Sliding vs. Deciding: How Relationship Formation Paradigms Undermine Commitment

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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?

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

- Cohabitting makes it harder to break-up by increasing constraints.

- Cohabiters 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


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.


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)

5.9
6.0
6.1
6.2
6.3
6.4
6.5

initial
last

before

Time

Marriage

Marriage or engagement

Dedication scores

Commitment

Before Marriage

Years Into Marriage

Males cohab before Marriage or engagement
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

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

Sliding vs. Deciding

How do Couples Enter Cohabitation?

• Qualitative Research: More than ½ of cohabiting couples report sliding into it (not talking about it, not making a decision together).


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

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?
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You can get word.doc versions of some of our papers at:
http://www.box.net/shared/xnxx4fb1ao01p0750h9s

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