Published in final edited form as:

J Couple Relatsh Ther. 2013 April 1; 12(2): 135–149. doi:10.1080/15332691.2013.779097.

Sliding versus Deciding in Relationships: Associations with Relationship Quality, Commitment, and Infidelity

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Abstract

From choosing a partner to date to deciding to cohabit or marry, individuals are faced with many relationship choices. Given the costs of failed relationships (e.g., personal distress, problems with work, lower well-being for children, lost opportunities to meet other partners), it is important consider how individuals are approaching these decisions. The current study tested if more thoughtful and clear relationship decision-making processes would relate to individuals' levels of satisfaction with and dedication to their partners as well as their extra-dyadic involvements. In a sample of 252 men and women, the results showed that regardless of relationship status (i.e., dating, cohabiting, or married), those who reported more thoughtful decision-making processes also reported more dedication to their partners, higher satisfaction with the relationship, and fewer extra-dyadic involvements.

Keywords

Decision-making; Commitment; Relationship Satisfaction; Infidelity

Romantic relationships are a source of happiness and fulfillment for many individuals, but troubled relationships can incur many costs, including personal distress, problems with work, lost opportunities to meet new partners, and lower well-being for children (Amato & Cheadle, 2005; Fincham & Beach, 1999; Waite et al., 2002). Thus, the decisions people make about their relationships, from choosing dating partners to deciding to marry, can affect many facets of life. Indeed, therapists frequently encounter clients (both individuals and couples) with varying levels of desire to continue their current relationships (see Doss, Simpson, & Christensen, 2004). How therapists help clients navigate the complexities of how to proceed (or not) in their relationship can be quite challenging (Lebow, 2004). This study examines how patterns of decision-making in relationships are associated with other relationship characteristics, including relationship quality, commitment, and extra-dyadic involvement.

Stanley, Rhoades, and Markman (2006) have put forth a model of explaining risks related to how relationship transitions occur. They suggest that sliding through relationship transitions,

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such as into sex, cohabitation, or pregnancy, without making a mutual decision to take such steps, may put a relationship more at risk for problems, particularly problems with commitment. Some relationship events and transitions (e.g., beginning a sexual relationship, moving in together, or becoming pregnant), they argue, can increase pressure to stay in a relationship. In commitment theory terms (Stanley & Markman, 1992), such transitions, particularly when they are unplanned or happen in the absence of clear decision, may increase constraints while not necessarily increasing interpersonal commitment or dedication to the relationship.

The literature on cognitive dissonance, establishes clearer decisions should set up stronger action tendencies to follow through (Brehm, 2007). If an individual fails to make a decision about events or transitions that ultimately affect whether he or she remains in the relationship, it may be hard to follow through in doing the work to make the relationship all it can be (also see Stanley, Rhoades, & Whitton, 2010). Thus, in this study, we tested the general hypothesis suggested by Stanley et al. (2006) that relationships transitions characterized more by “sliding” than “deciding” would evidence greater average risk for relationship distress.

The idea of sliding vs. deciding in relationships captures elements of impulsivity and relationship capacity (e.g., poor communication styles, relational efficacy), however is notably distinct from these personality and relational concepts. For instance, Vennum and Fincham (in press) found that lower scores on a measure of relationship decision-making is associated, but only moderately, with self-control ($r = .25$), conflict management ($r = .26$), and relationship efficacy ($r = .24$). Thus, sliding vs. deciding in relationships appears to be a novel concept that may contribute to our understanding of how individuals function in the context of romantic relationships.

It is becoming increasingly clear that making decisions throughout stages in relationships is advantageous. For instance, individuals' thoughtfulness about partner selection has been shown to moderate the effects of alcohol use on the decision to engage in casual sex relationships (Owen & Fincham, 2010). Additionally, individuals in dating relationships who discuss and share a similar vision about the long-term trajectory of the relationship report less personal stress, better relationship functioning, and engage in fewer casual romantic relationships (Loving, 2007; Owen & Fincham, 2011). In contrast, individuals who are in monogamous relationships but who express a desire to have multiple sexual partners are more likely to engage in extra-dyadic relationships (Barta & Kiene, 2005; Feldman & Caufmann, 1999; Seal, Agostinelli, & Hannett, 1994), which may suggest that they slid through the transition to monogamy without recognizing what they were giving up. Moreover, those who slide into sexual encounters (e.g., engaging in unprotected sex or casual sex) seem to be at higher risk for sexually transmitted infections, unplanned pregnancies, and negative emotional reactions (Manning et al., 2000; Norris et al., 1996; Owen, Rhoades, Stanley, & Fincham, 2010).

Qualitative interviews with individuals in cohabiting relationships indicate that many couples today slide into cohabitation without considering or communicating about what the transition might mean for the future of their relationship (Manning & Smock, 2005). Further, in a national sample, two-thirds of cohabiting respondents indicated that they slid into living together rather than the partners making a mutual decision about it (Stanley, Rhoades, & Fincham, 2010). Related to this, cohabitations that begin before a mutual commitment to marry has been made are characterized by lower relationship quality both during cohabitation (Brown & Booth, 1996) and even after marriage, for those who go on to marry (Kline et al., 2004; Murrow & Shi, 2010; Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2009). Other research shows that mismatches in partner selection on factors such as personality,

values, personal habits, and leisure activities are related to relationship distress (e.g., Bouchard, Lussier, & Sabourin, 1999; Kurdek, 1993; Fowers, Montel, & Olson, 1996). These findings suggest that being aware of preferences for certain partner characteristics and making sound decisions about partner selection may increase compatibility and subsequent relationship adjustment. In summary, several studies suggest that making decisions in relationships, rather than sliding through transitions or letting things just happen, may relate to better relational functioning. However, there is limited research directly assessing an individuals' own accounts of how they experience relationship transitions.

In addition to examining individuals' accounts of how they tend to make relationship transitions, we also examined attachment in this study. Attachment theory has garnered vast empirical support and has informed therapeutic work with individuals and couples (e.g., Hazan, Campa, & Gur-Yaish, Stuart, Robertson, & O'Hara, 2006). According to attachment theory, individuals form internal working models based on their interactions with other close others, which guide their desire and need for interpersonal relatedness (e.g., Collins & Read, 1990; Hazen & Shaver, 1987). Secure attachment styles reflect a sense of ease in developing romantic relationships as well as a comfort with establishing healthy boundaries in relationships; whereas insecure attachment styles reflect a sense of anxiety about, or avoidance of, developing an emotionally close relationship. Stanley et al. (2010) argued that a fundamental role of commitment is to secure romantic attachment between partners, and that this process should be more difficult for those with various types of insecurities about attachment. Thus, attachment dynamics may be an important third variable in explaining links between an individuals' relationship decision-making process and relationship functioning.

The Current Study

In the current study, we examine self-reports of individuals in dating, cohabiting, and married relationships, and observe how they tend to make decisions regarding relationship transitions and events. We test the hypothesis that a general propensity toward sliding (in physical and emotional aspects of relationships) would be associated with lower relationship quality, lower interpersonal commitment, and higher rates of infidelity in the current relationship after controlling for several variables, such as gender, age, income, religiousness, and attachment styles. Although our study is cross-sectional, thus limiting our ability to make causal statements, this study is one of the first to examine the relationship between individuals' relationship decision-making processes and relationship functioning.

Method

Participants

The full sample included 372 individuals who responded to an online survey. However, due to the purpose of the current study, we excluded 80 participants who indicated that they were single and 40 participants because they did not complete the entire survey. Thus, the final sample for the current study included 252 individuals who were in dating ($n = 71$), cohabiting ($n = 86$), or married ($n = 95$) relationships. Seventy-four percent (74.2%) of the participants were female and 25.4% were male (0.4% did not indicate their gender) with a median age of 28 years old (range = 18 to 60). The majority of the participants were Caucasian (85.7%), 2.8 percent were Asian American, 1.6% were African American, 2.0% were Hispanic, 3.2% were Multi-ethnic, and 0.4% were Arab American; 4.4% either indicated "other race/ethnicity" or did not endorse their ethnicity/race. The median annual household income was \$50,000, with a range from under \$9,999 to over \$100,000. In terms of education, 11.5% of the participants had no college degree, 52.0% had a bachelor's degree, and 36.5% had an advanced graduate degree.

Procedure

Leaders of 25 online professional organizations and other internet groups (e.g., Yahoo professional groups) across the United States were asked to forward a link to this study's online survey to their members. Nationwide organizations as well as those in a variety of cities, including large metropolitan areas (e.g., New York, Chicago, San Francisco) as well as smaller cities (e.g., Cleveland, Portland, Indianapolis, Denver) were targeted so that the sample would represent a wide range of individuals in various stages of their professional pursuits (as compared to undergraduate samples) and to ensure that we would be able to gather information from individuals who were at various stages of relationship development (i.e., dating, cohabitation, married). Due to restrictions to the lists of members for most professional associations, we sent a recruitment email to the leaders of organizations rather than directly to the members themselves. Because of this recruitment strategy, it is not possible to calculate a response rate, as we do not know how many potential participants the recruitment announcements reached. Participants endorsed an online informed consent form and then they completed several measures about their relationships. Participants in this study were invited to enter a lottery for one of four \$100 dollars prizes. The study was approved by the IRB from an accredited university.

Measures

Slide versus Decide Scale (SVDS)—The SVDS is based on the conceptualization of Stanley et al. (2006)'s sliding vs. deciding relationship decision-making theory, with items adapted from the Relationship Attitude Scale (RAS; Owen & Fincham, 2010) and the Sociosexuality Orientation Inventory (SOI; Simpson & Gangestad, 1991). Specifically, the SVDS was designed to assess the degree to which one makes thoughtful decisions about aspects within romantic relationships (versus less thoughtful or "sliding"). While much of the conceptualization of Stanley et al. (2006) about sliding vs. deciding is specific to the transitions a given couple makes, the scale used here is an extension of this concept to how an individual approaches important relationship transitions more generally. It consists of two subscales Physical Sliding vs. Deciding ("Physical Deciding"; 8 items, Cronbach's alpha (α) = .94) and Emotional Sliding vs. Deciding ("Emotional Deciding"; 6 items; α = .79). Items were rated on a 7-point scale with 7 (*Strongly Agree*) to 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) as the anchors. Higher scores indicate that a person believes he or she tends to make thoughtful decisions about relationships rather than sliding, and just letting things happen. An example of an emotional deciding item is "I put a lot of thought into the kind of person I want to be with in a relationship" and a physical deciding item is, "Having sex with someone is a decision that should be given a lot of thought." The SVDS has a two-month test-retest correlations for emotional and physical Deciding have been acceptable (e.g., r_s = .74, and .78, respectively; Owen, 2011). In terms of validity, the physical deciding scale is negatively correlated with engaging casual sex behaviors and emotional deciding has been related to single individuals' efforts toward coupling (Owen, 2011).

Dedication—We used a five-item version of the dedication subscale from the Commitment Inventory (Stanley & Markman, 1992; Stanley, Markman, & Whitton, 2001). These items are rated on a 7-point scale ranging from 7 (*Strongly Agree*) to 1 (*Strongly Disagree*), with higher scores indicating more dedication to the relationship. This measure assesses participants' perception of how much they prioritize the relationship, couple identity, satisfaction with sacrifice, and long-term view of the relationship. Example 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 may not want to be with my partner a few years from now" (reverse coded). In prior studies, this subscale has been associated with a variety of relationship functioning measures (e.g., relationship satisfaction, constraints in the relationship, negative communication;

Adams & Jones, 1997; Owen, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2011; Stanley & Markman, 1992). In the current study, $\alpha = .80$.

Dyadic Adjustment Scale—The four-item Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS-4; Sabourin Valois, & Lussier, 2005) is a measure of relationship adjustment that was developed from the 32-item Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976). The items are: “How often do you discuss or have you considered divorce, separation, or terminating your relationship?”, “In general, how often do you think that things between you and your partner are going well?”, “Do you confide in your mate?”, and “Please indicate the degree of happiness, all things considered, of your relationship. The middle point, “happy,” represents the degree of happiness of most relationships.” The DAS-4 has been shown to predict couples satisfaction and dissolution (Sabourin et al., 2005). In the current study, $\alpha = .81$.

Extra-dyadic involvement—We assessed extra-dyadic involvement through a one-item question: “Have you had a sexual relationship with someone other than your partner since you started the relationship?” The response categories were “No”, “Yes, with one person”, and “Yes, with more than one person”. Eighty-two percent (82.3 percent; $n = 186$) of the participants indicated that they had not engaged in a sexual relationship with another person since the start of their relationship; whereas 10.6 percent ($n = 24$) responded that they had a sexual relationship with one other person and 7.1 percent ($n = 16$) indicated there was more than one person that they had a sexual relationship with since the start of their relationship. Given the relatively low number of participants who indicated they have had an extra-dyadic sexual relationship we collapsed these latter two categories ($n = 40$).

Adult Attachment Scale—The Adult Attachment Scale (AAS; Collins & Read, 1990) has three subscales with six items each rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Very characteristic*) to 5 (Not at all *characteristic*). Two subscales reflect general avoidance of relational attachment: comfort with being emotionally close to others (Close scale) and ease with trusting and depending on other people (Depend scale). The other subscale reflects fears or anxiety about abandonment (Anxious scale). This scale was developed based on the theoretical assumptions of child attachment theory, and has shown adequate reliability and validity as the AAS predicts affect regulation, interpersonal disclosures, approaching others for support, and providing support in previous studies (Collins & Feeney, 2000; Collins & Read, 1990; Shaver, Belsky, & Brennan, 2000). To represent the theoretical position that attachment represents two dimensions (i.e., avoidance and anxious attachment; see Collins & Feeney, 2000), we combined the Depend and Close subscales into a single measure of avoidant attachment ($\alpha = .78$) and used the Anxious scale ($\alpha = .73$) as an indicator of anxious attachment. In previous studies, these two dimensions have demonstrated high correlations (e.g., $r_s > .65$) with other self-report measures of prototype attachment styles (see Collins & Feeney, 2000).

Religiosity—Religiosity was assessed by asking: “All things considered how religious would you say you are?” Responses were given on a seven point scale, with higher scores indicating more religiosity. This item has been shown to be a viable measure of global religiosity (Owen et al., 2010; Stanley, & Markman, 1992).

Results

Initially, we conducted bivariate correlations¹ and descriptive statistics to illuminate the associations among our variables (see Table 1). Next, we used hierarchical multiple regressions to test the first and second hypotheses – that physical and emotional deciding would predict (a) higher dedication and (b) higher relationship adjustment after controlling for age, gender, income, religiosity, relationship status, and attachment styles. In the first step, we included the control variables, in the second step we included the SVDS variables (i.e., emotional and physical deciding).

The results demonstrated that emotional deciding was associated with dedication and relationship adjustment, respectively, after controlling for all other variables in the model (see Table 2). That is, individuals who reported more thoughtful decision-making about emotional processes in relationships also reported higher levels of dedication to their partners and better relationship adjustment. Physical deciding was also significantly related to dedication. Of the control variables, age, income, relationship status, and avoidant attachment were significant predictors of dedication; while religiosity, avoidant, and anxious attachment were significant predictors of relationship adjustment.

We tested our third hypothesis, that physical and emotional deciding would predict lower levels of extra-dyadic involvement through a hierarchical logistic regression (see Table 3). Similar to the analyses above, we controlled for age, sex, income, religiosity, relationship status, and attachment styles in the first step of the logistic regression and included physical and emotional deciding in the second step. The results suggest that physical deciding is negatively related to extra-dyadic involvement. That is, individuals who reported less thoughtful decision-making about physical steps in relationships were more likely to report having had an extra-dyadic involvement. Emotional deciding was not a significant predictor of extra-dyadic involvement. Thus, our third hypothesis was only partially supported. Age was the only control variable that significantly predicted extra-dyadic involvement; older individuals were more likely to report extra-dyadic involvement. Follow-up tests indicated that relationship status (dating, cohabiting, or married) did not significantly moderate any of the associations between physical or emotional deciding and dedication, relationship adjustment, or extra-dyadic involvement ($ps > .05$).

Discussion

Sound relationship decisions can make an important contribution to the health of couples' unions. This study demonstrated that individuals who endorse more thoughtful relationship decision-making processes – about the type of person they want to be with as well as for physical intimacy – report better relationship functioning. That is, more thoughtful relationship decision-making was related to higher levels of dedication, relationship adjustment, and less infidelity, even after controlling for the other demographic variables and attachment styles. These findings provide support for Stanley et al.'s (2006) model about sliding and deciding in relationships. While their conceptualization was at the dyadic level and about the degree to which two partners make decisions together about key transitions versus sliding through them, the findings here support the extension of this idea to how individuals approach their romantic relationships more generally.

¹Married individuals had significantly higher scores on Physical Deciding as compared to individuals in cohabiting relationships; however, there were no statistically significant differences between individuals in dating and cohabiting relationships. There were no statistically significant differences across relationship status for Emotional Deciding.

Our results suggest that individuals who tend to use more thoughtful relationship decision-making processes (e.g., being more deliberate in their partner selection and in the steps of relationships) report higher levels of personal dedication and higher relationship quality with their current partners. Future research could examine the mechanisms underlying these associations, as it may be that more thoughtful decision-making processes are related to more proximal protective factors in relationship formation and development. For example, those who tend to decide rather than slide might be more likely to initiate earlier discussions about compatibility (e.g., about shared values) or expectations (e.g., about how to spend money, work/home responsibilities) or about what certain relationship experiences (e.g., sex, moving in together) might mean for the future of the relationship. As noted in the introduction, an awareness that one has made effortful decisions about commitment in a relationship may also activate cognitive dissonance mechanisms that will, in turn, undergird follow-through and support the derogation of alternatives (Stanley et al., 2010).

Additionally, individuals who reported more thoughtful decision-making processes about physical intimacy were also less likely to engage in extra-dyadic involvements. Infidelity is commonly associated with relationship distress and dissolution as well as being a symptom of poor relationship functioning (see Allen et al., 2005). Potentially, individuals with more thoughtful decision-making processes have a better understanding of the ramifications of extra-dyadic involvement for their current relationships. While prior research on correlates of infidelity has generally focused on individuals' desire to seek out alternative partners (e.g., Barta & Kiene, 2005; Feldman & Kaufmann, 1999), these results highlight a different way to conceptualize how infidelity happens. Namely, it may be that a lack of decision-making regarding physical aspects of romantic relationships is as problematic as more deliberate decisions to engage in infidelity.

The merits of the current study should be understood within the context of its methodological limitations. First, the study was a cross-sectional examination of relationship functioning, so we cannot disentangle the correlational effects of dedication, satisfaction, or infidelity with relationship decision-making. Second, future research should seek to understand how relationship decision-making is related to relationship functioning in more representative samples. Third, results from self-report measures are susceptible to shared method-bias. Indeed, this area of research would benefit from observers' or partners' ratings of relationship decision-making to determine if there is high degree of correspondence. Moreover, in relationships it is likely that one partner's relationship decision-making process would influence the other partner and data collected from both partners could yield very interesting results in the future.

Several tentative clinical implications can be drawn from these results. Therapists are commonly faced with clients who need assistance with making difficult decisions about relationships. In this process, therapists could work with clients to build awareness of their expectations for relationships, identify current and past relationship dynamics or schemas that may influence the decision-making process, and empower clients to make healthy decisions. For instance, even before the first date, individuals could consider their: (a) relational schemas (e.g., models of healthy relationships; Azar, Nix, & Makin-Byrd, 2005; Baucom, Epstein, & LaTaillade, 2002; Dattilio, 2005; Stanley, 2007), (b) motivation to couple (e.g., desire to be in a relationship, expectations, hopelessness about relationships), and (c) opportunities to meet available and healthy partners. As relationships grow over time and individuals seek to advance commitment in a relationship (e.g., as in deciding to live together, having a child, getting married), making wise choices may greatly impact the trajectory of the relationship. Therapy or relationship education could help individuals develop reasonable expectations for compatibility, determine ways to learn information about a partner prior to making commitments that constrain options to leave,

establish ways to thoughtfully progress through phases of courtship, and establish relationship skills to communicate with their partner during the formation of the relationship (also see Rhoades & Stanley, 2009). The ways in which individuals approach relationship events and transitions should be given the attention they deserve in both research and practice.

Acknowledgments

Support for the second and third authors' work on this paper was provided, in part, by Award Number R01HD047564 from the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health & Human Development.

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Table 1

Summary of Correlations and Mean Differences for Physical and Emotional Deciding, Dedication, Relationship Adjustment, and Extra-dyadic involvement

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7 ⁺
1. Physical Deciding	--						
2. Emotional Deciding	.39**	--					
3. Dedication	.24**	.17*	--				
4. Adjustment	.22**	.21*	.66**	--			
5. Anx. Attach	.13	-.01	.25**	.43**	--		
6. Avd. Attach	.05	.11	.32**	.34**	.35**	--	
7. EDI	-.37**	-.11	-.08	-.21**	-.19*	-.05	--
Dating M (SD)	4.95 (1.60)	5.63 (.95)	4.45 (.91)	4.55 (.88)	4.00 (.62)	3.43 (.78)	15.5%
Cohabiting M (SD)	4.75 (1.47)	5.42 (.90)	5.85 (1.07)	4.86 (.89)	4.14 (.78)	3.38 (.73)	18.3%
Married M (SD)	5.33 (1.59)	5.68 (.99)	6.16 (1.12)	4.87 (.90)	4.13 (.69)	3.56 (.72)	18.6%

Notes.

* $p < .01$;

** $p < .001$;

~ EDI = extra-dyadic involvement and was coded 1 = yes, 0 = no;

⁺ the percentages of those who reported EDI are listed in the last column. The two attachment variables are scaled such that lower scores reflect greater problems with attachment

Table 2

Summary of Regression Models Predicting Relationship Functioning

	<u>Dedication</u>		<u>Relationship Adjustment</u>	
	β	<i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>)	β	<i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>)
<u>Step 1</u>				
Age	-.14 *	-0.03 (.01)	.11	-0.01 (.01)
Sex	-.06	-0.17 (.16)	.01	0.01 (.13)
Income	.20 ***	0.08 (.02)	.13	0.04 (.02)
Religiosity	-.04	-0.03 (.04)	.16 *	-0.08 (.03)
Avoidant Attachment	.23 ***	0.38 (.09)	.21 ***	0.25 (.08)
Anxious Attachment	.07	0.13 (.10)	.31 ***	0.41 (.08)
Relationship status: Cohabiting	-.08	-0.21 (.16)	.04	-0.07 (.13)
Relationship status: Dating	-.48 **	-1.42 (.19)	.07	-0.14 (.15)
Model statistics	$F(8,244) = 19.29^{***} R^2 = .40$		$F(8,244) = 9.91^{***} R^2 = .25$	
<u>Step 2</u>				
Physical Deciding	.16 **	0.13 (.05)	.12	0.07 (.04)
Emotional Deciding	.11 *	0.14 (.07)	.16 *	0.13 (.06)
Model statistics	$\Delta F(2,242) = 7.98^{***}$ $\Delta R^2 = .04$		$\Delta F(2,242) = 6.32^{**}$ $\Delta R^2 = .04$	

Notes.

*
 $p < .05$,**
 $p < .01$,***
 $p < .001$. Relationship status was dummy-coded such that the comparison group was married participants. The two attachment variables are scaled such that lower scores reflect greater problems with attachment

Table 3

Summary of Logistic Regression Predicting Infidelity

	B (SE)	Odds (ExpB)	95% CI for Odds Ratio
<u>Step 1</u>			
Age	.05 * (.03)	1.05	0.99, 1.10
Sex	.25 (.47)	1.29	0.51, 3.26
Income	.01 (.07)	1.00	0.87, 1.16
Religiosity	.08 (.12)	1.09	0.85, 1.38
Avoidant Attachment	−.08 (.30)	0.92	0.51, 1.65
Anxious Attachment	−.30 (.30)	0.74	0.41, 1.32
Relationship status: Cohabiting	−.42 (.47)	0.66	0.26, 1.66
Relationship status: Dating	−.82 (.65)	0.44	0.12, 1.55
Model statistics	Step $\chi^2(8) = 14.21$		
<u>Step 2</u>			
Physical Deciding	−.71 *** (.16)	0.49	0.36, 0.68
Emotional Deciding	.13 (.21)	1.14	0.75, 1.72
Model statistics	Step $\chi^2(2) = 22.58^{**}$		Full $\chi^2(10) = 36.80$

Notes.

*
 $p < .05$;**
 $p < .01$,***
 $p < .001$; Relationship status was dummy-coded such that the comparison group was married participants. The two attachment variables are scaled such that lower scores reflect greater problems with attachment