Parents, Partners, Plans and Promises: The Relational Work of Student Loan Borrowing

Abby Stivers, University at Albany, SUNY

Elizabeth Popp Berman, University of Michigan

Abstract

When does student loan borrowing prompt relational work between borrowers and their family members? Research on student loans has focused on quantitative estimation of the effects of borrowing on educational attainment, economic well-being, health, and life course milestones. Drawing on sixty interviews with respondents working as lawyers in the northeastern U.S., we argue that student loans also have underappreciated relational effects, even for relatively privileged borrowers. Relational work around student loans is particularly visible during three important moments: the decision to borrow, the decision to partner, and when planning children's futures. While scholars have examined the effects of borrowing on marriage and childbearing decisions, they have implicitly assumed that it is difficulty repaying that causes such effects. Attention to relational work, however, shows how debt can create additional burdens even when borrowers have the ability to repay, and may help explain why similar debt levels affect different groups differently.

A growing body of literature explores the effects of student loan debt on borrowers (Hillman 2015; A. R. Baker, Andrews, and McDaniel 2017; Dwyer 2018; de Gayardon et al. 2018). Primarily quantitative, it focuses on the impact of borrowing on a variety of measurable outcomes—educational attainment, economic well-being, mental and physical health, and the achievement of life course milestones (e.g. Dwyer, McCloud, and Hodson 2012; Henager and Wilmarth 2018; Houle and Berger 2015; Houle and Warner 2017; Walsemann, Gee, and Gentile 2015)—as well as whether this impact varies among different types of borrowers (Addo, Houle, and Simon 2016). Though a number of studies have examined whether student loans affect the timing of marriage and childbearing decisions (Addo 2014; see Velez, Cominole, and Bentz 2019 for a review), much less work has focused on the subjective experience of student loan borrowing, or on the ways borrowing might affect decisions to form, or relationships within, families (though see Goldrick-Rab 2016; Cottom 2017; Zaloom 2019).

This study draws on 60 semi-structured interviews with practicing lawyers under the age of 45 in the northeastern U.S. to explore the relational work that student loan borrowing produces between borrowers and current and potential family members. As a group that is heavily indebted but relatively privileged, law school graduates are particularly useful for understanding the impact of borrowing on a group that typically can afford to repay, but for whom debt is nevertheless quite salient to everyday life. We identify relational work with family members—“the creative effort [of] establishing, maintaining, negotiating, transforming, and terminating interpersonal relations” in the context of economic activity (Zelizer, Bandelj, and Wherry 2012)—as critical to the subjective experience of student loan borrowing. While such relational work may be ongoing, it becomes particularly significant at three specific moments.

First, there is relational work with parents at the time of borrowing: around expectations about how much parents will assist their children financially and how much students will borrow, around promises made (and sometimes broken) to help with repayment, and around changes in circumstances (e.g. divorce, job loss) that affect parents' capacity to contribute financially. Second, there is relational work with (potential) partners regarding mutual obligations to one's student loan debt: to manage any stigma of debt when seeking a partner, to negotiate a mutually agreeable strategy for repaying a manageable debt, and to deal with the financial stress that results when debt is difficult to repay. Finally, there is relational work tied to planning for one's (future) children: around deciding what one's financial obligation to one's children's education actually is, negotiating that obligation with a spouse, and balancing it with one's own debt and long-term financial security.

Research increasingly suggests that student loan borrowing does affect family formation, and implicitly assumes that it is the financial challenge of managing debt that causes delays in marriage or childbearing (see e.g. Velez, Cominole, and Bentz 2019). But findings have also been somewhat inconsistent, with some studies showing more impact than others, and with effects varying across groups—e.g. by race and gender—even at similar debt levels. A focus on relational work, however, shows that borrowing affects the experience of family life even when borrowers are financially able to manage repayment, and suggests reasons debt might have different effects on family formation for different groups. Relational work is tied not only to the size of loans or how hard they are to repay, but to family members' beliefs about their financial obligations to each other, about who is responsible for paying for higher education, and about how existing debt should be managed and repaid. These beliefs are likely to vary significantly across populations, including by social class, gender, and race.

Unpacking what this relational work looks like for different types of borrowers is thus not only important for understanding the subjective experience of student loan debt, though that subjective experience should not be discounted. Relational work may also mediate between a given level of borrowing and a measurable effect on family life—with potentially varying impacts on women and men, on black and white borrowers, and on borrowers from different socioeconomic and educational backgrounds. Understanding how different types of borrowers experience debt in family contexts can help us better interpret existing findings on the relationship between student debt and family formation, and additional qualitative research focused on mapping patterns of relational work can usefully inform the quantitative literature.

Student Loan Borrowing and Its Relational Effects

The literature on student loans examines the effects of borrowing on a range of outcomes—particularly educational attainment (Dwyer, McCloud, and Hodson 2012; Dwyer, Hodson, and McCloud 2013; Jackson and Reynolds 2013; see A. R. Baker, Andrews, and McDaniel 2017 for a review), but also economic well-being (Fry 2014; Henager and Wilmarth 2018; Elliott and Lewis 2015), mental and physical health (Walsemann, Gee, and Gentile 2015; Walsemann, Ailshire, and Gee 2016), and the achievement of life course milestones like purchasing a home (Houle and Berger 2015; Mezza et al. 2019). A handful of studies have looked at the impact of borrowing on family formation, including the decisions to marry and to have children, under the assumption that increasing debt levels may be causing borrowers to delay such decisions because they do not feel they are in a financial position to make them (e.g. Velez, Cominole, and Bentz 2019).

The findings of this literature have been somewhat mixed, with some studies showing associations across the board (Addo, Houle, and Sassler 2019; Gicheva 2016), while others find that they are limited to women (Nau, Dwyer, and Hodson 2015), vary by race (Min and Taylor 2018), or attenuate over time (Bozick and Estacion 2014). They have also focused on measurable outcomes (e.g. age at marriage or having a first child), rather than the subjective experience that might lead to such decisions, or have other kinds of impact on family relationships.

These studies of the effects of borrowing on family formation are themselves part of an effort to expand our understanding of the potential impact of student loans beyond educational attainment and economic outcomes. But without attention to how student loans are actually experienced, they leave many questions open—about how loans affect not only borrowers themselves but their families, about when loans become stressors within families, and about how borrowers who look similar on paper may experience debt very differently. Examining how debt is experienced in family contexts can show more subtle effects of student loan borrowing, including on borrowers who are not financially struggling. It also suggests possible explanations for why debt might affect the family decisions of different types of borrowers differently.

While holding student loan debt was once positively associated with marriage, at least for men (Addo, Houle, and Sassler 2019), a growing number of studies find evidence that student loan debt now delays marriage (Addo 2014; Gicheva 2016; Velez, Cominole, and Bentz 2019), particularly for women (Bozick and Estacion 2014; Sieg and Wang 2018), though it may increase the likelihood of cohabitation (Addo 2014). Similarly, evidence is emerging that student loan debt delays childbearing for women (Velez, Cominole, and Bentz 2019), especially at high debt levels (Nau, Dwyer, and Hodson 2015), but that this relationship varies with race (Min and Taylor 2018). Evidence also exists that student loan debt is associated with “boomeranging”—

returning to the parental home—among some subgroups (black borrowers and those who did not complete a degree; Houle and Warner 2017), and that consumer debt (including, but not limited to, education debt) predicts marital conflict as well (Dew 2007).

Drawing on interview data, sociologists have shown how financial relationships within families around higher education financing are much more complex than the traditional assumption that parents assist children as much as they can, with children borrowing to make up the difference. Not only are many borrowers already well into adulthood, but it is also quite common for traditional-age students to be helping their parents financially, as is using financial aid not only to pay for educational and living expenses but to assist a broader network of family members (Goldrick-Rab 2016; Cottom 2017). Negotiating these expectations requires intense interaction within families, who experience “moral conflict” as they struggle to provide children with opportunity, but at great financial cost (Tevington, Napolitano, and Furstenberg 2017; Zaloom 2019). Families serve as a “source of knowledge” for borrowers, although some families are better equipped than others to provide such knowledge, as well as “emotional support” in the borrowing process (D. Baker 2019). Parents and siblings can also serve as negative models that lead students to avoid taking on debt, after seeing the struggles of family members to repay (Zerquera, McGowan, and Ferguson 2016).

This qualitative evidence suggesting the importance and complexity of family relations in student loan borrowing, along with the quantitative studies showing the association between debt and family formation, suggest that a closer examination of family interactions around borrowing is merited. To help conduct this examination, we draw on Viviana Zelizer’s concept of “relational work” (Zelizer 2012). Focusing on the “interpersonal processes that actually go into what economists usually abstract into production, consumption, distribution, and transfer of

assets,” Zelizer’s approach emphasizes that people are “constantly negotiating the exact content of important social ties” (Zelizer 2005:32). Economic sociology has more generally found the concept of relational work useful for understanding economic transactions—like student loan borrowing—in which the public and private spheres are blurred (Bandelj 2012; Wherry, Seefeldt, and Alvarez 2019).

Dwyer (2018) has recently proposed adopting Zelizer’s relational approach for understanding the debtor/creditor relationship. We suggest that this relational approach is also useful for understanding debt’s impact on close others (e.g. family members) who are affected by borrowing even when they have no direct financial stake in the debt. Zelizer (2005:265) emphasizes that income (including negative income, aka debt) catalyzes relational work within families, and changing family circumstances—such as would be prompted by the decision to marry or the need to plan for a child’s future education—similarly tend to reopen relatively settled internal financial arrangements.

By focusing on when relational work becomes important in the borrowing and repayment process, and how it is subjectively experienced by borrowers, we shed light on *how* borrowing affects families. We suggest that relational work might be a moderator between debt and family effects that can help explain variation across race, gender, or socioeconomic background. More generally, attention to relational work shows how borrowing is not only a constraint on family formation but restructures the very fabric of family life, even for economically privileged families.

Research Design

This study draws on in-depth, semi-structured interviews about student loan borrowing and

repayment with 60 currently practicing lawyers under the age of 45 in the northeastern United States. Interviews were chosen as the appropriate method because the study was intended to explore subjective experience, to allow respondents the opportunity to discuss the issues most important to them, and to provide a forum in which they could show “the framings that shape [their] thinking” (Pugh 2013). In addition, given the reliance of the literature on quantitative survey and administrative data, interviews provided the potential for preliminary identification of impacts on borrowers’ lives that might be less evident in other kinds of data.

While holders of professional degrees are often seen as not part of the student loan problem, as they typically have high earning capacity despite their greater borrowing (Baum 2016; Dynarski 2015; Akers and Chingos 2016), this study focuses on lawyers specifically for several reasons. First, lawyers do have both high rates and high levels of borrowing. The American Bar Association reported that almost 90% borrowed to pay for law school in 2012; that year, private law schools averaged \$127,000 of debt among graduates, and public schools \$88,000 (ABA 2015).¹ Income among law school graduates, however, tends to be bifurcated. Graduates hired by “BigLaw” firms in major markets—a group that makes up about 14% of the total—now commonly start at salaries of \$180,000, while as of 2011, more than half of new graduates—often those working in public interest law, criminal defense, or in temporary contract positions—earned \$60,000 or less (Dinovitzer, Garth, and Sterling 2013; Lat 2017). Thus, practicing lawyers include both a group that should be able to manage high debt levels reasonably well, and a group more likely to struggle with repayment. This should provide greater

¹ The National Center for Education Statistics (2019) produces somewhat different estimates of borrowing rates and debt levels, reporting that only 69% of 2015-16 law degree completers had student loans, and that average balances were \$145,500 among those with loans.

internal variation in responses than other professional-degree borrowers, like physicians or MBAs.

At the same time, however, lawyers are quite unlikely to stop paying their student loans, with only 2% defaulting within two years of graduation (ABA 2015). While this may be because they are in income-based repayment or Public Service Loan Forgiveness programs, rather than because they are successfully repaying principal, it does suggest that most lawyers are at least managing their debt. Thus, at some level lawyers are a “least-likely” case (George and Bennett 2005) for seeing intense relational work: if it is happening among these respondents, who have an unusually high capacity to manage their debt, we should certainly expect to see it among less economically advantaged groups. Given their very low rates of default, lawyers are also a particularly useful group for exploring how borrowing may affect family life even when borrowers are not obviously struggling to manage repayment.

Interviews, conducted in 2015-16 by the first author, were limited to practicing lawyers under the age of 45: none was born prior to 1970. This cutoff was chosen to include respondents who had a range of time in which to pay off student loans, but limiting the focus to age groups most affected by student loan borrowing. The oldest respondents graduated from law school in 1997; the youngest was born in 1991 and graduated from law school in 2016. Borrowing levels were high and increasing throughout most of this period, with the National Center for Education Statistics reporting average cumulative loan balances among law degree completers rising from \$82,400 in 1999-2000 to a peak of \$149,700 in 2011-12, after which they decreased by about 3% (NCES 2018; inflation-adjusted figures in 2016-17 dollars).

Interviewees were recruited through snowball sampling and by advertising the study on LinkedIn and the popular blog Above the Law; all interviews were conducted by phone. 38

interviewees were women and 22 were men; race was not asked, although three respondents spontaneously mentioned that they were African-American and three others that they were Asian-American. Respondents ranged in age from 26 to 44, with half being 30, 31, or 32 years of age. 58% took on debt to finance their undergraduate degree, and 93% borrowed to pay for law school, a figure similar to the roughly 60% of undergraduates and 90% of law school graduates who borrow overall (Baum et al. 2017; ABA 2015).

Though representativeness was not a core concern of the study, the sample was selected to ensure representation of graduates of law schools from a range of status levels. *U.S. News and World Report* divides law schools into four tiers, with Tier 1 graduates much more likely to be employed in BigLaw and with much higher average incomes upon graduation, relative to other tiers' graduates (see, e.g., Rivera 2016). 19 respondents graduated from a Tier 1 school, 13 attended Tier 2 schools, and the remaining 38 were from either Tier 3 or Tier 4 law programs.

Interviews lasted for about an hour, depending on respondents' time constraints; most respondents were quite busy. They were scheduled at respondents' convenience and were held on weekends, during lunch breaks, after work, or during the day. Many were rescheduled multiple times due to schedule changes and a few were cut short when something more pressing for the respondent took precedent. Interviews were subsequently transcribed and inductively coded in order to identify emerging themes (Luker 2008). Family relationships were not an initial focus of the interviews, although questions about undergraduate borrowing decisions and current financial situation, which tended to bring up discussion of family, were included.

However, the effect of borrowing decisions on family relations, and the effort associated with managing those relations, emerged relatively early as an important theme. Because the topic was not systematically covered in the very earliest interviews, some numerical totals (for example, on

whether a respondent's parents paid for college attendance) do not add up to 60, the total number of interviews conducted. Upon reexamining portions of interviews that touched on issues around family and relational work, three moments in which such decisions became important were identified.

Beyond ensuring respondents from a range of law school tiers were included, no effort was made to seek a representative sample. Respondents may have been unusually concerned with the topic of debt, although many did not exhibit obvious anxiety about their borrowing. The interviews did not systematically ask about loan amounts, due to many respondents' discomfort with providing such numbers, although a number of respondents volunteered how much they borrowed or still owed. Discussion covered undergraduate as well as graduate borrowing; relational work with parents and internal relational work with (future) children was more typically around undergraduate, rather than graduate, borrowing, given the stronger cultural assumption that parents will assist children with the cost of undergraduate education. While we do not have space here to fully unpack the differences in how respondents discussed undergraduate versus graduate borrowing, the fact that there was a difference reinforces the point that relational work around borrowing is shaped not only by the amount borrowed but by expectations about who is financially responsible for what.

The interviews did ask about parents' occupation as a proxy for socio-economic status; these borrowers are almost certainly different from undergraduate borrowers, not only in their earning capacity but in their origins in relatively well-off families. We make no claims that their experience is typical of either law school graduates or student borrowers more generally. However, that does not make it less useful for generating insights into the way borrowing can

trigger relational work, and what kinds of relational work people do as they manage their borrowing.

The Relational Work of Student Loan Borrowing

Though scholars are beginning to recognize the extent to which student loan borrowing decisions are shaped by family needs and relationships (Goldrick-Rab 2016; Cottom 2017; SallieMae 2019; Zaloom 2019), much of the literature still rests, implicitly or explicitly, on a human capital model in which students make individual, more-or-less rational decisions about borrowing and repayment based on expected future earnings (e.g. Avery and Turner 2012). Yet one theme that quickly emerges from interview data is the extent to which borrowing and repayment are intensely *relational* activities—and tied up not only with the actual income and wealth of parents, partners, and children, but with optimistic plans for the future, promises made and broken, expectations about mutual obligations, and adjustments to evolving family situations. While situations in which student loans create immediate financial difficulties obviously create the potential for stress, borrowing and managing the repayment of student loans nearly always requires relational work—even among borrowers who find their debt relatively manageable.

This relational work is ongoing and can come to the fore in a variety of contexts. In interviews, however, it was particularly salient at three moments in the process of borrowing and repayment. First, it takes place with students and their parents during decision-making over whether and how much to borrow. Second, it becomes important as people find partners and spouses and negotiate over obligations to and strategies for managing student loan debt. Finally, relational work again intensifies around consideration of obligations to provide for the education of existing or potential children. The intensity of relational work is not completely detached from

the quantity of debt at stake or the financial challenge of repaying it. But it is also deeply shaped by mutual expectations around obligations: between children and parents over expectations around who will pay for education, of partners to take on responsibility for each other's debt, and of parents and their balancing of obligations to children, to existing debt, and to retirement. Mismatches in expectations, renegeing on (perceived) promises, or the need to renegotiate in face of changing realities all produce such work, even in the absence of intense financial pressure.

Parents, Plans and Promises: Relational Work at the Moment of Borrowing

Discussions of financial aid and student borrowing have typically assumed that parents have an obligation to pay what they can for children's higher education, at least at the undergraduate level. Interviewees' accounts of parental contributions to their undergraduate education mostly reflected this expectation that parents will at least try to pay: 21 said their parents paid entirely, 21 said their parents helped to pay, and only 10 said that their parents did not pay for college.² Yet even parents who expect to contribute substantially may do so with the expectation that children will attend schools that parents approve of or that are financially affordable. When a mismatch occurs between parental expectations and children's preferences, relational work takes place to negotiate the gap.

Michael's parents, for example, had a plan for how they would finance his education. Because of his father's location and job, he could attend a specific set of schools at near-free tuition levels. Michael, however, had worked hard in high school and set career aspirations for himself that he felt this "approved" list of schools could not help him achieve. He tried one of

² Responses to the direct question of whether parents paid for college did not always align precisely with other information provided in the interview. Some respondents, for example, mentioned having taken on small loans but also maintained that their parents had fully paid for their college education.

them for a year, hated it, and transferred to a private liberal arts college in a major city. To pay for the new school, he started taking out both federal and private student loans. Michael was unhappy that he had to borrow because his expectations of his parents' obligations diverged from theirs:

I was mostly annoyed because my parents they were like, "Oh you know we were not expecting to get a big tuition bill and as it turns out we did not save a bunch of money for you to go to college we thought you were going to take the free ride" and ugh and I was annoyed by that.

This led to relational work to negotiate that mismatch. In Michael's case, this meant that his father agreed to help repay Michael's undergraduate loans, even though Michael had taken an educational path that did not accord with his parents' expectations:

My family income was such that I didn't really qualify for need based fellowships, and because we did not have the cash on hand we went ahead and borrowed...and we did so with the understanding that he would help pay on the back end of things. And that is kind of the way it has worked out.

The relational work that took place in reaction to the expectations mismatch helped repair the annoyance Michael felt at his parents for not being able to pay outright for his education after (in Michael's words) "all did not go according to plan."

While in Michael's family, relational work was relatively successful in managing the divergence between parental and child expectations, this was less so when children sensed not only a mismatch in expectations but a reneging on promises. Jessica, for example, perceived her parents as telling her she should choose a college without consideration of cost:

My whole life my dad told me you can go to school wherever you want to go to school and you can do whatever you want to do and you can be whoever you want to be....All I had heard for my whole childhood is that you go wherever you want to go.

When she chose to attend “the best school that [she] got into”—a small private liberal arts school in New England—her family was pleased:

My grandfather was just so excited to have a grandkid that was going to a prestigious school in the Northeast and was looking at going to law school and so was just encouraging me to get all the education that I could.

Her parents did not have a clear plan, however, for how to pay for her expensive education. Her father agreed to pay for half the cost, but failed to keep his end of the bargain, with the result that Jessica took on substantial public and private loans:

I remember my dad saying...“I am not sure, let’s figure out if we can make this work,” and...he ended up saying, “Well, you will finance half and I will finance half,” and then he just didn’t pay for his half. And by the time I realized he was not going to hold up his end of the deal I was at the end of my junior year.

This produced a great deal of stress and anxiety for Jessica. The anxiety was not only because of her lack of understanding of borrowing (“I didn’t understand that they were growing. I didn’t understand what a good interest rate was versus a bad interest rate”) or because of the size of the loans, though both of these were an issue. It was also because she felt her family’s high educational expectations, paired with a failure to follow through on promises to help pay for her education, had negative consequences for her:

No one was really stopping to think how this was going to affect...that this was going to affect my life.

In this case, relational work was a necessary response to the unkept promise but not enough to repair Jessica’s feeling that her father had broken her trust.

Finally, changing family circumstances can also prompt relational work even when children and parents have previously shared expectations about their mutual obligations to pay for college. Sarah’s parents, for example, divorced while she was in high school, introducing

complications into family negotiations about who would be responsible for paying what part of her higher education. Her parents covered most of her first two years, in part due to their divorce settlement:

My first year my dad was court ordered to pay \$5,000 cash and my mom ended up taking out whatever the parent loan was that [the school] told her she had to take out....Then second year my mom paid the family cash contribution, whatever the Parent PLUS loan was, and then this whole time I was taking out whatever [the school] told me I had to take out.

Changing financial realities, though, meant that her parents were not able and willing to continue this level of support. Sarah's father "was upset that [she] didn't go to the state school," despite the fact that "their financial aid package [was] worse," and her mother was unwilling to continue a high level of borrowing:

My parents were like, okay, you are an adult now and we are done. My mom was tapped out and felt nervous about taking out more debt and taking out more Parent PLUS loans and my dad was just not going to help me at all....It's not that my mom wasn't sympathetic, but she didn't have anything, she couldn't help me. My sister was still in high school and she was pretty much a single mom. She didn't have child support, so she was like, "You are just going to have to work with [your private college]."

Sarah did not feel animosity towards her mother, despite having to borrow enough to cover the remaining two years of private college. Her mom performed relational work first by pushing for the divorce settlement to require her dad to contribute, and later by helping Sarah come to terms with her decision to borrow substantially:

My mom had helped to reassure me, like, here is the form that you sign for your loan. And she would say, "This is what we do. I am taking out a loan, you are taking out a loan, it will be fine."

The change in family circumstances prompted the need for relational work, but Sarah's relationship with her mother, at least, remained solid as a result of that work. While relational work between parents and children may continue after the moment of borrowing, particularly if parents later fail to follow through on promises to help with repayment, it is the immediate negotiation over who will pay, how much they will pay, and how much borrowing will be required that prompts the most relational work between borrowers and their parents.

(Possible) Partners: Relational Work with Potential and Actual Spouses

While nontraditional students may already have a partner by the time they are taking on student loan debt, the lawyers in this study had typically made major borrowing decisions before they were seriously considering long-term partnership or marriage. 31 respondents were married at the time of their interview; 10 had a partner who lived with them, shared household expenses, and with whom they planned their financial future; and the remaining 14 were single or were in a relationship that did not involve shared financial decision-making. Both the process of seeking a spouse or partner as well as coming to agreement about how to manage student loan debt required substantial relational work.

At the front end, this was tied to anxiety about the impact of debt upon one's marriageability. All respondents who held large amounts of debt reported stress around finding a partner or spouse while holding the debt. Respondents worried that no one would want to marry a person with so much debt and felt guilty about bringing debt to the relationship. As Laura observed,

[The debt] is part of what you will be marrying. This absurd debt that will be ours. And yeah, I am really lucky that my partner does not have any undergrad debt, and it's more reasonable for two of us to have \$127,000.

When the debt did not immediately lead to a lucrative career it was perceived as stigmatizing, and telling a potential partner about it was something to be carefully managed, as Laura continued:

At a certain point it is like disclosing to people that you have a sexually transmitted disease.

Both the stigma and the actual financial burden prompted relational work between borrowers and potential partners before any long-term commitment to one another could be made.

Once such a commitment took place, however, relational work continued as partners negotiated over expectations about shared responsibility to the debt and about collective strategies for managing it. James and his wife each brought student loan debt to their marriage, him from law school and her from a master's degree. They negotiated a strategy of aggressively paying off their student loans, a process that James found relatively smooth:

We have been together for a while and we approach decisions very much as a team... We have a really good understanding of one another and our goals are aligned which always helps in our marriage. As a result, financial decisions have been easy for us and not difficult.

Shared values and successful relational work—along with an earning capacity that made it possible—led to rapid repayment. James and his wife paid off his law school loans “in three years and two months,” and reported a sense of satisfaction that the loans had been worth it.

Yet while the relational work of establishing a shared strategy toward managing student loan debt and paying it down may be relatively straightforward for some couples, for others the challenge may be substantially greater. This is particularly the case when borrowing levels are very high, or debt is difficult to repay.

John, for example, accumulated \$300,000 worth of student loans during undergraduate and law school. Although his salary was \$160,000 a year (after one year of lower pay due to the

2008 recession), budgeting was difficult, and he was frustrated with how little money he actually took home each month. His wife, who he met while in law school, had no student loan debt of her own, but when they married John's student loans came with him.

Dealing with the gap between his salary on paper and his paycheck size after student loan repayments was difficult for John:

\$4,800 a month was coming out of my \$6,600 I was earning after taxes. Imagine that. You are working so hard, you have this big job and your take home is like what my wife's take home was. It was, you know, making \$30,000 a year. That is crazy...I had 13 or 15 different loans and so I was making payments on all of them. Some were automatically coming out of my paycheck, some weren't, it was just like coordinating them was a headache. And all of them had the different payment dates. There are some of them on the first, some on the 15th, and that was stressful.

Managing the loans put pressure on his relationship with his wife:

I remember we got in so many arguments. Some of the nights I would get home from a long day of work, I would have to call the student loan company, wait on hold forever because too much money was taken out, too little money was taken you, the records were not right, and I just never wanted to have a late payment.

Their solution was for her to take over practical management of the loans for the sake of preserving their relationship:

My wife said, "Look, I will manage all of your student loan debt and I will make sure all these payments come on time." Because it was also stressful for me to see my paycheck and then to be obsessing over the fact that in my biweekly paycheck we had zero money left over because the loans were coming out of it all in one paycheck....So my wife said she'd take over and she's really organized and so she took over making all the payments and created an elaborate spreadsheet to manage them.

Though John's wife did not come to the marriage with student loan debt, she had to manage both the debt itself and John's anxiety about it. The extent of this relational work was amplified by the size of the loans relative to John's paycheck, even though John's earning power made them financially capable of paying down the debt in a timely manner. While the debt's economic burden was now shared between partners, its emotional burden grew as two people, not one, now shared the experience.

Thus, while the relational work of managing student loan debt with potential or existing partners was ongoing, it tended to be particularly visible early in relationships: as borrowers looked for long-term partners who might come to share responsibility for their debt, and as they worked with new partners or spouses to develop shared strategies for managing and repaying the debt. This work was particularly onerous when debts were large or difficult to repay, but it was visible in every relationship.

Parenting Plans: Relational Work and the Decision to Have Children

Student loan borrowing decisions not only prompted relational work between borrowers, their parents, and their existing or potential partners, but became newly salient as borrowers began thinking about children of their own. Of the 60 respondents in this study, 16 already had children (all younger than college age) and many others were considering becoming parents. Because their children were young, respondents did not report a great deal of active relational work with those children, who typically were not near the age of making college decisions. Instead, relational work was internal, and involved articulating a sense of one's financial obligation to one's children's higher education, and then to reconciling that duty with competing responsibilities to student loan debt and to one's own financial future, and particularly to saving

for retirement. This relational work of dealing with the costs of college often began even before respondents had children.

For many interviewees, the core issue was managing competing financial obligations to one's children, one's student loan debt, and one's future self, and finding a way to be at peace with the choices one made about their relative priority. Amy, the mother of a two-year-old, was a participant in the Public Service Loan Forgiveness program. Program participants commit to ten years of public service employment, during which they make income-adjusted loan repayments, and after which their remaining debt is to be forgiven. The income adjustment meant that respondents' monthly payments were often less than the interest on their loans, which meant their loan balances were growing while they were in the program. Amy was considering leaving the program for higher-paying employment in the private sector, despite having put in five years already.³ She noted the tensions between meeting the competing needs of her child, her retirement, and paying off her loans:

The immediate concerns of paying for childcare, putting money in college accounts, putting money in retirement accounts right now, all of those things are things that more time is helpful for and so waiting five years before you can start loading accounts that are interest bearing or interest producing is kind of a question...I obviously have not found another job yet...but I am leaning in the direction, yes. This is really crappy for this loan situation but better for all of these other reasons, so, I feel stupid, actually. That sounds kind of awful but I feel like an idiot because...when it comes down to bare numbers I will be paying so much more doing it that way, right? But the problem is time, and time is going to keep

³ The Public Service Loan Forgiveness program has become a hot-button issue, as almost no loans have actually been forgiven at the end of ten years of service, and it is likely that participants today would exhibit much more distress about their situation. At the time of the interviews, however, respondents generally assumed that the forgiveness would likely happen after ten years, but were concerned that participating might be a bad financial decision for other reasons, and unhappy about their loss of options after having committed to it.

ticking no matter what I do, so I have to also be addressing these other things that require time as well.

Amy was performing internal work to manage her sense of obligation to these competing demands. She was leaning toward taking the financial penalty on her student loan balance that would result from returning to the higher-paid private sector so that she could meet her own responsibilities to her child's well-being:

I don't know. I feel really frustrated that no matter what I am going to take a financial hit one way or another but that, as it relates to my child's welfare, clock's a-ticking. That sort of freaks me out.

Other parents, however, did not feel the same obligation to save for their children's education, making different internal calculations about what should be the priority in the short term. When Justin, father of two, was asked whose responsibility it would be to pay for college, he replied, "Theirs," without hesitation. He continued,

Would we hope to be able to be in a position where we could say we will help you out with some? Sure. But, as people have always said, you can take loans out for school, but you can't take loans out for retirement. So, it is better to get in shape for that, for retirement, and then whatever we can help out with on top for their school is great.

Justin has also done the relational work of articulating his financial responsibility to his children but landed in a different place. For him, the decision to prioritize retirement is the responsible one for his whole family, because "you can't take out loans for retirement." He seems satisfied, for now—but future relational work may be needed if his children do not share his sense that they should bear primary financial responsibility for their higher education.

The relational work of articulating financial responsibilities to one's children takes place within the context of what borrowers have learned from their own parents about interfamilial

obligations. Borrowers typically draw on what their parents did as a model for their own behavior. Kristen, whose parents paid for her undergraduate degree, felt a sense of responsibility to pay for her own (future) children's college despite the fact that she had a modest-paying job in the federal government and was married to a taxi driver. Her parents' behavior shaped her own expectations:

I felt that I was very lucky. So, I would like to be able to pass that same thing on. I think because I was able to graduate from undergrad with no debt I think that opened up many doors for me and actually allowed me to live the kind of crazy adventure that I got to go to Senegal and then came to the conclusion that I wanted to go to law school. I think that it gave me a lot of flexibility that I definitely would not have had otherwise. It was a gift in a way, so I would like to give that gift to my hypothetical children.

The language of a "gift"—a word that came up in fourteen interviewees—was common among respondents who hoped to pay for their children's college, reflecting a sense that it was desirable, but above and beyond what was expected.

Others, who expected to share the cost of college with their children, similarly drew on their parents' model as they did the relational work of developing their own sense of financial obligation to their children. James' parents had split the cost with him, and he was able to make enough money working summer and winter breaks to pay half the bill. He reflected that he and his wife

don't have a goal of funding 100% out of our pockets. We both found it healthy to have a personal involvement and financial stake in our undergraduate and graduate education. I think we both got more out of it. We don't really look to them to fund it completely but then we probably would not do it completely for them. We will probably have something like a 50-50 split.

Again, for James being a good parent meant not providing the “gift” of a free education, but assisting children as needed, even as they had a “financial stake” in their own education.

Justin, by contrast, thought his children would benefit from being responsible for the cost of college, even though his parents helped pay for his. Even if he and his wife were in a position to “help out”,

It is still up to the kids to pay for their school and then if they can show that they can budget properly and stuff like that, once they have learned that then we will help cover things.

Here, the primary obligation to one’s children is to teach them to “budget properly”, not to give them a “gift”.

While current and potential parents drew on the model of their family of origin as they did the relational work of sorting out obligations to their (future) children, their spouses were, of course, drawing on different family models. When asked whose responsibility it was to pay for college, Jason replied,

We actually have kind of different opinions about that, my wife and I, and it is obviously because of the way that our parents handled it. My parents didn’t put anything aside for us for college. My wife doesn’t have any student loans at all. Her parents had saved enough to cover all of her undergrad and then there are not student loans from grad school. So, my gut reaction is, well, it is an extremely daunting task of saving up enough to cover an entire college tuition, especially considering how rates might be in 18 years. At the same time, I don’t want my kids to be in my position where I am stuck with six figures of debt for eternity basically, so I definitely want to save up for them. How much, and how will we do it? Not sure yet, but then she is 100% we have to save as much as we can for their college education.

Thus, the relational work around financial obligations to one’s own children involves not only sorting out one’s own sense of responsibilities but negotiating different positions regarding those

responsibilities with one's partner. Student loan borrowing has the potential to produce relational work at any moment, but is particularly salient for borrowers at particular moments: when one decides with (or in response to) one's parents to borrow; when one is seeking a partner and then negotiating shared responsibilities to student loan debt and a shared strategy for managing it; and when one begins to balance obligations to one's own debt with obligations to the education of one's (future) children.

Discussion

The growing literature on student loan debt has begun to look at its impact on family formation, finding effects on marriage, cohabitation, and childbearing. But the paucity of qualitative research on borrowing means that we have a limited sense of *how* student loan borrowing is experienced within families, and why similar levels of debt seem to affect different groups very differently. The literature also implicitly assumes that it is the financial difficulty of managing student loans that produces the family effects it has identified.

By drawing on interviews with lawyers—a relatively privileged population with high levels of borrowing, widely varying incomes, and low rates of student loan default—we highlight the importance of relational work in shaping how student loan borrowing and repayment is *experienced* within families. While very few of these respondents struggled with making payments month-to-month, negotiating the borrowing and repayment process nevertheless required extensive relational work—both interpersonal and internal. While this work is ongoing, it tends to come to the fore at three particular moments of family transition: when borrowing becomes necessary, when relationships with partners begin and then stabilize, and when children come into the picture. Relational work may be prompted by difficulty with

repayment, whether because loans are large relative to income or because of competing financial obligations. But it can also result from mismatched expectations between parents, partners, and children over who is responsible for paying (and repaying) what, as well as from changed family circumstances tied to partnership, divorce, job loss, or having a child.

Shining a light on the importance of relational work complicates existing research on how student debt affects families, while also pointing to possible explanations for puzzling results. Relational work is most obviously produced when repayment is difficult to manage in the face of competing obligations. But these interviews challenge the assumption that student debt is only relevant for borrowers who struggle financially to repay, and that impacts on professional-degree borrowers are minimal. Debt also weighs heavily on many borrowers who are repaying successfully, and meaningfully shapes their experience of family life. These respondents are among the most fortunate of student loan borrowers: all hold a valuable professional degree, and while not all had parents who helped them pay for college, very few came from families that needed their financial assistance as they reached early adulthood, in contrast with many undergraduate borrowers (e.g. Goldrick-Rab 2016). Yet even among this largely privileged group, borrowing produced intense and ongoing relational work to manage it.

The *nature* of the relational work these respondents describe also suggests possible explanations for why debt seems to affect the family decisions of different groups differently. The experience of student loan debt is heavily shaped by cultural expectations around whose obligation it is to pay for higher education and/or repay student debt, and whether those perceived obligations are met or not. Borrowers' feelings about debt—its reasonableness, its manageability, its value as an investment—are tied not only to its amount relative to their own earning capacity, but to the circumstances under which they borrowed, their feelings about what

obligation their parents had to financially assist them and whether that obligation was met, their partner's relationship to the debt, and their sense of whether debt is preventing them from meeting responsibilities to their own children. Unhappiness with debt results from mismatches in expectations—feelings that obligations went unfulfilled, or disagreement about what those obligations were—as well as with actual difficulty with repayment.

Our respondents' experience of relational work around undergraduate versus graduate borrowing highlights the importance of cultural expectations. While some had parents who paid for law school, and others had parents who did not contribute to their undergraduate education, the most common expectation was that parents were obligated to help with college but not graduate school. Relational work was produced when borrowers' expectations of (undergraduate) financial assistance were not met, or when they worried they would not be able to meet them for their own children. Little work took place around law school assistance that was never expected.

We speculate that gender, race, and socioeconomic background are also likely to shape relational work around debt in ways that can help explain why it seems to have different effects on family formation for different populations. Men and women are still commonly expected to take different financial roles within the family, for example, as well as to do different kinds of emotional work around money management. This may produce different kinds of relational work and thus different family effects.

Expectations over who is obligated to pay are also likely to vary with socioeconomic background. Our lawyers, who typically came from relative privilege, most commonly expected their parents to contribute financially to their own college education, and in turn expected to contribute financially to that of their own children, in keeping with Zaloom's (2019) study of

middle- and upper-middle-class families. Relational work was produced when that contribution didn't or couldn't happen. Many also had class-specific expectations about what it meant to be financially responsible that produced a sort of existential dread around their student debt, even if it was manageable month-to-month.

Early qualitative work focused on less financially privileged undergraduate borrowers, however, suggests less stigma around student loan debt (in a population of mostly black women)⁴ and less expectation that parents should contribute to the cost of college (in a population of borrowers at two non-flagship public universities; Mazelis and Kuperberg 2019). Identifying the patterns in how student loan debt is actually *experienced* in family contexts—experience shaped not only by borrowers' financial situations but their economic expectations of family members—can help explain variation in the measurable effects of student debt on family formation.

More broadly, this research suggests we take a wider lens on how student loan borrowing is affecting family life. While difficulty repaying and delaying of marriage or childbearing are clear and important impacts of student loan borrowing, this paper suggests a whole range of interpersonal effects that must be managed through relational work, even when borrowers are repaying successfully. It suggests that borrowing is actually reshaping the experience of family life. As public debate heats up over the role of student loans in the portfolio of higher education financing, and over the question of student loan forgiveness, it becomes ever more important to examine the full range of effects of borrowing on borrowers' lives. This includes not only their progress on repayment, but the relational work required to manage such debt over the long run. While much of the debate over student loans has assumed that making regular repayments implies a lack of negative consequences, student loan debt also has real effects on subjective

⁴ Conversation with Jason Houle on research in progress with Fenaba Addo, September 2019.

experience and interpersonal relations—even for relatively privileged borrowers, and even when borrowers have the capacity to repay.

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