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Dedication and Sliding in Emerging Adult Cyclical and Non-Cyclical Romantic Relationships

This study investigates the association between dedication commitment and sliding (moving through relationship transitions without considering the consequences) over 14 weeks for emerging adults in cyclical (partners who have broken up and renewed) and non-cyclical relationships. An autoregressive cross-lagged panel and bivariate latent growth curve analysis were conducted using three waves of data from 220 emerging adults in exclusive dating relationships. Results indicated that dedication and sliding may be relatively stable constructs with a negative bidirectional association although their rates of change may not be related. Further, number of cycles experienced in the current relationship was negatively related to dedication, positively related to sliding, and negatively related to the rate of change in dedication, such that the rate of change in dedication over the course of the semester became increasingly negative the more relationship cycles a participant had experienced. The implications for relationship education are outlined.

About 30% to 50% of emerging adults (roughly ages 18–29; Arnett, 2000) have experienced at least one breakup and reconciliation with their current dating partner (a process termed *relationship cycling*, *relationship churning*, or *on–off relationships*) and, compared to non-cyclical partners, partners who have experienced a breakup and renewal report lower commitment and satisfaction, poorer communication, greater uncertainty, and higher levels of verbal abuse and physical violence (Dailey, Middleton, & Green, 2012; Dailey, Pfiester, Jin, Beck, & Clark, 2009; Dailey, Rosetto, Pfiester, & Surra, 2009; Halpern-Meekin, Manning, Giordano, & Longmore, 2013). Unfortunately, the risks associated with relationship cycling during emerging adulthood appear to be enduring, affecting relationship stability and quality during later cohabitation and marriage (e.g., Vennum & Johnson, 2014). The lower dedication and greater uncertainty experienced by cyclical dating partners (e.g., Dailey, Pfiester, et al., 2009) may be due in part to less explicit decision making in their relationships. Stanley, Rhoades, and Markman (2006) referred to the lack of thoughtful and clear relationship decision making in relationships as "sliding versus deciding." A better understanding of how decision making and dedication coevolve over time can inform interventions aimed at helping emerging adults stabilize their relationships going forward. Using autoregressive cross-lagged and bivariate latent growth curve models, we examined how decision making and dedication codevelop in romantic relationships over the course of a semester for emerging adults enrolled in a family studies course and how a history of cycling influenced those developmental trajectories.

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High- and Low-Risk Relationship Development

Building on the ideas introduced by interdependence theory (e.g., Kelly & Thibaut, 1978) and the investment model (e.g., Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998), Stanley and Markman (1992) proposed two meta-constructs, dedication and constraint, as the key components of commitment development. Stanley and Markman referred to the long-term orientation and desire of an individual to invest in, and improve, the relationship for the benefit of both partners as dedication. Encompassing the ideas of investments, barriers to leaving the relationship, and alternatives to the relationship, constraints encourage the continuance of the relationship by making termination of the relationship more financially, socially, or psychologically costly (Stanley & Markman, 1992). Alternatives to the relationship can include not only other potential partners but also alternative relationship types with the current partner (see the Bases of Relational Commitment Model; Agnew, Arriaga, & Wilson, 2008).

As partners invest in their developing relationship, anxiety over the potential loss of the relationship grows (Stanley & Rhoades, 2009). Partners may choose to deal with the uncertain future of their relationship in a variety of ways with varying degrees of risk. In an optimum situation, partners resolve uncertainty about the current and future state of the relationship quickly and overtly (lower risk), but relational uncertainty can make discussing the relationship more threatening, increasing the chances that partners will avoid the topic (Knobloch & Theiss, 2011) and slide through relationship decisions without clarifying each partner's dedication to the relationship (higher risk). In the lower risk sequence of relationship development outlined by Stanley and Rhoades (2009), partners evaluate their compatibility and commitment level to the current and future development of the relationship as well as the risks associated with the relationship before moving through relationship transitions (e.g., having sex, moving in together) that may accrue constraints to ending the relationship. Making conscious and explicit choices (i.e., about the boundaries of the relationship) decreases ambiguity (and anxiety) about the relationship by clarifying the desire and intent (dedication) of each partner (Stanley & Rhoades, 2009). Furthermore, thoroughly evaluating a romantic relationship and choosing to sustain or improve it over other alternatives is likely to increase partners' use of pro-relationship behaviors (i.e., maintenance behaviors) that sustain the relationship state to which they have committed (Stanley et al., 2006).

In the higher risk sequence, partners slide through relationship transitions (e.g., engaging in sexual intercourse, moving in together) without evaluating the relationship (i.e., risks, compatibility, and commitment) until after the transition has occurred and constraints to ending the relationship have accrued, thereby limiting the range of relationship decisions partners can now make (Stanley & Rhoades, 2009). Sliding through important relationship transitions is also expected to increase risk for future distress through the lack of commitment to pro-relationship behaviors (Stanley et al., 2006). For example, partners who had previously dated exclusively are now taking a break in the form of an ambiguous friends-with-benefits relationship. Because one partner's lease is about to expire, they decide it is more convenient and cheaper to move in together, especially given that they are spending half their nights together. In this case, the partners are moving in together for convenience rather than because they have re-committed to an exclusive relationship state and have had an open conversation about what moving in together means for their relationship. As a result, the barriers to dissolving the relationship (e.g., one partner having to find another place to live, dividing shared investment in furniture) are higher and these partners, who have already avoided defining the relationship, may be propelled to further constrained positions (e.g., children, marriage) without committing to engaging in the behaviors required to make this a healthy functioning relationship in the long term.

Association Between Dedication and Sliding

According to Stanley and Rhoades (2009), "at the root, commitment means making a decision to choose one alternative over others, and that in choosing, one is deciding to give up the other alternatives. Deciding is fundamental to commitment" (p. 35). Relationship decision making and dedication are intimately theoretically related, and several studies have documented an empirical association between them. For example, Vennum and Fincham (2011) found that thoughtful decision making in emerging adult romantic relationships was

positively associated with a host of individual and relationship variables, such as self-control, positive interactions, conflict resolution, satisfaction, and dedication. Deciding was also negatively related to behaviors that would threaten the relationship, such as psychological aggression, hooking up, and binge drinking (Vennum & Fincham, 2011). Owen, Rhoades, and Stanley (2013) found similar results with a sample of adults ($M = 28$ years) in dating, cohabiting, and married relationships; regardless of the relationship type, more thoughtful decision making in the relationship was concurrently associated with more dedication and relationship satisfaction and fewer extra-dyadic involvements. In examining outcomes 14 weeks later, Vennum and Fincham found that decision making predicted negotiation in romantic relationships and discouraged hook-ups but was not predictive of dedication, controlling for initial levels of dedication and satisfaction. Thus, preliminary data suggest that dedication and thoughtful relationship decision making are related, but how they are related over time has been minimally explored.

Although thoughtful decision making may clarify and build dedication (e.g., Stanley et al., 2006), it may also be that couples who are more dedicated make an effort to be more thoughtful regarding what is needed to sustain the relationship. For instance, Stanley and Rhoades (2009) explained the following regarding dedication:

> Simply put, dedication denotes the type of commitment associated with intrinsic motivation, including a desire to be with the partner long term, a willingness to have "we" trump "me," a willingness to sacrifice for the partner and relationship, and an element of priority being placed on the relationship. (p. 29)

Although researchers (e.g., Stanley & Rhoades, 2009) hint that dedication and relationship decision making are reciprocally related, to our knowledge the directionality of this association has yet to be studied.

Differences Relating to Patterns of Stability

The development of romantic relationships during emerging adulthood has become a more ambiguous process in the United States, creating multiple pathways to family formation (see Sassler, 2010). This ambiguity in relationship status, commitment, and progression is particularly salient for partners who experience multiple transitions into and out of their relationship. Partners with a disrupted path of relationship development have previously experienced an ambiguous and less committed relationship state (i.e., taking a break, or a friends-with-benefits situation) as an alternative to their exclusive relationship, making explicit clarification of their current dedication to an exclusive relationship state critical.

Unfortunately, recent findings suggest that, on average, cyclical partners are more likely than stably together partners to follow the high-risk sequence of relationship development outlined by Stanley and Rhoades (2009). Partners who have experienced relationship cycling report lower dedication (Dailey, Pfiester et al., 2009) as well as greater distress and constraints to permanently ending the relationship than partners who have remained stably together (Vennum et al., 2013). For example, cohabiting couples who experienced a breakup and renewal prior to cohabiting were more likely to currently report lower relationship satisfaction, greater uncertainty in the future of their relationship, and that child care was an important factor in their decision to cohabit than cohabiting partners who did not experience a breakup and renewal prior to cohabiting (Vennum et al., 2013). This pattern is mirrored at the transition to marriage, with newlyweds who ended and renewed their relationship prior to marriage being more likely to have considered calling off the engagement and reporting greater uncertainty in their decision to wed, less closeness, greater conflict, and less satisfaction than newlyweds with stable courtships (Vennum & Johnson, 2014).

Having already experienced the ending of the relationship, cyclical partners are more uncertain about the viability of their committed relationship in the long term. Unfortunately, this greater anxiety about the future of the relationship may make thoughtful relationship decision making and communicating about the state of the relationship all the more challenging (Knobloch & Theiss, 2011), prompting further sliding, lower dedication, and continued distress.

The Present Study

Relationship decision making is amenable to intervention (Vennum & Fincham, 2011); thus, a further understanding of how it is related to dedication and stability (e.g., cycling) can

improve interventions designed to help emerging adults establish stable, healthy relationships. Using an autoregressive cross-lagged model and a bivariate latent growth curve analysis over three time points, in the current study we examined the association between sliding and dedication in emerging adult cyclical and non-cyclical relationships at a large university in the southeastern United States. Each analysis offers different but complementary insights into the longitudinal association between dedication and sliding. Using the autoregressive cross-lagged model, we specifically sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the stability of dedication and sliding over time for emerging adults in exclusive dating relationships? In other words, to what degree do participants' levels of dedication and sliding in their relationship predict subsequent levels?
2. What is the direction of their association over time? Does emerging adults' lack of thoughtful decision making (i.e., sliding) affect their dedication to their relationships, or vice versa?
3. Is the strength of the association between dedication and sliding different for emerging adults who have experienced a breakup and renewal in their current relationship versus those whose relationship development has been stable?

Autoregressive cross-lagged models do not have the ability to model growth or to identify interindividual differences in growth (Young, Furman, & Laursen, 2011), so we used the bivariate latent growth curve to answer the following three questions:

4. How do emerging adults' dedication to their relationship and active decision making (or lack thereof; i.e., sliding) in that relationship change over time?
5. To what degree are emerging adults' levels of dedication and sliding associated at the beginning of the semester, and how is growth in one related to growth in the other over the semester?
6. How does a history of relationship cycling account for differences in emerging adults' dedication to their relationships and sliding within those relationships at the beginning of the semester and the rate at which dedication and sliding change over the course of the semester?

Because partners in cyclical relationships report being in their relationships significantly longer than partners in non-cyclical relationships (e.g., Vennum et al., 2013), and relationship length would theoretically be expected to affect the development of dedication in relationships, we included relationship length as a control variable in our analyses.

This study makes several clear contributions to the literature. First, few studies have examined the relationship between sliding and dedication, and no studies have examined the direction of effects, thereby hindering theory development. Second, few studies have examined change in these constructs over time in emerging adult romantic relationships, and no studies have tested the degree to which their rates of change covary. Third, this is the first longitudinal study to examine the development of dedication in cyclical relationships, thereby providing a more complete picture of relationship development in this population at risk for future distress and instability.

Method

Procedure

Data were drawn from a larger study on emerging adult romantic relationships collected at a large southeastern U.S. university. Participants were 979 undergraduate students (69% female and 31% male) representing all majors on campus in an introductory family relations course. Students were given several options for class credit, including participation in the survey used for this study. Those choosing the survey were emailed links to a secure online system during the second week of the semester (Time 1 [T1]), the middle of the semester (Time 2 [T2]), and the last week of the semester (Time 3 [T3]).

Sample

Twenty participants were dropped from the study because they were not emerging adults or were identified as providing unreliable responses (participants incorrectly answered more than two questions designed to assess whether they were reading the questions). Forty-three percent of students (315 females and 101 males) answered "yes" to the question "Are you

currently in a romantic relationship?" Because relationship processes around commitment may differ for those in non-exclusive or married relationships, participants in non-exclusive and married relationships were dropped from the study (34 participants [13.7%] from the non-cyclical group and 17 [10.2%] from the cyclical group). At T2 and T3, participants were asked to indicate "yes" or "no" regarding whether they had ended their relationship since the last survey. Participants who indicated "no" at both T2 and T3 were included, leaving us with a sample of 224. After removing outliers, the final sample consisted of 220 emerging adults in exclusive dating relationships.

Participants further indicated whether they had broken up and reconciled with this partner at least once. Consistent with previous research, about one third ($n = 64$, 29.1%) of those in romantic relationships reported "yes," and their relationship was classified as cyclical. The final sample consisted of 64 emerging adults in cyclical and 156 in non-cyclical exclusive relationships. Of this sample, 29.4% of women and 25.6% of men reported a history of relationship cycling with their current partner. The mean age of those in cyclical relationships was 19.52 ($SD = 1.42$); 66.7% were Caucasian, 17.5% were African American, 12.7% were Latino, and 3.2% were Asian or other races. The average age of those in non-cyclical relationships was 19.48 ($SD = 1.42$); 77.1% were Caucasian, 3.2% were African American, 12.1% were Latino, and 7.7% were Asian or other races. The majority reported their relationships were with opposite-sex partners (95.2% in cyclical and 97.5% in non-cyclical).

Measures

Commitment. Participants indicated their level of agreement with four items assessing dedication from the Commitment Inventory (Stanley & Markman, 1992), ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5). Samples items are "I like to think of my partner and me more in terms of 'us' and 'we' than 'me' and 'him/her'" and "I want this relationship to stay strong no matter what rough times we may encounter." Responses were coded and summed so that higher scores reflect greater dedication. Coefficient alpha was .83 for the cyclical group and .78 for the non-cyclical group.

Sliding. Sliding was assessed with the Deciding subscale of the Relationship Deciding Scale (Vennum & Fincham, 2011). Participants reported their agreement with statements such as, "With romantic partners I weigh the pros and cons before allowing myself to take the next step in the relationship (e.g., be physically intimate)" and "It is important to make conscious decisions about whether to take each major step in romantic relationships." Responses ranged from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5); they were coded and summed so that higher scores reflect greater sliding. Coefficient alpha was .77 for those in cyclical relationships and .69 for the non-cyclical group.

Controls. Relationship length was represented by number of months together in both the autoregressive cross-lagged panel and the bivariate latent growth curve analyses. Relationship cycling was coded as a dummy variable (0 = not cyclical, 1 = cyclical) for use in the multiple-group analysis. A continuous variable representing the number of times participants broke up and renewed the relationship (individuals in a non-cyclical relationship were given a 0) was added as a control in the autoregressive cross-lagged panel and a covariate in the bivariate latent growth curve analyses.

Results

Because of the small percentage of missing data (ranging from 1.4% at T1 to 2.3% at T3), we used listwise deletion to compute the zero-order correlations among study variables (see Table 1). Dedication at T1, T2, and T3 were all positively correlated. Sliding at T1, T2, and T3 were all positively correlated. Dedication and sliding were negatively correlated with each other at each time point. With these correlations consistent with our expectations, we next used Mplus 6.0 (Muthén & Muthén, 2010) to conduct the autoregressive cross-lagged and bivariate latent growth curve analyses using full-information maximum likelihood to handle missing data.

Autoregressive Cross-Lagged Model

We computed an autoregressive cross-lagged model to explore the stability of dedication and sliding over the semester, the temporal ordering of sliding and dedication, and whether the association between dedication and sliding is

Table 1. *Correlations Among Dedication and Sliding Across Three Time Points* (N = *220*)

Variables	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Sliding (T1)	10.15	3.14	—							
2. Sliding (T2)	9.94	3.13	.58**	—						
3. Sliding (T3)	10.23	3.21	.47*	.65**	—					
4. Dedication (T1)	16.29	2.86	−.17*	−.14*	−.14*	—				
5. Dedication (T2)	16.36	2.89	−.16**	−.17*	−.17*	.68**	—			
6. Dedication (T3)	16.21	2.81	−.23	−.24**	.24**	.61**	.77**	—		
7. Relationship cycling	.58	1.12	.14*	−.01	−.05	.09	.00	−.08	—	
8. Relationship length	18.88	17.37	−.10	−.13	−.11	.24**	.17*	.16*	.18**	—

Note. Relationship cycling is continuous, representing number of cycles. Relationship length is reported in months. T1 = Time 1, first week of the semester; T2 = Time 2, mid-semester (7 weeks); T3 = Time 3, end of the semester (14 weeks).
*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$.

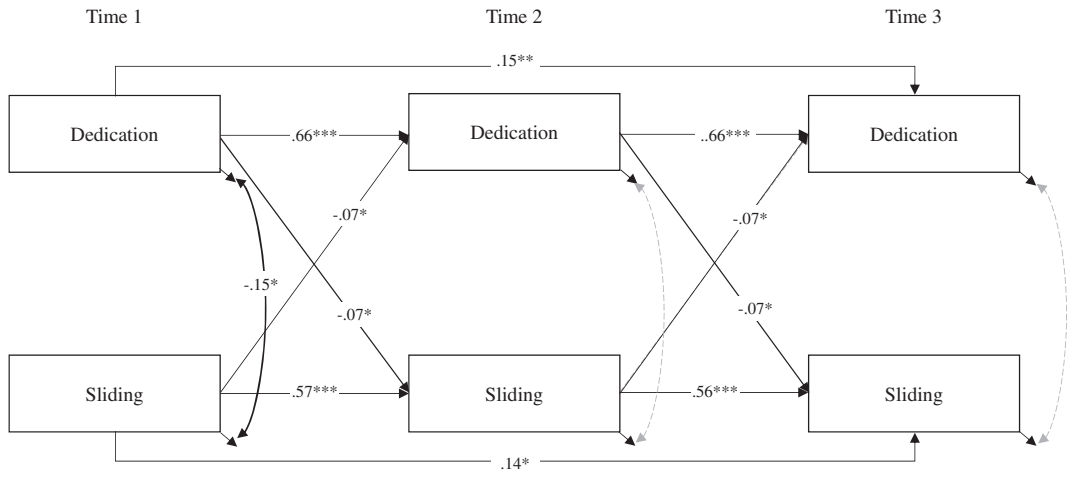
moderated by a history of cycling (Research Questions 1–3). The model was constructed so that each variable was predicted by itself in a time series (autoregressive stability paths) and by the other variable from the preceding time point (cross-lagged paths). Sliding and dedication assessed at the same time were set to covary. Because the time span between measurements was relatively short and the sample was limited to partners who stayed together over the course of the semester, we expected that parallel paths would be equivalent. To test this, we constrained parallel paths in the model (e.g., the path from T1 dedication to T2 dedication and the path from T2 dedication to T3 dedication) to be equal and conducted chi-square difference tests for all parallel paths in the model. Constraining parallel paths to be equivalent did not significantly reduce the fit of the model, so these equality constraints were retained for the final model.

We then conducted a multiple-group analysis with chi-square difference tests to examine whether a history of cycling (a dichotomous variable) moderated the association between dedication and sliding. The results indicated that path coefficients did not significantly differ across cyclical and non-cyclical participants; thus, all participants were combined into one group, and the number of times participants had cycled (continuous variable) and relationship length were included in the model as controls at T1. The final model was a good fit to the data (see Figure 1). The autoregressive paths indicated moderate stability in both sliding (ranging from $\beta = .56$ to $\beta = .57$) and dedication ($\beta = .66$ for both pathways). The cross-lagged paths indicated a negative bidirectional relationship between sliding and dedication ($\beta = -.07$ for all cross-lagged paths).

Latent Growth Curve Analysis

We conducted a latent growth curve analysis to assess change in dedication and sliding over a semester for emerging adults in romantic relationships, how the initial levels and rates of change of these two constructs related over time, and the degree to which a history of relationship cycling accounted for interindividual differences in initial level and growth rates of dedication and sliding (Research Questions 4–6). Change modeled by latent growth curves is assumed to unfold steadily over time, which the moderately high stability coefficients in the autoregressive cross-lag for dedication and sliding support. To begin, dedication and sliding were modeled separately to determine the presence of significant variance in the intercept and slope of each construct (Kline, 2010). For both the dedication and sliding growth curves, the variable loadings on the intercept were fixed to 1, and the loading of T1 on the slope was fixed at 0, T2 was fixed at 1, and T3 was fixed at 2 to specify a linear trend. Model fit parameters indicated the unconditional model for dedication was an excellent fit to the data (Kline, 2010): $\chi^2(1) = 1.10$, $p = .30$; comparative fit index (CFI) = 1.00; Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI) = 1.0; root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .02; 90% confidence interval (CI) [.00, .18], and standardized root-mean-square residual (SRMR) = .01. Participants' initial dedication score was 16.33 ($p < .001$) and did not change, on average, over the course of the semester. There was significant interindividual variability in both the intercept

FIGURE 1. AUTOREGRESSIVE AND CROSS-LAGGED MODEL OF DEDICATION AND SLIDING ($N = 220$).



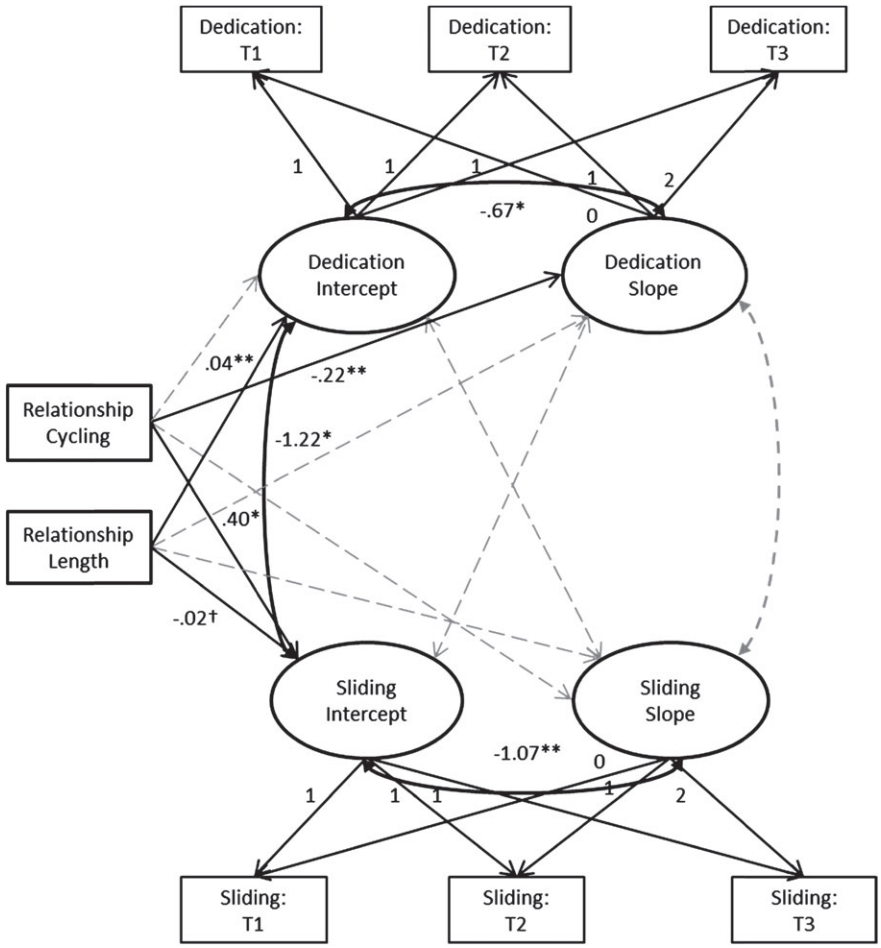
Note. Standardized estimates are shown for significant paths only. Time 1 relationship length and number of relationship cycles (continuous variable) were added as covariates but are not included in the figure for clarity. Model fit indices are as follows: $\chi^2(14) = 15.03$, $p = .38$; root-mean-square error of approximation = .02, 90% confidence interval [.00, .07]; comparative fit index = 1.0; Tucker–Lewis Index = 1.0; standardized root-mean-square residual = .03. $^*p < .05$; $^{**}p < .01$; $^{***}p < .001$ (two-tailed).

($s^2 = 6.32$, $p < .001$) and the slope ($s^2 = 1.00$, $p < .01$). The unconditional model for sliding was also a good fit to the data: $\chi^2(1) = 3.02$, $p = .08$, CFI = .99; TLI = .97; RMSEA = .10; 90% CI [.00, .23]; and SRMR = .02. Participants' initial sliding score was 10.07 ($p < .001$) and also did not change, on average, over the course of the semester. Again, there was significant interindividual variability in both the intercept ($s^2 = 6.61$, $p < .001$) and the slope ($s^2 = 1.31$, $p < .01$).

Next, we conducted an unconditional bivariate latent growth curve model to test the degree of covariance between the intercept and slope of dedication and the intercept and slope of sliding. This model was a good fit to the data: $\chi^2(7) = 6.87$, $p = .44$; CFI = 1.00; TLI = 1.00; RMSEA = .00; 90% CI [.00, .08]; and SRMR = .02. The intercepts of dedication and sliding were negatively related ($b = -1.39$, $p < .05$), as was the intercept and slope of sliding ($b = -1.07$, $p < .01$), and the intercept and slope of dedication ($b = -.67$, $p < .05$), indicating that a higher intercept was related to less change over time. The slopes of dedication and sliding were not related. We next added number of relationship cycles (a continuous variable) as a predictor of participants' levels of dedication and sliding at the beginning of the semester and their rate of change over the next 14 weeks, controlling for relationship length. Model fit indices suggested an excellent fit between the proposed model and the data: $\chi^2(11) = 11.26$, $p = .42$; CFI = 1.00; TLI = 1.0; RMSEA = .01; 90% CI [.00, .07], and SRMR = .02.

Relationship length was positively related to initial levels of dedication, and negatively related to initial levels of sliding, but not related to the slope of either construct. Number of relationship cycles experienced in the current relationship was positively related to initial levels of sliding (but not initial levels of dedication) and negatively related to the slope of dedication (but not the slope of sliding) over the semester. After accounting for relationship cycling and length, the intercept for sliding was 10.28 ($p < .001$), and the slope was 0.09 (*ns*). Controlling for relationship length, for each additional cycle an individual experienced, his or her initial level of sliding was .39 ($p < .05$) higher, on average, with a similar slope over time. After accounting for relationship cycling and length, the initial level of dedication was 15.55 ($p < .001$) and the slope was 0.12 (*ns*). Controlling for relationship length, the rate of change in partners' dedication to the relationship decreased by 0.22

FIGURE 2. LATENT GROWTH CURVE ANALYSIS OF DEDICATION AND SLIDING ($N = 220$).



Note. Unstandardized estimates are shown for significant paths only. Model fit indices are as follows: $\chi^2(11) = 11.26$, $p = .42$; comparative fit index = 1.00; Tucker–Lewis Index = 1.0; root-mean-square error of approximation = .01, 90% confidence interval [.00, .07], and standardized root-mean-square residual = .02. T1 = Time 1; T2 = Time 2; T3 = Time 3. †$p < .10$; *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$.

($p < .01$) for each relationship cycle, indicating that partners who had experienced even one breakup and renewal would have a negative dedication slope.

Summary

The results from the autoregressive cross-lagged model indicate that earlier levels of dedication and sliding predict subsequent levels (both constructs are relatively stable over time) and that they negatively influence each other for individuals in both cyclical and non-cyclical relationships. In the bivariate latent growth curve analysis, initial levels of dedication and sliding were related, but their growth patterns across one semester were not. A history of relationship cycling was positively related to initial levels of sliding and negatively related to changes in dedication (but not to changes in sliding) over the semester, controlling for relationship length.

DISCUSSION

Stanley and colleagues (e.g., Stanley et al., 2006; Stanley & Rhoades, 2009) have suggested

that active decision making in relationships can serve to increase feelings of security in the future of the relationship and partners' dedication to making the relationship work, thus decreasing the risk for further distress and instability. Finding empirical support for a negative bidirectional relationship between dedication and sliding demonstrates the importance of both processes for successful relationship development. Clarifying how these constructs coevolve over time sheds further light on theories of commitment development and points of intervention for increasing the likelihood that stable relationships will continue and unstable relationships will be improved or dissolve before they transition to cohabitation or marriage. Specifically, helping emerging adults in cyclical relationships evaluate and clearly communicate their dedication to the current and future status of the relationship may be a promising avenue for intervention with this high-risk population.

Our first research question addressed the stability of sliding and dedication over time. The stability coefficients were moderately strong for both constructs, suggesting that relationship development may unfold relatively consistently over time. This is in line with previous theory and research on the development of dedication but provides new information on sliding versus deciding. In addition to being influenced by current relationship events, partners' propensity toward sliding versus deciding may be affected by relatively stable traits individuals bring to the relationships (i.e., communication patterns or coping strategies learned in their family of origin, personality characteristics, relationship schemas).

We next examined the directionality of the relationship between dedication and sliding. Although our findings support the view that sliding negatively predicts dedication (which is strongly emphasized in the literature; e.g., Stanley et al., 2006), the less emphasized negative influence of dedication on sliding is deserving of further attention. Theoretically, making conscious and explicit choices (i.e., decisions about the boundaries of the relationship or contact with alternative partners) establishes the desire and intent of each partner (Stanley & Rhoades, 2009). In addition, Stanley and Rhoades (2009) suggested that dedication conveys relationship security through exclusion of other alternatives. As dedication builds and security is formed, the clarified long-term perspective may reduce relational uncertainty, decreasing the tendency for partners to avoid discussing issues that arise in the relationship (Knobloch & Theiss, 2011) and promoting the thoughtful decision making required to sustain the relationship.

We next examined, using a bivariate growth curve, how dedication and sliding develop over time and are influenced by cycles of breaking up and renewing. On average, neither dedication nor sliding changed over the course of the semester for emerging adults in exclusive dating relationships. We suspect that change in these constructs would be more evident over a longer time period than was possible in this study or in response to specific relationship milestones, such as becoming physically intimate or becoming engaged. Furthermore, although the initial levels of sliding and dedication were negatively correlated (consistent with the results of the autoregressive cross-lagged analysis), their rates of change were not related. It may be that processes not measured here, such as maintenance behaviors or increased awareness of relationship processes through relationship education (Vennum & Fincham, 2011), have a greater influence on rates of change in these two constructs.

The significant variability in the intercepts and slopes of these growth curves, though, suggests that change over time in dedication and sliding is not homogeneous. In line with the commitment model (Stanley & Markman, 1992) and inertia theory (i.e., sliding vs. deciding; Stanley et al., 2006), emerging adults in longer relationships had established greater dedication to their relationship and had lower tendencies toward sliding at the beginning of the semester, theoretically decreasing their risk for instability. Both individual and relationship characteristics may influence the increased sliding associated with each renewal partners experienced in their relationship. It may be that cyclical partners enter the relationship with a greater tendency to cope by using avoidance rather than thoughtful and overt decision making when faced with the relationship ambiguity and anxiety that are a normal part of relationship development. Furthermore, uncertainty in the state of the relationship increases with each renewal (Dailey, Pfiester, et al., 2009), potentially increasing the perceived threat associated with defining the relationship (Knobloch & Theiss, 2011). In addition, given the poorer communication reported by cyclical partners (e.g., Halpern-Meekin et al., 2013) and the positive association between thoughtful

decision making and relationship efficacy and conflict resolution (Vennum & Fincham, 2011), it is possible that partners in cyclical relationships may not believe they have the skills necessary to have the conversations vital to clarifying each partners' commitment to making the relationship work. Accordingly, Jang, Vangelisti, and Dailey (2013) found that efficacy mediated the link between uncertainty and people's tendency to use avoidance after the discovery of a partner's deceptive communication, implying that relationship efficacy may be a key component in helping emerging adults decide rather than slide in the face of relational uncertainty.

Counter to previous findings (e.g., Dailey, Hampel, & Roberts, 2010), relationship cycling was not related to levels of dedication at the beginning of the semester. It may be that measuring general dedication to the relationship is an imprecise measure of commitment for cyclical partners given their high levels of uncertainty in the current state of the relationship and their experience with alternative forms of their relationship. It may be more accurate to assess partners' commitment to the future exclusive status of the relationship or their commitment to having a relationship with their current partner regardless of whether they are romantic given that cyclical partners tend to maintain some level of connection even while "broken up," often considering it a continuation of the relationship, just in a different form (Dailey, Rossetto, et al., 2009).

It is interesting that for each breakup and renewal experienced, the rate of change in dedication over the semester became increasingly negative. Again, the greater uncertainty experienced by cyclical partners may be a key factor. Dailey et al. (2010) found that for both cyclical and non-cyclical partners, the negative impact of relational uncertainty on dedication was mediated by relationship maintenance behaviors; specifically, for cyclical partners the impact of relational uncertainty on dedication was mediated by their openness about their needs and the quality of the relationship. In line with Knobloch and Theiss's (2011) findings, cyclical partners' openness about discussing the relationship decreased as uncertainty increased. Taken together, it may be that as cyclical partners end and renew their relationships, uncertainty and anxiety grow, decreasing their confidence in their ability to communicate effectively in their relationship, leading partners to avoid evaluating their relationship and open discussions of their needs and the quality of the relationship. The increased avoidance and decreasing relationship maintenance behaviors may thus increase the accrual of unaddressed relationship issues, hastening the decline of partners' dedication to the current state of the relationship and prompting further sliding.

A Time for Relationship Education

Stanley and Rhoades (2009) argued for relationship interventions during emerging adulthood in order to have the greatest impact on those who are at a higher risk for future distress and instability. Rhoades and Stanley (2009) advocated for upstream interventions focused on helping individuals develop realistic relationship expectations and communication skills and identify unhealthy relationships. For example, based on the "Within My Reach" curriculum (Pearson, Stanley, & Kline, 2008), Relationship U was developed to educate undergraduate students, regardless of relationship status, on the risk and protective factors for relationship dysfunction and provide tools for diminishing risk factors and enhancing protective factors. The curriculum covers topics such as mate selection, family background influences on relationships, relationship expectations, gender roles, communication skills, and conflict management, with the themes of making explicit decisions and safety in relationships running throughout. Previous research has found Relationship U effective in increasing relationship decision making and students' attention to the warning signs of a dangerous relationship (Vennum & Fincham, 2011). Our findings suggest that a more thorough integration of intentional decision making throughout the curriculum may be warranted.

The optimum balance of promoting relationship skills versus self-regulation and intentionality is unknown. For instance, Rogge and colleagues (Rogge, Cobb, Lawrence, Johnson, & Bradbury, 2013) speculated that teaching couples communication skills may sensitize them to problems in the relationship and increase their distress. Communication skills training lies at the heart of most premarital education programs aimed at preventing later marital distress and divorce, but this approach has proven limited in sustaining long-term effects (Hawkins, Blanchard, Baldwin, & Fawcett, 2008). Various theorists have suggested increasing the emphasis

on self-development (Hawkins et al., 2008). We propose that within a decision-making (and self-development) framework, helping emerging adults who have yet to commit to marriage examine their current productive and risky patterns of communication may help them decide when they or their relationship is ready to transition to a more constrained stage (e.g., cohabitation or marriage) or whether it may be wiser to wait until they are able to increase the prevalence of positive processes in their relationship. Our findings support the notion that explicit decision making (likely enhanced by effective self-regulation) and dedication to the relationship go hand-in-hand and strengthen the call for relationship education programs to go beyond skills training and educate emerging adults on other attributes that make up healthy relationship functioning, including relationship-centered virtues (e.g., dedication and sacrifice) that engender satisfaction and stability (Hawkins et al., 2008).

Intervening upstream before more constraints accrue that limit partners' options may be particularly salient for partners experiencing relationship cycling. Cyclical partners in cohabiting and marital relationships are more likely to report the presence of constraints and low relationship quality than their non-cyclical counterparts (Vennum et al., 2013), indicating that cyclical partners may be at greater risk of following the high-risk sequence of relationship development (Stanley & Rhoades, 2009). Interventions focused on thoughtful decision making while couples are dating, before greater economic and material constraints to ending the relationship accrue, may prevent relationships that would otherwise not have continued because of lower relationship quality from proceeding to cohabitation and marriage. Researchers have yet to document the efficacy of relationship education with this high-risk population.

In general, therapeutic interventions with emerging adult couples experiencing anxiety over uncertainty in their relationship would benefit from interventions that help individuals cope with anxiety in constructive ways and create enough safety for couples to discuss concerns openly. It is important to note that even if partners thoughtfully evaluate the next steps in their relationship they may not have the confidence or skills to follow through with the decisions they make. Because partners' confidence in their ability to resolve problems in their relationship predicts positive interactions and conflict resolution (Vennum & Fincham, 2011), helping partners increase their confidence in their ability to effectively manage relationship issues may play a large role in helping couples follow the low-risk developmental path Stanley and Rhoades (2009) outlined.

Strengths and Limitations

Several limitations of the current study should be considered when interpreting the results. First, matching the spacing of data time points to the stability levels of the constructs under study is important when conducting panel analysis of longitudinal data. Accordingly, the three time points used in this study were potentially too close together to accurately capture change over time in sliding and dedication. Times of the semester may also coincide with particular stressors (e.g., final exams) or transitions (e.g., students preparing to leave for break) that may influence relationship decision making and dedication. Unfortunately, a measure of stressors was not included in this data set. Second, our measure of dedication to the relationship may not have been specific enough for use with cyclical partners. Third, the results may not be generalizable to noncollege student populations. Finally, the sample was mostly White and in heterosexual relationships. Despite these limitations, the current study contains several strengths. First, the three-wave longitudinal design enabled us to conduct multiple longitudinal models to examine the stability of sliding and dedication across time, the directionality of their association, and rates of change, and to predict variance in the rates of change in these constructs. Second, we were able to examine how the number of relationship cycles affected the development of dedication, providing a more complete picture of relationship development for this high-risk population.

Suggestions for Further Research

Longitudinal research on the association between sliding and dedication with nationally representative samples over a longer period of time is needed. It is likely that a host of other variables (e.g., relational uncertainty, relationship maintenance behaviors, feelings of closeness or intimacy, efficacy) influence this process, and more research on how these

variables influence each other is needed. Specific to intervening with college students, research examining how extra-dyadic factors common to the schedule and context of a college environment may affect decision making in romantic relationships is warranted. Furthermore, noncollege populations tend to marry earlier (Payne, 2012) and have higher divorce rates than college populations (Payne, 2014). Accordingly, more research on the different constraints and stressors that influence decision making during relationship development in noncollege populations would be helpful. Research on relationship cycling is growing; the field would benefit from more information on the individual and relational components that contribute to and sustain this phenomenon. In addition, it is likely that not all experiences of relationship cycling are the same, thus research distinguishing factors that increase risk for continued distress and instability from factors that allow couples to repair and improve cyclical relationships is needed. Furthermore, the Bases of Relational Commitment Model proposed by Agnew et al. (2008) includes commitment to the relationship in its current form versus alternative forms in the conceptualization of alternatives to the relationship and expands relationship investments to include expected future connections with the current partner. These ideas may be particularly salient for cyclical partners whose relationships experience multiple transformations.

Conclusion

The present findings advance our understanding of sliding versus deciding (Stanley et al., 2006) by explicating not only the role of thoughtful decision making in the development of dedication to one's partner but also that of dedication in the development of decision-making processes that promote relationship stability. Furthermore, the results highlight the potential risks associated with relationship cycling and support the theoretical impact of relationship ambiguity on the deterioration of dedication in developing relationships. These findings are informative to helping professionals who are seeking to facilitate the development of low-risk emerging adult romantic relationships.

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