

Families at Risk: Relationship Formation and Opportunities for Relationship

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9-17-2008 London
Keynote Address: What Works in
Relationship Education

- Preparation of this presentation and some of the research discussed was supported by two grants from The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD): 5R01HD047564-02 and 9 R01 HD053314-20A1.
- Awarded to PIs Scott Stanley and Howard Markman with colleague Galena Rhoades

Trends that Matter

Want and Fear

*We (people, culture, society)
have become deeply ambivalent
about marriage: we desire it yet
we fear it. We approach it, yet
we pull away.*

An Unfortunate Bargain

- “I can avoid the pain of divorce if I just avoid marriage.”
 - Avoid divorce? Yes
 - Avoid painful consequence? No

From the Telegraph.co.uk July 11, 2008

“Since 2006 the proportion of children born to married British parents is thought to have **dropped below 50 per cent for the first time**. They are being outweighed by those who are part of cohabiting couples or single-parent families.”

“It comes as data from the Office for National Statistics show that women are having more children than at any time since the 1970s.”

Raley & Bumpass (2003) *The Topography of the Divorce Plateau*

- Half of all first marriages will dissolve
 - (based current trends; representing a leveling off on a plateau)
- HOWEVER
- “Our understanding of family stability is impaired if we focus only on divorce rates: for example, children’s family lives have become increasingly unstable during the plateau in the divorce rate (Bumpass & Lu 2000).”

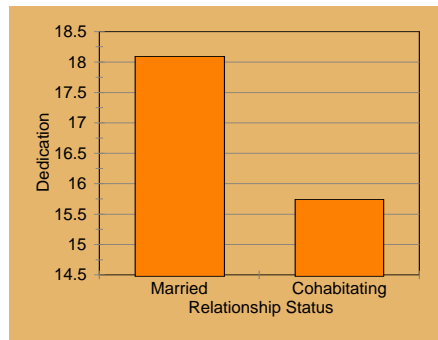
Commitment to the Institution & Commitment to the Relationship

- Commitment to the institution of marriage has steadily declined in industrialized nations.
- Non-married, cohabiting is associated with lower forms of interpersonal commitment than marriage.

9/18/2008

Dedication and Current Relationship Status:

(Controlling for years together)
Stanley, Whitton, and Markman (2004)



9/18/2008

Effect size = .78

Children are affected.

- The odds of a couple being together two years after the birth of a child are 6 times greater in marriage than cohabitation. (Galston, 2008)
- More children than ever before are being born in low commitment contexts.

Policy and Education Efforts In the United States

The (Brief) History of Efforts

- Premarital education has been a growing phenomena over the past decades.
 - Private, voluntary, & mostly conducted by religious organizations
- Various government policy discussions and efforts
 - The Big Change: Welfare Reform
 - Marriage and/or Two parent families was an explicit goal.

U. S. Administration for Children and Families

- Large randomized trials in multi-site studies of relationship education delivered to diverse groups.
- Demonstration projects in a diversity of settings
- Serious attempt to reach people who are never typically reached, including those in poverty
- At policy expert and research levels: unprecedented cooperation among liberals and conservatives

Relationship & Marriage Education

Helping Existing,
Committed Couples

The Role of Science: To Us, Empirically Based Means . . .

- Empirically Informed by Basic Science Research
 - Howard Markman's aim
- Empirically Tested
 - Outcome/Impact Studies (high standards)
 - Demonstration Projects (learning by watching)
- Regularly Refined based on knowledge

Factors Associated with Divorce and Distress

- | | |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Static Factors: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Neuroticism (reactive personality) – Insecure attachment – Parental divorce – Cohabitation history – Previous divorce – Children from prior marriage – Religious differences – Young age at marriage – Poverty – Substance abuse | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dynamic Factors <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Interaction Danger Signs – Mental health problems that are treatable – Substance abuse – Conflict management problems – Unrealistic expectations – Different values and beliefs between partners – Values that do not support marriages as long term – Commitment and motivation problems |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

Targeting Risk Factors

- With committed couples, where you are trying to help them make it:
 - focus more energy on dynamic risk factors.
- With individuals you are trying to help make best choices in partners:
 - both static and dynamic risk factors are equally pertinent.

Clear Basis for Encouragement that Marriage & Relationship Education Can Work

- Giblin, P., Sprenkle, D.H., & Sheehan, R. (1985). Enrichment outcome research: A meta-analysis of premarital, marital, and family interventions. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 11(3), 257-271.
- Hahlweg, K. & Markman, H. (1988). The effectiveness of behavioral marital therapy: Empirical status of behavioral techniques in preventing and alleviating marital distress. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 56, 440-447.
- Sayers, S. L., Kohn, C. S., & Heavey, C. (1998). Prevention of marital dysfunction: Behavioral approaches and beyond. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 18, 713-744.
- Silliman, B., Stanley, S.M., Coffin, W., Markman, H.J., & Jordan, P.L. (2001). Preventive interventions for couples. In H. Liddle, D. Santisteban, R. Levant, and J. Bray (Eds.), *Family psychology: Science-based interventions* (pp. 123-146). Washington, D.C.: APA Publications.

Clear Basis for Encouragement that Marriage Education Can Work

- Carroll, J. S., & Doherty, W. J. (2003). Evaluating the effectiveness of premarital prevention programs: A meta-analytic review of outcome research. *Family Relations*, 52, 105-118.
- Stanley, S. M., Amato, P. R., Johnson, C. A., & Markman, H. J. (2006). Premarital education, marital quality, and marital stability: Findings from a large, random, household survey. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 20, 117-126.
- Nock, S. L., Sanchez, L. A., & Wright, J. D. (2008). *Covenant marriage and the movement to reclaim tradition*. Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Hawkins, A. J., Blanchard, V. L., Baldwin, S. A., & Fawcett, E. B. (in press). Does marriage and relationship education work? A meta-analytic study. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*.

Examples: Our Curricula

- **PREP** (Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program)
 - For couples
 - Developed and refined over last 25 years (Markman, Stanley, and colleagues)
- **Within My Reach**
 - For individuals
- **Within Our Reach**
 - For couples

Outcome Research On PREP

- 9 of 10 outcome studies on PREP show promising results.
- There are more long-term studies on variations of PREP by more researchers on more continents than any other marriage/relationship education program for couples that we know about.

What We Know (and Don't)

- We can change how couples communicate, including lowering conflict.
- Some studies show effects for lower separation and divorce related to participating.
- It is challenging to study mechanisms of change.
- Couples benefit from well conceived and implemented strategies.
- The messenger matters.

Some Thoughts on Tracks and Trains

- **Trains** pertain to services we can send down a set of tracks
- **Tracks** pertain to infrastructure and reach.
- Effective educational approaches require both, but tracks are often not given enough consideration.

A Government Policy Question

- Are lower income people interested in marriage?
 - Yes, and more so, on average, than other groups
- Are lower income people interested in marriage and relationship education?
- Be careful to infer lack of interest where there is no access.

Individuals?

- There may be even more work to do in targeting individuals than couples when it comes to relationship education.
 - A lot more tracks are laid to where we can reach individuals than couples.
 - If we reach individuals prior to major bridges being crossed, there is potential for very large preventive effects.

Transition and Risk: How the New Courtship Paradigm Undermines Life-Long Love

Background Theory
for this part of this talk

The Essence of Commitment

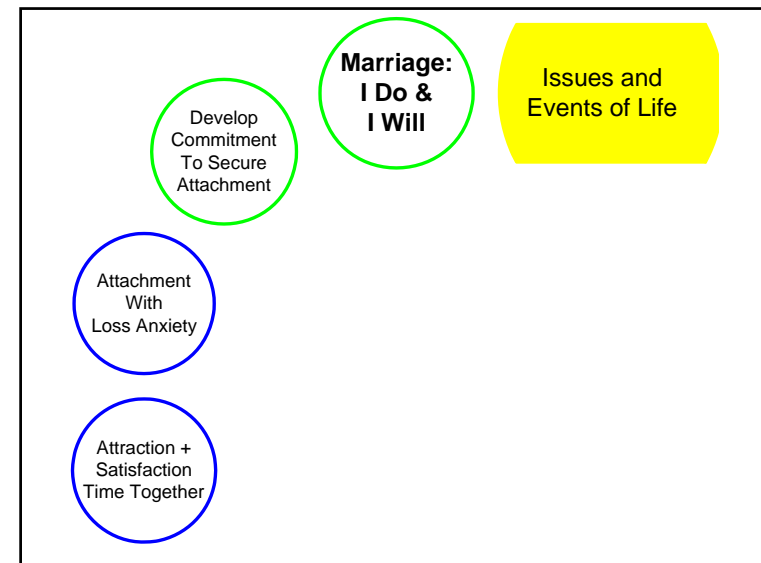
- Making a choice among alternatives
 - “Making the choice to give up other choices.”
Stanley, 2005
- Having a long-term time horizon
 - A long-term view

What is Commitment? (as couples experience it over time)

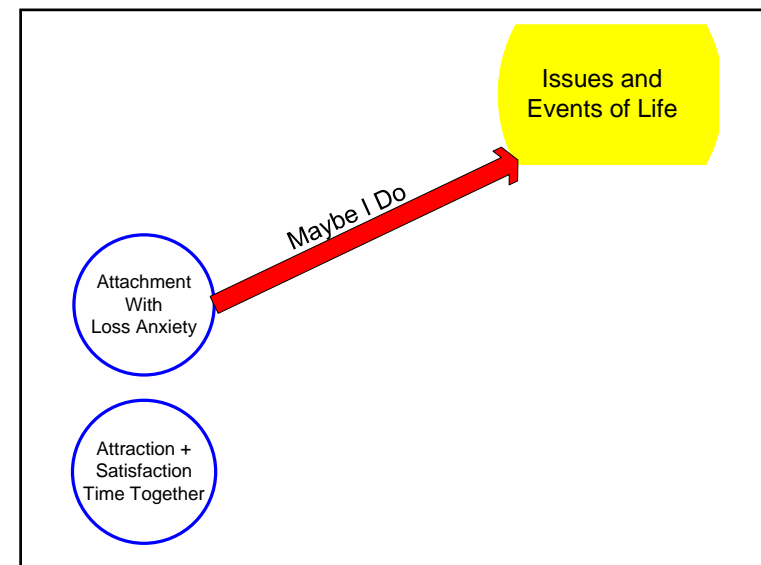
- Personal Dedication
- Constraint

Stanley & Markman (1992)

Why does commitment develop? A Psychological Perspective



- Attachment is not the same as commitment.
- Commitment secures the attachment.



Three of the Reasons Commitment Has Become Dicey

- 1) Insecurity about marriage
 - (though desire for marriage remains strong)
- 2) Difficulty choosing among options when there is an apparent explosion of options.
 - e.g., *The Paradox of Choice* (Barry Schwartz)
- 3) How relationships form and the nature of relationship transitions (my focus here)

Transition and Risk

A Core Concept: Inertia

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

Inertia

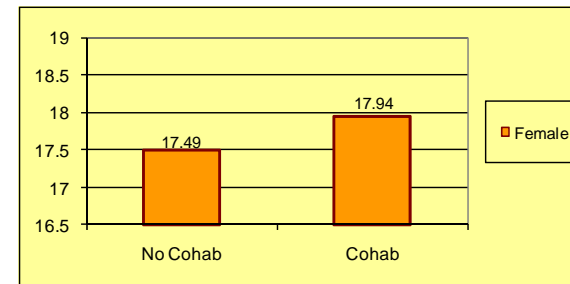
- Our work emphasizes a negative effect of inertia, starting with national survey data from 1995.
 - Stanley & Markman, 1996
 - Stanley, Whitton, & Markman, 2004
 - **Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2006**
- Current, popular work is emphasizing the positive uses of inertia.
 - Libertarian Paternalism: e.g., Thaler and Sunstein's new book, *Nudge* (2008).
- Similarities with Norval Glenn's Premature Entanglement, but many differences.

The Cohabitation Effect

- Premarital cohabitation is associated with higher risks for marital break up and lower marital quality.
- This effect has been shown in many studies spanning the past few decades, including in numerous recent samples.

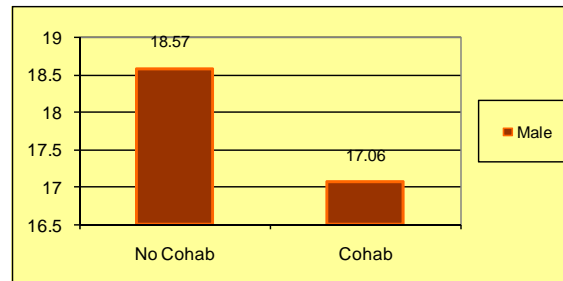
Dedication and Premarital Cohabitation

[Stanley, Whitton, & Markman (2004). Maybe I Do. *Journal of Family Issues*]



Dedication and Premarital Cohabitation

[Stanley, Whitton, & Markman (2004). Maybe I Do. *Journal of Family Issues*]



Males who cohabited with spouse scored lower (on average) on dedication to spouse.

This difference remains significant when controlling for religiosity.
Effect size for male dedication difference = .68

The Inertia Hypothesis

(Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2006)

- Are there a subset of these men who would not have married their current spouse had they not increased constraints prior to marriage?
- More generally, do constraints of cohabitation keep some relationships together that would otherwise end?

Testing What Inertia Predicts

- Inertia suggests that some people continue on in relationships that they would otherwise leave if they had not increased their constraints.
- Inertia should be a non-factor for those who have already clarified mutual, long-term commitment prior to increasing constraints (cohabiting, in this case).

- Therefore, with respect to premarital cohabitation and risk, the theory of inertia predicts:
 - Higher risk: cohabiting before clarifying commitment
 - Lower risk: cohabiting at marriage
 - Lower risk: cohabiting after mutual, public clarity on commitment (e.g., engagement)

Theory and Findings Thus Far

- Stanley, S. M., Whitton, S. W., & Markman, H. J. (2004). Maybe I do: Interpersonal commitment and premarital or nonmarital cohabitation. *Journal of Family Issues*, 25, 496-519.
- Kline (Rhoades), 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. (2006). Pre-engagement cohabitation and gender asymmetry in marital commitment. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 20, 553-560.
- Stanley, S. M., Rhoades, G. K., & Markman, H. J. (2006). Sliding vs. Deciding: Inertia and the premarital cohabitation effect. *Family Relations*, 55, 499 - 509.
- Rhoades, G. K., Stanley, S. M., & Markman, H. J. (in press). Couples' reasons for cohabitation: Associations with individual well-being and relationship quality. *Journal of Family Issues*.
- Rhoades, G. K., Stanley, S. M., & Markman, H. J. (in press). The Pre-engagement Cohabitation Effect: A Replication and Extension of Previous Findings. *Journal of Family Psychology*.
- Stanley, Rhoades, Amato, Johnson, & Markman (in preparation)

Is Selection Everything? (and, if so, so what?)

- Probably not
- Effect not covaried away:
 - Demaris & MacDonald (1993)
 - Cohan & Kleinbaum (2002)
 - Kamp Dush, Cohan, & Amato (2003)
 - Kline (Rhoades), Stanley, et al. (2004)
 - Stanley, Whitton, & Markman (2005)
 - Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman (2006)
 - Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman (in press) JFP
 - Stanley, Rhoades, Amato, Johnson, & Markman (in prep)

Sliding vs. Deciding

What Selection May Not Explain

Back to Fundamentals of Commitment

- Commitment means making a choice to give up choices.
- A clear choice is based on a conscious *decision*.

Sliding vs. Deciding

- Inertia and accumulating constraints:

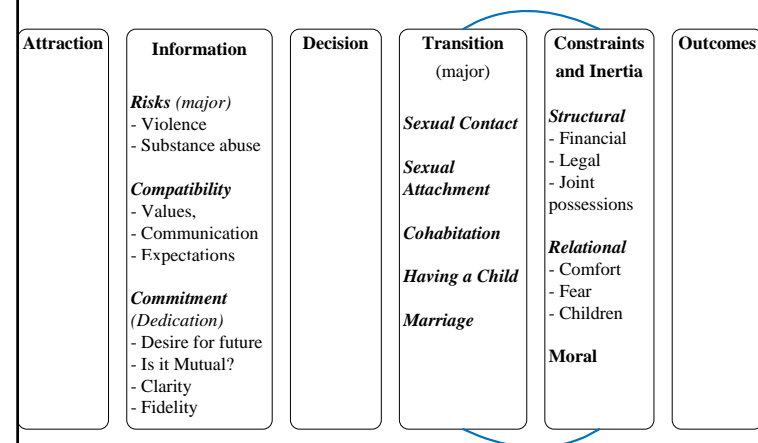
Stanley, S. M., Whitton, S. W., & Markman, H. J. (2004). Maybe I do: Interpersonal commitment and premarital or nonmarital cohabitation. *Journal of Family Issues*, 25, 496-519.

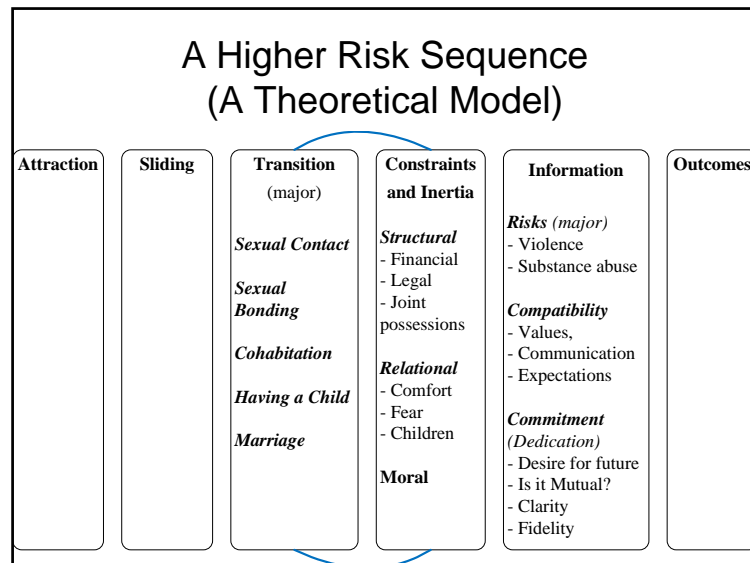
Stanley, S. M., Rhoades, G. K., & Markman, H. J. (2006). Sliding vs. Deciding: Inertia and the premarital cohabitation effect. *Family Relations*, 55, 499 - 509.
- Couples Slide across the line into cohabitation.

Manning, W. D., & Smock, P. J. (2005). Measuring and Modeling Cohabitation: New Perspectives from Qualitative Data. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 67, 989 - 1002.
- A strong form of Deciding to cross the line into marriage.

Nock, S. L., Sanchez, L. A., & Wright, J. D. (2008). *Covenant marriage and the movement to reclaim tradition*. Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

A Lower Risk Sequence (A Theoretical Model)





What's the Big Deal?

- The timing of information relative to development of constraints
- The development of weaker forms for commitment

Thinking Like an Economist

The Cost of Information

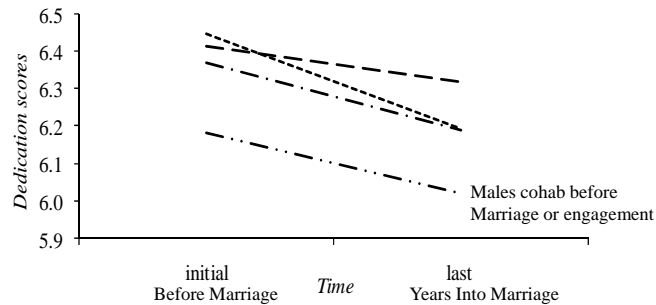
- Cohabiting prior to commitment being clarified (e.g., marriage, engagement) can be a high cost way to get information compared to dating.
 - Information comes after one can easily act on it.
 - Giving up options before making a choice
 - Getting information, or “testing,” is the reason for cohabiting most strongly associated with risk.
- Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman (in press) JFI

Why **Deciding** Matters: Decisions Set up Follow-Through

- I choose you.
- I chose this path.
- Cognitive Dissonance and action tendencies (e.g., Harmon-Jones & Harmon-Jones)

Transition is not Transformation

Dedication Levels Before Marriage and Up to 7 Years Into Marriage
(Ave. 4 Years Into Marriage)
Rhoades, Stanley, and Markman (2006)



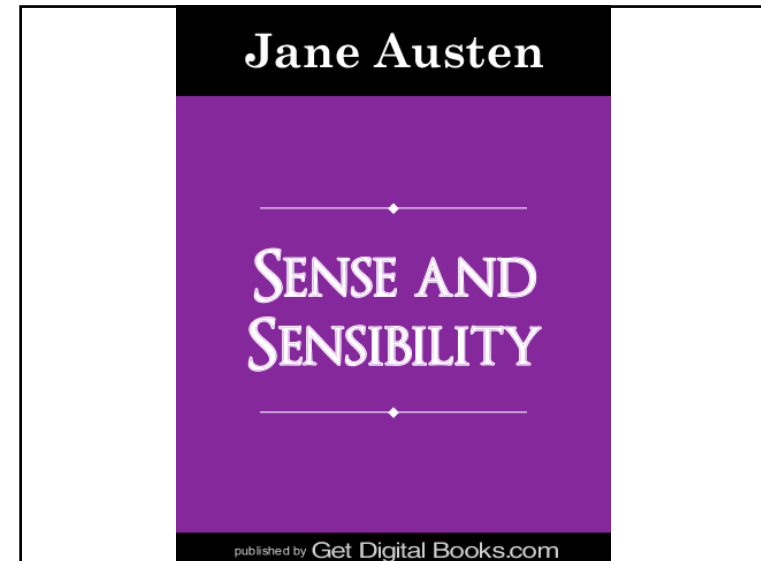
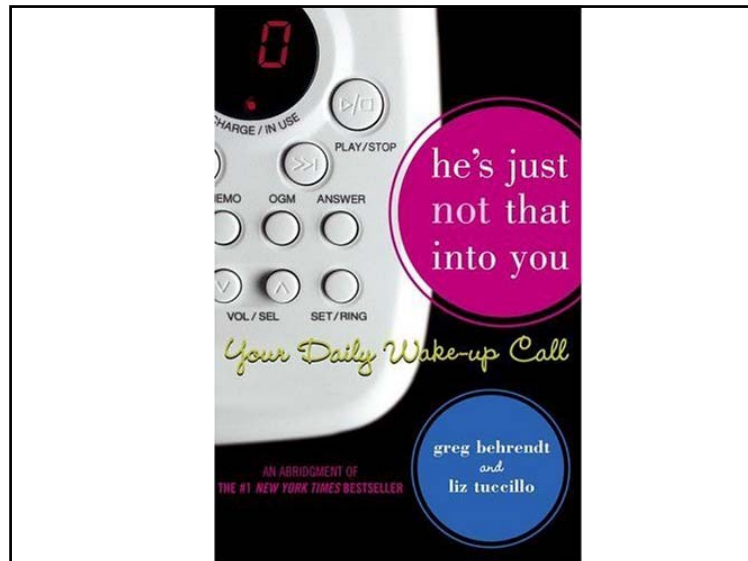
Why Would We Care? a few reasons

- Children are increasingly born to commitment vulnerable couples.
- Commitment asymmetry is more likely when transitions happen without commitment clarity
- 26% of teenage females in U.S. already have or have had a sexually transmitted disease.
- Emotional risks to casual, hooking up

The Perfect Storm

- Societal conditions are generating high numbers of people with:
 - insecurities about attachment and
 - low confidence about relationships and marriage . . .
- . . . at a time when we've been dismantling protective structures

- Courtship structures have been disintegrating. Good or bad or mixed?
 - Steps and stages provided information
 - Scaffolding
- We're in a period where nothing has replaced those structures.
- Facebook? MySpace (or yours?)



What Jane Understood Men Known Well, Only Over Time

- | | |
|-------------------------|-----------------|
| • Pride and Prejudice | George Wickham |
| • Sense and Sensibility | John Willoughby |
| • Mansfield Park | Henry Crawford |
| • Emma | Frank Churchill |
| • Persuasion | William Elliot |

Affection vs. Public Commitment: Elinor and her mother about Marianne

Elinor: "Not entirely. It may be proper to conceal their engagement (if they ARE engaged) from Mrs. Smith--and if that is the case, it must be highly expedient for Willoughby to be but little in Devonshire at present. But this is no excuse for their concealing it from us."

Mrs. Dashwood: "Concealing it from us! my dear child, do you accuse Willoughby and Marianne of concealment? This is strange indeed, when your eyes have been reproaching them every day for incautiousness."

Elinor: "I want no proof of their affection," said Elinor; "but of their engagement I do."

Elevator Talk (or Trains if you Desire)

- Not all elevators go to all floors.
- (Not all trains go to all stations.)

Some Advice

- Go slower. Speed is a big part of the problem (Sassler, 2004).
- Make decisions about transitions.
- Get information before giving up options.
- Pre-decide conditions for transitions.
- DTR: Define the Relationship! Have the talk.

Scott Stanley

- Scott Stanley, Ph.D., is a research professor at the University of Denver and co-director of the Center for Marital and Family Studies. He has published extensively in academic journals and books, with research interests including commitment, communication, sacrifice, the prevention of marital distress, and cohabitation. Stanley is the author of *The Power of Commitment*, and co-author of *Fighting for Your Marriage*, *A Lasting Promise*, and *12 Hours to a Great Marriage*.