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Exploring parents' ongoing role in romantic development: Insights from young adults

Tyler B. Jamison
University of New Hampshire, Durham

Hung Yuan Lo
University of New Hampshire, Durham

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Abstract

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. Romantic development is related to experiences in the family of origin such as parenting, parents' romantic history, and patterns of interaction within families. However, there is need for more in-depth research about how adult children perceive their socialization about romantic relationships and its impact on their romantic development. This study used qualitative data from relationship history interviews (N= 35) to explore how adults discuss their parents' influence on their romantic development. The findings suggest that participants viewed their parents as role models, and they adjusted their partner choices and their behavior in relationships based on their perceptions of their parents' romantic success. We also found that the level of support, love, and affirmation participants perceived from their parents in childhood was reflected in their partner choices and interactions in relationships. We explore implications of these findings for future research on romantic development and relationship education for young adults.

Exploring Parents' Ongoing Role in Romantic Development: Insights from Young Adults

Forming stable, satisfying romantic relationships is considered to be among the most important developmental tasks of adulthood (Arnett, 2015; Erikson, 1968). However, building the capacity to form such relationships begins early in life. Interactions with parents and other caregivers are crucial in shaping romantic relationship development because they influence individuals' basic beliefs about both themselves and relationships (Conger, Cui, Bryant, & Elder, 2000). One way messages about romantic relationships are transferred to children is through socialization, or the process by which children observe and internalize people's behaviors in their surroundings, especially their parents, and then translate 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) as well as through their parenting behaviors (Conger, et al., 2000; Einav, 2014). Specifically, 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 (i.e., how individuals build the capacity form and maintain satisfying and stable romantic partnerships; Furman & Wehner, 1994) 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. There is a wealth of data about the impact of family structure on children's romantic outcomes (e.g., Conger et al., 2000; Cui, & Fincham, 2010; Cui, Gordon, & Wickrama, 2016), the relationship between parent-child attachment and romantic attachments in adulthood (e.g., Furman & Wehner, 1994; 1997), and the ways that interactions with parents lay the groundwork for interactions with romantic partners (Shulman et al., 2012; Xia et al., 2018). However, these investigations do not address adults' perspectives about their parents' impact on their romantic lives. Second, many studies relating the family of origin to offspring's romantic lives focus on adolescent romantic development (e.g., Tyrell, Wheeler, Gonzales, Dumka, & Millsap, 2016; Valle & Tillman, 2014). Highlighting adolescence is important because beliefs and attitudes toward romance are often formed during this time. Yet, families of origin continue to influence family members in their adulthood (Arnett, 2015). In order to address these gaps, this study will focus on how adults discuss their parents' influence on their romantic development.

Theoretical Perspective

Social learning theory is a foundation for exploring how adults' romantic experiences are shaped by their families of origin (Bandura, 1977). According to social learning theory, 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 within their families (Bandura, 1977). In terms of romantic development, children often 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, parent-child socialization is related to the intergenerational transmission of relationship skills and behaviors (Bryant & Conger, 2002). For example, children that experience multiple family structure transitions (e.g. divorce, remarriage) have a greater likelihood of experiencing divorce themselves (Wolfinger, 2000; Amato & Patterson, 2017). There is also evidence that marriageable characteristics (e.g., depression) and relationship skills (e.g., communication) are transmitted across generations (Bryant & Conger, 2002; Dush, Arocho, Mernitz, and Bartholomew, 2018). 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 development.

Literature Review

Parents as Role Models

Parents' romantic relationships set an example for children as they develop 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 (Cherlin, 2010). For example, 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 after their child was born; Cui, Gordon, and Wickrama, 2016). Cui et al., (2016) found that 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. These beliefs may then influence the types of relationships adult children choose for themselves, such as when and under what circumstances they cohabit or marry. Children that grow up in unmarried families tend to perceive less commitment in their parents' romantic relationships and have more favorable attitudes toward divorce than individuals from two-parent married families. These attitudes may translate into lower levels of commitment to their own romantic relationships (Cui, Fincham, & Durtschi, 2011; Ryan et al., 2009). Thus, parents' relationship histories play an important role in how offspring view romantic relationships and the choices they make about relationships during adulthood.

Family structure and the frequency of transitions may also influence the development of communication and conflict management skills (Bryant & Conger, 2002). 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 were more capable of integrating negative and positive aspects of relationships than those from married families (Shulman et al., 2012). 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 development. When they perceive their parents to have low-conflict relationships, 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). When parental conflict is high in frequency and intensity with low resolution during adolescence, young adults may lack relationship efficacy (i.e., belief in the ability to resolve conflict). Lower relationship efficacy has been shown to result in higher levels of conflict and lower relationship quality (e.g. satisfaction and happiness) in adults' romantic relationships (Cui, Fincham,& Pasley, 2008). Thus, parents' romantic relationships influence their children both in terms of children's beliefs about relationships and in terms of the skills needed to successfully build and maintain satisfying relationships during adulthood.

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 and 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).

Children establish many of their social skills by interacting with their parents. Parental support and guidance are related to higher quality relationships and more positive attachments with romantic partners (e.g., turning to partners for advice and support; Tyrell et al., 2016; Xia et al., 2018). Other forms of positive engagement with parents such as expressions of love and affection between parents and adolescents, was related to better problem-solving strategies and greater feelings of love, connection, and trust with romantic partners (Xia et al., 2018). Using observations of whole families, Conger et al., (2000) found that parents who demonstrated high warmth, low hostility, positive monitoring, and consistency during adolescence predicted similar qualities in their children's interactions with their romantic partners at the age of twenty.

Interactions and closeness between parents and children may also predict adult children's beliefs about future romantic relationships. When parents are supportive of their children, young adults demonstrate more positive behaviors with their partners, such as 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) and higher romantic agency (e.g., better skills to deal with conflicts). In contrast, negative childhood experiences (e.g., insecurity, harsh parenting, little involvement) has a direct influence on adults' negative relationship attachment. Greater insecurity with parents, leads to lower attachment to partners, which may relate to later, less positive interactions with romantic partners (Dinero, Conger, & Shaver, 2008; McCarthy, & Maughan, 2010). Together, these studies suggest that parenting quality and offspring's perceptions of their relationships with their parents shape adult children's romantic experiences in important ways.

Present Study

Previous research provides evidence that both observations of parents and interactions with them are critical components of romantic development. In the proposed study, we used 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 development?

Methods

Data for this study come from a mixed methods investigation of young adults' relationship histories. This study is a secondary analysis of the qualitative data from that study, which included in-depth interviews with 35 individuals ages 24 to 40 years. We recruited participants using fliers posted in coffee shops, laundromats, apartment complexes, and grocery stores. Advertisements were shared on social media sites and posted on the first author's professional website. Interested participants completed an online screening form to establish eligibility and gather basic demographic information. Eligible participants were contacted for in-depth interviews, which took place either in person (n = 17) or using video conferencing software (n = 18).

The interview procedure for the original study began with creating a family genogram (i.e., a diagram of the family). Genograms included participants' parents or other adults who raised them, siblings, and their spouses or children 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, and yielded data that supported this secondary analysis of the relationship histories data. Interviewers and participants then co-created a timeline of every romantic and sexual relationship the participant was involved in beginning in adolescence and ending at the time of the interview. The interview technique was semi-structured, which is consistent with grounded theory interviewing techniques (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). 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 asked probing questions about the relationship's development, positives, challenges, and (when applicable) dissolution. Because of the open-ended nature of the interviews, participants were not all asked the same questions. With few exceptions, participants were not asked about their parents' influence on their relationships unless it was a follow-up question to a comment they already made about their parents. Thus, information about parents' role in romantic development emerged fairly organically in the context of participants' reports of their romantic histories. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. All names mentioned in this study are pseudonyms.

Sample

All 35 participants in the original study made meaningful comments about their parents' influence on their romantic lives. Thus, both the original study and this investigation include the same sample of participants. The sample included 20 women (57%), 14 men (43%), and one transgender man ranging in age from 24-40 years (m = 31). Participants reported their sexual orientation as heterosexual (n = 26), bisexual (n = 5), or gay/lesbian (n = 4). The self-reported race of partipants was White (n=26), Asian (n=4), African American (n=3), and Latinx (n=2). Twenty-four participants had a bachelor's degree or more and 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).

Data Analysis

Assisted by MAXQDA software, we analyzed the data using Applied Thematic Analysis (ATA) techniques (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). ATA's focus on lived experience is consistent with phenomenology and its emphasis on supporting claims with specific examples from the data is derived from grounded theory. Because this was a secondary analysis, ATA provided a useful procedure for identifying only the information that would potentially answer the research question, a process Guest et al., refer to as "bounding the analysis." The scope of this study was narrower than the larger study, so we searched for keywords related to the research question in each interview transcript to identify appropriate parts of the text for the analysis (i.e., family, mother, mom, father, dad, marriage, parent). We followed key words to relevant segments of the text and assigned code labels to capture concepts related to parental influence on romantic development. As new codes were created, we wrote brief descriptions to indicate the meaning of each code. 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"), we coded it as "direct family influence." We repeated this open coding process through all transcripts, adding codes as new ideas were identified in the data and categorizing other ideas into existing codes. The first author engaged in open coding of these data for other investigations, and her familiarity with the data provided a resource as the second author was conducting much of the open coding. The authors met weekly to go over the coding process and discuss passages of text that were challenging to categorize. Through this process, we refined the descriptions of each code to accommodate our growing understanding of the data. After coding several interviews, we transferred codes that were created in MAXQDA into a codebook in Microsoft word with code labels and descriptions (code book available upon request). This process allowed us to create an ongoing discussion of how each code related to the research question and how the codes related to each other. We updated the code book after coding every 7-10 interviews by removing irrelevant codes and refining codes that were unclear.

When open coding was complete, we identified the codes with the most data support and created a detailed theoretical memo explaining each emerging finding and providing participant quotes to demonstrate support from the data. In line with previous research, we identified two main findings that represented much of the data about parental influence on romantic development: role modeling and parenting. We organized other codes under those two broad categories. For example, quotes about infidelity were organized under "parents as role models." Through this process, we redistributed or eliminated quotes in order to focus on the themes that had the most robust support (i.e., multiple quotes from multiple different people). In the final stage of the analysis, we explored the variation within our two main themes: parenting and role modeling, in order to explain how parents' influences played out for different types of participants or at different stages of development.

Results

Role Modeling

Parents' romantic relationships are an important example for children as they learn about marriage, conflict, or relationships. In this study, participants discussed the ways that they either sought to emulate their parents' example or to avoid it. Attending to the relationships between these parents seemed to be especially salient for individuals who were married. They appeared to look to their parents for information about what it meant to be married and how to interact with a spouse instead of a dating partner. In forming their own long-term partnerships, they used both good and bad relationships between their parents to guide their choices.

Positive parental role models. When parents had happy and stable romantic relationships, or they overcame major challenges to stay together, adult children saw their parents as good examples. For children who perceived their parents has having a wonderful relationship, their reflections did not move much beyond wanting to be like their parents. However, when participants witnessed their parents navigate marital strain, they had some important reflections on what that taught them about commitment. For example, Pat (age 32, married) 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 he was committed to making it work.

> I don't remember having any one conversation with my dad or my mom about this. (…)
> But when I was in high school, my parents went through that spat where they almost got
> divorced. I remember commitment, or not commitment but staying together for the sake
> of the family was a big piece.

Pat's parents did not actually tell him what to do in a relationship or give him advice about marriage. However, by observing them, he formed a strong commitment to working through relational challenges, particularly in the context of marriage. When he hit a tough spot in his own marriage, he and his wife started reading relationship books to improve their interactions. Charlie (36, married), 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 ones.

> My parents have been married for a really long time. I always found myself to be a long-
> term relationship-type of a person. [I'm] unwilling to, like, let a relationship just dissipate
> for small reasons and kind of focused on trying to make things work.

> 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 with each other. Elizabeth (age 36, married) 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. 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, she credited their example for the health of her relationships, "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." Based on her observations about good communication from her parents, Elizabeth and her husband had weekly "state of the marriage" conversations that gave them a chance to check in.

> 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 (age 25, single) 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. I think that's totally a response to my parents, them getting divorced but still being able to be peaceful. (…) There's no need for bad blood." Parents did not need to be continuously married or have what appeared to be easy relationships in order to be considered to be a good example by their children. As adults who faced their own relationship challenges, having observed effective problem-solving or peaceful separation was also informative.

Negative role models. 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 different traits from their parents. Infidelity was a particularly salient issue that participants wanted to avoid in their own relationships. When participants were aware of infidelity in their parents' relationships, they reported feeling insecure, being fearful about commitment, and struggling with trust in their romantic relationships. For example, Sammy (age 27, married) found out when she was a teenager that her father had a second wife and more children in another country. In her first serious relationship, her parents' situation surfaced as jealousy and conflict:

> 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 (…). So we just had a lot of jealous feelings.

As she got older and gained more relationship experience, 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. She said, "My family relationships have influenced the way I behaved throughout my relationship history, 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." Alvin's (age 37, married) explained how he felt betrayed when he found out about his fathers' affair and his distress at watching the fallout between his parents.

> I saw that and I said, '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 don't want the blatant yelling and trying to tear the other person down. And I sure as hell don't want the physical abuse.

Alvin's home became a highly contentious place as his parents divorced but remained living together. As a consequence, he was cautious of relationships that seemed too volatile. He described knowing that his wife was a good choice for him:

> [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. (…) And 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 even those two things are just, are monumental. They're worth everything.

> Participants explained that problems in their parents' relationships, such as conflict, yelling, or abusive behaviors, also had an impact on their interactions with romantic partners. Jason (age 27, married) was affected by the way he saw his stepfather treat his mother. "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." After he got married, his childhood experiences surfaced during conflict with his wife. He said:

> And so now that I'm married, I realize that when my wife and I get into an argument or fight, 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.

Jason's first reaction was to lose his temper with his wife. However, he was deliberately trying to develop strategies for helping him to calm down during conflicts.

> And so a couple weeks ago my wife and I got into a fight over something really dumb 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 to decompress and, "Okay, let's not even put ourselves in that situation. (…) There's no reason to ever get that angry.

Claudia (age 40, divorced) also observed negative interactions between her parents. 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. (…) But it's just like, she doesn't get how her behavior is causing it to happen. So therefore, I'm super aware of [acting like my parents].

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 tended to avoid conflict. She said:

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 got along well together, [I thought] that I did okay.

Claudia avoided some of the negative conflict patterns she saw from her parents, but after many years she concluded that she had "no emotional connection" with her husband and that their relationship was "completely not satisfying." Danielle (age 36, married) also did not want to be like her mother, but she did not know how to do things differently. She said,

It's been difficult [because] my mom never really had any successful relationships. So for me, sort of constantly questioning, like, "Is this normal in a marriage?" (…) All I know is what not to do, you know. I just don't know exactly what to do.

Parental interactions had a strong impact on how children approached their own relationships, particularly their marriages. Avoiding or repeating their parents' patterns required participants to become aware of how their behavior compared to their parents and then make partner choices and establish interactions accordingly.

Parenting

Because they are important socializing agents, the levels of parental warmth, monitoring, and hostility lay a foundation for future romantic relationships (Conger et al., 2000; Conger & Bryant, 2002). We found that parental support, love and affirmation, and direct messages about relationships shaped participants' decisions about entering and exiting romantic relationships. Notably, parental support and love and affirmation were primarily mentioned when they were problematic – either because they were lacking or because parents were overly controlling. Very few participants organically mentioned their parents' positive influence unless it was in the context of role modeling. Thus, the data examples presented in this section of the results disproportionately reflect adults' negative perceptions of their relationships with their parents.

Parental support and involvement. During childhood and adolescence, parents are an important source of emotional and instrumental support. For participants in this study, too little or too much parental involvement influenced their behaviors 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. Jessica's (age 27, single) mother spent most of her time away from home, so Jessica was alone a lot. She moved out when she was 16

years old and lived with a friend's family. Because of this, Jessica became very attached to 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. And a good family. That's really important to me because I didn't have the best family growing up, so it's nice to have my partner have one." 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 (age 27, casually dating) also perceived a lack of parental support because his mother was often occupied with caring for his disabled brother. Jay lived most of the time with his grandmother, and generally did not feel close to his family. He explained, "Um, well we think that I had always looked at settling down sooner rather than later and I think it had to do with like having a really crappy upbringing with my family." Jay was married with a child in his early twenties. As adults reflecting back on their early relationships, participants explained that having parents who were uninvolved or unsupportive encouraged them to seek a sense of security and connection from their romantic partners.

Having parents who were overly involved or controlling also had consequences for romantic development. Don (age 39, committed relationship) 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." As a consequence, he preferred romantic relationships that allowed him to be in control. "There's definitely times in my life where I've been kind of a mess, emotionally and professionally and then I've entered a relationship with someone that is more dominant-submissive, and through that interaction, I'm able to get a handle on myself." Don's preference for 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. Lilly (age 31, casually dating) explained, "My dad rules the roost. (…) Like, my family is a very old like farm family, so…The men are the king - that's just how it is. Even if you don't agree, too bad." She went on to describe how this played out in her romantic life:

> When I got older in my relationships, I tried to change, 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 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.

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. We 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. Adults who had adequate support were less likely to mention it as a notable part of their romantic development. Ava (age 25, single) presented one exception. She explained how having consistent parental support helped her avoid poor relationship choices. "[My mom has] 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." 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 a partner whom she loved, but whose goals did not match hers. "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." Ava's situation stood out because people around her were the experiencing much lower parental support than she was. At either

extreme of parental involvement and support (i.e., too low or too high) adults perceived that their partner choices and decisions about the relationship's progress were tied to patterns established in their parent-child relationships.

Love and affirmation. 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 (age 35, divorced) 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 grew up with nobody ever saying 'I love you', nobody ever being affectionate. I sort of craved a certain kind of attention 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 (age 31, married) 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 from my mom is that he believed 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 my acne. And, I just couldn't ever live up to… I was constantly trying to find that approval somewhere.

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." Ann was partnered almost continuously 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 anyone who asked her out. Andrew (age 31, committed relationship) 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 in it 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 was cared for even if I wasn't being cared for.

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

Parents' direct messaging about relationships. Parents communicated values about romantic relationships through the rules they set about dating and through advice they provided to participants throughout their romantic development. Specific dating rules were most influential during adolescence, though the values reflected in those rules remained salient into the transition to adulthood. Seeking advice from parents became more common during adulthood, as participants made important decisions about their love lives. For Ava (age 25, single), conflicting rules and messages from her divorced parents contributed to a stagnant relationship that lasted nine years.

> With my dad it was a rule that you can't date or anything until you get 16 years old, and that's why when I got 16, I was in that relationship for so long. And then, with my mom, she was hoping I would be 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.

Parents' rules about dating sometimes guided big relationship decisions even when participants reached young adulthood. Claudia (age 40, divorced) explained that moving in with her boyfriend created conflict with her family, so she married him.

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 and sort of felt that, I love this person and I didn't want to end the relationship or separate physically. So in my mind the only alternative was to get married, which I never would have done now.

Kristen (age 33, married) faced a similar situation when she came out to her family as a lesbian.

But I also had this pressure because of my mom. She was like, 'If you're a lesbian, you're going to be promiscuous and whatever.' (…) 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.

Kristen did not marry her first girlfriend, but when she ultimately did marry, she planned a traditional Catholic wedding in the hopes that it would legitimize the commitment to her parents. Not all participants got messages about the need to get married and settle down. Brittney (age 32, committed relationship) described how her dad encouraged her to focus on other priorities in her life first. "My dad raised me, education before anybody. (…) Like, from my parents' perspective relationships were the last thing on earth that I needed to ever pursue or focus on."

Once participants became adults, some of their parents became a valued source of advice. In these roles, they gave advice or shared their own experiences about romantic relationships with their children. For example, Kayla's (age 33, married) mom helped her gain a new perspective about the problems she was having with her partner, whom she later married.

I just told my mom that, there's these 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. And she said you don't have to share your values exactly but you have to be able to compromise. (845YER)

Joe (age 39, committed relationship) also turned to his mom when he had difficulty deciding whether to propose to his partner.

My only psychiatrist that I have on this subject is my mother. (…) I was calling her every day and just expressing to her that I'm feeling this kind of pressure where I love Liza, [but] sometimes I wonder how I lasted so long with somebody so different. And she always told me just don't be pressured into it.

At the time of the interview he had not proposed to his girlfriend, despite increasing pressure to do so. 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 through their intimate relationships. Similarly, lacking love and affirmation from parents guided children to look for acceptance from romantic partners. Moreover, some parents shared their experiences about love with their children or set up rules to guide 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.

Discussion

Parent-child relationships are particularly important, as they relate the timing (Ryan, Franzetta, Schelar, & Manlove, 2009) and quality of children's intimate relationships during adolescence and into adulthood (Xia, Fosco, Lippold, & Feinberg, 2018). The present study

yields additional support for these previous findings using qualitative interview data from adult children's perspectives. Without specific prompting related to parental influence, young adults in this study highlighted the importance of parenting, particularly during adolescence, and the importance of parental role models, especially in the process of choosing someone to marry. These findings add to existing research by providing insight into the *process* by which parenting and role modeling seem to influence romantic development.

Role modeling

Previous research shows that when parents have difficulties in their relationships with each other, 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). However, the findings from this study suggest that children we much more concerned with how parents interacted with each other than the status of their relationship with each other. Parents who separated or even divorced were viewed as positive role models when they worked to maintain positive regard for each other. 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 their own and their partners' needs in the relationship. (Shulman et al., 2012). One of our most important findings in this study is that even in the midst of parental strife, adult children could glean valuable lessons about the nature of commitment and the value of working at a relationship. When participants observed their parents overcoming difficulties to stay together, they reported being committed to working on their own relationships with things became challenging. Alternatively, some participants viewed their parents as cautionary tales and actively avoided situations and partners that they thought might lead them into relationships with similar dynamics. Several participants mentioned that parental conflicts were bad memories and they did not want to repeat in their lives. These adults were sensitive to their own behaviors and choose partners who would not cause similar situations to their parents.

When parents were positive role models, some participants sought them out for advice as they decided whether their partners would be a good choice for marriage. This finding is particularly interesting because it suggests that parenting is not only important in terms of its lingering effects from childhood, but that parents continue to mentor and advise their adult children on important relationship matters in addition to serving as role models for them (Jackl, 2016). Understanding the ways that parents act as consultants for adult children's love marriages may be a fruitful avenue for future research.

Parenting

What children experience in terms of family structure transitions, parental support, love, and affirmation in childhood is reflected in their adult intimate relationships (Einav, 2014; Cui et al., 2016; Tyrell et al., 2016). This study provides insight about how parental influence was understood by adult children, and the strategies they used to translate parents' direct and indirect messages into their own choices about romantic relationships. Participants with challenging parent-child relationships felt that they were seeking something in their romantic relationships that they lacked in their relationships with their parents. Participants with overbearing parents sought autonomy and control, whereas participants with parents who were absent or withheld love and affection sought connection and stability. Tyrell et al. (2016) also found that the most meaningful parental impact occurred at high and low, rather than moderate, levels of parental support. We suggest that parents have an impact on romantic development regardless of how they engage with their children, but at the extremes it seems that children react against their

parents as they seek connections outside of the family. This may be especially problematic if it leads to continuing unhealthy relationships because they provide some sense of love and acceptance (Author citation). Without having loving connections with parents or other caretakers, adult children may have fewer resources for forming connected, loving, and trusting relationships with their romantic partners.

Contributions and Limitations

Adults' perspectives. Because individuals increasingly make important relationship romantic decisions in their late twenties or early thirties (Sassler & Lichter, 2020), understanding adults' perspectives of their romantic development makes an important contribution to this area of research. The findings of this 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 interaction patterns in their relationships that they either observed in their parents or that they formed as a way to avoid interacting like their parents. In future studies, using a longitudinal design may provide more complete information about how parental influence on romantic relationships develops into adulthood. 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. Using a qualitative study design was especially beneficial because it provided insight into how adults interpreted and responded to parental influences in their decisions about their romantic lives. However, there were two limitations to these data. First, data only included information from one person in the family, which means we cannot establish the point of view of parents. Second, the relationship histories study was not focused on the connections between parents and adult children's romantic development. Our findings may have been different had we asked participants direct questions about their parents' influence on their romantic lives.

Implications for Clinical Practice

Forming and maintaining satisfying relationships 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 research suggests that satisfying relationships are an important determinant of adult wellbeing (Antle, Sullivan, Dryden, Karam, & Barbee, 2011). The findings from this study show several ways that parental influence shapes adult children's romantic relationships. 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 in addition to the individual's past experiences in romantic relationships (Perrin, Ehrenberg, & Hunter, 2013).

A better understanding of family influences on romantic development would also be useful to strengthen relationship education and other efforts to improve relational well-being in adults. Several of the relationship education programs with the strongest research foundations and empirical evaluations contain specific mentions of past experiences (i.e., *Within Our Reach*; Stanley, Markman, Jenkins, Rhoades, Noll, & Ramos, 2006), family dynamics (*PICK a Partner;* Van Epp, 2016), or managing differences (*Couple CARE*; Halford, More, & Wilson, 2004). These programs all emphasize the development of positive communication skills (Stanley, Carlson, Rhoades, Markman, Ritchie, & Hawkins, 2019), which may pose opportunities to discuss the ways in which communication style is shaped by both parenting and parental

modeling. Participants in this study suggested that how they interacted with their partners, including their communication, was shaped by their families of origin. Thus, taking a systems approach in relationship education may highlight dynamics that couple members may have adapted from their families of origin.

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