

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

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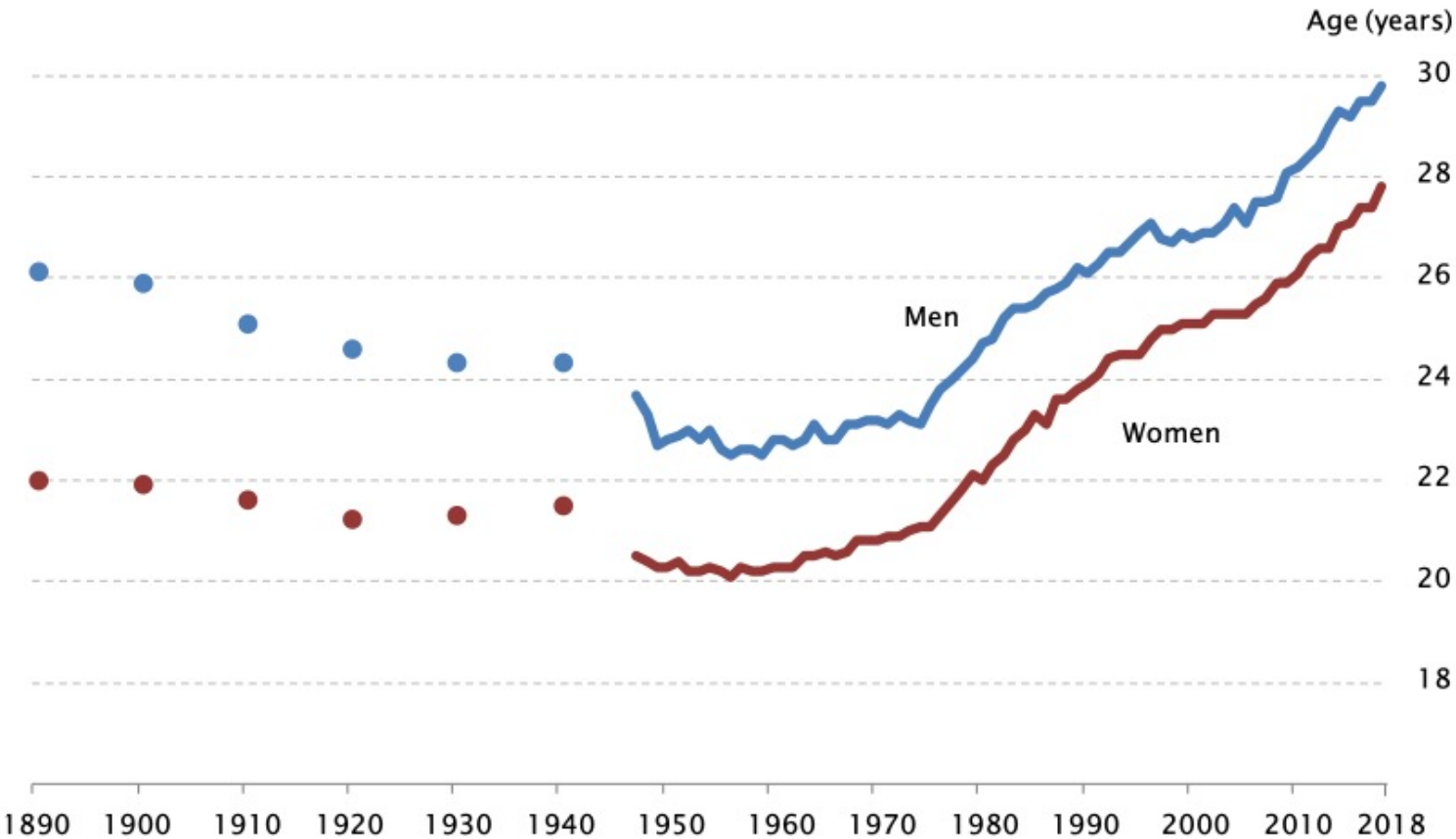
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The State of Things

The Big Delay

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

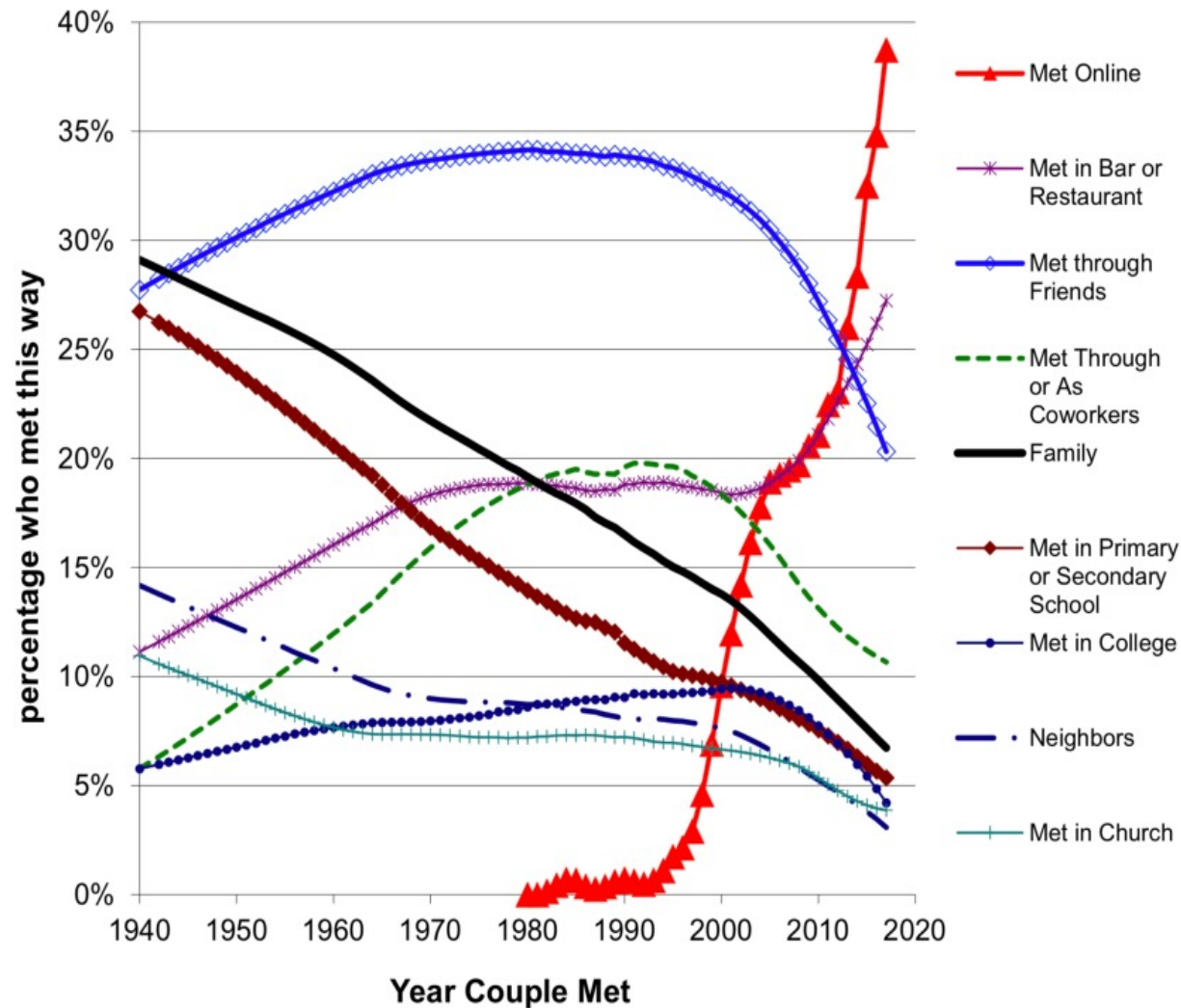


Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Decennial Censuses, 1890 to 1940, and Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplements, 1947 to 2018.

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)

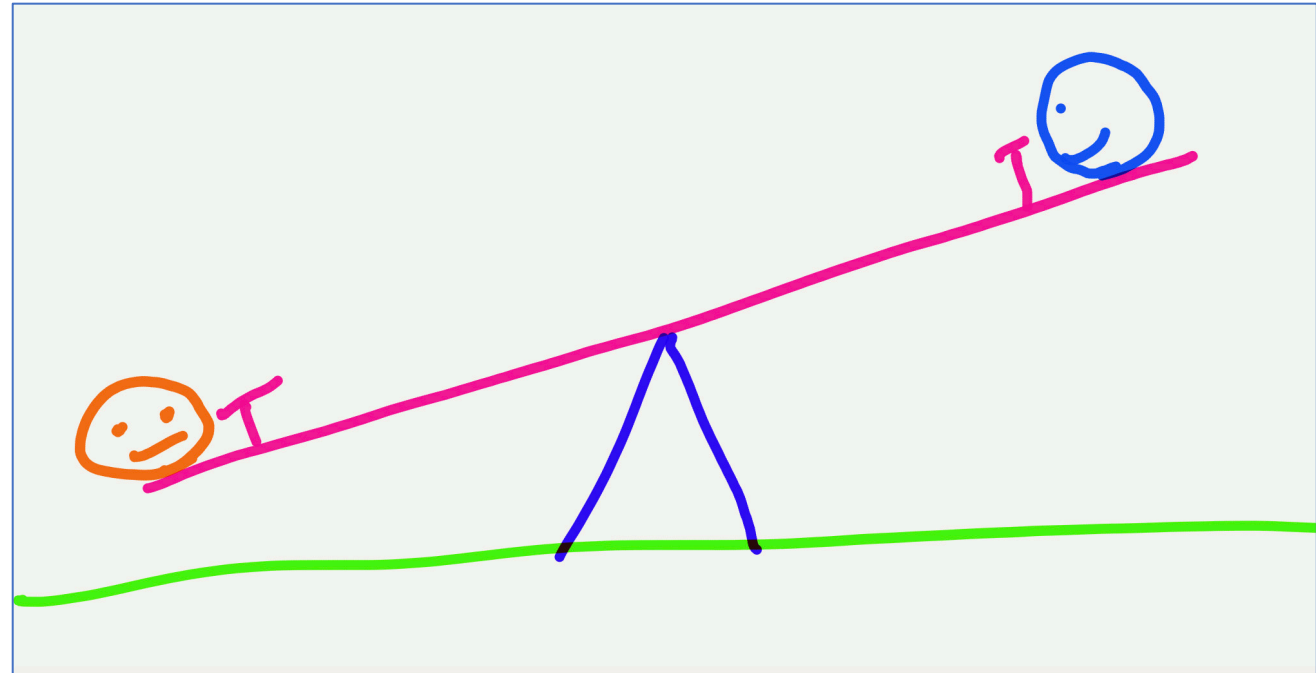
Scripts

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

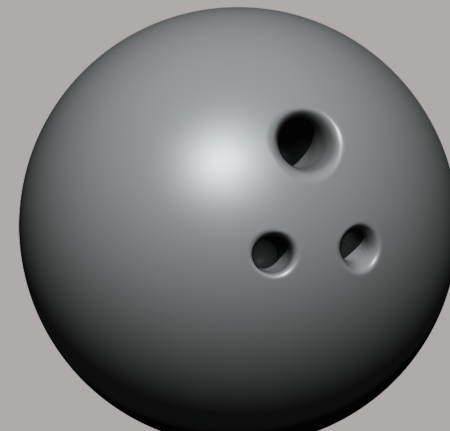
- There is (almost) no evidence that cohabitation before marriage improves one's odds of success in marriage.
- Why?

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.

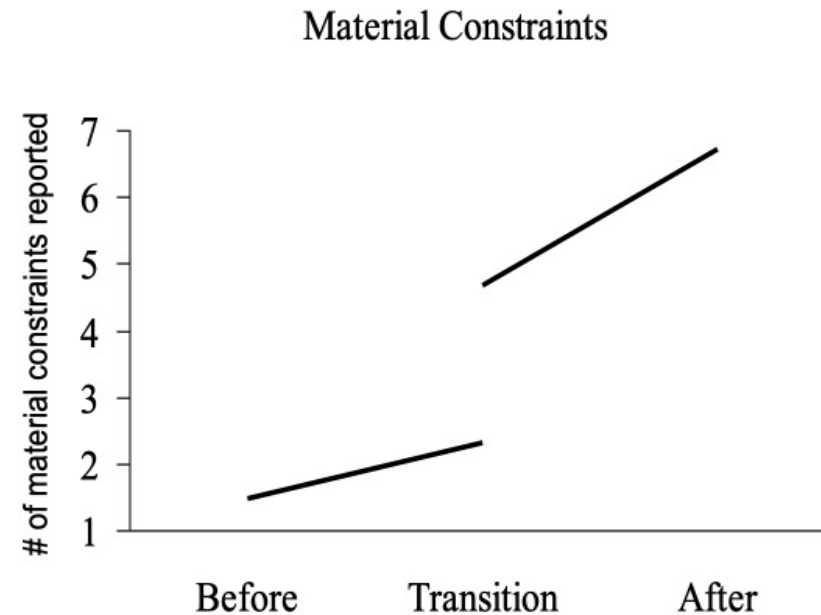
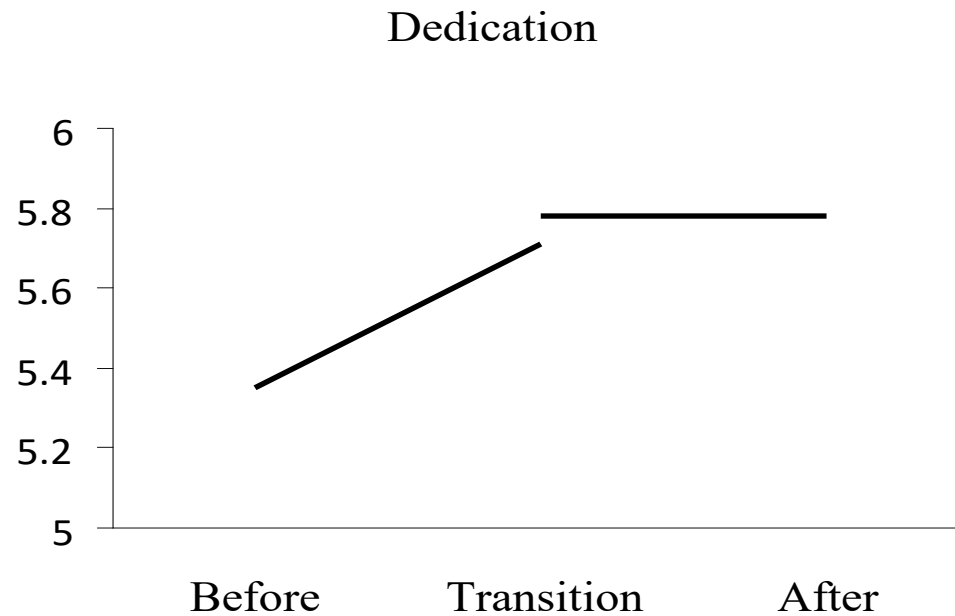
Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2010

- 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

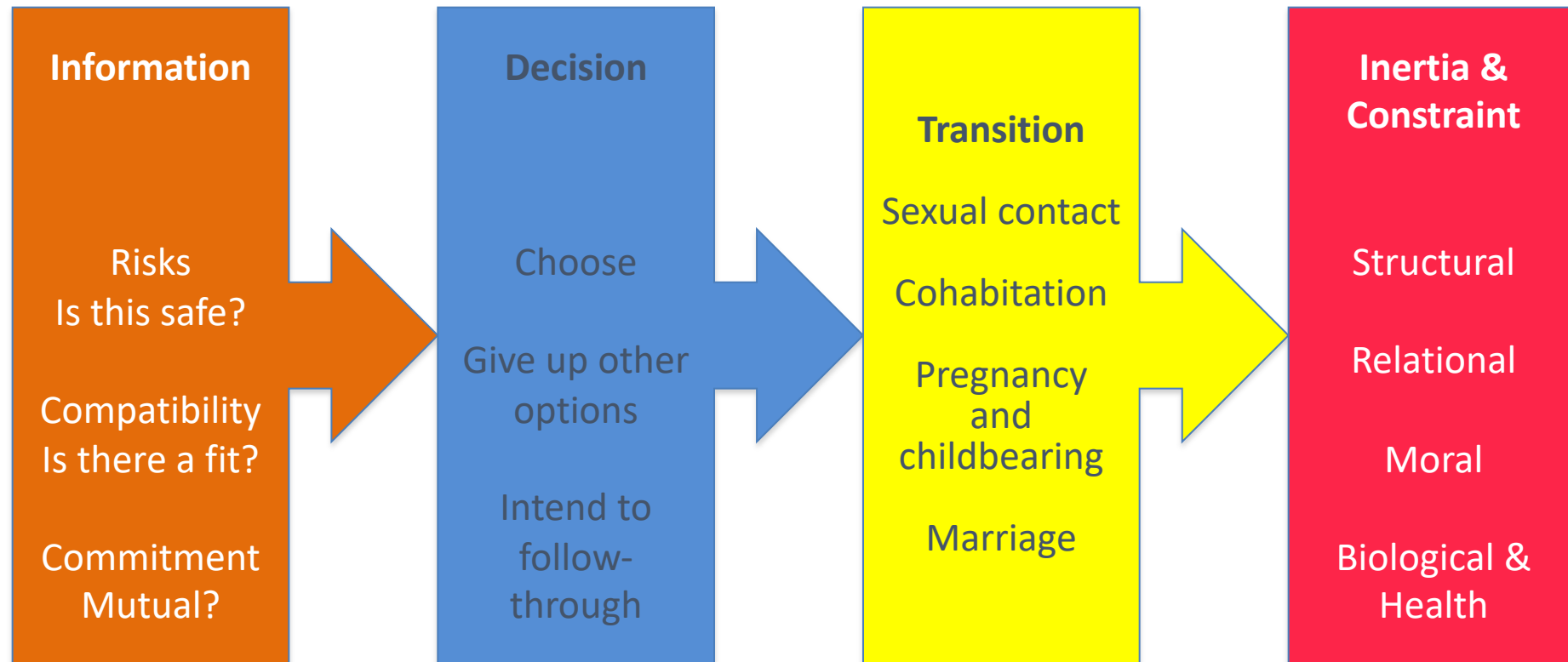


A Transition and Risk Model

Stanley & Rhoades, 2009

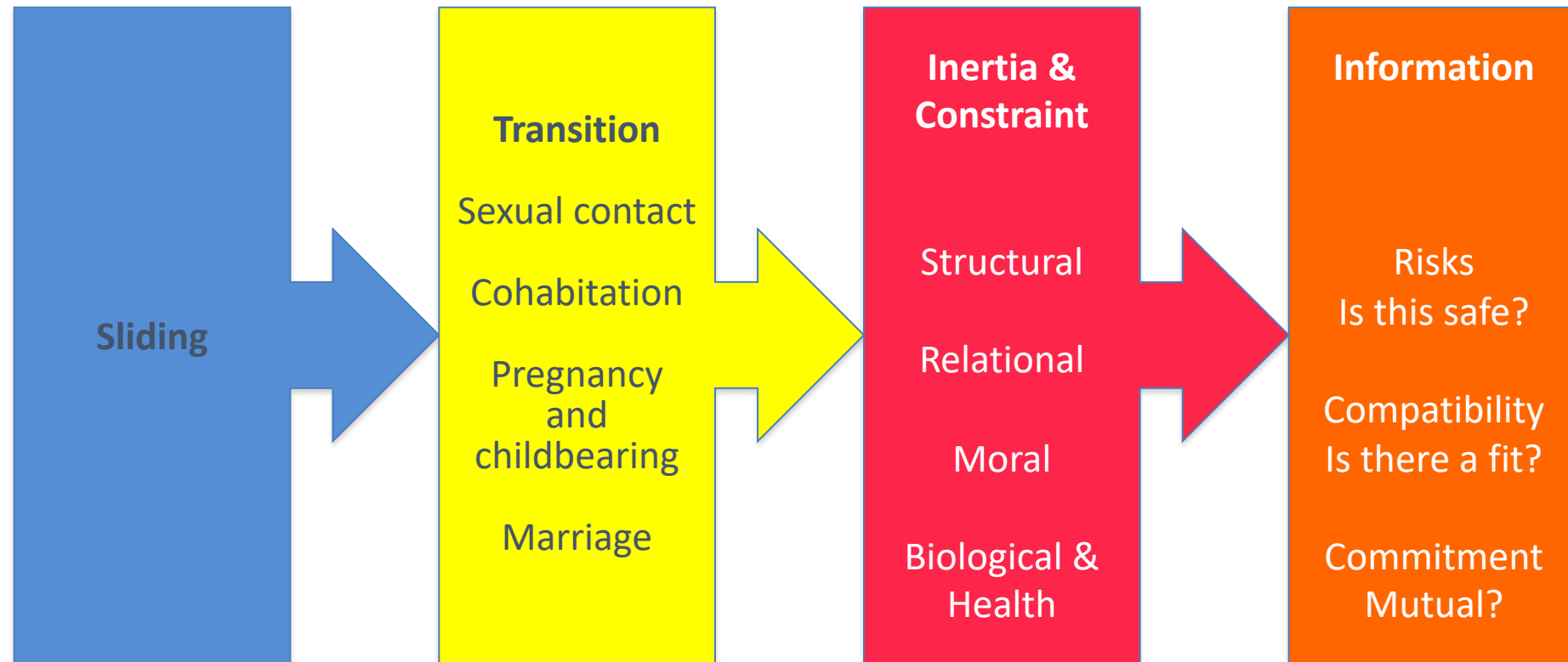
A Lower Risk Sequence

(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, & Lichter, 2012)

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

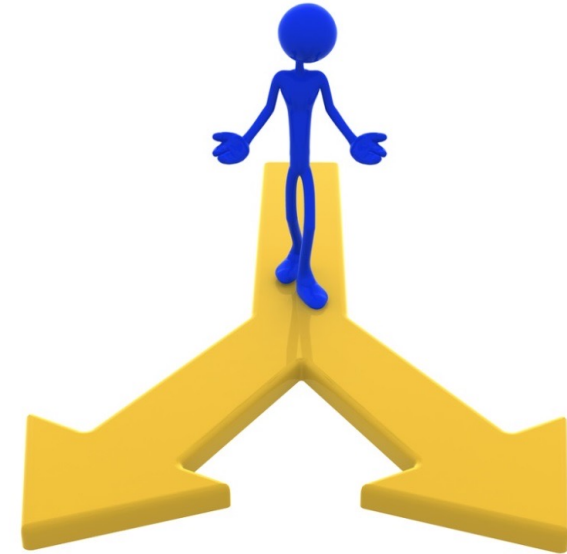
*People are giving up options
before they make a choice.*

In Contrast to Sliding . . .

Commitments are Decisions

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

(Stanley, 1998)



Implications

www.slidingvsdeciding.com

www.PREPinC.com