

Marriage or not? Rituals help dating couples decide relationship future

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Rituals such as those centered around holidays and other celebrations play an important part in human relationships. When dating couples engage in rituals together, they learn more about each other. And those

experiences can serve as diagnostic tools of where the relationship is going, a University of Illinois study shows.

"Rituals have the power to bond individuals and give us a preview into [family life](#) and couple life. We found they help magnify normative relationship experiences," says Chris Maniotes, [graduate student](#) in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies (HDFS) at U of I and lead author of the paper, published in *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*.

Rituals are experiences that are shared with others, and they impact communication between individuals. While rituals are typically celebrations such as holidays, they can also be idiosyncratic events a couple creates, such as Friday movie night. Most rituals are recurring events, though some (such as rites of passage) occur just once in a person's life. Rituals have elements of routine, but they have symbolic meaning that goes beyond routine interaction.

"Rituals provide a unique time to review one's partner and relationship; you get to see a host of behaviors and interactions that might normally be obscured," Maniotes notes. "Some of the ways rituals affected commitment to wed with these [couples](#) was by altering their view of their partner, giving them a new perspective."

Maniotes and co-authors Brian Ogolsky and Jennifer Hardesty, researchers in HDFS, analyzed in-depth interviews with 48 individuals (24 couples) in the U.S. Southwest region. Respondents were on average 23 years old and had been in their relationship for 2.5 years. They were randomly selected from a larger study examining commitment to wed in heterosexual dating couples over a period of nine months.

For this study, the researchers looked at the impact of rituals. They found commitment to wed could increase or decrease, depending on the

nature of the interaction. Rituals can reinforce bonds and strengthen commitment, but they can also showcase conflict areas and make people less likely to see the relationship heading towards marriage.

For example, holiday celebrations involving rituals could highlight interactions with extended family and provide a window into how people navigate through conflict.

"Rituals seem to really play a role in pausing and slowing down individuals, helping them take a better look at their relationship. They help them see, 'This is who we are as a couple; this is who we are as a family,'" Maniotes explains.

Rituals may not be the defining driver of where a relationship is going, but along with a constellation of experiences and behaviors it brings up important nuances that affect couples' decision whether or not to wed.

Couples who are dating can benefit from understanding how rituals affect their relationship. That's even more important during current COVID-19 restrictions, where rituals we used to take for granted are less predictable, Maniotes says.

"Just recognizing the importance of rituals in our lives, and the magnitude of the role they play, can help us integrate them in an intentional way," he concludes.

More information: Christopher R. Maniotes et al, Destination marriage? The diagnostic role of rituals in dating relationships, *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* (2020). [DOI: 10.1177/0265407520952166](https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407520952166)

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