. Because this all happens so fast for many couples, the worst case scenario is when knowledge of substantial risk with a particular partner is gained after, not before it would have been easier to avoid those risks. This can happen in marriage as well as cohabitation, one crucial difference being that cohabitation occurs rapidly for many couples (see Sassler, 2004). Speed and ambiguity can combine to land people in situations that are hard to exit because of inertia from constraint—situations that couples might not otherwise have chosen if they had been more deliberative.

Stanley et al. (2004) found that even into the early years of marriage, men who cohabited with their wives prior to marriage reported substantially lower dedication than men who did not (even controlling for religiosity, age, and income). This finding was part of a series of factors that brought to light the concept of inertia in our thinking and also

led to the interesting possibility that there are some less dedicated, cohabiting men who eventually marry their partners but do not reach the same level of dedication in marriage as men who did not cohabit. Perhaps, these cohabiting men were less interested in marriage than their partners from the start and were partly propelled into marriage because of cohabitation (Stanley et al.). Although there are surely couples for whom the commitment asymmetry runs the other way, Rob and Emily fit the pattern that Stanley et al. described, where the cohabiting man feels swept into marriage by the growing inertia instead of entering marriage by way of a clear decision and a fully formed level of dedication.

### Timing May Be Everything

The concept of inertia leads to several testable predictions. One important prediction is that couples who lived together before making a mutual decision to marry will be at greater risk for distress or divorce, or both. Inertia cannot be the driving force to marry if the decision to marry was made before cohabitation.

Existing research supports this inertia-based hypothesis. Brown found that individuals without plans to marry their partners showed lower relationship quality than those who did not cohabit prior to marriage (Brown, 2004; Brown & Booth, 1996). Kline et al. (2004) found that married couples who had started cohabiting before their engagement reported more negative communication, lower satisfaction, and more physical aggression than those who cohabited only after engagement or marriage. In addition, there were differences between the before-engagement cohabiters and those who waited until marriage to live together on measures of relationship confidence (e.g., doubts about the relationship) and dedication between partners. There were no significant differences between those who cohabited after engagement and those who waited until marriage to live together on any relationship measures. These differences held up before and after marriage, and when controlling for the traditional selection factors examined in this line of research. Further, Rhoades et al. (in press) found that married men who cohabited with their spouses before engagement scored lower on dedication than their female partners before marriage and after years of

marriage, with the transition to marriage doing nothing to mitigate the asymmetry. It remains a question for further research if a process consistent with inertia is responsible for pulling some men into marriages that they may have otherwise not sought, but it appears to be likely.

Discussions of findings from other areas of research are also in line with the concept of inertia. Glenn's (2002) notion of premature entanglement, for example, refers to situations in which a person's search for a suitable mate is curtailed by becoming overly involved with one partner to the exclusion of knowing what other alternatives would be like. Further, Surra and Hughes (1997) made a distinction between those who hold relationship-driven reasons for marriage (e.g., wanting to spend life with a person) versus those with event-driven reasons (e.g., pregnancy). Although these groups do not differ on amount of love, they differ significantly on relationship quality, with those giving more event-driven reasons for marriage reporting lower quality relationships. Surra, Chandler, Asmussen, and Wareham (1987) found that those couples who experienced pregnancy before becoming engaged reported more conflict and ambivalence about their relationships compared to couples who became pregnant following engagement or marriage. The consistency with the concept of inertia is striking. In commitment theory terms, "relationship-driven" reasons are "dedication driven" and "event-driven" reasons are "constraint driven." The theme throughout a number of studies (and theories) is that reasons for relationship transitions matter when it comes to understanding outcomes and that intrinsic reasons augur for better outcomes than extrinsic reasons.

### Sliding versus Deciding

One of the valuable insights emerging from the work of Manning and Smock (2005) is that many, if not most, couples slide from noncohabitation to cohabitation before fully realizing what is happening; it is often a nondeliberative and incremental process. Likewise, focus group research in Australia reported that most couples say cohabitation "just happened," potentially indicating a lack of decision making about the transition to cohabitation (Lindsay, 2000).

We use the terminology "sliding versus deciding" to describe this phenomenon of moving through

relationship transitions such as cohabitation without fully considering the implications. Although research on cohabitation led to the development of our concepts of inertia and sliding, we suspect that sliding through most any relationship transition or milestone in which constraints may increase (e.g., cohabitation, sexual intercourse, dating exclusively, marriage, break-up, divorce, and pregnancy) can be associated with greater average risks than explicit and thoughtful deciding. Transitions to pathways of increased constraint with little deliberation may lead directly to increased risk for distress or divorce for two fundamental reasons. First, as noted earlier, sliding may lead an individual to remain in a relationship he or she would have ended if constraints had not increased inertia to stay put. Second, the lower lever of deliberation of sliding may lead to increased vulnerability at times of future stress. In the former case, the risk is that a relationship where there is a poor match or with problems solidifies; in the latter, the risk is that a reasonably healthy relationship may be compromised because of a less clearly formed commitment.

For example, when times are tough, one may be more likely to think “I never really committed to you, anyway,” depriving a couple of potent psychological mechanisms for regaining or maintaining positive relational motivation. Specifically, cognitive consistency theory (Kiesler, 1971) and cognitive dissonance theory (e.g., the version advanced by Harmon-Jones & Harmon-Jones, 2002) suggest that people are motivated to behave in ways that are consistent with commitments they have made. An inner press to maintain congruency between prior commitments and one’s current behavior benefits relationships by generating prorelationship behaviors at critical junctures. Of course, this mechanism may have kept some people in dangerous and damaging relationships. Nevertheless, when people slide through major relationship transitions, the lower level of deliberation may lower the odds of prorelational behaviors.

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## Research Directions

Before turning to practice implications, we briefly discuss ideas for future research. The inertia perspective provides a number of directly testable hypotheses that have the potential to advance understanding

of risk trajectories in couple development and also advance knowledge upon which preventive and therapeutic interventions can be based. In an effort to conserve space, we will not repeat references cited throughout this paper (and in Table 1) that form the background for these hypotheses. Although cross-sectional designs can help evaluate such hypotheses, and have been expressed in those terms, the single most valuable designs would be longitudinal methods that follow individuals and couples during relationship stages and transitions wherein the variables specified here can be measured over time.

### *Hypothesis 1*

For couples who cohabit before making a mutual decision about marriage, higher levels of constraints will be associated with greater likelihood of marriage, regardless of relationship quality and dedication.

### *Hypothesis 2*

Some married individuals who cohabited before a mutual commitment to marriage will be more likely than others to report that they would not have married if they had not cohabited premaritally, that they feel trapped in their relationships, or that they felt pressured to marry while cohabiting. Such factors will partially mediate the relationship between premarital cohabitation and marital distress or divorce.

### *Hypothesis 3*

Individuals who report that they slid into cohabitation will demonstrate lower relationship quality than those who report making a clear decision to enter cohabitation.

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## Practice Implications

To our knowledge, there has been little attention to the implications of the research on the cohabitation effect in applied practice, whether that is relationship education or therapy. In addition, accumulating evidence from cohabitation and other areas of research on couple and family development suggests the value of attending to relationship transition processes. We briefly highlight the specific and the broad implications of the inertia perspective here.

Although there is great diversity of opinion based on cultural and religious traditions about the acceptability or advisability of cohabiting prior to marriage, there is a remarkable uniformity in the existing research findings. Though there is an ideologically charged element to many discussions about marriage and family patterns, the science showing increased risk for cohabitation prior to marriage is clear and robust. This suggests that practitioners should be paying attention to the role cohabitation may play when considering how to help individuals lower their risks. This finding holds true regardless of the degree to which selection or experience is determinative of increased risks for distress or divorce.

The selection perspective argues directly for targeted prevention efforts, especially for couples who cohabit prior to a clear and mutual commitment. After all, a best practices approach will often attempt to identify those at higher risk, for whatever reasons, and reach them with the most effective interventions for lowering their risks (Halford, Markman, Kline, & Stanley, 2003). For example, the finding that those who cohabit with multiple partners prior to marriage are at greater risk once in marriage (e.g., Lichter & Qian, 2005; Teachman, 2003) suggests that such individuals might benefit from secondary prevention efforts designed to address risks such as those related to communication, conflict, and commitment.

On the experience side, the twin themes presented here of inertia and sliding versus deciding have existing empirical support even as they suggest new avenues for research that can further inform intervention efforts. We focus on two specific areas, one pertaining to relationship and marriage education and the other to couple therapy. Young adults (such as high school students) could be helped to understand that the available evidence suggests caution about the commonly held belief that cohabitation lowers risks (cf. Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). More specifically, young adults could be informed that transitions into cohabitation are not usually deliberative in nature (Manning & Smock, 2005); further, they could learn that risks often increase when major relationship transitions are undertaken with reduced deliberation—not just cohabitation—because constraints generally intensify prior to awareness of such things as potential problems in a partner, before a good fit is determined and before high levels of mutual dedication have developed.

Some individuals will choose not to cohabit because they believe, often on the basis of their religious traditions, that living together unmarried is wrong. However, for those who are less religious, there is little information publicly available that could help them figure out what their personal views on cohabitation are and whether they might personally experience any negative effects from cohabitation. A strength of the inertia perspective is that people can evaluate their choices and possible consequences within their own moral frameworks.

One of the most important suggestions to emerge from the inertia perspective is that partners should talk candidly about the meaning of cohabitation, commitment levels (e.g., where does each partner see the relationship headed?), and potential constraints to stay together that they might experience during cohabitation. Because of the possible ambiguity around the meaning of cohabitation (in the absence of clarity about mutual commitment levels by way of marriage or engagement), there are likely many individuals who discover later rather than sooner that cohabiting did not mean the same thing for their partners as for them.

In focus group research of men in their 20s, Whitehead and Popenoe (2002) found a significant number of cohabiting men who reported resisting marriage essentially because they were waiting for a better partner or soul-mate to come along. Likewise, Rhoades (2005) found that among cohabiting couples, men were more likely than their partners to endorse moving in together because they could not see a future together but did not want to break up. There may be many couples in which neither partner desires moving toward marriage for any number of reasons; however, it is interesting to consider how many of the partners of men who are waiting for soul-mates know what these men are thinking. At a minimum, thorough communication between partners about expectations related to any transition as potentially life altering as cohabitation is important; unfortunately this is exactly the kind of encounter that the research suggests is not part of the relational process (Lindsay, 2000; Manning & Smock, 2005; Sassler, 2004).

Going more slowly and being more deliberative may be particularly protective for women. Although both men and women should benefit from making clear decisions with as much information as possible, women may have more to lose by sliding through relationship transitions. Women get pregnant, not

men; women disproportionately do the work of raising those children when the relationship ends. Women are also more likely than men to be trapped in the most dangerous types of domestically violent relationships. Further, another line of research suggests that men's attitudes about sacrificing for their female partners are far less associated with levels of commitment to the future than those of women (Stanley, Whitton, Low, Clements, & Markman, 2006; Whitton et al., in press). All these points suggest it is especially important for women to weigh the dedication levels of their male partners before undertaking major transitions; for, if there is a gender-based differential risk to inertia, it is arguably women who are at greater risk.

Those who contemplate cohabiting specifically to test their relationship might benefit from alternative ideas for testing that do not incur as great a loss of freedom. For example, there are a number of activities that could give couples increased clarity and reduced ambiguity about their relationship: attending a workshop together, reading relationship books, seeing a family life educator or therapist, or making time to talk openly about expectations.

On the other end of the spectrum of interventions, there are implications for marriage counseling from the body of knowledge that now exists. Because we know that those who cohabit prior to marriage are at greater risk for marital distress and divorce, exploring a couple's relationship history and decision-making processes around major transition may be particularly valuable. In our own work, the framework proposed here has prompted exploration of couples' histories for evidence that major transitions occurred without clear deliberation and discussion. Where sliding is in substantial evidence, it is then important to listen for inertia-based reasons for how the relationship continued (e.g., "We'd been living together so long, marriage just seemed like the next step"). Why is such history important? Because transitions occurring before clear and mutual dedication may suggest that a couple needs specific help with commitment issues.

On an individual level, one can likewise imagine therapy with a woman who is living with an intimate terrorist (e.g., Johnson & Leone, 2005), wherein she might be helped to realize that she is not in the relationship because she made a clear commitment but instead because of inertia. In other words, in some cases, the same theoretical system could be worked in reverse to help such an individual move to safety.

In closing, we note that there is a tremendous amount of basic science knowledge related to premarital cohabitation dynamics and outcomes. Yet, this knowledge has barely been tapped for practice implications. Advances in theory and research hold great potential for furthering efforts to help people increase their chances of success in their most important relationships.

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