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Rituals in Unmarried Couple Relationships: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract

This study provides an understanding of rituals enacted in unmarried couple relationships. One hundred and twenty-nine individuals involved in unmarried relationships reported on their rituals in an online, open-ended questionnaire. A typology of 16 ritual types was developed, 12 of which have been shown to be common in marital relationships. Four new ritual categories, unique to unmarried relationships, emerged from the data: Gift-giving, helping each other/being supportive, future planning/daydreaming about the future, and family involvement. Implications for future research on couple rituals conclude the study.

Keywords: couple rituals, unmarried relationships, relational behaviors

Rituals in Unmarried Couple Relationships: An Exploratory Study

Introduction and Purpose

Rituals are repeated and meaningful behaviors that people enact together. Some rituals are enacted by entire cultures such as national or religious holiday celebrations. Others are practiced in small groups, such as when families take annual vacations or when couples celebrate a wedding anniversary. The purpose of this study was to identify rituals in the context of unmarried couple relationships. Although rituals in marital and family relationships have been studied extensively (e.g., Berg-Cross, Daniels, & Carr, 1992; Crespo, Davide, Costa, & Fletcher, 2008; Fiese et al., 2002), unmarried relationship rituals remain virtually unexplored. These rituals are worthy of investigation because it is within unmarried relationships that individuals may develop patterns for their future marital and/or family relationships. Additionally, compared to the past, individuals are less likely to ever marry (Schoen & Canudas-Romo, 2005), making it particularly important to understand unmarried relationship dynamics. A third reason for why this topic is significant relates to the benefits associated with ritual enactment including enhancing relationship quality and intimacy (e.g., Pearson, Child, & Carmon, 2010). In order to examine the specific outcomes associated with ritual enactment in unmarried partnerships, these rituals must first be identified.

Literature Review

Rituals serve a variety of functions in marital and family relationships. They promote satisfaction and stability (Bruess & Pearson, 2002; Fiese & Tomcho, 2001), ease role transition such as the transition to parenthood (Fiese, Hooker, Kotary, & Schwagler, 1993; Kalmijn, 2010), contribute to a sense of marital and family identity (Braithwaite & Baxter, 1995; Crespo et al., 2008; Doherty, 2001), help transmit family values and beliefs (Friedman & Weissbrod, 2004),

and strengthen relationships during times of transition and crisis (Barnett, & Youngberg, 2004; Eaker & Walters, 2002). In addition to the benefits provided to marital and family relationships, Campbell and Ponzetti (2007) found that rituals enhance commitment for individuals in premarital relationships. Although this work provided some insight on the topic of unmarried rituals, the authors collected data using an adapted measure of family rituals because no prior work existed on premarital relationships. As such, the types of rituals enacted within unmarried relationships have yet to be identified.

Wolin and Bennett (1984) developed a useful typology for conceptualizing interpersonal rituals. Based on their degree of frequency and meaning, they classified rituals as celebrations, traditions, or patterned interactions. Celebration rituals occur infrequently, usually a few times each year and include cultural, national, and religious holidays such as Halloween, the 4th of July, and Christmas. Within a particular society, celebrations are enacted in a similar fashion and on pre-specified dates. For example, cultural holidays such as Halloween are celebrated the same way and on the same date by most people. These holidays follow a generalized guideline of enactment, which allows for modest variation depending on the individual participants. Because these rituals follow established rules of enactment, they are less unique or idiosyncratic to couple relationships.

Tradition rituals occur more frequently than celebrations and include events such as birthdays, anniversaries, vacations, and reunions (Wolin & Bennett, 1984). Each tradition, such as a birthday, might only occur once per year for an individual, but could occur several times per year when considering the number of family members and friends having birthdays. A given person could therefore participate in a particular tradition ritual several times per year. These rituals are guided by a cultural script, but are enacted according to personalized guidelines

(Wolin & Bennett, 1984). For example, although a person's birthday might include a cake, candles, and presents, individuals celebrate their birthdays on different days and in different ways. Because traditions are not enacted by all members in a given society at once, they are more personal than celebrations.

Patterned interaction rituals include daily or weekly rituals such as eating meals with a partner, saying hello or goodbye, and participating in weekend activities (Wolin & Bennett, 1984). These rituals can be confused with routines because they occur frequently and may be enacted out of habit or efficiency. The characteristic that distinguishes rituals from routines is the meaning participants ascribe to the activity or behavior (Viere, 2001). An activity is considered a ritual if participants consider it to be a meaningful and important part of their life. Accordingly, eating meals with a partner or engaging in weekend activities together may qualify as rituals for some couples and not for others. Compared to celebrations and traditions, patterned interactions may be the most relevant to unmarried couple relationships because they occur on a regular basis. Partners who have been together for a short period of time are likely to have enacted patterned interactions, but less likely to have enacted celebrations and traditions due to their infrequency. Patterned interactions are often enacted exclusively by the couple members, do not pertain to society at large, and may or may not involve family and friends. Because they emerge from shared experiences within the relationship, these rituals may not easily be identified or explained by anyone other than the actual couple members. For example, although several people in a given culture have mealtime or nighttime rituals, the manner of enacting these rituals is likely to be couple specific (Doherty, 2001).

Patterned interactions are common in marital relationships. Bruess and Pearson (1997) inductively examined the types of rituals enacted by married couples and identified seven types

(in order of most to least common): couple time rituals, idiosyncratic/symbolic rituals, daily routines and tasks, intimacy expressions, communication rituals, patterns/habits/mannerisms, and spiritual rituals. Couple time rituals consisted of three sub-categories: enjoyable activities (23% of all rituals), togetherness rituals (12%), and escape rituals (5%). Idiosyncratic/symbolic rituals included engaging in favorite activities (7%), using private codes (6%), play rituals (5%), and celebration rituals (2%). Daily routines and tasks (13%) included activities of daily living. Intimacy expressions (12%) pertained to verbal and physical expressions of affection. Communication rituals (7%) involved keeping in regular contact with one another. Patterns/habits/mannerisms (6%) pertained to unique interaction patterns. And lastly, spiritual rituals (2%) included activities such as attending religious services or praying together (Bruess & Pearson, 1997). Each of these ritual types is further defined in Table 1. Based on Wolin and Bennett's (1984) typology, a majority of marital rituals (97%) would be classified as patterned interactions.

Social construction theory is another useful framework understanding couple rituals. According to the theory, partners develop shared meaning systems based on their interactions (Berger & Kellner, 1984). When two individuals come together in a relationship, they integrate their individual conceptions of reality to form a common definition of the relationship. This shared reality is created and reinforced through regular conversations and joint experiences (Duck, 1994). For example, couple members might use certain nicknames or private jokes that are only understood by each other. This process helps partners establish a couple identity and enhance the intimacy in their relationship (Braithwaite & Baxter, 1995; Doherty, 2001). Rituals are an example of how couple members engage in the construction of a shared reality. Partners identify activities they enjoy doing together and repeat these activities because they are

meaningful and remind them of their shared life together. Based on these principles, the current study uses an inductive approach that will enable individuals to identify and describe their unique relationship rituals.

Current Study: Research Goals

Given the importance of rituals for maintaining relationships, it is surprising that few researchers have examined unmarried couple rituals. These rituals are important to understand because nearly all individuals are involved in an unmarried partnership during their lifetime, and it is within these relationships that they may develop patterns for their subsequent marital and family relationships. In order to address this gap in the research, the current study sought to identify the types of rituals enacted within unmarried couple relationships. A second goal was to comment on how unmarried rituals were similar to and different from marital rituals.

Methodology

Participants

Participants were 129 individuals (21 males, 108 females) who were involved in a couple relationship. The mean age of the sample was 23 years ($SD = 5.9$ years). Self-reported racial/ethnic identities were 83% Caucasian, 10% African American, 3% Asian, 1% Native American, and 2% mixed. Ninety-four percent of individuals were involved in heterosexual relationships and 8% were in same sex relationships. The mean relationship duration was 2 years ($SD = 1.9$ years). Seventy-two percent of the sample reported being in exclusively dating relationships, 14% were engaged, 11% were cohabiting, and 3% were casually dating.

Data Collection

An online questionnaire that was hosted on a university web server was used to elicit responses about unmarried couple rituals. The researchers approached graduate and

undergraduate classes at a southeastern university and informed students about the study. Individuals who were involved in an unmarried couple relationship were asked to provide the researchers with their email address. The researchers then emailed prospective participants with a link to the online consent form and survey. In order to recruit non-student participants, the researchers also posted the study information and link on professional list serves. Participants were informed that they would have the option of entering a draw for a \$50 gift certificate upon completion of the survey. Anonymity was assured because contest information was collected in a separate data file that was not connected to participants' survey responses. The survey took participants approximately 15 minutes to complete.

Unmarried couple rituals. Participants were provided with descriptions of rituals that couples may enact in their relationships such as signaling "I love you" with certain codes, communicating regularly throughout the day, and planning special meals together. After reading the description, participants were asked to list and explain all the rituals that they repeatedly enact in their relationship. They were instructed to include both present and past rituals.

Demographics. In addition to the open-ended question about couple rituals, participants were asked to indicate their sex, age, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, relationship duration, and relationship status (e.g., casually dating, exclusively dating).

Data Analysis

The principal researcher and a researcher who was unfamiliar with the couple ritual literature used Bruess and Pearson's (1997) categories of marital rituals to code the open-ended responses (see Table 1). The researchers independently coded the data and agreed beforehand to add new categories when the data did not fit into the pre-existing coding scheme. After completing the initial coding on their own, the researchers met to discuss their findings. The

rituals were reviewed case-by-case and if the researchers assigned different codes to a ritual, they discussed their rationale and arrived at a mutual decision. In one instance, the researchers did not reach a consensus about an assigned code. Therefore, inter-rater agreement was over 99%.

The principal researcher, who was familiar with the couple ritual literature, found categories in the open-ended responses that went beyond those identified in Bruess and Pearson's (1997) marital ritual study. The additional categories were helping each other/being supportive, gift-giving, future planning/day dreaming about the future, and visits with family. As the researchers discussed their initial codes, the principal researcher pointed out instances where some rituals might fit better into one of the new categories. Through discussion, the researchers arrived at mutual decisions about which rituals to code according to the preexisting schema and which to code as new ritual types. At the end of the coding procedure, the researchers revisited the new rituals to examine whether a noteworthy amount of rituals had been classified into each category and whether the categories were conceptually distinct. Each category had 8-10 cases, which the researchers deemed sufficient for a new category, and each appeared to be conceptually different from other categories. Therefore, the researchers added the four new categories to the ritual typology (see bottom of Table 1).

Results

A total of 756 couple rituals were reported by participants in this study. The average number of rituals reported by each person was 6 ($SD = 3.93$). Each ritual type is described below with examples to illustrate the participants' perspectives. The rituals are presented in order from most to least common.

Enjoyable Activities (23%)

Enjoyable activities were the most common type of rituals reported. These typically involved

cooking and eating meals together, watching certain television programs, going on dates, and engaging in hobbies (i.e., reading books together, playing sports, playing music together). One individual described how she and her partner “enjoy going to the grocery store together, picking out what [they] want to eat on [their] special date night, and going back to his house to prepare the meal.” Another individual noted that she and her partner “lay in bed and watch adult swim on Friday and Saturday nights.”

Intimacy Expressions (19%)

These rituals involved using gestures to indicate love, saying ‘I love you’ at certain times of the day, showing affection, giving each other massages, and having sex. One individual reported that she and her boyfriend “almost always take a shower together in the morning and wash each other’s hair.” Some individuals reported elaborate intimacy rituals exemplified in the following account: “A ritual for my fiancé and I is to open a bottle of champagne, turn off all the lights, light some candles, and dance in my fiancé’s den to slow music.”

Communication Rituals (14%)

These rituals typically included daily phone calls, leaving notes for one another, sending emails, sending instant messages online, and text messaging. One participant noted that he and his partner “call each other daily to talk about what’s going on in each others lives.” Another participant described how she and her boyfriend “regularly talk on Instant Messenger on the computer. [She and her partner] IM each other every morning. He always says ‘Good morning beautiful’.”

Patterns/Habits/Mannerisms (10%)

These rituals involved common patterns such as alternating who pays for a meal, sitting or laying in particular positions together, assigning roles to activities (i.e., one partner cooks, the

other washes dishes), or doing things in the same way every time. One participant described how her boyfriend “always opens [her] doors and gives [her] the first bite or sip of food that is shared.” Another participant indicated that whenever she leaves her partner’s home, “he always stands on his porch until [she’s] out of the driveway and waves to [her] as [she] drives off.”

Daily Routines and Tasks (8%)

These rituals were the most mundane or chore-like activities and included cooking and cleaning, walking the dog, and doing laundry together. One participant described how she and her partner do all their housecleaning together: “We do dishes, trash, laundry, beds, vacuuming...normally we each do some jobs during the week, trading out cooking and washing dishes.” Another participant indicated that “[she gets] home before [her] partner and each night, when he gets home, [their] two dogs start barking to let [her] know it’s time to meet him at the door. The three of [them] sit at the top of the stairs and greet him when he opens the door. [They] then take the dogs outside, talk about [their] days, and make dinner together.”

Play Rituals (5%)

Play rituals included silly games that partners played together, joking and laughing, and having fun together. In general, these rituals were very specific or unique to the partners involved. For example, one man described how he and his partner invented a funny language, which “involves changing any ’L’ in a word to an ’R’ sound. ‘Hello’ becomes ‘hero’.” Another participant described an elaborate ritual he and his boyfriend call “Mixing Phat Beats”. In this ritual, “one guy pins the other guy to the ground and uses his chest as one might use a DJ’s turntable, including sound effects and sometimes lyrics. It’s never just a simple affair though, it always involves a brief wrestling match to see who can pin the other first, and the winner gets to mix the beats (while the other struggles to get away).”

Togetherness Rituals (4.5%)

These rituals involved setting aside special time to spend with a partner. During this time, partners might engage in a variety of activities, which were secondary to the purpose of being together. For example, one participant indicated that she and her partner “enjoy spending time together doing just about anything with just the two of [them] (fishing, movies, dinner out, six flags).” One student described that she and her boyfriend “go to different colleges so [they] are only able to see each other on the weekends. This is a ritual in itself. Both of [them] don’t plan to go anywhere else but to see each other. The weekends are [theirs].”

Couple Favorites (3%)

This ritual type included preferred activities such as going to a favorite restaurant, buying favorite items, eating favorite foods, or watching favorite television shows together. One participant described how she and her boyfriend “have a special meal that [they] always cook when [they] have the chance to cook together. [They] always make chicken and shrimp fettuccini alfredo with all different kinds of seasoning that [they] like to experiment with. It is a favorite meal for both of [them] and [they] do not get the opportunity to cook meals very often so it is very special when [they] can.”

Private Codes (3%)

Private codes involved having established ways of communicating that other people may not understand. For instance, partners reported holding hands and giving three squeezes to indicate “I love you”, or calling one another by code names. One woman commented on how she used “baby talk when [she] was ready for sex” and that her boyfriend “stretches when he is ready for sex”. Another participant noted that he and his girlfriend “write notes everywhere [they] can, with the word ‘SHMILY?’, meaning ‘See how much I love you?’ or ‘CYKHMILY’ meaning

‘Can you know how much I love you?’.”

Celebration Rituals (2%)

These rituals involved celebrating anniversaries, birthdays, and holidays. One participant noted that she and her partner “always celebrate the anniversary of when [they] started dating and this is something [they] will do even after [they] get married.” Another participant described how she and her partner “give each other cards on [their] monthly anniversary, which [she] has renamed ‘month-iversary’. In the cards, [they] recount all that has happened in the past month, the struggles [they] have overcome, the good times, and [their] hopes for the future.”

Escape Episodes (2%)

Escape episodes involved taking weekend getaways, going on vacations, and taking time away from everyday routines. One participant described how he and his girlfriend go on “weekend excursions to another close-by city to experience a new restaurant together or an attraction there.” Another participant described that when she and her boyfriend “get bored, [they] will get in the car and go on adventures and drive until [they] see something interesting and then stop and hang out there or go exploring for awhile.”

Spiritual Rituals (2%)

Spiritual rituals included attending religious services together, praying, and celebrating religious holidays together. One participant commented on how she and her partner always have Sabbath dinner together on Friday nights, which includes “wine, candles, and conversation home alone together.” Another participant indicated that he and his girlfriend read spiritual growth books together and that “God is the center of [their] relationship.”

Gift-Giving (1.5%)

One of the new categories, which was not identified in Bruess and Pearson’s (1997) study of

marital rituals was gift-giving. As one participant described, “My boyfriend sends me flowers and attached to each flower is a quote, song, or movie that reminds him about me.” Another participant described how her boyfriend “is a regular rose sender. There is a \$6 rose place near [their] home that he gets the most wonderful colored roses from, fairly often. This gift usually serves as a ‘hey just thinking about you’ gift, but has also been sent as an apology in some cases.”

Family Involvement (1%)

Another new category, which was unique to unmarried relationships, pertained to family visits. These rituals might occur weekly, such as when participants had meals with parents on the same day each week. Other times, participants spent vacations with a partners’ family or went to the family’s house for visits. One woman noted that she and her boyfriend “are from the same hometown, so whenever [they] are heading home together, they make it a priority to see each other’s family. This is a major part of the relationship because [they] believe in order to have a good relationship [they] must get to know each other’s family.” Another participant described how “Every weekend, [her] partner invites [her] Mom to join [them] for dinner. He picks [her] and [her] mom up at [her] place and takes [them] to a restaurant that he knows [her] mom will enjoy. After dinner, he either drops [them] both off at home, or comes in and watches TV with [them].”

Future Planning/Daydreaming (1%)

Planning and daydreaming about the future was another new category, not reported by married couples. One participant noted that she and her partner “love to talk about when [they] will get married, where [they] will go on [their] honeymoon, and even [their] future sexual exclusion, seeing how [they] are both waiting on [having sexual intercourse] until [they] are

married.” Another participant recounted that she and her partner “constantly talk about the future, getting married, [their] prospective jobs, and education.”

Helping/Being Supportive (1%)

The final ritual category that was unique to unmarried relationships pertained to helping or being supportive of a partner. Examples of this ritual type included attending a partner’s sporting events, helping one another with school work, or doing favors for each other. One participant indicated that “[she is] not as good of a student as [her] boyfriend is, so he will regularly take time out of his day to help [her] study or do homework.” Another participant described how she frequently “visits [her boyfriend] at work just to say hi or bring him dinner.”

Discussion

In this study, we provided an account of the types of rituals enacted within unmarried couple relationships. Unmarried individuals reported a variety of rituals, which have been demonstrated as common in marital relationships (Bruess & Pearson, 1997). Four new ritual types emerged from the data, which have not previously been reported in studies of marital rituals: gift-giving, family involvement, future planning/daydreaming about the future, and helping/being supportive to each other. In the following paragraphs, we contextualize our findings in relation to marital rituals and comment on the unique categories that emerged from our data. Where applicable, we comment on how the passage of time since Bruess and Pearson’s study on marital rituals may have influenced the types of rituals reported.

The ritual types that were reported with similar frequencies by unmarried and married individuals included: enjoyable activities, intimacy expressions, patterns/habits/mannerisms, daily routines and tasks, play rituals, celebration rituals, escape rituals, and spiritual rituals. Enjoyable activities were the most common ritual type in both unmarried and marital

relationships (Bruess & Pearson, 1997), accounting for 23% of all rituals in both samples. Intimacy expressions were slightly more common in unmarried relationships, accounting for 19% of rituals, compared to 12% in marital relationships. This is perhaps because unmarried partners have not been together as long as married partners, and are still enjoying the “honeymoon phase” of their relationship. Patterns/habits/mannerisms were somewhat comparable in both relationship types, accounting for 10% of unmarried rituals and 6% of marital rituals. Daily routines and tasks were also comparable, but were slightly more common in marital (13%) than unmarried relationships (8%). This is likely because, compared to unmarried couples, married individuals are more likely to live together, and would therefore engage in more household maintenance activities together. Play rituals were slightly more common among unmarried (5%) than married couples (4%), which may be related to the younger age and earlier lifestyle of individuals in unmarried relationships. Celebration rituals were identical for the two samples, accounting for 2% of all rituals. These rituals may be infrequently reported simply because they occur least often. Individuals experience birthdays, anniversaries, and holidays only a few times each year. Escape rituals were more common in marital (5%) than unmarried relationships (2%). This finding could be a function of the number of student participants in the current study, who might not have the resources to take vacations or engage in other escape rituals. And finally, spiritual rituals were similar in both samples, accounting for approximately 2% of rituals in both types of relationships.

The ritual types that were reported with different frequencies by unmarried and married individuals included: communication rituals, togetherness rituals, private codes, and couple favorites. Communication rituals were considerably more common in unmarried (14%), than married (7%) relationships (Bruess & Pearson, 1997). As discussed in greater depth below,

advances in communication technologies since Bruess and Pearson's study have made it easier for people to communicate when apart, which would influence the number of reported rituals. It may also be that when partners live together, as most married couples do, their communication rituals may not be easily identifiable because they blend in with everyday routines. When partners are required to take time out of their daily activities to be in contact with each other, they may be more prone to see their communication as a ritual in itself. Togetherness rituals were more common for married (12%) than unmarried individuals (4.5%). It is possible that work demands and the involvement of children require married couples to make more of an effort to incorporate togetherness rituals into their relationships. For unmarried couples who are not cohabiting, togetherness time may be considered the livelihood of their relationship, and would be less likely to be viewed as a separate ritual. Private codes were more common in marital relationships, accounting for 6% of all rituals, compared to 3% in unmarried relationships. Couple favorites were also more common in marital (7%) than unmarried relationships (3%). These two ritual types may be a function of relationship length, with married individuals having had a longer period together to formulate private codes and establish favorite places to visit, etc.

An additional four types of rituals, beyond those reported in Bruess and Pearson's research, were reported by individuals in unmarried relationships. These additional ritual types, gift-giving, helping each other/being supportive, future planning/daydreaming about the future, and family involvement, were the least frequently cited, but may be important to explore in future research. A possible reason for the infrequent reporting of these ritual types is that they were not included in the ritual description provided to participants at the beginning of the study. At least two of these ritual types—future planning/daydreaming of the future and family

involvement—may be unique to more committed couples, who see potential for their relationship in the long-term. Future research might explore the frequency and salience of these additional rituals for both married and unmarried couples.

Findings from this study can be contextualized according to Wolin and Bennett's (1984) ritual typology of celebrations, traditions, and patterned interactions. Using Wolin and Bennett's classification scheme, the unmarried rituals of spiritual, celebration, escape, gift-giving, and family involvement qualify as both celebrations and traditions. Celebration rituals, such as anniversaries, birthdays, and holidays clearly overlap with Wolin and Bennett's celebration and tradition categories. The other types—spiritual, escape, gift-giving, and family involvement—may occur during celebrations and traditions, but could also be described as patterned interactions. The large majority of rituals reported by unmarried individuals would be classified as patterned interactions. In fact, all reported rituals, other than celebrations, could qualify as patterned interactions, because they occurred frequently (i.e., daily or weekly) and tended to involve the couple members exclusively. It can therefore be concluded that patterned interactions are the most common and pertinent rituals in unmarried relationships.

With respect to social construction theory, participants provided numerous accounts of how ritual enactment contributed to their shared meaning system. Their descriptions illustrated that partners select unique experiences to endow with meaning, and that these experiences help build intimacy and solidify a couple identity. Not only did participants report a variety of patterns that were classified as “intimacy rituals”, but they also described how other ritual types reaffirmed their partnership. For instance, one participant described a ritual of leaving notes with the acronym “SHMILY”, which means ‘See how much I love you?’ Another participant stated

that she and her partner exchange monthly cards to detail all that has happened in the past month, including the ups and downs and their hopes for the future.

Limitations and Future Directions

In terms of study limitations, a majority of participants were heterosexual women. Compared to men, women tend to be more attentive to relationship dynamics and better at interpreting interpersonal interactions (Hall, 2006); as such, the rituals reported by women should provide an accurate assessment. However, it is important to recognize that men may perceive their couple rituals differently and future researchers will benefit from including more men in their studies. Related to sexual orientation, Suter, Bergen, Daas, and Durham (2006) found that same-sex couples face unique challenges because they must resolve tensions between public and private rituals. The small number of non-heterosexuals in our study precludes the ability to examine variations based on sexual orientation but future research should explore this possibility.

A gradual next step will be to examine how unmarried rituals relate to intra- and interpersonal characteristics such as attachment style, personality, satisfaction, and commitment. Campbell and Ponzetti's (2007) work indicated that premarital rituals are associated with commitment, but their study provides one of the only accounts of rituals in unmarried relationships. Longitudinal research is also needed to examine whether ritual functioning in unmarried relationships is predictive of ritual functioning once a couple marries. For example, does the frequency and types of rituals enacted prior to marriage (e.g., communication rituals, future planning) shift once a couple gets married, and if so, how do these shifts impact relational outcomes? It is important to note that we compared our findings to a study of marital rituals that was conducted by Bruess and Pearson more than 10 years ago. As such, it will be important to

examine whether and how marital rituals may have changed over this time period. It is evident that a variety of avenues remain to be explored in future studies. We hope our findings provide a stepping stone to more work in this important area.

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Table 1

Unmarried Couple Ritual Frequencies and Definitions

Ritual type and frequency	Definition
Enjoyable activities (23%)	Enjoyable activities that are enacted with an intimate partner.
Intimacy expressions (19%)	Verbal and physical expressions of love and affection.
Communication rituals (14%)	Time set aside for couple communication. The couple may interact in person, over the telephone, or by email.
Patterns/habits/mannerisms (10%)	Predictable styles of interacting that are unique to the couple.
Daily routines and tasks (8%)	Daily household activities such as sharing meals or preparing for bedtime together.
Play rituals (5%)	Having fun together as a couple.
Togetherness rituals (4.5%)	Time spent together as a couple, irrespective of the activity involved.
Couple favorites (3%)	Enacting the couple's most preferred activities.
Private codes rituals (3%)	Using words, phrases, gestures, or jokes that carry unique and special meaning for the couple.
Celebration rituals (2%)	Things partners do to acknowledge holidays, anniversaries, and special events.
Escape episodes (2%)	Time spent away from the couple's everyday environment.
Spiritual rituals (2%)	Engaging in religious or spiritual activities such as prayer.
Gift-giving (1.5%)	Giving a gift to an intimate partner.
Family involvement (1%)	Setting aside time to visit as a couple with family members.
Future planning/daydreaming (1%)	Planning for a future together or daydreaming about how the couple's future will be together.
Helping/being supportive (1%)	Doing things to help a partner or indicate support.

Note: Rituals that have been identified in both married and unmarried couple relationships are listed in the upper portion of the table. Rituals that were reported solely by unmarried individuals in the present study are listed in the lower portion of the table.