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Commitment: Functions, Formation, and the Securing of Romantic Attachment

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Abstract

In this theoretical paper, we review central concepts in the psychological literature on relationship commitment to provide a foundation to discuss two themes related to long-term romantic relationships and marriages. First, we describe and discuss the role that commitment plays in stabilizing romantic attachment. Second, we use empirical research on cohabitation to highlight how the formation of commitment can be undermined by what are now common trajectories of couple development. The first topic underscores an increasingly important role for commitment in an age of companionate marriage. The second topic draws attention to dynamics that can affect the strength of romantic commitments, especially in marriage.

Keywords

Commitment; Attachment; Marriage; Interdependence Theory; Cohabitation; Sacrifice

This paper focuses on commitment in romantic relationships, which is generally defined as the *intention* to maintain a relationship over time (Johnson, 1973; Rusbult, 1980; Stanley & Markman, 1992). We will review central concepts in the literature on commitment as a foundation for discussing two topics. The first topic discussed is the role commitment plays in stabilizing romantic attachment. The second is how long-term commitment, such as in marriage, could be undermined by what are now becoming common trajectories of couple development. The first topic underscores the importance of commitment in romantic relationships, and the second emphasizes dynamics in the formation of commitment. In both cases, we draw broadly from diverse literatures that are seldom integrated, with our goal being to advance theory about romantic relationship development and stability.

The Psychological Construct of Commitment

Modern theories of commitment are rooted in interdependence theory (e.g., Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) and social exchange theories (e.g., Cook & Emerson, 1978; Homans, 1958). Interdependence theory posits that the tendency for relationships to develop and persist depends not only on the personal characteristics of the two individuals but on the interdependence that develops between the two partners. The level of interdependence in a relationship is determined by partners' level of satisfaction

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with the relationship and their perceptions of the quality of alternatives to the relationship (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959).

Rusbult (1980) developed an extension of interdependence theory referred to as the investment model, linking interdependence to the development of commitment. This perspective has generated a large literature (see Le & Agnew, 2003). The investment model suggests that dependence on a relationship develops not only based on the level of satisfaction and the quality of alternatives, but also on the investment that an individual has put into the relationship. Investments refer to resources that are attached to the relationship that would be lost or lose value if the relationship were to end; investments may take any number of forms including emotional investments such as self-disclosure (Stanley & Markman, 1992) and structural investments such as money and possessions (Johnson, 1973). Most relevant to the present discussion, the investment model proposes that increasing interdependence leads to *relationship commitment*, defined by Rusbult (1980) as a desire to persist in the relationship and maintain emotional attachment. Numerous studies support the investment model, demonstrating that relationship commitment grows as satisfaction and investments increase while perceived quality of alternatives decreases (e.g., Rusbult & Buunk, 1993).

The interdependence framework also addresses how two individuals come to develop an identity as a couple. Kelley and Thibaut (1978) theorized that those in developing and continuing relationships begin to take into account long-term goals for *the relationship* as an entity additional to the needs and desires of the two individuals. They called the process of moving from acting based on self-interest to acting based on preferences for joint outcomes the *transformation of motivation*. Similarly, Levinger (1979) noted that "… as interpersonal involvement deepens, one's partner's satisfactions and dissatisfactions become more and more identified with one's own' (p. 175). In economic and exchange theory terms, this transformation produces an exchange market (between partners) that is noncompetitive, where the goal is to maximize joint outcomes (Cook & Emerson, 1978). Although one partner should not lose his or her identity in the other, couples develop a degree of “we-ness” (Agnew, Van Lange, Rusbult, & Langston, 1998) or “couple identity” (Stanley & Markman, 1992). Combining the intention to be together, to have a future, and to share an identity as a couple, the state of being committed can be thought of most simply as having a sense of *us with a future*.

Commitment Dynamics: Dedication and Constraint

Commitment theorists Rusbult, Johnson, Levinger, Stanley, and their respective colleagues have put forth several specific models of commitment, each highlighting different components of commitment, or commitment dynamics. Although different theorists prefer different terms for specific components, one model of commitment can be easily translated to another. A construct viewed as a component of commitment in one analysis may be viewed as a correlate or outcome of commitment in another, depending on the research question (Stanley & Markman, 1992). While this overlap may lead to confusion between the construct itself and the factors that affect it, we believe that the differences between particular commitment theories are not critical, as there is notable consistency across theories and empirical findings.

From this point forward, we will focus on the model of commitment presented by Stanley and Markman (1992), which highlights two key dynamics involved in commitment: dedication and constraint. The model’s simplicity facilitates the discussion ahead. The model was strongly influenced by both the works of psychologists already mentioned (Thibaut, Kelley, Levinger, and Rusbult) and by sociologist Michael Johnson, whose model of commitment described three aspects of commitment (see Johnson, Caughlin, & Huston,

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1999): personal, moral, and structural. Personal commitment is the desire to be with the partner in the future. Moral commitment comprises values and beliefs that promote persistence. Structural commitment addresses the ways in which elements such as the quality of alternatives, the amount of investment in the relationship, and the difficulty of steps needed to end a relationship affect the likelihood of remaining in a relationship regardless of its quality.

Stanley and Markman (1992) focused broadly on the psychological aspects of the “want to” and the “have to” in commitment: dedication and constraint, respectively. Johnson’s personal commitment is best represented by dedication in this model, and his structural and moral commitment by constraint. Stanley and Markman’s two component model also is consistent with Levinger’s (1965) discussion of cohesion theory, in which he focused on attraction forces and barrier forces. Stanley and Markman (1992) describe a model reflecting this basic push-and-pull of commitment as most people experience it in romantic relationships, especially marriage. Quoting from their work (p. 595):

> Personal dedication refers to the desire of an individual to maintain or improve the quality of his or her relationship for the joint benefit of the participants. It is evidenced by a desire (and associated behaviors) not only to continue in the relationship, but also to improve it, to sacrifice for it, to invest in it, to link personal goals to it, and to seek the partner's welfare, not simply one's own. In contrast, constraint commitment refers to forces that constrain individuals to maintain relationships regardless of their personal dedication to them. Constraints may arise from either external or internal pressures, and they favor relationship stability by making termination of a relationship more economically, socially, personally, or psychologically costly.

Constraint commitment can be subdivided into variables that represent structural commitment (such as economic investment or shared possessions), quality of alternatives, social pressure to remain together, and variables reflective of moral commitment, such as thinking divorce is wrong or believing that you must finish what you start (Johnson et al., 1999; Stanley & Markman, 1992). Constraints explain why low quality relationships continue; when satisfaction is low but constraints are high, it may be too costly to leave the relationship. However, it is important to note that constraints are generally not considered negative by individuals until or unless satisfaction declines to the point where the desire to leave exists. Happy couples tend to perceive constraints such as shared property, friends, and children as sources of joy and evidence of investment. It is only when dissatisfaction sets in that constraints may become more salient and generate feelings of being stuck in a relationship. Although it would be hard to prove, it seems likely that few relationships are continually satisfying enough to persist without at least a few constraints that help put the brakes on impulsive, destabilizing behaviors during temporary periods of unhappiness (Stanley, Lobitz, & Markman, 1999). At times of transitory dissatisfaction, constraints may serve to reinforce the development, maintenance, or re-development of dedication. Further, since constraints are generally produced by past dedication, they have some potential to remind the individual of that dedication. While there are limits to the strength of such a mechanism, there is evidence that preferences can cohere to choices already made (e.g., Simon, Krawczyk, & Holyoak, 2004). Therefore, constraints should have some ability to produce or enhance or reinvigorate dedication. Of course, constraints are destructive when they serve to keep people in damaging relationships.

In all models of commitment, alternatives play an important role. Commitment can be conceptualized as making a choice to give up other choices (Stanley, 2005). In choosing one option over others, commitment can be seen as an act of choosing to be increasingly constrained because of the desire to persist, exclusively, on the chosen path. While the

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quality and availability of alternatives is a factor in the overall level of constraint, the monitoring of alternatives is more closely associated with dedication. Those who are more dedicated to their partners report less monitoring of alternatives (Stanley & Markman, 1992; Stanley, Markman, & Whitton, 2002) and they actively derogate attractive alternatives (Johnson & Rusbult, 1989).

From this point forward, when we use the term “commitment” without further specification, the reference will be predominantly to dedication. When we mean to denote constraint commitment, we will always use the word “constraint.”

The Influence of Commitment on Relationship Behaviors and Outcomes

A central feature of commitment is the intention to be together in the future—to have a long-term time horizon for a relationship. Being committed to a relationship for the long-term has a powerful influence on individuals’ relationship behaviors, promoting actions that serve the best interest of the couple rather than the short-term interest of the self. One of the important benefits of having a long-term view in relationships like marriage is that the relationship is evaluated based on an extended period of time rather than only on the basis of what happens in the here-and-now (Stanley, 2005; Stanley et al., 1999). Because few relationships are continuously satisfying, a here-and-now focus would put great pressure on the current exchange of positives and negatives as the basis for evaluating the relationship. When confident that a relationship will persist into the future, an individual is more likely to behave in ways that do not always benefit the self immediately but will enhance the long-term quality of the relationship.

A large body of research supports links between higher commitment and pro-relationship responses to dissatisfaction (Rusbult, Zembrodt, & Gunn, 1982), the devaluation of attractive alternatives (Johnson & Rusbult, 1989), and constructive responses to negative partner behaviors (Rusbult & Verette, 1991)—supporting the expected linkages not only with better relationship quality but also to increased relationship stability (Impett, Beals, & Peplau, 2001). Although there are numerous pro-relationship behaviors that tend to occur in the presence of strong commitment, we will now focus on one, relationship sacrifice, which demonstrates important commitment dynamics particularly well.

The tendency of individuals to sacrifice, or forego immediate self-interest for the good of the partner or relationship, is strongly dependent on the presence of commitment. Not only does commitment predict the number of sacrifices performed for partners (Van Lange et al., 1997), it also is associated with both the degree to which individuals feel satisfied with sacrificing for their partner’s benefit (Stanley & Markman, 1992) and their willingness to sacrifice (Van Lange et al., 1997; Wieselquist et al., 1999). Whitton, Stanley, and Markman (2007) showed that commitment to the relationship’s future is strongly related to whether or not day-to-day relationship sacrifices are perceived as harmful to the self—especially for men. Commitment to the future may transform the understanding of daily exchanges between partners that could otherwise be seen as winner-loser, zero-sum scenarios because there is no trust in future exchanges that can provide reciprocal or mutual benefits. Wieselquist and colleagues (1999) demonstrated that sacrifice serves to increase trust between partners, which fosters growth in commitment and reciprocation of more sacrifice (cf. Molm, 2006). Stanley, Whitton, Low, Clements, and Markman (2006) showed that satisfaction with sacrifice in early marriage is associated with global relationship quality in the long-term; in fact, satisfaction with sacrifice was a better predictor of future marital adjustment than early marital adjustment.

Of course not all relationship sacrifices are created equal. Sacrifices that are perceived by the giver as harmful to the self are linked with elevated depressive symptomatology and poorer relationship quality (Whitton et al., 2007). Similarly, sacrifices that are motivated by efforts to avoid conflict or guilt are associated with lower emotional well-being and poorer relationship quality (Impett, Gable, & Peplau, 2005). Based in part on evidence that higher commitment is associated with perceiving sacrifices to be *less* harmful to self-interest (Whitton et al., 2007), we believe that the presence of commitment is a crucial factor in not only determining whether an individual will work to strengthen their relationship by sacrificing, but also in how those sacrifices are perceived (e.g., as helpful rather than harmful to self-interest).

Taken as a whole, such findings about the nature of sacrifice in romantic relationships provide further evidence of the transformation of motivation that is part of Thibaut and Kelley's (1978) formulation of relationship development. In fact, sacrifice may be potent because it provides information about the presence or absence of that transformation, functioning as a strong behavioral signal of commitment and security between partners (Wieselquist et al., 1999). The potency of sacrifice may be rooted in the salience of negatives, which are believed to be particularly impactful in marriage (Markman & Floyd, 1980). We suspect that sacrifice may function as a salient but positive signal that counters the salience of negative behavior in relationships; the salience is rooted in the way that acts not based in self-interest are more likely to stand out from the day-to-day stream of exchanged behaviors to which partners become habituated. For this and likely numerous other reasons, sacrifice is therefore an important part of the maintenance of high quality, long-term romantic relationships.

With this background of theory and research on commitment, we turn to our two major theoretical goals in this paper. First, we consider how commitment functions to secure romantic attachment by shifting relationships from uncertainty to stability. Second, we make an argument that the process through which a commitment forms matters for how well it can secure attachment. Further, we argue that certain patterns of relationship development that have become increasingly common in recent decades may undermine the formation of commitment.

Securing Romantic Attachment: A Central Function of Commitment

We begin this section by establishing that there are two ways to conceptualize attachment, differentiating “romantic attachment” from “attachment security.” We will go on to discuss the role we believe that commitment plays in securing attachments between romantic partners during relationship development. Finally, in this section, we will briefly discuss some of the ways that the three constructs of commitment, romantic attachment, and attachment security intersect in the development and functioning of romantic unions.

In most of the literature in psychology, the concept of attachment refers to a theory of emotional security based primarily on experiences infants have with caregivers (Bowlby, 1969). At the core, the constellation of ideas under the heading of attachment theory suggests humans are “born equipped to form attachment relationships” (see (Hazan reference goes here), this issue). Further, childhood experiences as well as continuing relationship experiences into adulthood create relational tendencies within individuals, guided by internal working models, that become expressed in different enduring attachment styles (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Working models are based on the accumulated beliefs about the likelihood of others being available and responsive to one’s needs for support and security in the face of distress. While a variety of terms are used, there are three attachment styles commonly discussed in the literature on attachment security: secure, anxious, and avoidant. Securely attached individuals view other people as reliably available and responsive to meet their needs. In contrast, both of the latter groups are characterized by insecurity about the whether important others will be there when needed; the anxiously attached person copes by trying too hard to secure love while the avoidant person copes by resisting intimacy and dependence.

In a paper that became a watershed in the field of adult attachment theory, Hazan and Shaver (1987) showed how attachment dynamics beginning in childhood have important implications for adult relationships. The specific application of notions regarding attachment styles to adolescent and adult romantic relationships has generated a vast literature (see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; Zeifman & Hazan, 2008). In general, this body of work focuses on how internal working models and attachment styles that developed in childhood are manifested in adult romantic relationships. Longitudinal research has demonstrated that people who experienced a secure attachment to their primary, childhood caregiver tend to display similarly secure attachment styles toward romantic partners in early adulthood (e.g., Roisman, Collins, Sroufe, & Egeland, 2005), although the effect sizes are generally quite small since cumulative experiences with peers and environmental contexts can modify adult working models and attachment security (see Davila & Cobb, 2004).

Within the literature on attachment security, Zeifman and Hazan (2008) argued that adult, romantic relationships can develop into “full-blown” attachments. They defined full-blown attachment relationships as those that exhibit the same defining characteristics Bowlby (1969) outlined for parent-infant attachment relationships: (1) proximity maintenance, (2) separation distress, (3) safe haven, and (4) secure base. Zeifman and Hazan suggested that it takes two years for a full-blown attachment relationship to develop between romantic partners. However, short of full-blown attachments, attachment styles impact individual’s behavior in relationships that do not yet, or may never, qualify as full-blown attachments. Indeed, it is well established that internal working models and attachment styles play a central role in both peer and romantic relationships as adolescents move toward adulthood (Collins & Sroufe, 1999; Furman & Collins, in press). Further, Mikulincer and Shaver (2007) suggested that even flirtation activates dynamics related to enduring attachment dynamics around security.

There is another concept of “attachment” that is used by both social scientists and lay-people that does not invoke the conceptual schema of attachment theory. Attachment in this sense can describe a strong romantic and emotional connection between two adults without reference to their histories of felt security with parents, peers, and others. If someone remarks, “Mary is strongly attached to Bill,” it does not speak to Mary’s attachment style in relation to her childhood history but to the depth of her romantic connection with Bill. Attachment in this common use of the word describes a deep, romantic emotional bond; we will use the term “romantic attachment” for this construct. While we could use a different word than “attachment” to avoid confusion, other words seem inadequate, as deep emotional attachments in romantic relationships seem poorly and inaccurately captured by terms such as “connection” or “attraction.” We also note that the way we view this concept of romantic attachment is different from the concept of “pair-bond” that is commonly used in the attachment theory literature. As Zeifman and Hazan (2008) state, pair-bonds “involve the integration of three social-behavioral systems: sexual mating, caregiving (parenting), and attachment" (p. 442).

Other researchers use the word “attachment” in ways more consistent with what we are calling romantic attachment than attachment theory conceptualizations of attachment security. For example, Helen Fisher (2005) suggests that there are three related but different brain systems for courtship, mating, and parenting: “lust,” “romantic love,” and “male/female attachment.” Clearly, in the latter term, she is referring to something more akin to romantic attachment than to attachment security or enduring styles from childhood.

With terms defined, we will now focus on the role of commitment in securing romantic attachment. As romantic relationships develop, they are not necessarily stable or certain. That is, in early stages of dating, individuals are typically *not* certain that the relationship will persist into the future or that their new partner will be reliably available to them when needed. Nor should individuals be certain of such things since, before becoming committed in long-term relationships, people are searching for a good fit with a partner (Glenn, 2002). Prior to finding a good fit, commitment would interfere with this search. As relationships that have the potential to become significant and long-term continue over time, romantic attachment grows. In tandem, we believe that a particular type of anxiety commonly develops in which the individual begins to fear the loss of the partner as a love object. The potential pain of the loss becomes greater as satisfaction and relational benefits grow. Accordingly, anxiety grows as well. We believe that one of the fundamental roles of commitment is to secure the romantic attachment between partners, thereby reducing this type of anxiety. While there are many other functions of commitment—such as those that promote family stability for children—we propose that one of the key functions of commitment throughout history has been to secure romantic attachment. We believe that this function has become increasingly important in this age of “companionate marriage” where love is desired as the primary foundation for marriage (Coontz, 2006).

This link between commitment, romantic attachment, and anxiety was suggested earlier by Stanley and colleagues (1999):

> We believe that commitment develops in the first place in response to anxiety about losing the partner that one has become so attached to during the dating process. Commitment reassures two attached partners that each will be there for the other into the future … (p. 388).

This type of loss anxiety will arise when the strength of the romantic attachment exceeds the level of commitment between two partners. Our assertion is that this anxiety is a common characteristic in romantic relationship development, particularly in the earlier stages of what turn into long-term, committed relationships. (This anxiety can return for people who retain a romantic attachment to a partner who is straying or otherwise threatening the commitment in the relationship, because the level of commitment drops back below the level of romantic attachment for at least one of the partners.) This anxiety does not refer to insecurity in attachment based in childhood history and prior relationships. In fact, we believe it universally arises as romantic relationships progress, even among those with secure attachment styles. However, as we shall discuss, this normal anxiety about loss of a romantic attachment would be experienced most acutely by someone with a background of insecure attachment.

There is empirical evidence supporting this function of commitment in the early stages of relationship development. Eastwick and Finkel (2008) posited that anxiety about loss of a romantic partner is typical in “fledgling” romantic unions, and represents a normative, state-like phenomenon within the individual that is specific to a romantic relationship. They distinguish between this phenomenon and attachment styles which have trait-like characteristics, parallel to our distinction between “romantic attachment” and “attachment security.” Eastwick and Finkel demonstrated that state-like, relationship specific anxiety not only exists in fledgling romantic relationships, but that it leads to the types of behaviors discussed in the attachment theory literature as responses to anxiety and distress, such as proximity seeking in order to increase the sense of security about the relationship.

Eastwick and Finkel (2008) found that the state-like anxiety in a fledgling relationship is reduced once partners clarify that a “relationship” exists. While they did not link clarity about the existence of a relationship to the construct of commitment, what they described

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reflects the emergence of initial levels of commitment as described in various theories of interdependence and commitment. The emerging awareness that a relationship exists is consistent with the transformation of two individuals toward a shared couple identity (Levinger, 1965; Stanley & Markman, 1992). Eastwick and Finkel showed how the emergence of this early form of couple identity reduces anxiety about loss, well before there is either a fully developed commitment or a full-blown attachment relationship. This emergence of commitment stabilizes the relationship and enhances the sense of emotional security within the individuals.

If commitment develops partly to secure romantic attachments, which aspects of the broader construct of commitment serve this purpose? Going back to the simple distinction between dedication and constraint, dedication should be most directly related to providing a sense of security. Constraint can foster a sense of permanence, which can contribute to overall security, but dedication will be reflected in behaviors that are more readily seen as under personal control, and, thereby, informative about commitment in ways that fosters trust and security between partners. Such behaviors could include all of those we considered in the prior section: derogating alternatives, making the relationship a priority, acting consistently with having a couple identity, and demonstrating a desire to be with the partner in the future. Sacrificial behavior may play a particularly potent role in reducing anxiety about loss in romantic attachments by how it signals commitment to the future (Stanley, Whitton et al., 2006; Wieselquist et al., 1999). In short, all behaviors consistent with the construct of dedication have the potential benefit of reducing anxiety about the loss of the partner because the behavioral evidence of dedication is diagnostic of intention and desire. Consistent with this view, David Buss (2003) highlights the importance of acts of love in conveying information about commitment (p. 43). He suggests that it was historically most important for females to discern the commitment levels of males because of the comparative advantages to a woman of securing a male's devotion of resources given the personal costs of pregnancy and childbirth (p. 41–43).

When a relationship is developing and progressing, the growth in commitment is bidirectional; each partner draws an increasing sense of stability and emotional security from evidence of the other partner's growing dedication. It is the expression of dedication by Bill that reassures Mary about the security of the romantic attachment, and vice versa. While Mary could be reassured in some degree by her own level of commitment, or even project her own commitment onto Bill, the unambiguous evidence of Bill's commitment—demonstrated by his behavioral expressions of dedication—should do the most to build security in Mary. In turn, she is likely to feel and behave in ways that express her growing commitment, thereby increasing Bill's felt security. In contrast, a lack of evidence of a reciprocal commitment from the partner may serve to help the more committed partner to recognize the danger of a power imbalance. Consistent with the principle of least interest (Waller, 1938), the one who is least committed has the most power, with imbalances leading to various problems in relationship dynamics (e.g., Sprecher, Schmeeckle, & Felmlee, 2006). Some reasonable balance in actual commitment levels, as well as mutual clarity of signaling commitment, is important so that both partners are reassured that they are not being taken advantage of in the developing relationship. (Related to this and theories touching on commitment, one of the most important uses of exchange theory in the field of sociology has been to explicate such power dynamics and implications for imbalances based in differential quality of alternatives [e.g., Cook, Cheshire, & Gerbasi, 2006].)

Is there a conceptual difference between romantic attachment and commitment? This is a particularly important question when commitment is framed as dedication. More specifically, is it really the dedication of one partner that reassures the other or, more simply, mere evidence of a mutual romantic attachment? Such questions can easily become mired in

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tautology without careful definition of the constructs. One of the important differences between commitment and romantic attachment lies in the fact that intention is central in understanding commitment while romantic attachment only implies depth of emotional connection. Broadly, commitment (dedication and constraint) highlight an intention to persist in the relationship. Commitment in the form of dedication refines the focus, reflecting that the intended persistence is also what is desired. In contrast, a romantic, emotional attachment may not mean than an individual intends to pursue a future with the partner or is ready to signal that such an intention is growing. We would predict, were it possible to test, that the linkage between romantic attachment and dedication has weakened over the past few decades as romantic and sexual connections fueled emotional attachments without necessarily leading to the development and clarification of commitment. In other words, we believe that romantic attachment is currently a necessary but not sufficient condition for the development of a mutual intention to have a future.

It is important to keep in mind that the romantic attachment of one partner does not mean that the other partner has, or will develop, the intention to have a future. We can sharpen the contrast further by expressing a hypothesis about all three constructs considered in this section: people with anxious attachment styles should feel especially anxious as romantic attachment deepens unless and until mutual intentions for the relationship (i.e., commitment) become clear between partners. In other words, we posit that a growing, mutual commitment helps alleviate anxiety over loss for most people, and that this normative process becomes all the more crucial for those who have a prior disposition to be anxious about security in important relationships.

The distinction between romantic attachment and commitment becomes stronger still when we shift to interpersonal behavior that is linked to culturally determined emblems of commitment. For expressions of commitment to create security about romantic attachment, they must have two characteristics: mutuality and clarity at the couple level. Commitment cannot secure romantic attachment unless it both exists in each partner and is signaled between partners. As noted earlier, a strong commitment level of one partner but not the other may merely highlight the unpleasant circumstance of asymmetrical commitment and power. Our discussion thus far has focused on signals between partners based on behavioral representations of dedication. Another level of dyadic signaling is based in cultural emblems of commitment, such as reflected in the cultural practice of engagement to be married. Engagement is a culturally understood relationship form that is emblematic of a high degree of both mutuality and clarity between two partners regarding commitment to the future.

The widespread use of cultural emblems of commitment may be diminishing in industrialized nations (a theme discussed in Stanley, 2002). This should have consequences because of the potency of such emblems for securing romantic attachment; they move beyond what one person does to what both partners are willing to signal to the world. The commitment level of one partner can be miscoded by the other, but it would be much harder for either partner to miscode a public, cultural emblem such as engagement. Therefore, where cultural emblems of commitment diminish (e.g., “going steady” has mostly gone away), we predict there should be an increase in the situations where one partner misinterprets the commitment level of the other.

Marriage is a culturally imbued, societally sanctioned emblem with high signal value with regard to commitment. Sociologists Nock, Sanchez, and Wright (2008) wrote:

> Marriage, and a willingness to marry, signal commitment and exclusivity, acceptance of normative guidelines for good interpersonal behavior, and credibility as a dependable, mature citizen to the partner, employers, and the government. The

> marriage commitment contains both interpersonal and community messages (p. 79).

Nock and colleagues (2008) emphasized how marriage functioned, historically, to support couples' unions because of the meaning embedded in the religious, ritualistic, and cultural aspects of the institution. They drew attention to the signal value of marriage based on the writings of economist Robert Rowthorn (2002) who explained that, while marriage remains a signal of commitment, the signal value has diminished because of high rates of divorce. In fact, societal views of marriage as a lifelong commitment have decreased to where some people are choosing alternate types of marriage, such as "covenant marriage" offered in Louisiana. Covenant marriage differs from traditional marriage in that both partners have to agree to higher entry and exit costs. Nock and colleagues suggested some couples choose covenant marriage precisely because it offers a stronger signal of commitment than standard marriage.

Following from the ideas presented here, and the existing body of research on how attachment styles affect adult relationships in general (see Feeney, Noller, & Roberts, 2000; Zeifman & Hazan, 2008), we have several predictions about how enduring attachment styles may influence the development and securing of adult romantic relationships. Individuals who have an anxious attachment style will have a particularly strong need for security in romantic attachments and will therefore benefit most from clear and well formed commitment. However, in their insecurity, those with anxious attachment styles may also experience angst about pressing for greater commitment, or commitment clarity, out of fear that they will push a prospective long-term partner away. Hence, some people with anxious attachment styles may desire and need security based in strong expressions of commitment even while accepting a high degree of ambiguity about the status of romantic relationships (see discussion in Stanley, Rhoades, & Fincham, in press). In such cases, ambiguity is motivated, being preferable to loss. Consistent with our prior point about the diminishment in the use of cultural emblems of commitment, we believe that ambiguity in romantic relationships is on the rise.

In contrast to anxiously attached individuals, those who have avoidant attachment styles will resist increasing the level of commitment because of their desire to limit closeness and obligation. Their individual needs for avoidance will inhibit felt anxiety about romantic attachment as well as the development of commitment on the dyadic level. When these two different, insecure attachment styles are combined in one relationship, it is easy to see how the dyadic commitment processes that may provide security for one of the partners could increase anxiety for the other. Clear and mutually expressed commitment should lower anxiety about loss in romantic attachment for those with anxious attachment styles. On the other hand, the matter should be quite complicated for those with avoidant attachment styles because they may simultaneously benefit from security and stability in romantic attachment but have difficulties with the dependence that such a need betrays.

Insecure attachment styles can lead to marriages that are stable but based on insecurity more than satisfaction (Davila & Bradbury, 2001). Overall, attachment insecurities both contribute to relationship problems (Simpson, 1990) and complicate the development of commitment (see Birnie, McClure, Lydon, & Holmberg, 2009). Can commitment buffer against problems related to insecure attachment styles? Emerging evidence suggests it can. Tran and Simpson (2009) conducted a study in which they used observational methods to examine the emotional and behavioral reactions of married partners to threatening interpersonal situations (discussions where one partner discusses a characteristic of the other partner that he or she would like to see changed). Drawing upon evidence that anxious attachment hinders constructive reactions to negative relationship events, they evaluated the hypothesis that higher levels of commitment would buffer negative behaviors exhibited by people who were anxiously attached. Using a measure of commitment consistent with dedication, Tran and Simpson found that higher levels of partners' commitment were associated with more constructive responses by anxiously attached individuals. This is the first published study we are aware of that directly shows how commitment and attachment styles interact in marital behavior in ways entirely consistent with the ideas we present here.

In this section, we have argued that commitment plays a fundamental role in securing romantic attachments. Next, we discuss how patterns of relationship formation that are becoming increasingly common in western societies may affect the process of commitment formation in ways that may interfere with (or undermine) the development of security.

Commitment Formation: Insights from Research on Cohabitation

Our goal in this section is to use findings from research on premarital cohabitation to show how common patterns of relationship development before marriage may undermine the development of commitment, thereby undermining secure romantic attachments and marriages. We will use research on cohabitation to develop our points. Cohabitation is a heterogeneous relationship state (Thornton, Axinn, & Xie, 2007). It can be a step toward the possibility of marriage, a move of convenience, a form of dating, an arrangement of economic convenience, or an alternative to marriage. The theoretical points we make here can apply to many forms of cohabitation, as well as a wide range of relationship transitions, but we focus on cohabitation that leads to marriage with particular attention to the implications of relationship transition dynamics for the formation of commitment. What follows highlights our belief that the study of relationship transitions may yield considerable and additional insights about romantic relationships beyond what can be obtained by studying differences in relationship statuses (in support of this point, see also Casper & Bianchi, 2001; Thornton et al., 2007).

Sequencing Dedication and Constraint

Most couples who marry in the U. S. will cohabit prior to marriage (Bumpass & Lu, 2000). Premarital cohabitation has become normative (Smock, 2000), yet it has been associated with poorer communication, lower relationship satisfaction, higher levels of domestic violence, and divorce (e.g., Cohan & Kleinbaum, 2002; Kamp Dush, Cohan, & Amato, 2003; Kline et al., 2004; Stanley, Whitton, & Markman, 2004; for a review, see Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2006). Much research has examined whether selection factors can explain the increased risk for marital difficulties among those who cohabited first (see Smock, 2000). Commonly considered selection factors are variables such as religious beliefs, attitudes about marriage and divorce, and other sociodemographic variables that are associated with both the likelihood of cohabiting prior to marriage and difficulties in marriage. Plenty of evidence exists that selection variables explain some or all of the premarital cohabitation risk (e.g., Brown, Sanchez, Nock, & Wright, 2006). Nevertheless, numerous studies have controlled for selection variables (often many, simultaneously), finding that it does not completely explain the risk associated with cohabiting prior to marriage (e.g., Kamp Dush, Cohan, & Amato, 2003; Stafford, Kline, & Rankin, 2004) or cohabiting prior to engagement (Kline et al., 2004; Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2009a; Stanley, Rhoades, Amato, Markman, & Johnson, in press). Our research team (the authors along with Howard Markman) has focused on examining commitment in attempting to further understand premarital cohabitation. This work has led us to a series of ideas about how common patterns of relationship development may weaken commitment intentions and follow-through.

Stanley and colleagues (2004) assessed dedication commitment in a random national (U.S.) sample to compare married respondents who did or did not cohabit premaritally. We found that married men who lived with their wives prior to marriage reported significantly less dedication to their wives than those who did not cohabit before marriage. This finding led to speculation that the well-replicated risks associated with premarital cohabitation may, in part, be due to a subset of couples in which the men were always less committed to their partners but were nevertheless propelled by the greater constraints of cohabitation into marriage. We call this phenomenon inertia, which is the property in physics representing the amount of energy it would take to move an object from its present trajectory or position to another. We suggest that living together, especially when sharing a single address, makes it relatively more difficult than dating without cohabiting for a couple to veer from a path toward a future together, even into marriage (see Stanley, Rhoades et al., 2006).Glenn (2002) referred to a similar risk to mate selection, called premature entanglement, which interferes with the search for a good fit between partners.

Inertia implies that there is a subset of those who cohabited before marriage who would not have married had they not been living together. The idea is not that cohabitation increases risk but that cohabitation prior to clear and mutual commitment to the future makes higher risk relationships more likely to continue. In terms of commitment as we have discussed it, this risk model suggests that many couples increase their constraints prior to clarifying dedication. The inertia perspective also suggests that those couples who are fully committed to a future together *before* cohabitation—by being engaged or having mutual plans to marry—will have less average risk of marrying, or remaining with, someone partly because of constraints. Therefore, the risks of premarital cohabitation should be concentrated among those who cohabited before having mutual plans for marriage. Numerous studies support this prediction; the risks associated with premarital cohabitation are clearest for those who began to cohabit prior to being engaged or having mutual, clear intentions to marry (Kline et al., 2004; Goodwin, Mosher, & Chandra, 2010; Rhoades, et al., 2009a; Stanley, Rhoades, Amato, et al., in press).

This emphasis on the transition into cohabitation raises questions about how cohabitation typically begins. In their qualitative research, Manning and Smock (2005) found that more than one half of cohabiting couples reported drifting or sliding into cohabitation rather than having any discussion about the transition (cf. Macklin, 1972). Hence, many couples slide into cohabiting rather than actively talking and deciding about what they are doing. Deliberating about any major relationship step could lower the risk of the transitions being event-driven— such as moving in together mostly because one’s lease was up—compared to being more relationship-driven (cf. Surra & Hughes, 1997). That cohabitation often begins without deliberation is consistent with the notion that cohabitation is, in general, ambiguous with regard to commitment (Lindsay, 2000); it is an incomplete institution that does not contain the same signal value of other relationship conditions such as marriage, engagement, or having mutual plans to marry (Nock, 1995). A large percentage of couples who marry begin cohabiting prior to reducing ambiguity by developing clarity around commitment intentions—e.g., before either being engaged or having mutual plans to marry (Rhoades et al., 2009a). Further, the process often happens rapidly (Sassler, 2004). Hence, the lack of clarity of intentions around the time couples transition into cohabitation can add to future risk for some couples because constraints increased prior to the full development of dedication (Stanley, Rhoades et al., 2006).

Additionally, we see no reason why this risk model would not apply to a diverse range of couples. For example, some racial minorities, as well as people with lower levels of education or income, are more likely to cohabit instead of, or prior to, marriage in the U. S. (Smock & Manning, 2004). They are also at greater risk for relationship dissolution (Lichter & Qian, 2008). However, the fact that these demographic groups are at greater average levels of risk does not mean that the mechanisms of risk we propose here are moderated by

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these sociodemographic variables. We predict that greater clarity between partners about commitment and/or the meaning of a transition into cohabitation—prior to the transition occurring—will have protective benefits for most couples. This is why we expect it to remain generally true that couples who cohabit after having mutual plans to marry, or after marriage, will be at somewhat lower risk in marriage than other couples.

Linking this discussion with the previous one, we believe that romantic attachments drive much of the entry into cohabitation; e.g., the most frequent answer chosen for why people began to cohabit is to spend more time with their partner (Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2009b). If transitions into cohabitation did not increase constraints, it is possible that none of this would matter. Constraints, by definition, limit options, which makes the sequencing of dedication and constraint important. Well-formed commitments also limit options in that they involve choosing to constrain oneself to a specific path. The crucial difference between such a process of well-formed commitment and how cohabitation often comes about is that, in the former, the constraints are *chosen* rather than merely experienced as a result of one's behavior.

The Formation of Intention: Sliding versus Deciding

The points we have been making are not unique to cohabitation. People slide into having sex. People slide into having children. People slide into dangerous relationships. In contrast to sliding, there are strong conceptual reasons to suggest that clear decisions generally build the most resilient intentions. Sliding transitions may undermine the formation of dedication in relationships, even in those that continue. In these various cases of sliding, a person can experience a reduction in future options—such as health complications or single parenthood — without having formed a clear intention or commitment related to the transition responsible for diminishing the future options.

As already noted, the process of making a commitment entails making a decision to choose one alternative over others. The fields of social psychology and behavioral economics provide a vast amount of evidence that follow-through is affected by the strength of the decisions at the base of the intentions. We highlight the literature on cognitive dissonance as one example in support of this point (Festinger, 1957). In the cognitive dissonance framework, the more a person considers or wrestles with a choice between two options, the greater the strength of dissonance mechanisms that support follow-through consistent with the choice (Brehm, 2007). For example, E. Harmon-Jones and C. Harmon-Jones (2002) draw attention to how dissonance produces action tendencies in support of commitments one has made. Here is a simple example. Suppose one is considering buying a car and focuses on two options: a Ford Taurus and a Honda Accord. Suppose there is much to like about both models and the decision is difficult. Suppose the decision is for the Taurus. According to dissonance theory, awareness that the other option still exists, even after a choice of the Taurus has been made, creates internal dissonance because thinking about the alternative is not consistent with the commitment already made. What dissonance does is help a person create more mental distance between the attractiveness of the two alternatives, providing a strong, internal bias in favor of focusing on positive information about the Taurus and negative information about the Accord (see Harmon-Jones & Harmon-Jones, 2002). The implication here is that sliding through transitions is a process that cannot provide as much support for sustained commitment as the case where one intentionally makes a decision to become committed as part of the transition process.

There are additional reasons to be concerned about commitments that form after constraints have already developed. Again, we will use cohabitation as an example. From an exchange theory perspective, it has been argued that risky or chaotic relationship structures allow for greater ability to interpret the relationship motivations of others (see Molm, 2006).

Therefore, the existence of higher levels of constraints should stabilize relationships at the expense of clarity in interpreting motives. Thus, if Bill knows that Mary has poor options for leaving, Bill may attribute Mary's continuance in the relationship less to internal motivations than to her poor options. As a result, Mary has less ability to signal dedication to Bill under conditions of higher constraint. This dyadic effect has an intra-personal corollary. When exit costs increase before clear decisions about commitment are made, it may be harder for the individual to sustain a sense of intrinsic commitment, or dedication, in the relationship. The stronger the external reasons for staying, the harder it is to infer internal reasons. Hence, some people may be more vulnerable later, at challenging times in the history of their relationships, to constraint-laden attributions such as, "I never really committed to you anyway; I just got swept up in this." While constraints can induce increases in dedication, as suggested earlier, it does not seem possible that commitments can be generally as strong where constraints developed before dedication. As we believe that there has been a decided shift in recent decades in the direction of individuals entering constrained pathways in romantic relationships prior to the development of dedication.

The Insecure Future Ahead

We believe that important relationship transitions increasingly come about due to sliding processes versus deciding process. As such, we expect that current normative patterns of couple development will result in increasing numbers of couples with weakened commitment dynamics at the base of their romantic relationships. We further would argue (but likely cannot directly test) that ever greater numbers of people are reaching adulthood with insecurities about attachment (both kinds) because of the romantic relationship patterns of their parents: ever greater numbers of children are experiencing family instability (Bumpass & Lu, 2000) and exposure to multiple romantic partners in their parents' lives (Cherlin, 2009; McLanahan, in press). As such, the need for well-formed, clear commitment that can secure romantic attachments may be increasing even as this becomes harder to achieve. It is important that we, as a field, continue to advance understandings of how relationship trajectories and transitions affect the formation of commitment, and to what consequence for couples, families and children.

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