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They Should Say “I Don’t”: Norms About Midpregnancy Marriage and Job Loss

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Abstract

This study examined effects of local economic conditions on individuals’ attitudes toward midpregnancy marriages using an experimental vignette method. Adults (N = 460) were each shown two vignettes about a hypothetical couple expecting a baby; within each vignette pair, vignettes randomly varied as to whether the couple lived in a community that had recently experienced job losses or had stable employment. Respondents indicated if the couple should and will get married before the baby’s birth. Results showed that worse local economic conditions led people to believe that marriage would be less common. Among more socio-economically disadvantaged respondents, if the hypothetical couple lived in a community with job loss, fewer respondents also thought that the couple should marry. In contrast, among more socioeconomically advantaged respondents, slightly more respondents thought that the couple should marry. When economic conditions worsen, low-socioeconomic-status individuals may believe that financial prerequisites for marriage become harder to meet.

Keywords

economic well-being; low-income families; marriage; unemployment

In the past few decades, Americans have seen a paradigm shift in their attitudes and behaviors toward out-of-wedlock childbearing. In 2015, 61% of Americans said that out-of-wedlock childbearing was morally acceptable, up 16 percentage points since 2002 (Jones, 2015). In terms of behavior, the share of children born out of wedlock stands at an all-time high of 41% (Martin, Hamilton, Osterman, Curtin, & Mathews, 2015). Also, the share of women with a nonmarital conception who married before the child was born (which we term *midpregnancy marriage* because “shotgun marriage” is anachronistic) has fallen dramatically to less than 5% (Gibson-Davis, Ananat, & Gassman-Pines, in press).

Another norm that has shifted over time is the importance of achieving financial stability prior to marriage. Americans believe that there is a so-called “economic bar” to marriage,

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that is, a set of economic goals that needs to be achieved before couples should marry. The importance of economically sound marriage transitions has long been noted (Easterlin, 1987; Oppenheimer, 1988), but the salience of the economic bar to marriage may have increased in recent decades (Cherlin, 2009; Gibson-Davis, 2009) in part because marriage is no longer considered an inevitable part of the life course. Rather, marriage is optional and should come after couples are fully economically and emotionally prepared for it (Cherlin, 2004; Edin & Kefalas, 2005).

The intersection of these two norms may explain the high levels of out-of-wedlock childbearing and low rates of marriage among traditionally socioeconomically marginalized groups. Low-income women with a nonmarital conception encounter little stigma about having a child out of wedlock, and they do not marry before the child is born because they feel that they are not economically ready for it. Research has suggested that the cultural emphasis of the economic requirements of marriage is an important factor in explaining nonmarriage among low-income parents (Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Gibson-Davis, Edin, & McLanahan, 2005).

A limitation in assessing whether the “economic bar” norm acts as a barrier to having a marital birth, however, is that asking individuals about norms regarding financial stability for marriage is endogenous. Parents may find it easier to invoke a norm of financial stability to explain nonmarriage than to provide other explanations that may be more personal or intrusive (such as infidelity). In addition, studies on out-of-wedlock childbearing and the economic bar to marriage have focused almost exclusively on low-income couples (e.g., Edin & Kefalas, 2005). Less is known about higher resourced couples’ attitudes about the intersection of out-of-wedlock childbearing and the economic standards of marriage.

To causally test if economic circumstances are relevant for attitudes toward midpregnancy marriage, we conducted a within-person experimental vignette study. Within-person randomized experimental designs have been used in other studies focused on family-related behaviors, including intergenerational caregiving in China (Cong & Silverstein, 2012) and the motherhood wage penalty (Correll, Benard & Paik, 2007). In our study, respondents were given two vignettes that described a hypothetical unmarried couple who were expecting a baby. In half of the vignettes, the couple lived in a community that had recently experienced job losses; in the other half of the vignettes, the couple lived in a community with stable employment. Whether the respondent saw the job loss or stable employment vignette first was randomly assigned to individuals. After each of the vignettes, respondents were asked if, before the baby is born, the couple should or will get married. Our within-person design, which has lower error variance than a between-person design (Cohen, 1988), will identify causal differences in attitudes toward midpregnancy marriage as a response to local economic circumstances. To the best of our knowledge, ours is the first study to do so. Attitudes are not the same as behaviors, and we cannot comment on the causal role of the economic context in marriage entry. Nevertheless, attitudes are important predictors of behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977, 2005), and individual and collective attitudes toward marriage are a notable outcome in their own right.

BACKGROUND

Social Norms

Social norms, or accepted standards of behavior of social groups, have long been recognized as powerful determinants of people's behavior (Cialdini & Trost, 1998). Durkheim (2014) first understood that norms are a critical component of our "collective consciousness," or a society's common understanding of how to act and behave. In turn, this collective consciousness knits individuals together and results in social cohesion (Portes, 2000). Social norms are not fixed, but evolve over time and can have a powerful influence on well-being. For example, evolving attitudes on the unacceptability of smoking in the United States have resulted in decreased smoking rates and improved health (Alamar & Glantz, 2006).

Norms are generally categorized into two types. *Descriptive norms* refer to beliefs and perceptions about what types of behaviors are typically performed by members of society or a social group. When individuals perceive that a behavior (or the avoidance of the behavior) is common, they are more likely to also engage in (or avoid) that behavior (Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990). *Injunctive norms*, in contrast, refer to beliefs and perceptions about the types of behaviors that are encouraged or discouraged by society or a social group. Importantly, these two types of norms can lead to different behaviors because people tend to do both what they consider to be common and also what they perceive to be socially approved (Cialdini, 2003). The example of littering helps to illustrate the difference between descriptive and injunctive norms. When people observe trash on the street, they see that it is common to litter (a descriptive norm) and are more likely to do so themselves (Krauss, Freedman, & Whitcup, 1978). In contrast, people also believe that littering is not something that should be done (an injunctive norm; Cialdini et al., 1990).

Norms Regarding Out-of-Wedlock Childbearing

With regard to out-of-wedlock childbearing, both descriptive and injunctive norms have undergone a paradigm shift. From a descriptive point of view, what a mother with a nonmarital conception is likely to do has changed dramatically during the past half century. Assuming that the mother decides not to terminate the pregnancy, the likelihood that she would have a midpregnancy marriage has declined substantially over time (Bachu, 1999; Gibson-Davis et al., 2015). Current estimates suggest that only 4% to 6% of women responded to a nonmarital conception by marrying; for minority women, the fraction was a mere 2% (Gibson-Davis et al., 2015; Rackin & Gibson-Davis, 2012). As people have observed these changing patterns, their descriptive norms, that is, their perceptions of what is common or likely to happen when someone has a nonmarital conception, have likely changed as well.

In addition to changing descriptive norms, the decrease in midpregnancy marriages also reflects the changing injunctive norms regarding nonmarital pregnancy. The norms that a woman had to marry before a birth so that her child would be "legitimate" have largely dissipated. Between 2002 and 2015, the percentage of Americans who said it was "morally wrong" to have a child outside of wedlock declined from 50% to 35% (Jones, 2015). As

these data indicate, Americans view nonmarital childbearing very differently than they did just a few decades ago.

Differences by socioeconomic status in beliefs and behaviors regarding out-of-wedlock childbearing illustrate how injunctive and descriptive norms can be in opposition to each other. When asked about injunctive norms of out-of-wedlock pregnancy, individuals whose demographic characteristics have been traditionally associated with higher levels of socioeconomic disadvantage (those with less education or income, younger or African American) were less likely to approve of out-of-wedlock childbearing than individuals who were more socioeconomically advantaged (those with more education or income, older, and non-Hispanic White; Jones, 2015). With regard to descriptive norms, or what is common, however, the pattern is reversed: Out-of-wedlock childbearing is disproportionately concentrated among the more socioeconomically disadvantaged groups; a far smaller share of out-of-wedlock births occur to the socioeconomically advantaged (Manning, Brown, & Stykes, 2015). One subgroup in which descriptive and injunctive norms were consistent were religious individuals, the majority of whom disapprove of out-of-wedlock childbearing and, when compared with nonreligious individuals, have fewer out-of-wedlock births (Jones, 2015; Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2016).

Norms Regarding Financial Stability Prior to Marriage

In addition to a single broad norm about the acceptability of out-of-wedlock childbearing, marriage decisions are also guided by many additional norms. One particularly prominent norm is the importance of achieving financial stability before marriage. A common perception is that, prior to marriage, couples should have achieved a so-called “economic bar” to marriage, a bundle of goods that includes steady incomes, significant assets, and the ability to pay for a wedding (Cherlin, 2009; Gassman-Pines, Yoshikawa, & Nay, 2006; Gibson-Davis, 2009; Smock, Manning, & Porter, 2005). This norm is not new; for decades, scholars have noted the expectation that married households be financially independent from their families of origin (Easterlin, 1987; Oppenheimer, 1988). What has changed, however, is the relative importance placed on the injunctive norm that a couple should achieve this economic bar prior to marriage (Manning, Brown, & Payne, 2014; Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2016). Marriage is no longer necessary, in a practical sense, for many activities (e.g., sexual intimacy, cohabitation) that were once its sole province and has become a symbolic reward for those who have proved themselves worthy of its economic and emotional requirements (Cherlin, 2009; Edin & Kefalas, 2005). The changing cultural context of marriage, from an expected and nearly inevitable life transition to a capstone achievement that is reserved for a select few has increased the perceived importance of achieving the economic bar.

Given the norm of the necessity of a strong economic foundation for marriage, conditions that threaten economic stability may lead people to be less likely to marry and to believe that the economic bar will be more difficult to meet. When the economic climate in a community worsens, all community members, not only those whose personal circumstances change, can experience financial strain (Gassman-Pines, Gibson-Davis, & Ananat, 2015). Even among those not directly affected by job or income loss, economic downturns led to increased economic strain and uncertainty about the future (Catalano et al., 2011; Dooley, Catalano, &

Rook, 1988; Kalil, 2013). Therefore, individuals may be more hesitant to marry during a time of economic hardship because they perceive that meeting the economic perquisites of marriage is more difficult. Consistent with this idea, increases in the local unemployment rate have been found to decrease marriage rates and increase the number of single-parent families (Baghestani & Malcolm, 2014; Schaller, 2013; Schneider & Hastings, 2015).

Unlike out-of-wedlock childbearing, where descriptive and injunctive norms vary by levels of socioeconomic advantage and can produce offsetting effects on behavior, injunctive and descriptive norms for the economic bar appear to hold constant across levels of advantage. Individuals of all socioeconomic statuses have been found to value the importance of achieving the economic bar to marriage (Cherlin, 2009; Smock et al., 2005), although it is not known whether the strength of those norms or their importance varies by socioeconomic status. Socioeconomically disadvantaged couples have also explained their nonmarriage in terms of failing to meet this bar (Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Gibson-Davis et al., 2005; few studies have qualitatively examined the bar among the more socioeconomically advantaged).

The behavioral consequences of the norm of financial stability before marriage vary by levels of socioeconomic disadvantage. When experiencing economic conditions that threaten the achievement of this norm, individuals with lower socioeconomic status may believe that achieving the economic bar is more difficult than their counterparts who are higher socioeconomic status. These differences may arise for a number of reasons. Traditionally economically marginalized groups may be more likely to directly experience job loss and also have lower income and fewer assets to offset earnings losses (Kletzer, 1998; Wolff & Zacharias, 2009). Even if they do not experience job loss firsthand, socioeconomically disadvantaged individuals may be more worried than more advantaged individuals about their future job prospects because socioeconomically disadvantaged workers may find it harder to obtain new employment than more socioeconomically advantaged workers (Kletzer, 1998).

CURRENT STUDY

Based on the extant literature, it is unclear whether the two norms regarding the acceptability of out-of-wedlock childbearing and the economic bar to marriage play a causal role in explaining why births are realized outside the context of marriage. In observational studies, the presence of such norms may be only spuriously related to marriage and out-of-wedlock childbearing. In addition, the invoking of such norms can be endogenous to the outcomes in question. Samples that consist of poor unmarried couples who already had a child may invoke the norm of financial security when explaining why they are not married rather than providing potentially more intrusive explanations for being unmarried.

Our study addresses these gaps by using a within-person experimental research design to test the effect of the local economic context on individuals' attitudes toward midpregnancy marriage, in particular, their assessment of both descriptive and injunctive norms (whether a mid-pregnancy marriage will, and should, occur). Our study is the first to our knowledge that has used this method to causally evaluate the role of the economic context on attitudes toward mid-pregnancy marriage. We are also the first to examine whether the effect of the

local economic climate on attitudes toward midpregnancy marriage differs by the level of socioeconomic disadvantage of the respondent.

HYPOTHESES

Because the economic bar may be more difficult to reach during an economic downturn, we hypothesized that respondents would be less likely to say that a couple will and should get married when the hypothetical vignette couple was living in a community with an economic downturn when compared with the stable employment condition. Because of the perceived difficulty of meeting the economic bar among socioeconomically disadvantaged groups, the responses to the job loss versus stable employment conditions will vary for those who are not married, have less education, are Black, and are younger (all more socioeconomically disadvantaged groups, on average) relative to the respondents who are married, have more education, are White, or are older.

METHOD

Sample

The Attitudes Toward Marriage study was designed to test the effect of community-wide job loss on individuals' attitudes toward mid-pregnancy marriage. It was conducted in a midsize southern city using one-on-one, in-person interviews. Interviews were voluntary and typically lasted 5 to 10 minutes. After approval from our university's institutional review board, six recruiters recruited and interviewed respondents between November 2014 and February 2015 in public locations away from the campus, including bus stations, shopping malls, playgrounds, laundromats, and barbershops. A variety of off-campus locations was purposively chosen to recruit a sample with diverse demographic characteristics.

To be eligible for our sample, individuals had to be age 18 or older and English speaking. We recruited an initial sample of 476 individuals. We subsequently dropped 11 individuals with missing data on all of the dependent variables and five individuals who were younger than age 18. This left with us with an analytic sample of 460 individuals.

Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of our sample. Respondents were 51% female and 40 years old on average. In our sample, 41% of respondents were currently married, 45% had a 4-year college degree or higher, 39% were White, and 38% were Black. Although the sample was not representative, it was very similar to the population of the city of interest in terms of racial makeup and education (results not shown, but available from the authors).

Vignette Manipulation

We developed a set of vignettes that described a couple with a nonmarital conception. Vignettes differed on six different variables. The variable of interest was the presence of community-wide job loss (with a comparison to stable employment in the community). In vignettes without job loss, respondents saw the text "...a community that has stable employment levels." In contrast, vignettes with job loss showed the text "... a community that recently faced an economic downturn. For example, a large business closed causing a lot

of people to lose their jobs. Keep in mind that the economic downturn affects the whole community, not just the couple in question.”

In addition, vignettes differed on five other factors that are salient in the larger literature on marriage behavior and attitudes: the age of the couple (22 or 30 years old), the race of the couple (White or Black), the length of the couple’s relationship (6 months or 2 years), the religiosity of the couple (attends religious services weekly or does not associate with any religion), and the education level of the couple (high school diploma only or 4-year college degree). Race of the couple was indicated by the names of the individuals. The names came from a list of names with the highest likelihood of belonging to a Black individual relative to a White individual (Fryer & Levitt, 2003). The names describing the Black couple were Jamal and Imani, whereas the names describing the White couple were Jake and Claire. The wording and structure of our vignettes were developed over multiple rounds of piloting.

Below is our vignette structure with variable text indicated by brackets. For each variable in brackets, one of the two options was selected in a given vignette. For example, in one vignette, the respondent would have seen the names *Jamal and Imani*, whereas in another they would have seen the names *Jake and Claire* in the same place.

[Jamal and Imani] are an unmarried couple, both of whom are *[22]* years old. They both *[earned 4 year college degrees]*. They have been together for *[six months]*. They *[attend religious services at least once a week]*, and live in a community that *[has stable employment levels]*. The couple has recently discovered that they are pregnant. After the baby is born, the couple will keep the child.

The study design was a within-person experiment, in which each respondent was shown two vignettes. Community-wide job loss varied within each pair of vignettes so that every respondent saw one vignette that described job loss and one vignette without job loss. The order in which respondents saw each of the vignettes in the pair was random so that for each pair of vignettes half of the respondents saw a vignette with job loss first and half of the respondents saw a vignette without job loss first. The two vignettes were not identical: other factors varied across the two vignettes, as described in more detail next.

Because the necessary sample size would have been prohibitively large and because our substantive focus was on job loss, we did not use all of the 64 possible unique variable combinations (six vignette variables with two possible options each gives us $2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2 = 64$ possibilities). Instead, we created 20 vignettes by first creating all unique combinations of job loss and each of the other five factors (a 2×2 matrix replicated five times, giving us 20 vignettes). We then randomly assigned the remaining variables within these 20 vignette frameworks. These 20 vignettes were split into 10 pairs (each pair having one vignette with job loss and one vignette without job loss) to be distributed to respondents. This design ensured that both values of the job loss variable appeared with each value of the other variables of interest a significant number of times, which allowed us to examine the interaction of job loss and the other vignette variables. However, the vignette design did not enable us to test how the effects of additional vignette variables (such as religion and age) interacted with each other.

After reading the first vignette, respondents were asked the following two questions: “Will this couple get married before the baby is born?” (we call this the *will* outcome) and “Do you think the couple should get married before the baby is born?” (the *should* outcome). These questions allowed us to assess two aspects of people’s attitudes toward midpregnancy marriage: their beliefs about what people will actually do—will they get married (a descriptive norm)—and what people should do—should they get married (an injunctive norm). We note that attitudes are a component of norms (Mackie, Moneti, Shakya, & Denny, 2015); for ease of discussion in this article, we use attitudes and norms interchangeably. Although no standard way of asking survey questions about norms exists, simple questions that allow respondents to make the distinction between descriptive and injunctive norms work well in terms of reliability and validity (Mackie et al., 2015). Consistent with that notion, piloting results confirmed that individuals made a distinction between these two outcomes and that people who answered affirmatively to the “will” question did not always answer affirmatively to the “should” question (a result also found in the main study, discussed next). After answering the questions, respondents were read the second vignette and then asked the two questions in response to the second vignette. The two follow-up questions were always asked in the same order, first the “will” question and then the “should” question. Finally, respondents completed a brief demographic questionnaire after reading and responding to the vignettes.

Descriptive statistics for the key outcomes are shown in Table 1. Across all vignettes, for both the “will” and “should” outcomes, more respondents answered “yes” than “no,” but the percentages answering affirmatively did not differ significantly between the two outcomes. For the “will” outcome, 59% of responses were “yes” relative to 57% for the “should” outcome. Importantly, in response to any given vignette, respondents’ answers to the “will” and “should” questions often differed. Respondents answered differently to the questions 35% of the time, reinforcing our pilot results and the larger literature that “should” and “will” reflect distinct norms.

Analytic Plan

We used logistic regression to estimate the effects of community-wide job loss and the other five vignette factors on responses to the “will” and “should” outcomes. All factors were included as predictors in our final model. We also ran logistic regression models for “will” and “should” that included the interaction terms of job loss and each additional factor to explore whether the effect of job loss was dependent on other variables. Finally, we split our sample by different respondent demographics and ran separate models to determine whether the effect of job loss differed by the characteristics of the respondents. In all models, standard errors were clustered by respondent to address the nesting of vignettes within respondents.

The random assignment of vignette variables used in this study design allowed for a causal interpretation of the effects of vignette variables on the “will” and “should” outcomes. Because each respondent was equally likely to see each of the 20 possible vignette combinations, any relationship between vignette variables and the “will” or “should” outcomes can be interpreted as being the causal effect of vignette factors on these outcomes.

There are both advantages and disadvantages to either between-person or within-person experimental designs. The two key advantages of the within-person design, relative to a between-person design, are power and statistical efficiency (Cohen, 1988). Within-person designs need fewer participants because each participant represents two data points. Lower error variance occurs because each respondent serves as his or her own control, and therefore the conditions under which the participant experiences the experiment are exactly identical. In a between-person design, although individuals are randomized to different groups, the two groups may still differ with regard to individual factors that are related to the outcome of interest. Because individuals serve as their own controls in the within-person design, the conditions are exactly the same with respect to these individual factors. The two disadvantages of a within-person design are respondent fatigue and spillover (in which answers to the first vignette lead to different answers to the second vignette). In terms of the present study, fatigue is unlikely to have occurred because of the short nature of the experiment (all components took between 5 to 10 minutes to complete). Spillover is also unlikely to be a problem because half of the respondents saw the job loss vignette first and the other half saw the stable employment vignette first. Therefore, spillover effects, if they exist, would be equally present when respondents saw job loss first as when they saw no job loss first, with no net effects overall.

We conducted a set of robustness checks (all results available from authors). First, as a check on our randomization process, we tested whether there were any differences in observable participant characteristics between those assigned to see the job loss vignette first and those assigned to see the job loss vignette second. We found no differences between those groups in any of the demographics. Second, we tested whether results differed by recruiter. Results indicated no main effect of recruiter on our outcomes of interest, nor was an interaction between job loss and recruiter statistically significant. Third, there were a total of 893 observations for the “will” outcome and 884 observations for the “should” outcome, and we used all observations available for each outcome. We also ran the models using only the 869 observations for which both “will” and “should” were nonmissing and found results nearly identical to those described next. Finally, we ran all of our analyses using only the respondents’ answers to the first vignette to mimic a between-person experiment. Results were substantially similar to the within-person results but, as would be expected from reduced power in the between-person models, did not reach conventional levels of statistical significance.

RESULTS

Effects of Vignette Factors on “Will” and “Should” Outcomes

Table 2 reports the results of the logistic regressions of “will” and “should” on the vignette factors. Coefficients, *p* values, and odds ratios are shown. Job loss significantly predicted responses for the “will” outcome, but did not significantly predict responses for the “should” outcome. As hypothesized, when community-wide job loss was present, respondents were significantly less likely to say that the couple will get married before the baby is born. The odds that an individual responded “yes” to the “will” outcome were only 67% as great when job loss was present, compared to the stable employment condition. Although job loss was

not significantly related to the “should” outcome, the effect of job loss on the “should” outcome was in the same direction as for the “will” outcome, although of smaller magnitude. The effect of job loss on the “will” outcome differed significantly at the 5% level from the effect of job loss on the “should” outcome.

Several other vignette factors significantly predicted the “will” and “should” outcomes, with more factors significantly associated with the “will” outcome than the “should” outcome (Table 2). If the couple in the vignette was younger (22 years old vs. 30 years old), the odds that the respondent said the couple will get married were only 58% as great. If both members of the couple had earned 4-year college degrees (as opposed to high school degrees only) and if the couple attended religious services regularly (as opposed to not being affiliated with any religion), the odds that a respondent believed that the vignette couple will get married increased significantly. Race and length of the relationship did not significantly predict responses to the “will” outcome. However, the couple’s relationship length was the only vignette variable that had a significant effect on the “should” outcome. The odds that a respondent believed the couple should get married before the baby was born were 45% greater if the couple had been together for 2 years as opposed to 6 months.

Interaction Effects of Job Loss and Other Vignette Factors on Marriage Attitudes

We conducted additional models in which we interacted job loss with each of the other vignette factors (e.g., race, age, education, length of relationship, and religiosity; results not shown but available on request). None of the interaction terms were statistically significant, suggesting that the effect of job loss on marriage attitudes was not dependent on any of these other vignette variables.

Subgroup Analyses

In a final set of analyses, we examined how results varied by respondents’ sociodemographic characteristics. Respondents were categorized as follows: education (4-year college degree vs. some college or less), marital status (currently married vs. not currently married), gender, race (White vs. Black), religiosity (attend services once a week or more vs. other attendance categories), and age (18–34 vs. 35–54 vs. 55 or older). Comparisons by respondent race focused only on White and Black respondents because they were the only racial or ethnic groups with sufficient numbers of respondents to analyze them separately.

We first examined whether sociodemographic differences existed in the percentage of “yes” responses to the “will” and “should” outcomes in the stable employment scenario (results not shown but available on request). Results largely conformed to expectations, as those who were more socioeconomically disadvantaged in terms of race, education, and marital status were more likely to say that the couple should marry than respondents who were more socioeconomically advantaged. This finding accorded with previous work that found that more socioeconomically advantaged individuals were more accepting of out-of-wedlock childbearing (Jones, 2015). For the “will” outcome, differences by respondent characteristics were less pronounced, with the majority of respondents in each subgroup indicating that the couple will marry. Results for race also illustrated how descriptive and injunctive norms can work in opposing directions. More Blacks than Whites said that the couple should marry, but

fewer Blacks than Whites said that the couple will marry. That is, Blacks felt more strongly than Whites that the couple should not have a child out of wedlock, but were less optimistic that the couple actually would marry before the child's birth.

The next set of analyses examined if the respondents' demographic characteristics moderated the effects of job loss on the outcomes of interest. We found no moderation in the "will" outcome. Consistent with the main results, all respondent demographic groups believed that marriage would be less likely to occur when job loss occurred, relative to stable employment.

In contrast, when the "should" outcome was examined, we found that the sociodemographic characteristics of race, marital status, education, and age moderated our results (no differences were found by respondent religiosity or gender). As discussed in more detail next, the impact of the job loss condition was larger for respondents who had fewer sociodemographic advantages, either because they were Black, unmarried, had less education, or were younger. Results for variation by marital status, educational attainment, and race are shown in Figures 1 to 3, which present the predicted probabilities for the main effects and the interaction effects. Results for age are not presented but are available on request.

Respondents with a 4-year college degree were more likely to say that the couple should get married in response to job loss when compared with stable employment (odds ratio [OR] = 1.12, $p = .25$), but those who lacked a 4-year college degree were less likely to say that the couple should get married in response to job loss when compared with stable employment (OR = 0.75, $p < .05$; Figure 1). The difference in responses for the two educational groups was statistically significant ($t = 2.50$; $p < .05$). White respondents (Figure 2) were not more likely to say that the couple should get married in response to job loss when compared with stable employment (OR = 1.04, $p = .60$). Black respondents, in contrast, were significantly less likely to say that the couple should get married in response to job loss when compared with stable employment (OR = 0.71, $p < .05$), and the difference between White and Black respondents was statistically significant ($t = 2.40$; $p < .05$). Currently married respondents (Figure 3) were more likely to say that the couple should get married in response to job loss when compared with stable employment (OR = 1.21, $p < .10$). In contrast, respondents who were not currently married were significantly less likely to say that the couple should get married in response to job loss when compared with stable employment (OR = 0.77, $p < .05$). The different responses by marital status were statistically significant ($t = 2.95$; $p < .01$).

The results by age were similar to those reported previously in that more socioeconomically disadvantaged (younger) respondents showed a markedly different pattern from more socioeconomically advantaged (older) respondents (results not shown graphically but available on request). Those who were aged 55 or older were significantly more likely to say that the couple should get married in response to job loss when compared with stable employment (OR = 1.71; $p < .01$). Respondents who were aged 35 to 54 years, in contrast, were significantly less likely to say that the couple should get married in response to job loss when compared with stable employment (OR = 0.76; $p < .05$). The difference between these

two age groups was statistically significant ($t = 4.98$; $p < .001$). Although the effect of job loss on answers to the “should” outcome did not reach statistical significance for those aged 18 to 34 years ($OR = 0.82$; $p = .12$), their responses were significantly different from the 55 or older age group ($t = 4.54$; $p < .001$). The two younger age groups’ responses did not significantly differ from each other.

To summarize, when compared with their responses to the stable employment condition, when the more socioeconomically disadvantaged respondents (Black, nonmarried, less educated, younger) saw the job loss condition, they were less likely to say yes to the “should” question. Among the more socioeconomically advantaged respondents (White, currently married, highly educated, older), the pattern was reversed. When compared with their responses to the stable employment condition, when more socioeconomically advantaged respondents saw the job loss condition, they were more likely to say yes to the “should” question.

DISCUSSION

This study was the first to use an experimental vignette study design to examine the effect of the local economic context on people’s attitudes toward midpregnancy marriage. Our study was motivated by the dramatic changes in attitudes and behaviors toward out-of-wedlock childbearing (Jones, 2015) as well as quantitative and qualitative evidence suggesting the importance of economic conditions in determining marriage among parents (Carlson, McLanahan, & England, 2004; Harknett & McLanahan, 2004). We hypothesized that respondents would be less likely to say that a couple with a nonmarital conception should and will marry if that couple lived in a community that had experienced an economic downturn.

Consistent with our hypothesis, we found that when people were presented with information about job losses in the hypothetical couple’s community, the respondents were less likely to think that the couple will get married before the baby is born. That is, respondents believed that marriage would be less common when the community had experienced an economic downturn than when the community had experienced stable employment. The size of this effect was relatively large, decreasing the odds that a respondent would endorse the descriptive norm by 33%. Importantly, this result is highly consistent with the empirical literature on economic downturns and marriage rates. Others have found that when an area’s unemployment rate increases, the marriage rate decreases (Blau, Kahn, & Waldfogel, 2000; Lichter, McLaughlin, & Ribar, 2002; Schneider & Hastings, 2015). In the present study, respondents’ subjective perceptions of what would be common in the context of an economic downturn matched these empirical results. We did not find an interaction between job loss and any of the other vignette factors, indicating that this descriptive norm was universally applied and was unrelated to other characteristics of the hypothetical couple. Interestingly, however, when responding to the stable employment condition, the majority of respondents across all subgroups said that the couple will marry, perceiving midpregnancy marriage to be common. This stands in stark contrast to established demographic trends showing that midpregnancy marriage is currently quite rare (England, Shafer, & Wu, 2012; Gibson-Davis & Rackin, 2014).

In contrast, across all respondents, we did not find that attitudes about injunctive norms—whether the couple should get married—were different in the presence of job loss when compared with stable employment. This null effect, however, masked significant variation by respondents' demographic characteristics. The presence of job loss, when compared with stable employment, had a significant effect on the “should” response only among groups who are typically more socioeconomically disadvantaged; job loss either had no effect on more traditionally advantaged groups or had an effect in the opposite direction. For example, Black respondents were less likely to say that the couple should get married in response to local job losses—their odds of endorsing the injunctive norm were 29% lower in the presence of job losses when compared with stable employment—but White respondents' attitudes were not significantly affected by job loss.

Our results are highly consistent with the larger literature on marriage among low-income, unmarried parents for whom economic circumstances are highly salient to marital decision making (Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Gibson-Davis et al., 2005) and builds on that literature in important ways. First, the present findings demonstrate the salience of the broader economic context in determining injunctive norms about midpregnancy marriage. Much of the qualitative work that informed this study focused on individuals' economic circumstances. In the present study, however, the key vignette predictor described job losses at the community, not the individual, level. This focus on community-level economic circumstances has been understudied in the literature. Our findings, when coupled with previous literature indicating the importance of perceptions about individual economic well-being (Edin & Kefalas, 2005), suggest that the importance of economic well-being in determining suitability for marriage has both a micro- and macro-component. Prior research suggests that individuals living in communities with economic downturns, even if those individuals do not lose jobs, show increases in economic strain and decreased optimism about the future (Gassman-Pines et al., 2015; Kalil, 2013). This suggests that communities' economic contexts may change individuals' perceptions of their ability to meet the economic bar.

Second, we found substantial differences in how individuals of low socioeconomic status responded to these community-wide economic conditions when compared with their counterparts with higher socioeconomic status. Although people across socioeconomic groups endorse norms about the importance of financial security before marriage to some degree, these groups responded to the community-wide job loss information differently. It is possible that socioeconomically disadvantaged individuals perceived that the economic bar would become more difficult to meet during an economic downturn, leading them to be less likely to say that the couple should marry under those circumstances. Our results are also consistent with the hypothesis that socioeconomically disadvantaged respondents, relative to those who are more socioeconomically advantaged, care more about the economic foundations of marriage. It is possible that respondents of a lower socioeconomic status were more attuned to the necessity of financial stability prior to marriage and hence were less likely to believe that the couple should get married in the context of an economic downturn. Our study, however, did not test if the importance of the norm of financial stability varied by the social class of the respondent. It is unclear, therefore, if the differences we found in responses to the job loss condition, when compared with stable employment, were driven by

the importance of this norm by social class or by different perceptions about the ease of achieving economic stability during an economic downturn. Either explanation is consistent with our results, and additional research is needed.

A key strength of this study is that these findings were from a within-person experimental vignette study, in which information about the local economic context and the characteristics of the hypothetical couple were varied randomly and which increased efficiency of the causal estimates by showing each respondent two vignettes. This study design also increased our power and allowed us to isolate and identify the causal effect of community job losses on people's attitudes. Thus, the effect of job loss on attitudes toward midpregnancy marriage that we have found cannot have occurred because of an omitted factor that is associated both with job loss and attitudes.

This study has some limitations that should be mentioned. First, as with many experimental studies, the sample in the present study was not representative of the population of the city in which it was conducted, limiting generalizability. Although some observable characteristics such as race and education levels of our sample were similar to those of the population of the city, unobservable characteristics may exist that differentiate our sample from the greater population. The city in which the study took place was hard hit by the Great Recession, but has largely recovered. Although the economic context of the city should not bias results, because our experimental design nets out bias arising from unobserved factors, it is nevertheless possible that our results may not generalize to other locations that experienced different economic circumstances. It is possible, for example, that results would be different in cities with very high unemployment rates. By limiting our sample to English speakers, we excluded a large proportion of the Hispanic population. This limits the degree to which we can generalize these findings to the southern city as a whole. Relatedly, it is not known how reading about job losses in the context of a hypothetical scenario may generalize to actual job losses in a community.

Nevertheless, consistent with prior research (Baghestani & Malcolm, 2014; Schaller, 2013), the results of the present study show that the local economic context affects how individuals invoke norms regarding family formation. In other research, worsening economic conditions led to lower marriage rates (Lichter et al., 2002; Schneider & Hastings, 2015). These changes in marital behavior likely occur in part as a result of changes in individuals' attitudes and norms (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977, 2005; Cialdini & Trost, 1998). Our results suggest that, indeed, attitudes toward family formation are likely to be different depending on the local economic context. Community-level job losses were particularly salient for socioeconomically disadvantaged groups' perceptions about whether the couple should marry, suggesting that in addition to individual economic circumstances, community-level economic circumstances may also play a role in socioeconomically disadvantaged individuals' marriage decisions.

These findings also have potential implications for policy because increasing marriage among low-income, unmarried parents has been a public policy goal during the past 2 decades (Dion, 2005). The largest marriage-promotion programs, however, have not been successful in increasing marriage rates or relationship quality (Wood, McConnell, Moore,

Clarkwest, & Hsueh, 2012). Those programs focused primarily on relationship skills training and not on individual- or community-level economic circumstances. Given our findings and prior literature, however, increasing marriage among the targeted group may require such programs to expand their services to take into account the economic well-being of individuals and communities.

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Figure 1.
PREDICTED PERCENT ANSWERING YES TO SHOULD OUTCOME, BY RESPONDENT EDUCATION.

Figure 2.
PREDICTED PERCENT ANSWERING YES TO SHOULD OUTCOME, BY RESPONDENT RACE.

Figure 3.
PREDICTED PERCENT ANSWERING YES TO SHOULD OUTCOME, BY RESPONDENT RACE.

Table 1.

Sample Characteristics

Characteristic	%
Responded couple will get married	0.59
Responded couple should get married	0.57
Female	0.51
Age, mean (<i>SD</i>)	40.15 (16.11)
Race/ethnicity	
White	0.39
Black	0.38
Hispanic	0.06
Other	0.18
Marital status	
Married	0.41
Separated or divorced	0.15
Cohabiting	0.05
Never married	0.35
Widowed	0.03
Educational attainment	
Less than high school	0.09
High school	0.21
Some college	0.25
4-year degree	0.45
Frequency of religious attendance	
Never attend	0.20
Attend on holidays	0.17
Attend between once a month and once a week	0.22
Attend once a week or more	0.41
Sample size	460

Note. Statistics refer to proportion of respondents unless otherwise indicated.

Table 2.

Logistic Regression of “Will” and “Should” Responses on Vignette Factors

Vignette factors	Will ^a			Should ^b		
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	Odds ratio	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	Odds ratio
Community-wide job loss	–0.39**	0.12	0.67	–0.09	0.08	0.92
(stable employment)	–	–	–	–	–	–
Couple is Black	0.25	0.20	1.2	0.11	0.19	1.12
(couple is White)	–	–	–	–	–	–
Age of couple is 22 years	–0.54**	0.20	0.58	–0.21	0.21	0.81
(age of couple is 30 years)	–	–	–	–	–	–
Education level of couple is bachelor’s degree	0.41*	0.18	1.5	0.10	0.17	1.11
(education level of couple is less than bachelor’s degree)	–	–	–	–	–	–
Length of relationship is 2 years	0.23	0.17	1.26	0.37*	0.17	1.45
(length of relationship is 6 months)	–	–	–	–	–	–
Couple attends religious services	0.88**	0.17	2.4	0.20	0.16	1.23
(couple is not affiliated with any religion)	–	–	–	–	–	–
Sample size	<i>n</i> = 893			<i>n</i> = 884		

Note. Omitted categories are indicated in parenthesis.

^a“Will” value of 1 indicates couple will get married.^b“Should” value of 1 indicates couple should get married.* $p < .05$.** $p < .01$.