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Father Absence and Young Adult Romantic Relationship Ideals

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An abstract of
a thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences
of Emory University in partial fulfillment
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Bachelor of Science with Honors

Department of Anthropology

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Abstract

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The population of children without a consistent father-figure has grown considerably over the past 50 years. Previous research has outlined the effect that father absence can have on child development, highlighting the importance of having a father-figure and the negative ramifications that father absence can have. Associated effects include child stability and behavioral problems as well as social and emotional withdrawal. One area that has yet to be explored is the effect that father absence has on their children's long-term romantic relationship development. This issue is of importance because understanding the effect that fathers have on their children's attitudes towards romantic relationships can help to mitigate adverse effects on relationship development in situations when the father can still be involved to some extent in their child's life, such as in the case of divorce or work commitments. This study aimed to identify attitudes towards relationships and uncover differences in romantic ideals between those raised with and without a consistent father figure through semi-structured interviews with young adults. The results suggest that father absence does play a role in how individuals approach romantic relationships. As hypothesized, a large impact was seen within the female father-absent sample, where respondents reported struggling to establish and maintain romantic relationships due to a lack of experience with them and general discomfort being emotionally intimate in their interpersonal relationships. Surprisingly, the male absent-father sample reported similar experiences as the male present-father sample, indicating that perhaps a father's large impact on their son is not their approach to relationships or their beliefs but rather on their personality development. Ultimately, father absence is correlated with attitudes towards romantic relationship, particularly for father-absent females, as such connections are often avoided. Even when they exist, they are strained and unstable as compared to those of the father-present sample.

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Table of Contents

I: INTRODUCTION

Due to ongoing social change and rapidly shifting demographics within the United States, many families now deviate from the traditional two-parent household and have taken on a more unconventional family structure. The US Census reports that in 2016, just under 70% of children cohabited with two parents, while 23% lived with single mothers, nearly tripling the statistic in that category from fifty years ago (US Census Bureau, 2016). As it becomes increasingly common for women to take on the role of head of the household, whether as a result of work, divorce, or otherwise, more children are growing up without a consistent father figure, where a consistent father-figure is defined as the full-time presence of a resident male in the home (Teel et. al., 2016). Previous research has detailed the effect of father absence on child development, highlighting the importance of a father figure and the negative ramifications that absence can have, ranging from child stability and behavioral problems to social and emotional withdrawal (Rohner & Veneziano, 2001; Govind & Stein, 2004).

While there is a wealth of existing literature on the correlation between paternal tendencies and various aspects of child development, research scarcely focuses on the effect that fathers have on how their children approach romantic relationships, which is the primary concern of this research. This question is of importance because understanding the effect that fathers have on their children's attitudes towards romantic relationships can help to mitigate adverse effects on relationship development in cases when the father can still be involved to some extent in their child's life, such as in the case of divorce, separation, or work commitments.

1

This study sought to explore the extent to which father absence played a role in the approach to, establishment of, and experiences that individuals have within romantic relationships. Specifically, I explore the following questions:

> What attitude differences exist between those raised with and without a consistent father figure in regards to romantic relationships?

> Is there an observed difference between males and females in terms of how father absence manifests in attitudes?

These research questions both address the primary aim of this study and explore the aforementioned knowledge gap. Through a series of semi-structured interviews, my project seeks to identify attitudes towards relationships and uncover differences in romantic ideals between those raised with and without a consistent father figure. This will include an exploration of the reasons behind the differences in attitudes, including any distinctions that may exist between males and female in regards to thoughts on sexual behavior, benefits and values sought, and personality traits within relationships. Literature in the field focuses on behavior and sexual tendencies, but few studies address the specific effects of father absence on attitudes towards romantic relationships. Attitudes are important because they likely serve as the mechanistic link between father absence and the set of outcomes described above. In other words, if we find that young men raised without a consistent father figure engage in less stable relationships, then their attitudes towards the relationships may be the key mediator. It is important to note that sexual behavior was not a primary focus of this research; rather, I intend to build on the robust empirical basis suggesting that father absence is associated with differential sexual practices and hope to understand the attitudes and perspectives that might lead to those differences. Thus, any

discussion of sexual behavior was analyzed strictly in regards to the role of sex within romantic

relationships.

II: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The following section outlines existing literature regarding themes that relate to family structure and child development. There are few findings in the field that specifically address the link between fatherhood and romantic relationship attitudes, so hypotheses for this study were extrapolated from previous findings about related topics such as the effect of father absence on their child's personality traits and approach to sex. The following literature will help to establish a foundation by which the results of this study will be framed. A summary of themes will be provided at the end of the review in section II.v.

The Effect of Family Structure on Behavior and Disposition

Family structure has important implications for young people's attitudes and behavior. Generally, children coming from dyadic families have fewer behavioral problems than those emerging from unstable families (Govind & Stein, 2004). Children from stable families tend to have a healthier psychological well-being and fewer mental health problems as compared to single-parent or divorced-parent families (Carlson, 2006; Sprujt et al., 2001). Contrarily, elementary and middle school aged children with an absent parent have been shown to suffer from anti-social and poor behavioral tendencies (Pfiffner et al., 2001).

Family instability manifests differently in male and female children; females from single-parent families have lower self-esteem, engage in sexual activity earlier, generally suffer from troubled personal relationships, and hold negative attitudes towards males as well as towards relationships and marriage if their parents are divorced (Barber & Eccles, 1992; Draper & Harpending, 1982). Accordingly, women who grew up in two-parent families have been found to

hold more positive attitudes regarding marriage and more negative attitudes towards divorce (Glenn & Kramer, 1987; Kinnaird & Gerrard, 1986).

Males from unstable families, usually ones with father absence, are more aggressive and competitive in everyday tasks and interactions (Draper & Harpending, 1982). Furthermore, early cross-cultural psychological literature on males showed that individuals who grew up in divorced parent families engaged in exaggeratedly and stereotypically masculine behavior (Biller, 1981; Hetherington, 1972). Thus, males from such a background are also generally more aggressive towards females within relationships, as "the aggressive propensities of father-absent males facilitate their performance in male hierarchies and competitive encounters in a social environment where sexual access to females is determined by male-male interactions" (Draper & Harpending, 1982). In a longitudinal study of men's aggression in relationships, Kim et. al. found that adolescents and young adults with a history of family instability leading to conduct problems or antisocial behavior "tend to have higher levels of impulsive and aggressive behaviors and more conflictual interpersonal relationships" (Kim et. al., 2008). What remains unknown is how these traits are related to directly to father-absence and whether the impulsivity and aggression is reflected in their attitudes toward romantic relationships as well, not only in general relationships.

Parenting and the Impact of Parental Love

<u>Traditional Views of Parenting</u>

There is no dispute that parental love is crucial in the proper development of a child. However, studies suggest that maternal and paternal love impact different aspects of child development. Conventional views of parenting held at the end of the twentieth century

5

maintained that a mother's love was significantly more important than a father's love. Parenting roles were culturally rather than biologically constructed, with the term "fathering" implying nothing about love, while the term "mothering" incited feelings of warmth, care, and affection. Within the traditional family, the mother's role was to tend to the children while a father's main contribution to the family concerned economic and emotional support for the mother and children (Rohner & Veneziano, 2001). However, as more women are emerging as the primary providers for their family, this dynamic appears to be shifting.

Contemporary Views of Parenting

While some remnants of the previously discussed traditional philosophy hold true in the present, over the past few decades, findings have emerged that suggest the contrary; in fact, it appears that a father's love can be as influential as a mother's or even more so when it comes to certain traits. It appears that mothers have the greatest development on personal development while fathers impact how the individual interacts with society. In other words, "maternal function wants to ensure that children get what they need while residing in the family nest; paternal function offers support and guidance as those children prepare to leave the nest and make their way in the world" (Burgo 2013). Thus, paternal rather than maternal influence can have significant long-term implications on adolescent attitudes towards issues such as marriage, divorce, sexual debut, child support, welfare, and teenage childbearing (Brody et al., 1994). That being said, an absence of parental love, either maternal or paternal, can have adverse effects on child development. Love withdrawal has been linked to instability, anxiety, social and emotional withdrawal, aggression, conduct problems, delinquency, drug and alcohol abuse, cognitive and

academic difficulties, and forms of mental illness such as depression and borderline personality disorder (Rohner & Veneziano, 2001).

Father Presence and Attitudes Towards Sexual Behavior in Romantic Relationships

As mentioned previously, literature regarding father absence has proposed that family structure and early family experiences effectively shape the perspectives that children have towards pair bonding, in particular as they pertain to sexual relationships (Biller, 1981; Hetherington, 1972). Among numerous views regarding this link, Draper and Harpending (1982) proposed that perhaps early experience sets the reproductive strategy that individuals will adopt later in life. More specifically, children growing up in father-absent homes stemming from divorce "develop behavior profiles consistent with an expectation that paternal investment in child rearing will not be forthcoming and that pair bonds will not be enduring", while "those from father-present households anticipate the opposite and thus defer sexual activity once they reach biological maturity and seek to establish and maintain enduring, close, relationships" (Belsky et. al., 1991).

Extensive literature exists regarding the effect of father absence on female sexual behavior, most of which converges on the finding that females who grow up without a present father or father figure exhibit greater tendencies towards early and risky sexual activity (Bates et al., 1998; Ellis et al., 2003). Rostad et al. (2014) also finds that the degree of father psychological presence predicts both sexual riskiness and illicit drug use, excluding alcohol. Father psychological presence is best conceptualized as a construct "based on the child's relationship with his or her father, his or her attitudes about the father, and the effects of significant others on both the paternal relationship and attitudes about the father" during separation (Thomas, 2008).

Adolescent females have reported that engaging in sexual behavior makes them feel more mature, enhances their social prestige, and sometimes compensates for a lack of intimacy in their family lives (Collins & Sroufe, 1999). In many ways, sexual experimentation is also a means of exploring their identity, but simultaneously, involvement in multiple sexual relationships is likely correlated with insecure attachment in interpersonal relationships (Collins & Sroufe, 1999). Accordingly, father presence appears to be a consistent protective factor against early sexual outcomes and other risky behavior.

There also are findings at the biological level, as early research converged on a biological explanation for children's orientations towards pair bonding (Belsky et al., 1991). Father absence was found to correlate with earlier ages of sexual development in daughters. More specifically, girls with absent fathers tend to mature earlier and have an earlier onset of menarche, and this affects the timing of their sexual activity (Cavanagh, 2004; Webster et al., 2014). However, it is important to recognize that these findings are simply indicative of correlation rather than causation. Mendle et al. (2009) further explored the contribution of biological influences as well as paternal involvement on the trajectory of children's sexual development. By comparing the experiences of cousins, they found that females from father-absent families had an earlier sexual debut than their cousins, but only when they inherited different genetic information from their mothers. Their findings serve as a reminder that casually assuming causation between father absence and onset of sexual behavior can be problematic. This question instead defaults back to the greater debate of nature vs. nurture.

One limitation of current research on sexual development is that much of the literature revolves around the importance of fathers in the experiences of females. Only broad conclusions

have been made regarding how it manifests in males other than what can be assumed based on general behavioral trends (Cavanagh, 2004; Giordano et al., 2006; Meier & Allen, 2009).

It is again important to clarify, as stated earlier in the thesis, that all discussion of sexual behavior in this study is distinct from other explorations of sexual behavior because it pertains specifically to the role of sex within romantic relationships rather than the nature of sexual relationships. This thesis addresses attitudes through questions such as: what is the purpose of sex and physical attraction in relationships, and how does timing of sexual behavior matter within the timeline of establishing a romantic relationship?

Father Presence and Attitudes towards Romantic Relationships

Previous literature suggests that individuals generally hold positive opinions of the benefits of relationships, which motivates them to enter one to begin with (Collins & Sroufe, 1999). For instance, in a study conducted on adolescents from an ethnically and socioeconomically diverse high school, the students reported that positive experiences with relationships are correlated with giving and getting communication, commitment, emotional support, and togetherness, feelings of exhilaration, growth, and appreciation (Levesque 1993; Collins & Sroufe, 1999). While these characteristics are universally sought after, it appears that there exist gendered priorities; there is a general expectation that boys want sex while girls want romance (Giordano et al., 2006).

As previously explained, both unstable family structures and risky sexual behavior can be precursors to strained interpersonal relationships (Barber & Eccles, 1992; Collins & Sroufe, 1999). What remains unknown is how exactly family structure, in particular father absence,

affects individual attitudes towards romantic relationships in regards to their ideal relationship timeline, their motivation for entering one, and what they value within relationships.

Summary of the Literature and Proposed Evolutionary Theory

Based on the literature discussed, the following is a summary of trends, presented as an evolutionary theory of the two developmental pathways that are likely to occur as a result of the two most common parental conditions, dyadic and single-parent (Belsky et al., 1991; Draper & Harpending, 1982).

Table I: Characteristics of the Two Developmental Pathways

	Pathway 1: Non-dyadic	**Pathway 2: Dyadic**
Family structure	Unstable home environment, marital discord	Stable home environment, marital harmony
Personality and behavior	Insecure attachments, withholding emotions, distrusting of others, anxious	Trusting, skilled at establishing relationships
Physical maturity	Earlier onset	Delayed onset
Reproductive strategy	Early sexual activity, unstable relationships	Delayed sexual activity, pair bonds

The first pathway is the result of a family context of marital discord and environmental stress. Parenting strategies emerging from such a situation are more likely to be rejecting, insensitive, and inconsistent. This can lead to the child's insecure attachment to others, sparking negative traits such as the withholding of emotions and distrust of others. Sons of couples of marital discord are more likely to be aggressive and noncompliant with traditional and societal norms, while daughters are more likely to be depressed and anxious in social situations. This

combination of nature and nurture results in early maturation and pubertal timing, and thus earlier sexual activity. According to this theory, their interpersonal relationships will tend to be short-lived, unstable, and they will reflect their parents' behavior by having limited parental investment themselves.

Contrarily, the second developmental pathway emerges from an environment of spousal harmony. Sensitive, supportive, and responsive parents who frequently show positive affection produce children with more secure attachments. The offspring will generally be more trusting and skilled at establishing and maintaining close relationships. They will not mature early and will choose to delay sexual activity, prioritizing long-term pair bonds. They will also tend to mirror their parents' actions by investing heavily in the parenting of their own children.

This theory will be used as a framework for analyzing attitudes specific to romantic relationships. We expect to find results consistent with these trends, but applied in the context of romantic relationships rather than that of general behavior, friendships, or sexual relationships. Accordingly, I hypothesize that children emerging from the unstable family context will be more hesitant to seek out romantic relationships and desire a lower level of commitment, likely out of insecurity. Their environment will also influence personality traits such as their tendency to forgive others and their decision-making ability. However, the origin and expression of their insecurities are likely gendered; females may fear detachment and abandonment while males may fear that they will inherit negative traits from their father. As it manifests in relationships, father-absent individuals across both genders will be less confident and less trusting in romantic relationships and instead prefer to resort to sexual relationships or no relationship at all. Their

views on love and marriage will follow accordingly, presenting with more skepticism than individuals from the second developmental scenario.

The following summary outlines my hypotheses and the themes I expect to find based on the characteristics of each developmental pathway. While I was initially intrigued by these themes, I was equally interested in identifying novel themes that emerged from the data as well, all of which I will discuss in the results section.

Table II: Hypothesized Themes to be Observed According to the Two Developmental Pathways

	Pathway 1: Non-dyadic (father-absent)	Pathway 2: Dyadic (father-present)
Maternal relationship	Good relationship	Good relationship
Personality and behavioral traits within relationships	Trusting, forgiving, skilled at establishing relationships	Insecure attachments, withholding emotions, distrusting of others, anxious
Attitude towards sex in romantic relationships	Delayed onset of sexual activity, value sex beyond physical gratification, prefer pair-bonds	Earlier onset of sexual activity, prefer detached sex, low commitment interactions
Timeline for establishing relationships	Romantic, or at minimum friendly, connection first	Sex first or no preference

III. METHODS

Project Development and Approval

Interest in this particular topic emerged from Dr. James Rilling's Fatherhood Project, research which focused on fathers in the Atlanta area and explored their experiences with fatherhood. After assisting with transcriptions and coding of the data for Dr. Rilling's project, I became increasingly interested in the effect that family structure has on development, particularly the way in which fathers influence their children's approaches to romantic relationships. Thus, this study was born out of a desire to further explore this dynamic and what associations may exist.

All necessary Institutional Review Board (IRB) approvals were applied for and granted two months prior to beginning data collection. Emory IRB determined that this study was exempt from review, so no additional approvals were required.

Recruitment and Participants

A total of 26 individuals comprised the study population. The only demographic requirement for qualification was that the participants must have been Emory University students over the age of 18 at the time of the interview. Recruitment occurred through a variety of methods onsite at Emory University. Participants were recruited from various networks through emails sent to academic department, club, and Greek organization mailing lists. A number of the participants also learned about the project through word of mouth.

The recruitment communication included an explanation of the research objectives, study methods, and disclosure that verbal consent must be obtained. The study did not exclude any particular genders or ethnic groups. Since the research was interested in the experiences of both

those raised with and without a consistent father figure, individuals from a wide range of family

backgrounds were welcome. However, in order to qualify for the father-absent condition,

individuals had to meet the criteria commonly used in studies of father-absence. That being said,

'father absence' is an ill-defined term because many parents are absent or away from

their children sometimes. It is also a term that is rarely defined in the literature, so because of the

lack of definitional clarity, the term 'father absence' can encompass a range of circumstances

(East et. al., 2006). In this study, participants were considered father-absent if they had no father-

figure physically present or no relationship with a father-figure for any reason. Examples of

qualifying circumstances include loss due to death, divorce or marital discord, disinterest or

neglect, or away for work commitments. All paternal relationships must have ended before

middle school, as adolescence is often the period when romantic relationships begin, so they

must have been father-absent before this phase began.

Data Collection

Data was collected in the form of semi-structured interviews, which all took place

between August 2019 and December 2019. The interviews were conducted on the Emory

University main campus in private study rooms at the Woodruff Library to ensure that participant

confidentiality was upheld. An informed consent discussion took place on site at the time and

place of each interview. Verbal consent was recorded prior to conducting any interviews and all

consent discussions were held in person. The verbal consent script employed was written

according to IRB guidelines and approved prior to the study. When conducting the discussion, all

study materials were verbally summarized and subjects were provided with comprehensive

written information. They were all allowed ample time for questions at the end of the script. No

compensation or other incentives were offered and participation was entirely voluntary, which minimized risk for potential coercion. Participants were also informed that they could withdraw from the study at any stage by contacting myself or Dr. Hadley, although none did.

Each interview was recorded using an iPhone and the participants were assigned a number from 01 to 026. The audio files and typed transcriptions were saved according to these numbers. Their real names were not documented nor attached to their data, so for any cases where their names might appear, for instance in quotations, their names have been replaced with their assigned number. The interviews ranged from 14.0 to 50.5 minutes in length, with an average length of 23.8 minutes. The audio recordings were uploaded to a secure computer immediately after each interview and the files were saved on an encrypted flash drive. They were then permanently deleted from the iPhone.

The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed for more personalized conversations tailored to each individual experience. Each interview began with demographic questions such as gender, age, ethnicity, and family's socioeconomic status in order to control for any additional variables that may have arisen. The remainder of the questions addressed the individual's family background, upbringing, experiences with romantic relationships, and personality traits within relationships. Most of the questions were open ended, with the exception of one section where the participants were asked to rate on a scale from 1-10 how strongly they identified with a statement such as: *I am very trusting in relationships*. Individuals were also asked about forgiveness, decision-making, and confrontation in the same format.

Data Analysis

Each interview was manually transcribed beginning at the conclusion of the demographic questions. All transcriptions were then uploaded into MAXQDA for qualitative data analysis. Analysis was done through coding of the interviews. The interviews were first coded for broad themes and then parsed through several more times, narrowing down the themes each time through. Using primary codes, sub-codes, and memos allowed for the best organization of the data. While I initially expected to find the themes outlined in Table II, I was also open to allowing themes to emerge out of the data based on individual interpretations of the interview questions and their personal experiences.

IV. RESULTS

Overview

This section consists first of a summary of participant demographics, followed by the analysis of four recurring themes brought up throughout the interviews. The results are organized into a series of subsections within each larger theme.

Characteristics of the Sample

As noted previously, the sample consisted of 26 Emory University students. A concerted effort was made to ensure a balanced distribution of both gender and family background in order to compose a representative sample. Below is a table displaying the breakdown of participants into the four demographic categories of interest.

CONDITIONS	Present father figure (PFF)	Absent father figure (AFF)
Male	7	5
Female	7	7

The demographic information collected included age, siblings, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. This was to ensure that the results found were a function of the demographic characteristics of interest, not due to an alternative variable. The average age of the sample was 20.5 years, and the range of average ages for each of the above four categories 19.8 to 21.7. The represented ethnicities include Caucasian, African-American, Asian, and Latino and the majority of participants identified their family's financial status to be either upper-middle class or wealthy. The aforementioned four demographic conditions will henceforth be referred to using the following acronyms:

MPFF: Male, present father-figure

FPFF: Female, present father-figure

MAFF: Male, absent father-figure

FAFF: Female, present father-figure

Theme 1: Parental Love and Attitudes

To establish context by which to evaluate the effect of family structure on their approach to romantic relationships, each individual was asked early in the interview what their relationships with their parents were like when growing up. The following general trends were observed.

<u>Relationship with Mother</u>

Almost all the individuals interviewed, with the exception of a select few, reported having a good or very good relationship with their mother. All seven FPFF individuals reported maintaining a generally good relationship throughout their childhood, with two of them qualifying their relationship as "very good". Two different respondents reported becoming less close as they got older (although they maintained a good relationship) because "it got, not hostile, but less good during high school which I feel happens for a lot of people but mostly because she's very organized and kinda controlling and wants the best for me, but that's not always what I want" (P22) and "she had a hard time letting go of me, and I'm much more independent than my sister is, and so not having me in the house I think she would get upset when I didn't call her and stuff as much because I had a life and other friends" (P24). Of the two respondents who said they had a very good relationship, one reported having a consistently great relationship while the other cited a major incident that strained her otherwise-great relationship. She explained that "my first experience asking for birth control was actually terrible. Really

horrific, like scarring experience in a huge relationship point with my mom that we still don't

discuss to this day" (P5), but other than that, she had a very close bond with her mother.

The MPFF interviewees also all reported having a good relationship with their mother.

Two of them report having a good relationship, while the other five describe their relationships

as "very good". Some of this may be due to proximity; four out of the seven report having grown

up being raised almost exclusively by their mother while their father was often working. Other

sentiments regarding maternal relationships include "she's always been a very big role model in

my life" (P18), "in my household, the women are placed on a kind of pedestal, just a southern

conservative type thing" (P19), and "she was my go-to, genuinely someone who gets me to see

things from a different perspective… there's an emotional quotient and an intelligence quotient

and she just liked raised my EQ by like 1000 points" (P21).

Similarly, all of the MAFF individuals reported having a positive relationship with their

mother, but only one out of the five would call their relationship "very good". Specifically, he

reports that "I love her so much, she is like the person I look up to most in the world" (P16). The

other four reported a generally neutral-good relationship with their mothers, as they were

present, supportive, and interested in their lives.

With the FAFF individuals there was no middle ground; they either had an extremely

close relationship or an extremely strained relationship. Below demonstrates how those with a

positive relationship describe their connection:

> "My mom's my best friend always has been. It was like having like a sleepover buddy
> every night when it was just us — we've always been attached at the hip but like since I
> can remember it was me and her just living alone so regardless of other people being in
> her life we've always been super close" (P2).

"It's very close, and I tell her absolutely everything" (P3).

"Always very positive. She had a super active role in my life always pushed us and challenged us, but was always there to support us also and took on a very motherly role. She quit her job when I was born so she could be there after school for us pick us up from school help us with our homework, cook dinner, and just be there" (P8).

"My mom and I have the best relationship like we are so close" (10).

On the other hand, the strained relationships appear to have been extremely rocky, with all three respondents reporting having multiple hurdles and points of tension within their relationships. More specifically, the individuals conveyed the following sentiments:

"It was rocky… we would always kinda butt heads — We do still speak, but I don't see her that often. She's very dramatic, before they got divorced she would storm out, threaten to kill herself because she was so upset, and I realized I hated that growing up" (P7).

"I wasn't emotionally supported by [my parents] at all and so it's hard to define what my relationship was with my mom. She, like, wasn't my mom, she just was sometimes my mom. She would cook for me and make sure I got where I needed to be, and I would come to her with issues, but the advice that she would give me was not motherly advice… like I was very anxious as a child and so I would say 'oh I don't think my friends want to hang out with me, I don't think they like me' and she would say 'oh if you ignore them for a week then they'll come back to you'. But not an aggressive way, but basically that was the point, and so it was kind of like 'you're being annoying because you're asking them to hang out all the time so this is your fault, what they're doing is your fault not their fault'. So a lot of the blame got put on me in terms of my social failures… instead of it being like 'maybe they're not meant to be your friends' it was like 'it's your actions that are responsible for that' " (P9).

"I was also kind of a golden child growing up and my mom was weirdly competitive with me. I think in a lot of ways she wanted to be more like me than she was. She has a lot of things that I don't have and so she gets really competitive with me. Like she very very picky about how I look, yeah, like my weight" (P9).

"One time, we had sex in my house and my mom walked in and yelled at me in front of him and called me a whore, well she's British so she said [P9] 'I'm not running a brothel'

and then she said 'he's not welcome in our home' " (P9).

"I don't know, I can't really explain how we spent time together because I don't think we really spent time alone… right after they got divorced I totally stopped spending time with my mom… so we didn't spend time together, I wouldn't invite her to things at my school, she was very uninvolved in my life" (P11).

"My mom would, any time we ended up talking about my dad she would get so frustrated and upset and didn't understand why I didn't feel her similar anger, so it was just hard because like they were fighting over money in court and I was trying to have a dad, so me and my mom had different priorities… I think all those things made us have a lot of tension. I don't know, it's kind of like, obviously I think I was being a brat at that point, but I also don't know what else I was supposed to do, that's how I felt at the time, and I felt like obviously my mom was going through a lot but she didn't know how to be a parent getting a divorce" (P11).

"My mom and I are pretty different, she's a quiet and I would say introverted person, not that social, and so, which I am very social… it made her kind of bad at communicating things with me, and she was never good about talking about issue s in our relationship with me. Um, it's not that she didn't care, I think she did, but she didn't know how to properly address them so she just didn't" (P11).

Relationship with Father

While this topic is to be explored in depth in the next section focusing on paternal personalities, relationship, and impact, in general, the father-present sample had good relationships with their father while the father-absent did not.

Importance of Parental Approval

All four groups largely reported valuing their parents' approval to different extents, but no clear trend was observed between the conditions. Four of the interviewees reported that their parents disapproval would be enough to stop them from marrying someone, but the rest simply expressed that they would take it into consideration but ultimately decide for themselves. For instance, some of the explanations included:

"I can't imagine just ending a relationship with someone just off of my parents terms but because of how much I respect their relationship it would definitely make me rethink everything and go through my relationship and how I feel" (P13).

"My parents, like I said, have a lot more knowledge and wisdom. They raised me and I trust that they would have my best interests in mind. It's just sometimes in life in general and specifically in relationships it's hard to see certain things when you're inside of it, like the people on the outside can see inside. They're the only people who I really trust to play a role in like letting me know or not know they approve" (P19).

"I trust my parents to know me well enough and to know scenarios well enough that they probably, I'd like to think that I probably missed something. I trust their judgement but also know it's my decision, but they won't lead me astray" (P21).

Only two respondents reported that their parents' approval would matter very little to them. Specifically, when asked how important approval was, they reported "honestly, not a ton, in the sense that it's not something I strive for" (P20) and "I don't think it would matter at first, but I think it might eventually take a play into it depending on the length of it" (P16). Throughout all of the conditions, there was no difference in regards to the importance of each individual parent's opinion. In other words, among the respondents from two-parent families, they generally did not value their mother's opinion over their father's or vice versa.

Theme 2: Relationship with Father

The range of relationship qualities between individuals and their fathers ranged on a large spectrum from extremely strained to extremely close. Some of them attributed their relationships to personality similarities and differences between them and their fathers, while others believed their father's proximity and physical presence lead to their level of closeness.

The FPFF group all had good or fair relationships with their fathers. For the purposes of this research, women who grew up with a consistent step-father rather than biological father are

still included in the FPFF group because they did have the father-figure of interest in this study, and this applies to three of the seven women in this group. Five of the women called their relationship "good", holding the opinions such as "My father is my favorite person in the world" (P24) or "I got lucky, he was wonderful" (P6). These women consistently spent time with their fathers while growing up, as they reported their father engaging in activities such as coaching sports teams, taking them to the movies, driving them to and from school, taking them to museums, participating in parent-teacher conferences, attending school performances, and teaching them to read. The two individuals who had a "fair" relationship with their father attributed this not necessarily to their father's personality or effort but rather strictly his proximity; he was physically absent from the household often due to work commitments, but was always present when he could be. One respondent recounted a striking story about her experience with a working father, revealing the nature of her understanding of her familial life at the time:

> "There was actually a point when like I was playing with my dollhouse, I was like putting my family together like in the living room and I guess I didn't put the dad inside the house and my mom was like 'why didn't you put the dad inside the house' and I said 'because he doesn't live here'…I was shocked but also kind of hurt when I heard that I did that right cause as a three-year-old kid like thinking oh my dad doesn't live here" (P5).

The MPFF group also generally had good relationships with their fathers with the exception of one, but it was again due to proximity due to work commitments. All but two reported having gotten closer with their father as they grew up. Some of the sentiments expressed regarding their fathers were that "my dad is honestly probably one of my best friends" (P21), "my dad's always been there, always a role model in life" (P20), and "I basically followed him

23

around, learned everything from him, was basically at his hip until I graduated high school, so he taught me everything and he's like my best friend" (P19). Similarly to the FPFF group, MPFF fathers were involved in coaching teams and driving them around, as well as teaching them to cook and camp. Two individuals reported having bonded most with their fathers through their involvement with Boy Scouts of America. There did not appear to be a considerable difference between sons and daughters in regards to the types of activities fathers engaged in with them. Overwhelmingly, the most common activities related to sports, school events, and leisure activities such as going to the movies.

A different trend was seen in the father-absent groups. In the MAFF group, each was considered father-absent due to a divorce, so they grew up either with a single mother or with a mother who was in and out of relationships. One of them has a sparse communicative relationship with his father that was recently rekindled; the remainder have been entirely father-absent since at least middle school if not earlier. When asked about their early relationships with their fathers, the men reported the following:

> "It was always a bit strenuous. He was a bit harder of a task manager and disciplinarian and he very much was like stubborn and had his way of doing things and how to do them and so it was always kind of tumultuous just because I'm just a very curious person and would ask a lot of questions. I'm also, I would also be the troublemaker of the family being the youngest, so I would also be the most punished very often" (P16).

> "My dad was always a lot more, um, he was the one who would always put the stress on my brother and me to do well and stay focused, um, so I'm not gonna say he was the harsh parent or anything, but he was definitely the parent that was more focused on us staying in line and doing well and stuff, so I didn't feel as comfortable opening up to my dad as I did my mom" (P14).

As far as activities go, when the fathers were involved in early childhood upbringing they engaged in the same basic types of activities that the FPFF and MPFF fathers did, such as sports and outdoor activities. However, even though they were physically present, they were not always the most involved parents on a foundational level. For instance, when asked about his father's participation in basic care-taking activities such as cooking and driving him around, one individual responded that his father's attitude was very much self-interested, like "for the most part he would just cook for himself and then cook some extra for us" (P14). After their fathers were no longer involved in their lives, each of the five individuals reported having no similar father-figure in their life to fill the role.

Perhaps the most interesting results were observed among the FAFF group. Six out of the seven were considered father-absent due to divorce or separation, and one was due to work commitments that required her father to live out of state. As a result, she had almost no relationship with him and saw him only a few times a year. Even when the respondents did have relationships with their fathers at a young age, they were often strained for a variety of reasons, including the following:

> "He had very narcissistic tendencies which is difficult for father figures because, you know, kids are just inherently kind of narcissistic so that doesn't really mesh well. Him and my stepmom also used to have a very severely physically and verbally abusive relationship so that would happen like when I was there which was a problem. My mom and my dad have never gotten along since they got separated, they've been in multiple lawsuits etc., and so me being very close to my mother, that automatically sort of biased me towards her. He just, he was always very controlling when I was younger and it always felt like he wanted me to sit on a shelf and be perfect and that made me want to like not do that" (P2).

> "Post-divorce it's been extremely strained, me more so than my other siblings… we don't see each other, I haven't seen him now in probably over a year. He was still around and

he could have made an effort but he just didn't, and then it was like but why didn't you?" (P3)

"Over time it got progressively worse yeah… I would see him when I came home but we didn't talk. Like he would come home from work and we might say hi… I remember one specific time after swim practice he picked me up and we had the best, not even a great conversation, very normal actually, but I was on such a high because I had talked to my dad for more than a sentence. That was literally the first time that that had ever happened… He's like one of those people that just makes me angry to see, you know, like I see him and I just shut down and don't want to do anything" (P8).

"I grew up in kind of a violent household, although there was no violence directed towards me, but I did witness it. So that did hinder my relationship with my dad" (P9).

"He did the bare minimum to maintain me in homeostasis when I was at his house… I don't like him. In seventh and eighth grade I started only going to his house every other Monday and Tuesday, and I had been wanting that since the fourth grade and the reason why I couldn't have that was because of their divorce agreement. And then in seventh grade my dad was finally just like, 'I know you don't like me, and I'm not that attached having you at the house all the time' so he just let me go with my mom… My relationship with my dad we can be cordial for about 5 hours… he's very authoritarian and self-serving…when I say he did the bare minimum he would order food for himself and it would come and I would be like 'did you order me anything' and he would say 'no sorry I forgot'… parenting was not in the front of his mind… he was very comfortable and he wasn't going to let me inconvenience his life in any way" (P10).

Theme 3: Sexual Behavior and Attitudes

As sexual behavior was not a primary focus of this research, all discussion of attitudes towards sexual activity concerned its place in the context of romantic relationships. Across all four conditions, individuals had widely varying views on the onset, approach, and purpose of sexual behavior within relationships. While many prefer to have some form of a personal connection prior to engaging in sexual behavior, some respondents prioritize physical relationships precisely because of the lack of connection. These preferences are likely

attributable to personality traits and past experiences, which are a direct result of their upbringing.

The average age of sexual behavior onset for MPFF individuals was 16.7 years, and each had been romantically involved with their partner prior to engaging in sexual activity. Six out of the seven individuals preferred the timeline of romantic involvement prior to sexual behavior, though it was repeatedly pointed out that in a college environment this can sometimes be difficult. The overwhelming majority of MPFF respondents reported valuing different aspects of a relationship over the physical components. Specifically, one individual explains that "sex is more romantically driven than carnal… it's a romantic act and should be preceded by some sort of romantic interest" (P12).

The MAFF group tended to echo the sentiments of the MPFF group, which is surprising given previous research on males who grow up without a present father figure. Based on the previously outlined evolutionary theory, we would expect MAFF individuals to have a tendency to avoid interpersonal relationships, rendering them short-lived and unstable. However, in this sample, while they did have an earlier age of sexual behavior onset (15.7 years), the MAFF group shared similar views on the role of sex within relationships to those of the MPFF group, as they too generally valued romantic connection over sex in relationships. Summarizing a view expressed by multiple individuals, one individual explained that "a sexual relationship in that sense just isn't that fulfilling or the sole purpose, for me personally", as he instead prefers the deeper connection of a romantic relationship (P14).

The FPFF group had a sexual behavior onset age of 17.8 years, not including one individual who had never had sex. Overall, the females held similar views to their male

counterparts, preferring romantic connections prior to sexual behavior and in some cases consciously delaying sexual behavior for this reason. For instance, one woman reflected on the effect of her upbringing on her attitudes towards sexual behavior:

> "I had sex a little bit later than a lot of girls do these days, and I think it's because I had this very idealistic view. I was raised Catholic, so I had a very idealistic view of dating somebody and falling in love, like I didn't necessarily want to be married but I wanted to love this person and have this great experience" (P5).

Similarly, another FPFF individual reported that "I haven't had sex with too many people who I'm not interested in", highlighting the importance of interpersonal connection during sex (P6). The lack of security also presents a problem, as another woman explained that "being in a physical relationship is fun but it takes more effort… I like having something that I know I can depend on instead of having a bunch of small things I have to be constantly looking over" (P23). Ultimately, it appears as the though the FPFF women tended to prioritize interpersonal relationships and the security that comes with them, discounting sexual relationships as insignificant and fleeting.

A different trend was observed among FAFF condition, where females began engaging in sexual activity at the considerably younger age of 16.5 years. They also tended to place a different value on sexual activity in the context of romantic relationships than the FPFF individuals did, however within the FAFF group, they cited different reasons. For example, one respondent preferred to begin relationships with sex because she believed it to be indicative of emotional connection, and that "it's important to know that you have chemistry with someone before you become seriously involved with them" (P2). However, this appears to be an isolated opinion as the remainder of the group overwhelmingly places a decreased emphasis on the

emotional importance of sex in relationships. For example, sex has become such a commonplace act for the FAFF individuals, an "expectation" as many describe it, to the point where one woman reports no longer feeling "the part of sex that is being vulnerable to somebody else and now I see it just as a physical act" (P3).

Other FAFF women preferred physical relationships over romantic relationships because of the lack of commitment they involved, which they attributed directly to the relationships they had during their upbringing. For instance, participant 11 grew up with a father who was physically absent from the household due to his work schedule, and as a result, she had almost no relationship with him when growing up. Because she rarely received praise from any male figures in her life, she reports diving into sexual relationships often because "I know that I get validation and praise from men for sexual relationships" and therefore "I am far more comfortable being in a sexual relationship" (P9). Another FAFF woman agreed, citing a specific instance where she remembers expressing her disinterest in a committed relationship with a man due to her lack thereof when growing up:

> "I didn't have close relationships with men during my childhood… and I remember telling my friends that [this relationship] was the perfect relationship because we have casual sex and we're friends and I'm not interested in anything more and he's not interested in anything more. And he doesn't want to meet my friends and I don't want to meet his and it's great. Like it's so ideal" (P11).

Theme 4: Qualities of Romantic Relationships

The following section concerns various themes in regards to romantic relationships, including general approach, perceived benefits, important values, the reasons for failure, personality traits in relationships, and views on marriage.

<u>Willingness to Enter a Romantic Relationship</u>

As explained in the previous section regarding sexual behavior and attitudes, the MPFF, FPFF, and MAFF groups all preferred to begin romantic relationships with a romantic connection or interest rather than sexual behavior. Numerous individuals in these three groups also called themselves a "relationship person", almost always preferring to be in a romantic relationship than not. As summarized by one MPFF individual, there is more gratification in romantic relationships, which is the primary motivation these individuals had for entering a relationship to begin with:

> "I don't live my life with immediate pleasure in mind. so I think there's a lot more value to me in getting to know someone getting to connect with that person, like falling in love with them like being there for them when things are good or when things are bad like I think that's where a lot of the meaning, connecting with people is. That's sort of embodied in the Pinnacle of a romantic relationship with someone" (P19).

Contrarily, the FAFF women were much less eager to enter into romantic relationships for several reasons. While some struggled with the vulnerability required for relationships, others feared commitment within relationships. As one woman explained, "what I really want in my heart of hearts is to be in a romantic relationship, but I think there's a fear associated with that to the point where I would not pursue it at all and I physically shut down…the risks, personally just because of my past experiences, are so much bigger than the reward" (P9), and another echoed these sentiments, revealing "I was super super scared to be in a relationship, I had major commitment issues… the scary thing about relationships is that once it starts it has to end" (P2). A third FAFF respondent also expressed a distaste for romantic relationships but for a different reason, explaining that "I don't value [romantic relationships]. I think some people really value them and I'm not one of those people, at least not yet, and due to that I'm not willing to sacrifice

literally anything in my life for anyone else" (P10). Each of these individuals attributes their hesitation towards romantic relationships to the quality of their familial relationships while growing up, a topic to be further explored in a later section.

Benefits of Being in a Relationship

Regardless of their gender or familial condition, each group shared more or less the same view regarding motivation for entering a relationship and the benefits of being in one. All respondents expressed that having another person involved in their life was beneficial for both parties because they provided comfort, security, and the opportunity for growth. More specifically, respondents reported the following perceived benefits:

> "I think when I'm in a relationship I'm a better person, so I guess I get that out of it personally, it makes me less selfish and I know I'm more aware of myself and my time" (P5).

> "It's someone who I feel like enhances my life, I know that sounds kind of cheesy, but someone who has the same goals as me and will support me, someone who can understand me and be there for me in a way that other people can't necessarily be… in my current relationship, I know that if I ever do something cool or have an accomplishment he's going to be there and excited, so I'll call him first" (P7).

> "It's a unique sense of holding each other accountable and like being proud to hold somebody accountable, and I think that you grow as a person just knowing what you're capable of and how you can give love and also how you receive love, and I think that's really important" (P8).

Desired Values within a Relationship

As evident in the interviews, variation in family experiences leads to different priorities and values within relationships. Among the relationship components sought were trust, honesty, compassion, loyalty, support, respect, love, and sex, however the distribution of these values among the different conditional groups reflected varying attitudes towards relationships.

There were observed gendered differences; half of the women cited love as a vital component of a relationship while only one man did. Instead, all but two of the men listed sex or physical attraction as crucial while only one woman did. Their responses were well distributed independent of the father figure condition. Giordano et. al. found in their study that boys usually want sex while girls want romance in relationships, and the findings of this research mirror this trend (Giordano et al., 2006).

In addition to physical attraction, MPFF individuals also valued open-mindedness, honesty, and respect in relationships, while every one of the MAFF individuals valued trust above all else. One MAFF respondent presented a possible reason for placing such a high emphasis on the role of trust in relationships. Due to an extremely strained relationship with his father, who cheated on his mother, he found that "I became a lot closer to my mom and definitely recognized I could and needed to trust her more than my dad due to the circumstances, so that just spilled over", resulting in the expectation of trust in women within his relationships (P17).

A similar trend was observed in FPFF and FAFF women. The father-present sample valued more (nuanced? complex?) traits such as empathy, compassion, and intimacy, while the father-absent sample tended to seek fundamental qualities such as respect, trust, honesty, and loyalty. Some FAFF perspectives are as follows:

> "Part of being in a romantic relationship with someone is being honest about how you're feeling about everything about that person because otherwise what are you there for… having independence in a relationship is also important, just because I'm an independent person and I think that intrinsically tied to respect" (P11).

> "Loyalty, I think loyalty encompasses a lot of things, and I think that the big part of loyalty, trust is the biggest part of loyalty (P8).

The FAFF values are particularly interesting in light of their personal experiences, as many of them lacked secure relationships with men when growing up dues to their father's absence. Among some of the sentiments expressed were being "very paranoid about being abandoned" (P3) and "I couldn't rely on my father for anything" (P10), so it logically follows that traits such as trust and loyalty are a priority.

Why Relationships Fail

When asked what the most common reason for relationship failures was, the biggest difference observed was not between the father-present and father-absent groups but rather between males and females. Ten of the fourteen women believed a lack of communication was the root of relationship problems, while only one man agreed. Instead, males tended to think that a lack of trust, honesty, and effort were to blame for relationship ends.

Behavior and Personality Traits within a Relationship

To assess the effect that father absence has on behavior and personality tendencies in the context of a relationship, participants were asked to rank on a scale from 1-10 how much they identified with a series of statements, such as "I am very trusting in relationships" and "I am comfortable with confrontation", with one being the least and ten being the most.

Below is a visual map depicting the average responses by each condition to each personality trait. The responses for each trait are stacked vertically to allow for comparison between conditional groups.

Trait Values
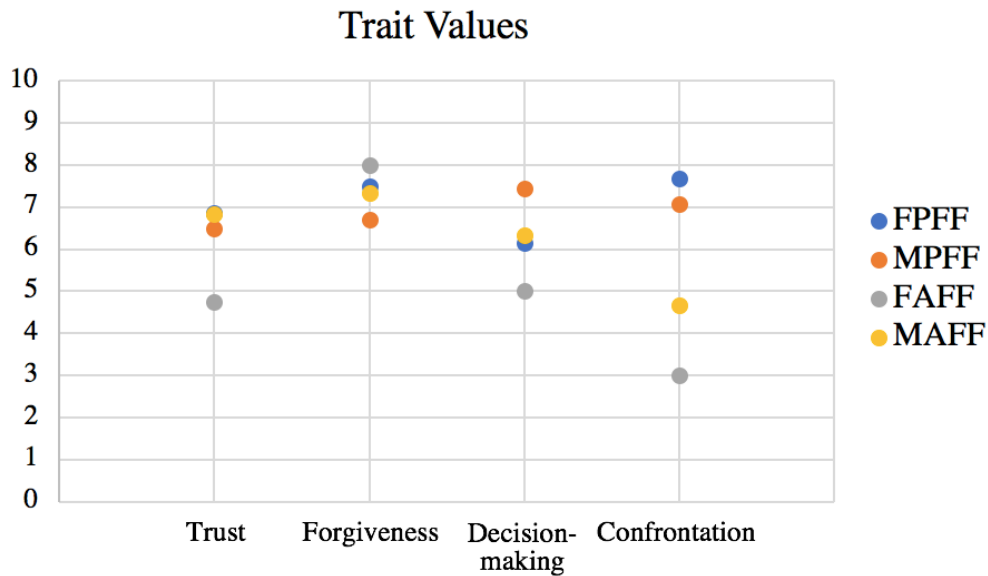
As evident in the above figure, there are notable trends observed between the different conditions. The FAFF group reported considerably lower scores for trust, decision-making, and confrontation, however they had the highest score out of any group for forgiveness. Meanwhile, no definable trend was observed in the FPFF, MPFF, and MAFF groups, as they all generally scored similarly, except for the MAFF score for confrontation.

Attitudes towards Marriage

When asked about their thoughts on marriage, a surprisingly small number of individuals saw marriage as an expected part of their story. Instead, the majority were of the opinion that marriage is more of a social norm, and while they are by no means against it, it is not something that should necessarily be actively sought out. Two individuals vocalized this sentiment, explaining that "I think it's just kind of like a standardized thing" (P16) and "part of it honestly is because everyone else does it, so there's a social pressure there" (P1). This view was commonly held among FPFF, MPFF, and MAFF individuals, but not among the FAFF group. While all 19 members of the former three groups reported that they would get married (either because they

love the idea or because they figured it would happen), only half of the FAFF group saw themselves getting married. The following excerpts from FAFF interviews further elaborate on this belief and their reasons for not getting married:

> "I see marriage as more of like a public declaration of your love for someone, I feel like you can definitely be committed to someone and not be married, um, and I feel like people are scared to acknowledge that" (P7).

> "I guess I'm going to get married at some point but I also understand it's a societal norm and part of the reason why I would be uncomfortable not being married is because it would look weird socially to not be" (P9).

> "I just decided that my career goals are way more important to me and if a marriage just kind of fits into that then sure" (P3).

> "I think marriage is kind of stupid to begin with because I think that, not that the intrinsic commitment legally to another person is stupid, I think that the idea that you are living your life in order to eventually find a partner to spend the rest of your life with and to solidify in a marriage is toxic for everyone on an individual basis, but also for dating culture, I think that I don't want to live my life and go through my romantic relationships trying to find someone I'm going to eventually marry… because I don't want to be in a 7 year long relationship that ends and see it as a failure for not ending in a marriage, and I also I don't want to be 35 in a 10-year relationship that's not going well and think that I need to make it go well just because I don't want to be 35 and single" (P11).

Interestingly, all but four participants reported that they have been in love. There was no clear trend in these responses, as those who responded "no" were equally distributed throughout the four groups.

V. DISCUSSION

This research intended to identify the degree to which attitudes towards romantic relationships varied between father-absent and father-present men and women to determine what influence fathers may have on their development. The following is a discussion of the perspectives of each condition based on the aforementioned results of the study as well as possible explanations for their approach to relationships.

Male, Present Father-Figure

Each of the MPFF individuals fell into the second developmental pathway described by the initial evolutionary theory presented. They had sensitive, supportive, and responsive parents, and these qualities can be seen in how they qualify their relationships, with all seven reporting they had a good or very good relationship with both their mother and father when growing up. The rest of their interview data supported the predications made by this theory, as they preferred secure attachments within romantic relationships. The findings of this study regarding father-present male approach to sex within relationships are consistent with the theory that males from families of marital harmony will prioritize secure attachments and long-term pair bonds. More specifically, the interview data reflect Belsky et. al.'s findings that those from father-present households "defer sexual activity… and seek to establish and maintain enduring, close, relationships", a sentiment explicitly expressed by individuals of the MPFF and FPFF groups (Belsky et. al.,1991). They also were generally more skilled at establishing and maintaining close relationships, another outcome of the predicted developmental pathway. Within relationships, they valued open-mindedness, honesty, and respect, all qualities they likely experienced within relationships with their parents when growing up.

A large part of the outlook that MPFF individuals carry towards relationships can be attributed to experiences they have had with their own fathers or advice they have been explicitly given. There were no instances of their fathers sitting them down and explicitly instructing them on how to approach relationships; rather, through observation of how their fathers carry themselves and interact with their mothers, it appears that the MPFF group has deduced either consciously or subconsciously that that is how they too would like to approach relationships. The interview data support this conclusion, as the men reported that "it's how he acts and how he holds himself" (P1), "it's just subconscious and how you're raised and just being respectful and loving of my mom" (P15), and "I always saw him treat women extremely well, so I think that sort of instilled that in me" (P18)". One respondent spoke very candidly about the perceived impact of his father on his approach to relationships, summing up a common sentiment held by other MPFFs as well:

> "I'd say he's a major influence in the sense that. The biggest thing I got out of my dad and interacting with my mom and with people in general is to have respect in open dialogue and approach all relationships with that. And to understand that people are what matter at the end of the day. You can make a billion dollars but it doesn't matter because you can't take all that with you. But the connections that you have and the people will really stick with you. You may not remember that year you made a million dollars but you sure as shit will remember that first girlfriend, the first breakup, the first impactful thing. So he taught me that those relationships matter and to approach each one like a small egg. It can crack at any moment so do your best to cultivate it, but also know when it's time to let go" (P21).

Ultimately, the MPFF individuals have learned by example how to approach, maintain, and grow relationships, and there is a clear observed as well as perceived impact of their father's involvement on their current relationship views.

Female, Present Father-Figure

Similarly to the MPFF group, the FPFF group's interview data was also consistent with the outcomes predicted by the evolutionary theory. They all came from families of spousal harmony, consistently living within a dyadic household. All seven women reported having either a "good" or "very good" relationship with both her mother and father. However, while most of the FPFF women reported having a good relationship with their fathers, all but one were careful to make the distinction that this did not necessarily entail that they had a close relationship. In fact, none of the FPFF individuals reported having a close relationship with their father, which is particularly interesting. One respondent offered a reason for why this may be the case:

> "I also think it's too hard for dads to bond with their daughters in general, like he only had brothers growing up so he didn't really know like what girls were like, you know? He didn't really date a lot before my mom so he didn't really know what girls were like so I think growing up it was harder for him to bond with us during our childhood" (P5).

An inability to relate or the absence of a common interest can certainly be a reason for a more distant relationship, as seen in the FPFF group. Without the luxury of shared experiences, it can be difficult for fathers to bond with daughters because of a lack of understanding. One MPFF individual addressed this, explaining that he was closer with his father because "as a male I talked to my dad more about it just because he's a man as well and my mom's a woman" (P19). Thus, while the FPFF group maintained good and healthy relationships with their fathers, none of them compared to the way the women described their relationships with their mothers.

As they all grew up in a dyadic household, it logically follows that none of the FPFF women hold negative views of marriage, although most of them are not necessarily expecting it to happen either. This is somewhat surprising given the apparent success of their parents'

relationship, as one would expect the FPFF individuals to seek to emulate this. Instead, they appear indifferent, as did the majority of the participants across all groups, perhaps indicative of a generational culture shift away from the institution of marriage.

Per Belsky et. al's findings, the FPFF group too prioritized interpersonal relationships and the security that comes with them over connectionless sexual activity. Almost all of them considered themselves to be relationship people, seeking comfort, security, and the opportunity for growth within another person. These findings are consistent with the evolutionary theory presented previously, which suggests that children from harmonious families have more trusting and secure attachments. It appears that individuals from father-present families worry less about the basic tenets of interpersonal relationships: trust, honesty, and loyalty. These qualities are so central to all of their relationships, not just romantic ones, that they may be implicit rather than sought out. Thus, without needing to worry about these fundamentals, the FPFF women instead were able to focus on next-level values that involve more complex emotions and are indicative of deeper connections, such as empathy, compassion, and intimacy, that are not necessarily found in day-to-day interpersonal relationships. It is evident that the nature of their relationships with their families have had an impact on how secure they feel in relationships now, especially as compared to the father-absent females who reported seeking the basic qualities rather than the advanced ones seen here.

The FPFF women are also more confident and secure once in relationships, as they reported consistently high responses for all four behavioral traits: trust, forgiveness, decisiveness, and comfort with confrontation. Based on the evolutionary theory, it logically follows that those from an environment of spousal harmony are more trusting, forgiving, and confident with

decision-making and confrontation because they were more likely to receive the necessary reinforcement from their parents when growing up. They also value communication within relationships, likely because they all reported witnessing a very healthy, communicative relationship between their parents. This is different than their male counterparts, who did not identify communication as a vital aspect of relationships. This distinction is perhaps indicative of gendered differences, rather than father involvement, in how relationships are approached as well as where priorities lie between the parties within relationships. Women may take on a more communicative role within relationships and expect the same from their partners, and without an open dialogue, relationships do not function optimally in their view.

By having a model relationship in their parents, the FPFF women appear better equipped to approach their own relationships. They knew what they wanted out of a partner, for instance, one expressed that "I would want to know if they would treat me the way that my dad treats my mom" (P4), while another explained that "he just always made me feel like I deserve the best, and I think that now I try to seek the best" (P6). They also place value on their father's approval within relationships, as one explained that:

> "Something I think about with guys frequently is do I want my dad to meet them. Or like am I confident that they should meet my dad. Because I think I only ever want people to meet my dad who I know are gonna be impressive, like who I know who are smart, who will get along with him well, who he won't think are stupid, anything like that. And I think it's to prove to him that okay, I can have a relationship with someone who is really great. You know thinking back to people, I ask would I have introduced them to my dad? And if the answer is no then okay but if it's yes, then okay it's a good thing" (P5).

Overall, the FPFF women have had more success with relationships and continue to maintain a positive and optimistic outlook towards them.

Male, Absent Father-Figure

Every MAFF respondent had a good relationship with his mother, though only one had a "very good" relationship, echoing the previously proposed theory regarding the strength of father-son and mother-daughter relationships. The trends seen among the MAFF group were quite similar to those seen in the MPFF group, which is somewhat surprising given previous literature. Despite not having a present father-figure, they held similar views on sex within relationships, preferred approach, perceived benefits, important values, and views on marriage. In terms of personality and behavioral traits within relationships, the MAFF responses reflect a similar trend to those of the MPFF and FPFF groups, however they have a surprisingly low confrontation score. There is no clear reason why this may be the case, as almost every one of the respondents reported believing that "it's not worth it" to be confrontational (P14, P17, P25, P26). Thus, while there is no clear connection to paternal influence, it is an important find nonetheless, suggesting that father absence is likely correlated with the importance individuals place on disagreements and therefore how likely they are to engage in confrontation within their interpersonal relationships.

The biggest influence a father seems to have is not on their son's approach to relationships or their beliefs but rather on their personality, as many of the MAFF individuals reported being afraid of inheriting negative traits from their father. One individual expressed the following thought process, which is indicative of a major influence his father has had on his development:

> "When I was younger I had a lot of insecurities in myself, feeling insecure that someone actually is into me and likes me. I used to question it a lot and just was not confident with kind of how anyone, especially in relationship, felt about me kind of thing… I had

insecurities because I had a bad relationship with my dad and I wanted more, and this kind of leaked over into my relationships, especially after we stopped talking. Yeah it dampened my confidence a lot and I felt like if my own dad doesn't want to talk to me why would someone like my girlfriend who is not my family want to? And kind of vice versa that's why it made me feel insecure and the I lost confidence in relationships, mainly in myself… so I feel like it caused me to dive way too quick into relationships and to feel, not like avoid but, like I so desperately, because when I was younger I really wanted to have a relationship, I wanted to talk to him more, and so I tried to fill that with romantic relationships or friendships… so now I feel like I have more, I establish easier relationships or friendships with women then I do men, like I have a lot of male friends but feel like I'm more trusting of my female friends than my male friends" (P17).

While this experience was not explicitly stated by any of the other MAFF respondents, it could potentially offer an explanation for why they prioritize different values in romantic relationships and have varying levels of confidence with, for instance, confrontation within relationships.

Female, Absent Father-Figure

The FAFF data was indicative of the large impact that father absence can have on a child's approach to romantic relationship. The data reflected trends different than those seen in all other conditions in regards to sex in relationships, their approach, values, personality traits, views on marriage, and even the quality of their relationships with their mothers. The interview data largely support the results predicted by the evolutionary theory, as they were hesitant to enter romantic relationships, desiring an overall lower level of commitment. They also tended to be more anxious in interpersonal relationship settings, leading them to be more short-lived and unstable. A fear of detachment and abandonment, in conjunction with a lack of experience with relationships with males, caused them to be more skeptical of relationships and instead prefer a sexual relationship or no relationship at all.

In regards to sex in relationships, consistent with Collins and Sroufe's findings regarding father-absent females, the FAFF women in this study reported engaging in sexual behavior to compensate for distant relationships with men in their family lives. Additionally, their frequent engagement in sexual behavior is likely correlated with insecure attachment in interpersonal relationships (Collins & Sroufe, 1999). This hesitation translates directly into their attitudes towards romantic relationships, as six out of the seven FAFF women report that they would avoid romantic relationships in favor of sexual ones. Ultimately, only the MAFF attitudes differed from the sentiments predicted by previous literature and the outlined evolutionary theory, as they, surprisingly, preferred emotional connections and romantic relationships.

A similar outcome is observed as far as their approach to relationships, as the FAFF women overwhelmingly reported avoiding romantic relationships. Whether out of fear of physical and emotional consequences or simply because they do not value relationships, their views can be traced back to their home experiences. It is easy to see why physical and emotional abuse would cause this reaction, but a father's impact can manifest in more covert ways as well. One FAFF respondent had a father who chose to not be present in her life post-divorce. He still lived in the same town as her and her mother but he never made an effort to maintain any relationship with her, a choice the respondent accepted as customary. The nature of the relationship with her father, or lack thereof, offers an explanation for the following sentiment she holds regarding relationships:

> "I'm in a place where one I don't value them, I think some people really value relationships and I'm not one of those people at least not yet… I'm not willing to sacrifice literally anything in my life for anyone else" (P10).

This particular individual had previously expressed that parenting was simply not at the front of her father's mind, for instance "he would order food for himself and it would come and I would be like 'did you order me anything' and he would say 'no sorry I forgot'" (P10), so she grew up in a household where sacrifices were scarcely made for her. This mindset seemingly is mirrored in her own relationships, as she similarly has not reached a point where she is willing to sacrifice anything for others either.

The qualities they necessitate in relationships also differ from the values that FPFF females seek in an a striking fashion. The FAFF women reported that trust, honesty, and loyalty were the three most important values that every romantic relationship should possess, while the FPFF women reported different important values: empathy, compassion, and intimacy. One could argue that trust, honesty, and loyalty are the fundamental pillars to establishing any relationship, not just romantic. However, based on their home lives, the FAFF women did not always have the luxury of finding these qualities in their familial relationships, and therefore often feel as though they are missing. On the other hand, the FPFF women were fortunate to have stable relationships when growing up and may not need to worry about these basic qualities, which allows them to instead seek more complex values that go beyond trust, honesty, and loyalty.

An interesting trend was observed when considering their personality and behavioral traits within relationships as the FAFF group reported a significantly lower score for trust, decision-making, and confrontation, but the highest score for forgiveness. The low scores for the first three traits track with the proposed theory since it predicted FAFF women would be more

anxious, less confident, and wary of trusting. One FAFF woman explained her experience when growing up and how this may have impacted the way in which she behaves in relationships:

> "Emotional abuse, and even physical abuse, is something that I've experienced and I think that forgiving that definitely came from the instability that I've grown up in and feeling like I couldn't trust my father figures and so when they told me that it was a justified thing that was happening I was just like 'yeah, it is a justified thing that is happening'. And I also think that with like sexual harassment and assault and stuff, I just value myself less you know, just because when you have a parent that can be available and chooses not to be or for whatever reason, it isn't, it's easy to say that it's your fault, which I know that you, you're not supposed to victim shame yourself, but it's easy to do that when you're a kid who grew up with it (P3).

The high forgiveness score is somewhat surprising, but upon further investigation can potentially be explained by the interview data. A few FAFF women addressed this phenomenon specifically, offering theories for why they believe this to be the case. One explained that "I got tired of my family disappointing me so I always try to see the best in people, and often times that will lead to me forgiving too much. It's easy to do because it's good, but evidently bad too" (P3), while another believes "I definitely forgive things that I shouldn't. I take things that should be very serious and just pretend that they're not because I'm comparing them to the even more serious things I've experienced like emotional and physical abuse" (P9). Ultimately, for these women, their home experiences have led them to forgive more because everything is relative, and by comparison, the acts they are forgiving are far better than other things that they have gone through.

Unlike the other three groups who were relatively indifferent towards marriage, the majority the FAFF women are adamantly against getting married. While it would be intuitive to infer that their views are result of witnessing a strained marriage between their parents, this is not

the case with this sample. As evident in the quotations presented in the results, the FAFF women have a variety of reasons for not wanting to get married, but they vary from person to person. What is consistent, however, is that none of them cite their own personal family experiences as the reason for why they hold this view. Every FAFF individual grew up in a divorced parent household, yet their parents' experiences with marriage do not appear to be the driving forces behind their views, nor does their lack of a father-figure. Instead, their opinions on marriage are a product of societal observation and their personal values.

The women's descriptions of their maternal relationships are also intriguing. It would be expected that they would lean more heavily on their mother in the absence of their father. However, this was not always the case, as only half the women reported having an extremely close relationship while the other reported having an extremely strained relationship. Those who had an extremely close relationship with their mother likely did because in the absence of their father, they needed to rely on their mother more. For those who had an extremely strained relationship, perhaps the struggles they encountered in their relationships with their fathers leaked over into their other relationships, causing them to all be generally contentious and overall strained. This would logically follow given their difficulties with other interpersonal relationships.

As far as direct impact of their father on their development, the interview data offer possible explanations. The following accounts are indicative of interactions the FAFF women had with their fathers that influenced their behavior, values, or other relationship ideology.

> "When he found out that I had my first kiss he like sat me down and we had a family meeting, like it was his 5-hour bullshit where he just yelled at me. But so he definitely made me feel like I had to be, like the person had to be perfect to be worthy of being in a

relationship with. It was a very critical eye, he always hated my boyfriends. Sure, maybe he wasn't always like a manly man, but mostly it was just my dad wanting to be an asshole" (P2).

"I tend to have more relationships that mirror my father's and they tend to be very emotionally unstable… we would always try to make it work but we wouldn't be close, then we would try again, and I tend to do that in romantic relationships, I always go back to people… he's made me very motivated to make sure that the people in my life know that they're valued" (P3).

"My father is abusive like physically and verbally, and I think that that's just made me very cautious of other relationships and also just anything. There's no rhyme or reason to it and so I think that I approached things very cautiously, but also I've become numb to a lot of things like I don't I don't recognize something as mistreatment until somebody tells me, somebody will be like '[P8] that's fucked up that is not okay' I just will be like 'really?' because that's my normal if that makes sense. I know that it would be different if our relationship were better and I'm not sure how. I think that maybe I would be more secure in who I am as a person… I think I would be more secure in my relationships, emotionally, platonically, or romantically. I definitely see it being more positive and being a more confident person in general. I don't think that it was necessarily the worst-case situation because he was never really present, it's not like something changed like when I went to college or something did a 180, so it was what I was used to and what I expected out of him… I just think it's discouraging because every time I meet a nice boy in the back of my head I'm waiting for the other shoe to drop… having it reinforced that something bad has always happened like is definitely discouraging for sure" (P8).

"He also just doesn't get it, he just, like he wasn't there. And so I feel like I don't need it but I'm always looking for attention… I feel like if I don't have that I'm very insecure" (P9).

"I definitely have trouble having having romantic feelings for guys… I had never seen a really healthy vulnerable model relationship because my parents' marriage was never great… I didn't have a good relationship with either of my parents so I didn't really have a good demonstration of healthy communication of emotions and so therapy doesn't count like I was just I didn't tell anyone how I was feeling until the end of high school when I started talking about how I was feeling about things… I think the way I see my father now… I definitely don't look for anyone like him because I think he has anger issues and is a bad person" (P11).

As evident in the personal accounts outlined above, each of the FAFF women had a strained early relationship with their father that either mostly or entirely had devolved by the time the interviews took place. Many of them attribute their poor experiences with relationships at least somewhat to their father's personality or behavioral tendencies. Even for those with divorced parents, it seemed that the fathers could have chosen to maintain a relationship with their daughters but instead chose not to, leaving them without someone to fill the father-figure role in their lives.

Limitations

This study, like all studies, suffers from limitations that should be taken into account when reviewing the study conclusions. The conclusions drawn from this study are restricted by the sample size as well as the nature of the group interviewed. Ideally, a more comprehensive study would have included more than 26 participants, especially since this group was further divided into smaller groups of specific conditions. Additionally, the respondents were all Emory University students, and since no incentives were offered to participate, the sample was in some ways self-selecting. The majority of the individuals came from a similar social group stratum on campus, and in terms of personality, they were likely more open and outgoing than most, since they held comfortable enough to openly discuss their familial experiences with a researcher they did not know. Thus, because the representative power of the sample is limited, the findings of this study are not universally generalizable and cannot be widely applied to include the experiences of young adults in general. However, the results may be applicable to the experiences of students at peer institutions and therefore provides insight into the experiences of students at elite universities and how their upbringings have shaped their views.

A further limitation of this study exists in the way in which the conditions were defined. Participants in the father-absent groups qualified if they had no father-figure or no relationship with a father-figure for any reason. However, because the father-absent condition encompassed a wide range of circumstances in this study (non-existent, lost through death, divorced, absent because of work commitments, neglect), it is unclear what effects can be attributed to which reasons. Thus, while conclusions were drawn from this research, further analysis might benefit from breaking down father absence into categories for studying the effect of each type individually, since there is likely a difference between father-absence due to death and father-absence due to neglect in regards to the effect it has on relationship attitudes and development.

VI. CONCLUSION

The results of this study suggest that father absence does play a role in how individuals approach romantic relationships. The largest impact was observed within the female father-absent sample, as they overall struggled with establishing and maintaining romantic relationships due to a lack of experience with them and general discomfort being emotionally intimate in their interpersonal relationships. The results largely align with the initially proposed evolutionary theory. As the theory manifests in romantic relationships, those from the first developmental pathway, a household of spousal discord without a relationship with their father, had short-lived and unstable relationships, while those from the second developmental pathway, one of spousal harmony, forged relationships that were positive and secure. The male father-absent sample diverged slightly from this framework, as their responses align more closely with those of the father-present samples. In terms of gender, the largest differences are seen in how they value relationships, but their views on marriage, sexual behavior within relationships, and personality traits within relationships are similar, with the exception of the FAFF group. Ultimately, father absence is correlated with attitudes towards romantic relationship, particularly for father-absent females, as such connections are often avoided. Even when they exist, they are strained and unstable as compared to those of the father-present sample.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

It appears that in general, the female absent father figure condition struggled the most with romantic relationship development and held the most negative views towards them. As mentioned previously, it would be worthwhile to explore whether the reason for the absence plays a role in shaping views or if simply their general absence is responsible. Nonetheless, it is

clear that father absence has a detrimental effect on relationship development, particularly for females. In instances where it would be possible for fathers to still maintain relationships with their daughters, for example in the case of a divorce or separation, it may be beneficial to institute social policies or programs that encourage fathers to form and maintain strong relationships with their families, specifically with daughters, in order to avoid any adverse outcomes. This would extend beyond the scope of simply relationship development, as father-absence has been shown to have a large impact on their children's behavior, mental health, performance in school, and involvement in crime, among many other arenas. The establishment of social programs to strengthen these relationships could help mitigate the negative outcomes.

VII. APPENDIX

Appendix A. Interview Question Guide

BACKGROUND

1. Please state your age and gender.
2. Do you have any siblings, and if yes, what age and gender?
3. With what ethnicity do you identify?
4. Looking back on your childhood, would you have considered your family to be poor, lower middle class, upper middle class, or wealthy?

FAMILY

5. Did you grow up with a present father or father figure?
6. Were your parents married? If divorced, did either remarry?
7. What was your relationship with your mother like?
8. What was your relationship with your father (biological, step) like?
9. How involved was your father during your childhood with daily basic care-taking activities such as cooking and driving you around (if no — what were they involved with??) and what other sorts of activities did you do together when you were growing up?

RELATIONSHIPS

10. If applicable, at what age did you have sex for the first time?
11. In that particular experience, did a romantic connection precede the sexual behavior or vice versa? What about interactions since then? Is this your ideal timeline?
12. If applicable, at what age did you enter into your first romantic relationship, by whatever criteria you wish to qualify that? —> describe what the criteria is?
13. What is your current relationship status?
14. Did your parents differ in their attitudes towards that relationship? Relationships since then?
15. How important is your parents' approval of your relationships?
16. Did your parents approach your relationships differently than those of your siblings?
17. Have your experiences with relationships been what you expected given what you had seen in your parents' relationship? How have the other relationships around you shaped the way you approach relationships?
18. Given the choice, would you prefer to be in a romantic relationship, a physical relationship, or neither? Why?
19. What would you wish to get out of a romantic relationship that would motivate you to enter one?
20. What three key characteristics or values should every romantic relationship possess?
21. What is one characteristic or value that you believe most relationships lack?
22. Have you been in love?
23. What is your opinion on marriage? Do you foresee yourself getting married some day?

PERSONALITY/BEHAVIOR

24. On a scale from 1-10…
    1. How easily trusting are you of others?
    2. How forgiving are you?
    3. How confident are you when making decisions?
    4. How confrontational are you?

WRAP-UP

25. Self-reflection: What influence do you believe your father/father figure has had on how you approach relationships with others?
26. Is there anything I didn't ask that you thought I would based on the brief description I gave during the participant recruitment process?

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