

What is it with Men and Commitment, Anyway?

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This draft is a greatly updated version of that work. It is a working paper that I plan to further refine for eventual publication in some outlet.

Abstract

This paper attempts to explain a paradox. Why do men seem to resist marriage when they experience greater net benefits from it than women, and when they are more likely to endorse beliefs that marriage is important? Relying on work from the fields of sociology and psychology, I make the case that men resist marriage because they see the line between marriage and not marriage in stark terms, and that crossing the line has more implications for changes in male behavior than female behavior.

What is it with Men and Marital Commitment?

This paper presents a hypothesis about why men resist commitment in marriage despite two facts. First, while both men and women believe marriage is important, a higher percentage of men than women report that it is important to marry. Second, men derive greater net benefits from marriage than women. In light of these facts, why is there such a strong perception that men are more marriage-commitment-phobic than women? I first set out to explain this paradox in a conference address in 2002 (Stanley, 2002). This paper is an expansion of those ideas.

The hypothesis I present here is a relatively simple way to explain the paradox presented above about men and marriage. I believe the answer to the paradox lies in this: Men see the line between marriage and not marriage more starkly than women. The average man views crossing the line into marriage as involving greater personal change than the average woman does. Therefore, men resist crossing the line until they can no longer afford not to cross it.

In laying out the rationale for this hypothesis, I begin by describing what I mean by commitment. I will discuss ways in which men and women do *not* appear to differ in marital commitment as well as evidence that men are somewhat more likely than women to believe that marriage is important. I then will construct the argument for why the line between marriage and not marriage is different for men and women. Finally, I address some implications of the manner in which one crosses the line. Before proceeding, I note that I am expressing hypotheses about average differences between men and women. There will, of course, be many exceptions to general tendencies when it comes to differences between the sexes. Yet, as I hope to make clear, there is enough evidence in many areas of something being different that it is worth contemplating the reasons and implications of these differences.

What Is Commitment?

The work on commitment has matured to the point that there exists an entire volume on the subject (Jones & Adams, 1999), complex measurement models (Johnson, Caughlin, & Huston, 1999; Stanley & Markman, 1992), and detailed theoretical perspectives on the central role of commitment in romantic relationships (e.g., Rusbult, Zembrodt, & Gunn, 1982; Stanley, Rhoades, & Whitton, 2009). Space does not permit the presentation of an overview of existing theory and research on commitment, but some elements from that growing body of work will be useful for the arguments I make here.

The ideas presented here require a view of commitment that can support insights about motivation. This is why I favor the model that breaks commitment down into the broad dimensions of dedication and constraint (Stanley & Markman, 1992). Personal dedication speaks to how intrinsically committed partners are to one another whereas constraints are the factors that might keep couples together when one or both partners would rather leave. Constraints are often based in the things that accumulate as relationships grow, and constraints, at least theoretically, make it harder to break up because they either create greater structural or moral barriers (Johnson, 1973; cf. Levinger, 1965). Constraints are evidence of past investment, but they also represent loss if one leaves the constrained pathway. Constraints can be any of a wide range of factors, including financial considerations, responsibilities for children, social pressure, or the lack of adequate alternatives, just to name a few. While defined as factors that limit options when one desires to leave a relationship, constraints likely play a positive function in ongoing, healthy marriages because they help prevent one or both partners from taking impulsive actions that unravel years of investment together during shorter-term periods of unhappiness. Of course, when someone is deeply unhappy for a long time in a relationship,

constraints can lead to feeling trapped. Constraints can also keep people in unhealthy or even dangerous relationships.

Personal dedication, on the other hand, refers to interpersonal, and comparatively intrinsic, commitment processes, particularly reflected in both commitment to the partner and to the relationship. While it can be decomposed in many ways depending on the research purpose, the construct can encompass at least four important components: a desire for a future together, a sense of “us” or “we” (or as being part of a team), a high sense of priority for the relationship, and a greater willingness to sacrifice for the partner or relationship (Stanley & Markman, 1992). By “decomposed,” I merely mean that for some kinds of basic science, it is useful to think of dimensions such as dedication to the future as separate from willingness to sacrifice (such as in studies of sacrifice, briefly described later). At other times, a global index of overall dedication is sufficient, such as when comparing the dedication levels of marrieds versus cohabitants (e.g., Stanley, Whitton, & Markman, 2004). Of various possible sub-constructs of dedication, the most central of all is the desire for a long-term future with the partner (Stanley & Markman, 1992).

To Signify

A fundamental characteristic of the process of making a commitment is that it requires making a choice to give up other choices. This basic axiom has a variety of implications; the one most relevant here is that relationship transitions that involve increases in commitment will include leaving some options behind. Fundamentally, commitment requires choosing one partner over others. Strong commitments will be associated with less subsequent monitoring of alternatives (Leik & Leik, 1977; Stanley & Markman, 1992) as well as active derogation of the attractiveness of alternatives remaining in awareness (Johnson & Rusbult, 1989).

If commitment requires giving up options, why would anyone do it? If I were Gary

Becker, I would simply assert that the perceived net utility must exceed the perceived net cost.

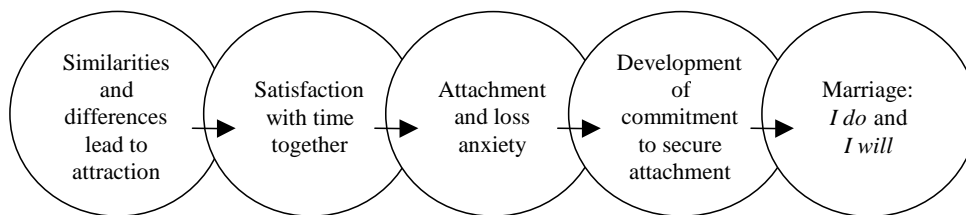
The benefits of commitment in marriage come from the fact that a couple has clarified the existence of a long-term time-horizon together (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). Functionally, this “us with a future” allows partners to weather the inevitable ups and downs in marital satisfaction and thereby provides a stable base for family life. It provides a secure foundation for investing in life together, both materially and emotionally. There is evidence that this type of security in commitment may be more difficult to attain for those who’s parents divorced (Amato & Deboer, 2001; Whitton, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2008).

Figure 1 presents a simple psychological model of why commitment develops. It begins with attraction. Attraction develops based on many things, including partners’ similarities and differences, biochemistry, and likely many other factors that, to my knowledge, remain somewhat of a mystery to science. As the relationship progresses, the ongoing satisfaction between two partners will produce a growing emotional attachment. However, along with the attachment comes anxiety over the potential for dissolution and loss of something valuable.

I think this attachment process is entirely normal in the development of romantic relationships. While there is a growing literature on how childhood attachment history and internal working models affect adult, romantic relationships (e.g., Feeney, Noller, & Roberts, 2000; Hazan & Shaver, 1987), I am focusing here on a type of attachment anxiety that is normative and not defined by working models from childhood. The one will, however, affect the other. In this model, commitment comes into play because attachment does not, in itself, settle the question of security. Strong attachments between partners often lead to commitment, but this is not automatic. It is the formation of commitment—a clear series of decisions about choices and the future—that brings security to a relationship and settles anxieties about attachment. I first

posited this dynamic between adult, romantic attachment and commitment in a chapter (Stanley, Lobitz, & Dickinson, 1999), and my colleagues and I have recently expanded on it (Stanley et al., 2009).

Figure 1
The Development of Commitment



Eastwick and Finkel (2008) have shown that such a normative, relationship specific attachment anxiety does, in fact, exist in developing romantic relationships. Further, they showed that it is reduced once it is clear that a “relationship” exists. In this case, I believe that crossing this threshold of mutual understanding that a relationship actually exists is a step up in commitment that calms the anxiety individuals feel. When people these days refer to the process of “defining the relationship” or “having the talk,” they are usually referring to this transitional step of up-defining commitment as a relationship progresses.

In this framework, marriage represents the highest expression of security between romantic partners. It is a relationship status that is public and relatively unambiguous. However, practices related to the development of romantic relationships prior to marriage have clearly been changing, at least in the U. S. In a report entitled *Hooking Up, Hanging Out and Hoping for Mr. Right*, Norval Glenn and Elizabeth Marquardt examined the dating experiences of women on college campuses (Glenn & Marquardt, 2001). One fact gleaned by observing the current dating scene among college students is that there are relatively few standards and structures for relationship development, particularly in comparison to past eras. This observation has also been

made by the social historian Barbara Dafoe Whitehead (2002). It used to be that there were relatively clear steps in relationship formation for a great number of people. While I am sure customs have always varied by region, country, and cultural background, relationships progressed along pathways marked by transitional stages of increasing commitment. For many, dating moved to “going steady” which may have moved to a woman being “pinned” or wearing her beau’s class ring, and so forth. Again, customs vary by culture and sub-culture; the important point here is that any number of external symbols existed to indicate the growth in level of commitment. One of the strongest signposts on the way to marriage has always been engagement, which, while in some decline, has not disappeared yet. (It appears closest to disappearing for those who are economically disadvantaged.)

The various stages of commitment noted above (and all similar customs in other cultures) represent emblems of commitment that marked the way toward and into marriage. To borrow a concept from the developmental scientist Lev Vygotsky (1962), these emblematic steps and stages “scaffolded” the development of commitment up to, and into, marriage. I speak in the past tense mostly in relation to Western culture (and perhaps industrialized societies, more generally). I believe that emblems of commitment helped young couples practice fidelity and also provided clarity between partners as to the mutuality, or lack thereof, of growing commitment. In some cultures, historically, emblematic stages provided similar information to the families to be joined by marriage. While it seems that such steps or stages are diminished for younger people in this day and age, there has recently arisen a new form of this phenomena through social networking services such as MySpace or Facebook, wherein people can publicly designate their relationship status. I believe, however, that the net shift in Western cultures is away from emblems of commitment.

Around 2000, I increasingly heard sociologist Steve Nock focus on the idea of the signal value of marriage. I believe that this was in relation to his work with colleagues Laura Sanchez and James Wright. These three scholars were conducting an evaluation, funded by the National Science Foundation, of the covenant marriage law that took effect in Louisiana in 1997. The concept of a signal comes from the economic literature, and it pertains to the information value of an entity. The economist Robert Rowthorn (2002) argues that “marriage” is a signal conveying information about the seriousness of the relationship and the likelihood of a future. Rowthorn also argues that marriage has lost some, but not all, of its signal value because of high rates of divorce. Nock, Sanchez, and Wright applied this schema in their analysis of covenant versus standard marriage in Louisiana, which is described in their book *Covenant Marriage and the Movement to Reclaim Tradition* (2008). Essentially, they argued that the legal changes in Louisiana gave couples the option to choose a form of marital commitment with a stronger signal value than standard marriage. This application of the concept of signal describes the motivations of people choosing covenant marriage over standard marriage. In an era of marriage having diminished signal value, covenant marriage couples seek the higher marriage status symbol.

The idea of marriage as a signal puts in sharp relief the seeming decline in the existence of clear stages in the development of commitment between romantic partners, at least in Western cultures. Indeed, it can be argued that ambiguity, not clear signals, now rules the day in romantic relationships prior to marriage (Stanley, Rhoades, & Fincham, in press). Further, ambiguity is part of a larger picture of how emerging patterns of relationship transition are linked to risk, in part because ambiguity interferes with the ability of two partners to develop clarity about commitment. The most important point we need from this discussion for the next stage of this paper is this: While marriage is diminished as a symbol of commitment with high signal value

(Rowthorn, 2002), and marriage has declined as an institution (as argued by Cherlin, 2004), marriage yet remains the strongest cultural emblem available for signifying that two partners have forsaken alternative partners and have chosen a future together. This means that the transition into marriage remains a strong signal of a change in the status of a relationship between two romantic partners.

Men, Women, and Commitment in Marriage

With this background on commitment in mind, I want to explore how commitment in marriage, or the process of committing to marriage, may differ between women and men. There are three sets of empirically supported facts to establish. First, once married, men are, on average, as committed as women. Second, men derive greater net benefits from marriage. Third, men appear to be more committed to the idea of marriage than women.

Men are as committed as women, once married

Before exploring the ways in which I believe commitment works differently for men and women, I want to note a way in which men and women are quite similar. In a nationwide, random digit dialing phone survey that we conducted in 1995, we found that married men are, on average, just as dedicated as married women to their spouses (Stanley, Markman, & Whitton, 2002). Similar findings were also found in the large survey conducted in Oklahoma, where a group of scholars found no meaningful differences between men and women in average level of dedication to their mates, nor in terms of how trapped they felt in their marriages (Johnson et al., 2002). Essentially, I have found that it is hard to obtain meaningful quantitative differences between already married men and women when comparing them on levels of dedication in their marriages.

Men derive substantial net benefits from marriage

Being equally dedicated to marriage does not mean, however, that people derive equal benefits from marriage. The benefits of commitment in marriage may be somewhat different for men and women. On balance, it appears that men and women both benefit from marriage, though men appear to benefit more (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). Women benefit too, though the benefits of marriage are more strongly linked to marital quality for women than for men (Proulx, Helms, & Buehler, 2007), and most strongly related to the “emotion work” of the men (Wilcox & Nock, 2006). While there are important questions about directionality of effects in the broad literature assessing marriage and quality of life (see Wood, Goesling, & Avellar, 2007), it remains clear that men, on average, derive substantial benefits from marriage. They should want marriage, and, as it turns out, most men do—at some point.

Men and commitment to the idea of marriage

Various findings suggest that both men and women see marriage as desirable or important. However, there is a consistent finding that men are more likely than women to report preferring to be married or to report that marriage is important. For example, Amato, Booth, Johnson, and Rogers (2007) reported this difference in their recent book that encompasses changes in marriage from 1980 to 2000 (see p. 200). This type of pattern is also very clear in the National Survey of Family Growth. In 2002, both male and female respondents indicated their level of agreement with the following item: “It is better for a person to get married than to go through life being single.” Of male teens (aged 15 to 19), 69% agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. In contrast, of female teens (aged 15 to 19), 54% agreed or strongly agreed with this statement (Abma, Martinez, Mosher, & Dawson, 2004). Of all males aged 15 to 44, 66% agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. In contrast, of all females aged 15 to 44, 51%

agreed or strongly agreed with this statement (Martinez, Chandra, Abma, Jones, & Mosher, 2006).

These are not small differences for this type of data, and such differences are common in various types of survey data. For example, a 2002 USA Today report cited a 1998 Gallup Poll in which 39% of unmarried men reported that they would prefer to be married, whereas 29% percent of unmarried women reported that they would prefer to be married (Jayson, 2002). In addition to global sentiments about marriage, both men and women are likely to believe that men need marriage more than women do (Kaufman & Goldscheider, 2007). These data suggest that men, maybe more than women, should be the ones pursuing marriage because, in general, they appear to view it as a desirable and important step. Why do they resist?

Why Men Resist Crossing the Line into Marriage

I hypothesize that men resist crossing the line more than women, not because they do not value what is on the other side, but because they believe that their own responsibilities and commitments have to increase substantially in crossing the line. To build the case for the hypothesis, I will present findings from three sources: (1) qualitative, focus group research by Whitehead and Popenoe presented in 2002; (2) findings and conclusions from the work of Steve Nock; and (3) findings from work in our lab on sacrifice and commitment.

Why Men Won't Commit

Barbara Dafoe Whitehead and David Popenoe used to head up the National Marriage Project (now headed up by Brad Wilcox), and they issued a yearly report on marriage called the *State of Our Unions*. I found their report in 2002 particularly fascinating as they described findings from focus group interviews exploring the beliefs of men in their 20s about marriage and commitment (Whitehead & Popenoe, 2002). Qualitative research such as this is of great

value for the generation of theory and hypotheses. I do not believe that I ever enjoyed reading a report more than this one.

From their interviews with men, Whitehead and Popenoe derived important insights about how men view marriage, their female partners, and the process of growing up. Here are a few highlights based on my reading of their report. First and foremost, men reported that they resist marriage because they can enjoy many of the same benefits by cohabiting rather than marrying. Further, they reported almost no social pressures to marry; not from family, not from friends, and not from the families of the women they live with. They also associated marriage with a number of increased responsibilities and with a greater possibility of financial loss. The men also expressed a fear that women will want to have children sooner if married. Essentially, men reported resisting marriage, not because they did not value it, but because they were not ready for all the responsibilities implied by marriage. Clearly, the men viewed the line between not married and married as a major dividing point in life.

There were two elements of their report that I found particularly intriguing; one that I found disturbing and one that I found humorous. First, Whitehead and Popenoe suggested that many young adults today are seeking soul-mates. They had produced a report in the prior year that included results from a national survey showing that ninety-four percent (94%) of young adults believe that finding their soul-mate was their pre-eminent concern in finding a future mate (Popenoe & Whitehead, 2001). What their 2002 report suggested is that men felt that a soul-mate is someone who will take them as they are and not try to change them. Disturbingly, some men reported that they were resisting commitment in marriage with their current female cohabitant because they were waiting for their soul-mate to come along.

As I read this report, I wondered how many women knew that their partners may still be

“on the market” when they are viewing the present relationship trajectory as solidly in the direction of marriage? These interviews produced a strong qualitative example of the ambiguity of cohabiting unions (Lindsay, 2000), at least for those who do not have overt plans for marriage (Brown, 2004), especially at the time cohabiting began (Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2006). This ambiguity is problematic precisely because it hides important information about the commitment levels between the two partners. Cohabitation does signify something, but it implies far less about commitment than marriage. How many people think they are on a trajectory toward marriage when they are actually in a stationary, low orbit, in which gravity will pull them down to earth? The popularity of books such as *He’s Just Not That Into You* (Behrendt & Tuccillo, 2004) suggest it is not an isolated experience for a woman to come to find she is in relationship with a man who does not share her perspective on the future.

Before proceeding, I want to acknowledge that difference between cohabitation and marriage may have less meaning when marriage is relatively harder to access. For example, people with very poor economic means tend to desire marriage more than most other demographic groups (e.g., Karney, Garvan, & Thomas, 2003). However, they are also less likely to marry for a variety of reasons, some of which include the inability to afford a nice wedding (Edin & Kefalas, 2005) or the mutual expectation that the male should have a good job, first, in order to be a good husband (consistent with Nock, 1998). In such cases, the absence of marriage has a much more complicated meaning since a lack of means creates greater barriers to having the choice to marrying, at least in the manner desired.

On a lighter note, I found it amusing that the men Whitehead and Popenoe interviewed reported that one of the benefits of not marrying was that, once they were married, their girlfriend-now-wife, would tell them what to do. I interpreted this to mean something pretty

important: these men were giving evidence of an inner view that, when they become married, their girlfriends-turned-wives have the right to tell them what to do, and not before. It's as if they were thinking, "When we're really teammates in life, you will have earned the right to tell me when there is something wrong with my play. But, not until we cross that line and are clearly on the same team." Teammates can ask things of one another, but not until one crosses the line and signs with the team. I found this amusing as I reflected on the evidence of the potential health benefits for men in marriage (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). Most scholars assume that a major reason for these benefits is that wives directly influence husbands' health-linked behavior: "Why don't you stop with the beer, that's your third tonight?" "You need to go to the doctor and get that mole looked at." "You have been working every night, running yourself ragged. You need to cut back." I am comfortable believing that one major reason that men live years longer if they are married (and are otherwise healthier in various ways) is causal in that their wives tell them what to do and they do some of what their wives tell them. From this point of view, younger men may be perceiving a drawback to being married that is, ironically, associated with health and long life.

In summary, one thing is very clear in the focus group data collected by Whitehead and Popenoe. Men believe that crossing the line from not married to married has substantial consequences for their behavior and commitments. The line is clear to men.

Marriage and Men: Nock's Thesis

Before his untimely passing, Steve Nock spent years building the case that marriage changes men in some fundamental ways. Nock amassed both conceptual and empirical arguments to prove his point. In his book, *Marriage in Men's Lives* (1998), he discussed how men's belief systems about themselves and their wives change when they cross the line. His

argument rests on the potency of the social role of “husband.” In general, Nock showed how men begin to see themselves as fathers, providers, and protectors when they transition into marriage. These are fundamental changes in identity that are both transformative and associated with behavioral changes. For example, Nock collected evidence that men earn more income when they’re married, work more, spend less time with friends apart from marriage and family, and spend more time with family and in the community in which the family is embedded. In Nock’s thesis, marriage is a very potent discriminative stimulus for males, indicating that the conditions of their behavior have changed. Marriage means large changes in identity for men, and those changes are all in the direction of the expectation of increased responsibility others. Economists Ahituv and Lerman (2005) found exactly what Nock predicted, finding that men’s economic productivity and job stability increased following transition into marriage. While causality can be argued, they used a variety of econometric strategies to rule out selection. They found the largest effects among men who would otherwise be considered the least able to contribute economically.

All of this is consistent, of course, with the idea that men see the line between marriage and not marriage in ways that are different from women, and that men see this line in particularly clear terms. Women see the line, too, of course, but men seem to think that marriage will change them, and that being a husband is very different from being a boyfriend or live in partner. They clearly believe that a greater level of responsibility is required in the role of husband than in the role of boyfriend. I may well be wrong about this, but I have not seen nearly as much reason to believe that women have this same sense that they (the women) are going to change dramatically when they cross the marriage line. Marriage seems to have a big effect on how men think about themselves, what they do, what a woman can ask of them, and what they’re willing to give.

Commitment and Sacrifice: Convergence with Nock

Research on sacrifice in marriage provides another window on potential differences between men and women. My colleagues and I have published two papers on sacrifice. The work led by Sarah Whitton was particularly provocative (Whitton, Stanley, & Markman, 2002; Whitton, Stanley, & Markman, 2007). We theorized that people should be most willing to sacrifice for their partners when they have a long-term view and a sense of “us” or “we.” In this research, sacrifice was defined as an act of foregoing immediate self-interest in order to promote the well being of the partner or the relationship. We found that sacrifice was seen as less detrimental to the self when males and females reported having a long-term view for the relationship. The unexpected finding, however, was that the association between sacrifice and dedication to the future was far stronger for men than women. The analyses did not show that women are more likely to report sacrificing than men. The difference was more in the degree to which attitudes about sacrificing were tied to commitment to the future.

While I would like to test this basic finding in a number of other data sets, we have found a parallel finding in another sample with different measures and methods. We found that the role of commitment to the future was stronger in understanding male attitudes about sacrifice in marriage than female attitudes about sacrifice (Stanley, Whitton, Low, Clements, & Markman, 2006). Specifically, the linkage between dedication to the future and future marital adjustment was mediated by attitudes about sacrifice for men but not for women.

There are a number of possible interpretations of these findings that suggest that males’ attitudes about sacrifice are more linked to commitment to the future than women’s. For example, women may be more socialized to give to others, regardless of the commitment status of a particular relationship. The interpretation I have been most intrigued by is more about men

than women, and can be expressed as a hypothesis: For men to sacrifice for their partners without resenting it, they need to have decided that a particular woman is the one they plan to be with in the future. They need to have decided that “this woman is my future.” Obviously, the state of marriage would be the strongest signal possible that this condition exists. In contrast, whatever flips the switch for women to sacrifice is less strongly linked to the level of dedication to the future.

As a side point, I have an untested hypothesis about women. My hypothesis is that women are more strongly affected than men by the development of an attachment to the partner. I suspect that attachment is a stronger trigger of sacrifice for women and commitment to the future is a stronger trigger for sacrifice in men. If this were true, part of the explanation could be biological. Women are more biologically primed toward attachment linked sacrifices because they give birth to children. The same chemical that fuels this bonding process at birth, oxytocin, is also released in both women and men with physical and sexual connection; yet, the effect may be greater on women. One implication of this potential difference in men and women is that women are vulnerable to over-sacrificing for men after the point of strong attachment and up to the point of mutual clarity about commitment to the future. What I am suggesting is that, on average, the woman’s sacrifice switch gets flipped before the man’s.

My main point in this section is entirely consistent with the major thesis of Nock’s work regarding men and marriage: that commitment in marriage changes men. Crossing over the marriage line changes how they see themselves and how they behave. That’s a lot of change on the line. Before leaving this point, I wish to express an important caveat. I do not mean to suggest that marriage makes a dangerous man a safe man. I *am* suggesting that, on average, marriage changes the average man in the direction of greater responsibility and sacrifice to a

female partner. This is partly why younger men resist marriage, an institution they have relatively high regard for and eventual interest in. They associate marriage with the strong expectancy of having to take responsibility for others. Marriage cannot be the only thing that may foster such changes, just an important one. Hence, I do not wish to suggest that men who never cross this line will never grow up. What I am asserting is what Steve Nock found: marriage is a particularly powerful step for men in taking on increased responsibilities in life. Hence, as Popenoe and Whitehead assert, some men will resist this change until late into their 20s or until they stand to lose more than they gain by resisting marriage.

Another point follows the argument made here. If marriage is a strong signal of a change in conditions and expectations for the behavior for men, this would explain the stereotype of females pushing for marriage and men resisting. Over thousands of years of history, females would have come to expect a substantial change in men from crossing the line. One resists and the other pushes for the very same reason—because it matters. Before leaving this point, I want to acknowledge the possibility that the important changes in economic opportunities for women in recent decades, as well as the changes in the roles of men and women in families, may result in changes in how these dynamics work in the years to come.

Does it matter, how the line is crossed?

If crossing the line into marriage has large effects on the identity and behavior of men, does it matter how one crosses the line? In 1996, Howard Markman and I conducted a nationwide random phone survey of married respondents. In addition to demographic information and measures of relationship quality, we asked respondents if they lived with their mate prior to marriage. Using this data set, we found that married men who had lived with their wives prior to marriage reported significantly (and substantially) lower levels of dedication to

their wives than men who had not lived with their wives prior to marriage (Stanley et al., 2004). This moderation of dedication levels based on cohabitation history appeared in the same sample where married men and women do not differ in overall, average levels of dedication, as noted earlier (Stanley et al., 2002). There is something about premarital cohabitation history that, at least in this sample, differentiated the males into groups with higher and lower dedication levels.

This finding led to a whole theory of cohabitation risk consistent with the concept of inertia. I began to suspect that this pattern meant that some of these men would not have married their wives had cohabiting not made it harder to break up. Hence, I suspected that some of the men in the cohabiting group had lower levels of dedication to their eventual spouse, all along, and that what cohabiting did was increase constraints making it more likely their relationships would continue on into marriage than would have otherwise been the case. Cohabiting relationships should have greater inertia than dating relationships because of the increased difficulties of moving, splitting up possessions, and so forth (Stanley, et al., 2006)—particularly when two people share a single address without a ready path to live elsewhere. In this sense, cohabitation can produce a complex mix of what Norval Glenn called premature entanglements that cut short an adequate search for a good match in a partner (Glenn, 2002).

The idea of inertia leads to a very clear prediction that has relevance for this discussion: This risk should not be observed among those who cohabited only after a clear, mutual commitment to the future has been made. One particularly clear marker of the clarity of a commitment to the future prior to marriage is engagement. In fact, engagement is another relationship designation with high signal value regarding commitment. Because of this theory, we (I along with my colleagues Galena Rhoades and Howard Markman) began to ask about the timing of engagement relative to the timing of cohabiting in every data set we've constructed

since 1997. We have been testing the prediction that those who cohabit only after engagement or marriage will be at lower relative risk in marriage than those who cohabit prior to engagement. We have now found support for this prediction in three data sets, including when controlling for a wide variety of variables presumed to be associated with selection effects (Kline, et al., 2004; Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2009; Stanley, Rhoades, Amato, Markman, & Johnson, 2009). We also have a strong forerunner of this finding in a new, large, longitudinal data set designed to address questions about relationship development and cohabitation. Essentially, in every data set we have examined where there is a way to differentiate people based on the level and clarity of commitment to marriage, prior to cohabiting, we find strong differences between groups on many variables.

Coming back to the men who had cohabited before marriage who had lower, average levels of dedication; it seems possible that some subset of those men did not freely choose to cross the line of commitment into marriage since their behavior may have been partly influenced by the constraints of cohabiting. In other words, while they may have become married, a higher percentage of couples who cohabited prior to marriage likely did not have two partners who clearly *decided* to be married prior to increasing constraints by living together. Therefore, they moved into marriage more from a process of being carried into it than from a process of making a clear decision. Perhaps one partner, more often the male, was actually coaxed or dragged across the line, so to speak, by the other. Of course that is just one among many possible extrinsic reasons why people marry, but research does show that external reasons for moving into marriage are more associated with problems in marriage than are internal reasons (Surra & Hughes, 1997).

The dynamics I describe here would explain how some commitment avoidant males may

come to cross the line into marriage without actually stepping up in their levels of dedication to their female partner. In our tests of these ideas, we have not always found such gender differences between men and women based on cohabitation history. We have not observed the gender differences in commitment related to cohabitation history in two cross-sectional samples (Rhoades et al., 2009; Stanley et al., 2009) but we have observed these differences in other samples, including the earlier cross-sectional sample (Stanley et al., 2004) and in longitudinal samples (e.g., Kline et al., 2004). Where we observed the differences linked to gender, they are always in the direction of the average male dedication scores being lower than the average female scores when couples lived together prior to marriage and prior to engagement. Further, Galena Rhoades conducted an analysis with one of our longitudinal data sets showing that, not only is one partner's dedication likely to be lower than the other's when couples cohabit prior to engagement, this difference remains through the transition into marriage and years into marriage (Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2006). These findings suggested that the transition into marriage is not always transformative in the ways predicted by Nock (1998). In a similar vein, Brown (2004) has found that the intention to marry is more strongly associated with relationship quality than the transition into marriage itself. It is not clear if these studies show the lack of a transition effect or if they show that the signal value of marriage begins to have its effect well before marriage, when plans to marry have developed and are public. I think the latter is most likely the case.

Sliding vs. Deciding

I was the discussant on a few papers at the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management in 2004, and two of the papers on the panel provided a powerful contrast related to the question of how the dynamics of relationship transitions affect commitment. Wendy

Manning and Pamela Smock presented findings from their qualitative study on cohabitation that resulted in their 2005 publication on their project (Manning & Smock, 2005). Among various findings, they presented data showing that more than half of cohabiting couples slid into cohabiting rather than first talking about it as a step and how it fit in with future plans. From a commitment standpoint, it did not seem likely to me that such sliding-type transitions could generally strengthen or support lasting commitment.

In another paper, Laura Sanchez presented findings from the study of the Louisiana covenant marriage policy that I noted earlier (Sanchez, Dienes, Nock, and Wright, 2004). Her presentation included a clear delineation of the idea of marriage as a signal, and how they were using that idea to conceptualize their findings on couples' choices of covenant versus standard marriages. Whereas Manning and Smock were discussing the ubiquity of relationship transitions into cohabitation via sliding, Sanchez, Dienes, Nock and Wright were laying out what I saw as a sort of hyper-deciding about commitment in the transition into marriage. They were describing something that was, in some way, at the other end of the spectrum of sliding and deciding. What they were describing reflected a process that should result in a clear decision in support of a commitment.

While those who choose covenant marriage are select for a number of characteristics that make them different from those picking standard marriage, what I thought most interesting in reviewing these papers was the fact that you could not slide into a covenant marriage. In many ways, it was designed to prevent anything like sliding. A covenant marriage required clear discussion, deliberation, and choice between two partners to have a particularly high signal-strength marriage. This type of process was part of the intent of the framers of that law, with the belief being that such a process would strengthen marriages (see Nock et al., 2008).

These two papers bookended the range of variability that now exists in how people go through transitions and make commitments in relationships. My colleagues and I believe that the odds are better for the future of a relationship if dedication has developed between partners prior to substantial increases in constraint coming from factors such as cohabiting or having a child (Stanley et al., 2006; Stanley & Rhoades, 2009). There are at least two reasons for this belief. First, as I have noted, constraints may cause some relationships to continue for some period of time that would have—and maybe should have—ended earlier. Second, there is a great deal of empirical evidence that a fully conscious, freely made decision to choose one path among the available options sets up the strongest motivational structure for follow-through on that decision (Brehm, 2007; Harmon-Jones & Harmon-Jones, 2002). The strongest commitments are decisions made with conscious awareness of the options. This suggests that it very much may matter how one crosses the line, whether male or female. It may be particularly important for men to make a clear choice to cross the line into marriage rather than passively floating down a river that may lead to marriage.

Moving Forward

The fundamental idea underlying the ideas I have put forth here is that the dynamics of relationship transitions are particularly important for understanding how romantic relationships and marriages will fair over time. I have suggested that the way people cross from not married to married may have important implications for marital success, and that there appear to be some important, average differences in how that transition is thought of and experienced by men and women. This may or may not be a difference that is changing. I am aware that even contemplating the potential meaning of gender differences that align with stereotypes makes some uncomfortable. Perhaps any observed differences at present will no longer exist in the

future. One could predict that such differences will disappear solely on the basis of societal changes. However, some of the differences that can be observed, and that remain cultural stereotypes, may have roots in biological differences starting with who can and cannot become pregnant. Certainly psycho-biological theorists such as David Buss (2003) believe that difference is so fundamentally powerful in shaping human mating tendencies, that some important differences may be with us for a long time to come. In fact, I am conscious of the fact that much of the theory I have laid out here—about why some men may resist a particularly salient form of commitment (marriage) even while valuing it—is quite consistent with the theories and analyses coming from that very different line of inquiry.

I leave it at this for now. Even with rapidly changing societal roles and opportunities, there could remain some fundamental differences between men and women when it comes to the formation of commitment in marriage (and otherwise) that are worth examining.

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