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# Factors Relating to Romantic Relationship Experiences for Emerging Adults

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Science

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ABSTRACT

Factors Relating to Romantic Relationship
Experiences for Emerging Adults

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This study of 1,492 emerging adults focuses on the relationships among negative family of origin experiences, attitudes about marriage, positive communication and the influence of past romantic relationships. The data used in this study comes from a survey questionnaire, READY (see www.relate-institute.org) completed by emerging adult participants (18-25). Results from the Structural Equation Model showed both aversive family of origin experiences and negative beliefs about marriage have a significant and negative influence on perceptions of romantic relationship experiences. Also, positive communication has a significant and positive influence on perceptions of past romantic relationships. However, positive communication did not mediate the relationships between negative family of origin experiences, attitudes about marriage, and the influence of past romantic relationship experiences. Implications for clinicians as well as directions for and content of future research on family of origin experiences, attitudes about marriage, and the influence of past romantic relationship experiences are explored.

Keywords: negative family of origin experiences, influence of past relationships, attitudes about marriage, positive communication, emerging adults

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Jonathan Sandberg, Richard Miller and Jason Carroll

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## Introduction

In this century, marital dissatisfaction leads to more divorce than ever before in U.S. history (Raley, 2003). As emerging adults grow to maturity in an environment of discontent and marital dissolution, there can be much trepidation about the future of their own romantic relationships (Goodwin, McGill, Chandra, 2009). Many emerging adults wonder how they can avoid the pain of divorce and experience optimal relationship satisfaction (Simons, Simons, Lei, Landor, 2012). Divorce is not only painful and expensive for those directly involved, but for local communities, state and national governments as well. Divorce places a substantial burden on government and health insurers (Caldwell, Caldwell, Woolley, 2007) each of whom must take on a great deal of extra cost for every couple who separates. Despite general declines in marriage rates, about 90% of the U.S. adult population will be married at least once by the age of 40 (Settersten & Ray, 2010), but 50% or more of these marriages either fail or are marked by conflict, withdrawal, and continuing unhappiness (Conger, , 2000, Bradbury, 1998; Halford, Kelly, & Markman, 1997). As educators and clinicians identify unhealthy behavioral and cognitive patterns they can reinforce the possibility of lasting relationships in the future.

For example, research has shown that negative family of origin experiences and more self-focused personal values may increase the chances of the relational instability that many emerging adults fear (Simons, Simons, et al., 2012). Assessing the influences of family of origin (FOO) experiences, personal attitudes and communication style may help young adults to become aware of how such variables shape their current behaviors and views about relationships, thereby helping them to prepare for successful romantic relationships in the future. Because relational patterns and attitudes are often learned in FOO relationships, the influence of these experiences can negatively or positively affect the future relationship stability of emerging

adults. Current research displays how attitudes about marriage and communication styles are both directly affected by FOO relationships. (Willoughby, Carroll, Vitas, and Hill, 2011) discovered that attitudes about marriage are heavily influenced by FOO experiences and help determine behavior in future dating situations and romantic relationships. Although FOO experiences cannot be altered, the effects they have on emerging adults can be changed through a shift in perception. Therefore, the feasibility of healthy future romantic alliances can be improved by changing the negative ways in which past romantic relationships and FOO experiences are viewed to positive (Jensen, Holman, & Busby, 2012). An understanding of relational communication style can also help predict future romantic relational satisfaction (Gottman, et al 1998; Markman, et al 2010).

Communication style can be indicative of both FOO experiences and attitudes about marriage. It is a large determining factor in the case for successful marriages and in the subsequent dissolution and dissatisfaction of marriages featuring unhealthy communication (Rehman & Holtzworth-Munroe, 2007). It may also act as a buffer to any harmful influences received from negative romantic relational experiences. There are many existing studies on emerging adulthood, future relationship satisfaction, or how FOO experiences influence relational stability (Willoughby 2011, Martinson, et al 2010; Topham, et al 2005, Gardner, Busby, & Brimhall, 2007). However, there are few studies that focus on all three. Through this study, mental health clinicians may be better able to support emerging adult clients who possess the motivation to reduce their relationship fears and desire to move away from negative past relationship experiences (Gardner, Busby & Brimhall, 2007). Emerging adults can also receive hope that the relationship patterns in their FOO may not have to continue or manifest themselves in permanent or temporary romantic unions. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to learn how

FOO experiences and attitudes about marriage affect the level of influence held by past experiences in romantic relationships and how communication style mediates this influence. Therefore, it is necessary to measure the level of the influence that past romantic relationships have on emerging adults; so that this negative influence can be reduced. Possible future negative experiences can be reduced as well through the mediating factor of communication.

## Literature Review

### Family of Origin Experiences

FOO experiences affect emerging adults in many ways that can contribute to the successes or problems in their romantic relationships. Multigenerational theorists argue that family issues from the past are influential but people can come to terms with them and experience healthy functioning in adult romantic relationships (Framo, 1992; Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Martinson et al., 2010). Murray Bowen's family systems theory offers one explanation for why processes in the FOO continue to influence children's adult romantic or marital relationships. According to Bowen's family systems theory (1976, 1978), an individual's level of self-differentiation—the ability to distinguish between thoughts and feelings, and to think clearly in the midst of strong emotion—enables or constrains the capacity for effortful self-control (cf., Bowen, 1976, 1978: Crosby, 1976; Kerr& Bowen, 1988; Miller, Anderson, & Keala, 2004). For example, emerging adults coming from emotionally reactive families are more likely to respond negatively to distress (Gardner, Busby, et al., 2007).

Also, both research and experience have suggested that emotional reactivity, particularly negativity, may have their roots in FOO processes. Specifically in family environments with high levels of cold, unsupportive, and conflictual behavior may result in poor stress reactions and dysregulation for children (Gardner, Busby, et al., 2007). However, positive family experiences

can lead to higher self-esteem, secure attachments and less negativity in adult children (Gardner, Busby, et al., 2007). It may be that the adults that exhibit high emotional reactivity struggle with emotion processing and regulation, which can result resulting greater experiences of emotional distress (Gardner, Busby, et al., 2007). As such, their experience of negativity and/or distress during disagreements, conflict, or other situations will likely be amplified leading to increased discomfort (Gardner, Busby, et al., 2007). A growing group of studies have shown that it may be relational schemas that serve as a link between people's past experiences and their approach to subsequent social relationships (Simons, Simons, Lei, Landor, 2012).

Some studies lend support to the idea that FOO experiences can be related to the way people perceive marriage and marriage-related issues. For example, young adults who reported growing up in an emotionally enmeshed home, who were pulled into their parents' disputes, and/or felt more parental intimidation had more negative attitudes and feelings toward marriage as well (Larson, Benson, Wilson, & Medora, 1998). A father's psychological abuse toward one's mother was associated with more dysfunctional beliefs about marital conflict and a spouse's ability to change. Larson and Thayne (1998) found that young adults who grew up with at least one alcoholic parent had more negative opinions and feelings about marriage, reported being less ready for marriage, and wanted to wait longer to marry. FOO dynamics can shape important beliefs about self, others, and relationships including young adult relationships outside the family. They set the stage for extra familial interpersonal relationships by providing a powerful blueprint or model of relationships for interaction in one's future relationships with others (Bagarozzi& Anderson, 1989; Beebe & Masterson, 1986; Blevins, 1993; Collins & Read, 1990; Marks, 1986; Nichols, 1996; Satir, 1988, Larson, Taggart-Reedy, Wilson 2001).

**Attitudes About Marriage**

Marriage has served many roles throughout history. It is the primary unit of society, ensures the perpetuation and survival of future generations and it continues to be one of the most enduring rites of passage into adulthood today. Many individuals view marriage as a means to receive emotional fulfillment, companionship and economic security (Glenn, 1999). Furthermore, local, state and national government entities are beginning to protect and sustain marriage. This comes after the realization that healthy marriages create healthy families, which enable the development of healthy individuals who in turn become productive, educated, law abiding citizens. Healthy societies are far less expensive to maintain than unhealthy ones (Wilson, 2002) Stable family units support, educate and protect their members. The impact that families make on society is visible in the incidences of a host of societal ills including: divorce, suicide, addiction, education completion rates, teen pregnancy, unemployment, imprisonment and mental illness (Wilson, 2002)

Marriage may become relatively more important compared to other life goals as adolescents transition into young adulthood (Willoughby, 2010). The attitudes related to marriage held by emerging adults are crucial to developing relational expectations, including the role that a romantic alliance will likely play in their lives (Hall, 2006). The importance of marriage greatly contributes to determining past relationship satisfaction in emerging adults as well (Simons, Simons, Lei, Landor, 2012). There are links between dating patterns and perceptions related to marriage and the possibility that marital meaning can shape the way people approach dating and premarital romantic partners (Hall, 2006). Dating relationships characterized by chronic discord, frustration, and disappointment are likely to foster a more negative view of the costs and benefits of marriage (Simons, Simons, et al., 2012). The investment model perspective proposed by Jensen, Holman and Busby, n.d., illustrates how

positive past romantic relationship experiences are seen as benefits which make investing in romantic relationships worth the possible risks. More relational benefits equal more positive views of past romantic relationships and current attitudes about marriage. It is not clear, however, if marital meaning influences dating or if dating experiences influence marital meaning (Hall 2006). It is also possible that there is a reciprocal link between dating and marriage that propels itself along certain patterns toward marriage (Hall 2006). The mechanisms through which these experiences, beliefs and attitudes are linked are complex and multifaceted; some authors, however, illustrate the likelihood that marital meaning and attitudes about marriage are related to early family experiences that add to one's perceptions of the relational nature of marriage (Hall, 2006).

**Positive Communication**

Communication plays a central role in marriage, for example, communication issues are the most frequent problem cited by couples in community surveys (Burleson, Denton, 1997). Self-esteem, constancy, and communication during the premarital relationships have also been shown to be predictive of sexual satisfaction in early marriage (Baker, 1986; Larson et al., 1998, Strait, et al, in press). A number of researchers have suggested that certain abilities in communication (e.g., problem solving, affect regulation, conflict management) that relate to success or failure in romantic relationships may be considerably influenced by the family of origin (Bryant & Conger, Feldman et al., 1998; Furman & Flanagan, 1997; O'Leary, 1988; Parke, 1998; Sanders et al., 1999, Conger, Cui, Bryant, Elder 2000). The damaging effects of negative communication have also been observed in committed relationships prior to marriage. One study described that self reported negative communication was a significant predictor of divorce and that observed and self-reported, negative premarital communication was associated with lower marital adjustment during the first 5 years of marriage (Markman et al., 2010). In

addition, positive communication has been shown to moderate the negative effects of FOO problems on relationship satisfaction for couples (Martinson, Holman, Larson, Jackson 2010). It appears that learning to communicate effectively can buffer a number of negative relationship outcomes such as: communication problems (Halford & Moore, 2002), negative attitudes about marriage, emotional dependency, and depression and anxiety (Martinson, Holman, et al., 2010). However, it is not known if positive communication would have a similar influence on the relationship between family of origin experiences and dating experiences for emerging adults.

**Experiences in Past Romantic Relationships**

Scholars who study adolescence have found that conceptualizations about marriage are often related to behaviors in romantic relationships (Crissey 2005, Willoughby 2009). Experimenting with intimate relationships is another way that emerging adults move toward a more stable identity. In contrast to adolescence, when explorations of love tend to be short term and unstable, exploration during emerging adulthood tends to involve a deeper level of intimacy that is more identity focused (Willoughby, Dworkin 2009, Arnett, 2000). Collins and van Dulmen (2006) seemed to suggest that some underlying relational issues persist from adolescence through emerging adulthood, but are handled in somewhat different forms as individuals' age. According to Snyder, learning how to form, maintain, and gracefully end romantic and sexual relationships with others is arguably one of the most critical developmental tasks of adolescence and early adulthood (Snyder 2006). Of particular importance are the formative experiences and developmental processes that occur during emerging adulthood. The salience of romantic relationships increases across these years, rivaling and sometimes surpassing those with parents and eclipsing those with friends (Laursen& Williams, 1997). Not only do particular romantic relationships change and develop but also changes can occur across

relationships. Emerging adulthood is often a time of exploration and many persons during this period have a series of different romantic relationships. As relationship experiences accumulate, patterned styles of interacting with romantic partners may emerge or change (Laursen& Jensen-Campbell, 1999).

The investment model (Sprecher et al., 2008), details how and why emerging adults commit to their romantic relationships and creates a trajectory of their possible future romantic relationships. Negative romantic experiences from the past increase negative marital attitudes and positive romantic relationship experiences from the past increase positive attitudes about marriage. The influences from past romantic relationships affect the willingness to enter into future dating relationships. A reduction of the negative influences of past romantic experiences may have a positive effect on current attitudes about marriage. It is possible that communication will be a mediating variable for either FOO or attitudes about marriage and the influence of past romantic relationships. More positive communication in past romantic relationships can alter the perception that emerging adults have of their future romantic relationships. Their marital attitudes will become more positive as will their willingness to enter into a romantic union. They will view the likelihood of future successful romantic experiences higher than if they hold onto negative communication and marital attitudes garnered from negative influences from past romantic relationships. In summary, research has shown that negative family of origin experiences and negative attitudes about marriage have an adverse impact on relationship experiences, although this relationship is less clear for emerging adults. Also, research has shown positive communication is positively correlated with many relationship outcomes (Gottman and Silver, 1999). However, little is known about how these variables are related for emerging adults. Therefore the purpose of this study is to determine if positive communication

can mediate the negative influence of FOO experiences and beliefs on romantic relationship experiences for emerging adults, as highlighted in the following hypotheses:

H1: Negative attitudes about marriage will negatively impact the influence of past romantic relationship experiences

H2: Negative FOO experiences will negatively impact romantic relationship experiences.

H3: Positive communication will have a positive mediating effect on the relationship between negative FOO experiences, and attitudes about marriage, and experiences in romantic relationships.

## Methods

### Participants

The sample for this study was drawn from a secondary dataset gathered by the RELATE Institute (RELATE: Busby, Holman, & Taniguchi, 2001). Individuals who were not in a committed romantic relationship during the time they completed the online assessment were provided the READY assessment. The READY assessment is a 200 plus item questionnaire that uses numerous measures to assess an individual's readiness for a committed romantic relationship. Such measures include attachment style, family of origin quality and functioning, risk behaviors, attitudes about marriage, etc. The validity and reliability of the READY scales have been assessed and established in previous studies (for details see Busby et al., 2001). The sample chosen included both homosexual and heterosexual males and females between the ages of 18 and 30 who were able to take the READY assessment after the marital attitudes scales were added (see table 1). The sample was also reduced in order to create a more equal distribution between the sexes, and also to provide a more accurate representative distribution of religious affiliation among participants.

The final sample consisted of 1,493 individuals, 70% of whom were female and 30% of whom were male. Participants were between 18 and 25 years of age with a mean age of 20.69 (sd=1.70). Eighty-seven percent of the sample was Caucasian, 3% Black, 3% Asian, 2% Latino, 3% designated "Mixed/Biracial", and 1% designated "Other". Eighty-six percent of the sample was enrolled in college, 6% had an Associate's degree, 3% had a Bachelor's degree, 2% were enrolled in graduate school, .2% had a graduate or professional degree, 1% had completed some college but were not enrolled. Very few had only a high school diploma, GED, or dropped out of high school. 77% of participants reported an annual income of under $20,000. In terms of religious affiliation, 8% of the participants were Protestant, 7% were Catholic, 77% were Latter-Day Saints (Mormon), 1% were Jewish, 0.2% were Islamic, 0.2% Buddhist, 3% were members of "another religion," and 4% were not affiliated with any religion (see table 1).

**Measures**

The variables from the READY dataset used in this study are family of origin, attitudes about marriage, the influence of experiences in past relationships and positive communication. READY questions are based on the RELATE measures which has consistently demonstrated strong validity and reliability (Busby, Holman, & Taniguchi, 2001). This project represents the first time these measures have been used from the READY project.

**Family of origin.** The family of origin variable was a combination of items from the family quality scale (Cronbach's alpha=.679) family influence scale (Cronbach's alpha=.798), and parent's marriage scale (Cronbach's alpha=.937).

**Family quality.** The family quality scale consists of four multiple choice items measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly disagree" to "Strongly agree." An example of a

question from this scale states, “From what I experienced in my family, I think relationships are confusing, unfair, anxiety provoking, inconsistent and unpredictable.”

**Family influence.** The family influence scale consists of three multiple choice items measured on a three-point Likert scale ranging from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree.” An example of a question from this scale states, “There are matters from my family experience that I’m still having trouble dealing with or coming to terms with.”

**Parent’s marriage.** The parent’s marriage scale consists of three multiple choice items measured on a three-point Likert scale ranging from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree.” An example of a question from this scale states, “I would like my marriage to be like my parents’ marriage.”The family influence scale and parent’s marriage scale are similar in construct and measurement. Together the three scales hold together well (with the standardized factor loadings ranging from .71 to .96).

**Attitudes about marriage.** The attitudes about marriage variable is composed of the importance of marriage scale (Cronbach’s alpha=.775), the individualism vs. relationalism scale (Cronbach’s alpha=.661) and the romantic vs. realistic scale (Cronbach’s alpha=.594). The importance of marriage scale consists of six multiple choice items measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree.” An example of a question from this scale states, “Being married is among the one or two most important things in life.” The individualism vs. relationalism scale consists of six multiple choice items measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree.” An example of a question from this scale states, “I would rather hold onto my independence than get married.” The romantic vs. realistic scale consists of seven multiple choice items measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree.” An example of a question

from this scale states, “I tend to emphasize careful thinking over strong feelings in relationships.” Together the three scales hold together well (with the standardized factor loadings ranging from .47 to .77).

**Positive communication.** The positive communication variable is composed of the empathy scale (Cronbach’s alpha= .775), love scale (Cronbach’s alpha= .785), and the clear sending scale (Cronbach’s alpha= .721). The clear sending scale consists of five multiple choice items measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree.” A sample from this scale reads, “I sit down with people who are close to me and just talk things over.” Together the three scales hold together well (with the standardized factor loadings ranging from .56 to .73).

**Influence of past romantic relationships.** The influence of past romantic relationships scale (Cronbach’s alpha = .694) consists of four multiple choice items measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree.” The questions from this scale are as follows: “From what I have experienced in relationships, I think close relationships are confusing, unfair, anxiety provoking, inconsistent and unpredictable.” “From what I have experienced in my romantic relationships, I think relationships are safe, secure, rewarding, worth being in and a source of comfort.” “There are matters from my relationships that I am still having trouble dealing or coming to terms with.” “I feel at peace about anything negative that has happened to me in my romantic relationships”. This scale is the only set of items used in measuring the influence of past romantic relationships variable.

## Analysis

Mean and standard deviation scores are reported for all key variables (see table 2) as well as all bi-variate correlations (see table 3). Structural Equation Modeling, the multivariate correlation procedure, was used to test the hypothesis because of its capacity to test primary as well as secondary associations among numerous diverse variables via the Analysis of Moment Structures (AMOS) program (Kline, 2005). The effects of family-of-origin variables and attitudes about marriage on the influence of past romantic relationship experiences was analyzed. Positive communication was tested as a mediator between family of origin experiences, attitudes about marriage, and the influence of past romantic relationships experiences. Standardized coefficients and Goodness of Fit indices were reported to help classify relationships between variables and the appropriateness of the offered SEM model.

## Results

### Full Model

Goodness of fit indices show that the model displayed sufficient fit for the READY data. The CFI for the model was .963, the TLI was .932, and the RMSEA was .059, with a chi-square of 365.61 (df=36, p=.000). CFI and TLI values of above .95 (Byrne, 2001) and an RMSEA value of below .05 indicate good model fit. The overall variance (R square) explained in the model was 33%.

### Direct Paths

The model tested five direct paths among key variables. The model showed that attitudes about marriage were significantly and negatively related to both communication ($\beta = -.29$; $p < .001$) and past relationship experiences ($\beta = -.47$; $p < .001$). These findings suggest the greater the negative attitudes about marriage the less positive the reports of communication and the more

negative the reports of previous relationship experiences. Similarly, the relationship between aversive family of origin experiences (FOO) and communication and past relationship experiences was also significant and negative, meaning more FOO problems were related to poorer communication ($\beta = -.24$; $p < .001$) and past dating experiences ($\beta = -.08$; $p < .001$). Finally, positive communication was significantly related to past relationship experiences ($\beta = .12$; $p < .001$), with more positive communication associated with more positive experiences in past relationships.

**Indirect Paths**

To test for the direct effect without communication as a mediator, an structural equation model (SEM) was run with only the predictors (attitudes and family of origin) and the outcome (experiences in past relationships). In the model, both attitudes and FOO were significant negative predictors of past relationship experience. When the mediator of communication was included, both still were significantly associated with past relationships, but the magnitude was smaller. In order to test for mediation, series of sobel tests were run. In the first test, positive communication was not a significant mediator of the relationship between attitudes and past relationship experience (sobel= -1.27; p=.20). Likewise, in the second test positive communication did not mediate the relationship between FOO and relationship experience (sobel= -1.28; p =.20).

**Overall Model**

The R square coefficient for the full model was .33, meaning 33% of the variance in past relationship experience was explained by the model. When the mediator of positive communication was removed, the R square only dropped to .32, suggesting the majority of the variance in the model was explained by the direct paths.

## Discussion

Hypothesis 1: Results showed that negative attitudes about marriage adversely impact perceptions of experiences in romantic relationships. This finding supports previous research claiming marital attitudes and preconceptions of emerging adults often create a sense of expectancy and anticipation in regards to their romantic relationships (Hall, 2006). Also, researchers have shown individuals with dating histories that are identified as distressing, unfulfilling and unstable, have an increased possibility of viewing marriage through a more negative and suspicious lens (Simons, et al., 2012). A number of explanations help explain these findings. First, it is possible that negative attitudes about marriage filter emerging adults' perceptions of their own relationship experiences. Cognitive theories of human behavior have long supported the idea that perceptions influence experience (Beck, 1970). Second, negative scripts about marriage may actually influence (Holmberg& MacKenzie, 2002) the way an emerging adult acts in a relationship, providing a painful self-fulfilling prophecy. Therefore, it may be that negative attitudes about marriage impact both perceptions and behaviors in romantic relationships for emerging adults.

Hypothesis 2: The results showed negative FOO experiences adversely impact past romantic relationship experiences. These findings suggest that FOO dynamics can shape relationships outside of the family. Previous research has suggested that FOO dynamics can also influence future relationships (Larson, et. al., 2001). There are a number of potential explanations for this finding. Because the FOO variable in this study was comprised of perceptions of overall family quality, coming to terms with past problems, and parents' marriage, it may be that a negative or barren family environment influences an emerging adult's ability to form their own healthy relationships. Similarly, witnessing a 'bad' marriage, with accompanying negative patterns in parents, may set a template that young people follow

unwittingly. And finally, if unresolved family problems from childhood are static; they may actually be played out in dating relationships, which can lead to negative experiences (Gardner, 2007).

Hypothesis 3: Positive communication did not mediate the relationships among predictor and outcome variables. Although communication did have a positive and significant impact on relationship experiences, it does not seem to buffer the negative effect of FOO and marital attitudes on past relationship experiences. This may be related to the fact that positive communication, as measured in this study, is an interpersonal variable that may or may not be related in the respondents' mind to romantic relationships. It may be that a person rates his/herself as a good communicator in a general sense, but still struggles in forming positive romantic relationships. Perhaps other intrapersonal variables, such as hardiness or resilience would more effectively mediate the impact of negative attitudes about marriage. Also, constructs like attachment security may be a better mediator of FOO issues because of its dynamic nature, as has been demonstrated in other studies (Knapp, et al., under review). Jensen, Holman, Busby, found that experiencing a positive influence from past romantic relationships can alter attachment security and marital attitudes. This suggests that marital attitudes and attachment security are fluid rather than concrete and can be adjusted through current romantic relationships. When emerging adults experience attachment security their positive appraisal of past romantic relationships increases. Secure dating relationships can mediate these insecurities as well (Jensen, Holman, Busby, under review). Perhaps experiencing attachment security within one or many dating relationships can set the stage for a more effective absorption and of positive communication skills later in the relationship.

## Implications for Clinicians

A number of implications for clinicians arise from the findings in this study. First, the results suggest clinicians may wish to focus more on FOO issues when working with emerging adults that present dating problems in therapy. Recent research has shown that coming to terms with FOO issues has a positive impact on both self and relationship variables (Martinson, Holman, Larson, Jackson, 2010; Strait, et al., in press). Clinicians may wish to look to Bowenian therapy to reduce chronic relational distress by facilitating awareness of how the emotional family system functions, and increasing levels of differentiation where the focus is on changing the self rather than others (Brown, 1999). The results also suggest that clinicians can help emerging adults address negative attitudes and beliefs about marriage in ways that positively impact romantic relationship experiences. Previous research has shown that attitudes and beliefs can be changed for the benefit of clients (Strait, 2010). In addition to research proven cognitive therapy, clinicians can also draw on narrative approach to therapy. In narrative family therapy, the language and meanings (attitudes and beliefs) people have about sexual and romantic relationships can act as a map for future relationships (Freedman and Combs 1996; Monk et al. 1997). These approaches may help emerging adults by helping them re-author problem saturated stories about relationships and free them up to experience them in new and healthier ways.

And finally, the results suggest that learning to communicate in healthy and positive ways can improve relationship experiences; however, it does not mediate harmful effects. As many clinicians recognize, positive communication skills can be modeled and taught effectively in therapy (Gottman and Silver, 1999). However, clinicians may wish to look to other constructs to help offset the negative impact of FOO and beliefs in the romantic lives of emerging adults. It appears that attachment theory may have the potential to help these young adults overcome

negative experiences. For example, the attachment literature highlights that the ability to regulate negative affect is one of the core tenets of the attachment system, which continues to influence emotional experiences in adult romantic relationships (e.g., Simpson, Collins, et. al. 2007, Kim, Pears, et. al., 2009). Therefore, clinicians may wish to draw upon empirically proven models of attachment based therapy to help emerging adults address these issues (Diamond, 2007).

## Future Research and Limitations

In the future, researchers may wish to consider attachment as a mediating variable in lieu of positive communication, as positive communication accounted for only a small part of the variance in the model. Much of the current literature suggests that attachment is highly critical to and correlated with healthy individual as well as relational development (Bowlby, 1958; Sandberg, et al., 2012). Perhaps cultivating healthy attachments in dating relationships can buffer negative attitudes about marriage and negative FOO experiences to decrease the amount of negativity in the perception emerging adults have of their past relationships. Positive communication still claims some mediating value and can be learned by emerging adults after they have coupled and addressed strained FOO attachments. Future researchers may wish to employ interviews with research participants for a more in depth understanding of their relational experiences. Also, the majority of the participants from READY self identified as heterosexual females who were Latter-day Saint, White, had some college and made between $0-20,000 annually. The outcomes of this study may not be generalized to other populations. Also, most of the individuals in this sample did not report high levels of negative FOO backgrounds or poor communication. Therefore, the results would be more applicable to therapy settings if the sample was drawn from a distressed clinical population.

Also, future research will need to draw less heavily upon the Latter-day Saint population. It is possible that within a heavily religious population participants are less likely to report negative family of origin experiences, due to concerns about being viewed as “less than perfect”.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of how emerging adults can come to terms with negative FOO experiences, attitudes about marriage and their subsequent influence on the perception of past relationships. The results show that positive communication does not mediate the negative effects of the attitude and FOO variables. However, this study supports previous research by finding that the quality of romantic relationships can be reduced if an individual has experienced dysfunction in their FOO. Also, the outcomes highlight that negative attitudes do negatively impact the perceptions emerging adults have of their past relationships. Clinicians and educators may wish to work with emerging adults too address FOO adversity and to challenge negative attitudes about marriage.

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**Table 1.** Demographic characteristics of Sample (n=1,492)

| Religious Affiliation | Income | Education | Sexual Orientation | Race/Ethnic Origin | Gender | Age |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Catholic 7%<br>Protestant 8%<br>Judaism 1%<br>LDS 77%<br>Islamic 2%<br>Other 3%<br>Unaffiliated 4%<br>Buddhist 2% | None 19%<br>Under $20K 77%<br>$20K-39,999<br>$40K-119,999 1% | High school or less 2%<br>Some college 87%<br>College or more %11 | Homosexual 2%<br>Heterosexual 97%<br>Bisexual 1% | White 87%<br>Black 3%<br>Latino 3%<br>Asian 2%<br>Other 1%<br>Mixed 3% | 0.70 Female | 20.69 (1.70) |

**Table 2:** Descriptive Statistics of Variables in Model

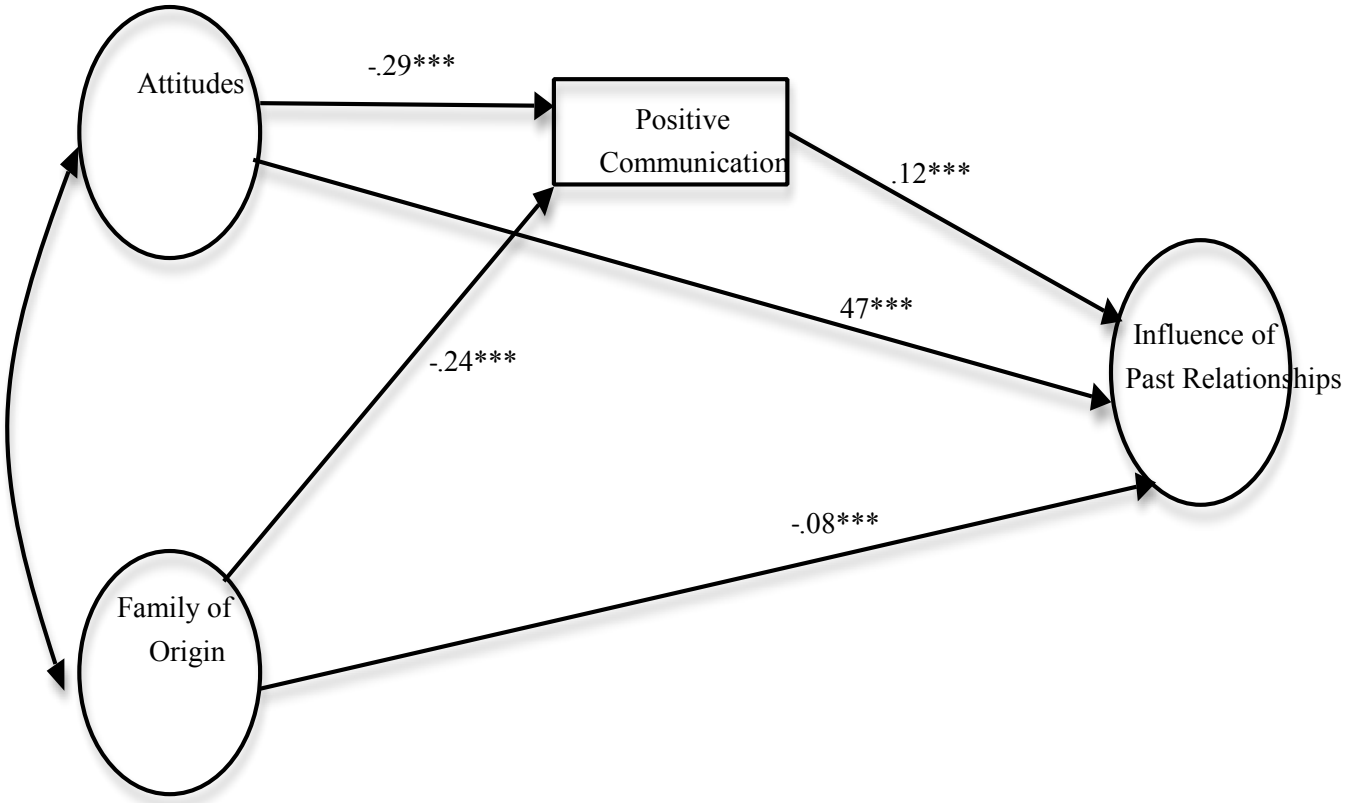
| Variables | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Family Quality | 4 | 20 | 5.25 | 2.08 |
| Family Influence | 3 | 15 | 5.04 | 2.42 |
| Parent's Marriage | 3 | 15 | 5.23 | 3.26 |
| Family Stress | 4 | 20 | 2.43 | 2.43 |
| Infl. Of Past Rel. | 4 | 20 | 14.40 | 3.07 |
| Empathy | 3 | 15 | 13.38 | 1.51 |
| Clear Sending | 9 | 25 | 20.06 | 2.81 |
| Love | 2 | 10 | 8.72 | 1.33 |
| Marriage Import. | 4 | 20 | 6.97 | 2.88 |
| Marital Optimism | 3 | 15 | 6.27 | 2.26 |
| Individual/Relation. | 7 | 30 | 15.02 | 3.27 |

**Table 3:** Bivariate Correlations for Variables in SEM Model

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Family Quality | - | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 2. Family Influence | .655** .000 | - | | | | | | | | | | |
| 3. Parent's Marriage | .518** .000 | .528** .000 | - | | | | | | | | | |
| 4. Empathy | -.182** .000 | -.102** .000 | -.040 .236 | - | | | | | | | | |
| 5. Clear Sending | -.221 .000 | -.180** .000 | -.066 .051 | .497** .000 | - | | | | | | | |
| 6. Love | -.274** .000 | -.172** .000 | -.068* .046 | .453** .000 | .573** .000 | - | | | | | | |
| 7. Influence of Past Rel. | -.242** .000 | -.308** .000 | -.199** .000 | .158** .000 | .224** .000 | .227** .000 | - | | | | | |
| 8. Marriage Importance | .222** .000 | .252** .000 | .274** .000 | -.039 .136 | -.025 .343 | -.059* .022 | -.191** .000 | -.048 .147 | - | | | |
| 9. Indiv. v. Rel. | .188** .000 | .218** .000 | .177** .000 | -.071** .008 | -.117** .000 | -.151** .000 | -.265** .000 | -.125** .000 | .466** .000 | - | | |
| 10 Family Stress | .445** .000 | .439** .000 | .366** .000 | .037 .151 | -.065* .012 | -.036 .163 | -.167** .000 | -.024 .471 | .136** .000 | .138** .000 | - | |
| 11 Marital Optimism | .196** .000 | .243** .000 | .141** .000 | -.112** .000 | -.193** .000 | -.192** .000 | -.360** .000 | -.196** .000 | .286** .000 | .406** .000 | .164** .000 | - |

Notes: $p \leq .05$,* $p \leq .01$, **

**Figure 1**: Structural Equation Model




Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$