

What is it with Men and Commitment, Anyway?

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This paper was given as a keynote address to the 2002 Annual Smart Marriages Conference in Washington D. C. The referencing has been updated as of November, 2004 to reflect works that were in press or under review that have been published since the time of the address. The paper reflects the structure of my thought and comments in the address, though, as a paper, it has the luxury of greater detail on a number of key points compared to the address. The flow is also slightly different from the address so as to improve readability of the paper. The recorded talk is available through links at www.SmartMarriages.com. The footnotes in this paper contain references to findings in research that are consistent with, or further bolster, the points being made but that were not available to me at the time of the address or that I thought would be useful to the reader.

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What is it with Men and Commitment, Anyway?

Scott M. Stanley

Before looking at the question of how men may differ from women with regard to commitment, I want to address the general question, “does commitment still matter?” Let us begin by looking at some of the findings that were just released from the Oklahoma Baseline Survey (Johnson et al., 2002). In this phone survey of 2300 Oklahoma residents, those who had been divorced were asked about the things that led to divorce. They were given a list of ten things and asked whether each was a major contributor to their divorces (see Table 1). Commitment was the mostly highly endorsed item. In fact, 85% said that “lack of commitment” was the major reason for divorce. I would not have predicted that it would be so highly rated in this day and age, much less the highest rated reason for divorce among the options presented.

Another finding coming from this survey just released from Oklahoma supports the importance of commitment in marriage. A question was asked of the currently married respondents: “Have you ever seriously thought your marriage was in trouble?” Thirty-four percent said “yes.” Those who said “yes,” were asked, “Are you glad you are still together?” Ninety-two percent said that they were glad they were still together.

A recent finding from the large-scale National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) is consistent with this point from the Oklahoma survey. As part of a report entitled,

Table 1
Oklahoma 2002 Baseline Survey: Reasons for Respondents' Divorces

<i>Reasons For Respondent's Prior Divorce</i>	<i>Percent Indicating "Yes"</i>
Lack of commitment	85%
Too much conflict and arguing	61%
Infidelity or extramarital affairs	58%
Getting married too young	43%
Little or no helpful premarital preparation	42%
Financial problems or economic hardship	41%
Domestic violence	30%
Lack of support from family members	29%
Religious differences between partners	21%
Other reason	21%

Notes. Percent reflects percentage of respondents who indicated that the corresponding factor contributed to their divorce, ordered from most commonly endorsed to least commonly endorsed.

Does Divorce Make People Happy, a team headed by Linda Waite examined longitudinal data from the NSFH (Waite et al., 2002). Among the findings, of those who were very unhappy in their marriages at one time point, two-thirds of those who stayed together were happy 5 years later.¹

These simple findings suggest that there is something wrong with the belief that many Americans seem to have: Once a marriage is down, it's done. My impression is that Americans generally believe that marriages don't recover and that the choice is black and white: either hang on in stable misery (perhaps some people's definition of commitment) or get out. The fact is, some marriages are, indeed, like that. For any number of reasons, they will not improve. However, there are also couples who hang in there and bounce back from difficult times. They endure, persevere, and continue to put one foot in front of the other. In the end, many get to a very different place in life.

So, at least for some couples, the perseverance that comes with commitment produces important, positive outcomes. This is also true more broadly, with couples generally doing best if they have a clear sense of future together (Amato & DeBoer, 2001; Amato & Rogers, 1999; Waite & Joyner, 2001). These data I briefly present, along with a great deal of evidence in various studies not presented, suggest that commitment certainly does matter in marriage (and divorce). Certainly, the average person thinks that it matters a great deal.²

¹ I have more recently heard from Paul Amato (personal communication, 2003) that he does not obtain a similar finding in his longitudinal data set. Hence, there is complexity here and more to be understood. Nevertheless, there are clearly some marriages wherein perseverance through tougher times has paid off. This may be least likely in situations where the "current" difficulties are driven by longstanding patterns of personality or characterological problems in one or both partners that make the relationship both destructive and unlikely to change over time.

For a further discussion, see: Beach, S. R. H., & Fincham, F. D. (2003). Spontaneous remission of marital discord: A simmering debate with profound implications for Family Psychology. *The Family Psychologist*, 19, 11-13.

² We have been moving toward conceptualizing healthy (and good) marriages as characterized by both safety in the day-to-day interaction (connection and support) and safety in term of a sense of security for the future (e.g., Stanley,

Before I continue with other points, I want to highlight that nothing in this talk should be construed to mean that I am arguing that people should remain in highly destructive relationships no matter what else. When there is danger of serious harm, safety should be the overarching priority.

What is Commitment?

How do couples experience commitment? Our theory suggests there are two components to commitment: personal dedication and constraint (Stanley & Markman, 1992).³ Personal dedication speaks to how intrinsically committed partners are to one another whereas constraints are the things that might keep couples together when partners would rather leave. Constraints are the things that accumulate as relationships grow and make it hard to break up, such as financial considerations, responsibilities for children, social pressure, and a lack of foreseeable alternatives. Despite the connotation, constraints can have a positive function in the lives of couples because they can help prevent one or both partners from making drastic decisions that unravel investment during periods of intense unhappiness. However, constraints don't lead to great, happy marriages. They mostly put the brakes on impulsive, destabilizing behaviors at critical times for many couples. Of course, when someone is really unhappy for a long time in a marriage, constraints can lead a sense of feeling trapped.

Personal dedication, on the other hand, refers to interpersonal and more intrinsic commitment processes, particularly in commitment to the partner and the relationship. It has

Markman, & Whitton, 2002). This fundamental aspect of a clear sense of a future together is, in that model, a core element of the type of safety people need to have to thrive in life together as a couple.

³ This model has both theoretical, practical, and empirical utility. If you are a researcher and interested in examining such dimensions, I have various measures available that I can send to you if you wish. My work has been heavily influenced by two icons in the research and theory of commitment: psychologist Caryl Rusbult and sociologist Mike Johnson. I highly recommend their works for those interested in further study.

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 more satisfaction with sacrificing for the other.⁴

There are two fundamentals that underline all of what commitment is about for couples. First, developing and maintaining a long-term view is crucial for marital success. Fundamentally, what commitment brings to a marriage is a long-term perspective that allows partners to weather the inevitable ups and downs in marital satisfaction. Second, commitment means making a choice to give up choices.⁵ Giving up choices is not a prized notion in American culture. We want to hang on to everything. In fact, we’re generally reinforced to believe that we should hang on to everything and keep all of our options open. Of course, at times, this presents a serious problem for individuals because one cannot have certain things in life by hanging onto everything in life. It is like the proverbial monkey with his hand in the jar who is trying to hold on to so much that he can’t get his fist out. We end up with much less in life when we try to hang on to everything rather than being more devoted and dedicated to a particular path or partner. So, while commitment remains crucial in so many ways to relationship and marital success, there are fundamentals to commitment that are at odds with much in American culture at this point, especially in regard to holding longer term views and making clear decisions to be committed.

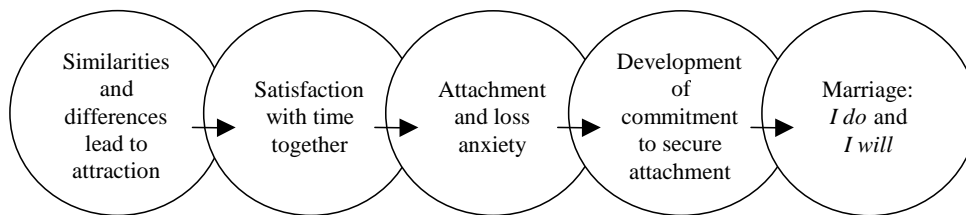
⁴ Depending on the theoretical or research use of the construct, certain elements can be measured as part of commitment or, alternatively, correlates of commitment (e.g., alternative monitoring).

⁵ This theme is explored in detail in my book, *The Heart of Commitment* (1998). That book was written for a religiously inclined audience. Since the time of this talk in 2002, I have completed a new book (coming out in April 2005) that covers similar material and also new ground. It was written for a broader audience and retains strong research foundations while including insights from scriptures. The new book, *The Power of Commitment*, will be accessible to those who are not religiously inclined as well as those who are.

Why Commitment Develops

So why would somebody give up any choices in life? What is it about commitment that would make the whole idea of giving up anything worthwhile? Figure 1 presents a model for how commitment develops. The reason commitment develops answers the question as to why one would ever make a choice to give up other choices in the first place.

Figure 1
The Development of Commitment



First, attraction develops based on partners' similarities and differences. There is a great deal of mystery, thankfully, in the roots of attraction, but let's assume for the moment that the attraction has developed between two people. Because of this, they spend more time together. As the relationship progresses, the ongoing satisfaction between partners results in a growing emotional attachment. However, along with the attachment comes a type of anxiety. I believe this is a nearly universal phenomenon.

Why do we get anxious? We get anxious because we start to think about and feel the potential for loss of something valuable (Stanley, Lobitz, & Dickson, 1999): "I like you, I like spending time with you, I enjoy being with you. What if you're not going to stay with me? What if you're not going to remain in my life?"

While I think this attachment process is entirely normal; I also believe that people will vary in how they experience it based on their own attachment history in their family of origin or in prior, romantic relationships.⁶

It is important to recognize that the development of attachment is not the same as the development of commitment, nor is attachment the same as commitment. 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, thereby settling any anxieties about attachment. Attachment often pushes one to desire security but commitment brings evidence that one can actually trust that security exists.

This simple model portrays what may be the most important role that commitment plays in relationship success and failure. Accordingly, marriage represents the highest expression of security between romantic partners. Therefore, a clearly understood, expressed, and regularly acted out *I do* is going to be the strongest foundation for relationship quality and security. Of course marriages are not always permanent. But, generally speaking, two partners derive a sense of permanence and a future when they look each other in the eyes and say *I do* and—by implication—*I will*. Couples clearly expressing and acting on such commitment will have an easier time in large measure because the long term perspective is in place to begin with, and that is crucial to help them. weather the ups and downs that are inevitable in life together. Conflicts,

⁶ It has become widely recognized that adults as well as children experience anxieties about the complexities of attachment. Sue Johnson, for example, has developed a strong and effective system of marital therapy based on this fact, working directly with couples in how they deal with the anxieties about attachment in the course of their marriages: Johnson, S. M. (1996). *The practice of emotionally focused marital therapy: Creating connection*. New York: Taylor and Francis.

A general resource on this theme of attachment is: Cassidy, J., & Shaver, P. R. (1998). *Handbook of attachment theory, research, and clinical applications*. New York: Guilford Press, Inc.

A great example of the use of this theoretical system in empirical research with couples is: Davila, J., & Bradbury, T. N. (2001). Attachment insecurity and the distinction between unhappy spouses who do and do not divorce. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 15, 371-393.

set backs, and challenges that could otherwise threaten a relationship will be managed better because of the secure bond.

American's views of how commitment in relationships develops appear to be changing. 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, focusing on how they are thinking about their relationships and how relationships form (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 compared to past eras. Personally, I have been struck by how much has changes in recent decades.

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 and cultural background, relationships progressed along pathways marked by stages of commitment. For many, dating moved toward "going steady" which may have moved to a woman being "pinned" or wearing her beau's class ring, and so forth. These actions represent emblems of commitment, with such patterns being ways young people practiced making commitments. It seems that such steps of practicing commitment are no longer existent for many younger people in America. In talking to experts in this field, I've come to the conclusion that it is not at all clear that anything else has replaced these patterns that have largely disappeared. In contrast, there is a general practicing of *not* committing, or not committing in any particularly tangible ways. I'm not suggesting—not at all—that young people should become, using Norval Glenn's (2002) concept, prematurely entangled and thereby close out alternative options too early in a relationship. Yet, I

am suggesting that some important symbols of commitment have been lost in recent years and I think the loss is meaningful.

Such a shift in basic relationship development behaviors is clear in Glenn and Marquardt's report. It is also very clear in Popenoe and Whitehead's (2002) findings that such emblems of commitment are no longer made in young adulthood. Rather, relationships and boundaries and futures are ambiguous as couples develop toward the possibility of marriage. Hence, with regard to the developmental model presented earlier, attachments without commitments have become widespread. This change, I believe, has consequences.

Where We Find Few Differences Between Men and Women in Commitment

Before exploring the ways in which I believe commitment works differently for men and women, I want to look at a few ways in which men and women are quite similar with regard to commitment. 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 (if not more so) (Stanley & Markman, 1997; Stanley, Markman, & Whitton, 2002). Similar findings were also found in the large survey we conducted in Oklahoma. Additionally, in the Oklahoma study, there were no meaningful differences between men and women in terms of how trapped they felt in their marriages (Johnson et al., 2002).⁷

Being equally dedicated to marriage does not mean that people derive equal benefits from the dedication of their partners. The benefits of commitment in marriage may be somewhat

⁷ These points are with regard to the more psychological dimensions of being dedicated to one's mate or feeling trapped in marriage. There is evidence that males are more likely, on average, than women to fail commitment tests in serious ways in marriage. To put it in the words of sociologist Paul Amato, many marriages do, in fact, end because of "men behaving badly" with regard to infidelity, substance abuse, or domestic violence. These data reported here suggest, though, that in marriages that are basically intact and moving forward, men report being just as dedicated as women (on average; your experience may vary!).

different between men and women. On balance, it appears that men and women both benefit from marriage, though men may benefit somewhat more; and women clearly are more likely to suffer the most when marriages fail or are of chronic low quality (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). I will come back to this point about benefits of marriage.

In the same national poll noted above, cohabiting individuals were, on average, less dedicated to their partners than their married counterparts, even when controlling for length of relationship in years (Stanley, Whitton, & Markman, 2004).⁸ Hence, it is not merely institutional commitment that matters in our culture (i.e., whether you are married or not). Commitment to the institution of marriage does tend to differ between marrieds and cohabiters (Nock, 1995). More importantly, institutional commitment appears to be linked with interpersonal commitment (dedication) to the partner. Thus, some people may under-interpret the meaning of their partner's reluctance (male or female) to move toward marriage in the future. Resistance of marriage may, quite often, mean uncertainty about the relationship, not merely uncertainty about marriage per se.

Differences Between the Sexes in Views of Marriage and Commitment

With this background on commitment in mind, I want to explore a theory about one of the major ways commitment is different between women and men related to marriage: *Although married men and women may be equally committed (dedicated) on average, men see the line between marriage and not marriage differently than women do.* Below, I review the research and thinking that led me to this theoretical statement. This is, to be clear, a theory requiring more thought and testing in the years to come; but it is a theory that explains a great deal of what people often see in the behavior of men compared to women.

⁸ These findings were in press at the time of this address but did not come out in the journal until 2004.

The Desire for Marriage

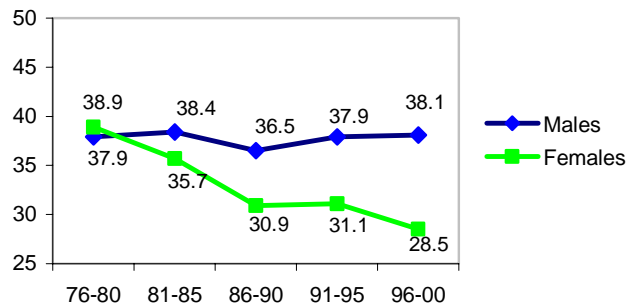
Let us look at some simple findings that suggest a difference between men and women in the view of marriage. First, various findings suggest that men, compared to women, see marriage as more desirable or important. In a 1998 poll, 39% of unmarried men reported that they would prefer to be married, whereas 29% percent of unmarried women reported that they would prefer to be married.⁹ In a 1994 with a similar question, but different wording, 59% percent of unmarried men said they want to get married, whereas 48 percent of women said they did.

There is some evidence of a difference in men’s and women’s views of marriage having opened up on the past few decades in the

Monitoring the Future surveys conducted by the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan.¹⁰ Over the past few decades, roughly 38% of male high school seniors agree or mostly agree that people who marry have happier lives than those who remain single or cohabit (see Figure 2). While the percentage has remained unchanged for males during this period, between 1976 and 2000, the percentage of female high school seniors who think that marriage

Figure 2

Percentage of High School Seniors Who Said They “Agreed” or “Mostly Agreed” that “Most People Will Have Fuller and Happier Lives if they Choose Legal Marriage rather than Staying Single or Just Living With Someone,” by Period, United States (Popenoe & Whitehead, 2002)



⁹ I obtained this data point and the one in the next sentence from the article in USA Today on 7/8/2002 entitled *Cohabiting is Not the Same as Commitment* by Karen S. Peterson. I have not, as yet, had enough time to find the proper references from Gallop. I will add them to this document in the future when I am able to do so.

¹⁰ I became aware of these data by reading the same State of Our Unions report put out by the National Marriage Projects in 2002, headed up by Barbara Whitehead and David Popenoe. The report is available at: <http://marriage.rutgers.edu/>

matters in this same way fell from 37.8% to 28.5%. This is an amazing gap opening up between young men and young women, with women increasingly coming to think, at least in high school, that marriage really does not matter. Of course, these data also make it clear that the majority of both young men and women believe similarly, but I think the change in female beliefs is particularly disturbing. It is almost as if we have finally succeeded in talking young women into thinking that marriage does not really have a great bearing on their prospects in life—this at the same time, as I will mention later, it is becoming clearer that marriage may make a particularly important difference in how men treat women.

Broadly speaking, all of these data show a 10-point difference in the percentage of males and females regarding beliefs about the value or desirability of marriage. This is a curious thing. The popular conception is that men are commitment phobic, especially about marriage, and women are the ones eager to move relationships toward that committed state. But these data suggest that men, maybe more than women, would be the ones pursuing marriage because they may actually see it as a more desirable or important step. What could explain this disconnect between the popular perceptions of men and the sentiments that men express? As I mentioned above, I think an understanding of how men vs. women see crossing the line between marriage and not marriage may explain a great deal.

To build the case for this theory that there are important differences in views about “the line,” I will present findings from four sources, but I would point out that there are many other ways these arguments could be supported. What is presented here are merely the steps on the path I took, and they are in the order I find most logically compelling for this presentation, not at all in the order that I encountered them: 1) qualitative, focus group research by Whitehead and Popenoe presented this year, and at this conference; 2) findings and thought from the work of

sociologist Steve Nock; 3) findings from work in our lab on sacrifice and commitment; and 4) findings from our research on cohabitation prior to marriage.

Why Men Won't Commit

Barbara Dafoe Whitehead and David Popenoe just issued their State of Our Unions Report from the National Marriage Project at Rutgers (2002).¹¹ This report contains an analysis of data gathered in focus groups led by Whitehead and Popenoe that explored the beliefs of men in their 20s about marriage and commitment. Barbara and David would be the first to acknowledge that such research lacks representativeness and sophisticated statistical procedures, but it is nevertheless a method of great value for the generation of further thought, theory, and hypotheses. Some things cannot be initially well understood in highly controlled research. I have scarcely had more enjoyment reading any document in our field. It's a fascinating report.

Whitehead and Popenoe derived important insights about how men view marriage, their female partners, and the process of growing up. Here are the highlights in my reading of what they found. First and foremost, men report that they can enjoy many of the same benefits by cohabiting rather than marrying. Further, they report few social pressures to marry; not from family, not from friends, and not from the families of the women they live with. They also associate marriage, not cohabitation, with the possibility of financial loss. Another fear expressed is that, in marriage, a woman will want to have children sooner. Across a spectrum of possible changes, they are essentially saying they are not ready and that they would like to put such changes off as long as they possibly can—for example, until their late 20s. Essentially, they report that they are not ready for all the responsibility implied by marriage. To them,

¹¹ As noted elsewhere, the report is available at: <http://marriage.rutgers.edu/>

cohabitation without marriage provides all the desirable benefits of companionship without the potential risks of marriage.

Whitehead and Popenoe suggest that “men see marriage as a final step in a prolonged process of growing up.”

There were two elements of their report that I found particularly intriguing; one disturbing and one semi-humorous. First, Whitehead and Popenoe suggest¹² that many young adults today are seeking soul mates. Ninety-four percent (94%) of younger adults actually express this as the most important feature of what or who they are looking for in a mate (Popenoe & Whitehead 2001). Part of what they implied in that sentiment is that a soul mate is someone who will take them as they are and not try to change them. Disturbingly, some significant number of men essentially reported that part of why they were resisting commitment in marriage was that they were not sure their female cohabitant was their soul mate.

Until they find a soul mate, however, they are willing to wait. They don't want to "settle" for second best in their choice of a marriage partner, though they don't have the same standards for a choice of a live-in girlfriend. (p. 12, Whitehead & Popenoe, 2002)

Put in my own rough language, some of these men were reporting this sentiment: “I'm happy here for the time being, sleeping with my partner and letting her care for me in various ways, but I am not sure she's really ‘the one’ for me, and I'm biding my time here while I keep looking around or until I decide that she is the one.” I wondered as I read their report how many women know that their partners may still be “on the market?” How many think they are on a trajectory toward marriage when they are actually in a stationary, low earth orbit? Surely there are many women who are equally uncertain about a future with a particular man, and, therefore, prefer aspects of cohabitation to marriage for the time being. Yet, I have a hunch many of these

¹² Their report in 2001 focused on this matter of soul mates in detail, using data from survey research that they commissioned. It is available at their website noted in an earlier footnote.

women think that their male partners are more locked into a future with them than might actually be the case. That is sobering and sad to me.

On a lighter note, I found it amusing that the men were essentially saying that, when they are married, their wives will be allowed to tell them what to do in a way that is not part of the cohabiting compact. There is some clear sense that marriage requires a greater level of mutual dedication and responsibility—as if they are 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 because I was reflecting on this simple finding in light of the evidence of health benefits for men in marriage (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). Most all scholars assume, rightly so I believe, that a major reason for these benefits for men is that their wives tell them what to do in very important ways: “Why don’t you stop with the beer, that’s your third tonight.” “You need to go to the doctor and get that looked into. I want you to go this week.” “You have been working every night, running yourself ragged. You need to cut back.” “You need more sleep; how are you going to get it?”

I’m pretty sure that one major reason that men live approximately 8 years longer if they are married (and are otherwise healthier in various ways) is that their wives tell them what to do and they do some of what their wives tell them. So, younger men are likely seeing something as a drawback in marriage that may be the major reason why they will live longer if they become (and remain) married.

All of this is consistent, of course, with my theory expressed above that men see the line between marriage and not marriage in ways that are, perhaps, quite different from women; 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, whereas I really do not think that women have this same sense that they (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. This may be the very reason why men are widely seen as resisting crossing the line between marriage and not marriage, especially in comparison to women. They believe that crossing the line has many implications for how they have to behave and what they need to give to their female partners. There are surely many exceptions, but I think, on average, it's different for women.

What Happens When Men Cross the Line Deliberately?

Sociologist Steven Nock has been, for years, building the case that marriage changes men, amassing both conceptual and empirical arguments that show this is the case. In his book, *Marriage in Men's Lives* (1998), he discusses how men's belief systems about themselves and their wives seem to change when they cross the line. His argument rests on several points, with the major one being the powerful social role of "husband" that is associated with the institutional of marriage. These institutional forces have, historically, been quite potent and generally constructive—though there have been less constructive elements, as well, which Nock handles well in his book as he contemplates the nature of marriage in our modern culture. Nock shows how men begin to see themselves as fathers, providers, and protectors in marriage. He reports

behavior changes, as well. For example, men earn more income when they're married,¹³ work more, and spend less time with friends apart from marriage and family, spending more time with family and community around the family. In many ways, men allocate their time differently when they marry.

Other important changes in men when they “cross the line” have to do with the nature of normal, healthy sacrifices that are required in a good marriage over time. Recent work by Sarah Whitton, me, and Howard Markman at the University of Denver indicates the importance of sacrifice in relationships (Whitton, Stanley, & Markman, 2002).¹⁴ We theorized that people should be most willing to sacrifice for their partners when they have a long term view and they have a sense of “us” or “we” or team. In this research, sacrifice was defined as an act of foregoing immediate self-interest in order to promote the well being of a partner or the relationship. We found that sacrifice was seen as less detrimental to the self when males reported high levels of couple identity and when males and females reported having a long term view for the relationship. However, the association between sacrifice and commitment to the future was far stronger for men than women. The findings did not show that women are more or less likely

¹³ This notion that men make more money when they become married has been increasingly supported by very sophisticated research, particularly by Robert Lerman of the Urban Institute. In general, he finds that marriage is associated with both employment stability and income growth. I was a recent discussant on a panel that included a paper by Ahituv and Lerman on this subject. It is just one example of the evidence for this point of marriage promoting a growth in economic behavior. I should point out that in such analyses (Nock also includes a great deal of such data in his book noted in the text above), there are sophisticated ways to attempt to rule out this being merely a selection effect. In fact, Ahituv and Lerman show that this effect is actually greater for men whose prior economic productivity has been marginal (not, therefore, a process of simply weeding out marriageable men from less marriageable men—though I also think it is very wise for women to evaluate men carefully. Men as well, need to make wise choices, but it seems pretty clear that, on average, women stand much more to lose from not being extremely careful as they make decisions regarding mate selection. Of course, there are stand out exceptions to every point one could make.)

Ahituv, A., & Lerman, R. (September, 2003). *Job stability, earning, marital stability: How are they related?* Paper presented at the National Poverty Center Conference on Marriage and Family Formation Among Low-Income Couples, Washington, D.C.

¹⁴ We currently have a paper under review that reports such findings, as well as linkages to symptoms of depression, in two samples.

to report sacrificing than men. The difference was more in the degree to which attitudes about sacrificing were tied to commitment to the future.¹⁵ For men to sacrifice for their partners without resenting it, they seem to need to see a clear future together and clear sense of being a team. For men to sacrifice for their partners freely and fully, they may need to be married—to have fully decided that “this woman is my future.” Whatever flips the switch for women is less linked to the level of commitment to the future. I have an idea what that is, and I will come to that shortly.

My main point here is that commitment in marriage changes men. Crossing over the line changes how they see themselves and how they behave. It changes how they view a relationship with a woman and how they are to act in relation to a woman. To be clear, I am not suggesting that marriage makes a dangerous man a safe man. I *am* saying that, on average, marriage changes the average man in the direction of greater responsibility and sacrifice to a female partner. Consistent with the major point I made in the previous section, this is partly why men resist marriage. They associate marriage with the expectancy of having to grow up. That step across the line will have a powerful impact on their lives. If they can, many men will resist this until quite late into their 20s.¹⁶

¹⁵ There is a more general and growing literature showing the positive effects or correlates of sacrificing (not martyrdom) in relationships. See: Stanley, S. M. & Markman, H. J. (1992). Assessing commitment in personal relationships. *Journal of Marriage and The Family*, 54, 595-608.; Van Lange, P. A. M., Agnew, C. R., Harinck, F. & Steemers, G. E. M. (1997). From game theory to real life: How social value orientation affects willingness to sacrifice in ongoing close relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 73, 1330-1344.; Van Lange, P. A. M., Rusbult, C. E., Drigotas, S. M., Arriaga, X. B., Witcher, B. S. & Cox, C. L. (1997). Willingness to sacrifice in close relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 72, 1373-1395.

¹⁶ The strong exception to this in today’s culture is that of religious men (and women) who remain prone to early marriage because of their value systems. Of course, marriage at very young ages places many such couples at increased risks for marital failure, so this can cut both ways.

Walking Over the Line vs. Being Dragged Across It

Premarital cohabitation has received much research attention recently. There are some important gender differences beginning to appear in this literature, that relate to commitment, and that shed further light on the themes presented here. This area of research has led me to think that there are some very important dynamics in how marriages form that have implications for men's and women's commitment to their partners in marriage. I want to explore some background from this area of research before presenting a hypothesis about men and women and how numerous couples transition to marriage these days.

In our larger survey in Oklahoma and surrounding states, we asked young men and women about their beliefs about cohabitation (Johnson et al., 2002). Of those 18-24 years old, 62% of men and 55% of women thought that living together would improve one's chances in marriage. While Oklahoma is no doubt different in many ways from other states, I am sure that those high percentages reflect a widely held belief by young adults across the U. S. The belief that cohabitation prior to marriage improves one's odds for marital success is widely held but it is also seriously flawed. It is a belief based on a theory of discovering compatibility and finding a fit, with the particular hope being that "we'll live together and we'll discover whether we're compatible, whether we're right for one another." The problem is that this is a strategy selective for risky relationships with nothing in place to lower risks except the hope of breaking up if the fit is poor.¹⁷ Let me put that in plainer terms and then explain the point in detail: it is becoming

¹⁷ There are many studies that document that this belief is generally false. Couples who live together prior to marriage are generally at greater risk, not lower, for marital failure. The really interesting question is why, not if, this is true. A sampling of studies:

Axinn, W. G., & Thornton, A. (1992). The relationship between cohabitation and divorce: Selectivity or causality? *Demography*, 29, 357-374.; Brown, S. L. (2004). Moving from cohabitation to marriage: effects on relationship quality. *Social Science Research*, 33, 1-20.; Brown, S. L., & Booth, A. (1996). Cohabitation versus marriage: A comparison of relationship quality. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 58, 668-678.; Cohan, C. L., & Kleinbaum, S. (2002). Toward a greater understanding of the cohabitation effect: Premarital cohabitation and marital

clear to Galena Kline, me, and Howard Markman (and many others doing work in this area) that those who are at greater risk may be those most likely to act on this belief; yet the only way this strategy can work is if partners who are poorly matched do, in fact, break up rather than remain together. There simply isn't another mechanism that most couples avail themselves of to otherwise lower the actual risks a couple may experience.¹⁸

A theory we have developed, inertia theory¹⁹, suggests that living together triggers forces that makes it more likely that a couple will get married, even if the fit between the partners was poor to begin with, or they were otherwise at higher risk. What couples may not realize is that ending a cohabiting relationship is more difficult (practically, financially, emotionally, and socially) than ending a dating relationship. In effect, constraint commitment (the source of the inertia) is increased by cohabitation, making continuation of the relationship somewhat more likely than if the identical couple had been merely dating, each retaining full access to separate places to live (Stanley & Markman, 1997). We suspect that this is the glaring fact that

communication. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 64, 180-192.; DeMaris, A., & Leslie, G. R. (1984). Cohabitation with future spouse: Its influence upon marital satisfaction and communication. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 46, 77-84.; Kamp Dush, C. M., Cohan, C. L., & Amato, P. R. (2003). The Relationship between cohabitation and marital quality and stability: Change across cohorts? *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 65, 539.; Manning, W. D., & Smock, P. J. (2002). First comes cohabitation and then comes marriage? A research note. *Journal of Family Issues*, 23, 1065-1087.; Manning, W. D., & Smock, P. J. (2003, November). *Measuring and modeling cohabitation: New perspectives from qualitative data*. Paper presented at Healthy Marriage Interventions and Evaluation symposium of the Measurement Issues in Family Demography Conference, Washington D.C.; Nock, S. L. (1995). A comparison of marriages and cohabiting relationships. *Journal of Family Issues*, 16, 53-76.; Smock, P. J. (2000). Cohabitation in the United States: An appraisal of research themes, findings, and implications. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 26, 1-20.

¹⁸ In our lab, Galena Kline, Howard Markman, and I are actively pursuing greater understanding of the risks, how they work, for whom, and the actual mechanisms of how cohabitation prior to marriage is associated with greater difficulties in marriage. As of 2004, Galena is actively collecting data on this subject, and we have submitted a grant for a large study to tease out the dynamics involved.

¹⁹ This idea arose from examining the differences in dedication levels between men who had lived with their mates prior to marriage and those who had not in our random, national sample from the mid 1990s. It is expressed in the simple report we put together from that data (Stanley & Markman, 1997). Those data are also the basis of two studies cited here (Stanley, Whitton, & Markman, 2004 and Stanley, Markman, & Whitton, 2002).

unsuspecting young couples do not see when they are acting on the belief that cohabiting can lower their odds of marital failure.²⁰

To put the underlying theory here in clear conceptual terms, we think that some cohabiting couples may move into marriage without making a deliberate decision to cross the line together. One of the places where we do see important gender differences in cohabitation research is with regard to commitment levels. In our national sample, selecting respondents who have been married up to 10 years, we found that husbands who lived with their wives before marriage were less interpersonally committed (less dedicated) to their spouses than men who did not live with their partners, even controlling for religiosity (Stanley et al., 2004).²¹ This research suggests that premarital cohabitation may be riskier for females than for males because some cohabiting men may not fully commit themselves to their partners in a subsequent marriage. Psychologically, they may not have really crossed the line of commitment to their partners in marriage even though they became legally married. In other words, while they may be married, a

²⁰ We have been actively pursuing the study of this theory of risk in cohabitation prior to marriage over the past few years. Galena Kline, in particular, has been investigating this theme and others related to couple development and cohabitation with us (I and Howard Markman) in our lab. In a study published since the time of this address (Kline et al., 2004), we examined directly a prediction that followed from inertia theory: that couples wherein both partners had clearly decided to marry before beginning to live together (e.g., as indicated by something such as engagement) would look very different from those wherein there were no clear plans for marriage. Specifically, we expected that those who did not live together until after engagement or until marriage would look better (lower risk) than couples who lived together before making clear plans to marry. Essentially, the prediction was that there exists a subset of couples who do not have marriage plans before cohabitation who end up marrying despite significant problems—and that they would likely not have married had they not been cohabiting. This hypothesis of inertia requires various other tests over time that we are planning to conduct, but tests so far of this specific point have been strongly confirmed in our longitudinal sample of couples in the transition to marriage. Those couples who were not already engaged at the point of beginning to cohabit demonstrated lower relationship quality (and higher risks) on many variables, including lower satisfaction, lower dedication levels, less confidence, higher conflict, poorer communication as measured by both self-report and objective coding of their conversations, and so forth. Further, these differences do not diminish after marriage, and they are not explainable by other variables normally considered to “explain” the cohabitation effect.

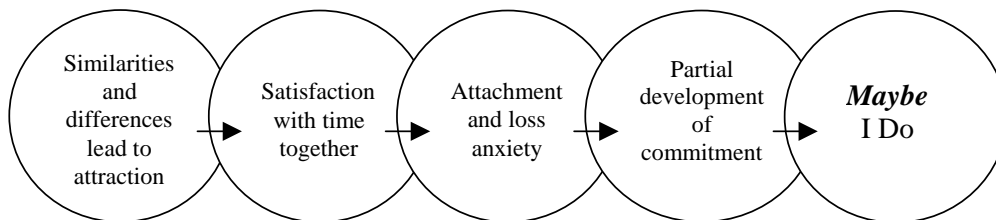
Kline, G. H., Stanley, S. M., Markman, H. J., Olmos-Gallo, P. A., St. Peters, M., Whitton, S. W., Prado, L. (2004). Timing is everything: Pre-engagement cohabitation and increased risk for poor marital outcomes. *Journal of Family Psychology, 18*, 311-318.

²¹ This finding is also obtained in the large, random phone survey conducted in Oklahoma (Johnson et al., 2002).

higher percentage of couple who cohabit prior to marriage likely did not have two partners who clearly and strongly *decided* to be married; they moved into marriage more from a process of being carried into it than from a process of making a clear decision.²² Perhaps one partner, more often the male, was actually coaxed or dragged across the line, so to speak, by the other.

What does all of this mean? I think it means that there are a greater number of marriages than ever before that begin with a “*Maybe* I do” rather than a clear “I do” at the root of the commitment underlying the marriage (Figure 3). Further, I believe there is evidence in the research on premarital cohabitation that men are much more likely to be the “maybe” factor in marital commitment. Does this matter? I think it does and I can express it best as a hypothesis for future research.

Figure 3
The Development of Commitment



A Hypothesis about Men and Women: Commitment vs. Attachment Based Motivation

Drawing on those findings, I have come to a hypothesis that I hope to directly test in the years to come. My hypothesis is that attachment triggers committed and sacrificial behavior in

²² Most recently (November, 2004), I have come to a short hand for this matter in noting that many couples are “sliding vs. deciding” when it comes to major decisions about cohabitation, marriage, babies, and so forth. I hypothesize that sliding will almost always be associated with greater risks in relationships. Further, while more speculative, I would predict that sliding scenarios will eventually become understood as more risky for women than for men in terms of long-term, negative outcomes. Howard Markman has observed couples having crises about whether or not to have children (one wants to and one does not), noting that these couples appear to him to have a history of sliding into marriage. His theory is that the pattern of sliding on major commitments may set up future vulnerabilities at each new developmental point where such couples have to re-choose the nature and security of their future together.

women whereas a decision to be committed triggers committed and sacrificial behavior in men.

In other words, women begin to give their best to men when they are strongly attached.

However, men may be less inclined to give fully of themselves to women unless they have decided that a particular woman is their future. This theory could, therefore, explain these phenomena I have covered here:

- Why men seem to resist marriage more than women, even though there is growing evidence that they see the importance of marriage, in some ways, more than women.
- Why commitment levels for men are very strongly associated with attitudes about sacrificing, but much less so for women.²³
- Why some, but not all, couples who cohabit prior to marriage are at greater risk, and contain men who score lower than other men on measures of dedication to their mates.
- Why male behavior reflecting responsibility in their lives and toward their wives grows when they marry. Related to this reasoning, I would hypothesize that this change will be found to be greatest and most positive when men make deliberate choices to cross the line, compared to scenarios where they slid across the line or felt compelled to cross it in some way that impairs (or reflects) lower intrinsic, dedication to the partner.

If the overall theory and specific hypotheses expressed here are true, they have important implications. For example, if a female thinks that a male becoming attached to her means that he's committed, she may be wrong. He may not have crossed the line even if he agrees or suggests that they move in together. In cases where the sense of the future is ambiguous, people

²³ Again, to be clear, we have growing evidence for this, but it remains an empirically-supported hypothesis that requires more study with larger and more diverse samples.

may grossly misinterpret what behavior, such as moving in together, means to their partner. While I may take this prediction back in the future (and ingest my words), I believe the tendency is generally for females more than males to over interpret what it means that a male is willing to move in with a female—at least in many parts of our society at this time.²⁴ Some males are, indeed, very attached and seriously thinking about a future with a particular woman. But others may merely be thinking “this is great for now, until I figure out what I’m doing and who I really want to be with in life.” Such a disconnect puts women at greatly increased risks for adverse outcomes, especially if a child results from the union—which has become increasingly common.

Conclusion (and Paradox)

An ancient Greek philosopher, Zeno, described a paradox that I believe is relevant to the themes presented here. He was a philosopher who focused, in part, on the nature of continuums and discontinuities. He posited numerous paradoxes about these and other subjects. Here is one of his masterpieces. Imagine that you’re in a room and you walk halfway between where you are and the wall. Then you do this again, walking halfway between where you are now and the wall.

²⁴ As Pamela Smock and Wendy Manning have been finding out in their research on cohabitation, there may be important cultural and economic variations in the meanings of important relationship events such as cohabitation. For example, see: Manning, W. D. (1995). Cohabitation, marriage, and entry into motherhood. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 57, 191-200.; Manning, W. D., & Smock, P. J. (2003, November). Measuring and Modeling Cohabitation: New Perspectives from Qualitative Data. Paper presented at Healthy Marriage Interventions and Evaluation symposium of the Measurement Issues in Family Demography Conference, Washington D.C.; Smock, P. J., Manning, W. D., & Porter, M. (2004). Everything's there except money': How economic factors shape the decision to marry among cohabiting couples, Working paper. Bowling Green University, OH: Center for Family and Demographic Research.

See also: Fein, D. J., Burstein, N. R., Fein, G. G., & Lindberg, L. D. (2003). The determinants of marriage and cohabitation among disadvantaged Americans: Research findings and needs. Cambridge, MA: Abt Associates, Inc.

And, finally, for an in depth look at how transitions on the possible pathway to marriage are thought about among the very poor, see: Edin, K., & Kefalas, M. J. (in press). Promises I Can Keep: Why Poor Women Put Motherhood Before Marriage. Los Angeles: University of California Press.

And again. And again. And again. And, . . ., well, you get the idea. Zeno noted that if you keep going halfway between where you are and the wall, you will never get to the wall.

Now picture the wall as a line. If you keep going halfway between where you are and the line, you will never cross the line. You'll get right up to the edge of it, you may even get dragged over it, but you'll never cross the line from a deliberate choice. Half steps and measures don't result in the full commitment that a deliberate choice confers and confirms. A deliberate choice brings the fullest sense of mutual dedication in life, together, which in turn causes marriages to thrive. There are many couples who, through any number of pathways, make a very clear decision to cross over the line, as partners in life. They have this understanding as a base from which to move into the future. But men who have not yet committed to their female partners will, understandably so, resist crossing the line. They may inch up to it. They may dangle a toe over it. Yet, without the clear, deliberate step over, the commitment is at best, *Maybe I do*, not the firmly expressed and embraced *I do*.

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