

The Inertia Hypothesis: Sliding vs. Deciding in the  
Development of Risk for Couples in Marriage

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## The Inertia Hypothesis: Sliding vs. Deciding in the Development of Risk for Couples in Marriage

The increase in cohabitation is one of the most significant shifts in family demographics of the past century (Casper & Bianchi, 2001; Manning & Smock, 2002; Smock, 2000). Furthermore, cohabitation is increasingly a context for child-rearing (Bumpass & Lu, 2000), and child outcomes are generally poorer in cohabiting unions or in marriages preceded by cohabitation (e.g., Brown, 2004a; Manning & Lichter, 1996; Rosenkrantz Aronson & Huston, 2004). Simply put, cohabitation has become a normative experience on the pathway to marriage (Manning & Smock, 2002), and, for some, an alternative to marriage altogether (Smock, 2000).

Despite the fact that it has become a normative experience, cohabitation prior to marriage is associated with poorer communication quality, lower relationship satisfaction, higher levels of domestic violence, and greater probability of divorce (Brown & Booth, 1996; Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Cohan & Kleinbaum, 2002; Kamp Dush, Cohan, & Amato, 2003; Kline et al., 2004; Stanley, Whitton, & Markman, 2004; Stets & Straus, 1989; Thomson & Colella, 1992; Waite & Joyner, 2001). The association between premarital cohabitation and poorer outcomes is known as the cohabitation effect. To limit the scope of this paper (and keep the focus on factors of centrality in our own research), it is this cohabitation effect that we focus on here.

While the existence of the cohabitation effect is well known to social scientists, its existence is less well known—and even quite counterintuitive—to the average person. People clearly believe that living together prior to marriage should lower their risks (Johnson et al., 2002). “How could it possibly be associated with increased risks?” Indeed, it is our perception that the basic association with risk is so counterintuitive that this is at least one reason why such findings get a great deal of attention from the national media from time-to-time (e.g., USA

Today; Peterson, 2002). If the cohabitation effect was not so unbelievable, or the movement towards cohabitation as a family form not so great, cohabitation would not get so much attention. While we clearly know some things, we in the social sciences know far less than we would like about *why*, and under what circumstances, cohabitation is associated with increased risks. This is important for many reasons, not the least of which is the fact that effective interventions designed to lower risk should be based as much as possible on an accurate understanding of the nature of those risks (Coie et al., 1993).

There are certainly a mass of findings that provide solid insights and a jumping off place for further research, but we believe that the ways in which knowledge is being built in this area needs to undergo change for significant advances to be made. Among the changes that must occur (and some are occurring), our theories and methods must reach more deeply into understanding the meaning of cohabitation for those choosing this pathway (the reasons why people do it, the meaning that it has for people within it, etc.). Qualitative research such as that being pursued by Pam Smock and Wendy Manning is a strong step in this direction.

As one simple example, while young people tend to believe that cohabitation prior to marriage should lower their risks, we are not aware of theories that take into account how such a belief could be associated with risk. To be sure, it is not necessary that this belief be associated with an actual increased risk, but what if it is? We suspect that it could be a contributing factor to risk for some couples, as we will make clear. However, we will only know such things clearly by learning more about the meaning of cohabitation for people.

Current speculation for the cohabitation effect suggests theories related to selection (i.e., people who choose to cohabit have pre-existing sociodemographic risks for poor outcomes) and experience (i.e., something about cohabitation itself makes poor outcomes more likely). Of

course, if you, the reader, are a dyed-in-the-wool “selection-effects-are-the-whole-story-here; move-on” theorist, you may be already to pack your bags and depart from this train because your dominant view suggests to you that we already know the important details. Yet, as we will briefly describe, there are studies that show that selection characteristics do *not* account for the cohabitation effect (or at least, most or all of it). Those studies provide tacit support for the notion that aspects of experience that are not explicated by prior research may account for some of the increased risk.

Here, we present a brief review of the existing literature and then focus on data and conceptualization that has driven us toward testable hypotheses that we believe hold particular promise for elucidation of the cohabitation effect. We will conclude this paper with a list of propositional statements or hypotheses to guide future study—some closer to existing findings and some a good deal more speculative, but all following from the nature of the reasoning presented here. This paper is best viewed as an intentional attempt to push theory and speculation in the furtherance of understanding the cohabitation effect. Hence, we will take some liberties in the direction of theory development.

### *The Existing Knowledge Base: What We Seem to Know*

There are considerable limitations to the research base we currently have about the cohabitation effect. In our view, the two greatest limitations are an absence of a strong theoretical perspective and an absence of longitudinal methods with sufficient sensitivity and quality of measurement to study key developmental pathways. Despite the limitations, much knowledge has been gained from existing studies of cohabitation. Below, we use a simple conceptual scheme to categorize major findings, noting that these categories are not orthogonal.

Findings here include those from studies on cohabitation that precedes marriage (premarital cohabitation) and cohabitation which functions more as a substitute for marriage (non-marital cohabitation). Of course, there are many variations beyond that as well, such as cohabitations where the possibility of marriage is strongly in view by the partners (or at least one of them), yet where they never make it to the altar. We acknowledge the complexity of distinctions about what type of cohabitation a couple is actually engaged in. Indeed, as we see elsewhere in this conference, it is quite complicated to consider the various ways to measure when cohabitation of varying sorts actually exists. At any rate, the simple distinction between that which precedes marriage and that which is generally more of a substitute will suffice for our purposes here.

**Background** variables differentiate cohabiters from non-cohabiters:

- More traditionally religious persons are less likely to cohabit prior to marriage (e.g., Lillard, Brien, & Waite, 1995; Stanley et al., 2004, Thornton, Axinn, & Hill, 1992).
- Those with more traditional and less egalitarian role orientations are less likely to consider cohabitation outside of marriage (e.g., Lye & Waldron, 1997).
- Children of divorce are more likely to cohabit (Cherlin & 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 risks in marriage (Teachman, 2003).

**General beliefs** about cohabitation and marriage likely affect behavior, and behavior likely modifies such beliefs:

- Young people strongly believe cohabitation is a good way to test their relationships (Axinn & Thornton, 1992; C. A. Johnson et al., 2002) and those beliefs likely affect behavior.
- 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 *Monitoring the Future* survey conducted at the University of Michigan, as reported by Popenoe & Whitehead, 2002).
- The very poor with children tend to believe it's better to have finances securely established before getting married, so they tend to cohabit longer before possibly entering marriage (Edin, England, & Linnenberg, September, 2003). The desire to have finances securely established prior to marriage is often linked to factors such as wanting to afford a wedding in a religious organization (rather than merely going to the justice of the

peace) and a reception, feeling a need to own a home prior to marriage, and a need for both partners to be financially responsible and succeeding prior to entering marriage (Edin, Kefalas, & Reed, 2004; Smock, Manning, & Porter, 2004).

- An increase in the cumulative experience of cohabitation prior to marriage (with more partners, and for longer period of time) is associated with a reduction, over time, in esteem for marriage and childrearing (Axinn & Barber, 1997; McGinnis, 2003).

**Relationship quality** variables differentiate cohabiters from non-cohabiters:

- Premarital cohabitation is associated with more negative communication in marriage, both on objective coding of couple interaction (Cohan & Kleinbaum, 2002; Kline et al., 2004) and self-report (e.g., Stanley et al., 2004; Thomson & Colella, 1992).
- Cohabitation (premarital and non-marital) is associated with lower levels of relationship satisfaction (Brown, 2004b; Brown & Booth, 1996; Nock, 1995; Stafford et al., 2004; Stanley et al., 2004) and lower levels of emotional and sexual satisfaction (Waite & Joyner, 2001).
- Cohabitation (premarital and non-marital) is associated with higher perceived relationship instability (Kamp Dush et al., 2003; Thomas & Colella, 1992)
- Cohabitation (premarital and non-marital) is associated with greater likelihood of domestic aggression (e.g., Brownridge & Halli, 2000; Stafford et al., 2004; Stets & Straus, 1989).

**Personal vulnerabilities** differentiate cohabiters from non-cohabiters:

- Cohabitation (premarital and non-marital) is associated with higher levels of depression and lower levels of self-esteem (Brown, 2000; Stafford et al., 2004).
- Poor job history or economic potential/situation for males appears to be a barrier to marriage, and subsequently a barrier to marriage among poorer, non-married couples having a child (Carlson, McLanahan, & England, 2001).
- Lack of financial resources is less of a barrier to cohabitation than to marriage among low income, working class, and lower middle class individuals (Smock, Manning, & Porter, 2004).
- Substance abuse and/or criminal history/behavior reduce the likelihood of cohabitation and marriage among poorer, non-married couples having a child (Carlson et al., 2001).

**Commitment** variables differentiate cohabiters from non-cohabiters:

- Non-marital cohabitation is associated with lower levels of dedication to the partner for both men and women (Nock, 1995; Stanley et al., 2004).
- Premarital cohabitation is associated with lower levels of dedication to the partner, once married, for men but not for women (Stanley et al., 2004).
- Cohabiters with plans to marry have higher relationship quality than cohabiters without plans to marry (Brown & Booth, 1996; Brown, 2004b).
- Timing of decisions about marital commitment vis-à-vis decisions about cohabitation differentiate quality of relationships on many variables, with those cohabiting prior to engagement scoring, on average, lower on a wide range of indices of marital quality

(including dedication) compared to those who live together only after engagement or after marriage (Kline et al., 2004).

We are personally convinced that ideal studies of cohabitation in the future will measure as many of these categories of variables as possible in order to bring further clarity to the dynamics and risks of cohabitation.

While this field of research does not, to us, appear to have been very theoretically driven, theories do exist that explain some of the major findings. For example, Nock posits that it is the institutional nature of marriage versus cohabitation that brings about many of the benefits of marriage over non-married cohabitation (Nock, 1995). This notion moves beyond mere selection because it suggests that marriage has a powerful social meaning that affects behavior of the participants. It is far less obvious why cohabitation prior to marriage, among those who marry, is associated with increased risk. We do know that many see cohabitation as a “trial run” for marriage (e.g., Bumpass, Sweet, & Cherlin, 1991; Cohan & Kleinbaum, 2002), and evidently young adults think cohabitation will improve their marriages (C. A. Johnson et al., 2002). While there are undoubtedly couples who learn things about each other in cohabitation that lead them to terminate high risk unions, there is no current evidence that couples actually lower their risks via the pathway of cohabitation prior to marriage. Either something about those who enter cohabitation or the experience of cohabiting is associated with increased risks for relationships.

### *Selection or Experience?*

Discussions of the cohabitation effect have centered on two fundamental explanations: *selection*, or factors related to the types of people who cohabit, vs. the *experience* of cohabitation itself (e.g., Brown & Booth, 1996, Smock, 2000). 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). Some studies suggest that selection accounts for a significant portion of the cohabitation effect. That is, selection variables predict both premarital cohabitation and marital distress, and, in some studies, controlling for such characteristics has been shown to eliminate the association between cohabitation and marital risk (DeMaris & Leslie, 1984; Lillard et al., 1995; Woods & Emery, 2002).

Not all studies of cohabitation support the idea that selection variables account for the risks associated with cohabitation. In fact, a surprising number of studies (e.g., Stafford et al., 2004; Kamp Dush et al., 2004) do not provide strong evidence for the traditional understanding of selection effect. In our experience, most social scientists who are less directly involved with this area seem to assume that selection is the entire and adequate explanation for the negative effects. We suspect otherwise; that selection of some sorts is only a part of the story, albeit, an important part. As examples of the lack of evidence for selection, Cohan and Kleinbaum (2002) found that people who had cohabited premaritally had poorer observed communication skills; these effects could not be explained by sociodemographic characteristics. Likewise, in a pre- and post-marriage longitudinal study of ours, 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 after-engagement cohabiters or after-marriage cohabiters; these effects were significant even after controlling for age, ethnicity, education, income, length of relationship, religiosity, and duration of premarital cohabitation (Kline et al., 2004). In another study of ours, using a random sample of the U.S. population, we found that although those who did not cohabit prior to marriage were more religious than those who did, the differences between these groups on male interpersonal

commitment levels were substantial, even after controlling for religiosity (Stanley et al., 2004).

It is not that the findings of various studies fail to show that traditional “selection” linked variables are not associated with who cohabits. For example, religiosity may be the strongest discriminator of who does and who does not cohabit prior to marriage or instead of marriage. But a number of studies are suggesting that controlling for such factors does not eliminate the risks associated with cohabitation. In other words, some of the relatively static individual characteristics cannot explain the cohabitation effect when certain other variables are assessed. Researchers who have not found support for selection generally conclude, by default, that there is something about the experience of cohabitation that increases risk for marital distress.

Though some may believe that experience affects outcomes, very few have tested how. One exception is the work of Axinn and colleagues that demonstrates 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 (e.g., Axinn & Barber, 1997). They suggest that this erosion reduces the motivation for, and commitment to, marriage. One could suggest that their findings show that the actual experience of cohabitation—and, simplistically, more total cohabitation experience prior to marriage—leads to changes in the meanings that people hold for marriage and child rearing, which in turn leads to changes in behavior in marriage.

It is our view that commitment theory, and the inertia hypothesis presented in the section following the next, hold promise for examining why the *experience* of premarital cohabitation may lead to poor outcomes for some people.

### *New Conceptual Framework: Commitment Theory*

One of the recent changes in union formation in American culture is that the lines between various types of relationships and their pathways have become quite blurred (Casper & Bianchi, 2001). At times, even partners do not share the same understanding of the path they are on (Manning & Smock, 2003). We believe these kinds of changes in the most typical developmental pathways are strongly associated with the patterns of risk seen in the existing literature, and that knowledge of development and risk can be advanced by using commitment theory. We will first detail core elements of this theoretical system and then illustrate some ways it can fill gaps in existing knowledge about the cohabitation effect.

Commitment fundamentally relates to the sense of security about the continuance and exclusivity of a relationship. Cohabitation represents, for many, an ambiguous state of commitment. Yet, for others, it represents a step on the pathway of decisions about a commitment to a future. In fact, we believe this and various other distinctions may be crucial in understanding risks associated with cohabitation. For example, we suspect there could be many relationships where the cohabiting arrangement has the former meaning for one partner (for example, the male) and the latter meaning for the other partner (for example, the female). Likewise, there are other couples where it has the same meaning for both partners, such as it being a step on the path for a future in marriage. Some couples have such shared understandings even though they may be very unlikely to ever actually arrive at marriage because of other risks they experience, such as those associated with poverty (Edin, et al., 2004).

Might commitment be an important framework for thinking about cohabitation? Related to the importance of understanding cohabitation, a recent exhaustive review of research on the determinants of cohabitation and marriage among economically disadvantaged couples reached

this general conclusion (Fein et al., 2003, funded by the Federal Administration for Children and Families):

“A general need is for more direct research on the processes that affect the development of commitment within cohabitation and decision-making about marriage (p. 18).”

Commitment theory provides a strong basis upon which to illuminate key developmental pathways couples take, and decisions that they make along the way, that relate to their ability to have healthy relationships. Closely related to commitment theory, a sense of long-term security is a crucial determinant of relationship quality for adults (Amato & Rogers, 1999) and children (Amato & Booth, 1997; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1996). In fact, we posit that a sense of security about the continuance of the relationship is one of the three most essential types of safety that characterize healthy relationships and marriages (Stanley et al., 2002; Stanley, 2003). The other types of essential safety are interaction or emotional safety and freedom from fear of physical harm. Cohabitation prior to marriage or in lieu of marriage could be associated with greater risks precisely because of the associated ambiguity about the nature of the security and exclusivity of the relationship. As Nock suggests, the ambiguity lies in the fact that it is an incomplete institution (1995). We suspect the very ambiguity of cohabitation undermines the ability of some couples, who are otherwise viable, to develop a clear sense of safety and security based in a mutual understanding (meaning) about the nature of their relationship. In this view, the ambiguity adds to risk because of the lack of a well constructed, mutual meaning that frames elemental security.

Commitment theory broadly overlaps other major theoretical perspectives, having close connections with exchange/interdependency theory (Levinger, 1979; Thibaut & Kelly, 1959), attachment theory (e.g., Bowlby, 1988; Hazan & Shaver, 1987), and extensions or modifications

of rational choice theory. In the latter case, commitment in personal relationships trumps competitive market conditions between partners (Cook & Emerson, 1978) wherein maximizing joint outcomes becomes important, not merely maximizing the individual's outcomes.

There are a number of models of commitment one can draw upon. We will describe commitment theory using our own model because (a) we believe it has the most straightforward applications in this line of research and (b) is a model heavily focused on measurement of relevant constructs (Stanley & Markman, 1992). It is, however, a model with close ties to other major systems for conceptualizing commitment in personal relationships, most notably the work of psychologist Rusbult and colleagues (e.g., Rusbult & Buunk, 1993) and sociologist M. P. Johnson and colleagues (e.g., M. P. Johnson et al., 1999).

Commitment theory makes an important distinction between forces that draw people together and motivate sustaining connection, versus forces that increase the costs of leaving. We call the higher order level of these constructs dedication and constraint commitment. Here, we briefly elaborate on these two constructs as well as their relation to alternatives to the relationship. Then, discuss their relevance to the proposed project in the next sections on the inertia hypothesis and the timing of engagement vis-à-vis cohabitation.

*Dedication (or Interpersonal Commitment)*: Partners who share a strong level of interpersonal commitment tend to have a strong sense of *couple identity*, or a “we-ness” that pervades how they approach life. They also are more likely to say they have a *strong desire for a future together, or 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; Whitton, Stanley, & Markman, 2002). Regardless of labels, when measured consistent with this definition, dedication is strongly associated with the quality of

relationships (Stanley, Lobitz, & Dickson, 1999). We believe that commitment of this sort functions to secure anxieties about attachment that naturally exist when two people are quite attached but not yet mutually clear about having a future and a boundary around their union (e.g., Stanley, 2002).

*Constraint commitment:* Constraints answer the question of why some people remain in relationships with which they are unhappy or that they might prefer to end. Constraints are forces that increase the costs of leaving and they can take many forms (Stanley & Markman, 1992). Those we have developed measures for include *concern for children's welfare, morality of divorce, social pressure, structural investments* (financial investments, commingling resources, etc.), and *termination procedures* (the difficulty of the steps to end the relationship). We will revisit the notion of constraint as we come to discussing the inertia hypothesis.

*Alternatives: On the edge of constraint and dedication:* Alternatives to the present relationship have played a particularly prominent role in theories such as exchange theory, where Thibaut and Kelley (1959) hypothesized about the comparison level of alternatives as a key determinant of one's satisfaction and the probability of exiting the relationship. Alternatives in that conception function as a type of constraint, in that if one perceives their *alternative quality* to be less than what they currently have, they are more constrained. Alternatives play an equally important role in understanding dedication, in the degree to which one is seriously evaluating alternative relationships or partners—termed *alternative monitoring* in this literature (Leik & Leik, 1977). Many findings indicate that increased alternative monitoring is consistent with lower levels of commitment (dedication) and higher levels of dissatisfaction in the present relationship (D. J. Johnson & Rusbult, 1989; Stanley & Markman, 1992; Stanley et al., 2002). Commitment can be understood as fundamentally encompassing the process by which one makes

a choice among alternatives and protects that choice against competing options over time. As such, these theoretical constructs have great overlap with considerations about fidelity.

Closely related to the issue of alternative monitoring, gender distrust (about sexual fidelity, in particular) appears to be especially strongly related to the difficulties and complexity of relationships for many couples in poverty (e.g., Edin, et al., 2004). While not the major focus of this paper (the cohabitation effect is), commitment theory has much to commend it in lending explanatory power to understanding the difficulties that couples in poverty face when it comes to relationship and marital success. While there is clear evidence of a desire for marriage among those in poverty (e.g., Edin et al., 2004; Karney, Garvan, & Thomas, 2003), there is also a good deal of evidence that they have a greater difficulty accessing and succeeding in marriage (e.g., Johnson et al., 2002; Smock, Manning, & Porter, 2004). In the framework of commitment theory, it could be that both the stressors associated with poverty as well as the difficulties forming a clear boundary around their relationships via marriage—a boundary widely understood both between partners and by their communities—contributes to the far greater risks for relationships failing. Such relationships are truly fragile, and for many reasons we will not take the space to list. However, for some, part of their fragility seems directly associated with the difficulties they have forming a clear understanding of what the boundary is around their relationship. Where is the “us” part, and what do we think “we” are about in life?

With regard to the risks in marriage associated with premarital cohabitation, the inertia hypothesis that we now present describes a way that we believe the *experience* of cohabitation might be linked to marital outcomes. It details a mechanism of risk that needs to be directly and extensively tested, but one that follows from existing findings. It is our primary example of how commitment theory can help us understand existing findings as well as guide construction of

important hypotheses for future research.

### *The Inertia Hypothesis*

The inertia hypothesis posits that the experience of cohabitation increases the likelihood of some couples getting married because the constraints fundamental to living together make it more difficult to terminate a relationship in comparison to dating and living in separate dwellings. We first raised this possibility in a report on marriage based on national data from a random digit dialing survey we conducted (Stanley & Markman, 1997), presenting it in more detail in Stanley (2002) and using the theory in discussing findings in a recent publication with an entirely different data set (Kline et al., 2004).

In commitment theory language, the inertia hypothesis suggests that cohabitation increases constraints (e.g., financial obligations, joint bank-accounts, a shared lease or mortgage, children or pregnancy) much more so than merely dating exclusively without cohabiting. Yet, there is nothing about cohabitation that necessarily increases levels of dedication or quality of relationship between partners. The inertia hypothesis overlaps with the concept of premature entanglement put forth by Glenn (2002). He describes 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.

In market theory terms, inertia suggests the possibility of moving out of the marketplace before adequately shopping. *Among those who eventually marry, options were constrained before life-altering choices (e.g., who to marry) were made.* Commitment fundamentally involves making (and preserving) a choice among competing options. Thus, it stands to reason that making choices about life partners when one's choices are already compromised or

foreclosed could affect both the quality of the option taken as well as the ongoing devotion to that “choice.” In this view, cohabitation increases the energy it would take to move off in a different direction, even if that would be the wisest thing to do.

We first speculated about the possibility that inertia might explain some of the cohabitation effect when we found that married men who cohabited before marriage scored substantially lower on current levels of dedication than those who did not cohabit premaritally, even after controlling for religious differences (Stanley et al., 2004; a finding replicated in the large Oklahoma survey, C. A. Johnson et al., 2002). Kline et al. (2004) found similar results; data from both male and female partners indicated that those who cohabited before engagement were less dedicated both before and after marriage. Thus, we wondered why these individuals married their partners if they were not as dedicated as those who had not cohabited. Our background in commitment research led us to consider the possibility that constraints rather than dedication drove the decision to marry for some of these premarital cohabiters. It would be hard to overstate the degree to which this idea captured a lot of what we were seeing in both the data and with couples we have spoken with, for example, clinically.

The central idea of inertia is that some couples who cohabit marry a partner whom they would not have married had they not increased constraints for continuance. Most importantly, some couples at lower levels of relationship quality and compatibility will enter cohabitation without clear deliberation. Or, if there is clear deliberation, it is a decision to “test” their relationship. In either case, the fact of cohabitation followed either a lack of clarity or an awareness of risk. A path of increasing constraints, despite higher levels of risk, has been entered.

Here is a specific example of how inertia might work in the life of one couple. Bob and

Mary are in love, and have developed a strong bond, but they also have low confidence about their ability to succeed in marriage. Their reasons for doubt are based on background variables (e.g., both are children of divorce and are wary of making a bad choice), problematic relationship dynamics (e.g., they do not manage conflict well), and greater personal vulnerabilities (e.g., he has poor job prospects, she tends toward insecure attachment, both have tendencies toward depression, and she has a child from a prior relationship). As is typical for younger people today, Bob and Mary hold the belief that cohabitation is a good way to lower odds of divorce and prepare for marriage (Johnson, et al., 2002). However, Mary is already more inclined toward marriage than Bob, and she is also thinking that this is a good step in increasing their levels of commitment to a future. This is part of the meaning that she ascribes to what seems to her as the next step in their relationship. Unfortunately (especially for Mary), this step of moving in together has not nearly the same level of meaning for Bob with regard to commitment as it does to Mary. He just thinks it's a good way to spend more time with Mary. He likes her (maybe loves her), and he is plenty happy to be around her more, but mostly, the opportunity to be together more sounds good to him. Plus, they will both save some money, because two can live as cheaply as one, or so they think.

Similar to Mary, Bob is not so sure about the long-term viability of the relationship. Yet, for Mary, this is an obstacle to overcome on the pathway to marriage. For Bob, the whole concept of a long-term future in marriage is far more hypothetical and not as clearly desired. Indeed, he associates marriage with a host of changes he's not at all sure he wants to make for Mary. His view of the whole arrangement is consistent with focus group research suggesting that cohabitation is not, among young men, necessarily a sign of any particularly high dedication to one's partner in terms of long-term view (Whitehead & Popenoe, 2002).

Bob and Mary have some serious risks which operate as true selection factors for them. What we mean is that they have backgrounds, individual characteristics, and beliefs that make cohabitation more likely and also put them at greater risk. In fact, cohabitation looks especially attractive Mary as a way to cope with an awareness of some risk in the context of their attachment to one another. He drinks a little more than she likes to see. She came from a divorce family, and has more difficulty believing that marriage could really work for the long term. Her view of commitment is impaired by what she's seen with her parents (Amato & DeBoer, 2001), and Bobs is impaired by what he's not seen—he knows of almost no happily married couples, and none personally or well

So, living together makes some sense to them. They surely aren't ready for marriage, and besides, both associate marriage with divorce, and who wants to risk that? What Bob and Mary do not think much about is the fact that their constraints will increase greatly when they begin to cohabit. According to commitment theory, these constraints (e.g., sharing financial responsibilities) make it more difficult to terminate a cohabiting union, even if there is clearly some risk or incompatibilities. Surely many cohabiting couples break up, but breaking up is hard(er) to do when cohabiting. With dating, it can become complex, but it's relatively easy to break up in comparison to moving out and finding another place to live. We will not focus on this here, but in the highest risk relationships where there is physical danger and intimidation from the male toward the female, the decision to move out (or have someone move out) is greatly compounded by the possibility of risk of harm by ending the arrangement of living together.

Through a combination of factors, such as an increasing frequency of intercourse and some sense of greater exclusivity that leads to less vigilance about birth control (K. Edin,

personal communication, November, 2004), they end up becoming pregnant and having a child together. This event and the baby greatly increase the forces that favor continuance of the relationship in the shorter term, but of course, do nothing that necessarily improves the quality of their relationship or the devotion (particularly his) to it. Their pathway into cohabitation was partly determined by some doubts about their relationships in the context of significant emotional attachment. The doubts have not abated but the costs of leaving have increased. When they eventually move on into marriage, with some considerable reluctance on his part, a higher risk marriage is born from an already higher risk relationship. Cohabitation was not causally related to the increase in their risks (albeit, arguably, it may have been, because of the increased likelihood of pregnancy), but it was causally related to the likelihood of them continuing on into marriage, risks and all.

Clearly, some couples who cohabit to test their relationship do not do well on whatever compatibility test cohabitation provides. Others likely do. The inertia hypothesis suggests that cohabitation constrains a couple's options to make other choices, even though they may have chosen cohabitation because they were not full ready to commit in the first place. The irony is that the practical effect of the behavior may be consistent with a thought that no one would actually agree with, consciously: "I'm not ready to commit to you or sure that I really want to, but I like you and want to be near you for now, so I'll merely take some steps that will make it harder to break up with you while I'm figuring all this out."

*The experience of cohabitation may not increase risks per se, but what it does do is increase the likelihood of a risky union continuing because of increasing constraints. That is one of our central hypotheses.*

### *Timing May Be Everything*

The inertia hypothesis leads to the prediction that, among all those who cohabit prior to marriage, those who live together prior to making a clear decision about their future together (i.e., about marriage) will be at greater risk than those who have clearly settled the question of the future before they live together. This is because the former group may increase their odds of marrying for reasons having more to do with constraints than dedication, while the latter group has made a clearer (and freer) decision to marry before increasing constraints by living together. In addition to the implications for relational degrees of freedom, it means something far different for the latter group—something clearer to both, and something apparently unassociated with risks in existing research. Of course, inertia also predicts that those who wait until marriage will be very low risk from, at least, this mechanism, because there is absolute clarity about commitment in marriage prior to the official and behavioral reduction in degrees of freedom.

Historically, the cohabitation literature has not explored in much detail the timing of commitment to marriage vis-à-vis cohabitation. However, Brown has found that only individuals without plans to marry their partners showed lower relationship quality than those who did not cohabit prior to marriage (Brown & Booth, 1996; Brown, 2004b). In terms of commitment theory, it could well be that the key distinguishing factor here is the presence or absence of a clear, long-term view on the relationship. Again, in the schema of our views on safety mentioned earlier, clarity about the future provides a degree of security that benefits relationships in the present. (Of course, causality would run both directions in any such association.)

In a direct test of the timing of commitment to marriage and cohabitation, we found that those who had started cohabiting before their engagement date reported more negative communication, lower satisfaction, and more physical aggression than those who cohabited

either after-engagement or not until marriage (Kline et al., 2004). 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 differences between those who cohabited after engagement and those who waited until marriage to live together on any relationship measures. These differences held up even when controlling for the traditional selection factors examined in this line of research. Selection did not appear to provide any explanatory power of risk when compared to timing of decisions about cohabitation. It should be noted, however, that the data set we used in Kline et al. has an important limitation in examining the cohabitation questions: while it follows couples from prior to marriage to after marriage and years into marriage, more clearly so than prior studies that we are aware of, it does not provide data from couples prior to the decisions they make about cohabitation. There is a clear need for data before, during, and shortly after these important decisions and transitions. We have proposed such a study to NICHD.

### *Relationship Driven vs. Event Driven Changes*

There are findings in other lines of research that suggest similar dynamics to what we propose here to be important for understanding risk related to patterns of couple development. For example, Surra and Hughes (1997) have made an important distinction between those who hold relationship-driven reasons for marriage (e.g., wanting to spend life with person) versus those with event-driven reasons (e.g., pregnancy). While these groups do not differ on amount of love, they differ significantly on relationship quality. Surra, Chandler, Asmussen, and Wareham (1987) found that those couples who were pregnant before being engaged reported more conflict

and more ambivalence about their relationships compared to couples who became pregnant following an engagement or marriage. The consistency with the inertia hypothesis is striking; in commitment theory terms, “relationship-driven” reasons are “dedication-driven” reasons and “event-driven” reasons are “constraint-driven.” While the findings of these studies are consistent with the inertia hypothesis, questions about the relative importance of selection and experience, and their linkages to risk, cannot be adequately addressed without a prospective design with multiple waves of data collected at relatively short intervals, measurement of commitment variables such as constraints, and direct assessment of reasons people have (or do not have) for the decisions they make.

Before moving onto a discussion of reasons and meaning, we want to highlight just one of the many reasons why it may be so important to untangle the relative contributions of various dynamics in the pathways that couples travel. It is the most gender linked part of our thinking and the implications are enormous.

### *Asymmetrical Commitment*

The data in Stanley et al. (2004) showed that what varies about cohabitation and marriage is more than simply commitment to the institution of marriage, but also interpersonal commitment to the partner. Not only were currently married couples different from currently cohabiting couples on the status (structure) of their relationship, they were different on the level of interpersonal commitment (dedication) to their partners, with cohabiters being less committed than marrieds. For premarital cohabitation, the difference in the interpersonal commitment level of the males, but not the females, of the couples who did live together prior to marriage and those who did not was striking. This suggested the probability of a subgroup of couples who cohabited

prior to marriage where the males were *always* less dedicated to their female partners, with this difference continuing on into marriage. As noted earlier, the existence of this asymmetry in the commitment levels of the men was subsequently found in the large, Oklahoma RDD data set as well (Johnson, et al., 2002).

Survey data are not, however, useful for testing if this kind of gender based, unbalanced commitment levels actually did exist prior to marriage. From cross-sectional surveys, we can only know that these differences exist after marriage. Most recently, we have conducted analyses based on the same data set mentioned in the prior section on timing. These direct tests of asymmetry are about to be under review (Kline, Stanley, & Markman, 2005). Again, this data set has limitations: the couples were all on a pathway to marriage (though, the timing of engagement vs. cohabitation varies), they all had presented themselves to a religious organization desiring marriage, and they were participating in a large study of the effects of premarital education. On the other hand, the couples have been followed for many years (as of this report, up to 8 years), they are being assessed on a wide array of rich measures of relationship dynamics, including objective coding of couple communication, and they are assessed yearly. Further, for this depth of measurement, the sample is relatively large (by psychological marital research standards). Additionally, the sample is not overly religious with regard to representativeness, and, we would argue, if anything, the limitations of the sample make the analyses conservative with regard to these tests because of constrained variance. Generalizability to other demographic groups such as those in poverty, however, would be a far more serious limitation, so we clearly cannot speak to the experience of such couples from this sample.

The data set does allow us to directly compare the interpersonal commitment levels of

partners based on cohabitation history, prior to marriage, and, now, well into marriage. Using Hierarchical Linear Regression (HLM), we have been examining the trajectory of dedication levels from prior to marriage to after marriage to years into marriage for the delineation of couples based on premarital cohabitation history (Kline et al., 2005). Based on Kline et al. (2004), our focus here is on the comparison of those who began to cohabit prior to engagement (prior to clear, mutual plans to marry) and those who cohabited only after marriage or after engagement. These analyses are based on a sample of 197 couples, all of whom married. The two groups (before engagement cohabiters, called the *Before* group here, and the after engagement or marriage group, called the *After* group here) differed premaritally only on age and religiosity, with the Befores being an average of 2 years older than the Afters and the Afters being, predictably, more religious. A longer version of the same dedication measure used in Stanley et al. (2004) and Johnson et al. (2002) was used in this sample. HLM was used to examine the groups for intercept and slope differences as we have examined this prediction: That males in the Before group would exhibit lower levels of dedication than their wives, and that the Before males would also exhibit lower levels of dedication than both After males and After females (essentially, lower levels, on average, than all other groups).

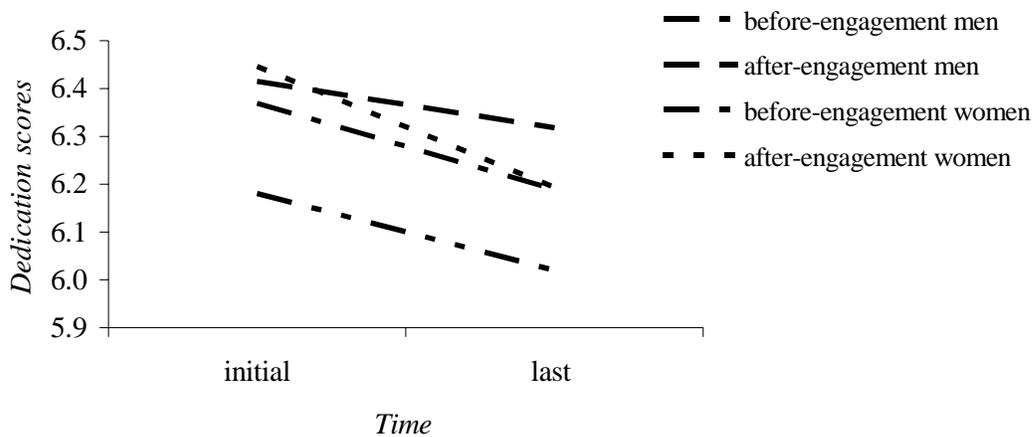
HLM provides the ability to test if there are differences at any point in time (intercept differences) vs. differences in rate of change in values over time (slope differences). HLM essentially takes the repeated measurement of dedication for each individual, forming the line of best fit for that individual, and uses the parameters of those individual lines as the data for inferential tests. In these analyses, individuals are nested within couples and couples are nested within type of relationship with regard to timing.

As can be seen pictorially in Figure 1, the HLM analyses confirm the hypothesis. (More

detail on these analyses is available on request.) The average number of months into marriage for the sample is 46 (*range*, 47 to 83.70 months) as of the last assessment point available for each couple.

Figure 1

**Cross-Level Interaction (Gender X Cohabitation history) for Dedication Scores Over Time**



*Note.* “Initial” refers to scores at T1, “last” refers to the last time point (i.e., T2, T3, T4, T5, T6, or T7) that each couple provided data. The y-axis is scaled to represent approximately one SD in dedication scores.

Most strikingly, these differences are not only significant, consistent with the prediction of gender based asymmetry, they hold up even when controlling for age, religiosity, and marital adjustment levels (using the Locke-Wallace, Marital Adjustment Test: MAT). Finding the difference while controlling for MAT levels is particularly impressive from the standpoint of unique variance (at least to us), given the amount of variance across a range of dimensions that such measures notoriously, and problematically, absorb in analyses (as noted by Fincham & Bradbury, 1987).

The findings displayed in Figure 1 show that the asymmetries in dedication levels do, indeed, begin prior to marriage and continue to well into marriage (up through 6 years later, in many cases). Of course, we are limited here from knowing if the asymmetries existed from the very earliest days of the relationships, but we would predict it so. This is another important reason why we hope to test for such patterns in longitudinal data that follows couples from much earlier in the process.

What is unique to these analyses compared to our prior works is the finding that these differences in commitment levels are differences between partners, not merely differences between the men whose marriages followed different paths in their formation. While we cannot directly test it with these data, we wonder if, at the point of moving in together, the females in these Before relationships tended to hold different meanings about the willingness of the males to move in than was actually held by the males. In other words, are females prone to miscode the meaning of cohabitation when a future, mutual commitment to marriage has not been arrived at between partners?

While clearly speculative, we see no reason from existing data to believe that this asymmetry goes away for most of the couples who experience it. To rephrase the title from what has become the most popular relationship book in America at the time we are writing this, “Maybe he was just not that into you.” Perhaps for too many women in marriage, he’s still not, or at the least, he’s never caught up to balance the commitment between the partners.

We also suspect that this pathway lays a foundation for future problems at times of stress or transition for many couples. For example, we have noticed, clinically, that many couples essentially re-experience or relive a process of differential dedication when deciding such important matters as if and when to have a baby, or where to live related to careers and family.

Another concern that we have about asymmetry of commitment comes from findings we are accumulating that show that a clear desire for a future together is strongly associated with male willingness to sacrifice for their female partners without resentment; yet the long-term orientation to commitment hardly explains any of the sacrifice variance among females (Whitton et al., 2002). We are seeing this pattern in three separate data sets (empirical papers are under review). We suspect that females are relatively more socialized to sacrifice in relationships than males, and therefore, their attitudes about sacrifice vary much less with the degree of their commitment than do males' attitudes about sacrificing. To the degree that cohabitation prior to marriage is associated with asymmetrical dedication levels between males and females, such findings suggest important implications for differential risks for males and females.

We have many questions related to this line of reasoning. Are there a significant numbers of couples where the female were more dedicated than the male all along? Data do not suggest that such a difference generally exists among married couples (Stanley, et al., 2002), only that it may be overrepresented among a subset of couples who cohabited prior to marriage (e.g., Kline et al., 2005; Stanley, et al., 2004). Is this pattern more common among those who drifted into cohabitation, as is increasingly commonplace (e.g., Manning & Smock, 2003; Smock & Manning, 2004)? In how many relationships where cohabitation precedes clarity about marriage did the female cajole the male into cohabitation as a stepping stone to greater commitment, as she understood the process? Is it common in marriages preceded by cohabitation prior to clarity about marriage that one partner was pulled along toward marriage by the other?

I (Stanley) have argued that it may be particularly important for males to make a very clear, overt decision about their commitment to their female partners—and that females are

disadvantaged by their own greater tendency for sacrifice to be unlinked to commitment if an overt, binary step of commitment has not been taken by their male partners (Stanley, 2002). Marriage, or a clearly expressed intention to marry, may function as a switch in identity (both reflecting the change and fostering it) that explains the data that suggest that males, on average (and surely with notable exceptions to the contrary) change in the direction of greater responsibility when they enter marriage (e.g., Nock, 1998; Ahituv & Lerman, 2003). All of this reasoning supports the suggestion that cohabitation, if a test for couples, is a particularly high cost test for women compared to men. This follows because the negative, reverberating consequences of a marriage or cohabitation that ends in dissolution are generally far greater for women, particularly when children have come from the relationship.

### *Sliding or Deciding?*

Much of the information above highlights the need to examine individuals' reasons for the life altering relationship decisions that they make. Such research would be very valuable for elucidating why some paths are more associated with risk in marriage than others. Further, knowing reasons would give insights to the meanings of important relationship "events." One valuable insight already emerging from more qualitative research comes from Manning and Smock's work (e.g., Manning & Smock, 2003). Among other things, they show that the word "event" two sentences ago is really a misnomer for how an increasing number of couples enter into cohabitation. Essentially, Smock and Manning find that there is far less discontinuity in relationship status changes and much more gradual morphing from one relationship status to another, almost before the couples even realize what is happening. Essentially, many couples slide into and through what become life-altering transitions without thinking clearly about what

they are doing. We call this sliding vs. deciding, and we are coming to suspect that it has enormous implications for risk.

While it is arguable and, fortunately, testable, we suspect that sliding will almost always be associated with greater risks than deciding. When people enter constrained paths without thinking clearly about the implications, they may be more vulnerable at points in the future when they are unhappy with their relationship. For example, when times are tough, they may be more likely to think things like “I never really committed to you, anyway,” depriving the couple of potent mechanisms of positive motivation that are based in the need to see one’s current behavior as consistent with past commitments (Kiesler, 1971). An inner press to maintain congruency between prior commitments and one’s current behaviors has undoubtedly benefited many marriages by generating within the individual partners pro-relationship behaviors at critical junctures. Of course, it has also, no doubt, kept some couples together in dangerous and damaging relationships. Nevertheless, it is worth considering that otherwise healthy and reasonably good relationships may sometimes fail as marriages because there never was an ideal clarity about each partner’s commitment to the enterprise. The meaning of the marriage may be less than it is among others who have made clear, intentional, commitments.

### *Reasons Why Couples Live Together*

In our work, especially that of Galena Kline, we are moving into the direct examination of the reasons for cohabitation, assessing individuals closely in time to when these decisions are being made. In the schema that we are pursuing, internal reasons refer to reasons associated with attributes made about one’s partner or relationship (e.g., “I moved in with my partner because I wanted to spend more time with him/her”) while external reasons are associated with attributes

made about the situation (e.g., “My lease was up and I needed a place to live”). Examination of the reasons people give for their relationship transitions will provide a valuable window into the meaning of those change between partners. It will also provide a much more direct test bearing on the validity of the inertia hypothesis.

We hypothesize that when external reasons drive their behavior and choices, couples may not be dedicated enough to make their relationships work as marriages in the long term. In qualitative research, Sassler (2004) found that many cohabiters give financial and convenience reasons for moving in together. Lindsay (2000) conducted focus groups in Australia on reasons for cohabitation and most participants reported few clear reasons, instead reporting “it just happened.” Manning and Smock (2003) have likewise reported that there exists considerable lack of clarity among partners about the status and future plans for their relationship, differences in understanding about the reasons for cohabiting, and a general sense that the path many of these couples are on, sort of “just happened” This lack of clarity about the current nature of the relationship is paralleled in the lack of agreement between adolescent and mother reports of the nature of the adult relationship in cohabiting step-families (Brown & Manning, 2005). Many of these ambiguities are consequences of sliding vs. deciding.

It is reasonable, indeed, compelling, to believe that there are increased difficulties having success in some relationship types because they are incomplete institutions (Cherlin, 1978; Cherlin, 2004; Nock, 1995). Among other things, incomplete institutions lack external, societal meanings and supports that likely strengthen protected factors and mitigate some risks. We suspect that other major risks are incurred by some couples in cohabitation because the very lack of an institutionalized meaning between partners and within their community; such lack of clarity as to meaning about what the relationship is fosters sliding vs. deciding. It seems possible

to us that that the effect of incomplete institutionalization on relationship risk is partially mediated by the dynamic of sliding.

In summary, choosing to cohabit based on external reasons may reflect a lack of a long-term desire to be with one's partner, and it could exacerbate the effects of other risk factors at points in the future when a couple normally needs to call on a reserve of beliefs and motivation framed in how their current commitment came about. Inertia is framed around this very notion, that external reasons become important in why some couples eventually marry. Similarly, cohabiting for the purpose of testing the relationship may reflect important relationship difficulties that may not get resolved during cohabitation and may persist into marriage. We believe that assessing reasons for cohabitation will tell us a lot about the personal meanings partners ascribe to changes in relationship status, and will thereby help shed further light on why some pathways are more strongly associated with risk. Various projects are underway to assess such reasons, and new windows on the meaning of cohabitation and various transitions for individuals and couples should result from this work and the work of Smock and Manning.

#### *Caveats and Limitations of the Foundation of Our Theorizing*

While the study of cohabitation has come a long way, there is very long way yet to go. Further, the target is not static but ever changing. For example, while it used to be unconventional to live together prior to marriage, that pattern has now become conventional, with the true unconventionality, statistically, being those couples who do *not* live together prior to marriage (Smock, 2000). Indeed, at least in one of our data sets, it looks like a key to understanding these new unconventional couples may be the religiosity levels of males (Stanley et al., 2004). Yet, the really interesting variance seems to be occurring among the increasing

numbers of couples to live together outside of marriage, before marriage, or instead of marriage. That is where the diversity of reasons and meanings and processes now lie.

Before closing this paper with some of the hypotheses that have most captivated us in our own program of research, we clearly acknowledge some important caveats beyond those that are more obvious in our speculations here, and among those contained in the hypotheses below. The most important is simply that so much of the understandings we now have in this field, and those we are working on in our group, are based on samples that are less than ideally diverse, not only in terms of race and ethnicity, but especially in terms of income. The overall forces working on couples in poverty may well overwhelm these other, more psychological/relational understandings of what relationship transitions mean. We believe that some of our major hypotheses will hold regardless of income and cultural variation, but we wish to make it obvious that other dynamics may simply not generalize because the playing field is not level.

#### *Hypotheses for Future Research Based on the Line of Ideas Presented Here*

We have many hypotheses about cohabitation. We believe that the testing of these (and many others) will advance the knowledge base. While there are many important but mundane hypotheses we could address here, we wish to take advantage of this less constrained format to list some of our favorite hypotheses, which in some cases, are also our most provocative hypotheses. Most of these hypotheses follow directly from the ideas presented here, though a couple of them are related in ways we have not made as obvious in this discussion as others. But they are all cut from the same cloth. Regardless of the eventual confirmation or disconfirmation of these, adequate tests of these hypotheses would surely, in our view, yield very productive insights about cohabitation.

*Hypothesis One:* Those in higher risk relationships will be more likely, not less, to choose to cohabit prior to marriage (or prior to clarity about commitment to marriage in the future) because of both insecurities about marriage and/or a desire to test their relationships. Consistent with inertia, the degree of constraints will explain the propensity to marry (above and beyond quality of relationship) among those cohabiting prior to a mutual commitment in or to marriage as a couple. Couples who more strongly believe in testing as a reason for their cohabitation will, because of prior risk (which could well be selection effects) and inertia (a phenomenon of experience), evidence poorer outcomes in marriage.

*Hypothesis Two:* Closely related to the prior hypothesis, cohabitations where one or both partners have no other place to live or easily move back to will be associated with greater risk. This lack of other options about where to live is one of the most important types of constraint, one that would strongly favor inertia and continuance regardless of relationship quality or risk.

*Hypothesis Three:* When properly assessed with longitudinal research and solid measurement, inertia will explain a substantial amount of the risks in marriage that are associated with premarital cohabitation. Assessing the reasons for cohabitation will reveal a substantial subset of premarital cohabiters who say they would not have married had they not been cohabiting (or otherwise increased their constraints, such as through having a child). These reasons will be given most often among couples who began to cohabit prior to a clear commitment about marriage and the future formed.

*Hypothesis Four:* For females, the meaning of the changes that occur between non-cohabitation and cohabitation, and cohabitation and marriage, will be better characterized by a continuum; for males, the great point of demarcation in the meaning they have for their relationships will be the line between marriage and not marriage—which may be expressed in terms of actual marriage and not marriage, or a very strong mutual plan for marriage or not (e.g., engagement). This follows from much of what has been suggested here, though the thinking underlying this it is more fully explicated elsewhere (Stanley, 2002).

*Hypothesis Five:* Regardless of income, race, and culture, sliding will be more associated with risk than deciding. While the nature of sliding vs. deciding will vary by culture and by developmental steps and stages within cultures (about such things as cohabitation, marriage, childbearing, etc.), deciding will be associated with lower risks because of the implied mutual clarity about decisions and commitment. Follow through will be fostered by such clarity.

*Hypothesis Six:* (Here, we make the prediction that seems most speculative of all those listed here. Nevertheless, this is our hunch at this time.) Women (and children) will, on average, be at greater risk from sliding scenarios than men because sliding scenarios will more often be associated with asymmetries in interpersonal commitment than deciding scenarios. Further, such asymmetries will put women at significant disadvantage because asymmetry of commitment is going to be associated with power differentials (he who is least committed has the most power, as suggested by making a variant of Waller's principle of least interest).

*Hypothesis Seven:* Simple interventions that foster greater awareness of what relationship

behaviors, particularly cohabitation, mean between partners will substantially lower risks for most couples. Among other things, such improved understandings would reduce the likelihood of cohabitation when there is asymmetrical commitment present.

### *Looking Forward*

As a field, we have come to a most exciting time in the study of cohabitation and risk. The improving opportunities to understand these phenomena could not come soon enough given the pace of societal change and the complex patterns of risk that we all seek to understand better. With improved methods, more powerful statistical procedures, richer measures, and, hopefully, greater awareness of the potential meanings of what we study for ordinary people, this field is entering a most exciting phase. If knowledge can advance sufficiently—and it seems certain to—the new understandings may be put to good uses in helping people reduce their risks. Prevention efforts depend on advances in basic science. Major advances in the basic science of understanding cohabitation will depend on an expansion of how we think about what we study, and also on how well we study what people think about what they do.

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