

RISKY FAMILY BACKGROUNDS AND THEIR IMPACT ON RELATIONSHIP  
OUTCOMES IN A YOUNG ADULT DATING SAMPLE

by

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Abstract of Thesis

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## Abstract

### Risky Family Backgrounds and Their Impact on Relationship Outcomes in a Young Adult Dating Sample

This study explored associations between individuals' risky family backgrounds from childhood and the implications for relationship outcomes (satisfaction and positive and negative interaction qualities) in young adult dating relationships. A sample of 100 dating couples completed self-report measures to address risky family backgrounds and current relationship satisfaction. Couples also participated in a videotaped discussion about a source of conflict in their relationship that was later coded by trained experimenters. Associations between these variables were analyzed using the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM; Cook & Kenny, 2005). The findings suggest that male risky family backgrounds were correlated with their own and their partners' positive and negative interaction quality. Female risky family backgrounds were not predictive of relationship outcomes for either partner. These findings may potentially be explained by gender differences in childhood friendships, willingness to seek counseling, or diverse coping skills used by males and females. Additional potential explanations for findings along with implications for the counseling field are discussed.

## **Introduction**

### **The Current Study**

The goal of the current study is to examine whether risky family environments and interactions in childhood have lasting effects as children grow up and enter into dating relationships in young adulthood. Previous research suggests that these early experiences shape children's perception of communication and conflict resolution and may further contribute to the ways in which individuals relate with others as they grow older (Crockett & Randall, 2006; Dinero, Conger, Shaver, Widaman, & Larsen-Rife, 2008; Gardner, Busby, & Brimhall, 2007). While most of the research that exists regarding this phenomenon deals with married couples, the current study puts a focus on dating partners and the role of relatively early and formative intimate relationships. Specifically, this study investigates whether experiences from childhood family of origin set the stage for positive and negative communication interactions in young adult dating relationships, which, in turn, may further contribute to relationship satisfaction.

### **Justification**

Given that people experiencing relationship distress are more likely to seek counseling and other mental health services than those who do not have this distress (Schonbrun & Whisman, 2010), studying associations between early childhood experiences and relationship functioning can be helpful to the field for several reasons. First, when individuals are able to understand their own styles of communicating and handling conflict, they may become better able to explore how these patterns have

developed over their lifetime and evaluate their effectiveness in everyday life. As people gain knowledge about ways these patterns of interacting have been passed on, they will be better able to understand their responses and learn what changes need to be made in order to have more positive interactions in their relationships. In a romantic relationship when both partners have this self-awareness, they can use the information to develop their own model of how their relationship will work. Partners are able to draw from what they learned in childhood to create an approach that fits both of their needs and gives them the opportunity to practice good communication skills along the way.

Additionally, as research on this topic becomes more prevalent and widely accepted, perhaps couples will feel less stigma to seek counseling as a preventative step to help them improve their interactions with each other (and with their children). Family counseling to help identify ineffective ways of communicating and handling conflict would be one option to help not only improve the parent's relationship, but also improve the quality of the messages they are sending to their children. This may help children down the road as they enter into romantic relationships of their own.

Seeking counseling for relationship issues is not limited to only couples and families. In fact, individuals who come to counseling for depression, anxiety, or other mental health concerns often times address relationships issues. For this reason, further research on how these relationship dynamics are created and how to improve their quality can have positive outcomes for clients coming to counseling for many different reasons.

In the existing literature surrounding couple relationships, the majority of research focuses on married couples, therefore oftentimes dating couples are overlooked. With the gradual increase in the age at which people are choosing to marry, it is particularly important to continue to study dating couples and their relationships. Because of the growing number of years people are spending in dating relationships, studying this cohort is not only important to improve the quality of these relationships, but also to help with premarital counseling and assisting individuals with making the decision if and when to marry.

### **Hypothesis**

This study tests direct associations between young adults' retrospective ratings of risky family environments in childhood and concurrent intimate relationship outcomes. Based on previous research, I hypothesize that individuals with more negative experiences in their family of origin, reflected by higher self-ratings of risky family background in childhood (Taylor, Learner, Sage, Lehman, & Seeman, 2004), will report lower relationship satisfaction in their current romantic relationship. Also, these individuals are predicted to display more negative interaction qualities with their dating partner (negative affect and conflict) along with fewer positive qualities (communication, support/validation, positive affect, and remaining engaged) during their conflict discussion as coded by trained observers.

The current study examines these associations between risky family backgrounds and relationship interactions and outcomes using a dyadic analytic approach. The analysis

further accounts for potentially confounding variables such as relationship length and the number of parental divorces experienced. In sum, higher levels of risky family interactions from each partner's childhood will predict less positive outcomes and more negative outcomes for both partners in the current relationship while accounting for partners' interdependent data and potential covariates.

## **Literature Review**

### **Risky Family Backgrounds**

The impact of risky family backgrounds on individuals and couples is very important to the field of counseling. "Risky families" can be described as families that exhibit much conflict/aggression, lack of warmth, lack of affection, or neglect in place of a warm and nurturing environment (Taylor et al., 2004). When violence, abuse, lack of warmth and nurturing, or high levels of arguing occur within the home, there is a great risk of these variables having a lasting impact on the individuals later in life, evidenced through lowered relationship satisfaction in adulthood, more physical health problems, and increased psychopathology (Taylor et al., 2004). Repetti and colleagues (2002) found several childhood emotional and behavioral issues that are associated with the presence of this type of negative environment including anxiety, conduct disorder, antisocial behavior, and suicide (Repetti, Taylor, & Seeman, 2002). Higher levels of depressive symptoms (Sen, Kranzler, Krystal, Speller, Chan, Gelernter, & Guille, 2010), increased reactivity to stress (Miller & Chen, 2010), decreased amounts of sleep at night (Hanson & Chen, 2010), heightened levels of explicit anxiety (Edge, Ramel, Drabant, Kuo, Parker,

& Gross, 2009), and lack of emotional regulation (Taylor, Eisenberger, Saxbe, Lehman, & Lieberman, 2006) have also been linked to risky family backgrounds in young adult samples as captured by the Risky Families Questionnaire (Feliti et al., 1998; Taylor et al., 2004).

In addition to all of the individual effects that risky family backgrounds are associated with, there are also many aspects of relationships that can be affected. Several research studies have supported this notion and found risky family backgrounds to negatively influence the development of social skills, response to stress, and the ability to control and regulate emotions, all of which are important when interacting with others in interpersonal relationships (Repetti et al., 2002; Taylor et al., 2004). While witnessing extreme levels of conflict in the home has been linked to individuals' response to anger growing up and into adulthood, all conflict has the potential to affect children and their later romantic relationships. Regular exposure to conflict (regardless of the severity) is correlated with children becoming "sensitized to anger" at a young age, which can create greater distress, fear, and anxiety when interacting with others (Davies & Cummings, 1998; Repetti et al., 2002).

### **Experiences in Childhood and their Impact on Adult Relationships**

Oftentimes children use their parents' relationship as a guide in which they learn many direct and indirect lessons about how relationships function and what they should look like. Many researchers suggest that this observational learning plays a key role in how individuals learn relationship skills and how to interact with others as they enter into

their own romantic relationships. In many ways parents act as role models for their children in this regard, so it is not surprising that children often replicate the relationship style they observed from their parents while growing up. It is by seeing these relationships and evaluating their functionality that children set up expectations and beliefs about romantic relationships for themselves in their future (Roisman, Collins, Sroufe, & Egeland, 2005; Weigel, 2007).

Since it is often from our family of origin that we learn how relationships work, it is important to study risky family backgrounds and how they can impact the messages that children receive about managing conflict and communicating effectively in relationships. Based on Conger and colleague's research (2000), the prevalence of divorce, emotional abuse and interpersonal violence within the home in the family of origin were all predictors of these same acts being found in the children's relationships as adults. In addition to these negative events, many participants also reported more unstable, distressed, and aggressive relationship characteristics with their partners, along with difficulties in interpersonal communication. Problem solving skills, conflict management, and affect regulation, can all be compromised when effective communication patterns are lacking as models for children in their family of origin from a young age (Conger et al., 2000).

Similar to a risky family background, stressful or traumatic life events from childhood have also been found to have a negative impact on relationships along with lowered marital satisfaction in adulthood. This has been attributed in part to disturbances

in intimacy, fear of repeat victimization, emotional avoidance, and issues with effectively expressing emotions (Whisman, 2006). In some cases when the trauma experienced is severe, such as childhood sexual abuse, the impact on adult relationships can be even more profound. Walker and colleagues (2011) studied conflict styles in romantic relationships and found that when one or both of the partners had a history of sexual abuse there was a much greater presence of contempt and defensiveness compared with relationships of individuals who had not suffered this trauma. Individuals who had experienced abuse were also more likely to rate themselves and their partners more negatively for these variables, contributing to a lowered level of satisfaction in their relationship functioning (Walker, Sheffield, Larson, & Holman, 2011).

A history of alcoholism within the family of origin has also been found to be correlated with negative adult relationship outcomes. In their study of 401 college students who grew up with an alcohol-abusing parent, Kelley and colleagues (2005) found that these individuals were more likely to display anxious and avoidant behaviors in their romantic relationships than students who did not grow up surrounded by alcoholism. Students who grew up in a home with alcoholism also reported lower levels of physical affection and support, both of which have been found to correlate with decreased quality in adult relationships (Dalton, Frick-Horbury, & Kitzmann, 2006; Kelley et al., 2005).

The influence that the family of origin has on adult romantic relationships has also been explored in terms of attachment figures such as a parent or caregiver (Conger et

al., 2000; Dinero et al., 2008). Because the attachment orientation can serve as a predictor of satisfaction and emotional quality of future relationships, it is important to look at these early interactions and be aware of the types of messages that have been displayed in childhood so that we can more easily work with couples whose attachment styles differ (Simpson, Collins, Tran, & Haydon, 2007). It is not only insecure attachments that are carried out from childhood into adult relationships, but secure attachments as well. Individuals who experienced a secure attachment paired with supportive and involved parenting while growing up reported higher levels of both commitment and satisfaction in their romantic dating relationships at age 20 (Conger et al., 2000). They also showed greater warmth and less hostility with their romantic partner than individuals who grew up with more negative parenting. These positive interactions in the parent-child dyad in adolescence were found to predict attachment security in relationships at age 25 (Dinero et al., 2008). Positive correlations have also been found between self-reports of quality of family interactions and reports of happiness in romantic relationships (Conger et al., 2000).

While it is possible for these attachment styles to change over time, it is more common for the style that develops in childhood to remain with an individual into adulthood (Bowlby, 1988). Because these attachment styles tend to remain constant for people over time, the exploration of these early interactions from the family of origin, along with potentially risky family backgrounds, are key to the study of adult romantic relationships (Dinero et al., 2008). Attachment has also been examined in the context of

couples' relationship satisfaction. In the case of anxious attachment styles, one possible explanation that Tucker and Anders (1999) suggest is lowered accuracy in interpreting their partner's expressions of love. Similarly, individuals with insecure attachments were more likely to report lowered relationship satisfaction (Rogers, Bidwell, & Wilson, 2005).

### **Relationship Satisfaction**

In addition to secure attachment and positive interactions in the family of origin, there are many other factors that contribute to relationship satisfaction in adulthood which can be extremely useful to the field of counseling. Learning what contributes to a person's perception of relationship satisfaction can help counselors in facilitating couple interactions and helping them to communicate their needs to their partner to improve the quality of their relationship and day-to-day interactions.

The ability to communicate and resolve conflict has been identified as key indicators of relationship satisfaction. When couples communicate with each other effectively, they are able to do preventative work on their relationship and in some instances keep some potentially conflictual topics from turning into a disagreement (Domingue & Mollen, 2009; Ogolsky, 2007). In a study of 736 couples, Gardner and colleagues (2007) found that males' and females' reports of conflict management in the relationship (both their own and their partner's) were correlated to relationship satisfaction. This correlation was also found in Cramer's study of 199 undergraduate students. Couples with negative conflict styles along with couples who rated their conflict

to be “not satisfactorily resolved” tended to report lowered satisfaction with their current relationship (Cramer, 2000). All of these studies are consistent with Gottman’s finding that negative interactions between partners, especially when high levels of contempt and hostility were present, are associated with lower relationship satisfaction (Gardner et al., 2007; Gottman, 1994; Heyman, 2001).

Previous research has also identified correlations in regards to conflict management and how similarly partners cope with this conflict. When couples believed that they had similar coping skills for handling problems, they reported higher levels of relationship satisfaction and closeness to their partner (Ptacek & Dodge, 1995). This notion that similarities correlate with satisfaction also extends to individual characteristics that both partners bring to the relationship. This was found to be especially true in couples who reported the dimension of similarity to be important to them (Lutz-Zois et al., 2006). Since communication and conflict resolution skills are both highly important to the longevity and quality of a relationship, one would expect these same results to be true if couples respond to these dimensions similarly, or are able to identify some sort of compromise with how they are going to respond to these issues in their relationship (Luo, 2009).

## **Methods**

### **Participants and Procedure**

For this study 100 heterosexual dating couples were recruited from Madison, Wisconsin to participate in a dating study. The study was advertised as a way to learn

about “the connections between romantic relationships and individuals’ well-being,” posted on flyers both on campus and throughout the community. In order to participate, couples were required to be dating each other exclusively for at least 1 month. Couples who were currently married, had been married previously, or had children were ineligible for participation. There were 244 couples who showed an interest in participation via email or telephone, 101 of which consented to take part in the study. One same-sex couple was excluded from this study due to the focus on gender differences during data analysis. For additional recruitment details, please see Papp (2010).

Couples in the sample for the current study had been dating for an average of 22.7 months ( $SD = 18.0$  months, range = 1-72 months), and 22% of the couples were cohabitating. The ages of male and female participants averaged 21.0 ( $SD = 3.1$  years, range = 18-36) and 20.3 years ( $SD = 2.4$  years, range = 18-30) respectively. Couples who participated attended a laboratory-based session on campus that lasted between 1.5-2 hours. These sessions were facilitated by trained research assistants from the Human Development and Family Studies Department. Individuals gave consent prior to participation and were given \$10 each upon completion. The study was first approved by the UW-Madison’s Institutional Review Board when the study began, and then by the UW-Whitewater Institutional Review Board when this thesis was proposed.

## Measures

### Risky Family Questionnaire

As part of their participation, couples completed the Risky Family Questionnaire (Feliti et al., 1998; Taylor et al., 2004) to identify experiences from their childhood. They were asked to think back to their family environment while they were growing up and rate their experiences of each item on a scale consisting of 1 (rarely or none of the time), 2 (a little bit), 3 (quite a bit), or 4 (most of the time). Items on this scale explored a range of both positive and negative experiences that may have been present during participants' childhoods such as physical or verbal abuse, shouting, lack of affection, and adult supervision. Scores for this measure were computed by reverse coding the items that reflected warmth and support from the family of origin and then summing the scores for each item to come up with a total score of risky family characteristics. This questionnaire has been used in combination with interviews regarding risky family backgrounds to help validate the items and had a Cronbach's alpha of .86 (Taylor et al., 2006).

### Conflict Discussion

Couples also participated in a discussion about a source of conflict in their relationship. First, the topics were selected using the Areas of Disagreement Scale (Roberts, Tsai, & Coan, 2007) where both partners individually rated areas of conflict (e.g., money, communication, sex, alcohol/drug use, their partner's family). They indicated the intensity of these problems along with how long they had been a source of

tension in their relationships. After sharing their responses, couples chose one area and began a videotaped 7.5 minute discussion about the topic.

Following the conversation, both partners were asked to complete a questionnaire regarding their feelings about their conflict discussion. Each partner rated emotions on a scale of 1 (*very low*) to 9 (*very high*) that they felt during the conversation, along with emotions they thought their partner experienced. Using this same rating scale they also identified the degree to which the problem was solved for each partner, the contribution from each partner to create and solve the problem, and how similar this discussion was to their interactions outside of the lab.

Trained coders reviewed the tapes of the couples' interactions and coded them using an adapted version of the Interactional Dimensions Coding System (Julien, Markman, & Lindahl, 1989; Kline et al., 2004). Based on this coding system, Cox and colleagues (1999) developed combinations of psychometrically sound variables to produce positive and negative composite scores. Observed positive interactions were characterized by positive affect, support/validation, communication and lack of withdrawal and observed negative interactions consisted of negative affect and conflict. All of these variables were coded by trained observers with interrater reliability of .75-.95 (Cox, Paley, Burchinal, & Payne, 1999). In this sample, each couple interaction was rated by two independent coders. Upon completion coders compared ratings and discussed discrepancies until all their ratings were in agreement within one point. Three

couples' interactions were not coded due to recording malfunctions or lack of consent for videotaping.

### Relationship Satisfaction

In order to assess relationship satisfaction in couples, each partner completed the Couples Satisfaction Index (CSI; Funk & Rogge, 2007). Couples assessed their happiness and satisfaction in their current relationship using a differential rating scale. This version of the measure used for this study consisted of 32 items that resulted in a total relationship satisfaction score ranging from 1-161. The CSI has been evaluated with other relationship satisfaction measures such as the Dyadic Adjustment Test and Marital Adjustment Test and was found to have considerably lower levels of error than these widely used and accepted assessments with a Cronbach's alpha of .98 (Funk & Rogge, 2007).

### Other Relationship Information

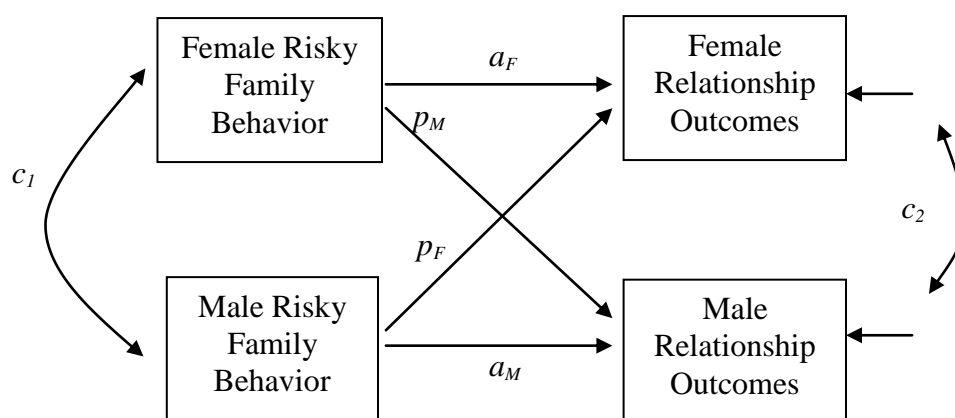
Couples also answered questions about their relationship history which included information regarding the length of the current relationship, number of serious romantic relationships they have been involved in, and whether or not they experienced a parental divorce in childhood. The original study included several additional assessments, however, only those related to risky family background, relationships satisfaction, and conflict resolution behaviors have been included for the current study.

### Data Analysis Plan

The current study uses the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM; Cook &

Kenny, 2005; Kashy & Kenny, 2000) to examine risky family backgrounds and their effects on relationship satisfaction and positive and negative interactions. This model accounts for the fact that both partners are reporting on the same relationship and therefore will likely have some similarities in their responses. The APIM looks at how a participant's independent variable (in this case, a risky family background) is related both to their own dependent variables as well as their partners'. Outcomes from this type of analysis result in both actor effects and partner effects. Actor effects show the relation between an individual's risky family background and their own relationship outcomes. Partner effects examine how an individual's risky family background relates to their partner's relationship outcomes.

*Figure 1.* Actor-Partner Interdependence Model is used to test associations between male and female risky family background and their relationship outcomes (relationship satisfaction and positive and negative interaction).  $c_1$  = correlated predictor variables;  $c_2$  = correlated outcomes;  $a_M$  and  $a_F$  = actor effects for males and females, respectively;  $p_M$  and  $p_F$  = partner effects for males and females, respectively.



## Results

After analyzing the data there were several strong correlations that emerged.

These associations between study variables can be found in Table 1. Male and female risky family backgrounds were positively correlated and found to be significant.

Significant positive correlations were also found between male and female reports of relationship satisfaction, their observed positive interactions, and their observed negative interactions. Significant correlations emerged within female relationships outcomes and within male relationships outcomes as well (see Table 1).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations of Risky Family Behavior and Relationship Outcomes (Couples Satisfaction and Positive and Negative Interactions).

Correlations for females are found above the diagonal and correlations for males are found below.

	1	2	3	4
1. Risky Family Behavior	.213*	-.157	-.012	-.015
2. Couples Satisfaction Index	.091	.622**	.299**	-.268**
3. Observed Positive Interaction	-.181	.320**	.443**	-.630**
4. Observed Negative Interaction	.216*	-.231	-.639**	.521**
Female M	15.65	137.26	5.28	3.35
Female SD	4.57	16.86	.97	1.48
Female Range	11-40	86-161	2.38-7.25	1.25-7.5
Male M	16.37	136.31	5.17	3.12
Male SD	5.00	16.90	1.02	1.42
Male Range	11-39	72-161	2.5-7.13	1.0-7.5

+ p < .10 ; \* p < .05 ; \*\*p < .01

Table 2. APIM Results: Associations Between Risky Family Behavior and Relationship Outcomes

	Y= Relationship Satisfaction		
	b	SE	t
Male Actor Effects, $a_m$	0.298	0.350	0.85
Female Actor Effects, $a_f$	-0.667	0.377	-1.77+
Male Partner Effects, $p_m$	0.078	0.384	0.20
Female Partner Effects, $p_f$	0.395	0.343	1.15
	Y= Observed Positive Interaction		
	b	SE	t
Male Actor Effects, $a_m$	-0.038	0.021	-1.80+
Female Actor Effects, $a_f$	0.009	0.022	0.40
Male Partner Effects, $p_m$	0.006	0.020	0.81
Female Partner Effects, $p_f$	-0.048	0.020	-2.45*
	Y= Observed Negative Interaction		
	b	SE	t
Male Actor Effects, $a_m$	0.063	0.028	2.31*
Female Actor Effects, $a_f$	-0.022	0.032	-0.69
Male Partner Effects, $p_m$	-0.019	0.031	-0.61
Female Partner Effects, $p_f$	0.077	0.029	2.62**

+  $p < .10$  ; \*  $p < .05$  ; \*\* $p < .01$

### Does a risky family background from childhood predict relationship satisfaction?

Associations between risky family backgrounds and relationship satisfaction were tested using the APIM and can be found in Table 2. When looking at these variables,

results showed a negative marginally significant female actor effect (female risky family background related to their own outcomes) for relationship satisfaction. There were no other significant actor effects found for this relationship outcome variable.

### **Does a risky family background from childhood predict positive and negative interaction qualities?**

Similar to relationship satisfaction, the associations between risky family backgrounds and positive observed interaction (e.g., positive affect) and negative observed interaction (e.g., negative affect) were calculated with the APIM. Positive interactions were characterized by positive affect, support/validation, communication, and lack of withdrawal, while negative interactions combined conflict with negative affect. Using the APIM, there was a negative marginally significant male actor effect (male risky family background related to their own outcomes) for positive interactions along with a negative significant female partner effect (male risky family backgrounds related to their female partners' outcomes).

Actor and partner effects were also found for observed negative interactions using the APIM. Similar to the observed positive interactions, male actor effects and female partner effects were found, this time with the male actor effect (male risky family background related to their own outcomes) being significant, and the female partner effect (male risky family backgrounds related to their female partners' outcomes) highly significant. There were no significant findings for female actor effects (female risky family background related to their own outcomes) or male partner effects (female risky

family background related to their male partners' outcomes were found.

In sum, the hypotheses for this study were partially supported. Female risky family backgrounds were negatively associated (marginal) with their own relationship satisfaction. Male risky family backgrounds were negatively related to their own and their partners' positive observed interactions. Male risky family backgrounds were also positively related to their own and their partners' negative observed interactions.

### **Discussion**

The current study found that males' risky family background had more consistent negative implications for relationship outcomes than females' family backgrounds did. Both male actor effects (males' family background associated with their own outcomes) and female partner effects (male family background associated with female relationship outcomes) were found for positive and negative observed interactions. Female actor effects were found between their own risky family background and their report of relationships satisfaction.

While the hypotheses for this study were only partially supported and some of the findings only reached marginally significant statistical levels (i.e.,  $p < .10$ ) there are a few potential explanations for this. Perhaps one reason for the presence of male actor effects and absence of female actor effects in regards to positive and negative interactions lies in their experiences outside of their family of origin in childhood and adolescence. Males and females generally have very different friendship experiences growing up which may contribute to their learning about communication and conflict resolution. Girls have a

tendency to display more intimacy and self-disclosure within their friendships, whereas boys focus more on participating in activities and competition (Underwood & Rosen, 2009). Due to a greater amount of practice with handling conflicts and expressing emotions in these early friendships than males, females may be able to learn new ways of interacting to replace potentially ineffective or destructive models they received from their family of origin. This means that perhaps experiences from friendships may mediate the negative effects of a risky family background and produce an even stronger impact on their development of learning how to interact and relate to others.

Another possible explanation lies with how much risky family background from childhood has been processed by the individual and how they have used what they observed to make decisions about their own relationships. Males are far less likely to seek counseling than females (Andrews, Issakidis, & Carter, 2001; Pederson & Vogel, 2007), which could mean that they have not fully processed any potential trauma from childhood. This could increase the chances for a risky family background to have a negative impact on a relationship for both partners. This theory would explain male actor effects and female partner effects due to lack of closure over male risky family backgrounds.

When thinking about females and the way that they interact in relationships, it is possible that their presence of risky family backgrounds may increase females' awareness of problems when they arise in their current relationship. Females may work to fix these issues for fear of them turning into a repeat of the negative events experienced in their

family of origin. They may also have a tendency to feel less satisfied when these problems occur due to worry or anxiety that their current relationship may be headed in this same direction.

The presence of risky family backgrounds could also have a very different effect on females' interactions in romantic relationships. Learned behaviors from the family of origin could stick with them and give them the message that relationships are bound to have distress and this is something that should just be dealt with and accepted. Because many women have a tendency to care-take, this could help to explain their acceptance of relationship distress if they are able to take care of their partner and work to please them (Jayne, 1995; Prime, Carter, & Welbourne, 2009). While this could have the potential to cause some resentment and other negative emotions, it may not be expressed in the form of reported satisfaction or observed interaction quality, but rather externalized in other ways.

### **Limitations**

There are a few limitations of this study that need to be considered when examining the results. First, the participants in this study were selected from a convenience sample with relatively high educational attainment. Participants were also not expected to have experienced severe trauma from their childhoods. While this sample was representative of the population from which they were recruited, it may not be able to be generalized to less educated, more diverse samples which should be taken into account for future research. There were several couples who showed some interest in

participating but for any of number of reasons decided not to take part in the study. The final sample may have different views about relationship satisfaction than the general population, along with risky family backgrounds that are not representative of all young adult couples. They also may differ in their relationships in terms of commitment and openness because of their willingness to participate, which may influence the data that was collected and the ability to generalize it. Finally, as with any laboratory-based experiment, there is always the chance for observation bias.

### **Implications for Counseling and Future Directions**

From this research it is evident that risky family backgrounds from childhood can have lasting effects on young adult romantic relationships. Even though the findings for female risky family backgrounds did not prove to be significant, both partners' relationship outcomes were affected by the childhood experiences of the male. For this reason, it is important for counselors to be aware that some relationship distress may stem from these early experiences in one or both partners and may take some exploring of the family of origin to address and eventually resolve them.

In future research that is to explore childhood experiences and their implications for relationship outcomes, perhaps information regarding interactions outside of the family of origin might be helpful. Exploring friendships and other exposure to conflict might shed some light on experiences that may be influencing the way couples learn how to interact with one another. Knowing whether or not partners have attended counseling

could also be beneficial to see if this was helpful in decreasing the negative impact of risky family backgrounds.

Additional information regarding gender role expectations would also provide insight in future research. Identifying the models that individuals were exposed to growing up and how they have shaped their view of what male and female roles should look like will help to show how current romantic relationships are similar to or different from these childhood models, and how this contributes to satisfaction based on expectations. The fact that relationship satisfaction can mean many different things to people may also be important to look at in future research. Exploring in depth what constitutes satisfaction and what makes couples either satisfied or dissatisfied with their relationships would give researchers and counselors a better idea of how to help couples decrease distress and hopefully become more pleased with the quality of their relationships. In closing, the current study begins to lay a foundation for future research to examine the relevance of risky family backgrounds on relationship outcomes.

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