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Assessing Differences in Intimate Partner Obligations Based on Relationship Status, Gender, and Parental Status

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the effects of relationship status (i.e., cohabiting or married), gender, and parental status on emerging adults' perceptions about intimate partner obligations. We created eight vignettes depicting different aspects of couple relationships (e.g., supporting a partner's decision about a career change, deciding to have a child). We manipulated relationship status, gender, and parental status within the vignettes and measured perceived obligations as the dependent variables. Participants also provided open-ended explanations for their perceptions about partners' obligations. We found that married couples were perceived to have greater obligations to one another than cohabitators when the issues were supporting a partner's decision about a career change, deciding whether to have a baby, and expressing affirmations of love. Women were perceived to be more obligated to support a partner's career change than were men. Men and parents were perceived to have greater obligations than women and childless couples to take action to maintain their relationships. Consistent with the quantitative findings, the open-ended responses indicated that marriage is an important factor in shaping perceived intimate partner obligations, but love, commitment, and intimacy also play a role in motivating relationship-enhancing behaviors.

Keywords: marriage, cohabitation, responsibilities, obligations

Relational obligations are defined as a task or a course of action that one *must* do for another person (Ganong & Coleman, 2005). Relational obligations are expectations for behaviors within the context of specific intimate relationships that emphasize rights and duties that are not optional, but are seen as requisite for maintaining the relationship. The standards for performance are higher for obligations than for other types of relationship expectations, and there is a belief that obligations must be met, and if they are not, the consequences are serious – involvement by outsiders to enforce obligation performance, shame and stigma, and even dissolution (see Ganong & Coleman, 2005, 2006 for reviews about family obligations). Although there may be limited role obligations even in casual or impersonal relationships, ongoing relational obligations between individuals in close relationships distinguish them from other types of relationships. In order to be more focused in our investigation, we are defining *intimate partner obligations* as what an individual must do in order to be a good romantic partner. Fulfilling intimate partner obligations requires that partners recognize each other's needs and act in ways that benefit both members of the couple (Sorkhabi, 2012). In doing so, partners reinforce their intentions to continue investing in the relationship.

Despite their potential importance, intimate partner obligations are a neglected area of inquiry in the study of personal relationships. Although similar concepts have been studied (e.g., marital expectations, marital commitment, relationship attributions, relational schemas, relationship standards and beliefs, relational maintenance and enhancement strategies, household division of labor and domestic responsibilities, and perceptions of marital roles), few researchers have focused specifically on obligations as relational duties that must be performed by one or both partners (Thompson, 1989). What distinguishes obligations from expectations, standards, and schemas is the element of necessity. The fulfillment of both intimate partner obligations and relationship expectations are likely to be related to relationship satisfaction, but romantic relationships in which partners fail to meet relational obligations are perhaps more likely to lead to unhappiness and dissolution than relationships in which expectations are unfulfilled.

There have been many investigations of intergenerational obligations among family members, usually examining the responsibilities of adult offspring toward their parents, or mutual obligations between parents and adult children (e.g., Doucet, 2001; Finch & Mason, 1993; Ganong & Coleman, 1998; Ganong, Coleman, & Rothrauff, 2005; Rossi & Rossi, 1990). Despite research that indicates having relational expectations met affects relational satisfaction and stability, there have not been studies addressing obligations in romantic relationships.

This study is based on the symbolic interaction (SI) principles. By exploring belief systems about relationships we can better understand not only the meanings of those relationships for individuals, but their future behaviors in those relationships as well (Blumer, 1969). Consequently, from the SI perspective, it is useful to study emerging adults' beliefs about partner obligations in marriages and cohabiting unions, because those beliefs provide relevant information about their future couple relationships and the meanings they will bring to those relationships (Hall, 2006).

This area of inquiry is particularly important given recent, widespread demographic shifts in union formation in the United States and elsewhere. Over the last 50 years the age of first marriage has increased, marriage rates have decreased, and cohabitation has become a normative part of union formation (Sassler, 2010). Weakening institutional norms surrounding marriage and increasing rates of cohabitation (Lauer & Yodanis, 2010) leave unanswered questions about what obligations, if any, intimate partners have to each other in different types of relationships. Given the importance of strong romantic relationships for promoting stability in families (Lauer

& Yodanis), these changes necessitate a closer look at what individuals are obligated to do in both marriage and cohabiting unions.

Marital Obligations

Traditionally, obligations have been prescribed for marriage partners by law, religion, and custom. Most family law, however, is concerned with the safety, support, and wellbeing of children, rather than focusing on the obligations of spouses to each other (Abrams, Cahn, Ross & Meyer, 2012). Although laws affecting marital relationships vary by state and by country, legal responsibilities between husbands and wives generally are focused on economic concerns (e.g., sharing resources, repaying a spouse's debts; Nock, 2000). Of course, many legal statutes affect how spouses relate to each other (e.g., laws opposing physical violence between partners), but these laws generally apply to everyone, and not only to spouses.

Religions vary in their dictates regarding marital obligations, but most major world religions instruct adherents that marriage involves sexual exclusivity, mutual support and caring, and the promotion of the spouse's wellbeing (Nock, 1995). Some religions also specify that wives should defer to their husbands' decisions, couples should "give" each other children, and spouses should assist each other in performing rituals and religious duties (Coontz, 2005).

Culturally prescribed marital responsibilities were once more widely known and were institutionalized through customs (Coontz, 2005). Nock (1995) identified several normative dimensions of marriage, some of which may be seen as institutionalized obligations - love, sexual fidelity, reproduction, and recognition of the husband as the head and principal earner. Nock argued that these core themes of marriage, or institutional ideals, informed individuals' behaviors toward their marital partners. However, during the last century there has been a shift from institutionalized marriage, with clearly stipulated obligations for husbands and wives based largely on instrumental activities, to a more relational marriage, in which the focus increasingly has been less on survival and more on emotional fulfillment (Cherlin, 2004). This shift in marital norms is not complete, however, because marriage still has institutional features as well as a strong emphasis on relational components (Cherlin; Lauer & Yodanis, 2010; Nock, 1995). Coontz (2005) has argued that the United States is in a transitional period from institutional to relational marriage, and that cohabitation and non-marital childbearing will continue to become more normative as a consequence.

Cohabiting Relationships

Recent data indicate that a majority of young men and women will spend some time in a cohabiting relationship (Manning, 2013). For most couples, cohabitation is a relatively short-lived experience; approximately 55% of U.S. couples marry and 40% of couples terminate the relationship within the first several years of cohabiting (Bumpass & Lu, 1999; Smock, 2000). For a minority, cohabitation is a long-term relationship that is considered to be an alternative to marriage (Bumpass & Lu, 1999). There is some evidence that cohabiting couples think of marriage as less special and distinctive (Axinn & Barber, 1997), and they come to view the two unions as similar. However, other research suggests that at a cultural level marriage and cohabitation remain distinct (Kuperberg, 2012).

Compared to marriage, cohabitation lacks institutional ties, social norms, and public rituals that define the interpersonal obligations of the partnership (Cherlin, 2004; Nock, 1995). For instance, the belief that marriage entails binding commitments, variously called enforceable trust (Cherlin), enforceable agreements (Lundberg & Pollak, 2007), and the promise of permanence (Waite & Gallagher, 2000), suggests that expected obligations between marriage and cohabiting unions differ. Researchers have found that cohabitation is perceived to engender

lesser role demands, more personal autonomy, and more egalitarian gender roles than marriage (Clarkberg, Stolzenberg, & Waite, 1995; Thornton, Axin, & Xie, 2007). Individuals have been shown to have different expectations for cohabitation and marriage, and to gravitate toward one type of union or the other based on personal preferences and priorities (Clarkberg et al.).

Manning and Smock (2005) found that cohabitators generally moved in together quickly and viewed cohabitation as an alternative to being single rather than as a clear stepping stone to marriage. Nock (1995) has postulated that cohabiting couples are less satisfied than married couples and more prone to dissolve because people in such unions are not guided by strong consensual norms in the same way that married couples are. For example, Clarkberg et al. (1995) found that both males and females expected cohabitation to involve dual-earner households in which men experience less pressure to maintain a consistent income and women could pursue their careers without having to accommodate their partners' careers (Clarkberg et al.). They also found that individuals expected more leisure time in cohabiting unions compared to marriages. On the other hand, marriage was perceived to be constraining and traditional, requiring more specific behaviors and responsibilities than cohabitation.

Some researchers have concluded that cohabitators and married couples seek different experiences from their relationships (Brines & Joyner, 1999; Clarkberg et al., 1995). In contrast, others argue that there has been a gradual convergence of beliefs about cohabitation and marriage as more young adults are choosing to engage in both types of unions (Allan, 2008). Although there are ways in which cohabiting relationships and marriages appear to be similar, the degree of similarity is unclear and the perceived differences in obligations remains undefined (Manning & Smock, 2005; Musick & Bumpass, 2006). There is a need for more research to clarify the obligations of cohabiting versus married partners in a relational landscape that increasingly includes both.

Gender and Parental Status

Although most young adults now endorse egalitarian relationships (i.e., those in which partners share decision-making, domestic work, and responsibility for earning an income) as ideal, gender norms for men and women continue to shape the context within which couples form and maintain their relationships (Gerson, 2010). Specifically, men are still expected to be the primary breadwinners in their families and women are expected, whether they work outside the home or not, to do the majority of domestic work and childcare (Bianchi & Milkie, 2010; Williams, 2001). These gender-based norms are likely to shape the perceived obligations partners have to each other, particularly in situations where gender is most salient (e.g., transition to parenthood, making career choices).

The presence of children changes the nature of a relationship in important ways regardless of whether the parents are married, cohabiting, living separately, or have no romantic involvement (Umberson, Pudrovska, & Reczek, 2010). Thus, parental status may also change the obligations that individuals are perceived to have to one another. There is evidence that Americans believe that parents have legal and ethical obligations to take care of and provide support for their children (e.g., Ganong, Coleman, & Mistina, 1995). It is not clear from this research if co-parents are seen as having obligations to each other in other areas of their relationships besides childrearing (Coleman, Ganong, Killian, & McDaniel, 1999), or if parenthood changes the intensity or nature of relational obligations.

Present Study

The body of knowledge about union formation continues to evolve in response to a rapidly changing relational landscape, yet there are basic assumptions about different types of

relationships that have not yet been tested. Among the most basic of these ideas is what obligations, if any, partners have to each other. Our lack of knowledge about how individuals view the fundamental “musts” of their relationships compromises our ability to understand the similarities and differences between relationship forms and the beliefs, expectations, and actions that lead to happy, well-adjusted partnerships.

In this study we used mixed methods to explore emerging adults’ perceptions about intimate partner obligations. We chose to examine the views of emerging adults because they are in a stage of life in which they are actively forming beliefs about committed relationships. Arnett (2000) defined emerging adulthood as a developmental period in which some young people delay adult responsibilities (e.g., marriage and parenthood) in order to engage in identity exploration. Emerging adulthood is also a time when many young Americans experiment with different types of intimate partnerships, and in doing so they gain a set of expectations about relationships. This investigation capitalizes on the fluid beliefs of young people at the beginning of emerging adulthood in order to understand the perceived obligations of romantic partners.

The present study was guided by the following research questions: (1) Do perceptions about obligations differ for married and cohabiting partners?; (2) Are men and women perceived to have different obligations in intimate relationships?; (3) Are parents perceived to have different obligations than couples without children?; (4) What are emerging adults’ subjective assessments of intimate partner obligations in different situations?

Methods

Sample

The sample included 269 female and 67 male undergraduate students ($N = 336$) who ranged in age from 17 to 27 ($M = 19.75$, $SD = 1.39$). Students were recruited from three sections of an introductory intimate relationships course at a large Midwestern university in the United States. The disproportionate number of women reflects the composition of the course that was used for recruitment. Most identified as White (85.4%), but the sample also included participants who were African American (8.8%), non-white Hispanic (3.5%), Asian (2.7%), American Indian (2.4%), or Pacific Islander (.3%). Very few participants had ever been married ($n = 2$) or cohabited with a romantic partner ($n = 22$), but almost half (44.7%) were in exclusive dating relationships. The mean length of those relationships was 21.22 months ($SD = 16.5$, range 1 month – 6 years).

Procedure

Prior to data collection, packets were assembled that included four randomly chosen vignettes and a demographic questionnaire. Because we wanted participants to write thoughtful answers to open-ended questions, we did not ask them to respond to all eight scenarios. During regularly scheduled class time each participant responded to the selected vignettes and provided basic demographic information. Participants were instructed to read the vignettes carefully, respond to the Likert-scale questions, and then provide a written explanation for their answers. Students were neither incentivized for their participation nor penalized for opting out of the study. All procedures were approved by the university’s Institutional Review Board prior to data collection.

Factorial Vignette Design

We used a factorial vignette design to evaluate if emerging adults perceived different intimate partner obligations for married versus cohabiting couples, men versus women, and parents versus non-parents. Factorial vignettes (i.e., brief, fictional stories with embedded independent variables) are useful for studying social norms (Ganong & Coleman, 2006). Using

this method, researchers manipulate the independent variables in the vignettes and then randomly assign study participants to different sets of conditions (e.g., presenting the characters as either cohabiting or married). It is then possible to examine the effects of group assignment on the dependent variable, in this case perceived intimate partner obligations.

Vignettes. We created eight vignettes depicting a conflict or challenge in intimate relationships: (1) supporting a partner's decision about a career change, (2) allowing a partner to maintain an opposite sex friendship, (3) deciding to have a child, (4) communicating about a partner's weight gain, (5) managing personality differences between partners, (6) providing emotional support, (7) expressing affirmations of love, and (8) taking action to maintain the relationship. These issues were chosen because we wanted to address common issues in relationships that would demand some kind of action or response. We selected these eight issues based on reading the intimate relationships literature (e.g., Sassler, 2010) and consensus among the research team about presenting a range of topics, from long-term, substantive issues (e.g., childbearing decisions) to potentially transitory concerns (e.g., weight gain, friends) that would elicit a variety of beliefs about intimate partner obligations.

Each vignette contained two types of characters, the *actor* (i.e., the member of the couple that introduced or created a problem) and the *partner* (i.e., the member of the couple responding to the actor's problem or dilemma). Couples were described as either married or living together in the first sentence of each vignette. The gender of the actor and partner were also manipulated to explore whether sex differences influenced the level of perceived obligations. Because we thought parental status might be salient for some situations, we varied parental status in two vignettes (i.e., communicating with a partner about weight gain and taking action to maintain the relationship).

Following each vignette, participants were asked to indicate the degree to which they perceived the actor and partner were obligated to each other by responding to a series of 9-point, Likert-type questions (1 = not at all obligated, 5 = somewhat obligated, 9 = very obligated). The number of questions varied for each vignette. In six of the eight vignettes, we asked about both the actors' and partners' obligations; in the remaining two we asked only about the partners' obligations. We did this because not all scenarios contained a logical set of obligations for the actor. For example, the vignette about expressing affirmations of love did not portray a specific problem, but asked about an ongoing mutual obligation, so we did not expect respondents to perceive different obligations for each member of the couple in this scenario. Similarly, in the vignette about maintaining the relationship, the story ended by specifying that the actor wanted to know what the partner was willing to do to keep the relationship going. Thus, questions about obligations in these vignettes were directed only toward the partner. See Table 1 for the vignettes and questions.

[Table 1 about here]

Dependent variables. Vignettes with questions directed at both the partner and actor contained two dependent variables, one measuring the actor's obligations and one measuring the partner's obligations. Vignettes with only questions about the partner contained one dependent variable for the partner's obligation. Within each vignette, responses to items about the partner's obligations were summed and divided by the number of questions to create a dependent variable called *partner obligations* (see italicized items in Table 1), with higher scores indicating greater perceived obligations for the person responding to the problem or conflict. In the six vignettes that included questions directed toward the actor, a similar scale score was created for the actor

and labeled *actor obligations* (see bolded items in Table 1). Higher scores indicated greater perceived obligations. Data from each vignette were analyzed separately.

Qualitative data analysis. For each vignette we asked participants to explain their answers to the Likert-type questions by writing open-ended comments for each vignette. The 1,039 responses were transcribed verbatim; 531 were responses to vignettes in the married condition and 508 were responses to vignettes in the cohabiting condition. In the first stage of analysis, the second author created a codebook using open coding procedures (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). During this process, codes were created to represent all written responses. Longer and more detailed comments were often given two or more different codes. In order to achieve greater parsimony in the final analysis, we retained codes that addressed general issues related to the amount of perceived obligations. We eliminated codes that were relatively rare (less than 5% of the coded ideas) unless the code represented variables in the quantitative analysis (e.g., gender). We also deleted codes that addressed specific, idiosyncratic vignette conditions. For example, in the opposite sex friendship vignette some people wrote that partners were obligated to accept friendships existing before the romantic relationship began. Because this code pertained to only one vignette, it was dropped from the final qualitative analysis. Using the new, shortened codebook, we reviewed all of the comments again to make sure there was consensus among research team members about the codes and their meanings. Although the initial coding was carried out by the second author, decisions about the codebook and analysis of prevailing themes were discussed as a group and revised as necessary through consensus.

Results

Quantitative Findings

Analyses were conducted for each vignette separately. The actor and partner obligations scores were the dependent variables in a series of 2 x 2 (relationship status x actor gender) or 2 x 2 x 2 (relationship status x actor gender x parental status) multivariate analysis of variance tests. A MANOVA was run for each of the six vignettes that had both actor and partner obligation scores as the dependent variables. The significant MANOVA tests were followed by univariate ANOVA tests and post hoc analyses (we used a conservative $p < .01$ for post hoc analyses to protect against experimentwise error). For the two vignettes that had only one dependent variable (i.e., partner obligations) we conducted ANOVAS. For the vignette about obligations to express affirmations of love a relationship status x actor gender ANOVA was conducted, and for the vignette about obligations to take action to maintain the relationship an ANOVA was conducted with relationship status x actor gender x parental status as the independent variables. Rather than present the eight vignette statistical tests sequentially, we collectively present the findings for interaction and main effects. For descriptive statistics and full ANOVA results see Table 2.

[Table 2 about here]

Relationship status x gender interaction. There was a significant relationship status by actor gender interaction effect for obligations to take action to maintain the relationship ($F(1, 264) = 4.23, p = .041$). Men, regardless of relationship status ($m = 7.40$ and 6.99 for cohabiting and married men, respectively) and married women ($m = 6.91$) were perceived to have greater obligations than female cohabitators ($m = 5.90$) to engage in relationship maintenance activities. Note that cohabiting men were more obligated than married men, $t(113) = 4.14, p < .000$, but married women were more obligated than cohabiting women $t(155) = 42.8, p < .000$.

Relationship status. There were significant main effects for relationship status when the issues were supporting a partner's decision about a career change (Wilks' $\lambda = .85, F = 9.66, p = .000$) and deciding to have a child (Wilks' $\lambda = .94, F = 3.66, p = .029$). Analysis of the univariate

findings revealed significant differences in obligations for both the actor ($F(1, 108) = 10.39, p = .002$) and partner ($F(1, 108) = 11.21, p = .001$) in the career change vignette. For deciding to have a child, there was a significant relationship status effect for partner obligations ($F(1, 118) = 6.84, p = .01$), but not for actor obligations ($F(1, 118) = 1.12, p = .29$). There also was a significant main effect for relationship status in obligations to express affirmations of love ($F(1, 129) = 26.65, p = .000$). In all three vignettes with significant relationship status effects, married individuals were perceived to have greater obligations than cohabiting partners. There were no significant effects of relationship status for the other vignettes.

Actor gender¹. There were significant main effects for gender in deciding about a career change (Wilks' $\lambda = .91, F = 5.04, p = .008$) and deciding to have a child (Wilks' $\lambda = .93, F = 4.46, p = .014$). In the career change vignette, partner obligations to support a career change were greater when the partner was a woman than a man ($F(1, 108) = 7.10, p = .009$), but there was no gender effect for actor obligations ($F(1, 108) = 2.12, p = .15$). In deciding to have a child, although there was a significant multivariate effect, neither the actor nor partner effects were significant when we ran follow-up univariate tests.

Parental status. We found a significant effect for parental status in the relationship maintenance vignette. When the couple had children, the partner was perceived to have greater obligations to work on the relationship ($F(1, 264) = 5.17, p = .024$) compared to the childless condition. There was no significant effect for parental status in the weight gain vignette, nor were there any significant interaction effects involving parental status.

Summary of quantitative results. There was one significant interaction effect – a relationship status x gender interaction for relationship maintenance. Cohabiting women were less obligated than married women, cohabiting men, and married men to maintain the relationship. In addition, in three out of the eight vignettes, respondents indicated that married couples had greater obligations than cohabiting couples when supporting a partner's decision about a career change, deciding to have a child, and expressing affirmations of love. There was a significant gender difference for career change (women were more obligated). However, the significant multivariate main effect for deciding to have a child disappeared at the univariate level, so we were not able to interpret the nature of the effect. Finally, for relationship maintenance, we found that parents were perceived to have greater obligations than childless couples. There were no significant differences by relationship status, gender, or parental status (when applicable) for vignettes addressing providing emotional support, communicating about weight gain, maintaining a relationship with an opposite sex friend, or managing differences in personality.

Qualitative Findings

The open-ended comments revealed that marriage remains an important factor in shaping how partners should treat one another, yet responses also indicated that love and commitment should be the underlying motivation for relationship-enhancing actions. Thus, marriage is a foundation for intimate partner obligations for many, but it is not the *only* thing that matters. Respondents suggested that regardless of relationship status partners should: (a) support each other, (b) accept problems and imperfections, (c) communicate about issues, (d) take responsibility for oneself and each other, and (e) compromise and make sacrifices for the relationship.

¹ We also ran t-tests for gender of the respondent for all dependent variables. Only one vignette (opposite sex friendships) had a significant respondent gender effect, $t(115) = 2.42, p < .05$. Regardless of the gender of the actor and partner in the vignette, female respondents perceived greater obligations than male respondents.

Marriage matters. The general obligations for good partnering were consistent across cohabiting and married couples. Yet, marriage emerged as an important factor in shaping the basic assumptions emerging adults made about the partnerships in the vignettes as well as the perceived strength of obligations between partners. Many responses began with phrases like, “Because they are married...” “They chose to get married so...” or “When people get married they...” When emerging adults were asked to explain why a married couple had certain obligations to each other, they often (46% of the responses) cited marriage as the central reason for their answers. The cohabitation condition did not elicit these types of responses, with only 7% citing cohabiting status in their rationale.

The content of open-ended comments yielded two important observations about how emerging adults view marriage in contrast to cohabitation. First, comments from respondents who read about a married couple were rich with underlying assumptions about what marriage is or should be. For example, they wrote, “Marriage is hard...,” “Marriage is sacred...,” “Marriage is a lifelong commitment...,” “Marriage is complicated...,” “Marriage is a two-way street...” Cohabitation rarely elicited such assumptions, and when it did the statements were more tenuous. For example, “Because Antonio and Leslie have been living together for 5 years, they should know each other well and love each other very much.” In most cases, the obligations of cohabiting couples were defined by the absence of marriage, “Since they are not married, she is not obligated to pay [his] student loans, but because they have been living together two years, they need to include one another in decisions.”

Second, marriage was perceived to be more permanent and less flexible than cohabitation. In the midst of seemingly intractable problems, cohabiting couples were sometimes encouraged to reevaluate the relationship, whereas married couples were expected to work it out. For example, one emerging adult writing about a cohabiting couple said, “Sometimes love just fades, people change. She should confront him, but if it’s more than just attraction and she doesn’t love him, it’s time to move on.” Another wrote, “They aren’t married, if they realize they want different things its better they break up before getting into a commitment like marriage. They should talk about things and may be better off with others who have common wants and values.” Married couples were assumed to have more permanent partnerships and therefore were forced to solve the problem. For example, one individual wrote, “They made a vow. That means forever, so they should at least try to uphold it.” Another common sentiment emerged with respect to premarital preparation, “They should have discussed this before marrying so they both could be clear. Justin should wait until Amy is ready [to have a child]. Actually, he has no choice.” This was a common sentiment among respondents to the vignette about deciding to have a child, but only for those in the married condition. Thus, preparation may be another factor that distinguishes cohabiting and married couple obligations. Overall, these examples reinforce the idea that marriage is still the benchmark against which other relationships are measured. Cohabitation was viewed as a state of *not* being married, thus cohabiting couples are relieved of some of the obligation to stick it out and make things work when difficulties arise.

Love also matters. Despite the strong association between marriage and intimate partner obligations, many comments referred more generally to love and commitment as the key factors that should guide relationship behavior. Providing support, accepting problems and imperfections, communicating, taking responsibility, and compromising were seen as natural expressions of mutuality and caring between partners. In coding the responses, we noticed that some vignettes elicited these themes more than others.

Providing support was mentioned most often in reference to obligations about career change (27%; these percentages represent the proportion of responses that were categorized under a given code within the specified vignette) and obligations to provide emotional support to a partner (67%). For example, one response read, “Couples who truly love each other should support each other with their decisions and work together to make it the best they can.” Another said, “Partners in committed relationships should support each other’s ambitions, even when it may be inconvenient for them.”

Accepting problems and imperfections was a common theme for allowing the partner to maintain opposite sex friendships (42%), communicating about weight gain (25%), and managing personality differences between partners (36%). Opposite sex friendships were seen as nearly universally undesirable and problematic, but the history between best friends made it seem inappropriate to demand a change.

In this case, I don’t think it’s a matter of obligation. More I think that when you’re in a relationship you want to support your partner and respect the things that make him happy. And that means you’ll make efforts to be friends with Alexis—not out of obligation but because it’s (she) is a part of his life (even if it was before you).

Acceptance also referred to personal imperfections or differences between partners. For example in reference to weight gain one emerging adult wrote, “Committing to a long-term relationship includes accepting the other person as they are and accepting their changes in their life.” Another simply stated, “You must accept your partner’s traits, but you also must compromise some to make the relationship work.”

Communicating about problems was particularly salient in the vignettes about deciding to have a child (46%) and communicating about weight gain (37%). For example, “Having a child needs to be discussed in great detail as it is a huge responsibility.” Many of these responses (24%) also emphasized that the couple should have talked about having children (or not) before committing to the relationship. One person wrote, “How did that subject never come up?”

Individual and mutual responsibility. Many of the qualitative comments outlined specific actions that partners should take (alone or together) in response to the problem at hand. These statements were often coded as *individual responsibility* and *interdependence*, respectively. They suggest that along with needing to take responsibility for oneself, partners should look out for each other and include each other in important decisions. These two codes were common when the issues were career change (66%), weight gain (32%), or taking action to maintain the relationship (26%). For example, “When you become married, decisions are made together, especially such life-altering ones. You and I become a we/us.” In reference to weight gain, one participant wrote, “If Liz has no desire to lose weight, then it’s nobody’s business but her own. Although, as a couple, both partners should at least feel a little obligated to think of and respect the other.” Finally, making efforts to maintain the relationship was seen as a team effort – one person could not effect change in the relationship without the other. “Katie should be willing to make changes (...) because that’s how you make a relationship work, but it comes from both sides. Mark will have to work just as hard as Katie and change some things as well.”

Relationships are work. Finally, emerging adults acknowledged that relationships require work, sacrifice, and compromise particularly when problems arise. These codes were especially salient for the vignettes about personality differences (60%), expressing affirmations of love (23%), and taking action to maintain the relationship (28%). Some responses referred explicitly to sacrifice or compromise. “This question seems more of a give and take relationship. Sometimes partners should sacrifice a little something for the other to stay happy in their

relationship.” “They should both respect each other’s differences and compromise. They need their space but also their intimate time together.” Particularly for the relationship maintenance vignette, responses highlighted the need to work on the relationship and put effort into creating a good partnership. “Mark needs to make a commitment to make the [relationship] work. However, “work” can be talking, apologizing, more effort, altering behavior or more commitment.”

Resisting obligation. Despite evidence that emerging adults perceived clear duties and responsibilities particularly for married couples, some emerging adults resisted using the word *obligation* to describe those duties. For example, one person stated, “I don’t believe a relationship brings any obligations. It should be desired by the partners to want to make each other happy but they are not obligated to.” Another participant said, “No one is obligated to do anything. They should talk it out and come to reasonable/fair solution that works best for everyone.” Instead, respondents explained that the characters should *want to* do the right thing for their partners because they love them and/or have made a commitment to them. “This is ridiculous. They aren’t obligated to do anything. This doesn’t mean they shouldn’t; it means that if they do, they’re doing it out of love and not obligation.” The idea of being forced to do something out of obligation was not widely accepted, but the notion that partners should do certain things in order to be a good partner was present across vignettes and for both cohabiting and married couples. Love, rather than obligation, was perceived to be an appropriate motivator to act in relationship-enhancing ways.

Discussion

Beliefs about obligations to a partner are shaped by relationship status, particularly when the issues are serious, life changing, and important. Both the quantitative and qualitative findings supported the notion that for topics such as career changes, having a child, affirming love, and maintaining the relationship, beliefs about marriage and cohabitation differ. Marriage carries with it greater perceived obligations than cohabiting does, at least for major dimensions of individual and couple life. More minor issues – allowing a partner to have an opposite sex friendship, communicating about weight gain, managing personality difference and providing emotional support - may be important issues in ongoing romantic relationships, but they are not generally seen as life changing, relationship-defining problems that evoke a sense of obligation in emerging adults. However, when the issues are major, with long-term consequences for both individual partners and their unions, married couples are seen to be more obligated to each other than are cohabiting couples. Our findings reflect the claims of scholars who contend that cultural norms about marriage and cohabitation remain distinct (Kuperberg, 2012), and that cohabitation lacks social norms that define the interpersonal obligations of the partnership (Cherlin, 2004; Nock, 1995). Our findings also support scholars who assert that marriage entails more binding commitments than cohabiting unions (Cherlin; Lundberg & Pollak, 2007; Waite & Gallagher, 2000), at least when issues are far-reaching (e.g., career, children, love, continuity of the relationship).

Coontz (2005) argued that the obligations of marriage have largely been overshadowed by the pursuit of romantic love – that love has “conquered” marriage. Instead of basing marriage on institutional and gender norms, she contended that couples increasingly seek companionship and intimacy as the foundation of their relationships. Our findings provide some support for this. Although marriage had stronger obligations than cohabitation at least in some situations, the qualitative results indicated that relationship status is not the only consideration for intimate partner obligations; affection, intimacy, and commitment are also relevant.

Changes in the institution of marriage have been accompanied by increases in non-marital family forms, including cohabitation. Based on data from Western Europe, Kiernan (2002) proposed a four-stage process through which cohabitation becomes a socially and legally accepted family form. In the first stage, nearly everyone enters into heterosexual marriages without cohabiting first and marriage is viewed as the only acceptable context for reproduction. In stage two cohabitation rates increase, but living together is typically a precursor to marriage. Couples marry in response to pregnancy or childbirth, and marriage rates remain high. In the third stage, cohabitation is widely accepted yet the legal distinctions between cohabitation and marriage remain. In the fourth stage, cohabitation and marriage are socially and legally indistinguishable. Cohabiting families are as common as married families, and the rights and responsibilities are the same for each.

Coontz argued that the U.S. was transitioning between stages two and three at the end of the 20th century. More than a decade later, our data lend support that we may still be in transition. The findings from this study suggest that perhaps young adults conceptualize marriage as distinct from cohabitation, but not in every situation. None of the qualitative comments condemned cohabitation as inappropriate, even when the couple had children and marriage, while clearly important, did not universally affect the level of obligations in the relationship. It is important to note that cohabitation is sometimes a stepping stone to marriage, so the two experiences are not completely distinct. It is also notable that a small portion of our sample had previous experience with marriage or cohabitation. This group was not large enough to constitute a statistical comparison, but we did run all analyses with and without them. When people with previous cohabitation or marriage experience were removed, one interaction and one main effect for relationship status were no longer significant. Consistent with findings in the cohabitation literature, this suggests that the experience of cohabitation may change how individuals think about the obligations of those unions (Stanley, Rhoades, and Markman, 2006).

The perceived gender differences in intimate partner obligations reflects Gerson's (2010) observation about the "unfinished revolution." She argued that although most young adults expect to form relationships based on equal decision-making, shared domestic work, and joint contributions to household income, they have reservations about whether it is possible to do so (Gerson). Thus, the obligations for men and women should be similar, but sometimes they are not. We found significant gender differences for three of the eight vignettes (supporting a career change, deciding to have a baby, and taking action to maintain the relationship). These findings suggest that perhaps deep-rooted beliefs about men and women's roles in families remain distinct despite the largely egalitarian values of emerging adults.

Despite women's engagement in the work force, men's careers remain primary in many families (Bartley, Blanton, & Gilliard, 2005) and our data suggest that emerging adults believe that women are more obligated to support career changes than men, even if it means making personal sacrifices. The breadwinner status of men is at the very heart of traditional gender norms, so it may have been more powerful in shaping responses than some of the other scenarios.

In the relationship maintenance vignette, cohabiting women were perceived to have fewer obligations than married women, but this difference did not exist for men. One possible explanation is that participants felt that men, regardless of relationship status, should put more effort into maintaining their relationships. Perhaps they assumed that women were already making an effort to maintain the union (e.g., talking about the issues, apologizing), so unless they were married they were not obligated to do *more* of them. Finally, the gender difference in

childbearing obligations was difficult to interpret because of the lack of significant univariate effects. However, childbearing may have affected obligation beliefs because the process of childbearing was seen as inherently gendered. Because women get pregnant and deliver the babies, their right to make decisions about whether to have a child or not may have been seen as overshadowing their perceived obligation to satisfy a partner's desire for a child.

Emerging Adulthood

Emerging adults were recruited for this study because they are in the process of forming and solidifying their beliefs about intimate partnerships. The self-focus that Arnett described as a central characteristic of emerging adulthood was present in their qualitative responses – specifically their resistance to the word “obligations.” Participants felt that the couples should *want* to act in relationship-enhancing ways, but many were put off by the suggestion that they *must* take specific actions. One potential explanation for this resistance is that emerging adults are self-focused (Arnett, 2004). Making sacrifices for a relationship is at odds with pursuing their goals and engaging in identity exploration. Consequently many emerging adults choose to delay marriage and forgo high-obligation relationships while they are pursuing their individual interests. Future research could explore whether older emerging adults become more comfortable with the notion of obligation.

Limitations and Strengths

The predominantly female, and otherwise homogenous, sample was one limitation of the study. A greater diversity of respondents may have yielded different results. For example, low-income couples and African Americans are often at the forefront of changes in family formation patterns in the United States (McAdoo, 2002). Cohabitation and unmarried childbearing was common among these groups decades before it became a widespread demographic shift. Greater representation across races and socioeconomic statuses in the sample may have made the perceived obligations of cohabitators and married couples less pronounced.

In using a factorial vignette design, we also limited the relational problems to which participants were responding. The vignettes highlighted specific situations instead of eliciting a more general set of intimate partner obligations. Perhaps a vignette about caring for a child would have elicited more gender differences or one about managing shared finances would have generated greater differentiation between married and cohabiting partners. The next step for this line of research is to identify additional conditions under which people perceive different obligations for cohabitators and spouses, and those in which there is no perceived difference. For instance, it is hard to know what the findings mean regarding partner obligations and parental status, given that we only looked at two issues regarding parenthood. Future research should examine more partner obligation contexts in which relationship status and parental status intersect.

This study may also serve as a foundation to further explore why some emerging adults resisted the idea of intimate partner obligations, and how that might affect the quality of their relationships. In a social context that increasingly favors love and intimacy as a foundation for long-term relationships, is it adaptive or problematic to eschew the notion of obligations to romantic partners?

Conclusions. Union formation is no longer characterized by a pre-determined set of steps leading to marriage. Over ten or fifteen years young adults engage in relationships that vary in physical and emotional intimacy as they meander toward committed partnerships. Although most individuals eventually marry, they are doing so later and at the culmination of complex relational pathways. Consequently, one of the things relationship scholars need moving forward is an

understanding of the meaning individuals assign to different relationships and intimate experiences. In the absence of a socially proscribed set of rules for union formation, our decisions are likely to be based upon our individual beliefs and expectations about what a good relationship looks like and what good partners do to make a life together.

The findings of this study add to the knowledge base about the symbolic meanings of marriage and cohabitation. This study has implications for understanding the mindset with which individuals enter into cohabiting unions or marriages, and perhaps the outcomes that result from those decisions. The findings of this study add to the knowledge base about how emerging adults perceive intimate partner obligations in a rapidly changing relational landscape. Emerging adults have many options for how to proceed through their relationships, and their perceptions of dating, cohabitation, marriage, and gender norms are likely to shape the choices that they make. This study provides insight into what emerging adults think people in different types of relationships *should do* in order to be good relational partners. This has implications for understanding the mindset with which individuals enter into cohabiting unions or marriages, and perhaps the outcomes that result from those decisions.

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Table 1: Vignettes with Likert-scale questions

Key Words	Vignette	Independent Variables	Likert Scale Questions
Deciding about a career change	<i>Anna</i> and Nathan have been (cohabiting, married) for 2 years. <i>Anna</i> runs a local non-profit organization. Although he just graduated from medical school as a general practitioner, <i>Nathan</i> thinks that he would rather be a surgeon. This would require him to spend many years in a training program that would delay his ability to repay his student loans and would require him to work nearly 100 hours each week until the surgical training program ended.	Relationship status Target gender	How obligated is the target/partner? (1 = not at all, 5 = somewhat, 9 = very). How obligated is Nathan to include Anna in making the decision about whether he should return to school or not? How obligated is Nathan to continue with his original plan to be a general practitioner? <i>How obligated is Anna to support Nathan in his desire to study to become a surgeon?</i> <i>How obligated is Anna to continue working in order to help pay Nathan's student loans and household bills?</i>
Maintaining an opposite sex friendship	John's best friend is <i>Susan</i> . They have known each other for years and share many interests. Before <i>John</i> began living with <i>Alexis</i> , he and <i>Susan</i> usually hung out together at least one night a week. Recently, <i>Susan</i> has called <i>John</i> several times asking him to go out.	Relationship status Target Gender	How obligated is John to stay home? How obligated is John to encourage a friendship between Susan and Alexis? If his best friend were another guy instead of a woman, how obligated would he be to stay home? If Alexis did not like Susan very much, how obligated would John be to end the friendship? <i>How obligated is Alexis to let John hang out with Susan?</i> <i>How obligated is Alexis to develop a friendship with Susan?</i> <i>If his best friend was another guy, how obligated would Alexis be to allow John to go out?</i>
Deciding to have a child	Amy and <i>Justin</i> have been (married, cohabiting) for three years. They met while working in a hospital – <i>Amy</i> is a nurse and <i>Justin</i> is an occupational therapist. <i>Amy</i> wants to have a child soon but <i>Justin</i> is not sure he wants children.	Relationship status Target Gender	<i>How obligated is Justin to have a child with Amy?</i> <i>How obligated is Justin to explain his reasons for not wanting a child with Amy?</i> <i>How obligated is Justin to go to counseling or to mediation with Amy in an effort to resolve this?</i> How obligated is Amy to accept Justin's preference to not have children? How obligated is Amy to explain her reasons for wanting a child with Justin?

			How obligated is Amy to go to counseling or to mediation with Justin in an effort to resolve this?
Communicating about weight gain	<i>Liz</i> and Ryan have been (married, living together) for a while. Both of them worked out when they were in college, but their jobs have made personal time hard to come by. They (do not) have children. Lately, Ryan has gained about 20 pounds and most of his clothes are too tight because of the added weight. To be honest, <i>Liz</i> is no longer attracted to him.	Relationship status Target Gender Parental status	How obligated is Ryan to be attractive for Liz? How obligated is Ryan to lose the weight he has gained? How obligated is Ryan to buy some new clothes that fit him better? <i>How obligated is Liz to be attracted to Ryan even with the weight gain?</i> <i>How obligated is Liz to accept Ryan as he is?</i> <i>How obligated is Liz to talk to Ryan about her perceptions of him?</i>
Managing personality differences	Tonda and <i>Jay</i> are a married couple. Tonda is extremely outgoing and loves to be with people and to go out. <i>Jay</i> is a friendly person, but he is often content to stay home. Tonda complains that <i>Jay</i> is keeping her away from friends and family and fun, in general.	Relationship status Target Gender	<i>How obligated is Jay to go out with other people when Tonda wants?</i> <i>How obligated is Jay to invite people over to their house when Tonda wants?</i> <i>How obligated is Jay to accept Tonda's outgoing, fun-loving personality?</i> How obligated is Tonda to stay home with Jay when he does not want to go out? How obligated is Tonda to not invite friends over when Jay wants to have a quiet evening? How obligated is Tonda to accept Jay's quiet, calm personality?
Providing emotional support	Antonio and <i>Leslie</i> are a young married couple. After the death of his father, Antonio experienced a long and severe bout of depression. He had a hard time going to work, doing his share of household tasks, and interacting with <i>Leslie</i> both emotionally and physically.	Relationship status Target Gender	How obligated is Antonio to seek help for his depression? How obligated is Antonio to continue working in and out of the home? How obligated is Antonio to turn to Leslie for support? <i>How obligated is Leslie to support Antonio during his depression?</i> <i>How obligated is Leslie to encourage Antonio to seek help?</i> <i>How obligated is Leslie to do extra housework to compensate for Antonio?</i> <i>How obligated is Leslie to accept Antonio's depression without resentment?</i>

Expressing affirmations of love	Shay and <i>Jeremy</i> are a young, married couple. Shay is a secretary for a law office and Jeremy works in construction. They are busy staying in touch with family, keeping up with their home, and working.	Relationship status Target Gender	<i>How obligated is Shay to have feelings of love for Jeremy?</i> <i>How obligated is Shay to tell Jeremy that she loves him?</i> <i>How obligated is Shay to express her feelings for Jeremy through sexual intimacy?</i> <i>How obligated is Shay to make time for her relationship with Jeremy?</i> <i>How obligated is Shay to prioritize her relationship with</i>
Taking action to maintain a relationship	Mark and <i>Katie</i> have been married for three years. They (do not) have children. Although things between them went well at first, they have been arguing a lot about little things. After their last argument, Mark asked Katie what she was willing to do to make their marriage succeed.	Relationship status Target Gender Parental Status	<i>Jeremy over friends and other family members?</i> <i>How obligated is Katie to make a commitment to Mark to work at the marriage?</i> <i>How obligated is Katie to agree to see a counselor or a mediator with Mark?</i> <i>How obligated is Katie to talk with Mark more often?</i> <i>How obligated is Katie to overlook Mark's faults?</i> <i>How obligated is Katie to apologize to Mark for her contributions to their problems?</i>

Note: Names and questions in bold type refer to the actor in the vignette. Names and questions in italics refer to the partner in the vignette.

Table 2. *Descriptive Statistics and Mean Differences of Study Variables (N = 366)*

Vignette	DV	Cronbach's alpha	<u>Relationship Status</u>		F	<u>Gender</u>		F
			Cohabiting Mean (SE)	Married Mean (SE)		Male Mean (SE)	Female Mean (SE)	
Career change	Actor	.29	4.92 (.21)	5.80 (.18)	10.37**	5.56 (.19)	5.16 (.20)	2.12
(n = 112)	Partner	.21	5.83 (.18)	6.62 (.15)	11.21**	5.91 (.16)	6.54 (.17)	7.10**
Opposite-sex friendship	Actor	.62	4.02 (.17)	4.49 (.17)	3.64	4.41 (.17)	4.10 (.18)	1.65
(n = 122)	Partner	.41	5.82 (.18)	5.57 (.18)	.99	5.55 (.17)	5.84 (.18)	1.35
Having a child	Actor	.36	6.23 (.16)	6.48 (.17)	1.12	6.47 (.17)	6.23 (.16)	1.06
(n = 123)	Partner	.48	5.04 (.16)	5.62 (.16)	6.84**	5.16 (.16)	5.51 (.16)	2.41
Weight gain	Actor	.62	5.04 (.15)	5.24 (.15)	.92	5.22 (.15)	5.06 (.14)	.59
(n = 234)	Partner	.57	5.96 (.14)	6.42 (.14)	5.84	6.06 (.14)	6.31 (.14)	1.67
Personality diff.	Actor	.60	6.33 (.17)	6.41 (.14)	.13	6.44 (.15)	6.30 (.16)	.41
(n = 115)	Partner	.57	5.92 (.17)	5.95 (.14)	.02	5.76 (.15)	6.12 (.16)	2.44
Emotional support	Actor	.52	6.59 (.19)	6.58 (.18)	.02	6.46 (.21)	6.71 (.15)	.90

(<i>n</i> = 104)	Partner	.73	6.91 (.20)	7.08 (.19)	.34	6.80 (.22)	7.19 (.16)	2.00
Affirmations of love (<i>n</i> = 133)	Partner	.92	4.56 (.21)	6.02 (.19)	26.66***	5.32 (.18)	5.26 (.22)	.06
Maintaining the rel. (<i>n</i> = 272)	Partner	.81	6.65 (.33)	6.96 (.11)	.79	7.20 (.33)	6.41 (.10)	5.26*

Note. * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$; DV = dependent variable;

Table 3: *Qualitative Coding Scheme Across Vignettes*

	Vignette							
	Supporting a partner's decision about a career change	Allowing a partner to maintain an opposite-sex friendship	Deciding to have a child	Communicating about a partner's weight gain	Managing personality differences between partners	Providing emotional support	Expressing affirmations of love	Taking action to maintain the relationship
Number of Open-ended Responses	N = 93	N = 100	N = 103	N = 201	N = 101	N = 86	N = 117	N = 238
Quantitative Sample Size	N = 112	N = 122	N = 123	N = 234	N = 115	N = 104	N = 133	N = 272
Focus on marriage	34%	19%	18%	14%	16%	7%	31%	32%
Focus on cohabitation	8%	0%	1%	0%	4%	5%	12%	3%
Focus on parental status	0%	0%	0%	6%	0%	0%	0%	19%
Focus on gender	1%	12%	10%	3%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Because you love them/are together	13%	3%	0%	22%	6%	9%	15%	0%
Accept the situation	0%	42%	5%	25%	36%	5%	0%	0%
Seek counseling	0%	0%	9%	0%	0%	26%	0%	5%
Importance of communication	9%	3%	47%	37%	2%	2%	5%	13%
Individual responsibility	18%	3%	4%	30%	5%	17%	0%	2%
Interdependence	48%	2%	7%	2%	3%	7%	0%	24%
Support the actor	27%	2%	0%	2%	1%	67%	0%	0%
Premarital preparation	0%	2%	24%	0%	8%	0%	0%	0%
Resisting the notion of obligation	15%	8%	17%	9%	7%	8%	14%	5%

Compromise/sacrifice	0%	2%	4%	1%	59%	8%	23%	28%
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Note. Codes > 20% are bolded for emphasis.