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Rituals in Unmarried Couple Relationships: An Exploratory Study

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### Abstract

This study provides an understanding of the most common types of rituals in unmarried couple relationships. One hundred and twenty-nine individuals involved in unmarried relationships (i.e., casually unmarried, exclusively unmarried, cohabiting, common law, or engaged) 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. Ritual enactment varied for people of different racial groups with Caucasian individuals reporting more overall rituals than non-Caucasian participants. Implications for future research on couple rituals conclude the study.

Keywords: couple rituals, unmarried relationships, relational behaviors

Rituals are repeated and meaningful behaviors that people enact together (Fiese, Tomcho, Douglas, Josephs, Poltrock, & Baker, 2002). Some rituals are enacted by entire cultures such as national or religious holiday celebrations (Deegan, 1989). Others are practiced in small groups, such as when families take annual vacations or when couples celebrate a wedding anniversary. Rituals occurring in smaller groups are often idiosyncratic in nature (Suter, Bergen, Daas, & Durham, 2006; Wolin & Bennett, 1984). That is, they typically emerge from the unique patterns and shared experiences of people in those relationships. The purpose of this study was to examine idiosyncratic rituals in the context of unmarried couple relationships. Although rituals in marital and family relationships have been studied extensively (Berg-Cross, Daniels, & Carr, 1992; Doherty, 2001; Fiese, Hooker, Kotary, & Schwagler, 1993; Fiese & Tomcho, 2001; Friedman & Weissbrod, 2004; Oswald, 2002), unmarried relationship rituals remain virtually unexplored. A natural first step, therefore, was to identify the types of rituals enacted in such relationships.

Wolin and Bennett (1984) identified three categories of rituals: celebrations, traditions, and patterned interactions (see Table 1). Celebration rituals occur infrequently, usually a few times each year and include cultural, national, and religious holidays such as Halloween, the 4<sup>th</sup> 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 who the individual participants are. 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 and intimate than celebrations.

Patterned interaction rituals include daily or weekly events 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 can 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 rituals most relevant to unmarried couple relationships because they occur most often and because individuals in such relationships are likely to have been involved with their partner for less than a year. They may not have the opportunity to engage in less frequent or annual rituals. These patterned interaction rituals are also the most couple-specific type. They are often enacted exclusively within the couple, 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, patterned interactions 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).

Bruess and Pearson (1997) inductively identified the types of rituals enacted in friendship and marital relationships (see Table 1). They noted that friends most commonly partake in rituals related to leisure activities and spending time together. The six most common friendship rituals were: social/fellowship rituals, idiomatic/symbolic rituals, communication rituals, share/support/vent rituals, tasks/favors, and patterns/habits/mannerisms (Bruess & Pearson, 1997). Social/fellowship rituals included spending time together and partaking in enjoyable activities such as shopping or playing sports. Other social/fellowship rituals involve established events such as girls' or boys' nights out or taking annual vacations. Idiomatic/symbolic rituals included celebrating birthdays and holidays together. They might also include play rituals such as sharing inside jokes or laughing together. Favorite activities are another common form of idiomatic/symbolic rituals. For instance, friends often have favorite restaurants or establishments they like to frequent. Communication rituals involved keeping in touch with one another, either by telephone or mail. Share/support/vent rituals refer to ways friends supported each other by talking through frustrating situations and being good listeners. Tasks/favors included helping friends with requests such as giving rides to or from work. Finally, patterns/habits/mannerisms referred to unique interaction patterns such as using familiar expressions or particular seating arrangements (Bruess & Pearson, 1997). As with most rituals, friendship rituals are diverse and highly stylized.

Some rituals commonly found in friendships have been detected in marital relationships as well. Bruess and Pearson (1997) identified seven types of marital rituals (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, togetherness rituals, and escape rituals. Similar to the social/fellowship rituals of friendships, enjoyable activities included leisure pursuits such as engaging in sports or hobbies together. Togetherness rituals referred to time spent with a partner irrespective of the activity involved. Escape rituals involved taking time away from the everyday environment (e.g., going on long drives, taking vacations). Idiosyncratic/symbolic rituals resembled the friendship category described above, but an additional sub-category existed among marital partners: private codes. Private codes involved using nicknames, symbolic activities, or secret codes to communicate with a partner. Daily routines and tasks included activities of daily living such as meal preparation and household chores. Intimacy expressions involved verbal and physical expressions of affection and love. Communication rituals were similar to friendship communications, except that married couples interacted more often and used communications to plan their daily schedules. Patterns/habits/mannerisms referred to particular ways of interacting, much like those described in friendships. Lastly, spiritual rituals included activities such as attending religious services or praying together (Bruess & Pearson, 1997).

Ritual types have also been identified in family relationships. Fiese and Kline (1993) built on Wolin and Bennett's (1984) categories of celebrations, traditions, and patterned interactions to develop a measure for assessing family rituals (see Table 1). They identified seven types of family rituals: two of which were patterned interactions (i.e., dinnertime and

weekend rituals), three traditions (i.e., vacations, annual celebrations, and special celebrations) and two celebration rituals (i.e., religious holidays and ethnic traditions). Using these ritual types, they constructed a self-report questionnaire to assess ritual characteristics (e.g., frequency, significance) in marital and family relationships. The questionnaire has been used to determine the role of rituals in these relationships.

Celebration, tradition, and interaction rituals serve a variety of functions in marital and family relationships. They promote marital satisfaction (Berg-Cross et al., 1992; Fiese et al., 1993; Fiese & Tomcho, 2001), enhance marital stability (Berg-Cross et al., 1992; Imber-Black, 1988), ease the transition to parenthood (Fiese et al., 1993; Sprunger, Boyce, & Gaines, 1985), contribute to a sense of marital and family identity (Braithwaite & Baxter, 1995; Doherty, 2001; Oswald, 2002; Papernow, 1984; Whiteside, 1988a), help transmit family values and beliefs (Bossard & Boll, 1950; Friedman & Weissbrod, 2004), and strengthen families during times of transition and crisis (Bennett, Wolin, Reiss, & Teitelbaum, 1987; Dubas & Gerris, 2002; Eaker & Walters, 2002; McCubbin & McCubbin, 1988; Whiteside, 1988b; Wolin, Bennett, & Jacobs, 1988; Wolin, Bennett, & Noonan, 1979). Although rituals clearly benefit individuals in marital and family relationships, they have yet to be explored in the context of unmarried couple relationships.

Given the importance of rituals in maintaining close relationships, it is surprising that virtually no research has examined rituals in unmarried couple relationships. The absence of research in this area is partly due to the lack of measures to assess couple rituals. Since measures for assessing rituals in marital and family relationships have been developed (Berg-Cross et al., 1992; Fiese & Kline, 1993), the large majority of research in this area has been devoted to these relationships. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to inductively identify the most common

types of rituals for individuals in unmarried couple relationships. This information can then be used to develop a measure for assessing these rituals and for examining their role in unmarried relationships.

A useful framework for this endeavor of understanding couple rituals and developing a measure is social construction, which describes how partners develop shared meaning systems based on their interactions together (Berger & Kellner, 1984; Berger & Luckman, 1966). When two individuals come together in an intimate relationship, they integrate their individual conceptions of reality to form a common definition of the relationship. This shared couple reality is created and reinforced through regular conversations and joint experiences (Duck, 1994). Partners engage in interactions that are congruent with their combined beliefs about how intimate relationships are supposed to function. They discuss their beliefs and preferences and select unique relationship characteristics to endow with special meaning. For example, the couple might use certain nicknames for each other or private jokes that are understood only by the partners themselves. This private language could be derived from a relationship characteristic or a shared event that carried special meaning for the couple. This shared reality helps partners establish a couple identity and enhance the intimacy in their relationship (Braithwaite & Baxter, 1995; Doherty, 2001; Oswald, 2002). Rituals are an excellent example of how partners actually engage in the construction of this shared reality. Partners identify activities they enjoy doing together and decide to repeat these activities based on the special meaning they hold. As rituals get repeated, partners create and maintain a joint reality and identity (Baxter, 1990). Consistent with a social construction perspective, rituals are co-created by the couple members. As a result, they are highly specific to the partners involved. For these reasons, the social construction framework is a very useful one for this study of how individuals subjectively identify and

describe rituals specific to their relationship. This framework also lends itself well to a qualitative or inductive method of inquiry, which is used in the present study.

In summary, although previous research has examined common marital rituals (Bruess & Pearson, 1997), it is unknown whether rituals in unmarried relationships are similar to or different from those in marital relationships. It is also unclear whether individuals in unmarried relationships might identify additional ritual types, beyond those described by married individuals. Therefore, the following research questions guided the study: What types of rituals are reported in unmarried couple relationships? Compared to individuals in marital relationships, are different types of rituals reported by individuals in unmarried relationships?

## Method

### *Participants*

The researchers approached graduate and undergraduate classes at a southeastern university and informed students about the study. For the purposes of this study, unmarried couple relationships were defined as casually dating, exclusively dating, cohabiting, common law, and engaged couples. Therefore, students who were involved in these types of relationships were asked to provide the researchers with their email addresses. The researchers then emailed prospective participants with a link to the online consent form and questionnaire. In order to recruit non-student participants, the researchers also posted information about the study on professional listservs with a web link to the questionnaire. 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 in no way connected to participants' survey responses.

One hundred twenty-nine individuals (11 males, 118 females) completed the questionnaire. The mean age of the sample was 23 years ( $SD = 5.9$ ) with a range of 18 to 53 years and a median of 21 years. The mean age of participants' partners was 24 years ( $SD = 5.8$ ) with a range of 18 to 51 years and a median of 23 years. Self-reported racial identities were 83% Caucasian, 10% African American, 3% Asian, 1% Native American, and 2% mixed. Partner racial identities were 84% Caucasian, 8.5% African American, 2% Latino, 2.5% Asian, and 3% mixed. Ninety-four percent of individuals were involved in heterosexual relationships and 8% were in same sex relationships. The mean relationship duration was 27 months ( $SD = 23.58$ ) with a range of 1 to 99 months. Seventy percent of the sample reported being in exclusively unmarried relationships, 11% were cohabiting, 14.5% were engaged, 3% were casually unmarried, and 1.5% were common law.

#### *Data Collection*

*The questionnaire.* An open-ended questionnaire developed by Bruess and Pearson (1997) was used to elicit responses about unmarried couple rituals. Participants were provided with descriptions of rituals that couples enact in their relationships. The description included fun and easy rituals (i.e., “regularly tugging on each other’s ears to say ‘I love you’”, “regularly calling each other throughout the day”), as well as rituals requiring elaborate planning (i.e., “regularly planning ‘special dinners’”, “taking weekend get-a-ways”). 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. Participants were given two blank pages to record their responses. Participants were asked to insure that only one member of their couple completed the questionnaire.

*Demographics.* In addition to the open-ended questionnaire, some personal information was collected from each participant. Ten questions were asked to help better understand the sample's characteristics. Participants were asked to identify their sex and their partner's sex by selecting either male or female. They indicated their age and their partner's age in years and were asked to identify their own and their partner's ethnic background by selecting one of six options (e.g., European/White American, African American, Hispanic or Latino, Native American, Asian, or a self-identified "other" category). They were asked to identify their sexual orientation by selecting one of seven options (e.g., heterosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, asexual, or a self-identified "other" category). They were asked to identify the length of their relationship in months and the status of their relationship by selecting one of five options (e.g., casually unmarried, exclusively unmarried, cohabiting, common law, or engaged). Finally, respondents were asked to indicate whether they were currently a student by answering yes or no.

#### *Data Analysis*

The principal researcher and a researcher of relationships 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 2). 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 only one instance, the researchers could not reach a consensus about an assigned code. Therefore, there was 99% agreement between the coders.

The principal researcher, who was familiar with the couple ritual literature, had found additional categories in the open-ended responses, beyond those identified in Bruess and Pearson's (1997) marital ritual coding scheme. 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 when 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 4-10 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 Table 2).

## Results

### *Rituals*

A total of 756 couple rituals were reported by participants in this study. The average number of rituals reported by each person was 6 ( $SD = 3.93$ ). The lowest number of rituals reported by a participant was 1 and the highest was 20. Each ritual type is described here with examples to illustrate the participants' perspectives on their ritual activities. The rituals are presented in order from most to least common (see Table 3).

*Enjoyable activities.* The most commonly reported rituals were enjoyable activities, which accounted for 23% of all reported rituals. These typically involved cooking and eating meals together, watching 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.* Intimacy expressions comprised 19.7% of all rituals. Common forms of intimacy expressions included saying “I love you”, giving each other massages, hugging and kissing, 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.* Fourteen percent of all rituals were communicative in nature. These rituals typically included daily phone calls, leaving notes for one another, sending emails, sending instant messages online, and text messaging with cellular phones. 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.* These rituals accounted for 10.3% of all rituals and involved common patterns used by partners 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.* These rituals were the most mundane or chore-like activities and accounted for 8.6% of all those reported. Daily routines and tasks included cooking and cleaning, eating meals together, 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.* Play rituals accounted for 5.3% of all rituals and included silly games 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 like to speak English with an Asian accent. He noted that this "involves changing any 'L' in a word to an 'R' sound. 'Hello' becomes 'hero'." A gay 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.* These rituals accounted for 4.5% of all rituals and 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] .”

*Private codes.* Nearly 3% of rituals were private codes in which individuals used a secret language to communicate, shared inside jokes, or had established ways of communicating that other people would not understand. These rituals were idiosyncratic in nature, because people outside the relationship would not typically recognize the purpose or meaning behind the ritual. 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?’ .”

*Favorites.* This ritual type accounted for 2.5% of all rituals and included favorite 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.”

*Spiritual rituals.* Spiritual rituals accounted for 2.2% of all rituals and included attending religious services together, praying, or 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.”

*Celebration rituals.* These rituals accounted for 1.9% of all rituals and 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, which is in June.” 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.* Escape episodes such as taking weekend getaways, going on vacations, and taking time away from everyday routines accounted for 1.5% of rituals. 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.”

*Gift-giving.* One of the new categories, which was not part of Bruess and Pearson’s (1997) marital coding scheme was gift-giving, which accounted for 1.3% of all rituals. As one participant described, “Last week I sent my boyfriend a card which explained how I feel about

him. Yesterday I received a dozen roses and attached to each rose was a quote, song, or movie that reminded 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.”

*Future planning/daydreaming.* Another new category, which was unique to unmarried relationships, was planning for or daydreaming about the future. This ritual type accounted for 1% of all rituals. 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.* Helping or being supportive of a partner was a new category, not reported by married individuals that accounted for .8% of rituals in this sample. 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.”

*Family involvement.* The least frequently mentioned ritual type was visits with family, accounting for only .5% of the overall rituals reported. 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] for a bit before leaving.”

### *Demographic Characteristics*

Regression analyses were used to assess whether any of the demographic variables were predictive of the overall frequency of rituals reported. Results indicated that except for ethnicity ( $\beta = -.269$ ;  $p = .006$ ), none of the demographic variables were predictive of overall rituals frequency. In order to examine how ethnic groups differed in their frequency of overall rituals, participants were split into Caucasian and non-Caucasian groups. This was done because there were too few participants in each of the non-Caucasian ethnic groups to assess them separately. An independent samples t-test was performed with overall frequency of rituals as the test variable and ethnicity as the grouping variable. Results for Levene’s test of equality of error variances were significant ( $p = .006$ ), so the Mann-Whitney U test was conducted instead. Results indicated that overall rituals frequency differed significantly as a function of ethnicity  $U = 494.50$ ,  $p = .000$ , with Caucasian participants reporting more overall rituals ( $M = 6.41$ ,  $SD = 4.0$ ) than non-Caucasian participants ( $M = 3.05$ ,  $SD = 1.8$ ).

### Discussion

This study examined rituals in unmarried couple relationships and compared them to rituals enacted in marital relationships. Findings show that unmarried individuals reported a

variety of rituals, most of which are common to marital relationships. Approximately 96% of reported rituals could be classified using Bruess and Pearson's (1997) marital ritual typology. Only 4.6% of reported rituals were unique to unmarried couple relationships. In addition, the majority of ritual types were reported with frequencies comparable to those found in married relationships. The similarity between this study's findings and Bruess and Pearson's marital ritual study suggest that ritual enactment is generally the same for unmarried and married couples.

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 19.7% of rituals, compared to 12.4% in marital relationships. This is perhaps because these unmarried partners have not been together as long as married partners have, and are still enjoying the "honeymoon phase" of their relationship. Patterns/habits/mannerisms were comparable in both relationship types, accounting for 10.3% of unmarried rituals and 5.7% of marital rituals. Daily routines and tasks were also comparable, but were slightly more common in marital (13.1%) than unmarried relationships (8.6%). This is likely because, compared to unmarried couples, married people are more likely to live with one another, and will therefore engage in more household chores and daily maintenance activities together. Play rituals were slightly more common among unmarried (5.3%) than married couples (4%), which may be related to the younger age and earlier lifestage of individuals in unmarried relationships. Spiritual rituals were similar in both samples, accounting for 2.5% of rituals in marital relationships and 2.2% in unmarried relationships. Celebration rituals were identical for the two samples, accounting for 1.9% 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 (4.6%) than unmarried relationships (1.5%). 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.

Communication rituals were significantly more common in unmarried relationships accounting for 14% of rituals, but only 7.5% among married couples (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 as 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 among married (12.1%) than unmarried individuals (4.5%). It is possible that full time 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 6.1% of all rituals, compared to 2.9% in unmarried relationships. Favorites were also more common in marital relationships (7.2%) than unmarried relationships (2.5%). 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. The ritual description was adapted from Bruess and Pearson's research and was designed to prompt individuals to think about their own relationships. If these additional types had been included in the description for both studies, participants may have been prompted to respond with more examples of gift-giving, future planning, etc. 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.

The findings of this study can also be compared with Wolin and Bennett's (1984) ritual typology of celebrations, traditions, and patterned interactions. Using their 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 often involved the couple members exclusively. It

can therefore be concluded that patterned interactions are the most common and pertinent rituals in unmarried relationships.

In terms of demographic variation, the non-Caucasian participants in this study reported fewer overall rituals than the Caucasian participants. It is possible that non-Caucasian individuals have a tendency to report fewer of their rituals, or they may actually enact fewer rituals in their relationships. Due to the preponderance of Caucasian participants (83%) in this sample, the rituals enacted by non-Caucasian individuals should be explored in future studies (in both unmarried and married relationships) before strong conclusions can be drawn. A larger representation of non-Caucasian participants would also allow for comparisons to be examined across ethnic groups.

Another demographic limitation of this study is the overwhelming number of heterosexual females in the sample, which confines the number of conclusions that can be made regarding sexual orientation and gender differences. Prior rituals research has identified unique challenges for same-sex couples, particularly related to how tensions between the couple's public and private rituals are negotiated (Suter et al., 2006). The small number of non-heterosexual individuals in this study precludes the ability to examine ritual variations between same-sex and heterosexual couples. Future studies will also need to investigate whether male partners perceive their couple rituals differently than females. Participants in this study were asked to report on their couple relationships and as such, the reports should reflect the rituals enacted by both couple members (not just the women). Therefore, although male versus female perceptions of ritual behaviors would need to be examined in future research, the authors view these findings as representative of rituals enacted within unmarried couple relationships.

The strong similarity between unmarried and marital rituals suggests that rituals in unmarried relationships are carried into marriage. However, research on couple rituals can be enhanced by collecting longitudinal data to examine whether ritual behaviors change during this transition. For example, does high ritual functioning in unmarried relationships (i.e., having many rituals prior to marriage) predict high ritual functioning once the couple marries? Do the types of rituals enacted prior to marriage shift once the couple gets married? It is known that rituals serve positive functions in marital and family relationships, so understanding the relationship between unmarried and marital rituals will be important for researchers who study relationship outcomes. Using results from this study, the next step is to develop a measure to assess rituals in all couple relationships and examine whether rituals are associated with satisfaction, commitment, and other relationship outcomes.

### Conclusion

This study provides a first examination of rituals in unmarried relationships and offers promising avenues for extending the research in this area. Its findings show that unmarried partners report relatively similar types of rituals as marital couples. Unmarried partners also report these rituals with comparable frequencies. However, four new ritual types were reported (i.e., gift-giving, helping each other/being supportive, future planning/daydreaming about the future, and family involvement), which could be given attention in future research. It will be fruitful to examine whether married couples engage in these newly identified types of rituals, even though they have not been reported in prior studies. It will also be worthwhile to examine rituals in non-Caucasian samples because the results reported here suggest differences may exist. Finally, the extensive overlap in the types and frequencies of rituals reported by married and

unmarried partners suggests that they serve similar functions in these relationships, but research is needed to explore this.

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Table 1

*Overlapping Types of Friendship, Marital, and Family Rituals*

Family Rituals Wolin & Bennett (1984)	Family Rituals Fiese & Kline (1993)	Friendship Rituals Bruess & Pearson (1997)	Marital Rituals Bruess & Pearson (1997)
Celebrations	Annual celebrations Religious holidays Cultural and ethnic traditions	Social/fellowship Enjoyable activities Getting together	Couple time rituals Enjoyable activities Togetherness rituals
Traditions	Special celebrations Vacations	Established events Escape episodes	Escape episodes Idiosyncratic/symbolic rituals
Patterned interactions	Dinnertime rituals Weekend rituals	Idiomatic/symbolic Celebration Play Favorites Communication Share/support/vet Tasks/favors Patterns/habits/mannerisms	Favorites Private codes Play Celebration rituals Daily routines and tasks Intimacy expressions Communication rituals Patterns/habits/mannerisms Spiritual rituals

Table 2

*Coding Scheme for Unmarried Couple Rituals*

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

Table 3

*Frequencies and Percentage of Unmarried Couple Rituals*

Ritual type	Frequency	Percentage
Enjoyable activities	176	23%
Intimacy rituals	149	19.7%
Communication rituals	106	14%
Patterns/habits/mannerisms	78	10.3%
Daily routines and tasks	65	8.6%
Play rituals	40	5.3%
Togetherness rituals	34	4.5%
Private codes rituals	22	2.9%
Favorites	19	2.5%
Spiritual rituals	17	2.2%
Celebration rituals	14	1.9%
Escape rituals	11	1.5%
Gift-giving	10	1.3%
Helping/being supportive	5	1%
Future planning/daydreaming	6	.8%
Visits with family	4	.5%