

EXPLORING THE PERCEIVED RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PARENT-CHILD  
SOCIALIZATION AND ADULT CHILDREN'S ROMANTIC EXPERIENCES

BY

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THESIS

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Table 1. Detailed Sample Description

Alias/ID	Age	Sex	Sexual Orientation	Relationship Status	Personal Education	Race
Sammy 015KUO	27	Female	Heterosexual	Married	Graduate degree	Asian
Jenny 016ITH	27	Female	Bisexual	Married	Bachelor's degree	White
Alvin 020VAS	37	Male	Heterosexual	Married	Graduate degree	Latino
Don 048ANE	39	Male	Heterosexual	Dating someone exclusively	Some college	White
Ann 089QUE	31	Female	Bisexual	Married	Graduate degree	White
Willa 122SON	29	Female	Heterosexual	Dating someone exclusively	Bachelor's degree	White
Jessica 191ENT	27	Female	Heterosexual	Single	Bachelor's degree	White
Steph 238AMI	32	Female	Heterosexual	Single	Graduate degree	Asian
Andrew 269AUT	31	Male	Gay	Dating someone exclusively	Bachelor's degree	White
Jay 323LOR	27	Transgender (FTM)	Heterosexual	Dating someone casually	Some college	White
Sarah 336MAL	31	Female	Heterosexual	Single	Bachelor's degree	White
Claudia 351ACH	40	Female	Heterosexual	Single	Trade/Vocational school	White
Michelle	32	Female	Heterosexual	Engaged	Trade/Vocational school	White

359ITE	Ryan	26	Male	Heterosexual	Single	Graduate degree	White
359ULT	Brittany	32	Female	Lesbian	Dating someone exclusively	Graduate degree	White
389HTY	Charlie	36	Male	Heterosexual	Married	Graduate degree	White
396SON	Claire	35	Female	Heterosexual	Single	High school diploma/GED	White
400EAU	Roger	28	Male	Bisexual	Dating someone exclusively	Bachelor's degree	Latino
445UEZ	Danielle	36	Female	Heterosexual	Married	Graduate degree	White
457IRA	Joe	39	Male	Heterosexual	Dating someone exclusively	Two-year degree	White
490ONE	Ava	25	Female	Heterosexual	Single	Bachelor's degree	Black/African-American
548NES	Jason	27	Male	Heterosexual	Married	Bachelor's degree	Asian
568MED	Kristen	33	Female	Lesbian	Married	Graduate degree	White
602NES	Brian	25	Male	Heterosexual	Single	Bachelor's degree	White
603TON	Marsha	24	Female	Heterosexual	Married	Some college	Black/African-American
634RSH	Lilly	31	Female	Heterosexual	Casually dating	Some college	White
637BOU							

Seth 674ALL	25	Male	Gay	Single	Graduate degree	White
Bill 719QUE	33	Male	Heterosexual	Married	Some college	White
Elizabeth 750LEY	36	Female	Heterosexual	Married	Associate's degree	White
Kayla 845YER	33	Female	Heterosexual /Bisexual in interview	Married	Bachelor's degree	White
Matt 856WEB	37	Male	Heterosexual	Dating someone exclusively	Bachelor's degree	White
Pat 867ARD	32	Male	Heterosexual	Married	Bachelor's degree	White
Julie 971ONG	27	Female	Heterosexual	Dating someone exclusively	Graduate degree	Asian
John 973LIE	35	Male	Heterosexual	Married	Graduate degree	Black/African-American
Jake 973RDS	25	Male	Bisexual	Causally dating	Some college	White

Total/ Mean	31. 14	57% Female	74% Heterosexual	43% Engaged or married  26% Single  31% Dating	68% Bachelor's degree or more	74% White
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Table 2. Final Code Book

Code Name	Code Description
Direct Family Influence (49)	Participants make direct connection between their romantic relationship and their family of origin
Your Beliefs about Relationship (29)	Participants talked about their relationships in general, for example, what they see it's a good or bad relationship
Family Structure (27)	Participants mentioned the marital status of their parents or structure of families of origin
Rule of Dating (21)	Participants talked about how their parents set the limits or guidelines about dating
Quality of Parents' relationship (20)	Participant gave their perceptions of the quality of parental relationship
Parenting (20)	Participants talked about how their parents offered communication and guidance to them
Parents' Thought of Your Relationship (19)	Participants talked about how parents felt about their romantic partners or the relationships
Relationship with Mom (18)	Participants talked about how the relationship was with their mom
Role modeling (15)	What behaviors participants witnessed in their parents' relationships and talked about them in the interviews
Relationship with Dad (11)	Participants talked about how the relationship was with their dad
Comparing Your Relationships to Parents' Relationship (11)	Participants described the way of their romantic relationship if it's similar or different from how they view their parent's relationships.
Culture Influence (7)	Participants talked about how cultures influence their ideas and behaviors in relationships
The Importance of Family (6)	Participants viewed their family is very important to their relationships
Infidelity (6)	Example's parents have real or imagine affairs
Gender Role Expectation (6)	Participants pointed that how men and women are supposed to behave in a relationship
Extended Family (5)	Aunts, uncles, grandparents

Different Beliefs/Values from Parents (5)	Participants talked about the differences between theirs and parents' in terms of beliefs and values among romantic relationships
Comparing Your Behaviors to Parents' (5)	Participants compared their behaviors to their parents' behaviors
Adulthood (5)	How the transitions to adulthood changed family or romantic relationships
Relationship with Whole Family (4)	Participants talked about how the relationship was with the whole family in general
Bonding with Your partner about Family (4)	Participants felt connections to their romantic partners because of family history
Parents' Romantic Relationship History (3)	Participants mentioned about their parents' romantic relationship history
Communicating with Family about Relationship (3)	Participants discussed that how they talked about their romantic relationships with their parents
Influence of Partner's Parents (2)	Participants talked about how their partners' parents affect them



## ABSTRACT

EXPLORING THE PERCEIVED RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PARENT-CHILD  
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by

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University of New Hampshire

Romantic relationship experiences are related to experiences in the family of origin such as parenting, parents' romantic history, and patterns of interaction within families. However, there is a lack of research about how adult children perceive their socialization about romantic relationships. This study used qualitative data from relationship history interviews (N= 35) to explore how adults discuss their parents' influence on their romantic relationship development. The findings suggest that the level of support, love, and affirmation they perceived from their parents in childhood was reflected in their adulthood intimate relationships. Moreover, participants viewed their parents as either good or bad role models, and they adjusted their partner choices and their behavior in relationships based on whether they wanted to be like their parents or avoid being like their parents. The findings suggest that parents' influence on romantic socialization is still relevant in adulthood.

## INTRODUCTION

The most important decisions about romantic relationships are often made during adulthood (e.g., when to marry or whether to divorce), but the foundations for healthy relationships often form during childhood. Interactions with parents and other caregivers are considered to be crucial in shaping romantic relationship development because they influence individuals' basic beliefs about relationships (Conger, Cui, Bryant, & Elder, 2000). Messages about romantic relationships are transferred to children through socialization, or the process of children observing people's behaviors in their surroundings, especially their parents, and then interpreting and internalizing those behaviors into plans for future action (Bandura, 1977). Research demonstrates that parental socialization often occurs through parents' role modeling in their own relationships (Cui, Gordon, & Wickrama, 2016) and through their parenting behaviors (Conger, Cui, Bryant, & Elder, 2000; Einav, 2014). Parents' role modeling and parenting are related to their children's level and timing of romantic involvement (Ryan, Franzetta, Schelar, & Manlove, 2009) their general interpersonal skills (e.g., conflict management; Shulman, Zlotnik, Shachar-Shapira, Connolly, & Bohr, 2012), and the quality of interactions with their romantic partners (Xia, Fosco, Lippold, & Feinberg, 2018).

Although parents' influence on their children's romantic development is supported by research, there are two important gaps in this literature. First, there is little research documenting adult children's perspectives about how their parents contributed to their socialization about romantic relationships. In previous studies, children were sometimes observed or included as reporters, but there is not research that provides descriptions of how adult children talk about their parents' influence on their romantic beliefs or behaviors. Another gap is that most research

on parental socialization about romantic relationships focuses on adolescent romantic development because this is an important time of growth in individuals' beliefs and attitudes toward romance. This gap is a problem because families of origin continue to influence family members in their adulthood as they make important life choices, including how they choose their long-term romantic partners and whether to divorce (Wolfinger, 2000). In order to address these gaps, the proposed study will focus on how adults discuss their parents' influence on their romantic relationship beliefs and experiences.

## Chapter 1

### Theoretical Perspective

Social learning theory is a foundation for exploring how adults' romantic experiences might be related to their families of origin. According to social learning theory, an individual's behavior is shaped by other people's influence (Bandura, 1977). Most behavior is learned from observing others through role modeling. By watching role models, individuals form ideas about the consequences of a new behavior, and they store that information as a guide for future behavior. Children's behaviors are particularly influenced by what they see around them within their families (Bandura, 1977). In terms of romantic experiences, children might learn or observe how to interact in romantic relationships from their parents. For example, teenagers who witness their parents' frequent relationship transitions or who experience their parents' divorces might consider marriage to be short term or internalize negative beliefs about commitment (Conger et al., 2000; Cui, & Fincham, 2010; Cui, Gordon, & Wickrama, 2016). This pattern occurs through something called vicarious learning, which involves learning by observing others' experience, seeing the consequences, and then adjusting one's behavior accordingly.

Research that is based on social learning theory suggests that adult children may make similar decisions as their parents did in their romantic relationships (Amato & DeBoer, 2001). Specifically, some scholars argue that parent-child socialization leads to the intergenerational transmission of relationship skills or behaviors. For example, Wolfinger (2000) found that there is intergenerational transmission of divorce across generations. Children that experience multiple family structure transitions (e.g. divorce, remarriage) have a greater likelihood of experiencing divorce themselves (Wolfinger, 2000; Amato & Patterson, 2017). Furthermore, Dush, Arocho,

Mernitz, and Bartholomew (2018) argued that marriageable characteristics and relationship skills are transmitted across generations. For example, if a mother has undesirable marriageable characteristics (e.g. depression) or poor relationship skills (e.g. difficulty in communication), the adult child has a greater possibility of also having these negative traits, which may affect their future intimate relationships. Seeing parents as role models or interacting with parents are both part of socialization during childhood and adolescence. It is consistent with social learning theory that some of what children observe in their parents might surface later in either their decision-making about relationships or in how they behave with their partners. By analyzing the perspectives of adults about their own socialization, the proposed study offers an important addition to the literature on parental influence on romantic relationship development.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

Previous studies suggest that parents have two main ways of influencing romantic development. First, parents are important role models for their children, so their interactions within their own romantic relationships are related to children's romantic relationship beliefs and experiences (Cui et al., 2016). Second, parents' interactions directly with their children are related to how children engage in romantic relationships during adolescence and early adulthood (Xia et al., 2018).

#### Parents as Role Models

Parents' romantic relationships set an example for children as they build beliefs and make choices about their own relationships. Children are particularly influenced by their parents' relationship transitions, as they often lead to changes in family structure for children. For example, Cui, Gordon, and Wickrama (2016) interviewed adolescents and their mothers and found that, consistent with social learning theory, adolescents' romantic involvement, romantic frequency, and attitudes about marriage, are shaped by their mother's relationship transitions (i.e., number of entries and exists of romantic relationships mothers had after target teens were born). Adult children whose mothers had frequent relationship transitions tended to have the attitude that relationships are short and that having frequent relationships is a common behavior (Cui et al., 2016). Ryan, Franzetta, Schelar, and Manlove (2009) also explored the intergenerational link between family transitions and how adult children form romantic relationships by analyzing the number, type, and timing of transitions and duration of time in various family structures. They found that young adults were more likely to be involved in early

cohabitation instead of marriage when they always lived with single mothers or they experienced two or more family structure transitions. On the contrary, people who have ever lived in a stepfamily had a greater possibility of forming an early marriage than those from both families with no formal relationship between parents and cohabiting families. Viewing parents as role models, children in single parent families or cohabiting families perceive less commitment in their parents' romantic relationships. They also have more favorable attitudes toward divorce than individuals from two-parent married families. These attitudes were associated with lower levels of commitment to their own romantic relationships (Cui, Fincham, & Durtschi, 2011; Ryan et al., 2009). Parents' relationship histories play an important role in how offspring view romantic relationships, which influence their behaviors within romantic relationships later in life.

In addition to parents' romantic transitions, the abilities and skills to handle a romantic relationship are also influenced by observing parents' behaviors. During adolescence and young adulthood, individuals develop communication and conflict management skills that are important for romantic development. Some of these skills are learned by watching parents' interactions with each other. Shulman, Zlotnik, Shachar-Shapira, Connolly, and Bohr (2012) conducted interviews with mothers (20 divorced and 20 non-divorced) and their adolescent daughters (aged 16-18) in Israel. The results show that compared to teen girls from intact families, teen girls from divorced families reported lower maturity (e.g., less ability to balance needs of self and others), less positive views of romantic relationships, and lower romantic agency (e.g., poorer skills for handling conflicts). However, teen girls from divorced families had a higher score on coherence, which showed that they were more capable of integrating negative and positive aspects of relationships than girls from intact families (Shulman et al., 2012).

When they perceive parents to have good relationships with low levels of conflict, children have better romantic relationship quality (e.g., higher romantic adjustment, strong commitment, less negative communication and less physical aggression; Rhoades, Stanley, Markman & Ragan, 2012). Whereas, children from divorced families or whose parents were never married are less likely to consider their parents to be good role models. Children in these families tend to have lower relationship adjustment, more negative communication, and more physical aggression in their romantic relationships (Rhoades et al., 2012). Regardless of family structure, interparental conflict also has an important impact on offspring's romantic relationships. Observing parents' conflict (i.e., high frequency and intensity, and low resolution) in adolescence, young adults may lack relationship efficacy (i.e. how to resolve the conflict), which may relate to higher levels of conflict and lower relationship quality (e.g. satisfaction and happiness) in their romantic relationships (Cui, Fincham, & Pasley, 2008). Consistent with social learning theory, people are socialized by seeing how parents deal with their romantic relationships or marriages. The transmission of romantic skills and behaviors occurs across generations, so that the family of origin influences the offspring's romantic relationships.

### **Parenting and Parent-child Relationships**

Based on social learning theory, parents are particularly important socializing agents because they help children form their values and beliefs about how they see their future romantic relationships (Bandura, 1977). Parents' interactions with their children also set expectations for children about what they can expect from relationships with others (Einav, 2014). Several studies have shown that romantic outcomes for adolescents and young adults can be explained by the interactions and relationships within the family of origin, such as closeness between parents and children (Cui et al., 2016), parental support, parenting supervision (Tyrell, Wheeler, Gonzales,



Dumka, & Millsap, 2016; Valle & Tillman, 2014), and family conflict (Heifetz, Connolly, Pepler, & Craig, 2010; Tyrell et al., 2016). For instance, having stable and connected relationships with family in adolescence predicts young adults' romantic relationship quality. When there is discord in the parent-child relationship young adults are more likely to have negative behaviors or lower quality within their romantic relationships (Crockett & Randall, 2006; Cui & Fincham, 2010).

Offspring establish many of their social skills by interacting with their parents. For instance, prior research suggests that having better parental supports, adolescents are more likely to have high quality romantic relationships (i.e., intimacy and attachment, trust, communication, and low alienation). Having parents' positive guidance and support might show them how to form positive attachments with their romantic partners (e.g., turning to their partners for advice and support; Tyrell et al., 2016). Research also shows that adolescents' interactions with parents and general family climate is associated with the development of positive romantic relationship functioning in young adulthood (Xia et al., 2018). Specifically, experiencing a positive family climate (i.e. higher cohesion and organization, lower conflict) during adolescence, was related to better problem-solving strategies with romantic partners (Xia et al., 2018). In terms of interpersonal skills, positive engagement with parents (e.g., showing love and affection toward parents) may enhance the likelihood that young adults feel positive in their romantic relationships (i.e., connected, loving, and trusting). When children developed the ability to express love and emotions with their parents during adolescence, they were more likely to have positive engagement in their adulthood romantic relationship as well (Xia et al., 2018). Conger Cui, Bryant, and Elder (2000) used observations of participants' interactions with their families and partners to understand if interactional behaviors within the family of origin could predict

interpersonal skills and romantic competency (i.e., high warmth-supportiveness and low hostility-coercion) in early adulthood romantic relationships. They found that nurturant-involved parenting (i.e., high warmth, low hostility, positive monitoring, and consistency) during adolescence predicted how young adults behaved toward their romantic partners at the age of twenty (i.e., high warmth and support, low hostility).

Similarly, interactions and closeness between parents and children may predict adult children's beliefs about future romantic relationships. When parents were supportive of their children, young adults have been shown to demonstrate more positive behaviors with their partners, such as better coherence (e.g., better integration of the good and bad in relationships; Einav, 2014) and higher quality romantic involvement (e.g. longer and more stable relationships; Conger et al., 2000). Positive parenting is also related to greater maturity (e.g. greater ability to balance needs of self and others), higher romantic agency (e.g., better skills to deal with conflicts) and higher levels of sexual intimacy (e.g., greater possibility of sexual intercourse; Shulman et al., 2012). Xia et al., (2018) also found that adolescents who experienced parenting characterized by less harsh and inconsistent discipline and more inductive reasoning, had better problem-solving strategies and experienced less violence in their romantic relationships. These studies suggest that using effective parenting practices may socialize children to interact more effectively in romantic relationships, particularly in terms of conflict management. When children perceived a lack of parent-child closeness or low levels of caring and nurturing, they had moderately high expectations of their future intimate relationships. Einav (2014) proposed that children in these situations might detach themselves from the family of origin, and form more positive expectations of their future partnerships. Moreover, drawing on the attachment perspective, negative childhood experiences (e.g., insecurity, harsh parenting, little involvement)

has a direct influence on adults' negative relationship attachment. The more insecurity with parents, the less attachment may grow with their partners, which may relate to later, less positive interactions with their romantic partners (Dinero, Conger, & Shaver, 2008; McCarthy, & Maughan, 2010). Together, these studies suggest that parenting quality and offspring's perceptions of their relationship with their parents have a strong influence on an adult child's future intimate relationships.

### **Present Study**

Previous research shows that romantic relationship experiences in offspring are related to familial factors such as parenting, parents' romantic history, and patterns of interaction within families. However, there is a lack of research about how adult children perceive their socialization about romantic relationships. This is a particularly important gap to address because most individuals make important romantic decisions as adults in their late twenties or early thirties (e.g., the average age at first marriage for women is 27.7 in U.S.; U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). In the proposed study, I will use qualitative data from relationship history interviews to answer the following research question: In the context of reporting their romantic relationship histories, how do adults discuss their parents' influence on their romantic relationship development?

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methods**

The data for this study come from the Relationship Histories Study (RHS) conducted by my advisor, Tyler Jamison. The study was a mixed methods design including in-depth interviews and relationship ratings (i.e., self-reported measures of emotional intimacy, sexual intimacy, commitment, consolidation, and quality for each relationship discussed in the interview). The present study will use only data from the in-depth interviews. Participants were recruited by posting flyers in the community (e.g., coffee shops and laundromats) and sharing electronic advertisements on social media sites. Eligibility for the study included being between 25 and 40 years old and having had at least one romantic partner. The RHS study had IRB approval and the first part of the interview involved careful review of the consent form. Participants (N=35) were asked to complete questions about basic demographic information (e.g., race, age, sexual orientation, education) in a survey and a 1-2 hour in-depth interview. The interview procedure began with creating a family genogram (i.e., a diagram of the family). Individuals reported on their parents or other adults who raised them, siblings, and spouses or children of their own when applicable. Although the study was not explicitly about the family of origin, creating a genogram provided a framework for participants to discuss their families.

After creating a genogram, interviewers and participants co-created a timeline of every romantic relationship the participant was involved in beginning in adolescence and ending at the present. The interview technique was semi-structured, which is consistent with grounded theory interviewing techniques. As each relationship was added to the timeline, the participant was asked, "What do you remember about this person?" Based on the participants' responses, the

interviewer clarified how long the relationship lasted and asked probing questions about the relationship's development, positives, challenges, and dissolution. Because of the open-ended nature of the interviews, participants were not all asked the same questions. The goal of the interviews was to gather as much information as possible about how the individual remembered their romantic experiences with their romantic partners. See Appendix A for the full interview protocol. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. All names mentioned in this study are pseudonyms.

### **Sample**

The sample included 20 women (57%), 14 men (43%), and one transgender man ranging in age from 24-40 years old ( $M = 31$  years). The majority of participants reported their sexual orientation as heterosexual ( $n = 26$ ), while the remaining participants identified as bisexual ( $n = 5$ ), or gay/lesbian ( $n = 4$ ). In terms of race, the sample included people who identified as White ( $n=26$ ), Asian ( $n=4$ ), African American ( $n=3$ ) and Latinx ( $n=2$ ). Twenty-four participants had a bachelor's degree or more; the other 11 individuals had a high school degree, some college, associate' degree, or vocational training. Participants reported their current relationship status as single ( $n = 9$ ), casually dating ( $n = 3$ ), exclusively dating ( $n = 8$ ), engaged ( $n = 1$ ), or married ( $n = 14$ ). See Table 1 for a detailed sample description.

### **Data Analysis**

Assisted by MAXQDA software, I analyzed the data in this study using Applied Thematic Analysis (ATA) techniques (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). Establishing the boundaries of the analysis was my first step in the analysis. Referring to the concept of "bounding the analysis" in ATA (Guest et al., 2012; p. 40-44 ), it is essential to decide what data are relevant for answering the current research question. In this study, the relationship history

interviews contain information that is not relevant to my study. To capture the contents, factors, and concepts related to my research question, I searched for keywords (i.e., family, mother, mom, father, dad, marriage, parent) in each interview transcript. The next step was coding by following those key words to identify relevant segments of the text. In this phase, I assigned code labels to relevant text and wrote a short description to indicate the meaning of each code as it was created. For example, when participants made direct connections between their romantic relationships and their families of origin (e.g., “I definitely think – this is very obvious – my family relationships have influenced the way that I behaved throughout my own relationship history”), I coded it as “direct family influence.” I repeated this open coding process through all transcripts, adding codes as new ideas were identified in the data and using existing codes to organize data that fit together under the same code.

In order to organize the codes, after coding 7-10 interviews, I transferred codes that were created in MAXQDA into a codebook (i.e., a Microsoft word document) with code labels and descriptions (see Table 2 for the final code book). This process allowed me to stop and think about how each code relates to my research question and how the codes relate to each other. I updated the code book after coding every 7-10 interviews by removing irrelevant codes and refining codes that are unclear. For instance, when participants talked about how their family have influenced on their view of marriage or relationship, I initially coded it as “the view of relationship.” Later, I refined the code to be, “your beliefs about relationships” and gave it a clearer definition, “participants talked about their relationships in general, for example, what they see as a good or bad relationship.” When all the coding was done, and the codebook was created, I identified the codes with the most data support and create a detailed memo with full sentences explaining each initial finding and quotes in bullet points underneath. In this process, I

combined and organized similar ideas and organized them into major themes. For example, I identified two main findings that represented much of the data about romantic socialization, parenting, and parents as role models. I organized other codes under those two broad categories. For example, quotes about infidelity were organized under parents as a role model. Through this process, I redistributed or eliminated quotes in order to focus on the themes that had most robust support (i.e., several quotes from several different people). The final process was reducing statements down to just those best supported and most relevant to the research question before drafting the results and forming a narrative to answer my research question.

## Chapter 4

### Results

#### Parenting

Because they are important socializing agents, the way parents interact with children has a major influence on romantic relationship development for individuals (Bandura, 1977). Specifically, the levels of parental warmth, monitoring, and hostility lay a foundation for future romantic relationships (Conger et al., 2000). In the relationship histories data, I identified three themes about how parenting is related to romantic relationship experiences for adults (i.e., parental support, love and affirmation, and advice or direct messages about relationships). The lessons participants learned from their interactions with their parents had an indirect relationship on their romantic lives. For example, when parents were not present or were unreliable, participants looked for stable relationships with their romantic partners. Parents also had more direct influences on their children's love lives based on the messages they communicated about dating, marriage, and healthy relationships.

**Parental support.** During childhood and adolescence, parents are an important source of emotional and instrumental support. For participants in this study, the level of parental support influenced adult children's views and behavior in their romantic relationships. For example, when parents were not present or involved, participants became more attached to their romantic partners and their partners' families. This was especially true during adolescence, when the need for parental support is particularly important. For example, when Jessica grew up, her mom spent most of her time away from home, so Jessica was alone a lot. She moved out of her mother's home when she was 16 years old and lived with a friend's family. Because of this, Jessica



became very attached with her first serious boyfriend and his family. She said, “I really valued that relationship. He stayed at my house because my mom was never around,” Her boyfriend’s parents served as parental figures for her, which was one of the qualities that attracted her to her partner.

He’s really funny and easy-going. He had a nice smile. I don’t know. And a good family.

That’s about, that’s something really important to me because I didn’t have the best family growing up, so it’s nice to have my partner have one. (191ENT)

Jessica even tried harder to maintain this relationship because she valued the support she received from his parents.

I think it was more my relationship with his parents because I felt like I had more parental figure in my life and I felt like trying harder. (...) His mom especially was always asking about, like, how I was doing in school and, like, she took me prom dress shopping because she didn’t have any daughters. And she, like, she sent me to Europe my senior year. And after we had broken up, actually. Um, just because, I don’t know, she was a mom to me, I guess. (323LOR)

Jessica pointed out that gaining support from her partner’s parents made her feel cared about and like someone was looking out for her. Jay also described that he did not feel like his mother took care of him very well because she was attending to his brother, who was disabled. Jay lived most of the time with his grandmother, but ultimately did not feel close to his family. He explained how this situation related to decisions he made in his love life, “Um, well I think that I had always looked at settling down sooner rather than later, um, and I think it had to do with like having a really crappy upbringing with my family” (323LOR). As adults reflecting back on their early relationships, these participants explained that having parents who were uninvolved or unsupportive encouraged them to seek a sense of security and connection from their romantic partners.

Alternatively, having strong parental support sometimes helped individuals avoid poor relationship choices or outcomes. Ava was in a relationship with the same man from ages 16 to 25. Reflecting back on that experience, she thinks they would have moved in and had children together without her mom's support for her to get an education.

I think maybe it kind of goes back to my mom. She's always been so supportive of me where a lot of my cousins and family, they've had to get out of their parents' house at a young age. I haven't. I've always had her support. (...) I think that's something that really separates me, and I'm thankful for that, because I feel like if she hadn't done that, I would probably be trying to make the best out of the situation with Harold. I said we would have moved in way sooner together. I feel like it would have been kind of forced for me to find somewhere to live and it probably would have been with him way sooner, and we probably would have had children. (548NES)

Ava knew that she could always live with her mother and have a place to come home to, which she felt shaped her decisions about her high school boyfriend.

Having parents who were overly involved or controlling also had consequences for adults' romantic experiences. Don described his mother as a, "dominating, aggressive, over the top woman." He said, "I always felt like I was really out of control of my life. Like, my mom was so in control of what happened and everything that I did and everything I could do." He went on to explain that sometimes he felt out of control in his life, and he found stability in a certain kind of romantic pairing.

There's definitely times in my life where I've been kind of a mess, like, emotionally and professionally and everything else, and then I've entered a relationship with someone that is more, you know, dominant-submissive, and in through that interaction with that person, I'm able to get a handle on myself. (048ANE)

Don's preference dominant-submissive relationships was uncommon, but the connection he made between his mother's control and what he looked for in his romantic life is similar to the experiences of other participants. Just like Don, Lily had a very controlling parent. Her family maintained traditional gender roles, so her dad was dominant in the house.

My childhood was so controlled...That once I had a little bit of freedom, it blew up. (...) You can't keep someone caged up and have them...expect them to know, you know, common sense and things like that. It doesn't happen. When you're locked in a house and you come home from school and you study for four hours, cook dinner, you can't even watch TV or use the computer, all you can do is read and study, you don't really know how to behave socially. (048ANE)

Instead of looking for a partner who was less controlling, Lily found that she felt more comfortable with a dominant partner similar to her father. She said,

My dad rules the roost. (...) Like, my family is a very old like farm family, so...The men are the king, like, that's just how it is. Even if you don't agree, too bad. (...) When I got older in my relationships, I tried...it tried to change, just because culture's different now and it's not that way anymore, but I always seem to go back to what I'm comfortable with and that's being the one that cooks and cleans and serves and provides household and then... The men I always end up dating are the men who are the breadwinner and the alpha male. They have to be in control. (637BOU)

Don looked for partners that were different from his mother and Lilly sought partners that resembled her father, but what both stories show is the connection between parents' characteristics and adults' partner choices. I found that whether they experienced low parental support or parents that were too involved, participants gave examples how their parents' presence affected their love lives. However, most participants with adequate parental support did not mention it as an important part of their romantic lives. Ava's situation stood out because people around her were the experiencing much lower parental support than she was. At either extreme of parental support (i.e., too low or too high) there seems to be consequences for romantic relationships, especially during adolescence.

**Love and affirmation.** Providing instrumental support, such as taking care of children and offering them a safe home is one part of parenting. However, children also need to feel loved and cared for in order to have all of their emotional needs met. Therefore, when participants felt a lack of love or affirmation from their parents, they tended to look for attention, approval, and acceptance from their romantic partners. For example, Claire explained that demonstrations of

love were not common in her family growing up. After her relationship with her husband ended, she reflected on how the lack of affection in her childhood shaped her romantic experiences.

I'm in the middle of five kids, we were never told that, 'I love you'. I grew up with that being normal, nobody ever saying 'I love you', nobody ever being affectionate. You know what I mean? (...) I just really, I needed attention. I sort of craved a certain kind of attention, um, and I usually would get it in a negative way. (...) I realized with [my ex-husband], I was constantly seeking his approval, but it wasn't just with [him]. That was why I compromised myself. I just wanted certain approval. And I was willing to lose myself in order to get it. (400EAU)

Ann explained that even though her parents were loving, they were harsh in other ways that led her to seek affirmation from her romantic partners. She said:

My dad was really hard on me. I found out later from my mom is that he believed that it was his job to tell me everything that anybody else was going to think about me negatively. So, we had a lot of conversations about my weight and about my acne. And, like, I just couldn't ever live up to... I was constantly trying to find, like, that approval somewhere. (089QUE)

She explained the consequences this had for her dating life, "And so that's why if [a person] gave me the time of day, like, I was probably going to date you and feel like I was in love with you. Because I got that [approval] somewhere, you know." Because she dated everyone that showed an interest in her, Ann was almost never single from the time she was a teenager until she met her husband. It took her a long time to discover what she wanted in a romantic partner rather than just dating everyone who asked her out.

Brittany explained she spent a lot of her childhood feeling like an "ugly duckling." "My parents aren't very mushy. My parents were never, like, 'I love you. You're pretty. You're beautiful'. (...) That wasn't really part of my growing up." The lack of confirmation that she was loveable and beautiful made her unsure about romantic relationships. She said:

For a while, I think I had this mentality where I was, like, "Oh, I'm never going to be with anybody. I like, no one was ever going to meet my expectations." (...) And if anything, I would be attracted to people and I was like, "Well, they're never going to like me." That hope was never even there. I'm just like, "It's just never going to happen. (389HTY)

Especially during adolescence, gaining affirmation from parents is important. Brittany was not getting love and affirmation while she was young, which made her less confident about finding a romantic partner. Andrew also looked for approval from romantic partners, but for different reasons. His parents rejected him when he came out as gay, so he looked for romantic partners to love and accept him. His first serious relationship became abusive, but he stayed with his partner for two years. He explained how he thought his relationship with his mother contributed to staying for so long.

I think that my need to have love and acceptance from my mother and always having to take care of her, I kind of ended up doing the same thing with [my partner], where I didn't care how he was treating me as long as I felt attention, as long as I felt like, I don't know, I was cared for even if I wasn't being cared for. I don't know. I did a lot of convincing myself that things were not as bad as they were because I would rather be with someone than be alone. (269AUT)

Andrew's story suggests that some people become involved in unhealthy relationships when they are looking for substitutes of familial love and approval.

**Advice or direct messages.** Participants explained the messages their parents gave them about what to do or what not to do in romantic relationships. When participants were adolescents, parents also set up rules for dating that communicated values about romantic relationships. For example, Ava was not allowed to date until she was 16 years old. Once she got into a relationship after 16, she stayed with the same person for a long time, even though she saw a lot of problems with the relationship. She said:

For example with my dad, like it was like a rule like you can't talk to any boys, that you can't date or anything, until you get, sixteen years old, and that's why when I got sixteen, I was in that relationship for so long probably. I think that has a lot to do with that. And then, you know, with my mom, you know, that rule, she was, you know, hoping I would be, you know, at least talking to boys, interacting with boys, just so I don't...this was her worst fear, that I would be stuck in a relationship so long, you know, due to what my dad's rule was. (548NES)

Because of her father's rule, Ava had limited experience with dating earlier in adolescence. She noticed that this rule made her be afraid to talk to boys and she did not know how to interact with them. Therefore, once Ava was in a relationship, she stayed because it felt safe and comfortable. Parents' rules about dating sometimes seemed to guide big decisions when participants were in later adolescence or young adulthood. Claudia explained that since moving in with her boyfriend created conflict with her family, so she decided to get married.

I grew up, like, [to] live in sin was a taboo thing and you don't do that. And so my family, well, my mother ostracized me and wouldn't let my [younger] brothers speak to me because I was living in sin. So I guess I had some guilt about that, too, and sort of felt that, I love this person and I didn't want to end the relationship or separate, like, physically. So in my mind the only alternative was to get married, which he wasn't keen on at first, which, you know, I never would have done now. (351ACH)

Kristen had a similar situation. When she came out to her family as a lesbian, her mother told her she would never get married and have children. She found herself trying to prove that her first serious relationship with a woman was legitimate by talking about marriage, even though she felt too young at the time.

I think [my girlfriend] got really serious about me (...) she was like, 'Let's get married. I'm ready. Let's commit.' And I was like, 'Whoa, I'm young. I don't want to do that yet'. But I also had this, like, pressure because of my mom. She was like, if you're a lesbian, you're going to be promiscuous and whatever. And then here I was living this life where I was living that way. And I was like, shoot, I can't tell my mom what I'm doing. So I felt, like, that pressure from [my girlfriend] and from my mom. It's like, okay, you're right. And I told my mom we're going to get married. (602NES)

Not all participants got messages about the need to get married and settle down. Brittney described how her dad passed down his view of marriage and encouraged her to focus on other priorities in her life first. "My dad raised me, education before anybody. Like, education was always number one. It was never, like, 'You need to get married.' Like, from my parents' perspective relationships were the last thing on earth that I needed to ever pursue or focus on." (389HTY)

Once participants became adults, their parents also acted as friends or mentors. In these roles, they gave advice or shared their own experiences about romantic relationships with their children. For example, Kayla's mom explained what she saw as the important things within a relationship and helped Kayla gain a new perspective about the problems she was having with her partner, whom she later married. Kayla said:

I just told my mom that, there's these, like, little naggy things where we don't get along. And my mom sort of laughed about that and she told me about some annoying things that my dad did. My dad is, like, sort of the opposite of us in that he was, like, so extremely frugal he would do things like have my mom write down the mileage of every trip that she went and weird things like that so he could do all the taxes or something. And she said it doesn't, you don't have to, like, share your values exactly but you have to be able to compromise, and that's what matters. (845YER)

Joe also turned to his mom when he had difficulty deciding whether to move forward into marriage with his partner. He said:

My only psychiatrist that I have on this subject is my mother. (...) I was calling her every day and talking to her every single day and just expressing to her that I'm feeling this kind of pressure where I love Liza. I'm working every day to make our relationship. I explained to her the differences in how different we are. Sometimes I wonder how I lasted so long with somebody so different. And she always told me just don't be pressured into it. Don't do it because you feel like you have to. (490ONE)

Joe's mom was a mentor to guide him and give him advice about his relationship. This support really helped Joe to feel like he should not feel obligated to get married. Together these findings suggest that the parent-child relationship is an important source of support as children learn how to be romantic partners. Without parents' presence and support, children sought connection in their intimate relationship. Similarly, lacking love and affirmation from parents guided children to look for acceptance within their love relationships. Moreover, some parents shared their experiences about love with their children or set up some rules to protect their children. Whether children followed their advice and rules or not, parents' messages had an influence on children's decision-making in their romantic relationships.

## Role Modeling

Parents' romantic relationships are an important example for children as they learn about marriage, conflict, or relationships in general from observing their parents. In this study, I identified three themes related to parents as role models for romantic involvement (i.e., desire to be like their parents, avoiding being like their parents, and forming general beliefs and values about relationships). Some of these themes highlight the lessons participants learned from parents' mistakes or how they used their parents' good examples in their own lives. The lessons they learned guided whether they wanted to be like their parents or not. For instance, observing positive interactions between parents made adult children want to have similar relationships with their partners. However, marital conflict or infidelity in their parents' relationships made participants want to avoid taking the same path as their parents. Aside from these more direct influences, some participants elaborated on how their parents' relationships influenced their general beliefs about romantic relationships.

**Be like my parents.** When parents had happy and stable romantic relationships, or they overcame major challenges to stay together, adult children saw their parents as good examples. In their interviews, they expressed a desire to be like their parents and have similar relationships or marriages to their parents. Pat explained that he witnessed his parents working on their marriage through a separation. This gave Pat the sense that staying together is important, and he approached his own marriage with an attitude that no matter what, he would make it work.

I don't remember having any one conversation with my dad or my mom about this. No, I do remember my mom saying you got to treat women with respect. I remember that. But when I was in high school, when my parents went through that spat where they almost got divorced, I remember commitment was something that, or not commitment but staying together for the sake of the family was a big piece. So I think that staying together was something that I learned from that as well. So more actions rather than words. (867ARD)

For Pat, staying together is the value he learned from his parents by watching their actions. His



parents did not actually tell them what to do in a relationship or give him advice about marriage. However, by observing them, those messages were conveyed through their actions. Another participant, Charlie, was also commitment-oriented but for different reasons. His parents were in a stable, long-term marriage, and he considered this to be the reason he often pursued long-term relationships rather than casual relationships.

My parents have been married for a really long time. I always found myself to be a long-term relationship-type of a person. More, probably more, uh, unwilling to, like, let a relationship just dissipate for small reasons and kind of, like, focused on trying to make things work. (396SON)

Charlie also noted that he tends to be willing to work on relationships rather than letting them go too easily. He explained that this might be related to a characteristic he shares with his father. He said, “So I feel much more independent and headstrong than my father, but I just kind of still have that, like, ‘Let’s forge ahead here, let’s just, like, let’s fix whatever is wrong.’”

Charlie inherited some good traits from his father and that influenced him to work hard on his relationships. For Pat and Charlie, observing their parents working through problems and staying together was influential, but parents also communicated positive messages through their daily interactions. Elizabeth (750LEY) explained that the good communication she saw between her parents was a template she used in her own marriage. “My parents [have] been married almost 40 years. And they’re both very healthy and open communicators. Uh, they were separated for a while when I was four, but they have always been open about the fact that marriage is work.”

Even though they had some struggles, her parents’ interactions shaped her romantic relationships in good ways, she said,

I got a good start with their example because they definitely don’t have a perfect relationship. They have serious struggles. I know what their issues are. (...) I’m also very well aware that they love each other very, very much and that’s why they’re willing to, they’ve been putting in this work. I really think the reason I have a good relationship

history and the healthy relationships that I do is because I have this excellent example. (750LEY)

She especially appreciated that her parents set a good example of a healthy marriage when she met her husband, whose parents were not good role models. Because he did not have examples of positive communication, she learned to be patient.

I was a lot more patient going forward with that, because I realized some people just aren't used to having the example of my parents who were both so open and healthy and communicative. Was a great example for me, but I had to realize that [not] everyone had that. (705LEY)

Having parents who stayed together and seemed happy provided a good example for participants' own relationships, but even divorced parents could be good role models. Brian explained what he learned because his parents stayed peaceful and friendly toward each other even though they got divorced. He said:

I'm always really hopeful that [my relationships] will work out and there'll be peace. And I think that's totally a response to my parents, them getting divorced but still being able to be peaceful. They were clearly very important to each other at one point in their lives. And we are a product of our past, not to say that we are entirely defined by it, but we are a byproduct of it. So, I think that was something that really stuck with me. No matter what, you can find peace in a situation because there's no need for bad blood. (603TON)

Positive parental interactions set a good example for children, but even the challenges of marriage showed that people need to work it through if they want to stay together. Also, parents showed their children how to maintain their relationships through good communication. Even when the outcome of marriage was not the best (e.g. divorce), if parents had a friendly relationship, children still viewed them as a good example.

**Don't be like my parents.** Participants also explained how negative parental interactions (e.g., fighting or infidelity) affected their families and how it influenced their view of relationships. Children who viewed their parents as having problematic interactions were determined to do things differently in their own relationships. In order to have different romantic

relationships, they avoided behaviors they thought contributed to a negative dynamic or chose partners who had opposite traits from their parents.

When participants were aware of issues with infidelity in their parents' relationships, adult children reported feeling insecure, being fearful about commitment, and struggling with trust in their romantic relationships. In these situations, participants explained why they do not want to be like their parents. For example, Sammy found out when she was a teenager that her father had a second wife and more children in another country. This betrayal of her mother was related to her own approach to romantic relationships. In her first serious relationship, her parents' situation surfaced as jealousy and conflict:

So [my boyfriend] knew about my family situation. I feel like in the beginning of our relationship, I did things on purpose to push his buttons, and I do remember telling him that I was afraid I was going to be like my dad, to be someone who can't be faithful, which is a horrible thing to say to somebody. So we just had a lot of jealous feelings, I guess. So I didn't want to give up going out, flirting, dancing. He felt like these are things that would attract other guys to me. I just, it was just a lot of fighting that way. (015KUO)

As she got older and gained more relationship experiences, she became focused on finding a partner that she felt she could trust. When she found someone that made her feel secure, she got married, even though she was young.

My family relationships have influenced the way that I behaved throughout my own relationship history, and which is why I find so much comfort and security in my current relationship. One of my biggest fears is to have that security broken. (...) And so I feel like I, if [my husband] betrayed me, it'd be extremely hard for me to ever trust or open up to anybody ever again. So I feel like, if things like that ever happened, he better keep it to himself. (015KUO)

Alvin's experience is similar. He explained how he felt betrayed when he found out about the affair in his parents' marriage. He realized he did not want to have that feeling again, so he was focused on finding a romantic partner he could trust. He said:

Well, because of the things I saw with my parents, because there was an affair involved and I was pretty much a front-row witness to that, I felt betrayed when I was a kid. I was

13 years old and I was trying to comprehend what was going on in front of me. But I saw that and I said, well, that's, I don't want to ever feel this way again. I don't want to feel betrayed. I want to be able to trust the other person. So that's how I gauged my relationships after that happened. I said, okay, well, I want to find somebody I can trust and not have to worry about. (020VAS)

Participants described that problems in their parents' relationships, such as conflict, yelling, or abusive behaviors, also had a big impact on their romantic relationships. They were aware of how their behavior compared to their parents' behavior and whether they were involved in similar relationships to their parents. The abusive relationship between Alvin's parents set up a negative model that he did not want to repeat in his life. He said:

I think, because, as I mentioned before, the relationship with my parents, my mom and dad, whew, there was always constant yelling and there was a lot of physical abuse. (...) So I saw this. And until that point and beyond I said I don't want that. I want the total opposite of that. I want to trust. I understand there's always going to be yelling to some degree. I don't want, you know, the blatant yelling and trying to tear the other person down. And I sure as hell don't want the physical abuse. (020VAS)

Jason was focused on being a kind partner because he witnessed his stepdad treating his mother badly. "My dad, stepdad, he was a complete a-hole to my mom, not very nice person. And my mom in turn took it out on me. So I definitely learned just to be a nicer person." (568MED) After he got married, his childhood experiences related to how he handled conflict with his wife. He said:

My [step]dad, he would put his hands on my mom and things like that, and growing up I saw that. And so now that I'm married or whatever, I realize that when my wife and I get into an argument or fight, I get angry and fight but I become very aware of how I'm acting and my inflection, and I realize I'm acting like my [step]dad right now. And there've been a couple of times where there'll be something on the counter and I'll throw it on the ground because I'm so angry, and that's something my mom would do. And so a couple weeks ago, or a month and a half ago, my wife and I got into a fight over something, something really dumb, like pizza, and I remember we were just yelling at each other and I caught myself and so I just went and sat at the dinner table and just, like, just to decompress and, okay, let's not even put ourselves in that situation. That's not necessary. There's no reason to ever get that angry. (...) Yeah, I really try to be aware of things like that just because I know what it does and I know how, what it felt like for me. (568MED)

His childhood experience influenced Jason when he got angry. His first reaction was to lose his temper with his wife. However, Jason was very aware of being like his stepdad, so he developed strategies for helping him to calm down during conflicts. Claudia also observed negative conflict between her parents, but she had managed to avoid repeating their mistakes. She noticed the roles both her mother and father played in making conflict worse, and she tried not to be like either of them. She said:

The only weapon my dad had was to say something really nasty to my mother because she would come after him physically and then if he did anything, you know, it was like, she would, 'Oh, you're abusing me', and she would just really set up dynamics to cause people to react in the way that they did, which was negative. And they're responsible for that. But it's just like, she's always, like, she doesn't get how her behavior is causing it to happen. So therefore, I'm super aware of [acting like my parents]. (351ACH)

Some participants worked to avoid the behavioral patterns of their parents by choosing partners that were different from their parents. Coming from a high-conflict family, Claudia expected she would end up in a relationship similar to her parents. To avoid this, she chose a partner who did not engage in open conflict with her. She said:

I remember thinking that I had always expected to be in a relationship where I was treated horribly and maybe abused, and so the fact that he never yelled at me, he never argued with me, that we cohabitated and got along well together, that I did okay. Um, but in hindsight, you know, looking back, it was completely not satisfying. Um, there was no emotional, um, connect-, there was no unity. There was no, like, "let's do this together." It was all, alright, come on. I got to pull you along with me. And it was just, it was work, but it wasn't a conflicting progression. It wasn't like there was a lot of conflict so I, I didn't realize that I was enabling this dynamic to happen. (351ACH)

Claudia avoided some of the negative conflict patterns she saw from her parents, but after many years she concluded that she also had little connection with her partner. Alvin was also attracted to partners who were very different from his parents. His negative experiences during childhood and early romantic experiences helped him identify what kind of personality he wanted in a long-term partner.

Yeah, [my wife] in many ways was very 180 degrees in the positive direction compared to a lot of the previous relationships that I had. For example, she's always been responsible, financially responsible. (...) My mom, that's a lot of problems with my parents, all the fighting and stuff came from my mom being financially irresponsible, my dad and mom. So when I ended up with Laura, that kind of came back to me and I said, ugh, I can't be having this. But with my wife, I didn't have to worry about it. (020VAS)

However, other participants who didn't want relationships like their parents ended up having no role models and struggled to know what was normal in a romantic relationship. For Danielle, she did not want to be like her mom, but she did not know how to do things differently. She said,

It's been difficult. I think the fact that my mom never really had any successful relationships. So for me, sort of constantly questioning, like, is this normal in a marriage? Is this not normal in a marriage? (...) [My husband and I] keep having the same arguments over and over and over again. I would say the culture of me living in a single-parent family and then also and sort of not knowing. Like, all I know is what not to do, you know. I just don't know exactly what to do. (457IRA)

Most negative parental interactions that happened during participants' childhood had a strong impact on how children' approached their own relationships. The feeling of betrayal from parents' infidelity affected their sense of trust and witnessing their parents' negative conflict resolution made it more difficult for them to establish positive conflict resolution in their relationships. They wanted to avoid being like their parents, which required them to be aware of how their behavior compared to their parents and then correct it by choosing different kinds of partners or interacting with their partners in healthier ways.

**General beliefs and values about relationships.** Witnessing parents' relationships or marriages, participants developed a set of general beliefs and values about how to form a romantic relationship and the attitudes they should apply within a relationship. They did not say they wanted to be like their parents or not – instead they explained how their parents shaped what they think about romantic relationships. For example, Ryan's parents were each married several times during his childhood. Because of these transitions in his family, Ryan assumed that

most relationships ultimately end. He did not think he would get married or stay in a long-term relationship.

I've seen a lot of different relationships break up, so that's the norm for me, is not staying together, I guess, is how, is how that's played out to me. It's not strange to me that people get divorced or they break up or don't have lasting relationships. To me, that's the outlier is the, it's the exception to stay together. I don't think I'll ever be married with anyone for a long time. If I get married. (359ULT)

Witnessing many relationships end, Ryan did not see himself staying in a long-term relationship himself. He felt that his parents' relationships were often unhappy, so they ended. Ryan built up the value that if he is not happy in a relationship, he should end it. He said:

It kind of goes back to seeing so many dysfunctional relationships from my parents. I mean, that's how I grew up. And you see, too, where people say, 'Well, we've been together so many years,' but they're arguing, and you know that they're unhappy. And why are they staying married? (...) So having that mentality where I'm always going to be okay with peace-ing out. If it's not working, it's not working. (...) That's the attitude I've adopted when relationships go bad. (359ULT)

However, Ryan did not always have this perspective. After he saw his parents' relationship fail, he wanted to make his own relationships work. He said:

I had a very different opinion on everything before, like, 2008. I had a couple very serious girlfriends that were the complete opposite of what I envisioned relationships as now. Those are all, um, very much no-end, foreseeable end in the future. This could be, you know, going for a while and very much monogamous. And after a certain point, it was very, very different. (359ULT)

After some of his own long-term relationships failed, Ryan shifted to his current belief that relationships generally do not last. He chose to be in casual relationships afterward and does not want to look to become involved in serious relationships. He said,

I mean, I do get into relationships. Um, but they're very, I guess, non-serious. Serious but not serious, if makes no sense. It probably doesn't. Um, I just don't, they always have an ending, I guess. I just expect that they're going to end one day. I don't know when it's going to be. It might be three months. It might be a year. It might be, maybe two years if things were going well. But it would just be kind of a casual, well, I guess, it would have to be some type of serious relationship if it was going to be for a while. (359ULT)

Ryan's parents were examples for him about how romantic relationships work. He witnessed unhappy and failed relationships from his parents, so he decided to make his own relationships work. After several relationships broke up, he adopted his parents' approach that relationships generally end, so it makes sense to keep things casual.

In contrast, when children viewed their parents as good models, some of their values were passed down to children. For example, from observing his parents' long-term marriage Roger adopted the attitude that once you're married, you stay together. He said:

And my parents weren't always the best together, (...) [but] it was like, you stay together. Some of that is like them being Catholic, and some of it is being Mexican American, but whatever it is, they're still together. To me it's like, yeah, you get married. You stay together. Like, in as many ways as I'm like progressive and shit, I still think about marriage as like you stay together and it's for life. (445UEZ)

Ava had a similar attitude to Ryan because her parents showed her that you don't have to force yourself to be in a relationship if it is not working well for you. She carried this value, but her long-term partner had a very different set of beliefs about relationships. His family believed that you should marry your high school sweetheart and stay with just one person. Ava was with this partner for so long that she had two sets of role models – her family and his family, which created some confusion and conflict about whether to stay with him. She said:

[My boyfriend's family] have been with their person since high school. Most of his family, if not all of them. Everyone I've met anyway. If they're not single, they have a husband that they've been with since they were in high school. And so I think Harold really values that, but at the same time, I have not been exposed to that. That's not how I grew up. If you're not happy, you don't [stay together]. (...) That's a fear in me, and on my side of the family, once they're not happy or they don't see the other significant other trying to make effort to change, sincere effort to change, it's a divorce. (548NES)

Children also learned about power from observing their parents. For example, Sammy had a strong sense of financial independence because she saw that her mom relied on her father financially and could not leave even after he cheated on her. Sammy learned that money was



power from her mom. When Sammy got married, she decided to have a prenuptial agreement to ensure that she was financially protected. She said, “So, it was definitely, that prenup was like trying to protect myself from being taken advantage of” (015KUO). After observing the situation between her parents, Sammy looked for a sense of financial security by asking her fiancé to sign a prenuptial agreement.

Parents also modeled gender roles for their children. For instance, Steph was from India where there is a strong cultural influence of arranged marriage. However, Steph’s parents’ marriage was unique because they were in a love marriage and were very progressive about their children’s love lives. Steph was encouraged to get an education and form her own goals without family pressure to push her into marriage at a young age.

They never really put any pressure on me or my brother, you know, to get married, to settle down, anything like that, which is quite rare for Indian families. And they both are pretty progressive (...) But definitely, it’s been really, really nice, especially to live in India as a young single woman and not have family pressure of, ‘You’re getting old. You need to get married. You need to settle down. You need to find a good husband who will look after you’, and that sort of thing. And so, I don’t necessarily talk to them a lot about my relationships unless they’re very serious, but I know that I could if I wanted to. (238AMI)

From these interviews, I found that when participants viewed their parents as good role models, they expressed that they wanted to have similar relationships as their parents. However, when participants did not see their parents as good role models, they adjusted their behavior and/or partner choices to try and do things differently. Participants shared that they either ended up doing the opposite behaviors or making different decisions to avoid being like their parents or learned and developed their love relationships from experiences. However, whether parents are good or bad examples, their role modeling was an important way for children to be socialized about romantic relationships.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion**

This study used relationship history interviews to explore how adults discussed their parents' influence on their romantic relationship development. The connection between family of origin and love relationships is well supported by previous research - specifically that parent-child relationships are related the timing and quality of children's intimate relationships. The present study demonstrated that both parents' interactions with their children and with each other were a way that children learned about romantic relationships. What they experienced in parental support, love, and affirmation in childhood was reflected in their adulthood intimate relationships. Moreover, when participants viewed their parents as role models, they used what they saw to make decisions about their own romantic relationships.

### **Parenting**

Parents play an important role in offspring's life with different levels of presence, support, and expressions of affection (Tyrell et al., 2016). Through the interviews, I found that some people tended to seek interactions or conditions in their romantic lives which they did not have with their parents (Cui et al., 2016). For instance, when parents were not around, adult children would look for attachment from romantic partners. Participants whose parents did not show love and affection, sought those things from others (Einav, 2014). Parents also offered messages to children, including dating rules or advice. During adolescence especially, rules about dating had an impact on children's romantic relationships because parents still had the power to control some of their behaviors in romantic relationships. Moreover, parents served as mentors and advisors who shaped children's views or behaviors in their love lives.

Previous research shows that with parents' guidance and support, children learn how to build positive connections with their romantic partners (e.g., turning to their partners for advice and support), which leads to higher relationship quality (Tyrell et al., 2016). The present study does not provide information about relationship quality, but the findings show that some participants felt they made poorer decisions in their love lives when they did not have enough parental support or involvement (e.g., staying in an abusive relationship). Participants did not bring up many examples of moderate parental support as an important part of their love lives. It may be that people would not notice how important parental support was unless they did not have enough. Instead, at either low parental support and involvement or too much control and involvement by parents, adults felt that their romantic development was affected. Similarly, adolescents who felt they had especially low or high parental support have been shown to engage in romantic relationships earlier than people with moderate levels of parental support (Tyrell et al., 2016).

Understanding how to show love and emotions is often developed by interacting with parents (Xia et al., 2018). Without having loving connections with their parents or other caretakers, adult children may not know how to form connected, loving, and trusting relationships with their romantic partners. My findings show that feeling a lack of love and affirmation from parents has similar consequences to having parents who are less present or involved. When parents and children did not have a warm connection, adults in this study looked for affirmation in their romantic relationships. This could be a problem if people stay in unhealthy relationships because they provide love and acceptance.

### **Role modeling**

Parents are important role models for children in their development (Bandura, 1977). In terms of romantic experiences, children are socialized by watching parents' interaction or how parents deal with issues that arise in their romantic relationships ((Ryan et al, 2009). Previous research shows that when parents get divorced or have frequent relationship transitions, their children sometimes develop more negative beliefs about marriage and are less committed in their own relationships (Conger et al., 2000; Cui, & Fincham, 2010; Cui, Gordon, & Wickrama, 2016). The findings in this study mirror previous research that witnessing parents' relationship transitions shaped participants' general beliefs and attitudes as well as partner choices. Parents set up examples for children either to follow or not. When parents were good models for children, adult children elaborated that they wanted to build similar relationships to their parents. Yet, when parents were not good role models, young adults learned to avoid being like their parents and looked for partners that would not repeat their parents' patterns.

Previous research suggests that when children experience less parental conflict and healthier relationships, they learn skills about how to handle fights with their own romantic partners and are more thoughtful of self and partners' needs in the relationship. (Shulman et al., 2012). Similarly, I found that parents' positive relationships passed down some skills such as good communication, to maintain healthy and happy relationships. Adult children learned parents' behaviors as good examples and tended to apply it to their own relationships. Another finding that has not been reported in other studies is that even struggles within parents' marriages can be positive for romantic socialization. Adults in this study recognized the effort their parents made to stay together, and this made them more committed to working on their own relationships when things became difficult.

Children with divorced parents or parents were never married have lower relationship adjustment, more negative communication, and more physical aggression in their romantic lives (Rhoades, Stanley, Markman & Ragan, 2012). In the current study, participants explained how their parents' negative interactions affected their romantic relationships when they grew up. For example, several people in the study mentioned that parental conflicts were bad memories and they did not want to repeat in their lives. They wanted to avoid being like their parents, so adult children were sensitive to their own behaviors and choose partners who would not cause similar situations to their parents. Whether parents are good or bad role models, children's socialization about romantic relationships was related to what they observed in their parents' behaviors.

### **Contributions and Limitations**

**Adults' perspectives.** Because individuals make important relationship decisions in their late twenties or early thirties, understanding adults' perspectives of their socialization about romantic relationships makes an important contribution to this area of research. The findings of my study demonstrate how parental influence continues as individuals' transition to adulthood. Specifically, the long-term consequences of parenting (e.g. parental support, love, affirmation) could be seen in adults' choice of partners and decision-making once they were in relationships (e.g., how to deal with conflict, whether to work on the relationship or break up). In terms of role modeling, adults used communication patterns in their relationships that they either observed in their parents or that they formed as a way to avoid communicating like their parents. In future studies, using a longitudinal design may provide more complete information about how parental influence on romantic relationships develops over time. Interviewing participants periodically from their teens to adulthood, would contribute to a better understanding of the long-term influence parents have on romantic development.

**Qualitative interviews.** Most previous research used quantitative or mixed designs (i.e., survey and observations) to investigate the relationship between parents and their children's romantic relationships. However, unlike other previous studies, this study used in-depth interviews, which provided more detail about how adults perceive their socialization about romantic relationships. Using a qualitative study design was especially beneficial because it could demonstrate more about people's thoughts and feelings about how their parents played a role in their romantic development. However, there were two limitations to these data. First, the data only included information from one person in the family, which means there is no way to establish the point of view of parents. Second, the relationship histories study was not focused on the connections between parental socialization and adult children's romantic relationship. Therefore, there may be missing information that would have added to the findings if I asked participants direct questions about their parents' influence on their romantic lives.

Another limitation is that the data do not reflect much cultural variation. It is important to include more perspectives from different backgrounds of people because norms for parenting and romantic relationship formation vary greatly between cultures. Also, cross-cultural relationships are increasingly more common, so professionals need to have a better understanding of how family experiences are related to romantic development across cultures.

### **Clinical Application**

Forming and maintaining healthy intimate relationship is an important goal in many human services settings, such as school counseling, relationship education programs, and marriage and family therapy. There is a growing body of evidence from previous and current studies to suggest that healthy relationships are very crucial to wellbeing (Antle, Sullivan, Dryden, Karam, & Barbee, 2011). The findings from this study show several ways that parental

socialization relates to adult children's romantic relationships. Therefore, it may be important for counselors to take a family systems approach to therapy when working with clients who are facing challenges in their romantic lives. From a family systems perspective, family is considered to be an interconnected system, where the development and experiences of each member influence the other members. Therefore, while in a therapy or counseling, professionals should consider the ways that an individual's behaviors or problems may reflect dynamics within the family of origin instead of just people's past experiences or developmental process (Perrin, Ehrenberg, & Hunter, 2013). A better understanding of this process would be useful to strengthen relationship education and other efforts to improve relational well-being in adults.

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