

# Rituals in Committed Romantic Relationships: The Creation and Validation of an Instrument

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*Rituals are widely studied in interpersonal communication research, but no instrument for assessing the perceived use of rituals among couples in committed romantic relationships exists. The purpose of this investigation was to create and validate such a measure (Rituals in Committed Romantic Relationships; RCRR). Five-hundred-sixty individuals in committed romantic relationships responded to a 50-item questionnaire that measured 5 sets of rituals pertaining to daily routines and tasks, idiosyncratic behavior, everyday talk, intimacy, and couple-time. In addition, they completed measures of perceived relational quality and perceived relational intimacy. Multiple analyses supported a 5-factor model consisting of 30 of the original 50 items. Perceived use of rituals was predictive of alterations in both perceived relational quality and perceived relational intimacy.*

*Keywords:* Committed Romantic Relationships; Relational Intimacy; Relational Quality; Rituals

Rituals are viewed as central to our understanding of interpersonal communication within relationships (e.g., Braithwaite & Baxter, 1995; Bruess & Pearson, 1997, 2002; Campbell & Ponzetti, 2007; Fiese, 2006). Rituals are an essential type of everyday, lived communicative behavior, beneficial to the development and maintenance of interpersonal relationships. In other words, they may be illustrative of the couple's

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microculture and, at the same time, predictive of positive or negative relational outcomes. Rituals are highly personalized and specific to the individuals who enact them. Rituals aid in the creation of a unique culture of two, which allows for the possibility of generating positive individualized patterns of interactions and strong, enduring relational bonds.

The types, forms, and functions of rituals in relationships have been delineated (i.e., Braithwaite & Baxter, 1995; Bruess & Pearson, 1997), but no measure has been developed to capture perceived ritual use among couples in committed romantic relationships. The purpose of this study is to build upon past research to create such an instrument and to determine the relationship between the perceived use of rituals and two essential relational outcomes—relational quality and relational intimacy. In making the case for a measure of rituals, we turn to the previous scholarship about the importance of rituals within committed romantic relationships.

## Related Scholarship

### *Rituals*

The concept of “ritual” has been defined in multiple ways but generally refers to behavior jointly enacted and shared by relational partners (Wolin & Bennett, 1984). Baxter and Braithwaite (2006) define rituals as “voluntary, recurring, patterned communication event[s] whose jointly enacted performance by family members pays homage to what they regard as sacred, thereby producing and reproducing a family’s identity and its web of social relations” (pp. 262–263). Although rituals are defined in a variety of ways, all encompass their recurring nature, the role of communication, and the need to honor someone or something.

Rituals have two distinguishing characteristics: routine behavior and the associated meaning for that behavior (Fiese, 2006). Routine behavior occurs in both intimate and nonintimate settings. For example, people perform routines to manage biological functioning, to earn money, and to participate in civic life. Further, patterned interactions are often considered routine in nature. While routines and patterned interactions are necessary for relational functioning and relational maintenance, the symbolic nature of rituals affects relationships in ways that routines cannot. When routines are disrupted, people may feel a bit of discomfort; when rituals are disregarded, people may feel that the relationship is in jeopardy, or at least, in need of repair.

Routines become rituals only when they acquire symbolic meaning (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2006; Bruess & Pearson, 1997, 2002). Indeed, this element of attendant symbolic significance is of utmost importance. Therefore, routine behavior is not considered a ritual unless it has relational implications for the individuals involved. Rituals, through their symbolism, signal membership in a culture, an organization, or a relationship (C. Bell, 1997). These two elements of rituals are central to the development of a scale to measure rituals in committed romantic relationships.

Rituals are organizing devices that order our lives and allow for both continuity and change. They are not only of symbolic value but are also rooted in action. Rituals embody dialectical tensions as they reflect the past and shape the future. The

symbolic nature of rituals takes human action to a level of consciousness. They are practical and have a level of utility that can be described and defined. Indeed, rituals are powerful in their promise of effecting change (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2006; Bruess & Pearson, 1997, 2002).

### *Interpersonal Rituals*

Rituals are particularly salient in interpersonal relationships. Reiss (1981) suggests that rituals serve to maintain family integration and coherence and, further, that families could be defined by their use of rituals over time. Wolin and Bennett (1984) note that ritual enactment has three key properties: transformation, communication, and stabilization. The enactment of rituals is transformative. In families, they allow members to abandon everyday routines temporarily and to focus on their family identities. Rituals are communicative and generally evoke strong emotional reactions among family members. They also have a stabilizing property in that they protect families from crises. For example, when an aging grandfather with Alzheimer's disease calls multiple people the pet name he had reserved for only one, family members may respond viscerally. They may feel that they, or he, are no longer in the familial relationship. The meaningfulness of the pet name has significance, even though the other family members recognize that the grandfather is ill.

Although rituals have been widely studied in families, relevant research in other types of interpersonal relationships is scant. "Dyadic traditions" (Oring, 1984), playful rituals (Betcher, 1987; Oring, 1984), and interaction routines (Baxter, 1987; Dindia & Baxter, 1987) demonstrate the importance of rituals in other relationships, such as friendships and between romantic partners. Rituals facilitate people's shared understanding of experiences, symbolize intimacy and create a shared sense of the relationship (Oring, 1984). Oring's conclusions, however, are derived solely from personal anecdotes. One exception is a study of divorced women and married women in successful marriages that demonstrated a broad range of rituals (Berg-Cross, Daniels, & Carr, 1992). In addition, Bruess and Pearson (1997, 2002) examined interpersonal rituals in marriage and adult friendship and concluded: "Rituals are prevalent in forms of relational functioning and maintenance in two of the most intimate relationships" (2002, p. 41).

Bruess and Pearson (1997) uncovered seven types of rituals for married couples: couple-time rituals, idiosyncratic/symbolic rituals, daily routines and tasks, expressions of intimacy, communication (or everyday talk) rituals, patterns/habits/mannerisms, and spiritual rituals. Couple-time rituals represent instances in which individuals have created traditions with the primary goal of spending time together. Idiosyncratic rituals focus on a wide range of events including birthday celebrations and unique traditions. Idiosyncratic rituals highlight specific events, whereas couple-time rituals privilege the ongoing nature and time commitment that occurs. Bruess and Pearson identified meaningful interactions between relational partners as communication rituals. We utilized the term "everyday talk" (Duck, Rutt, Hoy, & Strejc, 1991) to denote rituals about the use of special language between relational

partners. As such, communication, or everyday talk rituals, focuses on couples' adaptations to their communication patterns, language, and interactions with one another. Therefore, this type of ritual draws attention to how language creates relational uniqueness. Couples who create rituals around daily routines and tasks find ways to collaborate in order to accomplish everyday work, such as preparing meals, despite the fact that these activities could be characteristically mundane. Finally, intimacy rituals highlight how couples create unique traditions around sexual intercourse and affectionate behaviors.

Overall, romantic couples and friends demonstrated different frequencies of ritual use, reflected by the differences in the relationship type (Bruess & Pearson, 1997, 2002). The larger number of rituals among romantic partners may occur given the permanence, importance, and depth of the relationship. Although the authors have enhanced our understanding of rituals in marriage and friendships, systematic research is lacking related to other committed romantic relationships, including people in cohabiting and unmarried relationships.

#### *Importance of studying interpersonal rituals*

As important sites of relational understanding, rituals help us see interpersonal relationships as microcultures, in which relational identities are produced through symbolic enactments and reenactments (Baxter, 1987; McCall, 1988). Romantic relationships in the present study are microcultures, or *cultures of two*, in which relational identities are products of symbolic enactments within the relationship (Baxter, 1987; McCall, 1988). This perspective assumes that unique relational identities develop and persist through the symbolic practices of the partners (Baxter, 1990). An individual who has been in more than one romantic relationship will not recreate the same relational culture of the first relationship in a second, third, or subsequent relationship. Symbolic enactments, such as idiomatic expressions, co-constructed stories, and traditions are manifestations of relational cultures (Bruess & Pearson, 1993; Hest, Pearson, & Child, 2006; Koenig Kellas, 2005). Rituals, as relational symbols, are also manifestations of unique communicative systems (R. A. Bell & Healey, 1992; Betcher, 1987; Bruess & Pearson, 1993, 1997).

Rituals, for researchers, are a valuable resource for understanding the communicative processes that embody relationships. Ritualized interactions provide an essential starting point for understanding committed romantic relationships. Studying rituals, as Braithwaite (1995) has observed, "allows us to focus on both the everyday and nonusual aspects of communication in relational life" (p. 2). To date, however, a complete understanding of the development and enactment of rituals, as unique communicative practices, beyond the family is lacking.

Understanding rituals is also important because their presence ostensibly relates to relational maintenance and relational satisfaction. Interpersonal rituals are central to the maintenance of relationships (Dainton, 2007; Dainton & Stafford, 1993; Dindia & Canary, 1993; Fiese et al., 2002). As Dindia (2003) observes, "Similar to routine behaviors are rituals that function to maintain relationships" (p. 17). Dindia and

Canary posit that relational maintenance behaviors are critical to understanding relationships because they keep a relationship in a particular state or position. Rituals are also significant in respect to the well-being of personal and social relationships (Baxter, 1987; Campbell & Ponzetti, 2007; Oring, 1984). People in relationships develop a sense of belonging as they enact rituals. The use of rituals has a general effect on relational health. Holiday rituals, a specific type of ritual, demonstrate a global relationship to marital satisfaction (Fiese & Tomcho, 2001). Overall, couples are more relationally satisfied as they allow rituals to take precedence in their relationships (Duck, 1991).

### *Rituals change as relationships change*

Relationships and rituals change over time. As individuals initiate relationships, choose to deepen or strengthen those relationships and make commitments to each other, their behavior changes (Dainton, 2007; Dainton & Stafford, 1993; Dindia & Canary, 1993). For instance, at the beginning of relationships, men tend to be more active and focus on sexual intimacy, whereas women tend to be more passive and focus on communicating with their partners (Clark, Shaver, & Abrahams, 1999). As relationships progress, a couple is likely to experiment with rituals, to adopt particular symbolic and repetitive behaviors, and to alter those rituals. As successful relationships emerge and develop (Knee, 1998), it seems likely that couples create new rituals and alter or eliminate those that no longer seem to be compatible aspects of relationships. Indeed, successful long-term relationships are marked by adaptation. For example, Leon and Jacobvitz (2003) determined that secure adults take part in meaningful, flexible rituals

Rituals contribute to the health and well-being of relationships among family members, friends, and relational partners (Baxter, 1987; Campbell & Ponzetti, 2007; Oring, 1984). Thus, in an effort to demonstrate convergent and divergent validity with our measure of perceived ritual use, we utilized scales of perceived relational quality and perceived relational intimacy. These two well-researched outcomes are important as relational quality measures a combination of satisfaction, commitment, intimacy, trust, passion, and love, while relational intimacy is a global assessment of the closeness of a relationship. Because of the positive effects of rituals on romantic and family relationships, it seems likely that the perceived use of rituals in committed, romantic relationships will be positively related to perceptions of relational quality and relational intimacy.

### *Perceived Relational Quality*

Relational quality is a perceptual construct. All individuals have an ideal set of relational standards by which they judge their relationships (Baucom, Epstein, Sayers, & Sher, 1989). *Relational standards* are the guidelines individuals have for how relationships should ideally be (Baucom et al., 1996). Individuals develop such standards not only on the basis of their experiences in their families but also their

experiences in other relationships. People judge their relationships positively, thus positive perceptions of relational quality, when their standards match their perceptions of their relationships (Baucom et al., 1989, 1996; Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000; Lutz-Zois, Bradley, Mihalik, & Moorman-Eavers, 2006).

Perceptions of commitment, trust, love, satisfaction, intimacy, and passion in one's relationship appear to influence relational quality (Fletcher et al., 2000). Relational quality is a "natural outcome of pro-social relationship maintenance strategies" (Yum & Li, 2007, p. 80) and is relatively stable. Therefore, it seems likely that as ritual use has been found to be crucial to relationship maintenance (Bruess & Pearson, 2002; Dainton, 2007; Dainton & Stafford, 1993; Dindia & Canary, 1993), they will also be related to perceptions of relational quality.

When individuals experience high levels of relational quality, negative experiences have little impact on their relationships (Bachman & Guerrero, 2006). Rituals would seem to have a similar effect as they are often used in families to soften potentially negative experiences and family stressors (Fiese, 1992, 1993). The concept of relational quality has helped investigators to understand and predict responses to hurtful events in relationships (Bachman & Guerrero, 2006) and how forgiveness is manifested (Friesen, Fletcher, & Overall, 2005).

Perceived use of rituals, like the perceptions of increased relational quality, affect romantic relationships in similar ways in that they may mitigate negative experiences. Further, the use of rituals have been linked to increased perceptions of both marital and relational satisfaction (Duck, 1991; Fiese & Tomcho, 2001). Rituals allow romantic partners to develop mutual commitment, trust, and liking. Accordingly:

H1: Perceived use of rituals among individuals in committed romantic relationships is positively related to relational quality.

### *Perceived Relational Intimacy*

Rituals have the potential to enhance intimacy in romantic relationships. Intimacy in romantic relationships includes sexual feelings, but also the affective union between two individuals based upon trust (Radmacher & Azmitia, 2006; Sternberg, 1997). Individuals in intimate relationships generally have an extensive history and an anticipated future (Hinde, 1979). Self-disclosure and the exclusive sharing of activity and information are essential to the formation and maintenance of intimate relationships (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Jourard, 1971). As rituals provide opportunities for relief from daily routines and for communication between relational partners (Wolin & Bennett, 1984), it seems likely through their enactment relational partners would become emotionally close, developing increased perceptions of relational intimacy. Further, as individuals share feelings and information with each other, perceptions of validation and caring also result in perceived relational intimacy (Hook, Gerstein, Detterich, & Gridley, 2003).

As romantic partners disclose private information to each other, the amount and quality of time a couple spends together further affects their perceptions of closeness

and intimacy (Emmers-Sommer, 2004). Rituals, particularly couple-time and idiosyncratic rituals, not only allow individuals to spend time together but also to highlight the ongoing nature of their relationships (Bruess & Pearson, 1997). Smooth interactions, free of conflict and communication breakdown, contribute to more satisfying and intimate relationships. As intimacy is based upon mutuality and reciprocity, feelings of intimacy depend upon an equal balance of power between romantic partners (Rosenbluth & Steil, 1995).

Rituals develop in intimate relationships as partners reflect on their history and anticipate their future together. Rituals allow them to view their relationships with a past, present, and future. Trust is engendered when partners create meaningful rituals. Relational interactions may become ritualized as partners experiment with disclosing information differently during diverse shared activities. Finally, shared rituals encourage predictable and smooth interactions. Hence:

H2: Perceived use of rituals among individuals in committed romantic relationships is positively related to perceived relational intimacy.

H3: Perceived relational intimacy among individuals in committed romantic relationships is positively related to relational quality.

## Method

### *Participants*

Individuals currently in a committed romantic relationship (defined as such through either marriage or cohabitation) comprised the sample of the study. To be eligible for the study, participants needed to live together in the same household with their relational partner. Overall, 560 individuals in committed romantic relationships completed the survey. Not all participants reported on demographics, thus, the information is for participants who responded to each demographic question.

From the sample, 199 participants (35%) were male, 358 (64%) were female. They varied in age with 159 (29%) 18–25 years old, 151 (27%) 26–35 years old, 95 (17%) 36–45 years old, 108 (19%) 46–55 years old, and 45 (8%) 56 or older. Most participants identified their ethnicity as White/Caucasian (513 participants, 92%). In respect to their current relational status, 369 individuals (67%) were married whereas 182 individuals (33%) were cohabitating. When asked how many times they had been married, 163 (30%) indicated never, 337 participants (62%) had been married once, 42 individuals (8%) twice, and 6 individuals (1%) three or more times. Length of marriage varied as follows: a year or less (42 participants, 10%), 2 to 5 years (113 participants, 27%), 6 to 10 years (65 participants, 15%), and 16 years or more (144 participants, 34%). In the sample, 276 individuals (51%) had children whereas 284 individuals (49%) did not. Of those participants who were parents, the average age of their children was 15 ( $M = 15.10$ ;  $SD = 11.35$ ) with 67 (25%) having only one child, 114 individuals (42%) having two, 54 individuals (20%) three, 28 individuals (10%) four, and 9 individuals (3%) five or more.

## Procedures

Two data collections occurred. The first involved a snowball-sampling technique to distribute the survey to individuals in committed romantic relationships. Communication students at a midsized Midwestern university received survey packets to distribute to individuals they knew in committed romantic relationships, through either cohabitation or marriage. Each packet contained instructions, an informed consent form, a survey, and a self-addressed stamped envelope for returning the survey. In preparing participants for the statements about rituals, a distinction was made between rituals and reoccurring routines.

Second, an online survey was used. With the online survey, participants in committed romantic relationships were directly solicited rather than indirectly obtained through use of undergraduate student carriers. Directions to participants were identical in both methods. An invitation to participate in the research project was solicited via the National Communication Association listserv. From the sample, 343 individuals (61%) completed the study through student carriers in a paper and pencil format and 217 individuals (39%) completed the study directly online.

Because scale development was the primary purpose of this study, several steps were taken to prepare for administration of the survey. Ten items for each of the five primary ritual types were developed from Bruess and Pearson's (1997) study of rituals (couple-time rituals, everyday talk rituals, idiosyncratic rituals, daily routines and tasks, and intimacy expressions). Given that spiritual rituals (2.5%,  $n = 17$ ) and patterns/habits/mannerisms rituals (5%,  $n = 38$ ) were infrequent in Bruess and Pearson's original sample, they were excluded to provide for a more global and parsimonious conceptualization of rituals in committed romantic relationships. Constructing the 10 items for each ritual type entailed the use of examples from Bruess and Pearson's original work, increasing the face validity of the items. The face validity and relevance of all statements in the item pool were assessed by evaluating their consistency, clarity, and completeness to the intended construct of rituals in committed romantic relationships (see DeVellis, 2003). Once the surveys were collected, the factor structure, estimated reliability, and validity were determined via confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), Cronbach's alpha, and structural equation models (Pedhazur & Schmelkin, 1991; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001).

## Measures

### *Perceived use of rituals in committed romantic relationships*

The measure of perceived use of rituals in committed romantic relationships consisted of participants' responses to 50 items in five general areas: daily routines and tasks, idiosyncratic rituals, everyday talk rituals, intimacy expressions, and couple-time rituals. Two questions for each ritual type were negatively worded to provide a check for consistency of participant responses, such as, "There is a strain on our relationship when we do not spend time together as a couple" or "Our relationship suffers because of a lack of established communication routines."



Responses to the questions were on a 5-point scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” All items served as indicators of the degree to which rituals were evident and utilized within the committed romantic relationship. Higher scores indicate greater perceived ritual use. The overall scale maintained excellent reliability ( $\alpha = .85$ ).

### *Relational quality*

The measure of perceived relational quality was developed, tested and validated by Fletcher et al. (2000). It indexes an individual’s overall relationship strength via responses to 18 questions in six subdimensions: satisfaction, commitment, intimacy, trust, passion, and love. Items included such questions as “How dependable is your partner?,” “How much do you love your partner?,” and “How sexually intense is your relationship?” Responses were on a 5-point scale ranging from “not at all” to “extremely.” The measure has undergone extensive validity and reliability testing via CFA techniques (see Fletcher et al., 2000; Lutz-Zois et al., 2006). In previous research ( $\alpha \geq .85$ ; Fletcher, 2000) and among participants in the current study, the measure showed high estimated reliability ( $\alpha = .96$ ;  $M = 4.27$ ;  $SD = .67$ ).

### *Relational intimacy*

The measure of perceived relational intimacy consisted of the responses to 14 items, each on a 5-point scale. The measure was developed by Roloff et al. (1988) and included such relational characteristics as “superficial-intense,” “undesirable-desirable,” and “uncaring-caring.” The scale has been high in estimated reliability ( $\alpha = .86$ ; Roloff et al., 1988), which was also the case in the current investigation ( $\alpha = .87$ ;  $M = 3.98$ ;  $SD = .57$ ).

### *Manipulation Checks*

Given the two different methods of data collection (paper and pencil survey and online survey), differences were examined in all of the variables of central interest to the study. Overall, the perceived rituals in committed romantic relationships measure was not significantly different by method of collection,  $t(542) = 1.22$ ,  $p = .12$ . Similarly, relational quality,  $t(552) = .28$ ,  $p = .78$ , and relational intimacy,  $t(552) = 1.42$ ,  $p = .15$ , were also not significantly different by method of collection. Potential differences of these same variables were explored by relational status (married or cohabitating). Overall ritual strength was not significantly different by relational status,  $t(533) = -1.19$ ,  $p = .23$ . Furthermore, relational quality,  $t(543) = -.57$ ,  $p = .57$ , and relational intimacy,  $t(543) = 1.32$ ,  $p = .19$ , were not significantly different among either married or cohabitating couples. Given the lack of significance of all of these variables, the two subsamples were combined in one overall sample for the analysis.

## Results

### *Rituals in Committed Romantic Relationship Instrument Development*

The 10 items for each of the five distinct types of rituals were examined by computing Cronbach's alpha for each type of ritual. Low correlating items were eliminated, which resulted in more reliable and parsimonious measures. Overall, 20 items from the initial 50 were eliminated. Next, CFA techniques were used to test the measurement model and to assess the validity of a five-factor versus a one-factor model for the Rituals in Committed Romantic Relationship (RCRR) measure. The five-factor model incorporated items for the five distinct types of rituals (couple-time rituals, everyday talk rituals, idiosyncratic rituals, daily routines and tasks, and intimacy expressions). Each CFA model includes goodness-of-fit statistics with maximum likelihood standardized estimates. The results of the global tests of the models appear in Table 1. In assessing the goodness of fit of each hypothesized model to actual data, we examined several of the model fit estimates, including the  $\chi^2$  goodness of fit, the  $\chi^2$  to degrees of freedom ratio, the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), the

**Table 1** Fit Indicator Summaries for the Rituals in Committed Romantic Relationships Measure (RCRR)

Models	$\chi^2$	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	$\chi^2/df$	RMSEA	GFI	AGFI	CFI
<i>RCRR scale development</i>								
1. RCRR as a one-factor model	3394.53	405	<.05	8.38	.12	.71	.67	.86
2. RCRR as a five-factor, uncorrelated model	2775.75	405	<.05	6.85	.10	.75	.71	.86
3. RCRR as a five-factor, correlated model	1568.70	395	<.05	3.97	.07	.84	.81	.93
4. Final RCRR as a five-factor model <sup>a</sup>	1156.59	392	<.05	2.95	.06	.93	.90	.95
<i>Measurement model</i>								
5. RCRR, relational quality, and relational intimacy <sup>a</sup>	1791.74	678	<.05	2.64	.05	.93	.91	.97
<i>Structural models</i>								
6. Initial model predicting relational quality and intimacy <sup>a</sup>	1891.64	678	<.05	2.79	.05	.92	.90	.96
7. Final model predicting relational quality and intimacy <sup>a</sup>	1802.65	682	<.05	2.64	.05	.92	.90	.96

Note. RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation; GFI = goodness of fit index; AGFI = adjusted goodness of fit index; CFI = comparative fit index.

<sup>a</sup>Three error variance terms for specific ritual items were allowed to correlate (Idiosyncratic item 2 with Idiosyncratic item 3; Idiosyncratic item 5 with Idiosyncratic item 6; and Intimacy item 1 with Intimacy item 2).

goodness of fit index (GFI), the adjusted goodness of fit index (AGFI), and the comparative fit index (CFI).

A one-factor model where all 30 items of the RCRR measure loaded onto one latent construct showed poor fit with the RMSEA above .10 and the GFI, AGFI, and CFI well below .90 (see Table 1). A five-factor model consistent with previous research on rituals (Bruess & Pearson, 1997, 2002), in which the five factors were orthogonal revealed a significant improvement,  $\chi^2_{\text{difference}} = 618.78$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .01$ ; however, it was only marginal and still demonstrated poor fit (see Table 1). A third model was the same as the second model, except that all of the first-order factors were correlated. This model was also a significant improvement over the first,  $\chi^2_{\text{difference}} = 1825.83$ ,  $df = 10$ ,  $p < .01$ , and it demonstrated a good fit to the data in the hypothesized model (see Table 1). Each of the five types of rituals was significantly and positively related to each other.

In the final model, the disturbance terms for one set of items in each of the three factors were allowed to correlate (Bollen, 1989; Byrne, 1998) because the questions were closely worded to each other or a direct inverse of each other. Error disturbance terms for highly dissimilar items were not allowed to correlate because of the lack of either a theoretical or a rational justification for allowing the correlation (Bollen, 1989; Byrne, 1998; Kline, 2005). Allowing three error disturbance terms to correlate significantly improved the fit of the correlated three-factor model to the first model,  $\chi^2_{\text{difference}} = 2237.94$ ,  $df = 13$ ,  $p < .01$ . Overall, these results support the correlated five-factor structure of the RCRR measure highlighted in the final model as the best fitting model. Table 2 shows the final 30 items comprising the scale, the global reliability (alpha) for the scale, and the estimated reliability for each individual dimension. Table 3 contains the correlation coefficients, means, and standard deviations for each dimension or type of ritual for the final model.<sup>1</sup>

### *Structural Equation Model with Ritual Use, Relational Quality, and Relational Intimacy*

The primary goal of the structural equation modeling was to test the relationship between different types of perceived ritual use in committed romantic relationships and their ostensible impact on perceived relational quality and relational intimacy.<sup>2</sup> Prior to estimating the full model, a final structural equation measurement model was specified with all of the independent and dependent measures. In the measurement model, all of the first-order factors (five types of rituals, relational quality, and relational intimacy) were allowed to correlate. In specifying the model, we followed the recommendation of Little, Cunningham, Shahar, and Widaman (2002) and utilized parcels for the two dependent variables in order to reduce the number of indicators, make the model more parsimonious and reduce concerns about power. A parcel is "an aggregate-level indicator comprised of the sum (or average) of two or more items" (Little et al., 2002, p. 152). Given that 18 items comprise the relational quality measure with three items for each of the six subdimensions, each subdimension was constituted as a parcel. For the relational intimacy measure,

**Table 2** Items and Reliability Estimates for the Rituals in Committed Romantic Relationships Measure

Dimension and reliability	Ritual items (overall scale $\alpha = .85$ )
Couple-time rituals ( $\alpha = .81$ )	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Regardless of the activity, we make time to be together.</li> <li>2. We make time as a couple to get away from everyday routines and pressures.</li> <li>3. As a couple, we engage in leisure activities.</li> <li>4. An important part of our relationship involves the activities we do together.</li> <li>5. Our relationship is stronger because of the time we spend together.</li> <li>6. Within our relationship, we create routines around recreation outings.</li> </ol>
Everyday talk rituals ( $\alpha = .69$ )	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. As a couple, we use language only we understand.</li> <li>2. The use of unique words characterizes our relationship.</li> <li>3. We have patterns for how we verbally express our love for each other.</li> <li>4. We have established routines for when we communicate.</li> <li>5. We have established a pattern for having heart-to-heart discussions.</li> </ol>
Idiosyncratic rituals ( $\alpha = .73$ )	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Our relationship is stronger because of unique traditions we have established.</li> <li>2. Our interactions as a couple are not playful.*</li> <li>3. We tease each other in a playful manner.</li> <li>4. In our relationship, we have favorite activities we enjoy engaging in together.</li> <li>5. We do not have favorite activities we like doing as a couple.*</li> <li>6. We have traditions for memorable moments in our relationship.</li> <li>7. We celebrate special events in our relationship.</li> </ol>
Daily routines and tasks ( $\alpha = .76$ )	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Our relationship is stronger because of established daily routines and tasks.</li> <li>2. We have routines geared toward accomplishing everyday tasks.</li> <li>3. As a couple, we share certain meals during the day.</li> <li>4. We have a routine for preparing meals.</li> <li>5. Our relationship is more important because we do daily routines and tasks together as a couple.</li> <li>6. We do not have a routine, as a couple, for tasks related to the end of the day.*</li> </ol>
Intimacy rituals ( $\alpha = .68$ )	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. We have a routine for when we engage in sexual intercourse.</li> <li>2. As a couple, we have a pattern for how often we engage in sexual intercourse.</li> <li>3. We do not have routines for setting the mood before sexual encounters.*</li> <li>4. We have rituals for the way we engage in intimate displays of affection.</li> <li>5. Intimacy routines are important to the functioning of our relationship.</li> <li>6. Intimacy rituals do not increase the strength of our relationship.*</li> </ol>

*Note.* Items were mixed and were not grouped together by similar subject on the survey.

\*Denotes the item has been recoded (reverse-scored).

**Table 3** Correlation Matrix, Means, and Standard Deviations for Each Type of Ritual

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1. Couple-time rituals	–				
2. Everyday talk rituals	.390**	–			
3. Idiosyncratic rituals	.672**	.485**	–		
4. Daily routines and tasks	.386**	.448**	.349**	–	
5. Intimacy expressions	.315**	.504**	.322**	.485**	–
Mean	3.84	3.18	3.93	3.36	3.22
Standard Deviation	0.71	0.79	0.64	0.79	0.75

The asterisk reflects significance level with \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

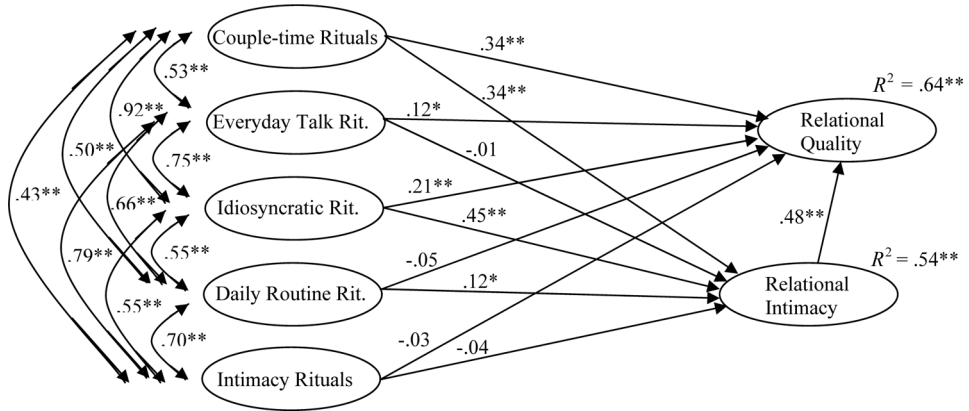
random subsets of items were grouped to form three parcels. Table 4 shows intercorrelations, descriptive statistics, and items associated with each parcel for the measurement model. The measurement model with the parcels for the dependent variables revealed an acceptable model fit with the RMSEA at .05 and the GFI, AGFI, and CFI above .90 (the fifth model is summarized in Table 1).

The initial hypothesized model (see Figure 1) demonstrated an acceptable level of fit of the data to the model (see the sixth model summarized in Table 1). In light of the acceptable fit of the data to this preliminary structural model, nonsignificant paths were sequentially removed until only significant paths remained in the model (see Figure 2). The four paths removed (intimacy rituals to relational intimacy, intimacy rituals to relational quality, daily routine rituals to relational quality, and

**Table 4** Intercorrelations and Descriptive Statistics for Outcome Indicators in the Measurement Model

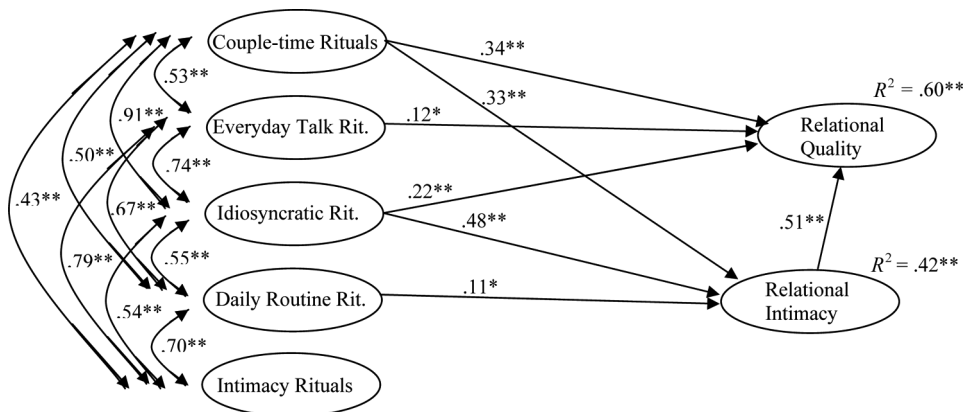
Latent construct and indicator	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
<i>Relational quality</i>									
1. Satisfaction (Parcel 1)	–								
2. Commitment (Parcel 2)	.70**	–							
3. Intimacy (Parcel 3)	.83**	.70**	–						
4. Trust (Parcel 4)	.67**	.59**	.59**	–					
5. Passion (Parcel 5)	.58**	.38**	.66**	.32**	–				
6. Love (Parcel 6)	.73**	.78**	.78**	.59**	.50**	–			
<i>Relational intimacy</i>									
1. Parcel 1 (1, 4, 6, & 7)	.61**	.49**	.59**	.58**	.34**	.51**	–		
2. Parcel 2 (2, 5, 10, 12, & 13)	.65**	.61**	.67**	.50**	.38**	.62**	.77**	–	
3. Parcel 3 (3, 8, 9, 11, & 14)	.48**	.40**	.50**	.36**	.36**	.45**	.57**	.60**	–
M	4.23	4.64	4.18	4.50	3.55	4.52	4.20	4.28	3.51
SD	0.90	0.67	0.87	0.76	1.00	0.70	0.78	0.69	0.49

The asterisk reflects significance level with \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .



**Figure 1** Parameter Estimates for the Structural Model of Ritual Use, Perceived Relational Quality, and Relational Intimacy Among Committed Romantic Relationships. \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

everyday talk to relational intimacy) increased the model fit,  $\chi^2_{\text{difference}} = 88.99$ ,  $df = 4$ ,  $p < .01$ . The final trimmed model showed good fit of the data to the model (see the seventh model summarized in Table 1). The final structural model supported ritual use explaining a significant amount of variance in both perceived intimacy ( $R^2 = .42$ ) as well as perceived relational quality ( $R^2 = .60$ ). The final model provides evidence of the predictive validity of the RCRR measure, as perceived use of rituals in committed romantic relationships accounted for significant variation in both perceived relational quality and relational intimacy. Furthermore, as depicted in Figure 2, all of the correlations among the dimensions of the RCRR measure were significantly and positively correlated. In support of Hypothesis 1, more couple-time rituals, idiosyncratic rituals, and everyday talk rituals were significantly related to the creation of high-quality committed romantic relationships. Supportive of Hypothesis 2, more



**Figure 2** Final Structural Model of Perceived Relational Quality, Relational Intimacy, and Ritual Use. All Parameters are Standardized. \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

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couple-time rituals, idiosyncratic rituals, and daily routines and tasks resulted in committed relationships marked by deeper levels of perceived relational intimacy.

Intimacy rituals were not significantly related to relational quality or relational intimacy in the final structural model. However, intimacy rituals had moderately high levels of covariance with daily routine rituals and everyday talk rituals. The covariance suggests that the prediction of intimacy rituals might be masked by these other types of rituals. Couple-time rituals and idiosyncratic rituals significantly predicted variation in both types of relational outcomes. The third hypothesis was also supported in the final model given that relational intimacy was a significant positive predictor of relational quality ( $\beta = .51, p < .01$ ).

## Discussion

Understanding rituals enables us to comprehend relationships more generally. The purpose of this study was to develop and validate a measure of perceived ritual use in committed romantic relationships. Although rituals have been defined in multiple ways, this study had as one aim a more precise, functional definition that would apply to people in committed romantic relationships. As routines serve an instrumental purpose in a relationship, rituals hold symbolic meaning and signal membership in a relationship. Although many people convey their romantic commitment to others through marriage, others do not or cannot. Consequently, the sample of the study was broadened to include committed relationships. A 30-item instrument emerged with five factors: daily routines and tasks, idiosyncratic behaviors, everyday talk, intimacy, and couple-time rituals. Rituals are functional and they relate to perceived relational quality and perceived relational intimacy.

Couples in committed relationships use rituals to define themselves as such, to become closer to each other, and to fulfill daily responsibilities. The rituals identified in the current study comport with Wolin and Bennett's (1984) purposes of rituals to provide temporary relief from everyday life, to provide an opportunity for interaction, and to provide a means of protection. They similarly substantiate Baxter's (1987) three findings that relational symbols allow relational members opportunities for fun and stimulation, opportunities for sharing, and they serve as indicators of intimacy. Finally, the results of this study replicate five of the seven types of rituals Bruess and Pearson (1997) reported in their investigation of marital relationships.

Although previous research (Bruess & Pearson, 1997, 2002) was inductive and exhaustive, the current investigation was deductive in nature and more centrally focused on providing a global and parsimonious model of rituals in committed, romantic relationships. The RCRR measure identifies five key dimensions of rituals in committed relationships in common with Bruess and Pearson's original work. However, this measure omitted the two categories of patterns/habits/mannerisms and spiritual rituals due to their lower reported prevalence.

Rituals allow couples to organize their lives and relationships so both stability and change can occur. They allow individuals the opportunity to assimilate into a couple, different from either person, alone. They permit the development of a culture of two.

Rituals are both symbolic and action oriented. They link the past, present, and future. As couples engage in ritualizing, they cement their relationship. This investigation found that rituals also lead to perceptions of relational quality and intimacy.

The RCRR measure is useful in extending romantic relationship research, in general. Relational scholarship, in the decade of the 1990s, shifted from narrow areas, such as mate selection and relational initiation, to a broader focus on relational processes, which apply to a variety of personal relationships (Surra, Boettcher-Burke, Cottle, West, & Gray, 2007). In as much as the RCRR measure captures perceptions of communicative behavior, it can be viewed as a relational process measure. Consequently, it complements current trends in research focusing on the maintenance and persistence of relationships, spanning many years for some individuals (Perlman & Duck, 2006).

The validation of the measure, it should be noted, included two types of committed romantic relationship types—cohabitation and marriage. As individuals move from dating relationships into more committed relationships, whether consummated in marriage or not, rituals play an important role (Bruess & Pearson, 2002; Dainton, 2007; Dainton & Stafford, 1993; Dindia & Canary, 1993). Rituals change over time; consequently, understanding ritual use in committed relationships, as well as dating relationships, allows a more complete picture of relationships. Through understanding the role that rituals play in committed relationships, we are able to understand better the everyday lived experiences of individuals in one of the most common types of interpersonal relationships.

Understanding ritual use allows us to predict relational quality more accurately. Couple-time, idiosyncratic, and everyday talk rituals predicted greater perceived relational quality. As the symbolic nature of rituals often has strong relational implications, it is not surprising that the use of rituals is related to higher quality romantic relationships. Given that relational quality includes such dimensions as satisfaction, commitment, intimacy, trust, passion, and love (Fletcher et al., 2000), the relationships between the ritual types and relational quality are part of a larger and complex depiction of committed relationships. Although multifaceted, this finding suggests a relationship between the perceived use of rituals and healthy romantic relationships.

Relational quality is perceptual; in that an individual's ideal standards underlie the assessment of personal relationships. Individuals have an ideal set of relational standards by which they judge their relationships (Baucom et al., 1989). The use of rituals may be a part of these relational standards. Therefore, the implementation of rituals in a relationship may improve the overall relational quality, as personal and social relationships are enhanced by rituals (Baxter, 1987; Campbell & Ponzetti, 2007; Oring, 1984). Further, Duck (1991) observes that relational satisfaction occurs when couples prioritize rituals.

Perceived ritual use is also related to perceptions of relational intimacy. Couple-time, idiosyncratic, and daily routine and task rituals predicted deeper levels of perceived relational intimacy. As relational partners disclose their feelings about past events and shared experiences and as they plan for their future, a sense of trust and validation occurs (Hook et al., 2003). Rituals encourage smooth interactions



with routinized elements. Indeed, self-disclosure, a centerpiece of intimacy, may become ritualized.

### *Limitations*

This study has broadened previous research concerning marital relationships to committed romantic relationships to include people who choose not to marry or who cannot marry. Greater ritual enactment in both types of committed romantic relationships was associated with higher quality relationships and more intimate relationships. This extension reflects contemporary society, but it does not allow the meticulous specification of whom the participants represent. Although one-third of the participants were not currently married, and 30% had never been married, we do not know if these individuals were gay or straight. The sexuality of the participants did not seem relevant in this development of a rituals scale; however, future investigations should determine if one's sexuality does affect ritual use. The nature of one's sexuality may well affect relationships and his or her use of rituals. The study limited the participants to those in committed romantic relationships. As such, the RCRR provides a snapshot of relationships already defined as "committed." Finally, this study also did not include rituals occurring in other types of relationships, such as family relationships.

### *Future Research*

Future research should extend this work to other personal relationships. An examination of dating couples, families, and extended families may be the essential next steps. Further refinement of the current findings is also in order. As cross-sectional data, this study cannot chart cause and effect relationships in the way that longitudinal data can, examining relational process and product outcomes across time. Therefore, future research should explore the extent to which rituals influence intimacy and relational quality or if high-quality and intimate relationships influence greater ritual development as an effect. The current study demonstrates that these behaviors co-occur in meaningful and significant ways. Future research should also explore rituals among randomly selected samples. Finally, relationships among the rituals in committed relationships and other crucial, healthy outcomes in personal relationships are critical.

The use of rituals is not likely to affect only the relational couple; their effects presumably extend to the family unit as a whole. Further research should be conducted to examine how the use of rituals in committed romantic relationships affect a variety of family-oriented variables, such as family satisfaction, family strength, and perceived trust within the family. Previous research, as well as the current study, suggests that the use of rituals has positive effects on couples. It would seem likely that if romantic couples perceive positive relational quality and satisfaction, it would likely extend into family life. Families are likely to be stronger and more trusting if the matriarchs and patriarchs are not only committed to their families but also to

their romantic relationships. Rituals are central to our understanding of interpersonal relationships.

On the one hand, rituals represent everyday behavior; on the other, they appear to be essential to relational quality and relational intimacy. Rituals allow us a glimpse of the couple's unique microculture and they predict positive outcomes. This study reports the creation and validation of an instrument of rituals in committed, romantic relationships. As such, it should promote further research, and understanding, of rituals in relationships.

## Notes

- [1] The standardized factor loadings and standard error for each item in the final CFA model are available upon request from the second author.
- [2] Separate structural equation models were also computed by relational status (married versus cohabitating relationships). The same patterns of results emerged among these two groups as in the overall analysis with slight variations in standardized estimates from one model to the other. Full differentiated results are available upon request from the second author.

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