

# Sliding vs. Deciding: Commitment, Ambiguity, and Relationship Formation

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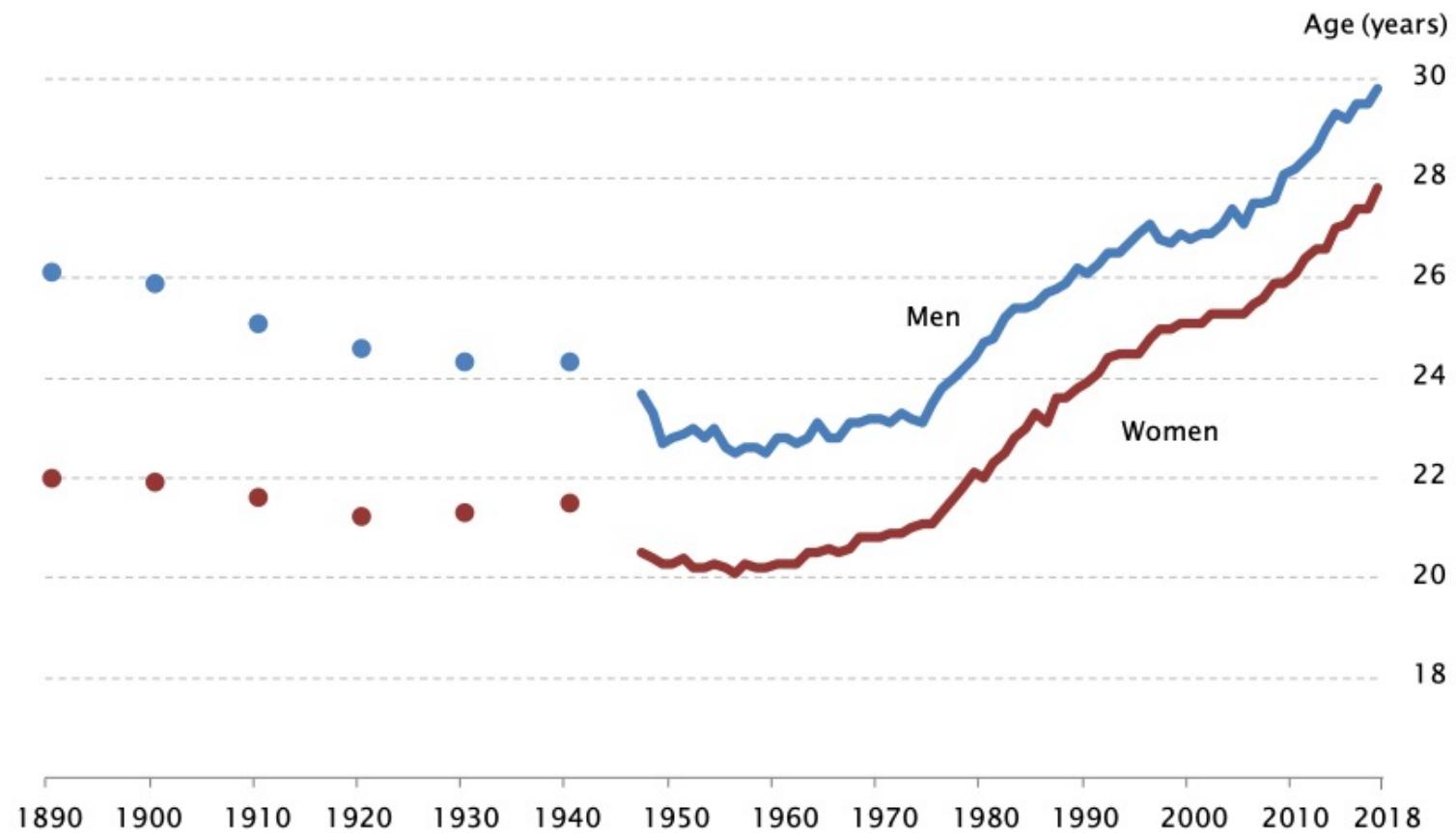
# Acknowledgements

- Colleagues
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The State of Things

The Big Delay

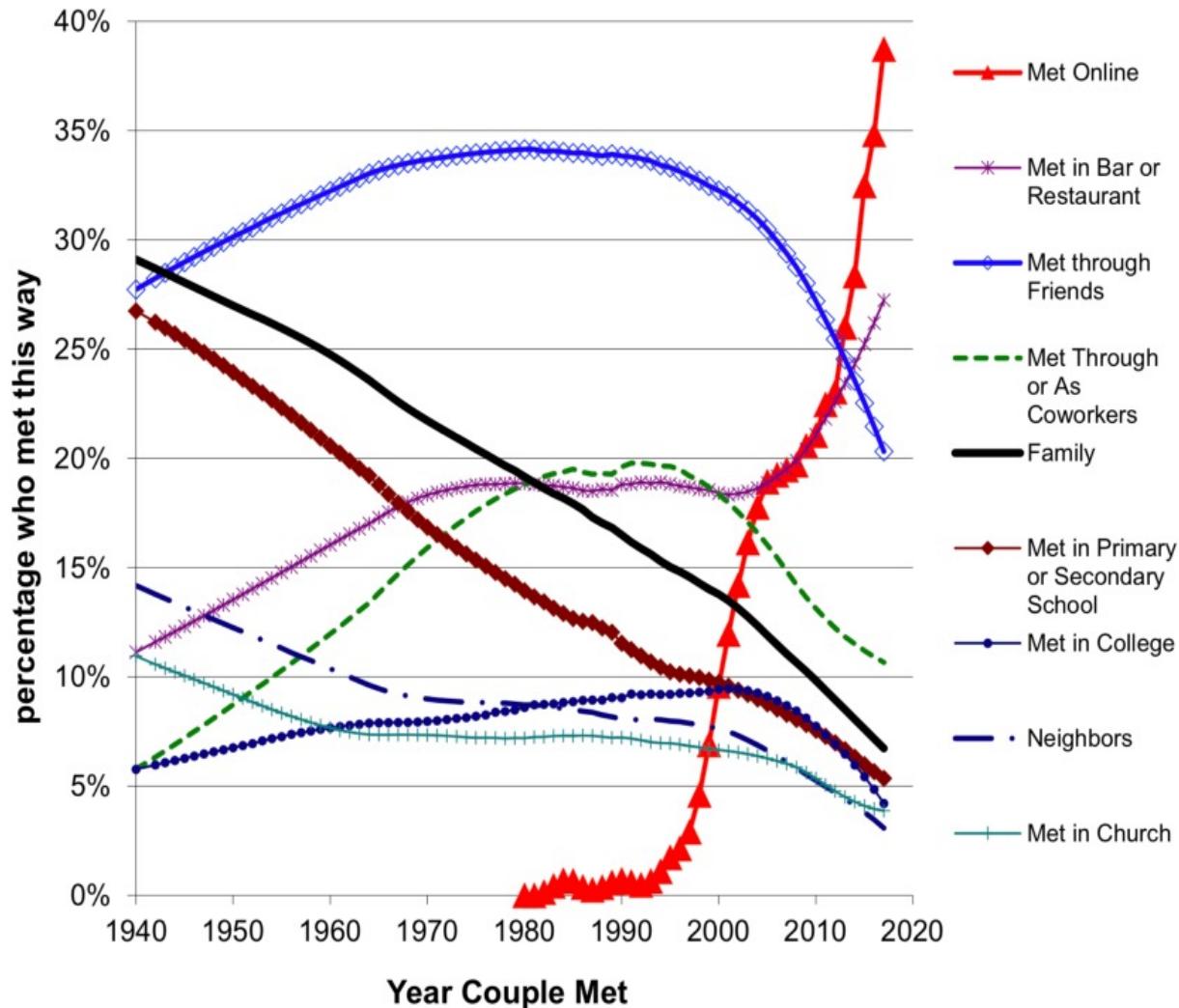
**Figure MS-2**  
**Median age at first marriage: 1890 to present**



# The Big Delay

- Most people have a goal to settle down—eventually, with a mate.
- Benefits:
  - More careful choice in mate
  - Self-insuring
- Consequences:
  - Maybe too much relationship experience
  - Children by other partners

# Large Shift in How People Meet: Rosenfeld: “Disintermediating your friends”



Rosenfeld, M. J., & Thomas, R. J. (2012).  
Searching for a Mate: The Rise of the  
Internet as a Social Intermediary.  
American Sociological Review, 77(4), 523–547.

# Key Thoughts about Commitment (for this talk)



- Commitment can be thought of in two dimensions:
  - Dedication
  - Constraint
- When a person makes a commitment, they are *making a choice to give up other choices.*
- Commitment secures attachment
  - To do that, it needs to be clearly **signaled**.



## Ambiguity Reigns

- “Is this a date?
- Soft break-ups
- Hook-ups
- “Just talking” relationships  
(D. Scott Sibley)
- Ghosting
- Cohabitation (Lindsay, 2000)

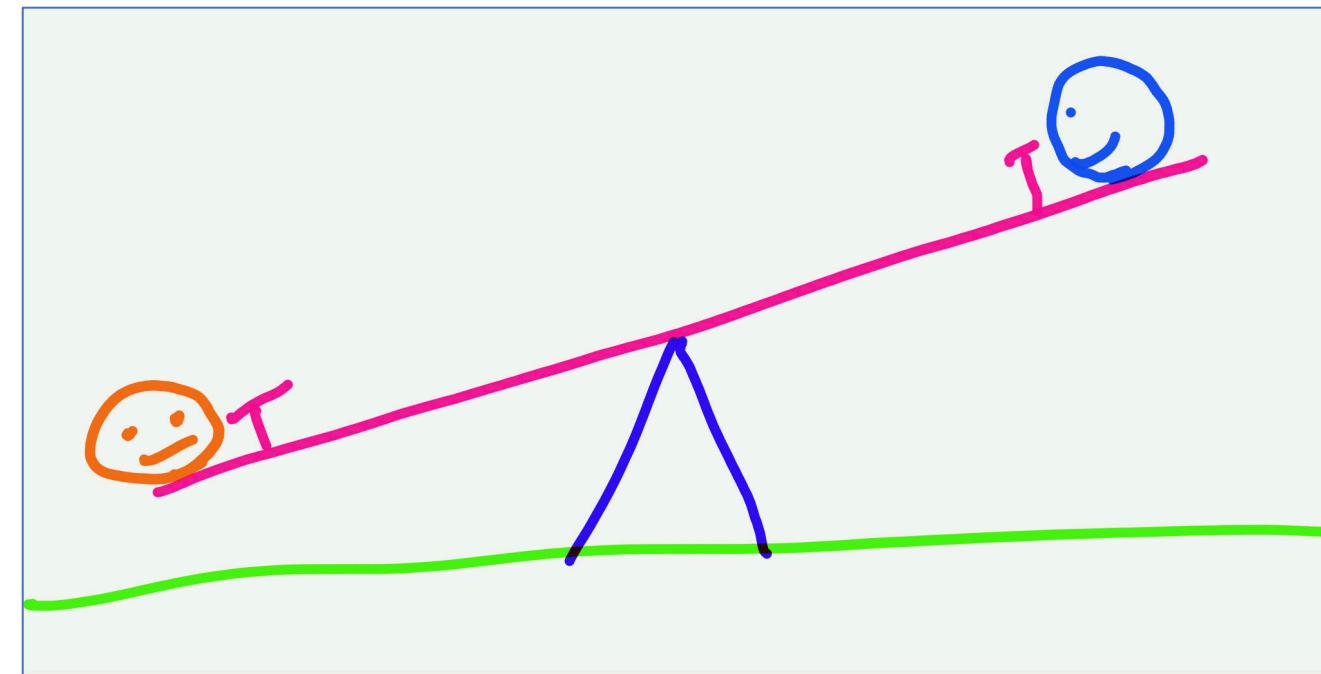
# Scripts

## Steps & Stages



# Ambiguity is linked to asymmetry

- Asymmetrical commitment
- Asymmetrical information



# Layers of complexity in the same market

- Stayers
  - Seekers of the one, or open to that happening
- Players
  - Seeking, but not seeking what stayers are looking for
- Delayers
  - Eventual stayers but currently determined delayers
  - Some are temporary players

Often not recognized in discussions about cohabitation vs marriage . . .

- Lower commitment is a feature, not a bug of cohabitation.
- Ambiguity (and commitment uncertainty) is often the point.
- So many flavors: heterogeneity among cohabiters
  - Long-term committed couples
  - Those who will marry in a short time horizon
  - Cohabitors
  - Cohabiting for convenience or need

# Before we go further, recognize . . .

- Patterns, risks—and what is modifiable or not—differ by economic resources, family backgrounds, education, and individual vulnerabilities.
- Patterns and pathways people take are hugely governed by selection.
  - What's already baked in the cake.
- People over-interpret selection to mean that nothing is changeable or that only context and resource changes matter.

# Timing and Sequence



Sliding vs. Deciding®

Interested in cohabitation research?  
Some folks to follow:

- Wendy Manning
- Pamela Smock
- Susan Brown
- Sharon Sassler
- Daniel Lichter
- Karen Benjamin Guzzo
- Arielle Kuperberg
- Michael Rosenfeld & Katharina Roesler

# The “Cohabitation Effect”

- Historically, premarital cohabitation has been associated with:
  - Greater odds of divorce
  - Lower marital satisfaction
  - More conflict and poorer communication

How many  
people will  
live together  
before  
marriage?

70 to 75%



# Recent Research, and Headlines

- There have been many reports that this effect has weakened or gone away for couples marrying in the past 10 to 15 years.  
e.g., Manning & Cohen, 2012, Kuperberg, 2014
- Sociologists have expected that this risk would go away as cohabitation became normative.
- But in 2018, two sociologists from Stanford shook things up, claiming the effect remains.
  - They found living together before marriage is associated with greater risk for divorce (except in the first year of marriage).

# Evidence of no-risk, only for those who ...

- Only cohabited after mutual plans for marriage

Rhoades et al. 2009; Stanley et al., 2010

- Only ever cohabited with the person married

Jose et al., 2010; Teachman, 2003; Lichter et al., 2010; Rhoades & Stanley, 2014

- Did not cohabit with anyone before age 23

Kuperberg, 2014

- Did not have a child before marrying

Tach & Halpern-Meekin, 2009

# Regardless

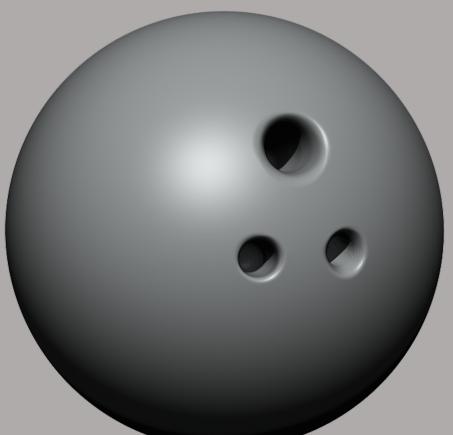
- There is (almost) no evidence that cohabitation before marriage improves one's odds of success in marriage.
- Why?

# How Could Cohabitation be Associated with Higher Risk in Marriage?

- Selection effects
- Changes in attitudes and beliefs  
(Axinn & Barber, 1997)
- Inertia

see Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2006

*Inertia is related to how much an object will resist changes to its present state of rest or motion.*



# Quiz: What has more inertia?

Dating

Living together



# Testing the Theory of Inertia

- Inertia should be a non-factor for couples who have *mutual* plans to marry (i.e., are engaged) or are already married before moving in together.
- Hypothesis supported in 7 studies/6 samples
  - Kline et al., 2004
  - Rhoades et al., 2009
  - Stanley et al., 2010
  - Goodwin et al., 2010
  - Manning & Cohen, 2012
  - Rhoades & Stanley, 2014
  - Rhoades et al., 2016

# Further Support for the Theory of Inertia

- Constraints predict staying together net of dedication.

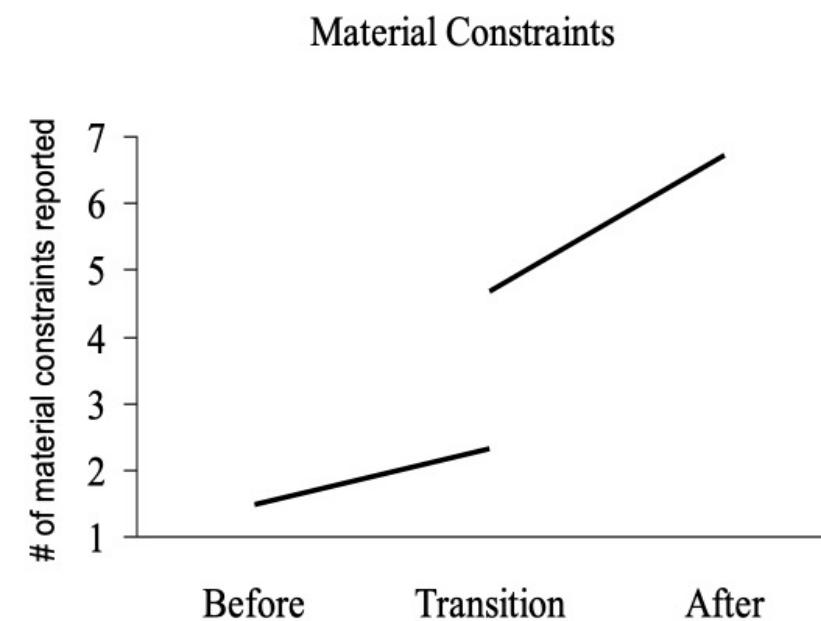
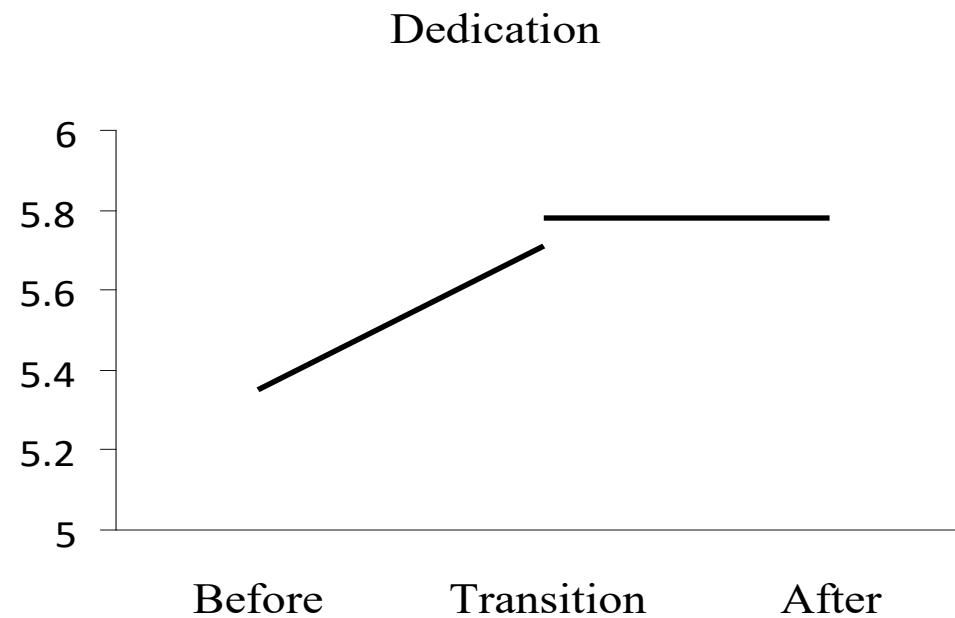
Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2010

- As people move in, dedication levels off and constraints jump up and take off.

Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2012

As people move in, dedication levels off and constraints jump up and take off.

Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2012



If cohabitation is associated with increased constraints, people would be careful about that, right?



Um, no.

## Sliding rules, not Deciding

- Qualitative Data: Over 50% of couples slid into cohabitation.

Manning & Smock, 2005; see also Lindsay, 2000

- Quantitative Data: 2/3rds slid into cohabiting

Stanley, Rhoades, & Fincham, 2011

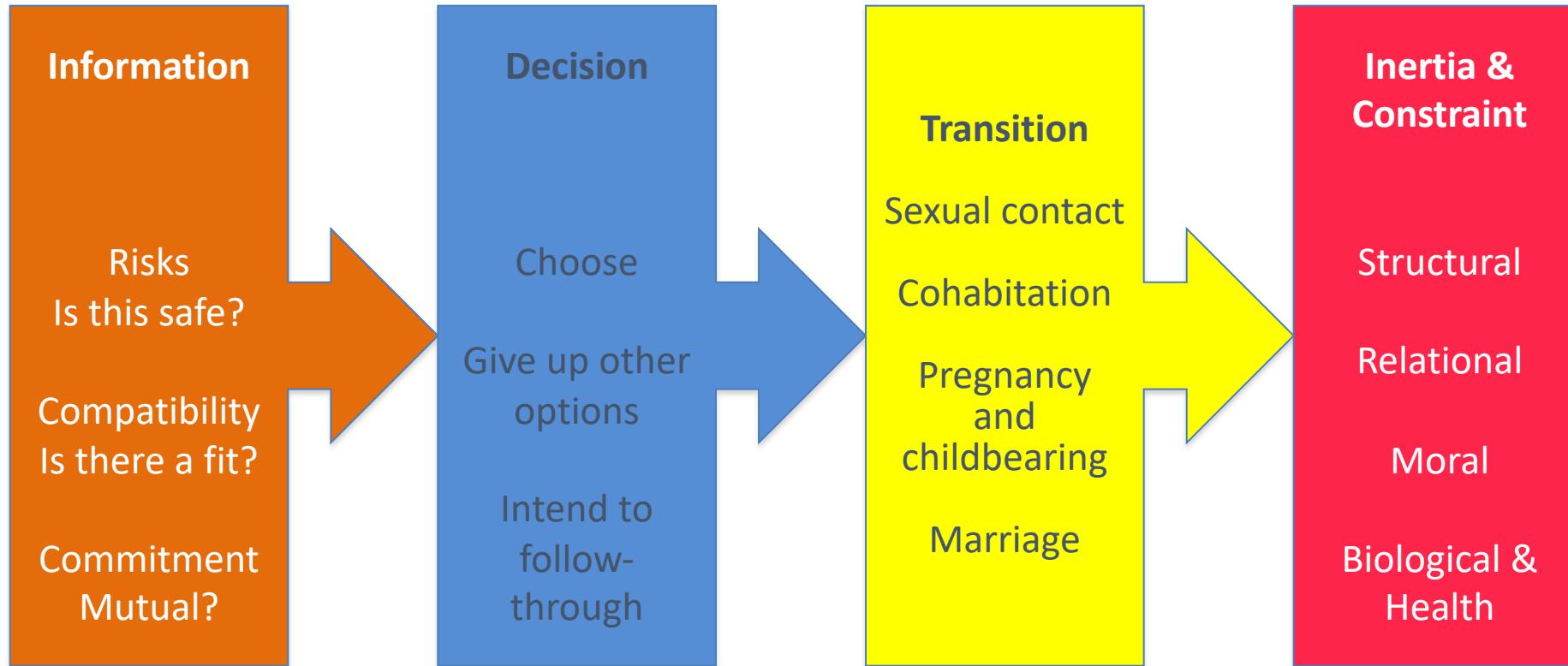
# A Transition and Risk Model



Stanley & Rhoades, 2009

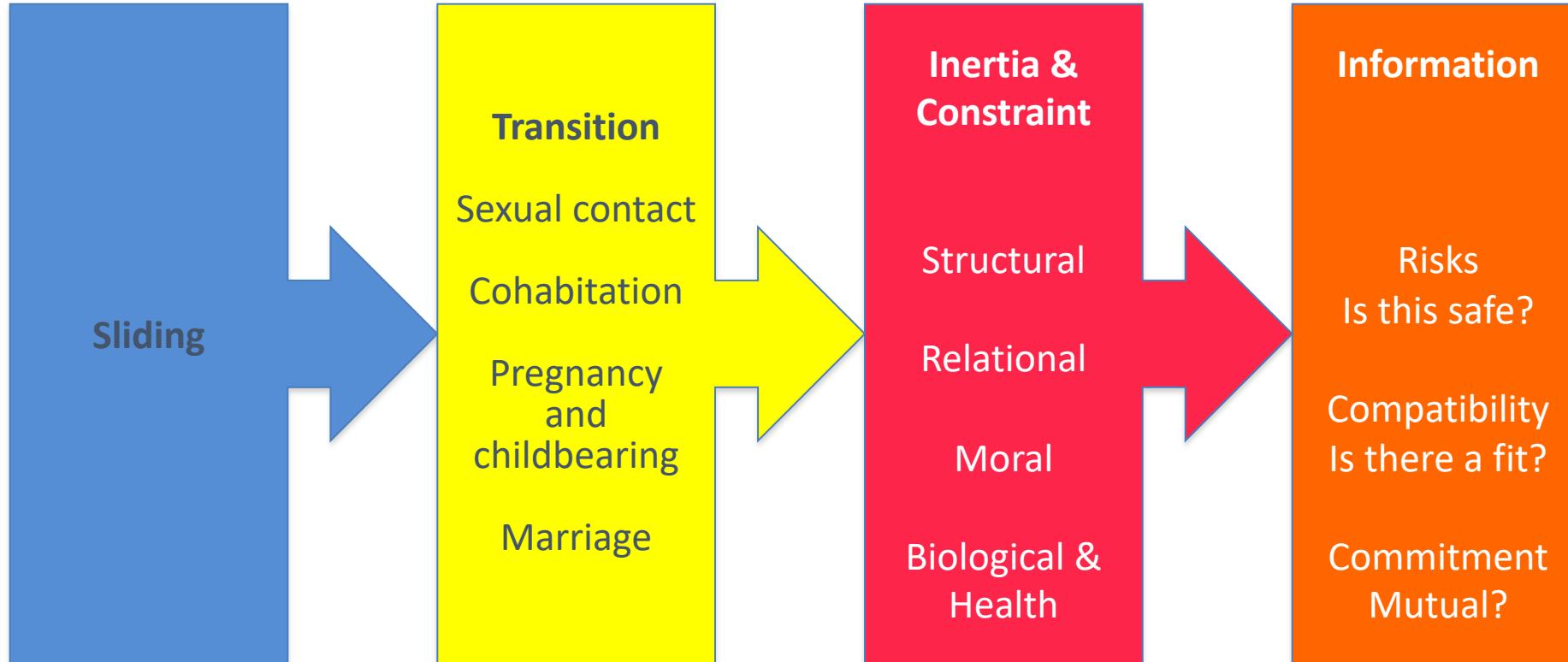
# A Lower Risk Sequence

(A Theoretical Model: Stanley & Rhoades, 2009)



# A Higher Risk Sequence

(A Theoretical Model: Stanley & Rhoades, 2009)



# Speed of transitions adds to risk

- Stunted relationship development  
(Busby, Carroll, & Willoughby, 2010)
- Fast “tempo” contributes to lower quality marriages  
(Sassler, Addo, & Licher, 2012)

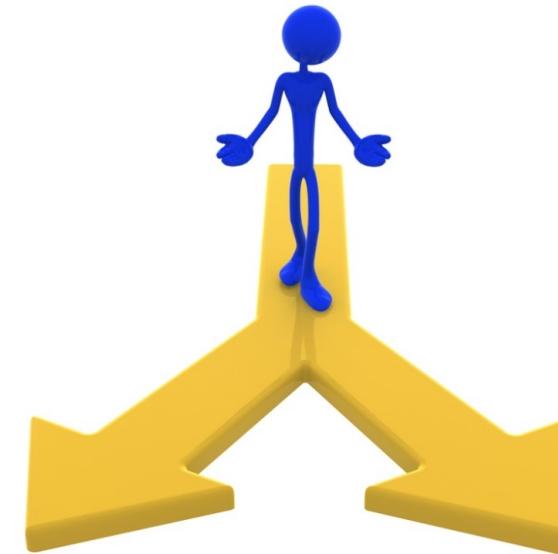
- Sliding is not always bad.
- But, in many cases . . .

*People are giving up options  
before they make a choice.*

# In Contrast to Sliding . . .

Commitments are Decisions

“Commitment is making a choice  
to give up other choices.”



(Stanley, 1998)

# Implications

[www.slidingvsdeciding.com](http://www.slidingvsdeciding.com)

[www.PREPinc.com](http://www.PREPinc.com)