

Q & A from Dibble Webinar with Scott Stanley

Webinar page: <https://www.dibbleinstitute.org/event/webinar-sliding-vs-deciding-commitment-ambiguity-and-relationship-formation/>

Before Q & A, Some Comments

My talk was focused on issues about commitment and how it forms, with insights primarily drawn from research on cohabitation, especially premarital cohabitation. Although my long-term focus has been on commitment, cohabitation became a great window in which to study the dynamics of commitment and its formation. Still, cohabitation is an immensely complex topic. Selection is a huge factor in all patterns of risk associated with most forms of cohabitation. That is, a lot of risk related to cohabitation and other relationship and family patterns is baked in prior to some life transitions such as into cohabitation. Debates in this area are more about the degree to which peoples' choices can affect their overall levels of risk; is everything that matters selection or context, or is there room for personal choice? Researchers cannot answer this question.

This webinar focused on the concepts of ambiguity and inertia. Related to cohabitation, the point of inertia is that, net of everything else, moving in together will increase constraints. My colleague Galena Rhoades and I believe that this fact puts some people at risk for poorer relationship outcomes than they might otherwise have experienced. Are some people unaffected negatively by sliding into increased inertia? For sure. Some people slide into perfectly fine places to be in life, and many likely slide into the same place they would have landed had they been much more decisional. Neither sliding nor inertia are always bad. However, the concept of inertia does produce testable hypotheses. This link below provides a detailed list of thoughts, studies, and progression in thoughts related to inertia.

https://slidingvsdeciding.blogspot.com/2018/03/citations-for-tests-of-inertia_26.html

There is a very practical use for this idea of inertia. Imagine you have a friend who is thinking about moving in with their partner—or letting their partner move in with them. You know this person well and, for whatever reasons, you have a few concerns. It may not be hard to ask, “are you ready to make it harder to break up?” Or, as a follow-up, “Are you both on the same page about what it means and what you expect?” Those questions are not likely to come across as judgmental. They are conversation starters. If you think those two questions could be relevant for someone on the cusp of this transition, you likely believe in both inertia and the role of ambiguity in how relationships unfold. You might believe it could matter about other transitions as well (e.g., having a child together).

Another practical use for any such knowledge is that it can help you identify people who may be at higher risk, and perhaps help them to improve their odds. In one of our studies (Rhoades, Stanley, Allen, & Markman, 2015) we studied a sample of married couples in the U.S. Army in a study on the effectiveness of PREP (The Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program).

PREP is a relationship education program widely used in the U.S. and around the world. In this longitudinal study, we showed that couples who had cohabited prior to either having a specific commitment to marry or being already married were at higher risk for both divorce and lower marital quality than other couples—just as the inertia theory predicts and consistent with a host of other published studies. More importantly, for couples who were randomly assigned to receive PREP and lived together before commitment to marry, their risks associated with premarital cohabitation were completely mitigated.

Rhoades, G. K., Stanley, S. M., Markman, H. J., & Allen, E. S. (2015). Can marriage education mitigate the risks associated with premarital cohabitation? *Journal of Family Psychology*, 29(3), 500-506. <https://doi.org/10.1037/fam0000081>

Lastly, keep this in mind. Some people do everything in a lower risk way and things turn out poorly. Others make many missteps and do fine. The goal is to help people improve their odds, not remove all risk. Now, some questions and answers.

Questions and Answers

My answers to questions here are relatively brief. However, there is a longer version of each answer with more thoughts about it, citations, and/or quotes. You can find the longer answers at: <https://app.box.com/s/zbgijszou7jw3p51p6sspalbopuzp0z>

Question: So would you say that the problem is inherently communication pattern, not cohabitation? Doesn't it depend on the couple?

Answer: Yes and no. Although I focused on research on premarital cohabitation in my talk, your question and my answer likely applies for those moving in together, regardless of if they ever marry. I believe it is both a communication and a commitment problem, and the relative mix depends on the couple. On the cusp of fully living together, two people could communicate, with either person asking these types of questions:

Are we officially moving in together?

What does it mean that we are moving in together?

Does that mean we are becoming more committed to a future together?

Do you plan to marry, one day? Me?

I am thinking this is leading to marriage, are you?

How are we sharing expenses and housework? Who is doing what?

Will you (or I) keep your own place?

Is it merely out of convenience that we would live together? Are we doing this mostly to share expenses and save money without expecting more?

People have varying reasons for either thinking positively or negatively about. No matter one's beliefs, it is easy to suggest that talking through such questions would greatly reduce ambiguity. Thus, I believe it would be wise for couples thinking about it to have "the talk." For couples with

no underlying commitment problem (e.g., no large asymmetry in commitment), the transition and risk question could be easily seen as a communication and decision-making moment where expectations are clarified. Of course, as we know from the work of Manning and Smock (2005), Lindsay (2000), and our work at the University of Denver, most couples do not have this type of talk. It's awkward and there may be reasons to avoid it. Perhaps partner A does not want it to be clear that they are less committed and partner B is afraid to push for clarity and scare A away. B might feel that the hook is not very well set, and it's too early to start reeling anything in. I would just note that, if one fears it's too early to reel the fish in, it might be too early to have the fish flop into the boat.

For others, there may be no special commitment in mind by either partner, just a belief that moving in together is convenient for now, perhaps to save money. Even with such a clear focus on convenience, some may fear making it clear that that is all that is going on—"it's too unromantic."

Communication can clarify many things if two people are resolved to have such a conversation at the right time (before building up too much inertia) and in the right way (openly and with emotional safety). However, based on studies by Manning and Smock (2005) and Lindsay (2000), along with the work Galena Rhoades and I have done, I can confidently say that most people have nothing like such a conversation before moving in together. Moving in together is usually a gradual and ambiguous process of sliding into increasing inertia. That has some benefits or it would not be so widely the case. But it also has costs.

Question: If the delayers are waiting to find mr/mrs right are they players currently? What are they getting from being with someone?

Answer: Depends. Some Delayers will become Stayers because, although delaying was their plan, they met someone special and turn into seeking and staying. Other Delayers are Players in the sense of playing the field, and perhaps being intentionally unclear with others about it. Some are very clear and up front.

I have talked with some people in their twenties who plan to marry but not until their 30s, and are in a series of (or simultaneous) non-committed relationships who know, often, they are hanging out with someone who is looking for more. This person can have some motivation not to reveal that they are not thinking the same way. Some of these people may catch commitment to their partner but others will hang out for quite a while with someone they may never really commit too, burning up time on the life clock of this other person whom they knew was looking for more. That scenario "feels" a little more like being a player to me, where one person who is less committed is playing their partner(s).

Question: Could this lead to unexpected expectations?

Answer: All of this could. The crux of ambiguity is things are not clear. That means some things are hidden and other things are merely not known. Early on, that is normal. Later on, if one is

thinking it could be more serious, ambiguity becomes risky. Ambiguity clearly can hide differences in expectations which can lead directly to unexpected (and unpleasant) results.

Question: We hear a lot about the divorce rate. What is the equivalent rate for cohabiting relationships that break up?

Answer: There are many answers because of the variations in types of groups where this same question is pertinent. It is also a complex question to answer clearly for any particular group because of all the limitations of data sets over time, and how one goes about answering such a question. All answers here are rough guesses based on existing studies. There is a much longer answer with more detail (and citations) in the other document if you are interested. But, in brief:

- Premarital cohabitation: Those who live together before marriage, compared to those who do not, have about a 30% greater chance of divorcing per year in marriage. Suppose the risk of divorce in marriage is 3.5% per year (its higher or lower in certain years) but the risk for the group living together before marriage is 4.5% per year. That's about a 30% higher risk per year.
- Pre-engagement/marital cohabitation: Those who start to live together prior to having clear, mutual plans to marry may be about 40% more likely to divorce than those who only move in together either after they are engaged or already married. [They also will report, on average, lower marital quality once married (effect sizes (d) have typically been between .2 and .6 for comparisons of the "before" group to the other groups. See inertia link earlier for an assortment of citations.)]
- Those who start cohabiting earlier in adulthood (let's say 34 or under) are now more likely to break up than ever marry (that partner). It is very hard to have precise estimates here, but more likely than not, more of these relationships end than continue.
- Couples who become parents are a great deal less likely to remain together over time than married couples.

Question: Are these stats from the US only or are they global?

Answer: The findings and statistics I presented in the webinar are U.S. samples, only. There are a variety of differences in the nature of cohabitation across different countries. The U.S. has the greatest difference between cohabiting and married couples of any country that has been studied. In some countries, cohabiting parents are more like married parents. In other countries, they are not. Regardless, I believe in any country where marriage is readily accessible as an institution to couples, couples who end up cohabiting versus couples who end up marrying will vary to some degree in the level of commitment between partners. You could or could not think this a problem with cohabitation, but my point is that there are reasons why it is chosen, and, on average, those reasons will involve something about commitment since marriage remains the strongest signal of a commitment to a future together in most (if not all)

societies. Hence, it will tend to show higher, average levels of commitment. Of course, some cohabiting couples in any country are more committed than some married couples, and many married couples divorce. Research is most typically about average differences.

If you want to read more about cohabitation, here are a few papers I believe are particularly interesting on the subject of cohabitation. These are papers with substantial nuance and depth of analysis or conceptualization.

Guzzo, K. (2009). Marital intentions and the stability of first cohabitations. *Journal of Family Issues*, 30, 179-205. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X08323694>

Kline, G. H., Stanley, S. M., Markman, H. J., Olmos-Gallo, P. A., St. Peters, M., Whitton, S. W., & Prado, L. (2004). Timing is everything: Pre-engagement cohabitation and increased risk for poor marital outcomes. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 18, 311-318. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0893-3200.18.2.311>

Lichter, D.T., Turner, R.N., Sassler, S. (2010). National estimates of the rise in serial cohabitation. *Social Science Research*, 39, 754-765. doi:10.1016/j.ssresearch.2009.11.002

Manning, W. D., & Smock, P. J. (2005). Measuring and modeling cohabitation: New perspectives from qualitative data. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 67, 989 - 1002. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3600252>

Rackin, H. M., & Gibson-Davis, C. M. (2018). Social class divergence in family transitions: The importance of cohabitation. *Journal of Marriage and Family*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12522>

Sassler, S., Addo, F. R., & Lichter, D. T. (2012). The tempo of sexual activity and later relationship quality. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 74, 708 - 725. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2012.00996.x>

Stanley, S. M., Rhoades, G. K., & Markman, H. J. (2006). Sliding versus Deciding: Inertia and the premarital cohabitation effect. *Family Relations*, 55, 499-509. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3729.2006.00418.x>

For an annotated list of our research (Galena Rhoades and I and our colleagues) with citations, abstracts, descriptions of what we found, thought, and tested, and how those findings built toward other tests and findings, here's a link:

<https://app.box.com/s/ugfa85i6lly8hp76qey7>