Factors Related to Parental Approval of Adult Children's Engagement Relationships

Marietta Malnar
Brigham Young University - Provo

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Factors Related to Parental Approval of Adult Children’s Engagement Relationships

Marietta Malnar

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

Leslie Feinauer, Chair
Jeffry Larson
Dean Busby

Department of Marriage and Family Therapy
Brigham Young University
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ABSTRACT

Factors Related to Parental Approval of Adult Childrens’ Engagement Relationships

Marietta Malnar
Department of Marriage and Family Therapy, BYU
Masters of Science

This study examined possible factors that may influence parental approval for their adult child’s engaged relationship. A total of 4,175 individuals completed the RELATE inventory. Among the items in the questionnaire were measures of parental approval, parents’ marital quality, autonomy from family-of-origin, and relationship quality. Individuals also reported age, education, length of relationship, parents’ marital status, and parents’ socioeconomic status. Results from the linear regression analysis indicate that age, parental marital quality, autonomy from family-of-origin, and couple relationship quality all influence parental approval. What is interesting about these findings is the difference in the predictive power of males versus females. The female models accounted for much more variance than the males models, suggesting that approval may be more important to females among other possibilities which are discussed in depth. Length of the relationship and parental marital status did not influence parental approval. Clinical implications and directions for future research are discussed.

Keywords: couple engagement, parental approval, age, length of relationship, marital quality, marital status, autonomy from family-of-origin, relationship quality.
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Introduction

The decision to marry is very important. The decision, however, does not in and of itself ensure a relationship defined by happiness and success. Stability and quality of marriage have been found to be associated with a number of premarital predictors. Research has documented that among the premarital predictors of marital stability and quality, length of courtship, age, and approval from friends and family are highly influential (Lewis, 1973; Felmlee, Sprecher, & Bassin, 1990; Sprecher & Felmlee, 1992; Knobloch, & Donovan-Kicken, 2006; Larson & Holman, 1994; Felmlee, 2001).

Partner approval from friends and family has been shown to influence stability and quality of relationships (Lewis, 1973; Felmlee, Sprecher, & Bassin, 1990; Sprecher, & Felmlee, 1992; Hill & Peplau, 1998; Knobloch, & Donovan-Kicken, 2006). Relationships defined by friend and family approval are correlated with more stability in the relationship, and less friction in the coupling process. Friend and family approval is further predictive of the quality of the relationship as reported by the couple. Decreased tension and conflict from external social influences is associated with greater satisfaction within the relationship than when disapproval is reported (Sprecher & Felmlee, 1992; Hill & Peplau, 1998; Knobloch & Donovan-Kicken, 2006). Furthermore, perceived approval is more predictive of high self-report relationship quality than is actual approval (Sprecher & Flemlee, 1992; Felmlee, 2001). One interpretation of this finding assumes that the perception of reality influences behaviors more than actual reality (Felmlee, 2001). Understanding the effects of friend and family approval informs what is known of pathways to relationship stability and quality. This information can be applied in order to facilitate greater relationship quality and stability.
Of the many studies which suggest that friends’ and family members’ views of the relationship are important, only one study was found to focus specifically on the influence of parents on the premarital relationship. This influence was not inclusive of parental approval. Driscoll, Davis, & Lipets (1972) studied parental interference in the relationship, hypothesizing that interference was predictive of increased love levels in the relationship. The results showed that parental interference is predictive of romantic love. This is referred to in the literature as “The Romeo and Juliet Effect.” Parental interference is also associated with decreased trust and friendship, and an increase in criticalness of partner. These findings indicate that parental interference is also associated with detrimental effects on some aspects of the child’s relationship. A review of the past ten years of MFT and other relationship journals reviewed, no other research articles addressing the specific influence of parental approval or disapproval on the marital quality of the child was located. It is also important to note that there are no empirical studies investigating factors that contribute to parental approval or disapproval of the child’s relationship.

The purpose of this study is to examine factors potentially influencing parental approval or disapproval of the child’s choice of marital partner. Many studies argue that (a) the age of the individual, (b) the length of the relationship, (c) the parents’ marital quality, (d) the parents’ marital status, (e) autonomy from family-of-origin, and (f) relationship quality are likely predictors of premarital quality and stability. This study will examine these factors as they relate to parental approval of child mate selection.

*Definition of Terms*
**Friend and Family Approval.** Friend and family approval is defined as the individual’s perceived approval, support, or positive reaction from the individual’s self-defined family and friends toward the partner or the relationship as a whole.

**Parental Approval.** Parental approval is defined as the individual’s perceived approval, support, or positive reaction toward the partner or the relationship as a whole from only the parents.

**Social Network Members.** Social network members are defined as both family and friends who could influence the individual’s decisions or from whom approval may be sought.

**Parental Interference.** Parental interference is defined as the intentional obstruction or hindering of couple formation and interaction imposed by the parents.

**Relationship Stability.** Relationship stability refers to how enduring the relationship seems at present and will be in the future, avoiding a pursuit of relationship dissolution.

**Relationship Quality.** Relationship quality refers to the overall quality or degree of satisfaction as experienced by the dyad within the marital or premarital relationship.

**Autonomy from Family-of-Origin.** Autonomy from family-of-origin refers to the degree to which the individual is able to make decisions and conduct one’s life independent of their family-of-origin.

**Ecosystem Theoretical Context**

This paper will investigate parental approval from an ecosystemic perspective. An ecological model views the individual as being embedded in and influenced by larger social systems, inclusive of the couple relationship, family relationship, and larger
sociocultural context. According to ecosystems theory the environment surrounding the couple system is dynamic and such changes in the surrounding system affect the dynamics of the relationship. Ecosystemic theory examines the greater systems and their influence as opposed to the individual or couple in isolation (Bubolz & Sontag, 1993).

In an optimally functioning ecosystem, all the subsystems work together to create an accommodating environment for the individual or in this case the couple. The ecosystem theory is applicable to couples and families. However, it is important to acknowledge that the individual is the basic unit of the system. (Bubolz & Sontag, 1993).

The present study’s emphasis on the individual in relation to surrounding subsystems is compatible with the assumptions and explanations of ecosystems theory. The subsystems surrounding the couple are examined to uncover the influence they have on the couple system. Specifically, the perceived approval from friends and family systems has been shown to influence the couple system (Sprecher & Felmlee, 1992; Felmlee, 2001). An individual perceiving less approval from an external system such as the family may alter the couple system in order to maintain a level of homeostasis within the system. Dissolution of the couple system is one means of regaining homeostasis with the outlying system.

Congruent with ecosystem theory, the research questions and hypotheses addressed in this study will address the factors that may influence parental approval of the couple system for engaged couples. Approval or disapproval from the parents and friends potentially influences the couple subsystem, and may lead the couple to alter that subsystem to maintain homeostasis. In this study, friends and family are divided into subgroups and parental approval or disapproval will be explored first.
Literature Review

In the following review of literature, approval and disapproval of family and friends relative to marital quality will be discussed. Factors which are potentially predictive of parental approval are also presented.

Friend and Family Approval

Friend and family approval literature does not explicitly specify who is classified as ‘friends’ or ‘family,’ but it can assume that it is inclusive of parents. Research has shown that the approval of friends and family directly influence the stability of relationships. Lewis (1973) assessed how support for and recognition of the relationship by parents and friends affects the dating relationship. Lewis studied 316 individuals and found that receiving greater friend and parental support for and recognition of the relationship at the beginning of the relationship was correlated with relationship stability. Lewis noted that support and recognition from family members had a higher intercorrelation with relationship stability than support and recognition from friends. Parental approval of the relationship prior to the engagement may be interpreted as a ‘seal of approval.’ This seal of approval and acceptance may help stabilize the relationship as well as lend the individual encouragement to continue pursuing the relationship. Such approval could lead to decreased tension within the couple and the family, thus improving the stability of the relationship.

Perceived rather than actual support and approval from social network members may be a strong predictor of relationship stability. Felmlee et. al. (1990) conducted a study in which perceived support from the couple’s social network was highly and significantly related to stability of the relationship. For this study, Felmlee defined the
social network as family and friends. She studied 445 individuals who reported on their
dating relationships. Using a continuous-time, discrete-state, stochastic model to
examine length of courtship, time spent together, dissimilarity in race, and perceived
support and approval of the relationship. She determined that out of those four variables
perceived approval by the social network members had the greatest effect on the stability
of the relationship. The strong correlation between perceived support of social network
members and relationship stability while dating may be attributable to a desire to be
accepted by and approved of valued others. Obtaining approval from family and friends
may be more valuable to some individuals than the competing romantic relationship.
Perceived support is more predictive than actual approval and support from social
network members because perceived support represents the amount of support the couple
is aware of. High levels of support or approval in favor of a relationship will be unable to
benefit a couple who remains unaware that support or approval is offered.

A longitudinal study provided greater understanding into relationship stability and
quality. Sprecher & Felmlee (1992) conducted a two-year longitudinal study of 101
dating couples that measured relationship stability and relationship quality. Sprecher &
Felmlee noted that approval from the partner’s social network members was not as
significant to the individual as was approval from their own social network members.
Felmlee’s definition of social network members as family and friends was used in this
study as well. The results show that greater perceived approval from the family and
friends of the female is correlated with decreased likelihood of relationship dissolution.
Results were found to be small and nonsignificant for males. Further research supports
the findings that perceived support is more predictive than actual support (Felmlee,
2000). Relationship quality is positively predicted by perceived approval from family and friends. Perceived level of approval is associated with higher reports of love, satisfaction and commitment in the couples. The longitudinal nature of the study adds strength to these findings.

Perceived approval and support for the relationship may vary based on the level of commitment within the couple. Knobloch & Donovan-Kicken (2006), building on the findings that perceived support from friends and family is a greater influence than actual support (Sprecher & Felmlee, 1992; Felmlee, 2001), looked at the influence of perceived network involvement on the couple relationship. Behaviors of the social network members are characterized as either perceived helpfulness or perceived hindrance. Perceived helpfulness or hindrance respectively support or impede the relationship. For example, many couples perceived hindrance on the relationship through the manifestation of criticism, questioning, and avoidance by network members. Both perceived helpfulness and perceived hindrance were used to generate results on intimacy throughout different dating stages. Results indicated that couples who were at a moderate intimacy level experienced the most perceived hindrance from network members.

Couples withdraw from network members and invest more time and energy into their romantic relationship when hindrance is perceived (Knoblich & Donovan-Kicken, 2006). It is unclear whether the couple first perceives hindrance from their social network members or if the couple invests more in the relationship in response to perceived hindrance. Perhaps network members are protective and skeptical of the “new” member, and until the couple has expressed a higher level of commitment (engagement) the network members will be skeptical of the relationship. Regardless of the pathway,
the perceived helpfulness increases and perceived hindrance decreases when the relationship reaches the engagement period.

Deconstructing social network members into the separate variable of friend approval and parental approval isolates the specific effect of each variable. Friend and parental approval of the relationship were both correlated with satisfaction and stability of the relationship independent from each other (Hill & Peplau, 1998). These findings were taken from a follow-up study 15 years after the Boston couples study. Seventy percent of the original participants participated in the follow-up study. This study found correlations between dating satisfaction and the degree to which friends liked the partner and the partner liked these friends. Respondents were specifically asked how well they liked and were liked by friends, a sentiment comparable to, and arguably interchangeable with, approval. Both “like” and “approval” connote a positive connection between friends and the partner, a connection which may influence satisfaction with the dating relationship.

Parental approval has an even larger effect on the dating relationship than friend approval. Parental approval was correlated with greater dating satisfaction, relationship stability, and marital satisfaction (Hill & Peplau, 1998). Parental approval increases the amount satisfaction experienced within the relationship. Relationships that receive parental approval may experience decreased stress and conflict with parents over the relationship, in turn contributing to increased satisfaction and stability. A stable relationship with high satisfaction is more likely to lead to marriage. This offers a potential explanation for the correlation between parental approval and marriage. Parental approval impacts the relationship stability and satisfaction leading to a likely marriage.
Some studies suggest that parental interference is predictive of an increase of love in the relationship. This could be explained by the hypothesis that family opposition toward the relationship draws the couple closer together as they unite in defense of their relationship. This may also motivate the couple to confront and resolve potential relationship problems thus strengthening the relationship and contributing to its stability (Felmlee, 2001). These findings are consistent with the findings in 1972 by Driscoll et al. The hypothesis that parental interference with the relationship drives couples closer together is referred to as “The Romeo and Juliet Effect.”

Driscoll et. al’s research is the only study that looks at parental influence separate from family and the friends. However, this study looked at parental interference rather than parental approval. Parental interference was measured by six interpersonal behavior questionnaire items: the communication (of a man to his wife, e.g.) that her parents interfere, are a bad influence, are hurting the relationship, take advantage of her, do not accept him, and try to make him look bad (Driscoll et al., 1972). Measuring parental approval may be accomplished by directly asking if the parents, collectively or individually as mother and father approve of the relationship or partner. Presently, there is no known data showing parental reactions to approving or disapproving of the relationship. Therefore, even though such behavior suggests parental interference in the relationship, this does not necessarily mean that the parents disapprove of the relationship.

Parental interference was associated with increased romantic love, decreased trust, increased criticalness, and increased frequency of negative, bothersome behaviors.
within the couple relationship. Driscoll et al. (1972) also made it explicit that romantic love is different than conjugal love. Conjugal love was defined as ‘love between mature adults and is thought to evolve out of mutually satisfying interactions and increasing confidence and personal security in the relationship.’ Conjugal love was conceptually distinguished from romantic love mainly by trust. In this study only romantic love was significantly correlated with parental interferences (Driscoll et al., 1972).

Though seemingly incongruent with previous research, the findings of Driscoll et al. (1972) may be interpreted as giving support to the argument that parental interference carries a threat to the relationship and could undermine stability and quality in the relationship. Feelings of love in the relationship are not synonymous with stability and quality in the relationship.

Disapproval from family is only predictive of relationship stability when the couple has perceived approval from friends (Driscoll et al., 1972). The relationship is less likely to remain stable and more likely to end in dissolution when the couple experiences disapproval from both family and friends. While some support fosters the satisfaction and stability in the couple relationship, small degrees of opposition may be beneficial to the extent that it contributes to an increase in romantic love in the relationship (Felmlee, 2001).

*Factors Related to Approval or Disapproval of an Engagement Relationship*

In summary, there is ample research to support that parental and friend approval likely improves relationship stability and relationship quality for engaged couples. While some studies have found the opposite to be true, there is more evidence and research supporting the positive influence of family and friend approval on the relationship.
Parental approval influences satisfaction and stability in the couple relationship. Further research is needed to determine what factors influence friend and family approval or disapproval of the relationship.

While friend and family approval were found to be influential on the couple relationship, it is not clear what factors individuals take into account in determining their level of support for the engaged relationship. It is also unclear whether friends, parents, or other family members have varying degrees of influence on the couple’s relationship satisfaction and stability. Rather than using a latent variable, this study divides friends and family into sub groups and looks only at parental approval or disapproval.

While no research has been found to explore the relationship between parental approval and gender, Sprecher & Felmlee (1992) found that approval from the females’ family and friends was predictive of relationship stability. However in males no such correlation was found. This study will test males and females separately to examine the influence of gender on predicting mother’s and father’s approval.

**Parental Approval Predictors**

Parental approval predictors have scarcely been studied. The most recent literature on the subject was conducted in the 1980s. Leslie, Hutson, & Johnson (1986) in their study of 150 college individuals, found that sharing more information with parents about the relationship, was correlated with greater approval of the relationship. This could be explained by realizing that when parents feel more informed about the relationship they are more willing to lend their support and approval. Parental approval was only one predictor addressed in the study.
Given the influence of family and friend approval on the relationship, it is surprising that more research has not been conducted on parental approval factors influencing approval. Understanding what predicts parental approval and disapproval is prerequisite to understanding the effects of parental approval on relationships. Understanding what factors influence approval may facilitate greater acceptance and approval, and, in turn, greater relationship satisfaction and stability. This information is also valuable to research on courtship and dating stages of the relationship.

**Age at time of marriage.** For decades age at marriage has been shown to be a consistent predictor of marital instability (Bumpass & Sweet, 1972, Heaton, 2002). Bumpass and Sweet (1972) found that out of 5,442 individuals, those who married under the age of 20 had substantially higher rates of marital disruption. Intuitively, age at marriage may be a predictor of parental approval. Persons that marry young have relationships associated with instability and higher divorce rates (Shoen, 1975; Booth & Edwards, 1985; Glenn & Supancic, 1984; Martin & Bumpass, 1989). Little is known regarding the factors contributing to increase in marital disruption among younger marriage partners. Parents may anticipate that younger children are less able to handle the responsibilities that marriage brings. It is also possible that children raised in dysfunctional family systems marry earlier to escape home life. There may also be a three-way connection between age at marriage, parental approval and marital stability, with child age affecting parental approval, with younger couples receiving less support, and parental approval affecting the stability of the relationship. This could potentially explain why couples who marry younger are associated with higher divorce rates.
When looking at individuals over age 30, parents may also disapprove of the relationship because the marriage would take that child away from the parents when dependency has been created (Booth & Edwards, 1985). However, other parents may easily offer approval for children over 30, in response to excitement associated with the child reaching the next phase of their life. When individuals are in the mid-20s parents may extend approval or disapproval based on criteria of the relationship.

**Length of relationship.** The length the couple has dated may predict parental approval. The length of the courtship has been shown to positively correlate with marital quality. Couples who have dated for over two years rank their marital quality consistently high, while those who date for shorter periods have greater variability in their rating of marital satisfaction (Grover, Russell, Schumm, Paff-Bergen, 1985; Hansen, 2006). Grover et. al. (1985) found a correlation between length of time spent dating and current marital quality with 51 middle aged women. Hansen conducted a study in which 952 participants responded to a 25 item questionnaire which found a strong correlation between length of courtship and marital quality.

In situations where the partners have dated for a short time, parents may worry about the quality of the marriage and the couple’s capacity to know each other well and make an informed decision. Conversely, parents may feel more comfortable with the partner and the relationship if the couple has taken sufficient time to get to know one another.

The potential for excessive dating lengths must also be addressed. It is significant to consider the difference in marital quality between couples who date two years compared to couples who date for ten years prior marriage. It is unlikely that such an
eight year difference of dating wouldn’t be reflected in the quality of the relationship. Those eight years may also affect parental approval. Parents of couples who have dated for ‘too long’ according to the parents’ subjective point of view may begin to question the couple’s decision to postpone marriage. This delay in marriage may be interpreted as an evidence of dysfunction within the relationship.

**Parents’ marital quality.** Parental marital quality may predict parental approval. Parents who have a higher marital quality tend to have higher quality relationships with their adolescent children (Hair, Moore, Hadley, Kaye, Day, & Orthner, 2009). In this study, Hair et. al. (2009) surveyed 3,316 adolescents between the ages of 12 to 14. Nearly 48% of the adolescents reported high marital quality between parents and sustained good relationships with both parents. Higher quality relationship leads the child to share more with the parent, which increases the likelihood of approval from the parents (Leslie et al., 1986). Parents who are more satisfied with their own marriage are often closer to their children and are therefore potentially more likely to lend parental approval. On the other hand, parents who are dissatisfied with their marital relationship may be less likely to lend parental approval due to a lack of closeness with their children. Furthermore, parents who are unhappy in their marriage may verbally express their personal marriage dissatisfaction in front of their children. Parents may also express less optimism about marriage and its outcomes in general.

Whether parents are satisfied or dissatisfied in their marriage they may transfer their marital quality onto their adult child’s engaged relationship. Through transference parents examine their child’s relationship through the lens of their own marriage, seeing
the same outcome they are currently experiencing. Hypothetically, parents will lend approval for the relationship, in part, due to the quality of the relationship.

There is also the possibility that parents who are dissatisfied with their own marriage may project those feelings onto their child’s relationship through transference. Children may also model their parents’ relationship in their own romantic relationship, whether satisfying or dissatisfying, parents’ marital quality could play into their child’s relationship quality.

**Parents’ marital status.** The marital status of parents is another potential predictor of parental approval. Married parents are more likely to anticipate marital stability and lend approval whereas divorced parents are less likely to anticipate marital stability and lend approval. Children coming from a family with divorced parents are more likely to experience divorce in their own marriages (Glenn, 1987; Greenberg, 1982). Divorced parents may worry that the model they have provided for their children may influence their children’s potential for divorce or a satisfying marriage.

**Autonomy from family-of-origin.** It is possible that higher autonomy from the family-of-origin predicts parental approval, while less autonomy predicts parental disapproval. Parents who have encouraged their children’s independence and promoted their autonomy in decision making may also more readily give support and approval of their children’s choice relative to marriage. Parents who have observed their children’s capacity to make wise decisions are more likely to accept and have confidence in their child’s marriage choice. A family-of-origin defined by low autonomy-granting may not trust their children to make important life decisions independently, and may assume responsibility for marital decision-making. When children from low autonomy-granting
families-of-origin make the decision to marry, their parents may disapprove of the relationship solely based on a lack of confidence in their child’s capacity to make independent decisions separate from their parents. No research was found to support this logic. However research indicates that when adolescents participate in decision-making, their emotional functioning may be developed (Grolnick, Deci, Ryan, 1997). This emotional functioning could be recognized by their parents when it comes time to make the decision to marry.

**Relationship quality.** The relationship quality of the adult child’s engaged relationship may predict parental approval. Premarital relationship quality may be one of the most important factors preventing marital dissolution (Jackson, 2010). Parents who observe their children in relationships of high quality will expect that quality to exist and sustain into the marriage, and parents will more easily lend approval. Couples who experience conflict in the premarital relationship then continue to experience conflict in the post marital relationship (Kelly, Hutson, & Cate, 1985). When parents observe conflict in the relationship they may feel concern for the overall welfare of the relationship and for their child, making it less likely they will lend approval.

**Purpose of this Study**

Based on the review of literature, the purpose of this study was to examine possible predictors for parental approval. Factors that were included in this study are age of individual, length of relationship, parent’s marriage quality, parent’s marital status, autonomy from family-of-origin for self and partner. Based on this information, the following hypotheses were set forth:
Ho1: Individuals at the age of 18 will score lowest on the parental approval scale. I also hypothesize that there will be a curvilinear relationship between age and parental approval.

Ho2: Individuals who have a shorter relationship will score lower on the parental approval scale and those who have longer relationships will score higher on the parental approval scale.

Ho3: I hypothesize those individuals who rate their parents’ marital quality higher will be associated with higher parental approval scores.

Ho4: Individuals whose parents are still married will score higher on the parental approval scale than those who have divorced.

Ho5: Individuals who report higher on autonomy from family-of-origin will report higher parental approval than those who report lower autonomy from family-of-origin.

Ho6: Individuals who report higher satisfaction with the quality of their relationship will score higher on the parental approval scale than those who report lower satisfaction with their relationship quality.

Each hypothesis could vary slightly for males and females. For this study males and females were grouped and tested separately to see the effects gender plays on predicting parental approval.

**Methods**

**Sample**

The sample consisted of 4,175 individuals. Of the 4,175 individuals 2,473 were females and 1,702 were males. All of the individuals reported that they were currently
engaged for the first time, and came from families where parents are either married or were married and now are divorced. All of the individuals also reported parental approval from their biological parents only.

Sample Characteristics

The median age of individuals was 25.8, ranging from 18 to 40 years old. 84% were Caucasian (6% Asian, 3% other, 3% American Indian, 3% Latino, 2% African (Black)), 5% had been dating for 0 to 3 months, 10% 4 to 6 months, 15% 7 to 12 months, 31% 1 to 2 years, 32% had been dating 3 to 5 years, 9% 6 to 10 years, 97% identified themselves as heterosexual (3% bisexual and homosexual), 28% were Protestant (Methodist, Lutheran, Episcopalian, Baptist, etc.) 27% were Latter-day Saint (18% None, 13% Catholic, 10% Other), 3% had completed high school diploma, 5% had completed an associate’s degree, 6% some college, not currently enrolled, 30% had completed some college and were currently enrolled in college, 28% had a Bachelor’s degree, 9% had an uncompleted graduate or professional degree, 18% had graduate or professional degree completed, 80% reported that their biological parents are still married (see Table 1 for demographics of males and females separately).

Instruments

To test the hypotheses, the RELATionship Evaluation (RELATE) questionnaire online data collected between January 2003 and April 2010 was examined. Only individuals with approval ratings from both mother and father were included. Also only those individuals that had responses for both mother and father marital quality were included. Therefore if their biological parents had divorced and then remarried the individual was actually rating the marital quality in their current marriage. The responses
of these individuals were analyzed and compared in order to predict the effects of age, length of relationship, parents’ marital quality and stability, and autonomy from family-of-origin on parental approval in order to better understand the factors influence parental approval.

The RELATionships Evaluation (RELATE: Holman, Busby, Doxey, Klein, & Loyer-Carlson, 1997) questionnaire was created at Brigham Young University. RELATE is a 271-item questionnaire designed to provide a comprehensive measurement of romantic relationships by assessing multiple variables that have been shown to be predictive of relationship satisfaction as theorized by ecosystemic theory (Busby, Holman, & Taniguchi, 2001). Selected scales from the RELATE which measure the variables in this study were selected and are described below.

The RELATE has been used in a variety of settings, including classroom and counseling settings, to help couples, couple educators, and therapists better understand the factors that contribute to relationship satisfaction. Participants were asked to answer several items on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1=never/strongly disagree, 5=very often/strongly agree) as well as answer basic demographic questions. The scales of RELATE demonstrate high internal consistency (between .70 and .90), and have been shown to be both valid and reliable (alpha test and test-retest) (Busby et al., 2001).

Independent Variables

Age of participant. Individuals indicated the age of self on RELATE. This was self-reported by the respondent. Age was coded as a continuous variable, with the internal variable entered as is. Age starts at age 18 and was cut off at 40, because the number of individuals entering their first marriage decreased as age increased.
**Length of relationship.** Individuals indicated the length of their relationship by answering the following question, “How long has it been since you first started dating your partner?” Responses were coded as follows: 0 to 3 months (1), 4 to 6 months (2), 7 to 12 months (3), 1 to 2 years (4), 3 to 5 years (5), and 6 to 10 years (6). Values on this scale ranged from 1 to 6 with higher values indicating greater length in the relationship.

**Parents’ marital quality.** Quality of the parents’ marriage was measured separately for mother and father. Each item is measured with a one-item scale in which individuals indicated how happy their father or mother was in the marriage by rating the following questions, “My father was happy in his marriage,” and “My mother was happy in her marriage.” Each score was coded and summed separately, one score representing the father’s score and one the mother’s. For each question scores ranged from 1 to 6. Higher values on this scale indicated greater perceived quality in the father/mother’s marriage. Internal consistency and test-retest reliability are significantly high. Internal consistency scores for both males and females were .91, and .92 for the test-retest reliability (Busby et al., 2001). In this study the Cronbachs alpha score was .93.

**Parents’ marital status.** Individuals indicated whether their parents ever divorced. Responses were coded as follows: biological never divorced (0), biological parents divorced (1). Lower values indicated a more stable relationship in their parents’ marriages.

**Autonomy from family-of-origin.** Autonomy from family-of-origin refers to the amount of self-directing freedom individuals feel they hold separate from their family-of-origin. Autonomy in their family-of-origin was measured using a two-item scale in which individuals rated the following items, “My parents currently encourage me to be
independent and make my own decisions,” and “My parents currently try to run my life.” The second question was reverse coded. Scores for both were summed to obtain a summed score. Scores may range from 2 to 10. Higher values indicated a higher level of autonomy from family-of-origin. Internal consistency reliability for males is .63 and for females is .65. Particularly noteworthy is the test-retest reliability which scored .74 (Busby et al., 2001). In this study the Cronbach’s Alpha was .59.

Relationship quality. Relationship quality refers to the subjective evaluation of the couple’s relationship (Larson & Holman, 1994). Relationship quality was measured using a seven-item question where individuals rated how satisfied they are with different aspects of the relationship using a 5-point Likert-type scale (1=very dissatisfied, 2=dissatisfied, 3=neutral, 4=satisfied, 5=very satisfied). Individuals rated the following items, “The physical intimacy you experience,” “The love you experience,” “How conflicts are resolved,” “The amount of relationship equality you experience,” “The quality of your communication,” and “Your overall relationship with your partner.” Scores ranged from 7 to 35. Higher values indicated a higher satisfaction with relationship quality. Internal consistency reliability for males is .82 and for females is .85 and .78 for the test-retest reliability (Busby et al., 2001). In this study the Cronbachs Alpha was .82.

Dependent Variables

Approval of Relationship by Parents. Parental Approval Scale is a two-item question where individuals rated the extent of perceived support for their relationship from their father and their mother using 4-point Likert-type scale (1=not at all, 2= somewhat, 3=mostly, 4=entirely). Approval of relationship by parents’ item’s
reliability of internal consistency was .72 for males and .74 with females. The test-retest sample was slightly lower at .65 (Busby et al., 2001). For this study the Cronbachs Alpha score was .81. Considering there are only two items from which to calculate reliability these are particularly noteworthy scores, which is less than what is suggested to obtain a high reliability score (Comrey, 1988). Higher values on the scale indicated more support and approval. Only questionnaires where a score was given for both mother and father were included.

Control Variables

**Education.** Individuals indicated their educational attainment by answering the following question, “How much education have you completed?” Responses were coded as follows: Less than high school (1), High school equivalency (GED) (2), high school diploma (3), some college not currently enrolled (4), Some college currently enrolled (5), Associate’s degree (6), Bachelor’s degree (7), Graduate or professional degree not completed (8), Graduate or professional degree completed (9). Values on this scale ranged from 1 to 9 with higher scores indicating greater educational attainment.

Education was included in order to decrease the level of variability between couples. It was unknown if education would affect parental approval and therefore was controlled for in the event that it did affect parental approval.

**Socio-economic status.** Individuals self reported their father and their mother’s yearly gross income. Responses were coded as follows, (0) None, (1) Under $20,000, (2) $20,000-$39,999, (3) $40,000-$59,999, (4) $60,000-$79,999, (5) $80,000-$99,999, (6) $100,000-$119,999, (7) $120,000-$139,999, (8) $140,000-$159,999, (9) $160,000-$199,999, (10) $200,000-$299,999, (11) $300,000 or above. Scores on these two
questions were summed and divided to obtain a mean score. Scores ranged from 0 to 11 with higher scores meaning a higher yearly gross income. Yearly gross income could affect the values of the parents. Parents who make less may be more concerned with aspects of the relationship than parent who have a higher yearly gross income and are more concerned with how their child will be provided for. For this study it was unknown exactly how socio-economic status of the parents would affect parental approval but it was controlled for in the event that it did affect parental approval.

Analysis

This study examined the factors that influence parental approval of their adult child’s engaged relationship using regression analysis. Initial data analysis consisted of basic statistical methods to report means, standard deviations, and correlations of all study variables. Data from these tests can be found in Tables 2 and 3.

First a Pearson’s Correlation test was run to examine the possibility of outlier or leverage points. Outliers are defined as observations that do not follow the pattern of other observations, which would compromise the validity of the results. Leverage points are observations with an extreme value on the explanatory variable, which would also compromise the validity of the results. Leverage points and outliers can affect the slope and standard error of the regression model as well. Because this effect can be large or relatively small and it is hard to completely identify the amount that a particular point compromises the regression model results, any leverage or outlier points that were found were removed from the model to eliminate their influence (Hoffman, 2010).

Next a bivariate correlation matrix was run between all the variables in the study in order to determine any multi-collinearity problems (see Table 2). If collinearity exists
within the model, certain variables may provide little or no unique information to add to
the model (Howell, 1992). High collinearity also produces large variance for slope
estimates and also large standard errors which makes identifying significance more
difficult (Lewis-Beck, 1980). Two variables that were found to have high multi-
collinearity were combined in order to create one new variable (mother’s marital quality
and father’s marital quality).

Finally, linear regression models were run for female and male individuals
separately predicting either mother’s approval or father’s approval. Running different
models in regard to gender was important because past research has shown that only the
female’s friends and family approval was predictive of relationship stability (Sprecher &
Felmlee, 1992). This study explored possible variables that could be predictive of
parental approval including gender.

Multiple linear regression models were used in this study for several reasons:
(1) Multiple linear regression analysis is effective in finding results involving many
variables, which is the case in this study (Ramsey & Shafer, 1997), and (2) the analysis
will test for the influence of one predicting variable while factoring out the influence
from the other predicting variables (Lewis-Beck, 1980).

Results

Using Pearson’s Coefficient test one leverage point was detected where the
couple relationship quality variable was below the possible score range of 7 to 35. This
could be due to a data entry error or to missing information from the individual’s
responses. This one data entry was eliminated to avoid any misleading influence on the
results of the study.
In the bivariate correlation matrix mother’s approval and father’s approval were highly correlated, as expected \((r = .692, p = .000)\). The same concepts for each parent were measured separately. These variables were left as separate variables because no model would include both variables in order to understand the influence of gender in each model. Another area of high correlation was found in mother’s marital quality and father’s marital quality \((.863)\), as expected. Once again these two variables were measuring the same concept for each parent separately. In order to compensate for the high correlations between these two variables mother’s marital quality and father’s marital quality were combined to show parental marital quality as a whole.

All variables were run in models for males and females separately to predict the mother’s and then the father’s approval. Tables 4 and 5 present the linear regression models for female individuals, with Table 4 presenting the mother’s approval and Table 5 presenting the father’s approval. Tables 6 and 7 display the linear regression models for male individuals, with Table 6 presenting the mother’s approval and Table 7 presenting the father’s approval. In summary, results for each hypothesis were drawn from 4 different models, and 2 models for each gender were used to predict either the mother’s or the father’s approval.

Upon initially testing both age and age squared in the same model the results suggested that age have more of a curvilinear relationship than a linear one, therefore age was eliminated from the models and age squared was tested for a curvilinear relationship as the more important variable. As shown in Table 4, when looking at female’s significant predictors were found using multiple linear regression models to predict the mother’s approval using Age Squared \((\beta=.049, p=.012)\), Length
(β=.002, p=.902), Parents’ Marital Quality (β=.065, p=.007), Parent’s Marital Status
(β=.006, p=.793), Autonomy from family-of-origin (β=.284, p<.001), Couple
Relationship Quality (β=.237, p<.001), Socio-Economic Status (β=-.034, p=.072), and
Education (β=.284, p<.001). The results of the regression indicated that four predictors
were significant and these predictors explained 16.9% of the variance (R²=.169,
F=54.76, p<.001). As shown in Table 5, significant predictors were found using multiple
linear regression models from females only to predict the father’s approval using Age
Squared (β=.094, p<.001), Length (β=.017, p=.411), Parents’ Marital Quality (β=.112,
 p<.001), Parent’s Marital Status (β=.019, p=.424), Autonomy from family-of-origin
(β=.223, p<.001), Couple Relationship Quality (β=.228, p<.001), Socio-Economic Status
(β=.030, p=.114), and Education (β=.015, p=.529). The results of the regression
indicated that four predictors were significant, explaining 14.6% of the variance
(R²=.146, F=45.84, p<.001).

As shown in Table 6, significant predictors were found using multiple linear
regression models for males only to predict the mother’s approval using Age
Squared (β=.063, p=.010), Length (β=.003, p=.912), Parents’ Marital Quality (β=.054, p=.086),
Parent’s Marital Status (β=.008, p=.789), Autonomy from family-of-origin (β=.190,
p<.001), Couple Relationship Quality (β=.185, p<.001), Socio-Economic Status
(β=.029, p=.224), and Education (β=.035, p=.225). The results of the regression
indicated that four predictors were significant and those predictors explained 8.9% of the
variance (R²=.089, F=18.32, p<.001). As shown in Table 7, significant predictors were
found using multiple linear regression models of males only to predict the father’s
approval using Age Squared (β=.079, p<.001), Length (β=.006, p=.820), Parents’ Marital
Quality (β=.078, p=.012), Parent’s Marital Status (β=-.021, p=.485), Autonomy from family-of-origin (β=.189, p<.001), Couple Relationship Quality (β=.190, p<.001), Socio-Economic Status (β=.006, p=.813), and Education (β=.018, p=.523). The results of the regression equation indicated that four predictors were significant, explaining 9.7% of the variance (R2=.097, F=20.12, p<.001).

It was hypothesized (Ho1) that individuals at the age of 18 would receive the lowest parental approval, and that approval would increase as age increases. This was supported in the models when age squared was not included. However the results suggest that there was more of a curvilinear relationship than a linear relationship. Age was excluded from the models and age squared was tested in all models as the more important variables. Hypothesis 1 also postulated that there would be a curvilinear relationship between age and parental approval, which was supported when both female and male individuals predicted mother’s approval (β=.049, p=.012) (β=.063, p=.010) and father’s approval (β=.094 p<.001) (β=.079, p=.001) separately. This means that as individuals increase in age their mother’s approval and father’s approval also increased until age reached about 31. At this point mother’s and father’s approval actually began to decrease as age increased.

Hypothesis 2 postulated that individuals who had a relationship of two years or more would receive higher parental approval. This hypothesis was found to be non-significant in females (β=.002, p=.902, β=.017, p=.417) as well as males (β=-.003, p=.912, β=.006, p=.820). Length squared was also run to see if there might be a curvilinear relationship between length and parental approval. Length squared was also found to be non-significant and was eliminated from the models.
We hypothesized (Ho3) that both males and females would receive higher parental approval if their parents’ marital quality was higher. This hypothesis was supported when predicting the mother’s approval from only females ($\beta=.065$, $p=.007$), as well as when predicting the father’s approval from females ($\beta=.112$, $p<.001$) and males ($\beta=.078$, $p=.012$).

It was hypothesized (Ho4) that individuals whose parents were still married would report higher parental approval scores. This hypothesis was found to be non-significant in females ($\beta=.006$, $p=.793$, $\beta=.019$, $p=.424$) as well as males ($\beta=-.008$, $p=.789$, $\beta=-.021$, $p=.485$).

We hypothesized (Ho5) that individuals who reported higher autonomy from family-of-origin would also report higher parental approval. This hypothesis was supported when predicting mother’s approval from both females ($\beta=.284$, $p<.001$) and males ($\beta=.190$, $p<.001$), as well as when predicting father’s approval from females ($\beta=.223$, $p<.001$) and males ($\beta=.189$, $p<.001$).

It was hypothesized (Ho6) that both males and females who reported higher satisfaction with the quality of their relationship would also report higher parental approval. This hypothesis was supported when predicting mother’s approval from both females ($\beta=.273$, $p<.001$) and males ($\beta=.185$, $p<.001$), as well as when predicting father’s approval from females ($\beta=.224$, $p<.001$) and males ($\beta=.190$, $p<.001$).

As shown in Table 8, autonomy from family-of-origin and couple quality were the only predictors found to be significant in all models run for both males and females. Length of the relationship and parents’ marital status, both independent variables, as well as socio-economic status and education, both control variables, were found to be non-
significant in every model run. Parental marital quality was significant in all models except when males used it to predict mother’s approval. On the other hand, age was significant in all models except when males used it to predict father’s approval. Age squared was only found to be significant when females were used to predict mother’s or father’s approval.

**Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to examine possible predictors of parental approval for an adult child’s engaged relationship. We hypothesized that age, length of the relationship, parental marital quality, parental marital status, autonomy from family-of-origin, and couple relationship quality would account for a significant amount of the variance in predicting parental approval.

The first hypothesis was parental approval would increase as age increased from age 18, and then decrease (curvilinear relationship) with age. Past research has shown that those who marry younger than average (about 27 for men and 25 for women) have higher rates of marital instability (Bumpass & Sweet, 1972; Booth & Edwards, 1985; Glenn & Supancic, 1984; Martin and Bumpass, 1989; Heaton, 2002) and that couples who perceive greater parental approval have higher relationship stability and quality (Felmlee, Sprecher, & Bassin, 1990; Sprecher, & Felmlee, 1992; Hill & Peplau, 1998; Knobloch, & Donovan-Kicken, 2006). Therefore, parental approval was hypothesized to increase with age. Past research has also shown that when looking at individuals over age 30, parents may disapprove of the couple’s relationship because the marriage would take that child away from the parents when dependency has likely been created (Booth &
Edwards, 1985). From that research it was hypothesized that parental approval would eventually begin to decrease as age increased.

Results from this study indicate that as the age of individuals increased, so did their approval from both mother and father. Age also showed a curvilinear relationship with mother and father approval rating, meaning that after an initial increase in age and parental approval, age continued to increase but parental approval began to decrease at about age 31 for both men and women, supporting the previous research of Booth & Edwards (1985). This may indicate that both mothers and fathers use age to at least somewhat gauge the readiness of their child to enter marriage.

When children stay at home longer than usual, parents or child may become more dependent upon each other and the parents may fear a marriage that would take their child away from them. This would support past research conducted by Booth & Edwards (1985) who found parents may become dependent upon their adult child and disapprove of any romantic relationships.

The second hypothesis was parental approval would increase as the length of the adult child’s engaged relationship increased. Even though length of the courtship was shown to positively correlate with marital quality in other studies (Grover, Russell, Schumm, Paff-Bergen, 1985; Hansen, 2006) there was no significant relationship in this study to connect length of courtship with parental approval of the adult child’s engaged relationship. Length of the relationship was not significant for males or females or when predicting mother’s approval or father’s approval. Perhaps the parents’ premarital dating length mirrors the length of their child’s relationship, in which case if the parents had only dated for a short period of time they may not have taken into account the length of
their child’s relationship when lending approval and would have easily lent approval for shorter relationships. No previous literature connecting or disconnecting parental approval and length of the relationship was found.

The third hypothesis was individuals who rate their parents’ marital quality higher would rate their parental approval as higher. Parental marital quality was found to influence parental approval for females for both mother’s and father’s approval; for males it was only father’s approval that was predictive. These findings support previous literature that parents who have a higher marital quality tend to have higher quality relationships with their adolescent children and young adults (Hair, Moore, Hadley, Kaye, Day, & Orthner, 2009), and this higher quality relationship between parents and child may lead the child to share more about their lives with the parent and bring them closer, creating more trust, which may increase the likelihood of approval from the parents (Leslie et al., 1986). This study supports the concept that parents who are more satisfied with their own marriage are often closer to their children and are therefore more likely to be involved and lend parental approval. The opposite would also be supported; parents who are dissatisfied with their marital relationship may be less likely to lend parental approval due to a lack of closeness with their children. It could also be attributed to disillusionment with marriage; unhappily married people are likely to be more skeptical of their children finding happiness in marriage. Parents may also be more likely to lend approval with higher marital quality because they have experienced higher satisfaction in marriage and are more encouraging of children to marry.

These findings suggest a connection between parental marital quality and parental approval, but it is still unclear if parental approval is influenced more by the parents’
marital quality or by the level of closeness in the relationship between parent and child, which is often a result of the parents’ marital quality (Leslie et al., 1986).

Interestingly, parental marital quality was not significantly related to mother’s approval for males. Perhaps there is a factor in the relationship between mother and son that is not accounted for in this study. Past research (Updegraff, Delgado, & Wheeler, 2009) indicates that mothers spend more time with their daughters and worry more about them than with their sons. This may influence the level of closeness between mother and son and eventually influence approval from mother for the son’s engagement.

Another interpretation of the results could indicate that parents tend to see others’ relationships similar to their own relationship. If they are satisfied with their relationship they could see others’ relationships (including their offspring) as satisfying. Transference of the parental marital quality to the child’s engaged relationship by the parent may explain the connection between parental marital quality and parental approval.

From another point of view, the child may model the type of relationship they see in their parents. Children from a home where the parents are unsatisfied or satisfied with their marriage may model that same dynamic in their own romantic relationship. At that point parents may lend approval based on the child’s satisfaction with the relationship, not realizing that the relationship may actually mirror their own.

The fourth hypothesis was individuals whose parents are still married would score higher on the parental approval scale than those who have divorced. Results indicated that parental approval was not influenced by parental marital status for female or male participants when predicting mother’s or father’s approval. However, even though parents may not lend approval based on their own marital status, they may still worry
more than intact couples about the quality of the child’s future marriage. Previous research shows that children are more likely to experience divorce in their own marriage if their parents divorced (Glenn, 1987; Greenberg, 1982); however, no current research found addressed the extent to which divorced parents worry about the marital quality and stability of their offspring.

The fifth hypothesis was individuals who have higher autonomy from their family-of-origin would report higher parental approval than those who reported lower autonomy from family-of-origin. Autonomy from family-of-origin was shown to positively influence parental approval. Mother and father approval scores were significant and positively related to the child’s perceptions of approval for both males and females. Research indicates that when adolescents participate in their own decision-making, their emotional functioning and independence may also become more developed (Grolnick, Deci, Ryan, 1997), and emotional development may be taken into consideration when parents are lending approval of their adult child’s engagement. Parents who have encouraged their child’s independence and promoted their autonomy in decision making seem to more readily give support and approval of their child’s choice relative to marriage and marriage partner. This may be because more autonomous people select better partners, thus making it easier for parents to give approval.

Parents who have observed their child’s capacity to make wise decisions seem to be more likely to accept and have confidence in their child’s marriage choice. However, a family defined by low autonomy-granting may be less likely to approve not only of partner choice but of the relationship or decision to marry. Low autonomy granting families have poor boundaries because the child and parents’ boundaries may become
blurred which is also known as enmeshment. Enmeshment may interfere with the child’s developing sense of self (Leary & Burgess, 2004). It seems that in this situation parents may see their child as an extension of themselves and not approve of any relationship that could take them away from the home and the family.

There was no difference between males and females in the significance of this predictive variable, but the difference came in the slope of this variable for females and males. When predicting mother’s and father’s approval for both female and male individuals, the female models had a larger slope than the males, meaning that as autonomy from family-of-origin increases, parental approval increases at a faster rate for females than males. It seems that even though both mother and father take into account the autonomy of their male child when lending approval, they rely less on his autonomy and pull input from other variables such as college graduation, a good job, or emotional maturity. For females, autonomy from family-of-origin may be more influential because it may be harder for females to gain greater autonomy from their family-of-origin whereas males are naturally granted autonomy from family-of-origin without planning or effort (Bumpus, Crouter, & McHale, 2001).

The sixth hypothesis was individuals who reported higher satisfaction with the quality of their engaged relationship would score higher on parental approval than those who reported lower satisfaction with their relationship quality. Satisfaction within the couple relationship quality was found to be significant when predicting mother’s and father’s approval for both males and females. Once again the difference between females and males within this variable is not in the significance of the variable but in the slope of the variable. Female models had an increased slope of .010 compared to the male
models, meaning that as satisfaction of the relationship increases, parental approval for females increases at a slightly greater rate than for males. Perhaps this difference is due to gender differences between males and females. Females are likely to talk more about their relationship to their parents (Leslie et al., 1986; Russell & Saebel, 1997). As the couple relationship quality increases parents of daughters may be more likely to be aware of the greater satisfaction felt by the couple with the relationship and reflect that change in their approval of the relationship.

These findings are supported by previous literature that states that premarital relationship quality has been shown to be one of the most important factors in preventing marital dissolution or maintaining marital satisfaction (Jackson, 2010). Parental approval also impacts marital quality (Hill & Peplau, 1998) as well as the premarital relationship quality (Hill & Peplau, 1998; Felmlee et. al., 1990; Lewis 1973), and now we see that the premarital relationship quality influences parental approval. It seems that parents who observe their children in relationships of higher quality expect that quality to exist and be sustained into the marriage, and parents are then more likely to lend approval. It is also possible that as parents lend approval the premarital quality and marital quality of the child’s relationship increases. When parents see the quality of the relationship increase they are more confident that the relationship will lead to their child’s continued happiness and approval of the relationship could then increase as well. It is still unclear which variable comes first in the sequence or if the relationship is simple reciprocal. Further research will need to decipher if parental approval improves relationship quality or if relationship quality influences parental approval.
Perhaps the most interesting findings in this study come from how gender influenced the results. When comparing the results of both models (male and female) we found that all the variables are either significant or non significant for each gender in each model, with only one exception: parents’ marital quality predicting mother’s approval in males. However, the level of variance accounted for in each model changed drastically from nearly 17% in one model (females) down to only 8.6% (males) in another model. The two models with the highest accounted variance (16.9%, 14%) were the female models predicting mother’s and father’s approval respectively.

Sprecher and Felmlee (1992) found that it was approval from the family and friends of the female, and not the male, which was influential on the stability of the relationship. This led us to expect that the female models would be more predictive of parental approval in terms of R2, which proved to be accurate. Results from this study indicated that these variables are better at predicting parental approval for females than for males. What gender differences could attribute to making it easier to predict parental approval for the engaged relationships of the adult daughters and more difficult to do so for the engaged relationship of the adult sons? Females are known to talk more often about relationships, more openly, and about more topics than males (Butler & Shalit-Nagger, 2008). Daughters are therefore more likely to talk and inform their parents about their romantic relationships. The more parents and daughters communicate about the relationship the more likely parents are to approve of the relationship because they are not only well informed about the quality and satisfaction of the relationship but they are also closer to and trust their daughters more (Leslie et al., 1986).
Parental approval may be more influential for females because they place a higher importance on parental approval than males. Past research finds that females put greater effort into relationships (Butler & Shalit-Nagger, 2008) and parental approval may be seen by females as a personal validation that they are succeeding in their romantic relationship. Females tend to avoid conflict in order to maintain social harmony (Saito & Ohbuchi, 2007) and females may therefore choose partners that their parents would approve of in order to avoid conflict within the family.

Parents may also worry more about and be more protective of their daughters than their sons, thus drawing conclusions from specific information when lending approval such as age, relationship satisfaction, etc. However, for their sons, parents who may not worry or be as protective of their sons, may lend approval without investing into the why they lend approval. Parental approval may be more important to females because this new marriage is often how young females differentiate from their families while males differentiate earlier in life through military service or serving a religious mission for their church.

The highest variance accounted for was 16.9% for females when predicting mother’s approval. The higher variance in the relationship between mother and daughter may be due in part to the theory that mothers are predisposed to create more intimate relationships with their daughters (Butler & Shalit-Nagger, 2008). The level of intimacy present between mother and daughter is not present in any other parent child relationship and may increase the importance of parental approval to the daughter. The high intimacy and frequent communication between mother and daughter gives mothers the potential to
influence the partner choice of the daughters. This also allows the daughter to present information about her fiancé in a way that would elicit approval from the mother.

Limitations

First, because all of the RELATE Evaluations were completed by the engaged adult child, questions regarding their parents (i.e. parental marital quality, parental approval) were measures only of their perceived indication of each variable. Research has shown that perceived parental approval is more influential than actual parental approval (Felmlee, 2001), but future research will need to look at whether perceived parental marital quality or actual parental marital quality is more influential to parental approval.

Out of all the individuals who participated in this study 26.2% identified themselves as members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (LDS) and have therefore been influenced by the emphasis placed on the importance of marriage in the LDS church (Heaton, Bahr, & Jacobson, 2004). In the LDS culture it is more common, and perhaps even expected, for couples to date for shorter lengths and marry younger. Future research will need to investigate how length of the relationship influences parental approval with a data set where the individuals participating accurately reflect the U.S. population. While fewer LDS young adults remain single compared to the general U. S. population, Heaton, et al. (2004) has found that in most cases LDS marriages are not much different than the rest of the U.S. population.

Also, the variable Parents’ Marital Status did not actually report current marital status of the parent, but instead reported whether or not the biological parents of the individual ever divorced. If they never divorced they were coded as married, but if there
was a divorce they were coded as divorced even if they remarried afterward. This is limiting to our findings because parents who were coded as divorced may have remarried and been more optimistic towards marriage than someone who is still dealing with the effects of their divorce. This may be one reason why this variable was non-significant in this study.

*Future Research*

None of the current research findings have separated males and females to understand the influence of gender with age on marital stability and gender with parental approval on marital stability and quality. Future research will need to address whether age at marriage is more predictive of marital quality and stability for both males and females.

In this study, parental optimism towards marriage was not measured. Future research may measure the relationship between parental optimism toward their own marriage and parental approval of their adult child’s engaged relationship.

Partner choice and autonomy from family-of-origin are likely connected. Future research will need to measure the relationship between autonomy from family-of-origin and quality of partner choice.

*Implications for Couple Therapists*

A transgenerational model would be beneficial to implement when working with couples and parents presenting with parental approval issues. Transgenerational therapy looks at the presenting problem as a generational pattern passed down from the family-of-origin (Goldenberg, 2008). Transgenerational fits well with this study because many of the variables influencing parental approval come from the parents’ marriage and need
to not only be differentiated from the child’s relationship but also need to be resolved so as to not continue to pass the pattern on to the next generation.

When premarital couples present themselves for therapy it will be important for the therapist to look at different factors of the relationship that will affect their future marital quality and stability. Parental approval has been demonstrated to be one of those important factors. As therapists discuss the importance of parental approval on the relationship, they will be able to facilitate discussion with the couple regarding how age, gender, parental marital quality, etc. may impact parental approval and their parents’ response to their choice of partner. Therapists should be advised to ask the couple whether they have perceived approval from both their parents early in premarital counseling. The therapist could communicate to the couple how parental approval could likely influence their relationship stability and quality now as well as into the future.

Some parents may disapprove of their child’s engaged relationship due to the age of the young adult. Parents may need help understanding that age alone does not define readiness for marriage and the therapist can facilitate discussion about other possible variables that could contribute to readiness for marriage.

Without investigation of the research available, clinicians may jump to the conclusion that parents do not approve of the relationship because the length of the relationship is too short. However, results from this study report that is not the case. Exploring other reasons why parents would not approve of the relationship will help the couple critically examine their relationship. Clinicians should ask questions to assess the couple’s satisfaction of the relationship, individual autonomy from family-of-origin, and
parental marital quality. All of these can be assessed for using instruments such as RELATE, PREPARE, etc.

Parents who are dissatisfied in their marriage may be less likely to approve of the adult child’s engagement. The disapproval from parents may have more to do with the parent and the quality of their marriage than with the engaged couple. Allowing the couple the opportunity to connect the parents’ disapproval with the parental marital quality may allow the engaged couple to move forward in their relationship and engagements with more confidence. The therapist will also help the parents to differentiate the quality of their relationship from the quality of their adult child engaged relationship.

Also, parents who raised their child in a family which allowed a low level of autonomy from the family-of-origin may not as easily approve of their child’s engagement. It will be important for the couple to identify if there is a lack of trust between parent and child or if the child has actually made a poor partner choice, partly due to the low autonomy family. If the therapist identifies that the adult child has indeed made a poor partner choice, the therapist will need to work with the couple to establish a realistic picture of what marriage will be like with their partner. Then the therapist will need to provide a safe and secure environment, where the individual can decide to dissolve the relationship or continue towards marriage. When a lack of trust is present between the parent and the adult child, the therapist can work with the adult child to increase trust in self and ability to make good decisions independently. When the opportunity to work with the parents is available the therapist will work with them to increase trust in their adult child and their decisions.
It could also be that parents don’t approve because of the child’s lack of satisfaction with the relationship. In this case the child may not even realize that they are unhappy in the relationship. The therapist should work to increase awareness of relationship satisfaction with the adult child.

No matter what situation the therapist is presented with, it is important to be familiar with gender issues surrounding parental approval. Males may not be as concerned with receiving parental approval as their females partners might be. Therapists will need to work with the male to help him understand and appreciate how important this is to him and his partner.

In summary, results indicate that age, parental marital quality, autonomy from family-of-origin, and couple relationship quality all influence parental approval for males and females. Noteworthy is the findings in the difference of the variance of mother’s approval compared to father’s approval. There is a strong gender difference between mothers and fathers and the ability to predict approval. Length of the relationship and parental marital status did not influence parental approval in this study. However, four of the six hypotheses were supported in the results.
References

*Sourcebook of family theories and methods: A contextual approach*. (pp. 419-450).


doi:10.2307/583577


doi:10.1080/01494920902733500


mexican immigrant families. *Sex Roles*, 60(7-8), 559-574. doi:10.1007/s11199-008-9527-y
### Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Sample

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Table 3. Mean Scores and Standard Deviations for all Variables

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51
Table 4. Predictors of Mother’s Approval for Females

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Table 5. Predictors of Father’s Approval for Females

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