

# Understanding the Relationship Between Family Structure and Romantic History

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## Literature Review

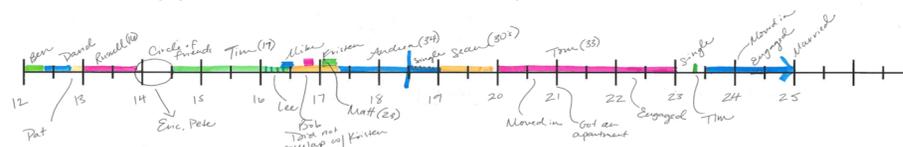
Previous studies have been conducted on the association between family structure (e.g., married, divorced, single-parent) and individual outcomes. Specifically, family structure has been shown to influence romantic relationships in adolescents and young adults. Pan (2014) found that young adults who experienced parental divorce at or before age 12 had a greater likelihood of being involved in romantic relationships and had more romantic partners. In terms of attachment with romantic partners, Tyrell and her colleagues (2016) proposed that adolescents in two-parent family have higher romantic attachment (i.e., a dimension of trust, communication, and alienation) than those from single-parent families, and individuals from families with high conflict and few positive interactions are more anxiously attached to their romantic partners (Jelić & Kamenov, 2015). Similarly, Feldman, Gowen, and Fisher (1998) found that family's power, roles, rules and relationships have an effect on romantic attachment. Several studies have shown that the associations between family structure and romantic relationship outcomes for adolescents and young adults can also be explained by family dynamics, such as closeness between parents and children (Cui, Gordon, & Wickrama, 2016), children's attitudes about sexuality and marriage (Whitbeck, Simons, & Kao, 1994), parental support and supervision (Valle & Tillman, 2014), and family conflict (Heifetz, Connolly, Pepler & Craig, 2010). From previous research, we can see family structure does influence adolescent and young adults' romantic involvement and the extent of romantic attachments, but few studies have explored the association between family structure and romantic quality or intensity. Specifically, relationship intensity includes intimacy (both sexual and emotional), commitment, and consolidation (i.e., intertwining of lives). This study addresses the role of family structure in determining outcomes across several domains of romance, and across the romantic histories beginning in adolescence through early adulthood.

## Methods

This study was a mixed methods design. Participants (n=34) were asked to complete basic demography information and 1-2 hours in-depth interviews. Interviewers created a timeline of every relationship the participant was involved in, and also constructed a genogram of their families or origin. During the interviews, participants rated each person on five variables (Intensity: emotional intimacy, sexual intimacy, commitment and consolidation; overall quality) on a scale from 0-100. **Sample.** The sample included 20 women (57%) and 14 men (43%), ranging in age from 24-40 years ( $m = 31$ ). The majority of participants reported their sexual orientation as heterosexual ( $n = 26$ ), while the remaining participants identified as bisexual ( $n = 5$ ), and gay or lesbian ( $n = 4$ ). In terms of race, the sample included 26 Whites, 4 Asians, 3 African Americans and 2 Latinos. Twenty-four participants had a bachelor's degree or more; the other 11 individuals had a high school degree, some college, associates degree, or vocational training. Participants reported their current relationship status as single ( $n = 9$ ), casually dating ( $n = 3$ ), exclusively dating ( $n = 8$ ), engaged ( $n = 1$ ), or married ( $n = 14$ ). **Analysis.** Because each participant had a different number of relationships that they rated, we first had to calculate average emotional intimacy, sexual intimacy, commitment, consolidation, and quality for each participant. To do this, we added the values for each variable for every rated relationship and divided by the number of partners. For example, we added together the ratings that a participant gave for each relationship's emotional intimacy and divided by his or her partners in total to get the average emotional intimacy. We then combined overall emotional intimacy, sexual intimacy, commitment, and consolidation to create the overall relational intensity. We also categorized participants into two groups based on family structure - married parents ( $n = 19$ ) and non-married parents (i.e., never married or a parent died when they were young;  $n = 16$ ). A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to assess group differences in relationship intensity and quality based on family structure. After the initial analysis, we re-calculated the five variables (emotional intimacy, sexual intimacy, commitment, consolidation, and quality) for each individual by grouping their relationships based on the participants' age when the partnership began. The partnerships were divided into four age groups: adolescent (<18), early emerging adulthood (18-25), later emerging adulthood (26-30), and adulthood (30+). In the final analysis, we ran a series of MANOVAs for each age range.

## Results

We first ran a MANOVA using family structure as the independent variable and emotional intimacy, sexual intimacy, consolidation, commitment, and quality as dependent variables. This model was not significant ( $F(5, 28) = 0.219, p = 0.951$ ; Wilk's  $\Lambda = 0.962$ ) so we did not explore between-subjects effects. Next, we ran MANOVAs for each of the 4 age groups defined above. In the adolescent age group, the model was not significant ( $F(5, 23) = 1.322, p = 0.29$ ; Wilk's  $\Lambda = 0.777$ ), however, the mean differences on several variables were large enough that we evaluated the between-subjects effects. We found that sexual intensity was significantly higher for participants who grew up without married parents ( $p = 0.015$ ) and consolidation reached trend level significance ( $p = 0.063$ ). Because of these significant findings, we also ran a t-test to determine family structure differences on intensity (combination of emotional and sexual intimacy, consolidation, and commitment). The results of this test also reached trend-level significance ( $p = 0.059$ ). The MANOVAs for early emerging adulthood (18-25), late emerging adulthood (26-30), and adulthood (30+) were not significant.



## Discussion

### 1 Summary

The main goal in our study was to explore whether family background is related to romantic intensity and quality. We identified two family types, people from married families and people from non-married families. First, we examine overall intensity and quality for each partner and then we divided romantic history by age stage into four groups to determine whether these impacts vary with participants' age at the time of the relationship. The findings shows that, on the one hand, family structure did have influence on people's relationships especially sexual intimacy of their adolescent romances. On the other hand, family structure did not really affect participants' romantic intensity and quality after adolescence.

### 2 Connection to Previous Research

The results relate to previous research showing that youth in non-married parent families tend to seek more sexual intimacy from their romantic partners. In addition, in our findings, we can see adolescents from non-married parents have higher consolidation and intensity than married parent family (Cui, Fincham, & Durtschi, 2011). The results may also suggest that the relationship between family structure and romantic relationships is possibly mediated by other variables related to the nature of the relationships between parents and children (Valle & Tillman, 2014), the level of family conflict (Heifetz, et al., 2010), supportive parenting, or consistent discipline (Tyrell, et al., 2016).

### 3 Future Research

For further research, we should consider using our qualitative data from interviews to see whether and how participants' family quality and dynamics shape romantic intensity and quality across each age phase. Also, we can assess whether the relationship between family and romantic outcomes differs by race, education, and sexual orientation.

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